COALESCE

Mind the Gap Report: COALESCE for Support in Cyprus

Needs analysis for the integration of migrant female victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation/abuse

Funded by the European Union's
Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund

MEDITERRANEAN INSTITUTE OF GENDER STUDIES

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Coalesce project

This report is produced for the EU funded initiative "COALESCE: Legal, Psycho-social and economic empowerment for the integration of women third country nationals (TCN) victims of human trafficking (VoT) for sexual exploitation and abuse" (Coalesce Project EC AMIF: 958133), led by the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) (Cyprus), in partnership with the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) (Ireland), Caritas Cyprus, Cyprus Refugee Council, SOLWODI (Germany), Associazione Iroko Onlus (Italy), Association, Marta Centre (Latvia), Klaipeda Social and Psychological Services Center (KSPSC) (Lithuania), and European Network of Migrant Women (ENoMW) - a European platform based in Belgium.

Coalesce works to support to victims of trafficking in human beings: providing gender-specific psycho-social, legal and economic support and assistance to third-country national women victims of sex trafficking, and to develop synergies and complementarities in facilitating needs identification, assistance and support, and improve transnational cooperation among front line professionals and practitioners. Coalesce's aim is to place the voices and authentic opinions of trafficked women at the centre of implementation.

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents

Chapter One: Introduction

The COALESCE project

This national report is produced within the framework of "COALESCE: Legal, psycho-social and economic empowerment for the integration of women third country nationals (**TCN**) victims of human trafficking (**VoT**) for sexual exploitation and abuse" (Coalesce Project EC AMIF: 958133). COALESCE is funded by the European Union Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and implemented by a partnership consortium: the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) (lead partner); the Cyprus Refugee Council; CARITAS Cyprus (Cyprus); IROKO Onlus (Italy); Marta Centre (Latvia); the European Network of Migrant Women (Belgium); the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) (Ireland); Solwodi (Germany); and Klapeida (Lithuania).

The objective of the project is to provide support to female migrant victims of trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation in Europe. By providing gender-specific psycho-social, legal and economic support and assistance to TCN women victims of sex trafficking, the project seeks to develop synergies and complementarities in facilitating needs identification, assistance and support, and to improve transnational cooperation among frontline professionals and practitioners.

There is a well-documented and acknowledged link between the assistance that the victims need and other factors such as their gender, the specific form of exploitation they have suffered, and their residence status (Directive 2011/36/EU). In fact, female victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation often have very complex needs (EC, 2016c; EIGE, 2018). Thus, the gendered nature of human trafficking, as a form of gender-based violence, is a fundamental element of COALESCE's conceptualisation and work programme. In responding to the priority five of the AMIF[1], the project focuses on the implications of developments in migration, especially within the context of protracted uncertainty and exacerbated social inequalities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic that affects the most vulnerable victims of human trafficking, in particular migrant women and children.

Specifically, the work plan of COALESCE project involves:

[1] Galanti- Eva Dimovne Keresztes. (2019). *AMIF Call for proposals Topic 5 – Support to victims of trafficking in human beings.* Retrieved from: https://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/data/ref/other_eu_prog/other/home/guide/amif-info-session-2019-ag-call-05_en.pdf .

- The provision of assistance guided by a **Gender Specific Integration Model (GeSIM)** for legal, psycho-social assistance and economic empowerment to enhance integration of women TCN VoT.
- The development of a **practical working toolkit** enhanced by input from affected women, **distilling specialised knowledge and recommendations** for a sustainable gender-specific implementation of EU guidelines and tools, **influencing the work of service providers** (including asylum authorities).
- The promotion of **national and transnational knowledge exchange** among relevant actors on the benefits of and commitment to GeSIM, nurturing collaborative approaches benefitting trafficked women.
- The improvement of the **capacity of victim support organisations** across the EU to provide **gender-specific support services** (including psycho-social, legal and economic empowerment) tailored to the needs of migrant women VoT for sexual exploitation/abuse contributing also to their early identification.

Last but not least, taking into consideration all available protection measures in the framework established by the Anti-Trafficking Directive,[2] this project seeks to enhance knowledge exchange and best practices on the integration of trafficked victims among the consortium, which brings together a diverse group of feminist organisations with particular expertise in supporting trafficked migrant women who have experienced sexual violence and exploitation.

The Mind the Gap Report: COALESCE for Support in Cyprus

The purpose of this report is to present a mapping and analysis of 1) the gender-specific needs for the support and integration of female third country national victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation (TCN VoT), and 2) of the local support mechanisms in Cyprus. The analysis adopts a victim-centred and gender-specific approach by directly involving the VoT in the mapping and assessment of existing local support mechanisms in order to identify areas of

[2] Directive 2011/36/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA.

gender-specific interventions. This report thus highlights gaps in assistance and support in Cyprus, from the perspective of VoT for sexual exploitation.

The following areas of intervention are taken into consideration: 1) psycho-social and legal support; and 2) economic independence (economic empowerment). The needs analysis includes secondary research and interviews with women TCN, who have become VoT for the purpose of sexual exploitation and forced prostitution. The gender-specific needs for support in terms of Art. 1 of the Anti-Trafficking Directive forms a focal point here. The report also takes into consideration the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic around access to support services.

The report comprises a short overview of the project, the legal and policy context at the EU and national level, followed by an analysis of the key themes and needs identified through in-depth interviews carried out in Cyprus with female TCN VoT for sexual exploitation.

Chapter Two: Methodology

The COALESCE consortium have adopted a common methodology to ensure coherence of the mapping and analysis of needs across the partner countries. The results of this context mapping and needs analysis are incorporated directly into the design, draft and development of the Gender-Specific Integration Models, or GeSIM (Work Package 3 of the COALESCE Project). Within the GeSIM, a handbook will be produced comprising a model for psychosocial and legal support (PLM) and a model for economic empowerment (EEM) for female VoT. Linking this needs analysis to the GeSIM guarantees the consistent incorporation of the voices and perspectives of affected female migrants into the integration measures that are developed, implemented, and evaluated in the course of the COALESCE project.

Two methods were used for collecting research data in this study, specifically, **desk research** and **semi-structured interviews** with the TCN VoT.

Desk research

Our desk research included a review of legislation, policy, academic and other research reports, as well as reports published by the Cyprus government, the EU and other international institutions. From these, we collected the most recent information around support and integration provisions available for women TCN VoT for sexual exploitation in the

local context. The analysis builds upon existing EU analyses of gender-specific measures on trafficking to help merge the micro with the macro level (Yonkova et al, 2017). To this end, we incorporated data collected through screening of relevant EU legislation and policies, EU studies, EIGE studies, the EU anti-trafficking online library, relevant project reports, and built on the findings of our colleague practitioners such as Solwodi and ICI that worked on the ASSIST project that identified best practices in delivering gender-specific assistance (Thomson & Yonkova, 2020).

Semi-structured interviews

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, instead of the planned focus groups, semi-structured interviews were conducted in March 2021. These in-depth interviews made it possible to gain deeper knowledge of the social realities experienced by the affected women, as they were able to provide first-hand accounts and opinions on existing support and integration measures. These interviews also facilitated conversations and discourses with VoT that explored their needs on how to be best supported, and thus allowed the researcher to be reflexive and obtain stronger objectivity (Harding, 1991, p. 161). The pre-formulated questions provided a broad structure for the interview based on the key thematic pillars of analysis and were then adapted to the respective socio-economic and personal background of each interviewee.

Interview sample

The sample included eight (n=8) beneficiaries of the Cyprus Refugee Council (CyRC) and Caritas Cyprus. Researchers from the two NGOs conducted a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews in March 2021. CyRC conducted six of the interviews and Caritas, two. The interviewees were selected based on COALESCE's target group. The objective of the interviews was to obtain qualitative information to identify specific areas of intervention on a local and national level: psycho-social and legal support as well as economic empowerment. Semi-structured Questionnaire A (Annex I) was addressed to participants who are recognised as VoT and Questionnaire B (Annex II) was used for those presumed as VoT, but not recognised by the state authorities. Key topics included residence status, accommodation, material support, social welfare, medical and psychological support, other integration measures, work and employment, economic independence, training and language. The

interviews were conducted in English. The interviewers took notes of the most important statements during the interviews and quoted the clients directly in some cases.

All eight women that participated in the interviews are VoT or were presumed VoT for the purpose of sexual exploitation and all come from African countries: specifically, 7 of the interviewed women come from Cameroon and one from Nigeria (CY4). Seven of the women are mothers (CY2-CY8). Four of the women's (CY1-2 and CY6-7) applications to be given VoT status were unsuccessful and their asylum application is pending. Two of the women (CY5 and CY8) were officially given both VoT and asylum status. Two other women (CY3 and CY4) are recognised VoT but their asylum application is pending.

Table 1. Demographics of women VoT participating in the needs analysis in Cyprus

Interview No.	**Acronym**	**Refugee Status**	**Trafficking Status**	**Country/ origin**	**Time in CY**	**Other**
Interview 1	CY1	Asylum Seeker	Presumed but not recognised	Cameroon	2 years	
Interview 2	CY2	Asylum Seeker	Presumed but not recognised	Cameroon	1.5 years	mother
Interview 3	CY3	Asylum Seeker	Recognised Victim of Trafficking	Cameroon	3 years	mother
Interview 4	CY4	Asylum Seeker	Recognised Victim of Trafficking	Nigeria	4 years	mother
Interview 5	CY5	Recognised Refugee	Recognised Victim of Trafficking	Cameroon	3 years	mother
Interview 6	CY6	Asylum Seeker	Presumed but not recognised	Cameroon	3 years	mother
Interview 7	CY7	Asylum Seeker	Presumed but not recognised	Cameroon	3 years	mother
Interview 8	CY8	Recognised Refugee	Recognised Victim of Trafficking	Cameroon	6 years	mother

Own table

Data analysis

The Mayring method of qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014) was used on the interview notes, which involved a systematic categorisation and analysis of the emerging key statements and themes from the interviews, in order to address the needs around psycho-social and legal support and economic empowerment.

Data quality and ethics

In this report, the following quality criteria have been applied: objectivity, reliability, and internal and external reflexivity. This report also complies with ethical research principles, as well as with the safeguarding policy established by COEALESCE's consortium of experts, for example, informed consent.[3] In addition, personal data and other information were anonymised in the process of data management and analysis (UNIAP, 2008).

Limitations of the qualitative research

Given that the participants are women from third countries, the Cypriot interviewers were cognisant of cultural and linguistic challenges, although given the interviewers' previous experience in working with VoT in the field of civil society and social work, they were sensitive to the interviewees' cultural and vulnerability context. The interviews were carried out in English. As the researchers are not trained interpreters or cultural mediators, they could not guarantee the exclusion of transcription errors. In addition, the small sample (n=8) meant the results of this primary research could not be fully representative, but rather provided some key themes around the gender-specific integration needs of TCN VoT.

Economic independence indicators

The concept of women's economic independence recognises that women are economic actors who contribute to economic activity and should be able to benefit from it on an equal basis to men. Additionally, it recognises that financial independence can have an important role in strengthening the position of women in society and within the household. Economic independence refers to a condition where women and men have their own access to the full

[3] The participants were informed about what would happen to their statements, that their participation was voluntary and that their consent was required for the interview. A declaration of consent was distributed to them for signature.

range of economic opportunities and resources – including employment, services, and sufficient disposable income – so they can shape and exercise control over their lives, meet their own needs and those of their dependants, and make conscious choices (Pesce & Christodoulou, 2017).

