

Anette Brunovskis and Rebecca Surtees

Leaving the past behind?

When victims of trafficking decline assistance



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A research co-operation between Fafo and NEXUS Institute

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AI	Amnesty International
AVR	Assisted voluntary return
BiH	Bosnia-Herzegovina
BKTF	Se Bashku Kunder Trafikimit Te Femijeve (All Together Against Child Trafficking)
CAFV	Counselling Against Family Violence
CAAHT	Coordinated Action Against Human Trafficking
ECPAT	End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes
EU	European Union
HIV/Aids	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
HRW	Human Rights Watch
ICCO	Interchurch Organization for Development Cooperation
IFS	International Forum of Solidarity
IO	International organisation
IOM	International Organization for Migration
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
NRM	National Referral Mechanism
GO	Governmental organisation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
RCP	Regional Clearing Point
SEE	South Eastern Europe
STC	Save the Children
STD	Sexually transmitted disease
TACT	Transnational Action against Child Trafficking
TRP	Temporary residence permit
UK	United Kingdom
UNICEF	The United Nations Children's Fund
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

While many victims of trafficking are assisted within the numerous anti-trafficking programmes found in both countries of destination and origin, a noted trend has been that some victims of trafficking also decline the assistance that is offered to them. Little is known about the motivation for and consequences of these decisions. The reasons that victims decline assistance and the circumstances under which they do so is the topic for this report, in which we describe the results from a study conducted in Albania, Moldova and Serbia. We approached the issue through interviews with 39 victims of trafficking and an additional 13 respondents in street prostitution, whose status with respect to trafficking could not be determined. We also interviewed 90 key informants, such as government officials and persons who work in assistance programmes.

Several key informants said that some victims of trafficking declined assistance because they wanted to go abroad again. “To go abroad”, however, is a term used rather ambiguously and, in many instances, it was assumed that victims who “went abroad” again were going into prostitution. In some cases this choice seemed to disqualify victims from being offered further assistance, undermining their credibility, particularly with the police. In some cases victims decline assistance because their trafficking experience has not ended in spite of their having returned home. Especially in the case of police raids or document controls abroad and deportation, victims may still be in debt or vulnerable to traffickers and consequently do not feel free to accept assistance. Other victims may indeed be free, but must adhere to their original objective of migrating for work because the initial circumstances, often tied to financial or other hardship, that preceded migration have not changed.

The family is also an important factor when victims decide whether or not to accept assistance. Many trafficking victims have been deeply traumatised by what they have been through and have great difficulties in trusting strangers. Many just want to return home for family support. Sometimes, however, it becomes difficult to accept assistance because the family is sceptical of the services provided or the assisting organisation. Most victims find it difficult to tell their families exactly what they have been through and, therefore, the family often do not know exactly what the assistance is for, why it is being offered, what it consists of, and often where the shelter accommodation is located. In other cases, families are mistrustful of the victim herself and do not want her to leave home again. In several cases we found that husbands were jealous and

mistrustful of their returned wives and actively tried to discourage them from entering shelter accommodation or accepting other assistance.

There is a common assumption that all trafficking victims require and want some form of assistance or support to recover and re-integrate into society. However, there are indications that some victims do not need assistance as they can cope on their own. In some cases this is because assistance is not required and the victim wishes to get on with her life. In other cases, while the victim may need assistance, she is able to access alternative sources of support. This may be either in the form of family support, support from their social network, community-based support or non-trafficking related assistance.

One of the greatest challenges in offering assistance to trafficking victims lies in information and communication. Victims generally reported not fully understanding what assistance was being offered, particularly when they were initially identified. This can cause some victims to decline assistance simply because they do not understand the purpose of the assistance or they do not trust the people offering assistance. None of the victims of trafficking we interviewed had been offered written material on what assistance consisted of, or indeed, what organisation was offering assistance. Aside from problems in communication between service providers and victims, communication between service providers and other anti-trafficking actors within and between countries was a challenge. Some victims felt misled about what would be available to them upon return to their country of origin and felt let down when this support was not forthcoming. Information to victims of trafficking in the initial stages after leaving their trafficking situation poses particular problems. At this stage, victims are often traumatised and in shock and not always able to comprehend what is happening, including services being offered. Trauma may severely impair their ability to process information and make choices about assistance. On a more practical level, some lack of understanding is related to language barriers in countries of destination. Some victims reported an inability to understand the services being offered because staff in destination countries did not speak their language. To a certain extent, this may also account for victims who returned home with unrealistic expectations of assistance and, thus, victims declining assistance upon their return home.

In some cases the organisation of assistance itself is a reason for victims to decline. Assistance programmes have often centralised their services in the form of a shelter or a day centre where education or training is provided. However, not everyone is able to access assistance in these forms because they have other obligations, such as work or care of children or other family members. There are also usually very limited possibilities for earning money while receiving assistance, meaning that assistance is not always something a victim can afford to accept as it is at the cost of earning a regular income. Where offers of assistance paralleled a trafficking dynamic, this also leads to victims declining. We found in several of our interviews that some features

of assistance seemed to victims to mimic the trafficking experience. Typically victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation have been deceived, often by someone they trust, with false promises of assistance and support in building a new life. They are moved to a new location, with hopes of realising this new life but, in the end, are exploited and abused. Offers of assistance may, to a certain extent, resemble this process in that similar promises are made – victims are transported and assistance toward a better life is offered. Some trafficking victims also decline assistance because of fear of retribution from their traffickers. Many feared that accepting help and shelter accommodation would be seen by their traffickers as co-operating with authorities.

While the topic for this research focuses on the victims of trafficking who decline assistance, rather than those who were not given assistance, we did find that the distinction between the two categories was sometimes blurred. In some cases beneficiaries had been excluded from programmes because they had broken rules. In some cases this seemed to be intentional behaviour, with the aim being dismissal from the programme. In other cases, beneficiaries had seemingly left voluntarily, but only because they found the programme rules and conditions untenable. In all instances, the picture is more complicated than just one party rejecting the other and the tension and interplay between service providers and beneficiaries merits careful consideration. In some cases, it was an open question as to how transparent programme rules were and just how clear it was to beneficiaries that there were offences for which they could be removed from a shelter or excluded from an assistance programme. Several victims had taken part in an assistance programs that operated with very strict rules and restrictions. For example, many shelters employed a closed model, which usually means that residents have little or no freedom of movement and must be accompanied when they are outside the shelter. Often victims who had been in such shelters found the conditions very stressful and prohibitively restrictive. One woman rejected further assistance after being assisted against her will in a closed shelter while abroad. She explicitly said that her experience of assistance was worse than her attempted trafficking.

Trust is a pivotal part of the decision-making process for a trafficking victim in choosing whether or not to accept assistance. Some victims are suspicious of certain forms of assistance, in particular when they are offered financial support or small loans. In some situations, a victim's decision to decline assistance is linked to her past experiences of assistance, both within the trafficking framework and more generally. It was clear that negative assistance experiences influenced declining assistance.

One particular challenge in offering assistance to trafficking victims is that receiving assistance can identify women as trafficked within their local communities and, therefore, lead to stigmatisation. The stigma attached to trafficking victims is often complex and may relate to the association with prostitution or with failed migration.

Some victims of trafficking do not relate to the trafficking term itself and, as such, assumed that assistance was directed at people who were “forced more” than they

were. Others may feel that their romantic involvement with the trafficker or their prior knowledge of prostitution means that they are not really victims. Further, several women expressed discomfort with the role of victim. Some also found it problematic to be on the receiving end of assistance and told us that they were used to providing for themselves. Some women may also want to distance themselves from the traumatic experience and move on with their lives and are, therefore, not willing to enter into trafficking specific assistance.

The majority of victims who accepted assistance said they did so because they had no other option. Several women said that, looking back, they do not know what they would have done had they not been offered assistance; some even suggested that they considered suicide. This clearly demonstrates the important function filled by assistance providers in all countries that have a trafficking problem. This also, however, illustrates the very high threshold for some women to enter into an assistance programme, as many of those who accepted did so only when they were at the end of their tether and felt there was no other option. Conversely, we also found that people who had any type of alternative to assistance would generally decline trafficking specific assistance and seek help in other places. This could mean that some of the characteristics associated with profiles of trafficking victims may be more representative of assisted trafficking victims than of trafficking victims generally. One common idea is that most victims come from dysfunctional families. Our data, however, indicates that trafficking victims who have good family relationships will generally return home rather than enter into an assistance programme. Victims with family support are, therefore, less likely to be registered in the assistance system, where most information about victims of trafficking comes from and on which new programmes and approaches are built.

The difference between assisted and unassisted victims is a finding that has implications both for policy and research. In the context of policy and programme development, there is a clear need for proper assessments and analysis of trafficking assistance efforts, both what works and equally what does not.

Preface

Assistance to and protection of trafficking victims is a pivotal part of anti-trafficking work. This study was initially conceived because in our previous research on trafficking we had noted that some victims declined assistance offered and available to them. While we felt that this was an issue that was important in its own right, we also felt that a consideration of this behaviour could potentially also tell us a lot about the conditions women and girls face after trafficking, what the challenges are, and whether there are factors that could be changed in order to ease the transition from trafficking. We are grateful that the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed and decided to fund our project. We also found as we conducted our fieldwork and data collection that this topic resonated with many service providers who had faced the phenomenon over a period of some time. We appreciate their generous sharing of information; often discussing the challenges and obstacles they face with great candour. We also thank these organisations for facilitating access to a wide range of trafficked persons whose experiences form the foundation of this study. We are grateful for the time and effort these organisations spent in supporting our research. We have not individually listed these supporting organisations because we do not wish for our findings to be unduly associated with any one programme, organisation or country. Our findings are reflective of the situation generally and the organisations that supported us in our work should be commended both for their transparency and their commitment to addressing this issue.

It is always with a certain regret that we thank our respondents in the studies we undertake on trafficked persons, as those we would like to thank the most are the ones we can never mention by name to protect their privacy and confidentiality. Here we refer to all the trafficked women and girls who lived through the experience and chose to share with us details of this dramatic stage of their lives and the difficulties as well as successes they have since faced. In this report, 39 trafficked women and girls and 13 street prostitutes whose trafficking status could not be determined, provided us with insight into their lives. Without their courageous and generous participation, this research in particular, and trafficking research in general, would not be possible. We continue to be impressed with their willingness to share their stories and opinions in order to improve the conditions and opportunities for other trafficked persons. We can only hope to have fairly represented their experiences in this report and that

the knowledge and insights shared herein will be put to use in supporting trafficked persons.

The authors of this report have not conducted this research alone; we have benefited from the cooperation of a number of colleagues as part of the research team. Laura Mitchell was central in the data collection process, conducting fieldwork in Serbia and Albania. Guri Tyldum was central in the design of the project. In Serbia, the Anti Trafficking Centre's team of outreach workers - Jelena Milic, Borislav Djurkovic, Stefan Dimitrijevic and Suzana Vukoje, - were hired as field assistants to our project. They interviewed 20 women, girls and transgender persons found in prostitution in Belgrade; interviews that provided valuable information about the lives of people in this situation, and information we would not have been able to collect without their competent assistance. We also want to extend our gratitude to Slavica Stojkovic, Valbona Lenja and Stella Rotaru from the IOM missions in Serbia, Albania and Moldova who went out of their way in helping us organise the repeated fieldworks in these countries. Further, we have had indispensable support through our team of highly competent translators; Milena Markovic, Daniela Hasa, Aljona Thaci, Julian Hasa and Alina Legcobit. Finally, we would like to thank May-Len Skillbrei of the Fafo Institute and Stephen Warnath of the NEXUS Institute for their on-going support for the project and their careful review of and inputs into the study.

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Part I: Project background

1 Project description

Introduction

Our primary task in this research was to explore why some victims of trafficking decline assistance and under which circumstances. But, in the course of our fieldwork, we found that our topic increasingly became as much about the very diverse circumstances trafficked women and girls face when they come into contact with assistance systems both at home and abroad. The reasons women and girls decline assistance also tells us a lot about the constraints and challenges faced by those who choose to accept. We, therefore, hope that this report will contribute to the knowledge about the conditions and needs of victims of trafficking in general, beyond the more narrow focus of declining assistance.

Our wish to engage in research on this particular topic was borne from our observations of victims declining assistance during other research on trafficking in human beings. While there is consensus that many victims are never offered assistance and that trafficking for sexual exploitation is in all likelihood widely underreported, we have repeatedly over the years also found that some of the women and girls who *were* actually offered assistance chose to forego the help that was available to them. We realised that neither we, nor seemingly anyone else, had systematised knowledge about the reasons behind these decisions, what happened to these women after and as a result of declining, and what paths their lives took after dropping out of contact with the identification and assistance system. Our starting point for the study was that if women and girls declined assistance because they did not need it, then this was fine and they should obviously be left alone. However, if in fact they declined assistance for other reasons - i.e. they were not able to partake of assistance due to circumstances in their lives or because of the way services are organised - and would benefit from some form of help, then the issue needs to be better understood and addressed.

Our aim was not to evaluate the efforts and competence of any particular organisations or individuals who work in this challenging field, but rather, as part of exploring why victims decline, to describe the challenges both service providers and trafficked women and girls face in their post-trafficking lives, including the interplay between

them. Our intention is that this report should contribute to a fruitful discussion of how assistance for trafficking victims is organised and, hopefully, provide some ideas for what could be done to increasingly meet the needs of the diverse population who fall within the category of trafficking victim.

As mentioned, our very specific starting point for this study was to understand why and under which circumstances victims decline assistance. We also addressed a number of sub-themes in order to illuminate the main issue. For victims who declined services, we wished to determine if the woman was in need of any assistance (e.g. economic, legal, medical, etc.); if the needed assistance is/was available in the country of destination or upon return home; and if the woman was offered assistance or was aware that these services were available. One of the issues we focus on is whether the information flow about assistance options is sufficient for trafficking victims to make an informed choice in their post-trafficking lives. Previous studies have also indicated that a limited flow of information between shelters and assistance programmes in countries of destination and countries of origin, reduces the victims' ability to make informed decisions concerning services available to them (Bjerkan & Dyrliid 2005, Surtees 2005). This often implies that what could be a continuum between the different assistance programmes often ends up as distinct, sometimes repeated, stages in the assistance process, making the victim perceive the offered assistance as ill-suited and unresponsive to her needs. We aimed to explore the suitability of the services offered and whether some of the reasons for victims declining assistance could be found in whether or not services met the needs of victims.

Another central topic was whether assistance services are currently tailored to the perceived needs of a certain type of victim, while others do not find the services well suited to their needs. This may be based on the actual situation or misconceptions and lack of information on the victim's side. Another critical factor in a victim's decision-making process may be how and when in the post-trafficking stage that assistance is offered as well as by whom.

The structure of the report

The present report consists of four main parts; each documenting different aspects of the research. This part, part I, gives the reader the background of our study, including descriptions of the research themes and questions, existing knowledge on the topic, methodological issues and our understanding of central terms, as well as a presentation of the anti-trafficking assistance available in the three countries where our fieldwork took place; Albania, Moldova and Serbia. Parts II, III and IV present the findings of our research. As we started to document the reasons victims declined assistance, we

chose to divide them into three main categories, reflected here in the separate parts of our report. Part II presents reasons for declining related to the individual's personal circumstances at the time of decision-making. Part III deals with reasons for declining that can be seen as a consequence of factors in the assistance system itself, while part IV discusses the perhaps more elusive reasons for declining found in the social context and issues related to personal experience. As our fieldwork progressed we increasingly found that victims spoke about assistance not only in terms of practical implications and difficulties, but also in terms of how it affected their view of themselves. This in and of itself is not surprising, as psychological guidance and personal development is one of the goals of most service providers. However, we found that the issues of social belonging and identity were very complex and, in some instances, became an obstacle to accepting assistance. Finally, in our conclusion we present our thoughts on what could potentially be improved in order to ensure that victims of trafficking can access the assistance they need and want.

Existing knowledge about victims who decline assistance

While there is a substantial body of literature on trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation, there has been relatively little discussion of victims who decline assistance. The issue has, however, been noted by other authors in connection with studies and evaluations of various programmes in the region.