Economic empowerment is understood within the framework of enabling economic independence and includes, but is not limited to, these themes and indicators: employment opportunities; education and professional training (job orientation training and access to entrepreneurship, business plans, access to resources); resource mobilisation and funding schemes (start-ups, small businesses); access to technology and digital skills; mentoring; care services; welfare and social benefits; housing and transportation services; and direct or indirect financial services.

The three pillars of intervention – psychosocial, legal and economic empowerment – are understood as taking place in complementarity with counselling which is defined as follows:

> *Counselling is a multidisciplinary approach in which refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence are offered a multitude of support, including psycho-social counselling, information on their rights and assistance in fulfilling their everyday needs. The aim of counselling is to support clients in different areas of life, not just with incidents connected with gender-based violence. The counselling process can take months or even years and it intersects with several other processes to which asylum seekers and victims of violence can be part of: the asylum process, criminal process and civil law processes such as divorce, family unification or custody of children. Counselling is in practice a series of one-on-one sessions where refugee women are given an opportunity to be heard and to tell their story. Together with the counsellor a spectrum of opportunities are jointly discovered. Women are informed about their rights as victims of crime and as asylum seekers. Their practical needs such as sustenance, housing and medical needs are mapped and, when needed, they are referred to other service providers. At a more in-depth level, counsellors describe counselling as a process of moving from shame, fear and self-blame to building confidence, empowerment and integration.* (Lilja, 2019, p. 43)

Chapter Three: Legal and policy framework

EU policy context

Trafficking in human beings (**THB**) is a major problem in the EU that shows no signs of decreasing (EC second progress report, 2018), especially the trafficking of women and girls for the purposes of sexual exploitation, which remains the most widespread form of exploitation (Europol, 2021). Female victims represent 77% of all victims, while trafficking for sexual exploitation represents 65% of the overall registered trafficking crimes (according to EU statistics, excluding UK data; see EC, 2018). The statistics mandate particular attention to trafficking of women on the one hand, and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation on the other. THB is a form of violence against women (CoE Istanbul Convention, 2011), a highly gendered crime evidenced not only from the statistics but also from the severe, long-term consequences and harm it has proven to cause its victims, according to the Study on the Gender Dimension of THB (EC, 2016c). Victims' recovery requires significant specialised investment over long periods, therefore planning and organising efficient recovery and re-integration programmes are of paramount importance.

The Study on the Gender Dimension of THB (EC, 2016c), the Gender-Specific Measures in Anti-Trafficking Actions report (EIGE, 2018) and the Anti-trafficking Directive, all recommend that assistance must be appropriate to VoT's gender and age, and respond to the form of exploitation the they have experienced. To that effect, the Commission supports efforts geared at "*comprehensive and accessible protection and [to] help the reintegration of victims of trafficking, taking account of the specific needs of each gender*" (EC, 2017). Therefore, EU Member States (**MS**) must take into account the most recent developments in knowledge around gender-specific integration, as well as the most efficient approaches in supporting the recovery of trafficked women (EC, 2016a, b, c).

THB has been greatly shaped by and entangled with significant migration flows into and within the EU. Europol recently reported that organised criminal groups involved in THB often exploit existing migratory routes to traffic victims into and within the EU (Europol, 2018). In line with the European Commission's second progress report (EC, 2018), the same Europol report exposed the nexus between asylum seekers and human trafficking, which has also become a key concern for the European Asylum Support Office (EASO). Frontex (2018), the European

Border and Coast Guard Agency, found a significant increase in the number of Nigerian women and girls (increasingly minors) in mixed migration flows to Italy, intended for supply to the European sex market. Similarly, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported a 600% increase in a three-year period of the number of female migrants, primarily from Nigeria, with an estimated percent of potential VoT among them reaching 80%. Nevertheless, trafficking of women for sexual exploitation remains a low priority across a number of MS and many women VoT are not formally identified as such (EC, 2018). Despite insufficient identification efforts, including in the asylum process, it is clear that a sizeable proportion of the sex trafficking victims registered in the EU are TCN women. This adds a layer of complexity in dealing with such cases, due to factors such as immigration status, cultural specificity, limited eligibility to general state-funded services, lack of support networks, and increasing racism and xenophobia, all of which makes integration assistance challenging as it simultaneously requires gender-specificity, expertise in violence against women (**VaW**), as well as intersectional competence.

National legal and policy context

Cyprus is a high-risk transit and a destination country for women victims of THB. According to the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA), conviction rates for smugglers who exploit women for sex, forced marriage, and labour remain low.

Over a four-year period, GRETA (2020) reported that only 190 out of 801 presumed VoT in Cyprus, mostly women, were formally identified as such. The main form of exploitation cited in the report was sex, followed by forced marriage, labour and a combination of sex and labour. Almost all male victims were trafficked for labour exploitation. There were seven child trafficking victims. The gap between identified and presumed THB victims did not change significantly between 2017 and 2019. The rate of identification for 2017 was 18% and the rate for 2018 was 18.7%. The rate of identification during this period was higher for women at 22% compared to 17% for men. This may be explained by the higher rate of identification of victims of THB for sexual exploitation, which was 13% in 2018, while the rate of identification of victims of THB for labour exploitation was 10%. Another observation was that in 2018, no child victims were identified despite a relatively high number of presumed victims compared

to 2017. Another trend that can be noted is that, despite an emerging correlation of presumed victims of THB for forced begging, illegal adoptions, and other crimes, no victims of these forms of THB were identified in 2017 or 2018.

The GRETA report also observed an emerging trend since 2015 in the context of THB relating to abuse of visa regimes. Transnational criminal networks abuse visa regimes in order to bring victims into the country and exploit them. Visa regimes that are misused tend to be tourist visas and working visas held by TCN, who are then exploited by employers and agents, as well as intermediaries. The use of intermediaries of the same nationality as the victims facilitates and enables the formation of criminal networks both in their home countries and in the country of destination (GRETA, 2020).

Another trend is an increase in the number of asylum-seekers being exploited at some point along their migration journey by smugglers and traffickers. Finally, there is an increase of trafficking for the purpose of forced marriage, mainly by European criminal groups that exploit women often from Bulgaria and Romania (GRETA, 2020).

The Republic of Cyprus has seen a huge increase in the number of first-time asylum applicants in the last decade. This steady increase intensified in 2018, with a 72% increase over the previous year. By the end of 2019, the upward trend continued with the submission of 12,724 new asylum applications. Overall, more than 18,800 applications for international protection were pending at the end of 2019 (UNHCR, 2019). According to a Eurostat report, Cyprus had the highest number of registered first-time asylum applicants in Europe relative to population in the fourth quarter of 2019 (Eurostat, 2019). Men make up the majority of asylum seekers in Cyprus. In 2018, for example, out of a total 7,765 of applicants, 5,295 (68.2%) were men, 2,410 (31.8%) were women, and 14% were children (Eurostat, 2019).

Displaced migrants enter Cyprus either via the sea or by crossing the UN controlled buffer zone that divides Cyprus. Areas south of the dividing 'Green Line' are controlled by the Republic of Cyprus; areas to the north are administered by the Turkish Cypriots who declared the 'Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus' in 1983 which is recognised only by Turkey. Two out of three migrants who apply for asylum in the Republic of Cyprus arrive by irregularly crossing the Green Line. Smugglers, often presenting themselves as agents for private universities in the north, offer their services to potential asylum seekers, without explaining

the intricacies of the political situation on the island. This leaves migrants and especially women at risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation (Angeli, 2020). Thus, in a situation like in Cyprus where refugees and asylum-seekers often find it extremely difficult to find affordable and suitable accommodation, women and girls face even greater risks (UNHCR Cyprus, 2018).

According to the GRETA report (2020), there has been a significant increase in the number of asylum seekers identified as presumed victims of THB or at risk of being trafficked, in particular among girls and young women from Syria arriving unaccompanied in the northern part of Cyprus to join "husbands" to whom they have been married by proxy. In addition, an increasing number of applicants from African countries (mainly Cameroon and Nigeria), both women and men, have been identified as presumed victims of trafficking. According to the Cypriot authorities, in the period between 2015 and 2018, 31 persons were referred by the Asylum Service and the Refugee Review Authority to the police as presumed victims of THB. The police formally identified 16 victims of THB whose status at the time of referral was "asylum seeker". Since 2015, 12 persons had been granted refugee status on the grounds of being victims of THB (primarily from Cameroon and Nigeria).

Cyprus established a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) in 2016, defining the co-operation framework between the relevant services and NGOs for identifying and referring victims of trafficking to services (see Chapter 4).

Legislation

The 2014 Law on the Prevention and Combat against Trafficking in and Exploitation of Human Beings and Protection of Victims was the most recent to revise the relevant legal framework in Cyprus. The law calls for severe sentences (up to 10 years' imprisonment) for the perpetrators of THB, which are even harsher if the victim is a child (up to 20 years). It also penalises the use of services, should there be a reasonable suspicion that the service is provided by a victim of THB. Trafficking for forced labour is punished with up to 6 years' imprisonment if the victim is an adult and up to 10, if the victim is a minor.

In addition to prison sentences, punishment under the 2014 trafficking law includes confiscation of personal documents with five years and/or a fine of €17,000, and bribing of civil servants with five years' imprisonment and/or a fine of €17,000. If the public servant accepts a bribe, then s/he is subject to up to five years imprisonment and/or up to €20,000

fine. The law also provides for fines and other penalties (including confiscations and the temporary or permanent shutting down of premises). The 2014 law is aligned with the Council Directive 2004/81 (on the residence permit issued to third country nationals who victims of THB or who have been the subject of an action to facilitate illegal immigration) and provides victims with at least a one-month reflection period with the possibility of renewal. It is also aligned with the Council Directive 2011/36/EU (the Anti-trafficking Directive). The law also conforms with international treaties, conventions, and EU laws, such as the Framework Decisions of the European Council 2002/629, as well as the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings that has been in force since 2008.

The 2014 Law also provides for a National Coordinator for combating trafficking in human beings (it was first established under Law 87(I)/2007). This role is exercised by the Minister of Interior. It also provides for a Multidisciplinary Coordinating Group (**MCG**), which was first established in 2007 to take all the necessary measures to combat human trafficking and protect its victims. The MCG which monitors the implementation of the Antitrafficking Law, the National Action Plans against THB and the of the NRM (among other responsibilities), is chaired by the Minister of the Interior in his capacity as National Coordinator against trafficking in human beings.[4]

The National Action Plan (**NAP**) 2019-2021 includes specific targets and practical measures, under the following nine thematic areas: coordination; prevention; identification and recognition of victims; protection and support of victims; suppression and prosecution; data collection; training; international cooperation; and evaluation. However, apart from the provisions for training front-line professionals, interpreters and other stakeholders, the NAP has no gender-specific integration provisions tailored to the needs of TCN VoT, the budget for its implementation is insufficient and lacks comprehensive indicators for monitoring and assessing its impact. Indicatively, the NAP foresees the establishment of a 24/7 helpline (IV. Protection and Support, p.22) and the drafting of new informative material (III. Identification

[4] The bodies represented in the Multidisciplinary Coordinating Group are: the Law Office of the Republic, the Ministry of Justice and Public Order, the Police, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Labour, Welfare and Social Insurance, the Department of Labour, the Social Welfare Services, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Education and Culture, the Civil Registry and Migration Department, the Asylum Service, the National Machinery for the Rights of Women and the Union of Cyprus' Municipalities. Four NGOs also participate in the group.

and Recognition, p.18) for presumed and recognised VoT with allocated budget €140.000 and just €300 respectively.