Barbara Limanowska's reports on trafficking in South-Eastern Europe (Limanowska 2002, 2003, 2004) make mention of a trend in some countries of the region whereby some women who the police believe to be trafficking victims decline assistance and instead say that they are voluntarily working as prostitutes, waitresses or entertainers (Limanowska 2004: 50). For example, up until October 2001 in Kosovo, 180 women who had been brought to IOM's attention as possible trafficking victims declined the assistance offered to them, while 250 accepted assistance. A few possible reasons for declining are outlined; assistance means the women have to return to their home country without money; they are under threats from pimps, they fail to understand the situation and assistance being offered; they do not trust the police; and/or do not want to return to their country of origin (Limanowska 2002: 98). She also notes that women from SEE identified in Western Europe often refuse any assistance at home because they are afraid to be recognised as trafficking victims (Limanowska 2003: 21).

Other reports from the region, for instance the Regional Clearing Point (RCP) Programme's reports of victims of trafficking and victim assistance in SEE, note victims declining assistance. The RCP's first annual report noted cases of declining assistance

in Albania where 40 of 177 suspected foreign trafficking victims declined assistance in 2000 and 13 of 77 declined in 2001. Similarly, in Bulgaria it was noted in 2002 that 10% of victims declined all further assistance following their return home and only 33% accepted the full range of services offered. And, in Kosovo, 40% of the 621 foreign trafficking victims identified between January 2000 and May 2003 declined assistance (Hunzinger & Sumner Coffey 2003: 34, 64, 133-140). The RCP's second annual report documented patterns of declining assistance as one of its indicators in each of the ten countries. In some countries, like Albania, Moldova and Romania, information on national victims declining assistance was largely anecdotal. However, in other countries, clear patterns of victims declining assistance emerged. In Bosnia-Herzegovina (BiH), the IFS Safe House in Doboj estimated that approximately 20 foreign and national victims declined assistance in 2003 and 2004 and, from 2000 to 2004, 160 women (both foreign and national) declined IOM assistance. Similarly, in Kosovo, between 2000 and 2003, IOM screened 671 victims and assisted 410. Of the 261 who were not assisted, some were not trafficking victims, while others declined the assistance offered, which was contingent upon return to their home country. In 2003 and 2004, 15 and six victims respectively screened by IOM declined assistance. In Bulgaria, four national victims of sex trafficking in 2003 and four in 2004 accepted only IOM return assistance, choosing to return to their families immediately and declining referrals for reintegration. And, in Serbia in 2003, six foreign victims declined assistance, preferring to return home independently. In 2004, two foreign victims trafficked for sexual exploitation declined assistance (Surtees 2005).

The RCP's second annual report notes that declining assistance has many explanations which differ according to country and whether one is a national or foreign victim. As importantly, the report notes that the decision is often contextual as the legal framework of the assistance structure impacts what assistance and alternatives are available. That is, in BiH and Kosovo when victims declined assistance, they often returned to their work situations because authorities lacked the resources (detention centres and financial means) to deport illegal migrants who instead were generally either deported at the border, sent to the next canton or released to leave on their own. Those who declined assistance often preferred to stay and earn some money so that they could be "successful" migrants. Other reasons for declining assistance included, but were not limited to, distrust of authorities and assistance providers; fear of criminal sanctions and publicity; concern that representing themselves as trafficking victims would prevent them from returning abroad for work in the future; and/or fear of social stigmatisation related to the trafficking experience. Some also did not see themselves as victims, having been paid for their work, albeit often less than what was promised. Still others declined assistance because they did not feel that it was required. Having survived trafficking and escaped, they felt equipped to return home independently. Yet others were afraid to accept assistance because returning through an NGO or international organization

was perceived as returning home with, and therefore collaborating with, the police and they feared retaliation and reprisals from traffickers (Surtees 2005).

Similarly, a study on reintegration services noted that reasons why victims may not seek out assistance included fear of stigmatisation; the offered assistance does not correspond to their needs, either in the type of assistance or how and where it is offered; fear of contact with the police if they seek out assistance; lack of information about available assistance and support; shame of relating their “bad experience”; restrictions within assistance (like closed shelters); and lack of trust in the assisting organisation (ICCO 2005: 32). Other studies have also made mention of victims declining assistance, although the issue and meaning of the trend is not explored in detail (see AI 2004; Andreani & Raviv 2004; HRW 2002; Surtees 2006a; UNICEF 2004; UNICEF & STC 2004).

Importantly, this is not a phenomenon that is unique to south-eastern Europe; Derks noted this issue in the Cambodian context. Among the reasons that some Cambodian victims declined assistance were negative attitudes from service providers; that the victims did not want to spend a lot of time learning new skills, being counselled or staying in a shelter; and also that they wanted to reunite with their families as quickly as possible. Assistance was also found to cause gossip and jealousy in the local community, as community members in some cases resented the special attention paid to the trafficking victim, thus interfering with reintegration rather than facilitating it (1998:15-16).

While the issue of declining assistance is relatively under explored in trafficking studies, there is a body of literature from other fields – like abuse and violence - which considers the decision-making processes of “beneficiaries” and the meanings behind these decisions. These studies cover very different groups and mechanisms and, thus, illustrate some of the complexities involved in assistance provision for marginalized groups. How such tensions and complexities are managed in these spheres may be helpful in shedding light on assistance for trafficked persons. We will, however, limit ourselves to mentioning a few studies that may be of relevance in understanding victims of trafficking who decline assistance.

Some lessons might reasonably be drawn from assistance to victims of violence in that models of care and many of the issues are not dissimilar to those faced by trafficked persons. For example, domestic violence victims access shelters and assistance at different stages of their lives and for different periods of time, in response to various factors. It has been noted that in domestic violence assistance programmes there is a continual tension between the position of victim as autonomous adults, role as resident/beneficiary (often in communal living arrangement), dependency on programme resources and readiness to face the impact of their trauma. Dealing with these complex tensions does lead some beneficiaries to leave programmes (Blitz et al. 2003). Other domestic violence victims struggle with the models of care available, sometimes accepting and

sometimes rejecting them. Problems can centre around the arrangement of services; the ideological basis of programmes; cultural and linguistic barriers; relationships between staff and beneficiaries and so on (Arora 2004; Ferraro 1983; Fullbright 2004).

Similarly, other marginalized groups may also decline assistance or are declined themselves. In an ECPAT study (2004) of minors working in prostitution in the Netherlands¹, interviews about the experiences and needs of ten at-risk girls and girls in prostitution found that most had experienced unsatisfactory contact with mental healthcare organisations which led them to search for other care options. Joniak (2005) considers the interactions and relationships between staff and beneficiaries in a drop in centre for homeless youth where staff behaviours intended to reduce conflict, such as withdrawal and silencing of the beneficiaries, in fact served to cause and heighten tension and, arguably, inhibit the therapeutic impact of the centre. And Morinis (1982) discusses the relationship between “skid row Indians” in Canada’s major cities and mainstream actors, like law enforcement and health care workers, who are tasked with assisting and protecting them. The relationship with the law-enforcement is ambiguous, with the police seeming to see native Canadians as a people in need of discipline, while native Canadians see the police as oppressors and abusers. A large percentage of healthcare workers see communication as a major problem with native Canadians and find them to be uncooperative in terms of their health and medical needs. Morinis argues that this “deviant behaviour”, including the rejection of assistance by “skid row Indians”, is not a psychological problem (as some psychologists have tried to argue) but rather an act of defiance, an effort not to conform to the “white” (mainstream) way. For Morinis, declining medical and police services is a manifestation of the “politics of self”, a political protest at an individual level and an expression of a deviant but important identity.

Methodological issues and data collection

The main source of information on decisions regarding accepting and declining assistance must be victims of trafficking who have been in this situation and have made their choices. We interviewed 39 victims of trafficking, in addition to 13 respondents in street prostitution whose status with respect to trafficking could not be determined. 30 of the interviewed victims had accepted assistance at the time of the interview, but several of them had at an earlier stage declined all or parts of assistance offered to them. Seven of the interviewed victims were unidentified and had not been offered assistance, while two victims had been identified but declined all assistance. The interviews var-

¹ Only available in Dutch.

ied substantially in length; with some respondents the interview ended after 20 to 30 minutes, whereas in other cases we spent several hours with respondents. Most of the interviews, however, lasted approximately 1 hour. Most respondents were interviewed on their own, whereas others preferred to be interviewed together or in the presence of a social worker or shelter staff. Seven respondents were interviewed a second time on repeat field trips.

Another very important source of information was interviews with key respondents such as government authorities or persons who work in assistance programmes. These respondents were mostly social workers, psychologists, other medical personnel, lawyers and representatives of the police. We interviewed 90 respondents in this category, 11 of whom were interviewed at least twice.

Field sites

Fieldwork was conducted in Serbia, Albania and Moldova between April and November 2006. In each country we conducted interviews in the capital, as well as in other locations. In Serbia, we visited Belgrade, Pancevo and Kragujevac, while in Albania we visited Gramsch, Vlora, Elbasan, and Puka in addition to Tirana. In Moldova we travelled to Komrat, Tiraspol and two rural villages as well as Chisinau.

The field sites were chosen because we wanted to maximise the information we could get by visiting countries that had both similarities and differences in assistance provision and trafficking situation. Serbia has mainly been a country of transit and destination, although this has begun to change of late, and more and more national victims have been identified and assisted. Albania has a history of being a country of transit and origin, while Moldova has primarily been a country of origin. However, there have also been a few cases of women trafficked to Moldova, which shows how countries may have many different trafficking scenarios to deal with.

Of interest to us were also the different situations of women in the three countries – in terms of general roles and expectations of women and expectations as female migrants. Just as we noted substantial differences between the three countries in terms of women's roles and opportunities, we also noted differences within countries. There are clearly great differences between rural, northern Albania and the capital Tirana with respect to what is accepted or indeed expected behaviour for young women. There are also differences in terms of assistance systems, which are described more comprehensively in appendix 1.

Each country was visited twice and each visit lasted approximately one week. This allowed us to optimise data gathering, re-interview respondents on the second visit as well as visit new respondents and new locations that we learned about during the first visit. Initially, we assumed that interviewing victims a second time would give us an increased chance of building trust and that we would probably receive more detailed

information in the second interview. It was, therefore, somewhat surprising to us that this was not necessarily the case. Victims of trafficking who were interviewed the second time tended to give the same type of information as they did in the first interview. While we often appreciated the opportunity to clarify some details and even minor misunderstandings from the first interview, we generally found that a second interview did not necessarily change or enrich the data we already had.

Recruitment of and information to respondents

We started the initial round of fieldwork by interviewing key informants in assistance organisations and other actors involved in the anti-trafficking field. We selected these respondents based on our knowledge of the anti-trafficking actors in the three different countries and ensured that these respondents represented different approaches and had a variety of working fields in order to learn from the range of perspectives held by different actors and organisations. Trafficking victims were then recruited as respondents through these organisations. We made a conscious choice not to attempt to recruit respondents outside of these channels - for instance through social service centres, community groups or other local actors - as such an approach involves the very real risk of exposing individuals as trafficked to their community, which may result in stigmatisation and other associated problems (see also the paragraph below on ethics in trafficking research).

We provided information about the research project to potential respondents through a one page description in local languages. We then repeated the information verbally as an introduction to each interview, ensuring to the best of our ability that the information was understood and accepted, by adjusting language and terms to each individual. We set aside time towards the end of each interview for any questions the respondent might have and also made sure that they were aware that we could be contacted later if any concerns arose as a result of the interview or research. However, we did in a few cases after interviews have the suspicion that the respondent had not fully understood the purpose of our research or our roles as researchers. This is further discussed in the chapter 7, which deals with communication between service providers and trafficking victims.

There were substantial differences in the approaches of different organisations in terms of their willingness to ask their beneficiaries whether they wanted to participate in research, as well as in their willingness to speak openly about their work and experiences of victims declining services. There was a more or less perfect correspondence between the two in that organisations that were less transparent about their work were also less willing to pass on information about the research project to their beneficiaries and did effectively make the decision of non-participation for their beneficiaries rather than ask and allow them to choose for themselves. There was also a tendency for some

of the less cooperative organisations to have placed restrictions on their beneficiaries in terms of closed shelters and controlled contact with people outside the organisations (discussed further in chapter 9). However, other organisations that arranged their assistance in similar ways did refer respondents on to us, meaning that we were not completely cut off from information from respondents with this type of assistance experience. It is difficult to say whether our data would have been significantly different had access to respondents been more evenly distributed among different organisations and models of care. In the end, respondents were referred on to us by ten different organisations in the three countries we visited and represented a wide variety of experiences with assistance. Nevertheless, the unequal access to respondents depending on which organisations assist them should be kept in mind in trafficking studies in general and raises the issue of to what extent an organisation should reasonably be able to control and determine the interaction of its beneficiaries with the outside world, including participation in research.

Ethical research on a sensitive topic

Any research involving people who have been abused must be sensitive to the potential anguish research can cause respondents. Trafficked women and girls have frequently experienced trauma and to ask them to recount events in an interview may feel intrusive and can also trigger memories and bring past events to life again. We have throughout the research been acutely aware of this and attempted, to the best of our abilities, to avoid causing further trauma for our respondents by following principles of ethical interviewing as well as the ethical guidelines provided by WHO for interviewing trafficking victims (WHO 2003).

Aside from causing trauma, it is imperative in research of this kind to avoid subjecting participants to the risk of exposure in local communities. As a consequence, we have exclusively selected and approached respondents through a process of referral from service providers. This ensured that potential respondents could be informed by someone they knew before deciding to participate in our research. It also has the added advantage that should any assistance needs surface during the interview; we knew immediately where to refer the respondent. Similarly, when we wished to collect information from street prostitutes, we decided to hire local research assistants based within an assistance organisation.

On paying respondents

We are aware of the power divide that may exist between foreign researchers and trafficking victims, which may influence if and how victims participate as respondents. Bringing money into the equation as payment for respondents may further skew the

relationship and we have taken a principal stance against paying respondents to participate in our research. It may be very difficult for an individual in a financially precarious situation to decline to participate in research if he or she can make some money from it and, as such, to pay respondents to share stories containing sensitive and/or traumatic information may prejudice the informed and voluntary consent necessary for responsible and ethical research. Our position of not paying for interviews is also informed by not wanting to contribute to create a situation where a history of suffering becomes a commodity that can be sold, be it to researchers, journalists or others.

That being said, we feel that there are exceptions to this rule. We decided before fieldwork started that we did not want any potential respondents to suffer financially as a consequence of participating. This meant that we were prepared to compensate people who had to take time off work or other income generating activity in order to talk to us. In our view, this principle is also an important methodological issue. Failure to compensate people who have to earn money could mean that this group is excluded from research, causing biases in the selection of respondents. As it turned out, we were able to schedule all interview appointments with victims of trafficking in such a way that no one had to take time off work which involved loss of income, and consequently, no payment or compensation was necessary. We did, however, cover travel costs for respondents who had to travel to be interviewed.

Central definitions and use of terms

Trafficking in women, sexual exploitation and prostitution

We have based our understanding of human trafficking on the definition in the *United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons*² as it is the most widely applied definition in use today and forms the basis for the legal definition of trafficking in human beings in the countries where we conducted our fieldwork. In the Protocol, trafficking is defined in article 3a as:

[...] recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

² Also known as the Palermo protocol, this protocol is one of the three protocols which supplements the UN Convention on Trans-national Organised Crime, adopted by the UN General Assembly on November 15, 2000.

Further, the protocol specifies in article 3c that if any of the means listed in article 3a have been used, the consent of the person is of no relevance, and further, that if the person is a child (i.e. under 18 years of age), exploitation, as described above, is trafficking, regardless of whether any of the means have been used.

The protocol has been the subject of much debate, because of the inherent ambiguities in central terms, such as “position of vulnerability” and “exploitation”. These terms were left unspecified to accommodate countries with very different positions on prostitution, for instance Sweden where clients in prostitution are criminalized, to countries where the prostitute risks prosecution, to the Netherlands, where prostitution is considered sex work. The explanatory notes go some way in specifying vulnerability as “not having a real and acceptable alternative but to submit to the abuse involved” (Jordan 2002:7). Still, this does not necessarily bring us any closer to a demarcation of what is trafficking and what is not, as the definition of “real and acceptable alternative” will again be open to interpretation.