Gender and asylum policies

The Republic of Cyprus recognises refugees in accordance with the terms of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the related 1967 Protocol, which together provide the general foundation for the system of protection for refugees. Despite the fact that the Geneva Convention is gender blind, Cyprus interprets this document in a gender-sensitive way, recognising gender as a basis to grant protection. Vulnerable groups that can apply for asylum include victims of gender-based violence (**GBV**), trafficking and survivors of female genital mutilation (**FGM**).[5]

Nevertheless, women and men are not equally integrated and protected under asylum processes. When it comes to integration policies, Cyprus has not been particularly successful in addressing the gender-specific needs of the asylum population. This is perhaps related to the lack of women's participation in local and national politics. Emmenegger and Stigwall (2019) found that European countries who have a balanced share of female MPs tend to produce more women-friendly asylum policies and are characterised by more positive attitudes toward immigrants from non-EU countries. By comparison, Cyprus currently ranks 21st in the EU on the Gender Equality Index (56.9/100 points – 11 points lower than the EU average). Cyprus has made the least progress in the domains of work, knowledge, and money. Gender inequality is significant especially in the domain of power, where Cyprus is at the bottom of the rankings among MS (EIGE, 2020). More specifically, the recent parliamentary elections (May 2021) resulted in the just 8 women MPs being voted in, out of a total of 56. Since independence in 1960, the participation of women in decision-making roles in Cyprus has ranged between 0% and 20% (MIGS, forthcoming). The recent elections also saw rising support for the far-right party; in much of Europe, a key characteristic of such parties is the strong backlash against women's rights (FEMM, 2018). Thus, it is no surprise that Cyprus scored among the lowest in by Emmenegger and Stigwall's (2019) Women-Friendliness in Asylum Index (WFA), which explores the implementation of women's rights in the framework

[5] For more information, see http://www.moi.gov.cy/moi/asylum/asylumservice.nsf/0F2309A3D5BC6D33C2258329003060E9/$file/INFORMATION%20LEAFLET%20for%20Applicants%20for%20International%20Protection.pdf

of asylum recognition and reception. The low WFA score reflects the weaknesses of gender equality and migration policies in Cyprus.

Chapter Four: Psycho-social and legal support

In the COALESCE project, psycho-social and legal support is understood as the provision of gender-specific psycho-social and legal services that aid the rehabilitation and social integration of victims of trafficking. These support services are targeted towards women VoT for sexual exploitation who may have also experienced other forms of VaW. For the purposes of this mapping, the semi-structured interview guides (Annexes I and II) include certain indicators adapted from ASSIST (ASSIST Project, 2020; Yonkova et al, 2020). These involve "*the identification and recognition as a victim of trafficking; obtaining and/or renewal of the necessary immigration permits; international protection related matters; any other immigration related matters, as well as criminal matters*". Specific focus is added but not limited to: "*family-related matters, securing access to appropriate housing (provision of shelters and protected flats); medical assistance; compensation; access to material assistance; psychological support; other integration initiatives*" (ASSIST Project, 2020, p. 36). These indicators are investigated in the context of the analysis of gender-specific psycho-social and legal support needs in Cyprus.

Identification

VoT come into contact with a variety of frontline services, such as asylum officials, refugee reception centres, social workers, the police (specifically, the Police Office for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings, from here on, the anti-trafficking unit), local health authorities, as well as NGOs. It is important that professionals are able to identify VoT as such (Yonkova et al, 2020, pp. 10-11).

Under the 2014 Trafficking Law, a National Referral Mechanism (**NRM**) was set up in 2016 to provide relevant authorities with a consistent and standardised way to process presumed victims of VoT while giving them the support they need as quickly as possible.

The NRM sets up a co-operation framework between and among the governmental services and NGOs and provides guidance and standard operating procedures for handling victims and

potential victims of human trafficking, including identifying and referring victims to services. First responders must carry out preliminary identification of presumed VoT[6] and refer them to the SWS, which act as the first point of contact with victims of THB.[7] The SWS must then provide presumed victims with information and notify the anti-trafficking unit at the police, who are tasked with formal identification.[8] The police must provide the victim information on 1) their rights in the relevant judicial and administrative proceedings, in a language the victim understands,[9] 2) the services they are entitled to and the organisations providing support and legal advice, 3) as well as other forms of assistance they may need, notably in the framework of criminal proceedings. Moreover, victims must be informed about how to file a complaint against the perpetrator and about the procedure that follows the official complaint, their role and obligations in the proceedings, the conditions under which they can receive protection, legal assistance and legal aid, and the procedure for claiming compensation (GRETA 2020, p. 13).

While the co-ordination between the SWS and the police and their respective roles are clearly defined in the NRM, the experiences of women in this study reveal that this coordination is badly implemented in practice; as a result, presumed VoT are less likely to be identified and assisted in a timely or adequate manner.

TCN VoT in Cyprus are also mentioned/covered by provisions of the Refugee Law of 2000, which defines the categories of persons considered as vulnerable (Art. 18). These are similar to Article 21 of the Recast Reception Conditions Directive (2013):

> *[M]inors, unaccompanied minors, disabled people, elderly people, pregnant women, single parents with minor children, victims of human trafficking, persons with serious illnesses, persons with mental disorders and persons who have been subjected to torture, rape or other serious forms of psychological, physical or sexual violence, such as victims of female genital mutilation.*

[6] Paragraph 158.
[7] If a person or service believes or has reasonable suspicion that any person may be a victim of trafficking, he/she has to refer the presumed victim to the SWS (Art. 44)
[8] The unit has specialised staff trained to perform victim identification, including a forensic psychologist. VoT are issued with a "certificate of identification" with which they can access services.
[9] Art. 32(1)

The Refugee Law provides for an expedited asylum process where: the application is likely to be well-founded or when the applicant is vulnerable, or in need of special procedural guarantees, as in the case of unaccompanied minors (Within the meaning of Art.18). Despite efforts made to ensure adequate prioritisation of vulnerable cases as in cases of THB, it does not necessarily mean that other important safeguards are followed, such as the evaluation of their vulnerability and psychological condition and how these may affect their ability to respond to interview questions (based on Special Procedural Guarantees, see Art. 10 of the Refugee Law).[10] Often these cases may start out prioritised but meet delays due to a backlog of cases, lack of interpreters or additional requirements for the applicant to meet, for example, victims of torture must be examined by medical professionals, whereas VoT must be interviewed by the police anti-trafficking unit (AIDA, 2020, p. 30).

The Refugee Law sets out the following identification mechanism: an individual assessment shall be carried out to determine whether an applicant has special reception needs and/or requires special procedural guarantees, and the nature of those needs (Articles 9ΚΔ(a) and 10A). These individualised assessments should be performed within a reasonable time during the early stages of the asylum procedure, and the requirement to address special reception needs and/or special procedural guarantees applies at any time such needs are identified or ascertained. Any special reception/procedural needs of applicants identified by a governmental authority should be reported to the Asylum Service. The law also provides a basic overview of the procedure, specifically, the competent officer at the place where the claim of asylum is made fills a special document indicating any special reception and/or procedural needs of the claimant as well as the nature of such needs. The type of that document is not specified in the law but according to the Asylum Service it has been provided (AIDA, 2020, p. 52).

The Refugee Law also allows medical professionals (e.g., doctors or psychologists) to include any special reception/procedural needs of the applicant upon examination. Furthermore, within a reasonable time period from the admission of an applicant in a reception centre and

[10] If the Asylum Service finds that an applicant is in need of special procedural guarantees, they should be provided with adequate support, including sufficient time, so that the applicant can benefit from their rights and comply with their obligations throughout the asylum procedures in order to be able to highlight the elements needed to substantiate the asylum application. However, and crucially, the level and kind of support is not specified in the law. (AIDA, 2020)

following personal interviews, social workers and psychologists must prepare a report to the Asylum Service indicating any special reception needs. Finally, Social Welfare Services (**SWS**) must also report special reception needs to the Asylum Service. However, specific identification mechanisms that would systematically identify vulnerable asylum seekers have not been put in place (AIDA, 2020, p. 52).

EASO, among others, have highlighted these processes are lengthy and acknowledged the need for identifying and addressing in a timely manner the special reception and procedural needs of female VoT and other vulnerable persons (EASO, 2021). Currently, in the absence of targeted legislative or procedural guidelines, as well as defined or standardised assessment tools and approaches, the identification and assessment of special reception and procedural needs take place in a fragmented manner. SWS and other health provision services – who are the most competent authorities to evaluate the needs of vulnerable persons – are limited by a lack of training around gender-specific and culturally appropriate identification and assessment procedures. Furthermore, there is no procedure-monitoring mechanism that could contribute to the effective coordination among the relevant governmental departments/agencies (AIDA, 2020, p. 53).

In recent years, the identification and assessment of vulnerable persons by the Asylum Service have markedly improved with the support of EASO (2021), UNHCR, and the Cyprus Refugee Council. However, the efforts are not gender-specific and often neither consistent nor systematic. This leads to cases still going unidentified, and the needs of female VoT not being met, thus confirming the need for a comprehensive and effective mechanism.

According to AIDA (2020), in 2019, the Asylum Service carried out screenings of vulnerabilities at the Pournara Reception Centre in Kokkinotrimithia. While these were not full assessments, the results nevertheless indicated that cases were going unidentified. From March 2019 onwards, the CyRC also carried out vulnerability assessments at the centre using UNHCR tools and, through this process, identified a number of vulnerable persons that were referred to the relevant authorities. Such referrals became priority cases at the Asylum Service. However, gender-specific data was not collected and it is not clear if any other procedural guarantees were applied.

From mid-2019 onwards, the Asylum Service and EASO, in collaboration with UNHCR and the CyRC have been working to set up a comprehensive vulnerability assessment procedure at Pournara, including the development of a common tool to be used for screening and assessment of vulnerable persons, a Standard Operating Procedure, and a team of vulnerability examiners to carry out the assessments. Vulnerability examiners receive training by EASO, however the process has been hindered by insufficient supervision and coordination of the team, as well as high staff turnover (AIDA, 2020, p. 54). Furthermore, due to the rise in numbers of new arrivals and the impact of COVID-19, these efforts were put on hold from March until October 2020. Due to overcrowding at Pournara, as well as ongoing COVID-19 protection measures, the procedure has yet to be completed.

Vulnerability experts have been provided by EASO to Cyprus since 2018, with more envisioned in 2021. EASO support over the last four years has led to more cases being examined. Yet it is still not clear if all such cases are being identified and handled in a timely and appropriate manner. In 2018, CyRC reported issues relating to the duration of interviews, with some cases concerning vulnerable persons said to last five hours and, in a case of a victim of torture with ongoing physical pain, eight hours (AIDA, 2020, p. 54).