It has been argued that an understanding of what constitutes trafficking in women and girls for sexual exploitation will, in the last instance, come down to what position one holds on prostitution. There are many positions in this discussion but one of the more central disagreements is whether human trafficking should be defined only to include forcible recruitment for prostitution or whether it should include *all* recruitment to prostitution (Derks 2000:7). If all prostitution is seen as exploitation or abuse (Farley et al 1998:406), then everyone who in any way profits from prostitution will be guilty of human trafficking. If, however, prostitution is defined as work, others argue that trafficking should only include cases where coercion or deceit has been used (Doezema 2002). The most common /official understanding that is in use in the countries in this study appears to be that trafficking in women and girls or sexual exploitation includes more than purely forced prostitution but, at the same time, not all prostitution is seen as trafficking. However, where the line is drawn remains unclear.

It is neither our intention nor our mandate in this research to take a position in this debate. We do, however, find it interesting to keep these discussions in mind when exploring who is offered assistance, who accepts, and who declines. One issue we were curious to investigate was whether people who were defined as trafficking victims by police or service providers, but who did not see themselves in this way, might be less inclined to accept assistance than people whose self-image corresponded with that of the assistance system. On the other hand, we were also curious about whether different understandings of trafficking would lead to some victims, whose stories were perhaps less obviously trafficking, not being offered assistance. We find the topic of understandings of trafficking a central one, not least with respect to declining assistance, and will return to the issue throughout the report, most notably perhaps in chapter nine on different forms of stigma and chapter eleven on identification with the trafficking role.

Victim of trafficking

We often refer in this report to women and girls who have been trafficked as victims of trafficking. There is a body of literature criticising the use of the term “victim” for people who have been subjected to violence or abuse, referring in particular to women who have been abused by husbands or partners. This literature argues that the term ascribes a passive role to someone who has in fact come through a trying experience, and thereby undermines her agency. While we sympathise with that sentiment, we feel that the alternative term “trafficking survivor” is insufficient in many cases. Several of the trafficked women we have interviewed in the past decade have technically survived trafficking in the sense that they are still alive, but to call them survivors would, in our view, mask the realities they have faced in the past and often continue to face, and that their lives have often been irreparably altered. Further, from a human rights framework, the term “victim” is important as it designates the violation experienced and the necessity for responsibility and redress. As such, in our framing, “victim” denotes someone who has been the victim of a crime and does not refer to the person’s agency or any other characteristics.

Assistance

In this project we have limited our understanding of assistance to the formalised anti-trafficking assistance systems in the region. These are generally run by national and international NGOs and IOs and most of them participate in some sort of network with other organisations or state bodies. We are aware that assistance can mean many things and informal assistance through personal contacts or networks may be a very substantial part of the assistance that trafficking victims receive. These networks, however, vary substantially from person to person and in this research we wanted to focus on assistance that was, at least in principle, open to anyone. Also, we found it relevant to determine whether women who declined assistance did so because they had other alternatives and whether those who accepted had few other options.

Service providers

Organizations and individuals that provide one or more of the range of services and assistance provided to trafficking victims. These may include social workers, psychologists, shelter staff, medical personnel or legal professionals from NGOs, IOs and GOs.

Accepting and declining assistance

The terms of accepting and declining assistance are at the very core of this study. We found that these seemingly clear terms were both ambiguous and complex and, therefore, dedicate the next chapter to a discussion of how we understand the terms for the purpose of this study.

2 The continuum of accepting and declining assistance

When we started the study we mapped out what, for us, were some very clear categories of “accepting” and “declining” assistance that we had documented in our previous work. We were aware that the issue of declining was more nuanced than is often presented – that very few victims either wholeheartedly accept assistance or unequivocally decline. So we sought to capture this complexity in our categories.

“Accepting assistance” refers to trafficked persons who had voluntarily received some form of service as a result of their trafficking experience. Services may have been offered in the country of destination, transit and/or origin and may have included one or more of the following: accommodation; document processing or travel assistance; transportation; medical or psychological assistance; legal assistance; education or skills training; humanitarian support; financial assistance; job placement; or other forms of reintegration support. To accept assistance did not only imply accepting all assistance offered at the various stages but also refers to the selection of services that met the victim’s needs. For example, a victim may choose to receive a reintegration grant and vocational training but not to stay in a residential programme because her family was able and willing to support her and she wanted to return home to live. A victim may also accept initial crisis intervention post-trafficking (i.e. shelter, medical care, counselling) but then may not require or accept intensive follow-up assistance.

“Declining assistance” refers to any situation when a victim who has been offered, or knew that she was entitled to any of the above listed services, chooses to decline these services. Some victims may decline assistance entirely, choosing to be classified as an illegal migrant or a prostitute rather than as a victim of trafficking. A victim may also partially decline assistance – for example, accept assistance for document processing or travel but decline assistance upon return to the country of origin. Dropping out of a programme, in some cases, may also be seen as a variant of declining, when the individual feels that her needs are not being met through the provision of available services or is not comfortable with the assistance framework. Similarly, being excluded from a programme might, in some circumstances, also constitute an expression of declining. Or a victim may initially decline assistance and then accept services at a later point. Someone who is not identified as a victim of trafficking but who knows about the assistance and does not access it is also, arguably, a category of “declinee”.

While helpful conceptual frameworks, we quickly learned in the course of our fieldwork that this framing was not sufficient. Our interviews with trafficked women and girls in Serbia, Albania and Moldova revealed that victims' decisions about accepting and declining assistance were more complicated still. It is generally not an "either/or" decision, with victims often selecting and declining services from the various options available in the country of destination, transit or origin, over a period of weeks, months and even years.

In reality there are gradations in terms of assistance being either accepted or rejected. Few victims could easily be categorised as "acceptees" and "declinees". More commonly, decisions about accepting or declining were influenced by time, situation and the level of involvement required. Victims made different decisions at different stages of their post-trafficking life, as their individual situation evolved and in response to the level of commitment required by the different forms of assistance. This suggests a far more complex decision-making process than is often presented. As such, when talking about "declining assistance" it is more appropriate to speak about a continuum of decisions along which most victims move and about the complexity surrounding the decision-making process, the services offered and each victim's personal interests and needs.

Decisions as time-bound

Victims' decisions did shift and adjust over time – both between the time abroad and upon return and also over the course of the reintegration period. One minor victim trafficked to the EU received temporary shelter and basic assistance prior to her return home. However, upon her return, she and her family were adamantly opposed to receiving any assistance in spite of their poor economic situation. Over the course of a year this changed and the family approached service providers for different forms of assistance and support. When we met her, some months following her return, she and her family were starting to think beyond basic needs and more about longer term responses like employment. Similarly, one service provider explained the case of a woman who had declined assistance initially when she returned: "and now she called the other day to ask for assistance in learning English. She didn't get primary school and she has now gone back to school and she is asking for money to get lessons because for primary school you need to know English and she needs a tutor".

Giving people time to process the assistance offered seemed also to be an important variable. As a representative of a social assistance organisation in Moldova explained,

We do not make them follow us immediately. We don't tell them "get into the car and we are going to the centre". We just explain that and we give them time. Usu-

ally they are met by someone at the airport. We give them our business cards, our contact numbers and say that if you just decide and make up your mind, just call us. There are some who call us and some who come to us and some who just disappear, who do not contact us at all.³

Time-bound decisions appear to be linked, at least in part, to issues of trust, a subject discussed in more detail in chapter 10. That is, not only do their needs change over time but so does their ability or willingness to trust the individuals and institutions offering assistance. Many victims described how trust was a major issue for them for some time after trafficking, even after clear demonstrations that assisting individuals and organisations could be trusted.

Decisions as situation specific

A victim's current situation was also a factor in what decisions were made about accepting and declining. Victims often return home to conditions even worse than those faced before being trafficked, with all of their pre-trafficking problems amplified by their negative experience abroad. Where debt has been incurred or their prostitution is known to family or community, this amplification can be particularly acute. As such, those who decline assistance and return home immediately often face a changed situation (or learn that they themselves have changed). Many of these individuals who have initially declined may return at a later stage for (some form of) assistance. One service provider in Moldova explained how decisions can change over time and in response to the situation of individual victims:

We face people when they accept repatriation through AVR [assisted voluntary return] programme, some are very much fixed in their view that they want only airport assistance and further down they think they can manage themselves. And, among those, because we still try to tell them about the programme, there are some within this category that can still come and address us for help after some time. I think they still need some adaptation, because being away from home, they don't know about the environment or how their family is doing and things.

For some women, different forms of assistance may be consumed at different stages, based on their individual situation and needs at that time and in response to specific

³ This trend was also noted in other countries in SEE. In Croatia, some national victims who initially declined assistance requested help at a later stage. Some were out of touch with service providers for up to a year before they requested some form of support. Sometimes victims accessed assistance independently, while others were encouraged to do so by their family or friends (Surtees 2005: 15).

developments in their personal lives. Some women may request assistance only in a time of crisis or in response to a specific need. As one victim from Moldova explained,

At work I often listened to the radio and some times I listened to the one station and there they always had the ad for the hotline, “you are not goods”. I thought it was a lie like everything that surrounded me. I listened to the ads for two days, and then thought, “well, what if I called?” I called, and [the social worker] answered. Her voice was so mild, so soft, and I melted too. Such a voice could not hurt me more than I had already been. She told me the address and that she could help me, that I could get medical assistance. I did not believe a word she said. I called them in the spring and for about two months I did not call them again. I thought all they said was a lie.

When she finally did call back to the hotline, it was a moment of crisis when she was without even the most basic food products. She explained to us that had it not been for her daughter and her need to feed and take care of her, it is unlikely she would have ever called again.

When asked about victims who had initially accepted services but then subsequently dropped out of the programme, one social worker in Moldova noted how, in her experience, decisions were generally tied to their often changeable situation:

I don’t think she will drop the programme for good, that she will come back, even maybe not now, but maybe she will have a crisis. Because what we tell women that they can stop the assistance at any time. But if they want to come back later, even after two years, they can.

Decisions may also change as victims pass through different stages of reintegration and their lives change accordingly. For example, in terms of the legal process, victims may initially be willing to participate as witnesses but later on may wish to withdraw from the process. This is not only because of the process itself (which can be difficult and stressful) but also because victims want to move on with their lives. The case of one victim we met illustrates how life circumstances change and how this, in turn, affects their post-trafficking experiences, including contact with anti-trafficking actors. The woman had given a statement immediately after her trafficking experience and been willing to testify. However, in the time that it took for the investigation to take place, charges to be laid and the trial to commence, a lot had changed for her and she was no longer happy to be involved in these legal proceedings. She was living with her family, had a new relationship (marriage) and she did not want this legal process to disrupt this.

Decisions informed by commitment and requirements

Another consideration that underpins decisions on accepting or declining assistance is linked to what level of commitment and investment is expected from victims. Some victims may be willing to accept short-term emergency interventions, while longer term assistance requires too high a level of investment, engagement and trust. As one social worker noted in general about beneficiaries, “Many of the girls call just for money, no other type of assistance. We have a case of a girl who is married. She was in the shelter for a short time in 2005. Her husband is working with monthly pay and she called to ask for money for food”.

Victims may find that assistance in the destination country impinges on their freedom in significant ways, experiences that may disincline them to accept assistance in their country of origin. That is, where foreign victims are obliged to stay in shelters prior to their return, they may experience assistance as intrusive and not responsive to their needs. This may be particularly the case for women who are held in closed facilities and whose freedom is curtailed and who, as a result, have less than positive assistance experiences. One service provider explained how this manifests in the Serbian context and informs foreign victim’s acceptance of assistance following their return home:

When it comes to foreign victims, it is because they have no documents and they have to stay at the shelter while documents are processed. But they often will refuse all other help. And some are very angry because they have to stay even for a day. Some foreign victims will accept some psychological assistance and also be examined by the doctor but when they are offered reintegration assistance in their home country, they will refuse.

In origin countries there are also cases where victims are not comfortable with the level of commitment and investment required of them. One social worker explained how she saw this category of beneficiaries:

Some dropouts started already with crisis intervention and further reintegration but then it comes that they assume responsibility as well, that it is not only us giving assistance, that it is essential that they participate as well, that they are committed and attend courses or do things as well. I would say that there are some people, when it comes to them showing responsibility, they say that they are fine with what they already received. We still remain open to them. But I would say that there are cases that are completely demanding of us and ignoring their side. It is usually those that refused.

These feelings may be particularly acute in the context of shelter-based programmes. One victim, when offered the option of a shelter, reacted negatively. Said her social worker, “When we offered her a place in the shelter, she said: ‘what shelter? I want to

work’’. This minor had been trafficked to a neighbouring country for prostitution and described “good conditions” in the nightclub where she worked because she was allowed to decide whether or not to go with a client, if she wanted to work and she was able to go home for a vacation. The social worker explained her reaction to assistance,

It was hard for her to go home because of the conditions but she also didn’t want to go to the shelter because of the conditions of it being closed and we had to put her in a closed type shelter because we did not know if she would contact her trafficker if she were free to go... She has a low tolerance for frustration so she can’t handle a closed shelter.

Despite the shelter’s concerns, this young woman perceived that she was being required to accept more restrictions and limitations in choosing to receive assistance than had been imposed by her traffickers.

Comments from two young women illustrate how some victims seem to grapple with the expectations and requirements that assistance can involve. One woman explained that assistance created obligations, “If someone sponsors my studies, I must also do something – I can’t just sit around”. For her this assistance also involved an additional obligation for her to assist others: “I was helped, so I must help someone else”. Her friend, also a victim of trafficking, expressed similar sentiments; “I think I should do something so the assistance is not in vain”. That assistance seemingly creates, in some people, a pressure to act or feelings of obligation, which may be a reason why some victims feel they are not able to be involved in assistance. One’s participation becomes a demand and a requirement that perhaps the individual is not able or willing to respond to at that moment.

The intrusiveness of assistance may also play a role in accepting or declining. Assistance by its very nature is intrusive and, for some victims, this is very difficult to handle. One victim we spoke to explained the peculiarity of this dependence on people, “So no one limits my independence [in the programme], but the situation is certainly different if you are on your own. Maybe I wasn’t used to that, it was something unusual.”

Read in light of the above issues, it becomes clear that decisions related to accepting and declining assistance are multilayered and fluid. There are different reasons that come into play in the decision-making process and these reasons may change at different stages of the post trafficking experience and in response to the victim’s individual situation. It is precisely this complexity that we seek to disentangle in this study and in the next chapters we will describe and discuss factors that cause victims of trafficking to decline assistance.

3 Assistance to trafficking victims: What is available?

There are many different ways that victims exit trafficking, are identified and come into contact with the anti-trafficking framework, including assistance options. How victims are identified has a direct and immediate impact on their knowledge of assistance and often, by implication, their willingness or opportunity to access and accept this assistance. In SEE, most assisted victims are initially identified by law enforcement.

That being said, in each country of the SEE region and the destinations where victims were trafficked, identification and intervention by law enforcement differs. Some victims may be identified at the border by border police, others through raids and still others when victims themselves seek out the assistance of police. How victims were received by different law enforcement actors in various countries was often substantially different. One victim we met was arrested and detained for many weeks and it took much time and effort for her to convince the police involved that she was, in fact, a victim of trafficking. By contrast, we met other victims who were immediately recognised by law enforcement personnel as at-risk of trafficking or having been trafficked and treated both sensitively and appropriately.

Beyond law enforcement interventions, victims assisted in SEE were identified and referred by NGOs and IOs. These actors include Centres for Social Work and national help lines for victims of violence and trafficking. In addition, a number of victims were self-referred or referred by family, friends or private citizens. Clients also account for a portion of those who identify and assist victims. In the present, victims are being identified by a more diverse pool of counter-trafficking actors which, arguably, signals an increased awareness of trafficking among professionals and the general public, as well as increased visibility of services (Surtees 2005).

Consequently, there are many different ways of being offered assistance. Our respondents came into contact with assistance systems in many different ways and received information in very different manners and from a range of actors. Contact with assistance systems is, to a large extent, contingent upon the local systems of referral, as well as the mechanisms most commonly found within each local context.