The lack of an effective identification procedure prevents and/or delays (depending on the specific vulnerability and support consequently required) access to support, which is already limited. In cases of female VoT, this will often impair the efficient examination of asylum applications as the victims do not receive prior counselling – psychological or legal – that may assist them in presenting their asylum claim adequately (AIDA, 2020, p. 54).[11]

From the perspective of the interviewees, the fear of talking to officials is still the greatest obstacle in being identified as a VoT.

> *It was very difficult for me because that time it was not easy for me to talk about my story. […] I was still starting working with [the psychologist] and I was not feeling really comfortable to explain, to expose myself, to make confidence but they were good.* (CY2)

[11] The lack of effective measures for identifying vulnerable persons was raised in the recent review on Cyprus by the UN Committee against Torture, specifically the lack of procedures to identify, assess, and address the specific needs of asylum seekers, including survivors of torture (AIDA, 2020, p. 54)

The Asylum Service claims to have provided the necessary training and resources to the authorities where asylum applications are made, as well as other relevant authorities (e.g., the Labour Office and the SWS) so that the latter can identify VoT and other vulnerable persons. In practice, there is no formal assessment tool for vulnerability and the authorities have been coached to merely look for visible signs of abuse or exploitation on the applicants.

Regardless of the trainings, vulnerable persons and especially female VoT, and their special reception and/or procedural needs are still identified in a non-standardised manner. This might happen during contact with the SWS, during the interview for the examination of the asylum application, and by local NGOs offering community services and support. There are no statistics or official data available on the effectiveness and the gender impact of this procedure. Accordingly, the majority of the women involved in this needs analysis reported that their first contact of support was an NGO, specifically the CyRC and Caritas Cyprus or the social workers at Pournara. For example, CY1 was referred to the SWS by a social worker working at the reception centre. The SWS interviewed the victim and then referred her to the anti-trafficking unit at the police. With regards the quality of identification support, as well as useful information and guidance, the majority stated that lawyers and social workers at the NGOs attended to them, heard their stories and accompanied them to the Immigration Office and the SWS, and assisted them in applying for victim of trafficking and refugee status.

The biggest challenge for asylum officers, the police, immigration authorities, and specialised counsellors is that they depend upon the affected women revealing their experiences before they talk to them about their legal entitlements, rights to victim compensation, etc. Due to the understaffing at government agencies and in refugee accommodation, victims are often unidentified and/or women VoT are not provided with specialised counselling.

With regards to the women VoT participating in this analysis, two were identified by social workers at the reception centre, four were identified by local NGOs and/or referred to NGOs by local community members, one through an immigration officer who directed her to the SWS, and one through the governmental shelter.

> *Actually, a lady walked up to me because she saw that I was crying. […] So, she called [a person working in one NGO]. And then [NGO worker] asked her to bring me to her office. So, it is from the NGO office that I met the police.* (CY3)

I came to [NGO]. When I got there, the lawyer that attended to me and she heard my story, she took me to the Immigration Office, and they did everything. And then she later on referred me to [another NGO worker], which I went there, and they attended to me and they took my stories and then applied for the trafficking too. (CY8)

After the first point identification at the reception centre by social workers or asylum officers or NGOs, the VoT who participated in our study were referred to the SWS and then guided mostly by NGO social workers through the process of accessing residence and asylum process as well as psycho-social and legal support. Most of the women in the sample reported lack of information and delays in communication, especially those identified at the reception centre.

I was in the camp and I was having a problem because [of my situation]. I was trying to find someone who can listen to me and try to help me. So, one lady who was working from Asylum Service she was making her round, she was asking questions to some groups [...]... maybe it was that day that she introduced me, like, trafficking because I didn't even know what is trafficking, even till now, I cannot really explain to you clearly what is trafficking. […] then she called me and I try to explain her my story, […] so that she can understand my situation with my child and she told me that okay I understand, we will call you. And she didn't even call me after, […] I cannot really explain to you how it happened for my file to be trafficking because no one explained to me, no. (CY2)

In addition, some interviewees reported negative experiences during their interviews with the police, describing it as a group interview with other women at the shelter. One interviewee expressed how she was not given the opportunity to tell her story: "*[the police] told us that we were lying and that they would give us one last chance to tell the truth*" (CY6). They pressured the interviewee to reveal who had coached her on what to say, and she was not provided with any information on the process before or after the interview. The interviewees also reported that when an NGO worker was with them, there was a shift in attitude from the police: "*everyone acted differently*".

The women reported that they had to attend several interviews over a long period of time (e.g., a year), an experience they described as re-traumatising:

It was not easy because the police was very harsh. And from there, I developed the high blood pressure because of all the pain and torment that I went through. It was

> *very harsh, like when she's talking, she will hit the table. She will shout at me […] But I will take it calmly. Even though it's so painful, because anytime […] I have a call that I'll be going for interview, I won't sleep for like one week, because I know it won't be easy […]. Most of the girls that went there, they would say the same thing.* (CY8)

In addition to being called in for several interviews (e.g., one woman had ten interviews) participants faced delays and lack of communication with regards to the status of their trafficking proceedings. A mother VoT reported that it was only when she gave birth that she was invited to an interview during which she was informed that she was recognised as a VoT. Even then, she was not provided with any official documentation; the police forwarded it to the Asylum Service and gave a copy to the NGO social worker (CY8).

In practice, the procedure for identifying and referring female VoT, as defined in the law and the NRM, is not always followed, with the SWS often failing to inform presumed victims of their rights. Referral delays can result in presumed VoT not gaining access to appropriate accommodation and support; meanwhile delays also slow down the victim identification process as presumed victims are not brought to the attention of the police for formal identification, or if they are, they are sent there without the basic information SWS was meant to provide them. In addition, the experiences of the participants in this study reveal that police officers are not sufficiently trained to provide gender-specific and culturally sensitive information to female VoT.

Despite translation and interpretation services being envisioned in the law, participants found there was a lack of provision of information in their native language(s) and a similar situation when they were being interviewed by police. Any interaction between female VoT with the police should take place in the presence of an interpreter[12] qualified in the relevant language.

Residence permits

Participants highlighted that obtaining a residence permit is a crucial aspect of their integration. As CY3 and CY7 note, uncertainty is the hardest part of their experience:

[12] Cypriot authorities report that it is a prerequisite for interpreters working with the Asylum Service to follow the European Asylum Support Office (**EASO**) online training module for interpreters (GRETA, 2020, 14). However, such training must be gender-specific, compulsory and systematic.

They have not given me my reply from the asylum service. So, I don't know what's happening. Do I belong or I don't belong? So, I still have a lot of uncertainties. […] For now, I don't know anything. I don't work. I just wake up. Days are passing. (CY3)

I don't know, for 2 plus years now, I don't know my situation. I am not too happy, I am still waiting for my answer for the asylum seeker. It is taking too long. I don't know my situation. It is difficult. (CY7)

TCN VoT can obtain a temporary residence permit in Cyprus in two ways: either by applying for a temporary residence permit through the 2014 Trafficking Law or by applying for asylum (the 2000 Refugee Law). According to the former, victims of trafficking are protected from penalties where the offence is directly related to their status as victims, including illegal entry and residence. Victims are granted a reflection period of at least one month (Arts 53-54), with the possibility of renewal (Art. 55). No fees are required for the issue of a temporary residence permit. During this period, the victims have the following rights:

- protection from deportation;
- the right to medical care;
- the right to information concerning their rights and possibilities provided for by the Law;
- public allowance;
- the right to psychological support;
- protection by the police;
- free translation and interpretation services;
- protection of personal data;
- access to programmes provided by the state or by NGOs in cooperation with the state (if available) for rehabilitation (e.g., vocational training);
- the right to change sector of employment.
- The Law also provides for the right of the victim to seek compensation.

According to the Refugee Law (Art. 18A), recognised refugees are granted, as soon as possible, a residence permit that is valid for three years. The permit is renewable for restricted three-year periods only. The law also allows for the residence permit to family members of

beneficiaries of refugee status that do not qualify individually as refugees, with the same time limitation and obligation to renew, however in practice this limitation is rarely applied. Obtaining a residence permit is the top priority for VoT for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Until they receive the documentation that they have been recognised as such, they can only receive their rights as asylum seekers.

There are no units within the Asylum Service dedicated to handling cases of VoT. However, there are five specialised case officers dealing with claims from vulnerable persons, including three officers for unaccompanied children and two for vulnerable groups such as VoT and GBV (AIDA, 2020, p. 56). The data collected from women VoT in this study reveal that appropriate interview techniques are not systematically used, and the quality of interviews still depends on individual officers/case workers conducting them. In addition, due to the lack of an adequate identification mechanism, in many cases the interview will be carried out by an officer/case worker who lacks the necessary training. In line with the AIDA Report (2020), there is absence of an internal procedure to refer cases, which highlights the essential (albeit unrecognised) role of front line NGOs in the legal support of VoT during the lengthy and often re-traumatising process of the interview and examination of the application.

It should be noted that due to the global escalation of COVID-19, interviews for the examination of asylum applications were conducted inconsistently and were also suspended between March and May 2020 and at various other times throughout the year depending on the restrictions in place due to the pandemic. This situation caused further delays in obtaining residence permits, with delays of upwards of three months between being recognised as VoT and receiving their paperwork. For CY4, this meant continued access to rights as asylum seeker but not as a VoT, which would afford them the rights and protections as provided by law. The lengthy procedure is very frustrating for VoT, while it is not adequate to meet the needs of asylum seekers who are VoT, despite the implementation of several EU Directives.

Access to information

It is evident from the experiences of the interviewees that the provision of information in relation to rights and available services for women asylum seekers recovering from trafficking and sexual violence is inadequate in responding to the trauma they experienced. Most

interviewees were either not aware of their rights or were unable to exercise them due to the challenges in navigating the system.

> *I don't even know who my social worker was. I didn't know. I didn't have any idea of who my social worker was.* (CY8).

> *Nobody informed me about the rights I have. The person that was supposed to inform me about the rights I have was my social worker. And she did not. She told me she was going to come see me and she never did. [...] Most of the times when you call her, she doesn't answer her calls. And if you sit and you even wait for her, she will tell you she is coming and she doesn't come.* (CY3)

Some participants reported that it was only after they were recognised as a VoT that they met with their social welfare officer. Prior to the interviews with the police, some women reported that they had no contact with the SWS and received no information about their rights, the procedure that would be followed or even the results of their application. Crucially, the specific needs of women asylum seekers VoT had not been assessed to identify whether specialised support and access to services were needed. An exception to this were those identified as VoT that had received such support in the government shelter for trafficked women. Interviewees reported the information provided to them was mainly through NGOs working in the field, and from other asylum seekers.

Access to information regarding their asylum case was a source of particular frustration to interviewees and exacerbated feelings of anxiety and helplessness. In addition, the interviewees were not adequately informed by the SWS about the procedure of recognition as a VoT. Only one interviewee was informed about her rights by the SWS social worker after she was recognised as a victim:

> *I received a small paper when the social worker came to the shelter to inform me that I've been recognised. She gave me one small booklet that have the rights of recognized victim of trafficking. […] I read through them. I have them with me. That was how I knew about the rights […] that has everything.* (CY5)

CY2 reported that after leaving the reception centre, she went to the Asylum Service where someone reviewed her file and realised she may be a potential victim of trafficking and then

informed her that she will be contacted by another government official without stating who or from which department/agency. She was then contacted by the SWS. The interviewee explained that the social welfare officer did not provide clear explanation of her situation and what THB is.

> *I was not myself. I was lost because I needed help. […] And I was trying to meet with someone who can really explain my situation. [The SWS social worker] that day, I don't know if that's because she was having a lot of work, she didn't really take the time to explain to me, because trafficking to me was a new word […] I was not really understanding my situation. […] It was very, very confusing. (CY2)*

One of the main difficulties reported by interviewees in accessing information and support was in communicating with the SWS. Interviewees that tried to contact their social welfare officers directly reported that they were made to feel unwelcome. For example, their calls were seldom answered: "*When you call, they not picking the phone. If you go there, you cannot see them. It is difficult*" (CY7). Again, most interviewees reported that communication with the SWS and other services was facilitated by NGOs. While they were grateful for the assistance, they felt that being dependent on NGOs and not being able to advocate for themselves disempowered them.

Language barriers also limited access to services available to asylum seekers. Some interviewees could not understand why interpreters were not available at the public services since many VoT and asylum speakers do not speak English or Greek. CY7 found her interview with the SWS and the police to be very hostile, which was frustrating and upsetting; meanwhile, the French interpretation was inadequate, which exacerbated the situation.

Overall, the interviewees identified from the reception centres seemed to demonstrate a relatively higher level of wellbeing due to access to information and services. Caritas Cyprus and CyRC report that those at the Kofinou Reception Centre seem to have greater access to information and services than those living in private accommodation due to the availability of on-site services. They report having regular contact with their social worker and feeling satisfied with the level of information they had in relation to their case. They also reported that the on-site social worker had facilitated access to psychological support.

Criminal proceedings

Despite the fact that the Cyprus government increased the penalties for THB and criminalised the use of sexual services by victims of trafficking, Cyprus has failed to provide free legal aid and expertise to trafficking victims during criminal proceedings (GRETA, 2020). Currently, criminal proceedings often take two or more years. Such systemic delays remain one of the key challenges hampering the rights of the women affected by trafficking for sexual exploitation and abuse.

VoT report finding these protracted investigations exhausting. Frustration and confusion are also caused due insufficient information of the process they must follow (i.e., interviews with the police anti-trafficking unit). The unit often delays informing the women of their decision to recognise them as VoT. CY1 and CY2, for example, have waited over 12 months to find out about the police decision following their interview.

> *They told me that they will call me to give me the answer. But till today almost more than one year after, they never called me, so I don't know what happened there. […] I've never got the feedback. [The policewomen] told me that okay, I have to discuss with my supervisor, we'll call you in one to two weeks. Till today, they never called. […] So that's what I'm telling you that even now I cannot explain to you what is trafficking because finally they didn't call me to explain to me why they were taking all this information and what they did with the information they took from me.* (CY2)

Faster investigation procedures would be helpful for women VoT. In order to achieve this goal, the number of police and prosecutors could be increased. In addition, due to the complex legal difficulties facing VoT, it is of paramount importance that they receive legal assistance, whether as witnesses in criminal proceedings or for matters relating to their temporary residence permit.

In terms of convictions, according to the 2020 GRETA report, police submitted 58 trafficking cases for prosecution over the course of 2015 to 2018, but only nine cases resulted in convictions. Given the low conviction rates, the Cypriot authorities must intensify the investigations for human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

One positive development is the government has set up a facility that makes it possible to limit the number of interviews that underaged abuse victims can undergo. Otherwise, the GRETA report noted that from 2015 to 2019, no legal aid was provided to VoT in Cyprus. While

victims can seek financial compensation and damages through criminal or civil proceedings, there are no examples of a criminal court granting such compensation in THB cases. The GRETA report concludes by urging the government to set up a victim support fund and to ensure convicted perpetrators compensate victims.

Access to adequate accommodation

Housing is directly related to the health and security of asylum seekers and is particularly important to improve the functioning and wellbeing of VoT and their children. When asylum seekers enter the Republic of Cyprus, they can either apply for material assistance and seek private accommodation, or apply for accommodation at the Kofinou Reception Centre or other state accommodation. For those living in private accommodation, rent allowance is paid directly by the authorities to landlords. Due to the lack of capacity at Kofinou, most asylum seekers end up in shared houses or apartments, which they are expected to find on their own and subsequently provide all the necessary rental documentation to the SWS. All interviewees living in private accommodation said that they received no assistance (from governmental authorities) in securing adequate housing and that they had instead depended on other members of their community, NGOs, or searched online.

In addition to the reception centres, since November 2007, a state shelter for female victims of sexual exploitation has been operated by the SWS, meant to provide VoT with safe accommodation, psychological support and counselling, as well as individualised treatment plans. In practice, beyond providing a basic level of safety, the remaining services of the shelter are largely inadequate for the needs of the women.

The women interviewed for this study have experience of this state shelter, NGO shelters, as well as private accommodation shared with one or more other persons. They also lived at the reception centres, in hotel accommodation provided by the state, or in housing provided by NGOs and other community members.

After leaving the reception centre, CY2 explained that the SWS found hotel accommodation for her in a village. After four days, she was forced out of the hotel due to the high cost of living, and looked for a place in an urban centre instead:

There was no food in the village and it was very difficult to get something to eat there, it was very difficult. And to have a lunch there you had to pay 1.5EUR only for one bread or something like that, so it was difficult to eat that time. So, I had to live somewhere that I know that if I have 2EUR I can cook rice maybe for two days […] to have food you have to come to Nicosia, you have to pay the bus, so it was not easy, it was very difficult for me. Especially, at that time I didn't have money so for me 1 EUR was very big money for me. (CY2)

The lady that helped me and brought me to the [NGO], I met her at a church. So, I continue to stay with her we have time together until I started getting the money and then [NGO social worker] found another apartment for me and I was sharing with another lady as well. (CY8)

A participant who was pregnant at the time, CY6, was moved from the government shelter to a hostel with three other pregnant women. Four pregnant women sleeping in one room with bunk beds made for a challenging living situation. An NGO worker who had been familiar with all the women from the shelter stepped in to arrange more suitable accommodation, meanwhile the women took shelter at a local church, sleeping on the floor. Even when private accommodation was arranged, the difficulties continued with SWS delaying rent to the landlord.

It was evident from the interviews that most, if not all, women asylum seekers experience housing insecurity at some point during their time in Cyprus. A number of interviewees stated that property owners are not willing to rent to foreigners, or are likely to try exploit them, for example, asylum seekers may be required to pay several months' rent in advance in order to secure rental contracts.

Once they hear you're a refugee they don't want to give a house. So, I think most landlords equally have problem with the way they relate to people, especially foreigners. […] He told me that we don't accept refugees. […] that it is the policy of the company. […] yeah, he said it openly. All that they want is students. (CY5)

This often precludes asylum seekers from finding appropriate accommodation, as they do not have the economic means to cover the deposit and advance. Women asylum seekers and VoT

also report that governmental payments for rent are often delayed resulting in them having to pay out of pocket or risk being evicted.

Women with young children receive no assistance in accessing adequate or even safe housing, even though low quality and precarious housing situations are particularly risky for single mothers. Conditions are often inappropriate with overcrowding and lack of basic amenities and privacy. While some women had managed to improve their living conditions over time, many were still living in poor conditions. CY3, for example, a mother whose residence permit papers are still pending, cannot get a job. As a result, she is forced to remain in an overcrowded house with other VoT.

> *Where I was living before the house was falling, the roof on top, it was falling. So, I told the landlord, and he didn't do anything. There was no running water, house really needed a lot of things. And I've been living there for like three years before I packed and came to this one.* (CY8)

The level of financial assistance provided to single women asylum seekers was also reported as inadequate and delays in rent payments by the SWS put women in precarious conditions. One participant, CY1, who chose to move out of the reception centre did not receive any assistance in finding accommodation. She is now facing financial difficulties in paying for her rent due to limited financial benefits, as well as bureaucratic delays and difficulties:

> *The Welfare did not pay the house because they told me that they needed a letter to prove that I'm outside of the camp. So, I went back to the camp to tell them that they have not supported me with my house rent and with my food money. And the Welfare is demanding that they should give a letter to prove that I'm out of the camp. So immediately they give the paper and then they told me in the Welfare that they were sorry that they don't have any cash. They were to prepare me a cheque for early March. So, my house rent for last month and this month, I have not paid in because I'm still waiting for the Welfare. Because they have not sent the cheque. They have not done anything.* (CY1)

Assistance with accommodation is essential in order to ensure that victims can escape from their exploitation, but also to start their recovery and reflection in a safe environment

conducive to their healing. The gender-specific guidelines from the ASSIST project echo this line, specifying that VoT should receive accommodation that is designed specifically for vulnerable women. The women also need support searching and securing private accommodation, especially in cities where the housing market is very expensive.

Financial and material support (compensation)

Article 9IA(1) of the Refugee Law says the state must provide "*economic support for everyday expenses and the provision of housing, food and clothing […] in order to secure an adequate standard of living capable of ensuring the subsistence and physical and mental health*". Asylum seekers living in private accommodation receive material support in the form of a monthly cheque amounting to €261 for a single person which is supposed to cover food, clothing, utilities, medical expenses, transportation and other basic expenses. As mentioned earlier, the rent allowance is paid directly to the landlord and is approximately €100 per month.

Material assistance is determined by the Council of Ministers (the executive). As a result, the financial support received by asylum seekers is dependent on the political climate at any given time. With the post-recession rise of right-wing political parties, this is a clear and imminent threat to female VoT, as for any group of displaced migrants hampering their ability to survive the immigration process (Angeli, 2020).

The EU directive on reception stipulates that material assistance must "*ensure a standard of living adequate for the health of applicants and sufficient to ensure their subsistence*". The amounts indicated above fail to cover the basic needs to asylum seekers, leaving them, in short, below the poverty line. It is worth mentioning that the allowance per person is significantly lower than the Guaranteed Minimum Income that is provided to Cypriot and European citizens: €480 in cash, compared to the cheque of €261 that asylum seekers receive. While the material assistance policy is problematic for all asylum seekers, we have seen that it has a more adverse effect on women. In the case of families, the asylum application tends to be formally submitted by the male "head of the family" f– with his partner and other members of the family considered as dependents – and it is he who receives and manages

the cash or vouchers. By treating women as non-subjects or secondary beneficiaries who are not eligible for direct funding, the practice thus reinforces patriarchal structures.

In order to apply for material support, NGO assistance becomes crucial, as applicants face multiple obstacles when accessing services, including lengthy bureaucratic processes, complex administrative requirements, practical challenges, and personal problems relating to shame or unease around asking for help as well as stigmatisation and mistrust from the authorities.

> *Sometimes in the month I have 30 EUR to eat for me and my child. It's not easy. It's very difficult. I have to try to see if Caritas can give me some bag food. Because, finally, my child came, my child [is not an asylum seeker], so I don't have any help for [my child]. I tried any means, that's what I was looking for job. So now, I have one cheque, one support, but I have to share it with my child.* (CY2)

The role of the SWS in the lives of the women interviewed is limited to the provision of financial support and assistance. They are mandated to perform an initial assessment of whether an asylum seeker has sufficient resources to cover the basic needs of their household, and to provide financial assistance.