Among the 32 identified trafficking victims that we interviewed⁴ who had been in contact with assistance providers, there were five main ways they had exited their trafficking situation:

- Eight women had been arrested and deported by police from the country to which they had been trafficked. Six of these women were identified as trafficking victims upon return by local police and referred for assistance; two women self-identified to an assistance organisation after they had been deported, one after hearing a radio programme about the shelter.
- Four were arrested for prostitution or violation of immigration laws and later identified as victims while still under arrest.
- Seven women escaped from their traffickers; three of them with the help of a client, one with the help of her mother. Those who were helped by clients did not go to the police but self-identified at a later stage to service providers; in one case several years after the trafficking had taken place. These women did not know about the assistance options until informed about them by friends or acquaintances. The three women who escaped on their own all went to the police and were referred on for assistance.
- Six women were identified immediately by police as trafficking victims; four of them following targeted police raids against their traffickers; two at border controls. All of these women were directly referred on for assistance.
- Two women were released by their traffickers. One went directly to the police and was referred for assistance, the other self-identified later.

While the above is by no means a representative sample of all trafficking victims, it is striking that when women and girls are arrested for legal violations, particularly of immigration and prostitution laws, there is wide variation in whether they are referred on for assistance or not. We have also observed that some women tried to tell their stories to police when arrested but were not believed, while others did not want to tell the police, often out of fear, and preferred arrest and/or deportation. When women escaped, it seems that they were more likely to go to the police if they have escaped on their own, and less likely to do so if a client has helped them.

Women who self-identify often do so quite a long time after they have been trafficked. Many expressed surprise that such assistance was available and also considerable distrust of this assistance. Further, many said that they had never seen advertisements, television spots or radio spots, at home or abroad. In many cases, women came across

⁴In total, we interviewed 39 victims of trafficking, seven of whom were unidentified by anti-trafficking actors, and an additional 13 women in prostitution who may have also been trafficked.

the information by chance. This may indicate that there are many more trafficked persons who *do not* come across such information and never know about options for assistance.

The many different ways that trafficking victims first hear about services raises a number of issues with regard to the initial phase of assistance, especially concerning who offers assistance and who presents information based upon which victims decide about accepting (or declining) assistance. It is also the issue of whether the person who initially informs victims about assistance options has enough information about what assistance alternatives are available⁵.

Some of the issues surrounding declining assistance in SEE are linked to the specific legal framework of the country. To decline assistance in some countries in SEE is to decline the status of a victim of trafficking, which means the individual is categorised as an irregular migrant and, therefore, faces some form of punishment (a fine or period in detention) and subsequent deportation. Alternatively, some suspected victims who have declined assistance have returned “voluntarily” at their own expense. However, in BiH and Kosovo, where deportations have not been fully functional, refusing assistance may be read directly as a decision to stay and work (albeit in exploitative conditions) rather than return to what are also often poor conditions. With victims of trafficking in Kosovo and BiH reportedly receiving better living and working conditions as well as receiving some payment, they might be less inclined to leave their “work” and accept assistance (Surtees 2005). However, in the three countries considered in this study, there is no option to stay after declining assistance. Therefore accepting and declining assistance has more social, economic and personal explanations.

Models of assistance in Albania, Moldova and Serbia

There are myriad components to the assistance and protection offered to trafficked persons in Albania, Serbia and Moldova. These range from basic needs (like accom-

⁵The mechanisms described here do not necessarily represent the full picture, nor are they necessarily representative of the situation in other countries. For instance, it has been reported that trafficked women and girls in Ukraine self-identify to a much larger extent than in other countries, generally after having seen advertisements for services or becoming aware of services through media campaigns. Profiles of victims may also substantially differ. Ukraine reports a significant number of women with higher education among assisted victims, while Moldova has a noteworthy percentage of people with mental disabilities among beneficiaries. It is difficult to say whether this reflects an actual difference in who is trafficked in the different countries, whether this is due to differences in the assistance system or referral mechanisms or because of the culture of seeking/accepting assistance in different countries. One of the challenges in trafficking research today is the bias in data when victims are difficult to access and are only approached through assistance systems.

modation, food, clothing, document processing and emergency medical care) to more comprehensive and long-term assistance (like psychological support, legal assistance, longer term medical care, vocational training, job placement, housing assistance and family mediation). Similarly, the forms of assistance differ according to whether a country is one of transit and destination, where assistance is generally short-term and oriented toward emergency support and assisted return, to a country of origin where assistance is longer term and ranges from security and family assessments to a comprehensive package of services to support the victim's long term recovery and socio-economic reintegration. Not all components of this assistance continuum are equally well developed or implemented and each country has a distinct framework in which it offers assistance to trafficked persons.

In Moldova and Albania, reintegration assistance for national victims is the central orientation of available services, although there is also short-term assistance (including shelter) available to the small number of victims trafficked through and to these countries. By contrast, in Serbia, which has traditionally been a country of transit and destination, services, until recently, have focused on short-term assistance to and return of foreign victims. With the increased identification of Serbian victims, assistance has been expanded to include reintegration services.⁶ In all three countries most of the assistance is tailored to adult female victims of sex trafficking and is, at least initially, shelter based.

Victims trafficked internationally return home either independently, through assisted return programmes for trafficked persons or are deported. Cross border referral mechanisms for trafficked persons are not fully developed in the region or sufficiently operational to smooth the return of trafficking victims to their countries of origin. This impedes the ability of service providers in destination and transit countries to inform victims about the assistance and reintegration options available upon return and to implement appropriate case planning. It also means that victims are not always fully or accurately informed about what awaits them during and following return. Because service providers in countries of origin are often referred victims about whom they have only limited information, victims often endure extensive re-interviewing and are assured little continuity of care. Victims tend also to be returned and assisted within the framework of one organisation and its network rather than being offered the full range of services available in a country (Bjerkan 2005; Surtees 2005, 2006a).

Services are primarily managed by NGOs or international organisations and funded by foreign donors. Government involvement in service provision for trafficked persons has improved but the capacity of most government departments remains quite low.

⁶For detailed country-specific information about assistance in SEE, please see Bjerkan 2005; Hunzinger & Sumner Coffey 2003; Limanowska 2002, 2003 and 2004; Reiter 2005; Rosenberg 2006; Surtees 2005, 2006a, 2006b.

In addition, social services in many countries do not take a proactive role in social work, with outreach not a traditional component of social services. In some countries, social work is primarily comprised of the distribution of financial assistance. In other countries, lack of training and inadequate resources for outreach services are significant impediments to an effective and proactive social welfare system. Institutions providing services to trafficking victims are often specialised in trafficking rather than in social protection issues more generally. Few service providers assist other socially vulnerable groups – like victims of violence – in spite of the inter-related protection needs and many commonalities in service and methodology.

Albania

Albania is primarily a country of origin, with victims trafficked for sexual exploitation, labour, begging and delinquency. In Albania, there are three distinct identification and referral procedures for trafficking victims – one for Albanians trafficked for sexual exploitation, another for Albanian minors trafficked for labour, begging and delinquency⁷ and a third for foreign nationals trafficked to or through Albania. While the Government of Albania initiated the development of a national referral mechanism together with various counter-trafficking actors to harmonize the identification and referral process for all victims of trafficking, it is not yet fully operational. The Government of Albania recently established the National Responsible Authority – an inter-ministerial body comprised of the Ministry of the Interior, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunity – to coordinate and oversee this process.⁸

While the assistance frameworks have not been fully rationalised, reintegration services for Albanian victims of sexual exploitation (the target group of our study) are coordinated, with programmes referring amongst one another as needed. Assistance is focused mainly within reintegration shelters and centres in select cities around the

⁷ The study does not consider trafficked minors or the assistance framework within which most trafficked minors are assisted. Services for trafficked minors are primarily offered within the framework of Terre des homes TACT project and the BKTF coalition which include a wide range of partner NGOs. A central aspect within this assistance was the signing in February 2006 of a bilateral agreement between the Greek and Albanian governments for the repatriation of trafficked and unaccompanied Albanian children from Greece.

⁸ Anti-trafficking efforts are coordinated by the State Committee to fight against Trafficking in Human Beings, which is chaired by the Ministry of the Interior. The National Coordinator for Anti-trafficking, the Deputy Minister of the Interior, supervises the Anti-Trafficking Unit which is responsible for coordinating with key institutions on anti-trafficking, collecting information and data on trafficking in persons and monitoring the implementation of the National Strategy to Combat Human Trafficking and the National Strategy to Combat Child Trafficking, which outline the anti-trafficking policy framework for the country.

country (Vlora, Tirana, Elbasan, and Gramsch), although non-residential services and assistance are increasingly being explored. Services offered in residential care facilities include medical care, psychological counselling, legal assistance, educational reinsertion, vocational training, financial assistance, family mediation, housing support and job placement. The implementation, capacity and extent of these services vary from organisation to organisation. In addition, there are mechanisms for short-term assistance to Albanian victims within the government run National Reception Centre as well as the transit centre in Gjirokastra for victims returned from Greece. Other organisations provide non-residential services, including legal assistance, medical assistance and social work. Recently, a national help line was implemented to assist in the identification and referral of trafficking victims and operationalised nation-wide.

Through recently established regional committees (operating in twelve regions), the intention is to provide local level assistance to victims within their own communities and to tap into social services more generally. The regional committees are comprised of different government institutions (i.e. health, education, social services, law enforcement) at the local level and also representatives from civil society. As these structures are newly established, they are not yet fully operational. Further, work is needed in terms of building the trafficking specific capacity and competency of these institutions at the local level. What is significant, however, is the reorientation of services to the local level.⁹

Moldova

Each year large numbers of Moldovan women, men and children are trafficked abroad for sexual exploitation, labour, begging and delinquency. Many are deported from countries of destination without receiving any assistance, while others are returned through the assisted return programmes of IOs and NGOs. The assistance and protection framework for trafficked victims in Moldova has been geared mainly toward the reintegration of Moldovan victims who have been returned (or deported) from abroad. Services available to beneficiaries range from basic (i.e. initial accommodation and return transport to home community) to a more comprehensive package of assistance (i.e. accommodation, legal, medical and psychological assistance, vocational training, job placement).

Short-term emergency assistance is offered at a residentially based shelter in Chisinau. Some victims stay at the shelter immediately upon their return from abroad, while others are referred there for a stay upon identification in their home community. Vic-

⁹ For more detail, please Tozaj 2006 which provides an overview of the anti-trafficking in the country, including victim assistance organisations funded by USAID's CAAHT programme. Cf. Somach & Surtees 2005 for an evaluation of USAID's anti-trafficking programme in Albania, including victim assistance and protection.

tims stay generally for a few weeks toward stabilisation and then receive individualised (and non-residential) assistance in their home community. There are also a handful of residential facilities available to trafficked persons in Chisinau (for trafficked persons as well as vulnerable persons generally) and efforts are underway to provide mid to long-term housing options for trafficked persons outside of the capital.

In addition to residential care, there are a number of agencies throughout the country that provide various aspects of reintegration assistance from their offices in regional centres and other organisations based in regional towns/communities that provide local reintegration assistance.¹⁰ Assistance is determined on a case-by-case basis but, in the short term, deals with crisis intervention (addressing emergency needs like food, medical care and psychological assistance) and in the longer-term is focused on education, training, job placement and social inclusion. Much assistance is specialised for victims of trafficking, however, there is also assistance that is offered as part of programmes for the socially vulnerable, like single mothers and orphans.

Identification and referral of victims are facilitated through two hotlines, which operate throughout the country. One hotline is focused on legal assistance, while the other is geared toward general service provision for victims of trafficking. A noteworthy number of victims are identified through these help lines, many of them some time after having returned from abroad.

The mobilisation of a national referral system is currently underway by which assistance can be provided at a local, community level. In mid 2006 local counter-trafficking actors were trained in five different rayons.¹¹ The Ministry of Social Protection, Family and Child assumed responsibility for the coordination of the multidisciplinary teams

¹⁰ This includes Transnistria, a region in the Republic of Moldova situated along the banks of the Dniester River and bordering Moldova to the West and Ukraine to the East, which declared its independence on September 2, 1990. Transnistria is internationally considered to be part of the Republic of Moldova and previously part of the Moldavian SSR, but has declared independence as the Pridnestrovskaya Moldavskaya Respublika or Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic (PMR), with Tiraspol as its capital. In September 2006 a referendum was held on independence and, according to the Transnistrian government, the majority of the population supported independence and free association with Russia. The OSCE and many countries opposed the referendum, refusing to recognize it or its results. To date Transnistria's de facto independence has not been recognized and its sovereignty remains an issue of contention. The political situation complicates assistance and support to victims of trafficking because there are no official connections between the state structures in the two entities. For example, there are no formal lines of communication between the Transnistrian and Moldovan police, which complicates anti-trafficking operations and investigations. Also problematic is that the work of NGOs in Transnistria is quite restricted. In March 2006 the government issued a law that prohibited the activity of the organisations financed by foreign donors (which included the one Transnistrian organisation working on anti-trafficking). While an amendment to the law was passed which allowed for the continued work of social organisations with foreign donor funds, the organisation was forced to cease work for a number of weeks in the interim.

¹¹ A "rayon" is a low-level territorial and administrative subdivision, roughly equivalent to a region or district. It may include city/ies, municipality/ies, commune(s) and village(s).

tasked with the provision of services at the local level. Services will be provided according to the individual needs of trafficking and the rayon level coordinator will coordinate the provisions of services from different organisations and agencies, both state and civil society. A reintegration fund will also be available to victims, but implemented locally. In 2007, this strategy will be expanded to additional rayons.

Serbia

Serbia has traditionally been a country of destination for women trafficked from the former Soviet Union and other countries in the Balkans. It has also served as a transit country for the transportation of victims into the EU. As such, services, until recently, have focused on the short-term assistance needs and return of foreign victims. With the increased identification of Serbian national victims, assistance has been expanded to also include reintegration services. One NGO programme offers reintegration assistance to Serbian victims, providing them with shelter and stabilization through a one-year rehabilitation programme. This service runs alongside that of the NGO's recently established day centre, which hosts a range of activities, including legal assistance, counselling, traditional and alternative educational assistance, sports programmes, creative workshops and economic empowerment programmes. The centre has also recently established a "field support team" which will provide on-site reintegration assistance to victims residing outside Belgrade. In addition, another NGO provides shelter based emergency intervention both to national victims and foreign victims prior to their return to their country of origin. The shelter is a closed facility and appropriate for high-risk cases and short periods of stay. Other organisations provide complimentary support for victims of trafficking, including a help line, legal assistance, medical care, counselling, education and vocational training.

All assistance is coordinated through the country's national referral mechanism¹², which is led by the Agency for Coordination of Assistance to Human Trafficking Victims, a body that was formally established in 2004 and is situated within the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Policy. While the Agency is operational and coordinates victim assistance in the country, it lacks independent resources for the implementation of its mandate (the Ministry has not allocated funds for the provision

¹² In its initial phase the NRM was led by a mobile team comprised of the Agency and two local NGOs.. According to this model, any organization that came into contact with a potential victim was to contact the "mobile team", which was established in early October 2002 for the screening and processing of identified victims of trafficking. However, until 2004, the mechanism was not fully operational. In December 2004 the mobile team was dissolved and responsibility for the identification of victims was taken on solely by the Agency in cooperation with the organization who identified the victim. Roles and responsibilities among the various service providers were mapped out with cooperation agreements finalized in 2005.

of services) as well as clarity in terms of lines of responsibility and reporting within the Ministry.

Services and assistance for trafficking victims are primarily Belgrade focused and there are limited opportunities for community-based assistance in victim's areas of origin. Efforts have been made through the Agency to mobilise services at a local level through the Centres for Social Work and some NGOs are increasingly providing some reintegration assistance to victims in their home communities, such as financing vocational courses, educational reinsertion and medical assistance. There are also increasing efforts to mobilise the resources of local NGOs (not specialised in trafficking) and government departments in the provision of services within victim's home communities.

Part II: Personal circumstances that lead to declining

4 When assistance stands in the way of migration

According to police in Albania, around 80 per cent of women identified as trafficking victims by the police decline assistance, a substantial number of whom allegedly decline because they intend to go abroad again. A similar observation was made by an NGO which had a list of returned women believed to be trafficking victims. When the organisation followed up with these women, with the intention of offering assistance, many had already left for abroad again. According to the NGO they had been sent abroad by their traffickers.

It is often assumed that trafficked women who go abroad again are either “voluntary prostitutes” and were “not really trafficked” in the first place, or that they are re-trafficked by the same or another trafficking network. At the same time, when interviewing victims and institutional representatives, we found a very complex picture of reasons for women to decline assistance in order to return abroad. We also found that the discussion of this particular tendency was complicated by the different understandings of what is actually implied in “going abroad”.

What does it mean to go abroad again?

When discussing the issue of trafficking victims going abroad there can be substantial confusion due to different understandings of what the term implies. While the general linguistic connotation would be to leave one country and go to another, we found that “going abroad” is a far more loaded and complicated expression when discussing trafficking victims. The lack of clarity stems from a tendency to use the term “to go abroad” as a euphemism for engaging in prostitution. At other times, however, the term is not used in this way and “to go abroad” simply means to migrate. Further, while most organisations aimed to provide alternatives to prostitution and discourage women from going abroad in that sense, others formulated a stance that was explicitly anti-migration regardless of whether prostitution was involved or not.

The ambiguity in the use of terms can be found among institutional representatives and trafficking victims alike. In one sense it also reflects the suspicion that women

returning from abroad can face in their own community. Often, having been abroad will be enough to cause suspicion that a woman has been involved in prostitution. Hence, a seemingly innocent and straightforward term can reveal assumptions and prejudices about women who leave their communities to migrate, victims of trafficking and prostitutes.

Women return to their home countries under different circumstances, which, in turn, affect the range of choices open to them. Also, many of the known countries of origin for trafficking victims are countries with very high and socially normative migration levels in the general population. Therefore, returning trafficking victims may still have migration as a goal to build a better future, in spite of negative past experiences. When a trafficking victim returns, she may face not only the same dire conditions that originally inclined her to seek better opportunities elsewhere, but her situation upon return may also be exacerbated her negative experiences abroad. Further, in the case of the arrest and deportation of a trafficking victim in a destination country, with no charges pressed against the trafficker or trafficking network, very little will, in practice, have changed for the woman. She will not necessarily be free from the trafficking cycle and will, in all likelihood, still be expected to be an income source for the trafficker, sometimes even with greater debts because of the additional costs of her re-trafficking/re-migration. Also, in many cases women are less controlled by physical obstacles and more by psychological hindrances, for instance in the form of threats. Again, being deported will not generally have changed her situation vis a vis the trafficker and she will feel no freer to accept assistance or break with the trafficker even though technically she may appear to have “gotten away”.

Trafficked women who decline assistance and “go abroad again” are often presented as having chosen prostitution, thereby losing the label of trafficking victim and eligibility for assistance that being identified as trafficked entails. A young woman told us about the problems of getting assistance from the police following arrest because one of the women with whom she was detained had been abroad before:

At first he didn't believe me, because among us there was a girl who has already been to [the country] and already to the police and she was also a victim. So first he didn't believe us. And he asked that girl why she went to [the country] for the second time. He beat all of us. I am not going to speak about that. But I managed to convince him.

It is worrying that female migrants who have been abroad before, and possibly also engaged in prostitution either through trafficking or in other ways, are not considered eligible for assistance, as outlined above. This indicates a sifting process, whereby only the most “worthy” or “innocent” cases are referred on for assistance.

Not only service providers or police describe women this way; fellow victims may also express rather harsh judgements about women migrating again. A young woman

who was trafficked and later assisted with education and vocational training told how after returning to her home country she met a young woman who had been trafficked with her and was now trying to get documents to go to France. We asked if she thought the woman she met was planning to migrate for labour or whether she was going back to a trafficker or for prostitution:

She has no one in France and I don't think that it is just a simple way to go to France just like that. So she can't go there as a tourist because she has no money. Her parents are poor; she can't go as a tourist.

When I saw her [where I was trafficked], it was a surprise for me to see a familiar face, but I was not surprised that she got there. I have known her since we were small, [...] and she had a bad reputation. That's why I wasn't surprised to see her there. [...] When we were in prison we talked and she said she wanted to continue her studies. And I said very well, let's do that together [when we get back]

Q: And when you met this girl, you said you ran in to her the other day; did you talk at all about this education programme?

As for me, I don't like to let people down, so I didn't tell her. When I saw her, she was trying to get some documents for going to France and if I told her she could have said yes [to assistance], but she wouldn't have come here and I didn't want to let this organisation down. I don't like doing that.

While the woman we interviewed did not really know the intentions of the other young woman in France, she implied that she was going for prostitution. Furthermore, this appears to be based on her alleged bad reputation and family background, which led our respondent to conclude that to give her information about available assistance would be to let the organisation down. It is impossible to say whether this has to do with signals she has been given from the organisation about what kind of persons they want to assist or whether she has concluded this on her own.

In principle, and according to the definition in the Palermo protocol, it should be of no consequence to a woman's status as a victim of trafficking whether she has gone abroad to be a prostitute. This does not make a victim of trafficking ineligible for benefits. The reality, though, may be different. Service provision happens within a constrained budget and it is possible that some organisations will have to choose between trafficking victims who to assist. The issue of who is and is not offered assistance is further discussed in chapter 9.

Continued trafficking and re-trafficking

In some cases, women decline assistance when it is offered because their trafficking has not ended in spite of their return home. In the cases where they have been caught in police raids or document controls abroad and been deported, they will often still have the burden of the debt hanging over them and the trafficker will generally know where they are. One woman had stayed with a trafficker for several months in France, being sent to different cities and countries, sometimes with him, sometimes alone. She had been in contact with several different agencies that offered her help, including the police in a country different from where her trafficker was. Nevertheless, she was afraid to leave because the trafficker had previously threatened she and her sister. As a result, she decided to go back to France and try to pay off the debts he told her she owed him: 10.000 Euros.

In many cases the victims will have debts, real or invented, and will feel the need to pay them off. These kinds of debts are frequently accompanied by threats in the event of non-payment, often not only against the woman herself, but against family members. One threat that seems particularly effective is for traffickers to say that they will kidnap or harm a younger sister and subject her to the same exploitation. Threats against family members generally were also not uncommon. This creates a very complicated situation where some women are forced to stay in touch with traffickers (or at least not alienate them) because they do not know the implications for themselves or their families if they break contact by entering an assistance programme. Because most programmes require that women end contact with traffickers when entering the programme, this may be an inhibitor for women who do not know if they or their families will be sufficiently protected. Further, it has been noted elsewhere that traffickers may read accepting assistance as equivalent to cooperation with police, which may lead (or victims may fear will lead) to retribution by traffickers.

Creating emotional dependency is a technique frequently employed by traffickers, and this can make it extremely difficult for women to break away. One woman repeatedly declined the assistance offered to her over a period of several years, while trafficked in a western European country. While most outside observers would classify her situation as one of exploitation by a criminal network, her primary understanding of her relationship with her trafficker was as a romantic one. After she had been exploited and abused in several different countries, including as a drug mule, she still felt obliged to pay off the money the man claimed to have spent on her. This relationship meant that she returned to the country where he was exploiting her after having turned down, by most standards, an attractive offer of assistance in a third country. While she was no longer involved with this man at the time of the interview, she was still somewhat ambivalent about the relationship. On the one hand she said that she could not understand why she did not accept assistance before; on the other hand,

she still felt that the man who exploited her was not to blame because she had gone along with it.

In this woman's case it is very important to understand that her actions were rational to her at the time and given her miserable life situation. She had originally left her home country in an attempt to get away from an abusive husband and in her initial assessment, the man, who later exploited her, was perceived as her ticket away from a difficult life. She did not have any alternative safety nets to rely on at home, as her family was as abusive as her husband – in fact, they told her there was room for her within the family only if she was dead – and she originated from an area where there is no assistance available to victims of domestic violence. She did try to live with her family after returning to her home country following her trafficking, but fled in the end to a shelter for trafficked women because of the violence inflicted on her by her family. Her family felt she was a disgrace both for her divorce and for her involvement in prostitution and feared that the family's honour would be ruined.

Given what we know about the financial situation many trafficking victims face when they return, it is hardly surprising that some see no other possibility than to go abroad again, even with the same organisers, in the hope of making at least some money for themselves. Closely related to going abroad with the same network or trafficker, is the problem that victims of trafficking are sometimes trafficked again, by other people. Many victims come from small communities and, because of real estate prices and rent, it is very difficult for them to resettle in larger cities or towns. This means that victims can be very visible when they return to their small communities. The combined pressure of financial difficulties and stigma (see also chapter nine on different forms of stigma) create a vulnerability that may be even stronger than it was when they were initially trafficked.

Two staff members working at a shelter explained to us how they sometimes had the same women come back to the shelter, having been exploited for the second or third time, often by different networks:

Staff member A: If you go to any village [here], you will see the houses of poor people. They can easily identify the houses of poor people and people who work abroad. So they find victims of trafficking quite easily. Two neighbouring houses; one luxurious, [one poor]. If you say they can earn 300 dollars, they are over the moon. So if the trafficker offers to pay for the passport, visa, they accept. Staff member B: This is the best motivation to see how other people have found work abroad. The houses, the cars. A: If you drive around the country, you can see that yourselves. You can even become traffickers.

It was indeed very easy to see, even as foreigners, when driving through the countryside, which houses and families were less affluent and which were owned by the (relatively) rich. Therefore, it is, arguably, quite easy for traffickers to find out whom to target.

Aiming for independent prostitution

The inherent ambiguity in the definition of trafficking in human beings means that, at the moment, there is no clear demarcation between being a prostitute and being a victim of trafficking. This is not just a matter of theoretical or philosophical discussion; the methods of control, deception and coercion used by traffickers means that many women are gradually introduced and come to accept conditions they might not have chosen or accepted in the first place. This means that the lines will be blurred as long as the definition includes more than forced prostitution, through the inclusion of abuse of a position of vulnerability as a criterion for determining trafficking. At the same time, it is hardly functional to group all women who have migrated and are involved in prostitution as victims of trafficking, regardless of their own understanding of the situation.

Further, it is clear in many countries of origin for trafficking that two identical situations, which involve women selling sex and someone else taking part of the profit, may be classified as trafficking if it happens abroad or includes a foreign national and prostitution if it happens domestically and with local women. Carol Harrington argues in her article on assistance to trafficking victims in Kosovo and BiH that some assistance systems exclude women who are not foreign or who do not want to return to their country of origin, thereby upholding an image of two distinct categories of women and girls in the sex industry; innocent victim of trafficking and guilty prostitute (Harrington 2005:175).

The distinction between foreign victim of trafficking and local prostitute is sometimes also reflected in how the police are organised to deal with the issue of trafficking and prostitution respectively. In Serbia, the anti-trafficking police deal with cases of deported victims and suspected cases of trafficking through or to Serbia, while the public order police deal with local street prostitution. Traditionally, bar and brothel raids have been the domain of the anti-trafficking police, as there has been a tendency for women trafficked to Serbia to work in such locations. However, when we interviewed 20 street prostitutes in Belgrade, it became clear that at least seven of them had been trafficked internally in Serbia or abroad in the past and a number of them were minors. They almost universally reported very bad relationships with the police, including having been subjected to violence and abuse by police officers on a regular basis¹³. This illustrates how the division between trafficking for sexual exploitation and prostitution is contingent on the framework in which the issue is seen, rather than any objective signifiers with respect to exploitation or vulnerability.

¹³ See chapter 8, on organisation of assistance as a reason to decline and chapter 12, on identification with the victim of trafficking role for more discussion of this topic.

Labour migration

While women who are re-trafficked or continue in prostitution decline assistance either of their own volition or because they have no real choice, many others will try to go abroad to find a regular job. In many cases labour migration will have been their ambition when they were trafficked and to try again is merely to rejuvenate their original plan.

In certain countries, for instance Albania and Moldova, some studies indicate that 25 per cent of the population is abroad at any given time. Consequently, it is reasonable to assume that many young women will have migration as one of their life goals. We discussed the issue of migration with a returned victim of trafficking, who was asking a lot about opportunities to migrate to the countries we live in: Austria and Norway. While she had had a very traumatic experience abroad she said that she would like to go again, but that she wanted to make sure that the offer was real this time:

I have heard a case in the village, a woman earned \$900 or \$1000 and it's a very big sum of money. So for example, [someone I know] went to Norway and stayed for two months but there was not work and he came back. With the help of a firm he went there. They went to pick strawberries. He wanted to stay for three months but stayed for only two months and did not earn a lot. I didn't speak to him so I don't know what he earned or what, but still people go. Because it is almost impossible to live here, it's poor and [difficult to] survive. I would go but I would like to be sure, 95%.

She expressed some interest in using an agency to migrate, while, at the same time, acknowledging that there were inherent dangers in using such agencies.

Pursuing a relationship with a “rescuer” in the destination country

A substantial number of women recounted that they had been helped by a client in their process of getting away from traffickers. The way this happens differs a lot from place to place and also between “rescuers”. In some cases they literally buy the women from the trafficker and keep them as “wives” or personal servants; in other cases, their involvement may be more of a genuine rescue effort where the man at least appears to show real concern for the woman. In one case, a man in Cyprus called the help line in Moldova asking whether they could assist some girls that he had helped. He passed on information about the services to the women and gave them money and plane tickets so that they could get home.

In a few cases women leave reintegration programmes in their own country and return abroad to live with these rescuers. This is a situation that some service providers were concerned about. There have been instances where women who have returned to these men have been kept more or less as slaves and where the situation is no better

than the one they were in when they were trafficked. Children may also have been born into these relationships, a situation which may further complicate the issue. In some countries, it is very difficult to register and obtain legal documents for children when they are born abroad. For many people it is almost impossible to navigate the complicated and sometimes corrupt local bureaucracy in order to get documents for their children. One young woman we spoke to had accepted assistance only to get help to have her young son registered. Having children registered has many practical implications, as this is necessary in order to be eligible for benefits (albeit usually meagre) and to prevent the child's vulnerability to trafficking. The lack of birth registration is believed to be a factor in creating vulnerability to child trafficking.

It does not always take much for a rescuer to be the motivation for going abroad again; one woman told us that she frequently thought about a man who had helped her abroad. She said she would really have liked to get together with him again because he treated her all right and did not beat her. Service providers generally worried about victims of trafficking who returned to the place they were trafficked to be with someone who rescued them:

Q: How do you work with women, what do you say to women who want to go abroad, when they have a rescuer, they have a job?

I always tell them that I have heard 2000 stories of trafficking experiences and that I can give them the numbers of victims and that she can talk to them. I often invite girls who have been [trafficked] for the second time, in the hope... Or I simply wait, tell them you [may end up] the slave of one man, because you can stay there illegally, you have no medical insurance, you can't go out, and even if the cage is golden, you can't go out. It is difficult to convince her. If she still wants to go, I give them the phone numbers [for help lines].

Whether the women are at risk of being trafficked into prostitution again in these situations is hard to assess. However, they will, as pointed out by the psychologist above, often be in a very vulnerable position. Still, there are some success stories with respect to these rescuers, which serve to encourage others to attempt the same.

Miracles do happen – there is a woman [who was trafficked], she has been waiting here for almost two years to get back and marry the man who helped her. She has prepared a lot of documents and she is going to the man who helped her. She has given birth to his child; this is a great love, if she managed to fight for it for two years.

The psychologist who told us of this case did, however, feel that this constituted a rare example. In the experience of many service providers, “rescuers” may keep calling the woman and give them hope, but in the end discard them, sometimes using their past in prostitution against them.

5 Interaction with family in deciding on assistance

While the topic of this report is very much about the decisions that trafficked women and girls make about whether or not to accept assistance, it is clear that they mostly do not make these decisions in a vacuum. The family plays an important role in decisions, sometimes also directly influencing the decision, or effectively making the decision for the victim, especially in the case of minors. The influence of the family and the decision that must be made also depends on the character of the assistance system, as in some cases victims can also receive assistance in their local communities. However, local assistance may be less comprehensive than that available to those who go to a shelter. There are several different circumstances under which victims of trafficking choose to return to their families rather than enrol in an anti-trafficking assistance programme. What may, at the surface, appear to be the same pattern – i.e. returning to the family after having been trafficked – consists of a great number of different motivations and mechanisms.