Other than the cheques, most participants reported receiving emergency money ranging from €50-75 after leaving the reception centre or the government shelter. Almost all reported having experienced delays in the processing of payments, forcing women to live on charity, borrow from friends, or do odd jobs in order to earn money. Reasons for delays or suspensions of payments vary and are often not made clear to beneficiaries; either due to communication difficulties or due to a lack of access to social workers. Participants reported once more that accessing or reinstating financial assistance was facilitated by NGOs.

Finally, some participants expressed feeling frustrated with having to depend on benefits, as they would prefer to work and earn a living. In fact, the top priority for participants was work. They also called for the government to arrange for special rental prices with landlords to accommodate TCN's needs.

> *[…] the little money government is giving us. A room is 250-300 euro. Government is assisting you with 100 euros to pay the rent. So, tell me. That is why in one house, there are like 10 people, because at least three persons have to fit in one room in order that government can pay the house. So, it's difficult.* (CY3)

CY1 also stressed the importance of the support in the form of clothes, shoes and toiletries received by the Cyprus Red Cross (a local NGO) during her stay at the reception centre. One interviewee expressed that even though hunger was not an issue for her, others may face difficulties with food. Despite the fact that NGOs do help asylum seekers by giving them food, CY3 connected material and food support with the issue of inadequate housing:

> *Because, if you at least have a place that is your own, that you can sleep there peacefully without disturbance, is already a therapy to the person. […] The welfare is giving the person coupon to buy food [but] where would this person cook the food to eat? Where?* (CY3)

It is crucial that gender-specific support does not fall below minimum standards, in order to avoid a return to an exploitative situation. In this regard, the gender-specific needs of VoT must be taken into consideration, for example, being able to afford sanitary products, contraceptives, children's clothing, etc.

Access to medical and reproductive health services

Healthcare services require a distinctly gender-specific approach focusing on the recovery of women from physical trauma and other conditions related to sexual exploitation, including sexually transmitted diseases, pelvic infections, infertility and addiction. Gynaecological healthcare should be provided in a trauma-sensitive and culturally appropriate way. Women from West African countries, such as Nigeria, may also be survivors of female genital mutilation (**FGM**). It is essential that the medical professionals – who provide the medical certificates and detailed gynaecological reports that are vital to VoT asylum procedures and residence permits – are mandated to undergo structured training on the immediate and long-term health consequences of trafficking as well as on FGM.

Those who have had their status as VoT rejected – who continue to pursue a residence permit based on their asylum application – have many difficulties in accessing the healthcare system. Many female victims have devastating problems that affect their physical, mental, sexual, and reproductive health. There are frequent reports of unwanted pregnancies, forced abortions, STIs, vaginal haemorrhaging, and miscarriages as a direct consequence of sexual violence. In addition, many VoT suffer from chronic physical ailments and mental health issues, which are a result of trauma.

Beyond the basic health checks upon arrival that all asylum seekers must undergo, there is no evidence that specialised care is available that takes into account the specific needs of female VoT asylum seekers. Only once recognised by the police can female VoT get access to the general medical healthcare system (GESY). Potential or rejected female VoT meanwhile have access to the medical healthcare rights through their asylum application. Access to reproductive healthcare and services, including assistance with birth and post-natal medical support, is often facilitated by NGOs, particularly for those women living outside state shelters or reception centres.

Furthermore, there is no evidence of procedures in place to monitor the health needs of female VoT or that sexual health information and education is made available to them, both of which could play an important role in mitigating further risk of sexual GBV and facilitate healing.

The state shelter seems to provide the more coordinated access to medical services. When they leave the shelter, women VoT, especially mothers, report difficulties in accessing free medical care. Some have been able to apply for a medical card on their own. The majority said that they did not receive sufficient assistance by governmental services but rather felt more secure by the support received from NGOs; for example, NGO social workers made themselves consistently available to accompany them during the visits to the hospitals.

Beyond hospital care, several participants emphasised that giving birth and not having the essentials for the baby causes additional insecurity. They emphasised how the government did not provide them with material support and were left entirely to depend on the NGO networks and the local community for the essentials. CY7 felt language was an yet another

barrier adding to an overall stressful situation. She received assistance by Caritas to issue her medical card, arrange her medical appointments, and apply for social welfare support. Notably, she felt that if someone who speaks the language had not accompanied her, she would not have been taken seriously:

> *The [health services] do not care about you. So then all the time I was going with somebody working with Caritas. They helped me to do everything with the baby.* (CY7)

Specialised gender-specific treatment for female VoT affected by torture and trauma is limited in practice. Difficulties in accessing public healthcare services can be exacerbated by for cultural reasons too (e.g., shame, especially if the medical professional is a man, language barriers, etc.).

Attention must also be paid to the comprehensive sex education for VoT. Gender-specific support from counsellors and other frontline health professionals is important, as participants reported lack of information about their own bodies, menstruation hygiene, contraceptive methods to avoid unwanted pregnancy as well as a desire to access information about available support services, as there are no reproductive health clinics in Cyprus; CY5, for example, became pregnant unintentionally. Sex education and intercultural work as part of reproductive health and rights is a medical need identified not only by the women VoT in this study, but also by the NGOs involved in integration. The VoT in this study suggested awareness-raising among the refugee community and affected women through seminars and other educational activities on family planning, sexually transmitted diseases and birth control, as well as safety in relationships, sexual violence and building healthy relationships.

Access to mental/psychological healthcare services

Many VoT suffer from mental health problems such as port-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The participants in our study cited trauma as a significant obstacle to integration: they deal with insomnia, anxiety and other symptoms that effect their wellbeing. The women also often struggle with suicidal thoughts. Psychiatric assessments are frequently necessary to support their asylum applications in Cyprus. Much like other medical services, however, access to public mental health services also presented a huge challenge for the study participants.

Instead, NGOs – funded either under EU programmes and/or donations – offer the majority of specialised counselling to support the affected women.

The law states that material reception conditions are provided to applicants to ensure an adequate standard of living capable of ensuring the subsistence and physical and mental health. But no other provisions are included in the law determining the conditions and level of assistance provided. The UN Committee against Torture, in its latest report (2019), expressed its concern about:

> *the lack of procedural safeguards to ensure a timely medical examination of alleged victims of torture and ill-treatment, including psychological or psychiatric assessments when signs of torture or trauma are detected during personal interviews of asylum seekers or irregular migrants. The committee regrets that the requested information on the rehabilitation of identified victims of torture and ill-treatment, and on priority access to the asylum process for those who have been so identified, was not provided*.

Gender-specific health programmes should be put in place for VoT to treat not only the physical but also the mental consequences of the complex stress instigated by sexual exploitation. Repeated rape is a frequent characteristic of THB for the purpose of sexual exploitation and therefore its victims would benefit from gender-specific psychological support (Yonkova et al, 2020, p. 23).

CY8 reported suffering from trauma-related mental health issues and receiving psychiatric and psychological assistance, but only when her situation had escalated significantly. As the SWS do not systematically monitor cases of VoT, the victims often do not receive the treatment they need in a timely manner.

> *I am seeing a psychologist which most of the problems that I face I always go to her to tell her because now I really have a psychological problem that is really weighing me down. And I'm seeing a psychiatrist, too as well. So, I take pills. So, all the time when I go to her and she asks me if my social worker came to check on me and I said no. And she'll be like, why? That they are supposed to check on me all the time to see if I'm okay with the baby or anything. But they don't come to check.* (CY8)

In another case, a social worker working at the reception centre helped a participant (CY1) get psychological support from an NGO, which she found extremely helpful. We note that psychological support on the public system was not offered. CY2 was offered the possibility of seeing a governmental psychologist by the anti-trafficking unit at the police following her interview, but they never followed through. Like CY1, she found this support from a local NGO, who gave her access to their lawyer, social worker, as well as their psychologist.

The participants in this study frequently mentioned the importance of the psychological support received from the local NGOs. Even when face-to-face sessions became online only, they felt the level of care did not suffer.

> *With the corona they stopped but [the psychologist] always gets to me on phone. She always checks on me. She wants to know if there is anything, I would like to talk with her, things like this. So, she's really helping, because at times I really, like, need somebody to talk to and I'm happy she's always there*. (CY1)

As mentioned, while the government-run shelter provided access to psychological services, this key type of publicly-funded support became incredibly challenging to access once the VoT (especially mothers) moved into other types of accommodation.

Access to other integration opportunities

Leisure activities were identified by the participants as an important factor in their gender-specific integration and support, as they facilitate social interaction, personal growth and structure in everyday life.

According to AIDA, leisure activities at Kofinou are organised and implemented mainly by non-governmental actors, such as NGOs, voluntary organisations, individual volunteers, education institutions etc. Activities at the centre offered throughout the year include labour-related trainings, language courses, computer lessons, cultural activities, art/handcrafting, school support classes, occupational therapy sessions, gymnastic classes as well as various recreational activities for adults and minors. Other facilities include two open-space playgrounds and gym equipment, a playroom, a library and a computer room. Wi-Fi is available at the centre, although poor speed and coverage are frequent complaints. The

computer room, the playroom and the library remain locked, unless there is a specific activity taking place (AIDA, 2020, p. 79).

CY1 attended sewing classes at the reception centre, however, the class was discontinued. She expressed that there was initially a willingness to start leisure classes, however, attendees could not commit after the first class. She was unsure of the reasons why there was such a low attendance, but this could be attributed to a need for more promotion and encouragement of such opportunities and activities. It should also be noted that VoT do not receive any financial support for leisure activities or additional integration measures. The women may be offered recreational activities within the reception centre. Referring to the importance of support provided by the Red Cross, CY1 said:

> *They were always coming every Saturday to help us. And also, they are always taking us on trips. […] Yes, like day trips, like, they take us to the zoo […also to a] cooking competition in Nicosia. So that's good.* (CY1)

Data from our interviews – in line with other local research – also shows that female VoT experienced increased isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kyritsi et al, 2020). Once COVID-19 restrictions are relaxed, it's key to support VoT with additional integration opportunities and re-open public spaces (e.g. parks), where they can socialise.

Chapter Five: Economic empowerment

According to the International Labour Organization, economic empowerment involves providing an individual "*with the right skills to excel in the job market*" (ILO, 2020). This can be achieved in numerous ways, for example through vocational training programmes, non-formal educational activities (e.g., language courses and computer skills training). Such activities can enable better integration in the labour market by developing the capacity for work and economic independence (Pesce & Christodoulou, 2017, pp. 12-14). Within the context of this needs analysis, economic empowerment consists of the following aspects: 1) employment opportunities; 2) education and vocational training and other resources related to business initiatives; 3) resource mobilisation and funding schemes (start-ups, small businesses); 4) access to technology and digital literacy; and 5) mentoring.

Beyond the services provided by the Department of Labour for the general population, there are no government-funded economic empowerment programmes in Cyprus specifically for women VoT.

Meanwhile, NGO-led programmes offer migrants and refugees training aimed at labour market integration, such as Greek and English language courses, as well as information, advice and guidance with regards to social benefits. For example, MiHub provides services to vulnerable migrants.[13] It should be emphasised, however, that none of these programmes are tailored to female TCN VoT for the purpose of sexual exploitation, nor do they employ a gender- and trauma-sensitive approach.

Access to employment

Entering the labour market is one of the main integration goals for women VoT. Although all the women who participated in this study were unemployed at the time, access to employment was high among their priorities, not only in terms of economic independence and supporting their families, but also for their emotional and psychological wellbeing. As mentioned above, many women felt frustrated at being dependent on financial assistance and would prefer to be able to earn their own living. Employment was understood as a way to gain more independence and agency over their lives, and a sense of stability, responsibility, as well as structure.