The main reasons we have found for the return to the family were to get emotional support; because the victim has financial obligations to support family members and needs to work and/or because the family puts pressure on the victim not to accept assistance. These reasons are described in more detail below.

Sometimes declining assistance to return to the family can be read as declining assistance because victims have other sources of support, as discussed in more detail in chapter seven. However, declining assistance in order to return to the family is sometimes declining by default, because accepting assistance comes at too high a cost. These costs can be emotional costs in that the victim wants to be comforted by her own family. They may also be social costs, for instance when service providers demand that the beneficiary limits contact with the family (at least during their shelter stay) and can only meet them in a controlled environment, for instance at a police station. There may also be financial consequences, as accepting assistance often means the victim does not work and earn money, at least initially. These costs may make it virtually impossible for some trafficking victims to accept assistance.

During the course of our work we found, unsurprisingly, that the families of trafficking victims play very different and diverse roles in the decision making process in whether to accept or decline assistance. One might divide these patterns roughly into situations where the family is a passive factor in encouraging victims to go home rather

than seek assistance, and those where the family plays a more active part in applying pressure to victims either to accept or decline assistance. Further, as discussed above in chapter two, this is also very often a process where the time element plays an important part, as relationships may change a lot over time, which can substantially affect assistance needs and the propensity to accept assistance. Victims will often want to return to their family immediately after having been trafficked but may find that relationships have changed or that the problems they face are bigger than they thought and that they may need, for instance, psychological assistance. In such cases, women may initially decline but accept assistance later on. It is, of course, imperative that they then have the information they need to seek out appropriate services at later stages.

Returning home for family support

A great number of the women we met described how their first inclination was to return home to their families after having escaped trafficking. This seemed to be particularly common among women who have been through very traumatic trafficking experiences and it may be that heavily traumatised victims, or those who might benefit the most from assistance, are therefore also a group that is more likely to decline¹⁴. Many trafficking victims have been deeply traumatised by what they have been through and describe great difficulties in trusting strangers. Several have told us how they just wanted to go home to their families and not to have to think about their experiences anymore. This is precisely the situation that Maja found herself in, after a very traumatic experience abroad. She returned home through an assisted return programme and described to us her emotional state before and after travelling back to her country:

When I was in the detention centre [abroad], the police officers saw that I was on the edge of hysteria. There was a part of me that realised what was going on, but another part could not assess the situation properly. So the police asked [an organisation] to take me away. I shared a room with another girl [at the detention centre] and after some time she was going to be taken somewhere else. But I felt like a baby, I had grown very attached to her, and when I realised that she was going to be taken somewhere else I was hysterical. So the representative of [the organisation] said they could take both of us. When we came there, I couldn't stay with the other girls because I was so nervous. If there were more than two people in a room, I would flee to the balcony. After three days they sent me home. I was told that there would be someone to meet me at the airport and that they would give

¹⁴The capacity to process information after a traumatic experience is also discussed in chapter 7.

me money to get home. But I think that even if nobody had met me, I would have walked home [*she lives a three hour drive from the airport in question*].

Maja describes how her only thought was to get home, particularly because she was nervous and felt unsafe around other people, even though she also told us she had a positive experience with the assistance she received in this initial stage. She was treated well by both police and service providers and had to wait only a relatively short period of time before she was returned home. Her attachment to the woman she shared a room with in the shelter was also taken into account and the assisting organisation changed their plans to accommodate her wishes. Nevertheless, Maja was so traumatised by her brutal experiences abroad that her only thought was to get home, to safety and something she knew.

However, when she did get home, she realised that she was not able to move on from what had happened to her on her own. She was not able to talk to her husband about it, not from fear of rejection, she said, but because it was too painful to even begin to describe what had happened. She, therefore, decided to go back to the shelter to get medical and psychological assistance.

Several assistance models put restrictions on the contact between victim and family, even in cases where there is no reason to believe that the family was involved in the trafficking. This could mean that victims will decline because the cost of entering assistance is too high in terms of losing contact with their families. It may also cause suspicion among, for instance, parents of young trafficking victims who have, in many cases, been deceived by traffickers. To expect them to trust a service provider with their children may be too much to expect.

Wanting to go back to the family can also be seen as a very natural reaction for others who are not necessarily as traumatised. It does not necessarily mean that she has had bad experiences in a shelter or assistance programme. One of our respondents was identified as a victim of trafficking abroad and taken to a shelter there. Although she found it difficult to fit in at first, the shelter stay turned into a positive experience. She said:

When I was offered to go to the shelter here, I thought it must be like the one in Italy, which I liked. But I did not want to go to the shelter. I just wanted to go home.

This seems a natural response to having been through a bad experience. Women who have chosen to stay in a shelter, often because of serious security concerns, have expressed longing and worry for their families. Wanting to go home can reflect a happy and healthy family relationship; we found that in many cases victims who have accepted assistance have done so more or less because they have not been able to live with their families, and because the relationship is poor. One woman had returned to her family after an initial stay at a shelter. The situation quickly became untenable; her family would beat her and tell her that there was only a place for her in the family if she was

dead. The family also wanted to get rid of her because they were afraid that their own reputation would be tainted by her prostitution. After some time she moved back to a shelter and did not see herself reuniting with her family anytime soon. Another woman who had travelled home said that she only accepted assistance because the situation at home with family and neighbours became too difficult. Research on trafficking describes many trafficking victims as coming from what are termed “dysfunctional families”. However, research on this group is usually based on victims who have received assistance, and usually victims who have stayed or are staying in a shelter¹⁵. It is, therefore, likely that there is a considerable bias in descriptions of the relationship between assisted victims and families, as victims with well-functioning families may be assumed to be more inclined to return home rather than accepting even minimal support.

When the family distrusts the assistance

While some women and girls may reject assistance because their first instinct is to return home, in other cases the family plays a much more active part in their decision to decline assistance. According to service providers, in many cases when a trafficking victim returns, the family will have little or no idea why she has been gone and what exactly has happened. Victims find it very difficult to tell their families what has happened and this can cause considerable problems. It can also be difficult for the family to fully understand the situation of the victim; they may fail to recognise how serious the situation is and that the victim may, in fact, need help. In several such cases we found that families actively tried to discourage victims from accepting assistance, like the husband of Elena, who had been offered help to start a small business:

Q: What did your husband think [about the offer of assistance]?

A: He did not want to let me go. He said; you have already been away. He meant when [I was trafficked]. He didn't believe in this business plan.

In Elena's case, the husband expressed two reasons she should not go the shelter; first; she has already “been away” and secondly; he did not trust that the offer of assistance was real. Elena did, in the end, decide to go, but with serious doubts:

¹⁵ While the selection of respondents in assistance systems is likely to create biases and skew the knowledge on trafficking, recruitment of other respondents for trafficking research is a challenge. Attempts to recruit returned victims outside of assistance systems involves a very real risk of “outing” them as trafficking victims in their local communities and is, therefore, ethically irresponsible. See also Tyldum & Brunovskis 2005:25 for discussion of the implication of studies on different populations of victims of trafficking.

Q: Was it difficult for you to go to the shelter when he was so sceptical?

A: He did let us go, but it was difficult for him. He called me there every day. Here, he did not even eat or drink for a month. [...]

Q: Did you consider not going to the shelter because of your husband's reaction?

A: I think I would have changed my mind. I always speak to him and consult him and if he says a word I will start to hesitate. He doesn't believe that anyone will give you anything free of charge. He thinks that I should go somewhere and earn good money and that this is what I can do.

Lack of information or the lack of understanding of assistance, as in the situations described above, can cause tension in the family and often also make families display negative attitudes toward assistance programmes. This is further exacerbated by the fact that the family often will not know exactly what the assistance is for, what it consists of, and, importantly in many cases, where the shelter accommodation is located.

Some shelters operate by a strict principle of secrecy and will not let family members come to visit the premises. In one country, shelters are generally operating in this way and the police explained how this could affect families' attitudes to assistance:

Generally, the family does not want the victim to come to the shelter. This is because she has been away for two years and now she is back. They want her to come home, and we try to explain the situation, but they say we are harassing them and they don't see it as help. The family has to contact the victim through the police. Even when they have visits we do this through the police and arrange to meet at the police office. The shelters are secret and it is not good if the families see them and also, it is very difficult for other victims, whose family don't come to see them [to see that other victims get visits from their family]. The family does not need to know where the shelter is. It is secret for police reasons.

While in many cases there are good reasons for the limited information about shelters, it is not difficult to understand that this may be both confusing and worrying for family members. This is likely to become even more difficult to cope with if the girl or woman has been away for a long time without the family knowing where she was or what happened to her. Many victims described the suspicion and worry especially parents had that they were being abused or exploited in the shelters. Julia explained her mother's reaction to the shelter she was staying in. When she was first offered assistance her mother would not even let the service providers speak to her. She imagined Julia would be taken away and put in a cell behind bars. Julia trusted the staff members of the organisation and managed to persuade her mother to let her go, but nevertheless, it was difficult for her to fully believe that all was okay:

My mother would demand that I show her that they didn't hurt me – that there were no bruises. She'd tell me to take off my clothing to check for herself [that there were no hidden bruises].

While Julia's mother finally agreed that she should accept assistance, she did so reluctantly and with serious suspicions that her daughter was being mistreated.

When the family distrusts the victim

Suspicion of maltreatment is not the only source of distress to family members, nor the only motivation for discouraging victims from accepting assistance. For several victims, assistance was made difficult because of a husband's jealousy and suspicion that his wife was having an affair or was involved in prostitution rather than in an assistance programme:

Sometimes we were called by the husbands who did not believe that the wives were at the [place where we had the programme] and they would call the wives several times a day to assure themselves that she was there, and they were asking "can you give me someone else like a woman who can confirm you are [there], why can you not tell me where you are now?"... For example, we had a woman, who was called by her husband the last day and he said that I know you have found someone else and when you come back I will beat you, so she was very scared to go back.

This illustrates not only the specific dynamics between victims and their families with respect to whether or not to accept assistance, but also the range of relational difficulties victims of trafficking face when they return to their home communities. While families may express relief to have her back, there are also ranges of emotions that surface, and many have to do with distrust of the victim. If she is secretive about where she was or what happened to her, this might sow seeds of doubt about what she was doing and how "innocent" she really was. A social worker explained it like this:

So what would I think of my child or my wife if she comes back with a lot of gynaecological problems and she will not tell me what has happened, she is crying all the time or very aggressive, something bad has happened but maybe she did something wrong, she came with a deportation, or without documents, she is not answering the phone or leaves the house for several days and I have to look for her, she is not a good person anymore. This may be why the society sometimes has such a reaction to these women.

As assistance programmes become increasingly visible to the general population in many of the known countries of origin, more and more victims have the opportunity to come forward and receive assistance. However, this also has the added effect of making it known that certain organisations are involved in anti-trafficking work. While significant resources have been invested in awareness-raising efforts to convince the public that trafficking victims are victims of a crime and should not be ostracised, effects have been limited. Said one social worker:

At the beginning of this year we had a social campaign on raising awareness. In the video spots they say that 80 percent of victims of trafficking are not accepted, and before that we did a research. It was really striking or shocking for us to see how people see the victims of trafficking: “Bad person”, “Everyone knows why she left, what she did”, “I wouldn’t help”, “No one from my family would even be a victim of trafficking”.

If the family of a trafficking victim holds the same attitude as the society in general, it may be very difficult for a woman to accept assistance that may identify her as trafficked. Alternatively, it means that she has to accept assistance without disclosing to her family details of where she is or what she is doing.

Family should take care of their own

In most of the cases above, family has been sceptical of assistance out of concern for the victim. In other cases, it is also clear that the family may act out of concern for its own reputation. While stigma attached to prostitution is well known, there are also indications that sometimes to accept assistance can in itself be stigmatising in a community, regardless of the link to prostitution inherent in trafficking for sexual exploitation¹⁶. This seems in particular to be the case for parents of minors, who in accepting assistance for their children, may be cast as a family unable or unwilling to help their own child. This was expressed clearly by a man from a close-knit local community, when asked what the reaction would be if a girl from the neighbourhood was in a shelter for trafficking victims:

The community is very close and [people] always talk among themselves. Everybody would know. [We] are very patriarchal and take good care of [our] children. [People would think]; “who am I to judge what she has done?” The family would

¹⁶The role of stigma in relation to assistance is further discussed in chapter 11.

not reject her. They might let her go to the shelter if the family was very poor and they could not provide support [for her] themselves.

This quote describes the assumption that a family should take care of a trafficked child themselves, unless in very special circumstances. It is also interesting to note that this man felt that the stigma attached to not taking care of the child would be stronger than stigma associated with prostitution. This sentiment – that families should take care of their children – was also supported by others not involved in service provision. As one woman said: “The child is mine, so she should be helped by me, not others”. Accepting assistance that identifies them as unfit parents, as in the case of removing a family member in order for her to live in a shelter, may have negative repercussions in the local community, which, in the last instance, may have a negative impact for the trafficking victim. This may, in part, be addressed through the provision of community-based services that can be accessed while the family still provides the overall framework of care and support, consistent with their value system of taking care of their children.

In most of the cases already described, the family was confused or sceptical because they were not sufficiently informed about (or did not comprehend) the assistance offered; or the assistance was organised in such a way that family could not keep in contact with the victim during assistance; or last, that they don’t fully comprehend the gravity of what has happened. While trafficking in women most significantly affects the trafficked individual, it is also very often an extremely disruptive experience for the victim’s family. This is a huge challenge for an assistance system, which already struggles to include victims of trafficking in their programmes. While families should in many instances probably be more involved as beneficiaries and participants in discussions about assistance, this may be very straining for already limited assistance resources.

6 Victims who do not need assistance

One reason that victims may not accept assistance is that they (and/or their families) have decided that they do not need the assistance that is offered to them. In some cases this is because assistance is not required and the victim wishes to get on with her life. In other cases, while the victim may need assistance, she is able to access alternative sources of support and does not require the formalised services offered by counter-trafficking actors. In light of the general assumption that all victims of trafficking are traumatised and require extensive assistance to be able to function again in society, the fact that some prefer to deal with their experiences on their own or have alternative sources of support is worth keeping in mind, and, similarly, that given a choice, some will prefer assistance that is not trafficking specific but aimed at the general population.

Victims who have no unmet assistance needs

There is a common assumption that all trafficking victims require (and want) some form of assistance or support to recover and reintegrate into society. However, there are indications that some victims do not need assistance because they can cope on their own. Among the victims who declined assistance in Kosovo, for example, not needing assistance was one reason given. Having survived trafficking and escaped, they felt equipped to return home independently and declined return transportation as well as options for assistance in their country of origin (Surtees 2005: 270). Other victims accept initial emergency intervention – temporary shelter or some medical services – but do not require further assistance. As one social worker explained, “Then there are others who receive airport assistance and medical assistance in the shelter but either don’t have social assistance or further reintegration needs”.

One woman we met had been abroad for a short period of time and upon her return home declined all forms of assistance, even changing her phone number to avoid being contacted by service providers. She was recently married and her husband did not know about her experience. While keeping her experience a secret from her new husband was a factor in declining, it was as much about her specific situation. She was working and studying and had the support of her mother who had been active in searching for her during her disappearance. As she explained,

When I met some women at the shelter [abroad], I saw that they needed help offered for their studies and the job. For me I have studies and a job. What help do I need? The women I met needed help because they went abroad to find a job because for them there was not other way out. For me I went for a rest but was kidnapped and next time I will not to go for fun.

Strikingly, even in situations where victims have few options at home, many do not seek out assistance because they do not perceive their needs in the same way as an outside observer might. One woman had been home from abroad for eight months before she sought help, in spite of the acute poverty that she and her children were facing. When asked what led her to call for assistance she explained,

I had some nuts and I could sell them and I had some money and could provide for the family for a short time. Then the nuts were over and in a week I ended up with empty shelves. I even forgot about [the organisation], but when I ended up having nothing, I remembered and I decided to try and I tried.

Assistance provided at the destination country may also play a role in whether a victim does or does not need assistance. As one psychologist observed,

Girls who come from Europe – Italy, Germany – have already gotten some treatment and they don't want any other assistance... If the girls come from Italy they have a better treatment and public organisation and are treated very well. There is a religious organisation in Italy. There was a priest who attended them carefully, who went with them to parties, to bars; they were showered with attention, so when they came here they did not like our treatment. So we were a little bit insulted! We have a lot of people and to give what we can to two or three when we have twenty-two is impossible.

This may be particularly the case where beneficiaries have received long-term assistance in the country of destination through, for example, the provision of temporary resident permits (TRPs). Two of the women we interviewed in Serbia had received TRPs and reintegration assistance, including educational classes. Therefore, were they to return home, as one did shortly after we interviewed her, it would not be unreasonable that she decline (at least some) services already received in the destination country. Similarly, one woman trafficked to the UK was involved as a witness in criminal proceedings against her trafficker in the UK, during which time she received assistance in the UK. When she returned to her country of origin she was in touch with service providers but did not request reintegration support. As the service provider explained,

She had some additional little medical needs and we covered these. But she had a profession. She's a hairdresser. We consider this case successful because she has a family; she's integrated in the family. She had a good job in a good beauty salon.

She's a hairdresser. So of course we can help her in the future but I am not sure that she needs what we have.

Some organisations do not seem to easily accept that some victims may not need assistance or at least not need assistance beyond that which they received abroad. One woman had received almost a year of what could be described as reintegration-oriented assistance in the country of destination. Because she had family to return to and who offered her support, service providers in the destination country did not feel that she needed to be transferred to the shelter in her home country and favoured an immediate return to her extended family. Nevertheless, the receiving organisation insisted that she come first to the shelter:

We had a conversation with [the shelter in her home country] and the whole thing was maybe one minute and they said for her to come here to [the capital] and we will discuss it when you get here and they didn't ask her about what she wanted. We wanted to develop a plan for her because she cannot go home to her father because he is very abusive. And it is a waste to go to [the capital] because her relatives are in [another part of the country]... We told them about [other options] and they said that she should come [to the shelter] and I don't think it was a good thing.

In some situations victims were self-regulating in terms of the types of services they sought and/or accepted. In some cases victims declined some aspect of assistance because they did not feel it was needed. In one case a victim was referred by her medical doctor and during her stay at the shelter she saw the range of options and service available. But after discussing the various options with social assistants she declined these different services. As she explained, her assistance needs were primarily medical and she was satisfied with the provision of this service and did not ask for more. Another victim explained that, for her, the most important assistance was the time in the shelter, a period of rest and reflection. And, while very satisfied with the assistance she had received, she did not express the need for additional services:

In any case, I am not just staying at home and waiting for help. So I get this help and that and that's help but it's not enough so I am doing something because it is not enough... I received the help that I received. They gave me this amount. And I am satisfied. I am not a person that asks for more. I will get what I need on my own.

About the small business grant she received she maintained "so if I hadn't had the grant I would have found a way but the rehabilitation period was helpful for me because I had a terrible time". Assisted victims also said that there were some forms of support that they did not need. Said one programme beneficiary, "I don't feel the need to speak to a psychologist. I want to cope on my own. I want to do things on my own and don't feel the need to talk to her. It is important for me to realise my own mistakes".

Similarly, Ukrainian NGOs report an increased number of victims of trafficking who are interested only in financial support – up from 55% in 2003 to 61% in 2004. As a corollary, a limited number of victims sought assistance in finding a job or skills training – 10% and 20% in 2003 and 2004 respectively (Winrock 2004: 8). Feeling that one does not need assistance, however, does seem to change over time. As one service provider observed:

Making a plan, even when she is still in the transit or destination country, is not realistic because the situation is different from when she left the country so there is some dynamic in the family. Sometimes the family is happy, sometime not happy. Sometimes it is favourable to return home and also not and [they] need to find another place. So better if we start drafting something or really planning when the person is already here.

One beneficiary in Moldova had returned home five years prior to seeking assistance and upon her initial return did not feel that she needed the services offered, although she was aware of the availability of services. However, after five years she contacted one service provider for one specific form of assistance, psychological counselling:

Although she knew before about us but she thought she could manage on her own. And I remember that she said that afternoon, in counselling, “why did I suffer for five years?” and she said I knew about you providing assistance but I thought maybe mine is not the worse case. Some others don’t have or see internal resources. She thought she has enough and a family and things. But still she couldn’t, this is part of it. They can’t discuss really, they can’t find people who will understand this. And it’s still with you and you didn’t share it with someone.

As previously discussed, there may be a crisis point in the post-trafficking experience that triggers the need to accept assistance. One victim declined all assistance offered to her until she was threatened by the police who were coercing her to testify against her trafficker by threatening to charge her with prostitution. Only then did she seek out the agency that had initially offered assistance. Without this trigger, she would not likely have accepted. As she herself said, she would have found a way to cope on her own as she had in the past.

Victims with other sources of support

Some victims decline assistance offered through formal assistance frameworks because they have access to alternative forms of support. This might be family based help, support from their social network, community based assistance (i.e. church or community

groups) or non-trafficking related services. In fact, it was generally agreed that where alternative options were available, victims preferred to pursue these. As one social worker in Albania noted: “If they find any other source of support – like family or friend – they might leave. It’s a reflection period and they are encouraged to think of what support is available to them... They usually only leave when they have support outside”. As a corollary, a social worker in Moldova observed that those who accept are generally those with no other options:

All those that have received assistance treated the situation as unbearable anymore, that’s why they came. Maybe also her husband kicked her out with the children. The majority of them always get some food products. They can’t buy enough clothes for their children, even soap or washing powder. They are on the border, on the edge, there is no future for them and they dare to get this help. Certainly they take a risk but they understand that there is no way out. If the situation is a little bit better, they have a sister or a mother that might help them, then they decline.

It was a common theme in our interviews that many victims accessed assistance only at the point of crisis, when they had exhausted all other avenues. When asked what led her to overcome her fear and lack of trust to access this help, one Moldovan victim explained that it was simply the only option:

At that moment when I started communicating with [the social worker] I was in a very difficult situation, I got only 300 leis [approximately 18 Euros] and it was not enough for food and clothes. When I was offered this assistance I thought about my girl, because I needed something for her.

She went on to say that she would not have called for assistance if it hadn’t been for her daughter, “I would not even have called maybe, maybe I wouldn’t know about it. I think more about my girl”.

Family based support

The most common alternative assistance appears to be victims returning to their families because the family feels they can provide the assistance and support needed.¹⁷ One victim declined all assistance offered because her family wanted her to come home and said that they would support her. The mother was unequivocal on this point in spite of the fact that her daughter had returned home pregnant, often a source of tension and even rejection in families of trafficking victims,

¹⁷ Another explanation for a preference for family based support may be that assistance provided in the family does not identify the woman as a victim and, therefore, is less stigmatising both for her and for the family as a whole.

We couldn't wait to see her when she came back. We were so worried. We were so excited to have her back that we accepted the baby... There is space in the back and maybe we will build a space for the baby to sleep.

In another case, the victim returned home to her mother with whom she had a good relationship. The mother has a pension and she also works in agriculture to support her daughters. She declined assistance because she felt she had sufficient resources to support her daughter's recovery. As one social worker explained, "These are those that have families and are happy with the confidentiality when they go to the family and then they start from there".

Looking at the question from another angle, we asked about the family situation of those who accept assistance. Organisational staff postulated that it was those without families or family support and who have no other options or place to go who accepted assistance. One service provider in Moldova observed, "I expect that there are many cases of trafficking victims that are successful, whose families accept them and they receive assistance but not from trafficking service providers. The successful trafficking victims do not call us". Similarly, a social worker in Albania noted:

They want the family to accept them, to help them. Because the family is life long support. And I believe that they want to go back to the family, even for when they find the support of the family. The family is ready; the family is the first choice that they made actually. If we say "do you want to go back to the family?" and the family accepts them then they go back to the family. If we say "so you want to go back to the family" and then the family does not accept you and you get in touch with the family and they say "no I don't care" then the only place is the shelter.

This explanation was borne out in our research with a number of assisted beneficiaries reporting that when they accepted assistance it was their only option, they were not able to return home either because their families would not accept them or because of security risks.¹⁸

There are those women who decline because they think they can rely on assistance from their families but, in reality, this is not the case and they face problems and even rejection. Explained one victim, "A lot of girls were first approached and asked by the police and they declined assistance. They thought that they would get support from their family but the family does not accept them to go back where they are". Service providers reported a number of cases in which declinees have returned to them after finding no assistance available to them within their family network.

¹⁸ This pattern may also influence the profile of assisted victims, with those with no family or what is often described as "dysfunctional" or "problematic" family relations highly represented in the assisted caseload. Therefore, the attribution of "dysfunctional" or "problematic" family may be more of an issue amongst assisted victims than amongst victims generally.

In declining formal assistance, it seems that families and relatives (and even communities in some cases) play a role in this decision-making process. When Julia returned from abroad and was offered assistance, she faced a lot of opposition from her family:

My relatives were influencing my mother [that the situation in the shelter must be bad] and that hurt me since I felt my mother didn't trust me. My relatives were doubtful [of the shelter and its intentions]. And my mother didn't understand why she couldn't come to the shelter and see for herself. I used to tell my mother that they gave me clothing and cosmetics. My mother would demand that I show her that they didn't hurt me – that there were no bruises. She'd tell me to take off my clothing to check for herself. Now my mother is grateful for the help.

At the same time, some families recognise when they cannot provide the support needed by the victim and, at a later stage, follow-up for assistance and support. Sometimes this was when material and economic assistance was needed, other times social and psychological support. In Croatia, a number of national victims who initially declined assistance contacted service providers after some time to request assistance, often encouraged by their families to do so (Surtees 2005: 237). In other cases it was a security issue, as explained by one service provider in Albania:

Well, we recently had a case where we assessed that the risk was high and the family did not. They said, "well, she can come back and we're going to protect her and help her". And so she went back to the family but of course the risks were different and the trafficker was around and the family phoned us up and she was exposed to danger and she requested assistance.

Service providers report being contacted by the family to take the woman back into assistance also when families feel shame at what has happened or when the victim is facing difficulty and stigma in the community and they wish to shield her from this.

In returning to their families some victims explain to (some or all) family members what has happened and receive support. Other chose not to. One psychologist explained that women often did not tell their families both for their own and for their family's protection:

The thing is that only a few girls confess to their families that they have been trafficked. Two reasons: a part of them is afraid that the family will not forgive them and receive them back, and the second part of girls have very good relationship with the family, and they don't want to hurt anyone or don't want to spoil their relationship, just want to bear the burden themselves. Just a few girls tell and either to their mothers or their sisters.

Where family assistance options are viable, most beneficiaries prefer to go home. This was often the case even in the most unpleasant circumstance such as that of Marina

who returned home to her family in spite of their poor treatment of her and what she perceived to be demands made of her (like marriage) which were contrary to her own dreams (a self sufficient life). She explained that, in spite of this conflict, she craved a good relationship with her brother and mother, neither of whom was supportive of her. Another victim in residential care explained how she was not welcome at home, something that was clearly very difficult and upsetting for her personally.

I did not go home; I have no home. Well, I do, but it's not my home. My parents try to get rid of me. When I visit, and that is rare, I think my mother wants to get rid of me, to send me back. That is why I stayed here; now this is my home. I am very satisfied. I did not use to have such a home. The atmosphere... home is home. Each of us has a home, and you know what it is.

When asked what she would have done had no assistance been available, she was sombre:

I don't know, I am afraid to guess. But because of my depression, I am afraid that I would have killed myself.

Returning to the family does not always translate into real assistance, nor does it inevitably translate into a safe and protective environment for the returned woman. As one staff observed, "a victim can be kept inside the house or the family compound for a long time, never able to go out. This is the family 'protecting' her but it is not really protection". This point was illustrated by the case of Marina who was trafficked to Greece but recently returned to her family following her arrest and deportation for illegal migration. Marina had a good relationship with her father and he was very supportive of her throughout the legal proceedings associated with her trafficking, always accompanying her to the court. However, her relationship with her mother and brother was not as good. It was due to tensions with her brother that she accepted work abroad in the first place. Her family wanted her to get married rather than work but she said that she could not think of marriage until she has created the conditions for a good life for herself. While able to live at home with her family she is not happy there, nor are there the appropriate conditions for her recovery. Further, while she wants good relations with her family, she does not want reintegration into the village environment.

There is also the risk that when families decline assistance, that this may be because of family complicity in trafficking, which they are seeking to camouflage from service providers. It is worth noting that family members have been involved (directly and indirectly) in trafficking from each of the three countries studied (see Surtees 2005), which may play a role in decision-making about assistance.

Even amongst those who do accept assistance, family support is a vital component of their recovery. Where there are few long-term residential options, this may be par-

ticularly the case. Explained one social worker when asked about the profile of those who accept only limited/emergency assistance, “In my experience these are women who have a good relationship with their families and who come only from time to time with a particular need that they cannot solve themselves”. Similarly, “drop outs” for this social worker were more common when victims had a family to fall back on: “In my experience, they have had very supportive families, or they married and don’t want the husband to know what happened so they asked to stop the assistance”.

Support from social network

Some returning victims find the support they need in their network of friends and other relationships. This can be for both interim and longer-term assistance and the relations were not always very intimate. Rather, victims were prepared to consider different possibilities and social constellations. One victim explained how she had considered a range of alternatives before accepting assistance, including staying with a friend:

I have a friend here in [the capital] and maybe would have asked her to stay and look for a job. It would be very hard to stay here but if not here then with my grandma. I asked the girl, sent her a message about staying and she said no problem. But she’s a student and she’s younger and I didn’t want to impose on her.

Similarly, we interviewed another woman – a minor when first trafficked – who had returned home after a particularly harrowing experience of sexual exploitation. Because of bad relations in her family, returning home permanently was not possible. But neither did she look to state or NGO assistance. As she explained,

I was afraid of going to the police, I thought about complaining, but I was afraid. After I came back I rented a flat with another girl.

Unfortunately, the man who owned this flat was, as she described him, a criminal and tried to again traffic the two girls. When they refused he brutally beat and raped them.

There are also more complicated cases where victims do not need assistance because of their relationship with a “lover”/“husband” from the destination country. In these cases the woman is supported and often intends to return to this man. One psychologist explained this scenario:

There is a group of girls who have been trafficked for several years, up to five years. So we have girls who have been trafficked for several years and during the last two or three years they usually stay with the man who helped them to escape. So they give evidence because they are really victims and then they are sent here. But they come here with the bags of clothing and things because they lived there in a family.

Certainly they have sent money for a while so when they come here they decline assistance because they don't need. They are not undressed. We even at the airport see them going out of the airport with huge bags and we understand that these are not our girls. And they honestly say, "I don't have any problems with my health. Thank you very much".... As a rule they answer what I already mentioned – "I have been trafficked, I was bought by another man, he is waiting for me, I will come back or he is coming here and we will officially get married". So they think "I don't need anything".

In some cases these relationships are "real" and translate into a long-term relationship, also discussed in chapter 4. The woman returns to marry him or he joins her in the country of origin. In other cases, however, women were bought by a client and moved into his home where she was required to provide both sexual and domestic services. Generally, the victim is at the disposal of one man, although there were also instances in which the victim was obliged to provide sexual service to his friends.¹⁹ This relationship and the support she receives upon her return may also be a ruse to have her return again to the trafficking situation.

In terms of how this impacts assistance, it can translate into declining most or all of the help offered. Where the relationship is or is perceived to be genuine, women will not see the need for assistance. As one service provider noted,

Some of the girls who had relations with the owner of the bar get some financial support from abroad. I have some girls for eight months. He sends money to them and I tell them that this is a trap, this is not love, it's a trap. He sends money in the hope of you coming back and if you come he will still use you. In such cases they refuse the whole pack of assistance, they accept only just some type of assistance, usually just medical assistance.

Even where the relationship may continue to be abusive or exploitative, women may not always see it in this light. Because of the perceived intimacy of the relationship by the women involved, this often camouflages at least some of the exploitation. Women may see themselves as wives or partners rather than as victims of exploitation, a bond further galvanized over time spent in this situation. Further, the hidden nature of this arrangement – within the domestic sphere – reduces chances of identification and intervention, by victims themselves and outside actors. Even when identified, there is the risk that such cases are misinterpreted as domestic violence rather than trafficking and referred for other services and protection (Surtees 2005: 314).