Despite this, all participants reported many limitations in finding appropriate employment as asylum seekers, particularly those with young children who do not have access to affordable childcare. In fact, for some women, employment was not an option at all:

> *The first [priority] is the house, it is not easy. Without the house there is nothing. Also to get the job, it is not easy. Maybe single people, people who have a baby it is not easy. There is nobody to take care of the child. The school is so expensive. [In Cyprus], normally they go to school at five years but before five years, it is not easy. So maybe they can start by doing something about that, for the mothers.* (CY7)

[13] See https://www.mihub.eu/en.

Another participant also considered integration into the labour market as unrealistic due to the high cost of childcare (CY5). She explained that, far from being able to save for emergency funds, she had to make cuts from the family food budget in order to pay for nursery (pre-school):

> *There are so many girls that have children, but they cannot afford to pay in private schools because the child's age.* (CY5)

Matters relating to motherhood play a significant role in the integration of VoT and require gender-specific support. Being a mother means dealing with additional bureaucracy (e.g., registering the child and applying for child welfare benefits). The lack of childcare proves to be a great obstacle to integration, as it makes it impossible for the mothers to attend language or other integration courses, for instance.

Government policy would do well to include free or affordable access to childcare for ages 0-5, which would immensely benefit VoT who are mothers. Awareness of childcare options is another element to focus on, as this could help the affected women in their effort to get back into the job market.

Some interviewees also raised concerns about the kinds of jobs offered to them, which do not take into consideration their actual qualifications. For context, the positions they can apply for legally are restricted to nine sectors, all of which are for some form of low-skilled, manual, and typically underpaid, job. Although a number of women only had secondary education, they had professional experience gained in their country of origin:

> *I went to school, I am not stupid. If my life was different, maybe I would be able to do the same job that [the governmental worker] doing there. So, I'm not asylum seeker here in Cyprus today because I'm idiot. […] I'm not working. I've been looking for jobs. I'm tired […] It's very hard. I think I have my CV in all the supermarkets in Cyprus. But I guess with the corona and all this stuff is not also easy. Especially, now with the asylum seekers it is very difficult to get a job.* (CY2)

One participant found employment with help from her social worker and the manager of the reception centre, however, at the time she was not in a position to undertake the employment due to her psychological state.

> *I did not think that I can do the job at that time. […] It was not like it was too early. It was just that I did not have confidence in myself. Because of what I've been through.* (CY1)

Participants also mentioned that racism and xenophobia put them off the job opportunities they do have access to:

> *When I go find a job they don't want asylum seeker, you know […] I don't like to stay like this, no work, it is not easy. Only to stay in your house. It is not easy. […] I want to integrate into Cypriot society.* (CY7)

> *Then [in 2015 – 2016] I was just like, looking for some [job], because then I was really bogged down, and I was depressed, and I was really looking for somebody to talk to. All the time I feel like all hope is lost. But when I got recognised this made me feel like okay, now I can get a job, because I had kids back home, that I can take care of my kids and make them feel happy. But when I started looking for job, it was not all what I thought. Getting a job is not easy. I used to go to the Labour Office to apply for jobs. So, every month, I had to go and renew my labour card. They used to give me jobs like, the farm, cleaner. I went to so many cleaning companies, and they rejected me. They said, there's no vacancy. But I told them, the system is showing that there is a vacancy. They said no, they don't have anything.* (CY8)

Apart from the impact on their ability to become economically independent, unemployment also had an impact on the women's emotional and psychological wellbeing. Feelings of helplessness, having "*too much time to think*", and social isolation were some of the negative consequences of unemployment expressed by the participants. Some women said they were willing to work "*any job*" or as volunteers just to be able to leave the house for a few hours.

> *I just want, like, to keep myself busy, like keeping myself busy is like helping myself. If I'm busy helping myself, I can also, like, if I see somebody in my position or even if I*

come to talk to somebody, I would like, feel very proud. But the issue now is like... When you go to look for a job anywhere, I don't blame them, they are doing their job. They will just tell you we are sorry you cannot work in this place because you are not recognised. The list that my social worker gives me, it shows that I can do cleaning, I can work in a bakery and I can do this, but at times when you go there, they still refuse […] Any activity that can keep me busy. I just want to be busy. (CY1)

But if you can work, you will be open, you will meet people [...] In fact, when I stay on my bed I, sometimes, because of difficulty, I think a lot of what happened in my life, like this. And sometimes I go back again to depression, I start again to despair. But if I'm working, if I leave my house, I can keep myself busy, even though it's not specially for money, but if I can do activities or something like that you can keep yourself busy, you will feel less bored. (CY2)

What I need right now is just to have a place of my own and a job. Yes, what I need now, even more than anything is to have a job. Like, I wake up in the morning, I go to work, and I come back. I want to feel responsible. I want to do like, you know, I want to have for life. Because, like you, you have a programme […] I wake up, I come out of bed whenever I want, because what am I waking up for? […] So, it's really stressful for me, it stresses me a lot. I sleep, instead to get rest, I get tired. […] For me, don't give me food, teach me how to work, I want to work to earn my own money. Because, before I used to work, I earn my own money. I don't depend on somebody to give me something. (CY3)

Due to the abovementioned challenges in accessing employment, women VoT resort to seeking employment in the informal economy where they are at increased risk of labour and sexual exploitation.

Access to education: Language and other integration courses

Participants reported having limited access to training and education due to lack of information, language barrier, and lack of access to childcare. Some had taken Greek language classes offered either by NGOs or during their time at Kofinou or the government-run shelter. CY1, for example, completed two Greek language courses, and had an online exam. Some

expressed the desire to continue their formal studies but did not see this as a possibility until they got their refugee status and managed to secure childcare (e.g., CY4).

Participants mentioned that they were best informed by NGO workers who disseminated information on language courses through social media, emails and text messages, however, due to the pandemic, the language courses were discontinued.

Other participants said that applying to take part in language courses was too challenging. This reveals the need for both more intensive information-sharing as well as capacity-building on applying to such opportunities. By the end of 2020, those who were following certain courses also found their progress halted due to programme funding running out. New funding cycles, especially with the added burden of the pandemic, didn't launch until spring 2021.

One participant expressed that, even though she receives regular emails and messages for training opportunities from a local NGO, due to her job (making jewellery) she cannot attending the trainings at the times they are scheduled.

Overall, participants showed a strong willingness to learn Greek, which was also indicative of their desire to be more integrated into the Cypriot society.

> *I want to learn the language so I can integrate very well. […] Like, if I had known the language, I wouldn't face these difficulties. And with that, I can get a good job to feel belonging. […] The six years that I've been in Cyprus, I think is, apart from me not getting the job and I know maybe it's my fault. I don't know the language. I need to put more effort to learn the language, so I can get a good job. (CY8)*

Access to other economic services

In Cyprus, information on resource mobilisation, access to technology, funding schemes (start-ups, small businesses), technology and digital skills development, mentoring and care services remains extremely limited.

While none of the participants were economically independent at the time of their interviews, all expressed a desire to change their circumstances, for example by completing vocational training and/or getting a job. The interviews highlight the need to raise awareness of employment rights in VoT, as they are often lacking important information with regards to

the employment schemes in Cyprus. Gender-specific employment support programmes would be of great benefit.

Digital literacy (e.g., how to use a computer, write emails, submit applications, etc.) is also a skill that would greatly benefit women VoT to better integrate in the labour market, but also access and navigate public services. This kind of psycho-social support should also include opportunities for mentorship programmes or even peer-to-peer programmes focusing on social and economic integration.

Chapter Six: Discussion of findings

Cyprus has minimal gender-specific integration programmes focusing on social, legal and economic support for female TCN VoT for sexual exploitation. What programmes exist do not target the aforementioned group. Both primary and secondary data show this continues to cause multiple obstacles to integration for affected women.

This study's analysis of psychosocial and legal support and economic empowerment in Cyprus reveals the need for diverse, long-term projects to support VoT that respond to their gender- and trauma-specific needs.

Overall, the women VoT participating in this needs analysis expressed that NGOs were crucial in meeting their essential needs, as well as for navigating the complex socio-legal system in general and the asylum process in particular. The participants expressed a deep gratitude and appreciation for the support that was provided by local NGOs.

> *I think the best thing that happened to me in Cyprus now is that day that I met [NGO social worker] at the reception centre, who gave me the number of [NGO]. Because if I didn't know that association, I don't really know how will my life be till now. It's very difficult, every day, you don't know where to go, you don't know how to find help, you don't know even to look for job. It's very difficult even though I'm trying to make some Greek lessons when I can. It's not easy also to speak the language […] But when you learn and you cannot practice, it's very difficult.* (CY2)

In contrast, the participants felt that governmental services, especially the SWS, as first responder, failed to respond to their needs in an adequate or timely manner. The provision of information must be strengthened to presumed victims and formally identified VoT

regarding their rights, the services available and how to access them, as well as the implications of being identified as a VoT.

While the introduction of the NRM was a positive step, further measures need to be taken to ensure that it is effectively implemented in accordance with the needs of the women VoT: by providing appropriate training to Social Welfare Services staff and strengthening their capacity to fulfil the role assigned to them by the NRM, as well as training staff at District Immigration Police offices on trafficking indicators and the NRM. Further, additional measures should be taken by the Cypriot authorities to proactively identify victims of THB among asylum seekers. Further, Cypriot authorities should take further steps to train interpreters to the issue of human trafficking in line with the targets included in the NAP 2019-2021. (GRETA, 2020, p.40).

In terms of economic empowerment, participants highlighted the absence of effective economic services, such as resource mobilisation, digital literacy, as well as corresponding integration programmes and research that would make a significant difference in the lives of this particularly vulnerable target group. Integration into the labour market was cited as particularly challenging given the ineffective system for job identification, the lack of access to affordable and accessible childcare, the inexistent guidance for housing, and the perceptions of landlords. Here, the Department of Labour should put in place a better system for job identification and open up the types of jobs made available to female VoT based on their vulnerability assessments.

Furthermore, female VoT have diverse life stories and cultural backgrounds, as well as a variety of educational and professional skills, strengths and needs. By acknowledging that they are not a homogenous group, integration programmes should focus more on engaging affected women in shaping such interventions. Thus, it is of paramount importance not only to offer gender-specific support, but also to follow a victim-centred approach (Yonkova et al, 2020, p. 24). Only with participatory approaches can affected women be empowered to become independent.

The majority of the women VoT participating in this study expressed that the governmental services need to be urgently improved, above all by treating them with respect and giving them the opportunity to explain their situation and be heard when they seek assistance. CY2

described the condescending and infantilising way in which she has been treated by government officials:

> *They don't listen to you. They have to listen to you, at least. […] It's very difficult to feel like you're nothing. Yes. And most of the times that you go to the government office, you come back and feeling like you are nothing. Really, they have to review how they treat people, is not good. […] They really need to improve their service. They need to train, to give the training to their agents, so that they learn to respect people, that equality is for everybody. Yes, I'm asylum seeker, but I'm a human being. I'm not an animal. I just didn't have the same luck.* (CY2)

Interestingly, despite experiencing widespread discrimination and xenophobia, all women VoT stated that they felt safer in Cyprus. This can perhaps be attributed to the socio-political stability in Cyprus compared to their countries of origin.

> *Really, that is the only thing that is perfect for me. It's not okay, but I feel safe. I can go in the street, I can go. […] I'm not afraid. And I always think that if I have a problem, I will call the police. […] I feel safe.* (CY2)

In addition, there is a great need for anti-racism awareness-raising campaigns targeting Cypriot society, and especially employers and landlords.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion and recommendations

The lack of a solid and ongoing integration plan in Cyprus has left female TCN VoT for sexual exploitation struggling to find gainful employment, while also exposing them to much higher rates of homelessness and exploitation. Women also face multiple forms of discrimination, significantly fewer opportunities to integrate into their host societies, and a higher risk of experiencing violence.

This needs analysis report positioned women's experiences at the forefront. It reveals that these women face additional challenges that are specifically based on their gender. Sexual violence, sexism, childcare responsibilities, traditional gender roles and institutionalised gender stereotypes are factors that put extra barriers to the integration of women displaced migrants in Cyprus.

We have provided evidence with this research that integration policies in the Republic of Cyprus do not meet the needs of female VoT for sexual exploitation. Many participants felt that integration policies through language training, employment and vocational training do not cater to their needs. This is because most integration policies are gender neutral and therefore risk being gender blind. One reason is likely the fact that voices of refugee women are not heard when drafting integration policies. The needs of refugees are communicated to the central government either by NGOs or self-declared community representatives who are usually men. Refugee women-led organising can contribute to social-group empowerment and a power shift that would allow women to advocate for their rights.

The following table presents areas in which female VoT require more gender-specific support. We outline some gender-specific recommendations that are in line with the needs and gaps we have identified throughout this study.

Area	Recommendations for gender-specific support
Identification	• Systematic and mandatory training for government officials, particularly at the Social Welfare Services (SWS), on victim identification, assistance, and referral (training to be offered also to police, judiciary, healthcare professionals, administrative staff, teachers: nursery, pre-school, primary and secondary education) • Establishment of a mechanism for the systematic identification of female VoT and other vulnerable asylum seekers • Definition and standardisation of systematic vulnerability assessments/screening tools and approaches • Introduction of a basic framework of operation for effective monitoring mechanisms • Targeted legislative and procedural guidelines • Timely handling of the special reception and procedural needs of female VoT • Enhancement of the implementation of the National Referral Mechanism (**NRM**) on THB.
Right of residence	• Reduction of delays in providing victim assistance, including access to health care, rental disbursements, and financial assistance, as well as residence permits
Access to information	• Timely information about rights and integration measures, as well as on the progress and status of cases.
Criminal proceedings	• Provision of legal assistance to victims • Reduction of delays in court proceedings

	• Victim-centred investigations and prosecutions and implementation of witness protection measures • Facilitation of fast-track investigations (by increasing the number of police and public prosecutors and a monitoring mechanism for the implementation of the NRM) • Allocation of sufficient resources to enable the anti-trafficking unit to effectively investigate all offenses • SWS to refer all potential victims in a timely manner • Training for prosecutors and judges so human trafficking charges aren't downgraded to offenses that carry lighter penalties and make victims ineligible for aid and compensation (GRETA, 2020).
Family-related matters	• Intercultural work with mothers • Provision and financing of childcare so that mothers can pursue their own integration • Comprehensive sex education • Access to sexual and reproductive services (including free or low cost contraception and abortion services).
Accommodation	• Gender-specific accommodation in women's shelters that specialise in VoT or private flats.
Compensation and material support	• Gender-specific, victim-centred material support irrespective of residence status • Improved access to child benefits irrespective of residence status
Medical support	• Provision of medical support irrespective of residence status • Gender-specific medical support, e.g., gynaecological assistance • Inclusion of FGM in medical curricula and practice • Systematic and mandatory training for healthcare professionals.
Psychological support	• Gender-specific, trauma-sensitive psychological support measures and practitioners with knowledge in the field of THB and trauma • Provision of native-language therapy options • Provision of psychological support without restrictions arising from immigration law. Extension and integration of such support within the national health policy.
Access to other integration measures	• Facilitation of social, gender-specific integration by e.g., covering the costs for participation in mother and child activities, sports courses, sewing courses etc. • Better use of adult education centres for education and training opportunities for TCN • Improvement of affordability/accessibility of integration activities (e.g.,by diversifying payment methods)

Access to education	• Provision of integration courses targeting specifically women • Personalisation of teaching – smaller groups • Educational interventions/lessons focusing on women's everyday needs (e.g., sanitary products, childcare, parenting, wellbeing, etc.)
Access to employment	• Consideration of individual needs and requirements with regards to education and vocational training plans for VoT • Development of a network of trustworthy employers and educational institutions • Provision of cost-free childcare
Access to other economic empowerment services	• Financed training, self-employment, start-ups, etc. to facilitate economic independence • Access to digital literacy lessons • Implementation of mentoring programmes (incl. peer-to-peer mentoring) with volunteers and/or former VoT clients • Easily accessible information about employment rights • Establishment of refugee women's rights organisations.
Gender-specific policies	• Mainstreaming of gender equality across integration policies in order to ensure that migrant women and men are benefiting equally and that the protection and integration needs of women displaced migrants are met with statutory funding • Gender-specific support through specialised counselling centres, with sufficient long-term funding (personnel and material costs) • Extension of shelters (including government-run shelter) for VoT with long-term funding for psycho-social, legal and integration support • Extension and funding of nurseries that make childcare affordable • Establishment of gender-specific interpretation and cultural mediation • Funding and implementation of awareness-raising in Cypriot society to combat racism and sexism (through national campaigns and educational programmes) • Funding and support for research looking at gender-segregated data on the integration of VoT, displaced migrants as well as violence against refugee women • Immediate lifting of the reservation on Article 59 of the CoE Istanbul Convention. • Implementation of recommendations made by the Ombudsman and other entities that monitor and evaluate anti-trafficking policies and efforts.

Table adapted from Wells et al, 2021, pp. 35-36.

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Annexes

Annex I - Questions for interviewees who are recognized victims of trafficking (VoT)

Tell me a little bit about your time here in Cyprus.

- How long you have you been in Cyprus?
- What is your current legal status? (AS, IP, VoT)
- When have you been recognized as a victim of trafficking?

In Cyprus, people who are victims of trafficking are entitled to certain rights. How did you learn about these rights?

- When were you informed and by whom? (Also, ask about knowledge on procedures, information received on steps to be taken etc.)

Have you received any support since you arrived in Cyprus? If yes, what support have you received in Cyprus and by who?

- Were you assisted by Social Welfare Services? If yes, what was your experience?
- Have you been interviewed by the Police? What was your experience when you were interviewed by the Police? Did the Police inform you about their decision after the interview? If yes, how were you informed? Was this decision communicated in a language that was understandable to you?
- Were you offered safe accommodation? Was this accommodation in a shelter? If it was not in a shelter, were you assisted with finding an accommodation? If yes, by who?
- Were you offered psychological support? If yes, who helped you find this support? Was it provided by the government or by an NGO?
- Did you receive financial support? If yes, was this from an NGO or the Government? What kind of financial support did you receive? Cash, covering costs of services?
- Did you have access to (emergency and necessary) medical care? Was this free of charge?
- Did you have access to interpretation and translation services? (if applicable) Also, clarify whether everything provided in writing was translated. Who provided these services (Government service or NGO)?
- Who helped you apply for financial support, access medical care and psychological support? How (if at all) did Social Welfare Services assist you with this?
- Who helped you with obtaining a medical card?

How do you feel about your life in Cyprus?

- Are you currently working? Did someone help you find a job? (Also clarify whether interviewee has the same access to the labour market as a Cypriot citizens do in practice.)
- Do you have a residence permit on the basis of being a VoT? Is it still valid? (If not, inquire what was the most challenging about this change.)
- Do you consider returning to your home country? Why?
- Do you feel safe in Cyprus?

- Are you happy with your current living situation? Did this improve since you were recognised as a victim of trafficking/were granted international protection?

Do you feel like you have a sense of community in Cyprus?

- Do you feel like you are a part of Cypriot society? To what extent do you feel like you are a part of Cypriot society? What helped you to feel part of Cypriot society?
- What makes it difficult for you to feel part of Cypriot society?
- What could help you feel more part of Cypriot society in the future?

Who do you think played the biggest role in helping you to access services and support?

- Have you recieved any support from NGOs (give examples of NGOs if that will be not clear)? Please describe the kind of support you received? (give examples: financial, advice, advocacy, psychological support, translation etc.)
- What could NGOs do differently to make you feel more supported?
- What could governmental actors (e.g. SWS) do differently to make you feel more supported?

Note: Throughout the interview, it is important to specify whether the services we are asking about are the services a person receives as an asylum seeker/international protection holder or as a victim of trafficking.

Annex II - Questions for interviewees who are not recognized victims of trafficking (VoT)

This guide was used for women interviewees with unsuccessful applications for the status of VoT or who are in the process of recognition at the time of the interview.

Tell me a little bit about your time here in Cyprus.

- How long you have you been in Cyprus?
- What is your current legal status? (AS, IP, VoT)

Did you receive assistance from Governmental services?

- What was your experience when you were assisted by the Social Welfare Services?
- What was your experience when you were interviewed by the Police?
- Did the police inform you of their decision following your interview? If yes, how did they inform you? Did they inform you in a language that was understandable to you/ did you have access to translation services? If not, how long have you been waiting for their decision?

Have you received any support since you arrived in Cyprus? If yes, what support have you received in Cyprus and by who?

- Were you offered safe accommodation? Was this accommodation in a shelter? If it was not in a shelter, were you assisted with finding an accommodation? If yes, by who?
- Were you offered psychological support? If yes, who helped you find this support? Was it provided by the government or by an NGO?
- Did you receive financial support? If yes, was this from an NGO or the Government? What kind of financial support did you receive? Cash, covering costs of services?
- Did you have access to (emergency and necessary) medical care? Was this free of charge?
- Did you have access to interpretation and translation services? (if applicable) Also, clarify whether everything provided in writing was translated. Who provided these services (Government service or NGO)?
- Who helped you apply for financial support, access medical care and psychological support? How (if at all) did Social Welfare Services assist you with this?
- Who helped you with obtaining a medical card?

How do you feel about your life in Cyprus?

- Do you feel like you are a part of Cypriot society? To what extent do you feel like you are a part of Cypriot society? Do you consider returning to your home country? Why?
- Do you feel safe in Cyprus? Why?
- Are you happy with your current living situation? If applicable: Has it improved since you were granted international protection?
- What helped you to feel more like part of Cypriot society?
- What makes it difficult for you to feel part of/ included in Cypriot society?
- What could help you feel more part of/ included in Cypriot Society in the future?

Who do you think played the biggest role in helping you to access services and support?

- Have you received any support from NGOs (give examples of NGOs if that will be not clear)? Please describe the kind of support you received? (examples: financial, advice, advocacy, psychological support, translation etc.)
- What could NGOs do differently to make you feel more supported?
- What could governmental actors (e.g. SWS) do differently to make you feel more supported?

Note: Questions 7 – 9 and 12 should be asked with caution since by law potential or rejected victims of trafficking to not have such rights. This gap is usually filled in with the rights they have as asylum seekers.

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