¹⁹ This trend was also noted in Macedonia and Kosovo. See Andreani and Raviv, 2004; Surtees 2005: 264, 314.

Community based support and non-trafficking related assistance

There exist, in some communities, informal mechanisms for support and assistance that trafficking victims as well as other socially vulnerable people can tap into. Where assistance is community based, the issue of accepting or declining assistance may not be as pronounced. In such cases, victims can both return to their families and access these different forms of assistance, like job placement or vocational training.

In some communities, religious organisations play a prominent role in providing social assistance and assisting the socially vulnerable, including in some areas, victims of trafficking.²⁰ For example, in some areas of Albania, the Catholic Church plays a prominent role in the daily life of congregation members and in the provision of social assistance. Importantly, assistance from the Church is consistent with community members' worldview and these same community members may be more resistant to and suspicious of assistance from "outside" organisations. One organisation which conducted awareness-raising with girls and young women in these communities reported that the Church proved a key interlocutor with parents who were more comfortable letting their daughters attend meetings when they were organised at the Church and in cooperation with Church leaders. It stands to reason that these same parents would be more open to church-based assistance in cases of trafficking.

In spite of the important role that can be played by religious organisations, attention must also be paid to situations when this religious assistance is somehow conditional on religious involvement or where the ideological position of the organisation on issues such as abortion, prostitution and/or marriage can have a negative or constraining impact on offers of and access to assistance by trafficked women. One victim we met was extremely suspicious of assistance through religious organisations:

I don't turn to the church for help, I don't believe in these crazy things. There are so many religions now... I didn't go to the church, I don't believe in these things, and I think I never will. There are so many bad things they do. I had bad experience with my child.

One victim interviewed for a different study felt that religious organisations put undue pressure on victims who needed assistance:

There are many representatives of different religions in [our] villages who attract people and offer help on the condition of converting to their religion. This is not good when you are manipulated by someone or when there are some conditions to accepting assistance. It should be sincere, from the bottom of one's heart. (Surtees 2007)

²⁰ In some communities religious organisations are increasingly working with this target group. In others, women may seek assistance without self-representing as a victim of trafficking.

The potential conditionality of assistance on participation in a religious community and the possible other implications on what is or is not offered is a very serious issue that needs to be kept in mind, as human trafficking is a field where faith based organisations are increasingly offering assistance in countries of destination and origin.

There were also cases where victims were assisted outside of the trafficking framework in their home region. This was particularly likely to be the case for victims from outside the capital cities and large towns where anti-trafficking service providers were not present or were less known. In some cases, victims may opt for this non-trafficking assistance while others may only have this option. One Serbian girl who had been kidnapped was found and returned home by the police. She was not identified as a victim of trafficking (she was en route to Italy and had been raped many times by her traffickers) but rather as a victim of kidnapping. The girl was traumatized by her experience and received psychological support and assistance from GOs and NGOs, but not as part of the trafficking assistance framework. Anti-trafficking actors only became aware of the case when the trial took place and the girl testified, which was some time after she had been victimised. She and her mother – who was supporting her – declined further (trafficking specific) assistance because they had already received emergency assistance and said that, beyond this, they could cope on their own. The girl was constantly accompanied by her mother during the trial and it was clearly both this family support and the emergency (but not trafficking specific) services that were central in her recovery (cf. Bjerkan 2005).

Part III: Difficulties in the assistance system

7 The problem of information and communication

One important question in this research is whether information available and mechanisms for conveying this information are sufficient for trafficking victims to make an informed choice about assistance. Not understanding the services offered appears to be a relatively common reason for some victims to decline assistance. Even victims who accepted assistance, or in some cases have had little real choice but to accept assistance due to their status as irregular migrants, described a high level of confusion when first offered services. Questions about their initial impression of, for example, a shelter illustrates this point. When asked what they expected the shelter to be, one victim explained that she thought it would be a house full of people, children and girls and also full of cameras. Another victim said, “Where I was from I had no idea about it, what it was. I found it was good and I didn’t know that before I came. In [my town] there is nothing like this and I did not know that it could be like this”. Still others reported imagining it would be “a cellar with bars”, “a fraud” or “a home with a lot of people”. Some were scared of where they were being taken when they agreed to assistance, not sure that they could trust the service providers or police. Many worried that they were, in fact, being trafficked again. This confusion seemingly results from a number of issues, including insufficient or confusing information and a victim’s lack of capacity to understand the services offered.

Insufficient or confusing information about assistance

Victims generally reported not fully understanding what assistance was being offered to them, particularly when initially identified. Generally assistance was explained verbally to victims in broad terms. One victim explained how when she was abroad she was initially identified by law enforcement and then referred to the department of social welfare that helped her, including in returning home. But no one told her about the specific service providers in her home country or that she would have contact with the police. She said it was a “huge shock and trauma” and felt very strongly that social workers in the destination country should have explained more about what would

happen upon arrival, including who will be there: “I wish they had explained what the shelter was beforehand – that’s what really got me!”. One woman, when asked what information she had received prior to her return, explained that she had received very little information about what to expect:

The only thing they told me at the [shelter abroad] was that I would be met by someone and that they would give me some money to get home... Maybe when all the girls were together, that someone said something. But what I am sure that I remember was that someone would meet me in the airport. And another thing, that I could be provided with medical assistance.

Few victims reported receiving written information outlining their assistance options. Generally victims were given contact details for services and service providers to follow-up if they choose but little specific information about what these services might entail or about the assistance organisations.²¹ One social worker observed,

It’s also a problem of how the assistance is offered. Again, it’s unclear what is offered and whatever is offered is offered by a stranger. And its not enough to just say “give me a call if you decide you want it”. It is a strange person who offers assistance and it is not specific assistance. Also she doesn’t know the contact information in [the capital] or maybe doesn’t have the money to call to [the capital] for assistance.

Informing victims about assistance can be difficult when victims are not open to and are even hostile to the idea of assistance. Further, the conditions for information sharing are often not ideal and service providers must work under constrained conditions. Information may be given in any number of (complicated) situations, like at the airport upon arrival (sometimes with family members present), in the presence of law enforcement authorities or while providing transportation home. As one social worker explained,

If they refuse to go the shelter just to talk, [we] talk in the car on the way home, when giving them a lift to railway or bus and we provide money for the return home. We give our card with our name and things and tell them generally about the assistance programme and we try to find out, maybe the person planned something already

²¹ In a five country study in SEE, Surtees (2007) found that access to reliable and comprehensible information was an issue at all stages of anti-trafficking intervention – at identification, through return and during assistance. Information is needed about the range of options and the process to be followed, information which is specific, accessible, comprehensible, age appropriate, language specific and culturally appropriate. Time was also important in the provision of information – that information was given at the appropriate time, provided more than once and that victims were given time to process the information and make decisions accordingly. Being involved in decision-making rather than being passive recipients of information was also central in terms of this information flow as well as toward the longer term recovery and empowerment of trafficked women.

like study or a profession. So depending on feedback, we try to provide them with information and let them decide.

It is worth considering if written material, tailored to beneficiaries' age, language and education levels, and available for future reference, would be a valuable means of conveying information, particularly when many victims require some time to understand the offer and come to a decision about assistance. Most organisations stressed the importance of providing victims with helpful information about available services but there was no consensus of what constitutes good information. It seems likely that different types of information – leaflets, hotlines, TV spots, posters – as well as on-going contact would be needed. To ensure the comprehensibility and accessibility of that information, it would be important that trafficked persons be involved in determining what and how information can be best presented to and shared with trafficked persons.

Some organisations are more proactive and creative in explaining their services to potential beneficiaries. Victims are invited to the facility so that they can see exactly what they are offered and also meet with other beneficiaries. It is only at this stage that they are asked to decide and, if they decline, still given the option to return at a later stage. Said one psychologist, "It is one thing to tell them about assistance, it is another thing to show them".

Some of the confusion may also result from a lack of clear information about services between service providers themselves. A number of service providers in destination countries felt that they did not have adequate information about services in the home country. As one social worker explained, "But we can't get feedback from the origin countries... so we can't know about the situation. We just can't get this information about what happens". Similarly, service providers in origin countries felt that in an effort to create stability and reassurance, counterparts in destination countries often caused confusion by over promising services and assistance:

[The victims] just expect so much and sometimes they misunderstand. When they come from temporary sheltering in transit shelters the social assistants [there] want to calm them down, tell them they will be helped with everything. But they have never been here and seen the conditions. Because then they would not promise. So the problem is not that they do it out of evil, not unprofessional, it is reassurance, and they don't know the real situation they come from and the problems they face.

Information about assistance may come to the attention of victims at any number of stages during and following their trafficking experience. How information is presented and disseminated, therefore, needs to mobilise access points specific to post trafficking phases and victim's specific post-trafficking lives. Equally important is who disseminates

information, with possible interlocutors being outreach workers, medical personnel, law enforcement, tourism industry staff, transportation personnel and embassy and consular staff. Equipping these individuals with the skills, information and material to inform victims of their rights and options in a comprehensible and clear way is paramount.

That various actors providing information have different and competing interests complicates this. That is, counter-trafficking actors have different interests, roles and preoccupations, which may inform what information they share and assistance they offer. For example, police and service providers may have conflicting perspectives on how victims should be approached and their needs addressed. Even amongst service providers there are differences. Some organisations “encourage” victims to be involved in criminal proceedings against their traffickers, while others counsel against this. Where victims are informed only about services deemed appropriate from the perspective of a particular stakeholder, this may also inform their decision-making processes.

Another issue was that victims were sometimes provided with offers of assistance from different (competing) organisations, which they found confusing (cf. Surtees 2007). In all three countries, services for one victim may be facilitated through different organisations – whether they are legal, medical, or psychological – and there have been instances where organisations seem almost to be competing for influence with victims and in ways that potentially compromise quality care. Said one social worker at a residential programme, “It’s confusing for them when they get different information from different sources. There are different organisations that are in contact with them like the police and they are told different things and we have to explain to them what it all means”. One organisation related a case in which assistance from cooperating agencies complicated the situation for one beneficiary:

We had the case of a woman who needed an operation... This operation is only available at the private clinic... Assistance was requested from another NGO who has money for medical care. After the operation they started to call her and gave her some opinions about the medical treatment that made her confused and conflicted with what she had been told by her doctor. And they just started to be in touch with her. Some NGOs have funds for different types of assistance – like medical care – and we need to be in touch with all of them to get the assistance we need for our clients. For us it is no problem to ask for help, to get the most services possible for our clients. But it can cause problems.

The result, from the perspective of the victim, is potentially confusion and discomfort, neither of which contribute to effective care and may inform some victim’s decisions about assistance in future. An associated point was that this dynamic seemed, according to some service providers, to allow disgruntled or dissatisfied beneficiaries to play service providers off against one another to get more and different services.

While it is important that beneficiaries have the opportunity to access the full range of services available in the country of destination or origin, competition (or at least lack of coordination and cooperation) between agencies may mean that services are not appropriately, effectively and/or judiciously implemented.

Finally, it also appears that information about available assistance directed at the general public has serious limitations in reaching victims of trafficking. One victim had been home for many years and had never seen any information about assistance options, even though several campaigns had been run in the time period. She only found out that she might be eligible for assistance when she talked to an acquaintance in a bar one evening. Others may not understand that the assistance is directed at them, as they do not recognise that they have been trafficked.²²

Lack of capacity to understand what is offered

In some cases, being able to understand the services on offer is tied to the specific capacities of individual victims. This can be attributed to the psychological state of the victim, their comprehension capacity, language obstacles and their lack of knowledge and experience of assistance.

Psychological state of victims

Many victims came into contact with counter-trafficking personnel shortly after exiting trafficking. At this stage, victims were often traumatised and in shock and were not always able to comprehend what was happening, including the services being offered. This initial phase post trafficking can be very disorienting and service providers reported difficulties in reaching victims. One social worker noted,

We meet them after four to five days so they are not aware of who we are but maybe after some time, maybe they can understand. So we can't be sure if they understand [at identification]. And they don't have a clear picture of what they want to do.

Others echoed this point,

They are scared, tired, exhausted, and hungry and don't know what they want. They have no idea what they can get and we inform them but they don't perceive it. It is a period where she still needs to rest, to recover from the trauma.

²²This is further discussed in chapter 12.

Trauma may severely impair a victim's ability to process information and make choices about assistance. One psychologist detailed her experience with several women who returned with serious mental illness (sometimes even in a state of psychosis) and insisted on going home rather than receiving medical attention. In serious cases, women have been referred on to psychiatric health care. In such cases, providing information about assistance programmes is not possible or realistic and targeted assistance will be contingent upon follow-up at a later stage.

Victims themselves expressed the confusion they felt when initially in contact with assistance organisations and while trying to make decisions about assistance option. One woman described intellectually being able to understand that the assistance organisation was trying to help her, but at the same time being unable to fully process what was happening or relate to it at an emotional level:

In the shelter itself [in the destination country] I had a room for me and my girls. Analysing the situation now, I can say that at that moment I was unstable. I could live among people one moment, the next I got nervous and had to take the children and go away. When I was in the shelter I tried to avoid communicating with people, and the psychologist also told me that she noticed that I tried to avoid people. For example, if I sat in the lunchroom, I could sit there for a long time with no TV or communication, but could get up very suddenly. If we take [my social worker] who used to come to me, I never accompanied her to the door, I told my husband to do it; I just wanted to sit alone. On the one side, I understood that this person came to my place with good intentions, but on the other hand I couldn't process this information very well. I wasn't able to see what was happening.

Another case illustrates how shock and the resulting incapacity to understand services may have played a role in declining, although threats from traffickers were also a catalyst. Danjiela explained that she was initially offered legal assistance after reporting her case to the police:

But I didn't accept this because I was confused and shocked. Then on the 19th I met [the service provider] and I had to accept the assistance because of [the risk to] my family.

This same beneficiary had other assistance needs that had not been met and when asked about these she replied, "I did not discuss it because I was confused for days". When asked about her perceptions of the assistance she explained,

They offered to stay at the shelter, to have protection after the trial and to attend a course. Only when I came and was in a room alone and had time to reflect was I aware of what was being offered.

One might also argue that victims' families also suffer this shock and confusion as a result of trafficking, which may affect their ability to make decisions. Service providers and police alike frequently reported that families were very sceptical of assistance and refused shelters in particular, often out of fear that this was another ploy to exploit their family member, as discussed in chapter 5.

Importantly, this shock and trauma generally abates over time, both for trafficking victims and their families, and service providers report less difficulty in terms of victim's comprehension and ability to make informed decisions about assistance over time. One psychologist working in a reintegration programme explained that her first contact with victims was after some time and they were usually not so confused – they have already been in a centre and are not as traumatised. But she noted that, from a psychological perspective, when they are initially identified, it is too early for them to be thinking about important decisions. This is consistent with the comments of one social worker who explained her experiences of initial contact with victims:

Sometimes when you speak to them, it's as if you were an alien. Sometimes I wonder – does she understand at all? Maybe I should try to contact her later. Give her a chance. She's just back and wants to see her family and people. Every adult will say I can do it [manage] myself. There are cultural differences that are also created by this distance [when the trafficking victim was away from the country] – so; I can seem like a foreigner. Give them the time to reflect, give them proof that it's really their choice.

Limited comprehension

Some confusion about services appears to be linked to beneficiary's capacity to comprehend the services which may, in turn, be linked in parts to their educational background, analytical and decision-making skills and/or level of literacy. This impacts their ability to understand and make informed decisions about the assistance being offered. Where victims suffer from mental disabilities, this adds another layer of complication.²³ Limited comprehension within the family (and of parents specifically) may also play a role in not understanding and, therefore, not accepting the assistance offered. This can occur both in the initial phase but also at later stages of the assistance programme and can inform how victims and their families chose to access and accept services. As one psychologist observed,

²³ In our interviews in Moldova, service providers reported many cases of mental disabilities amongst assisted victims. Similarly, amongst assisted Albanian victims of sexual exploitation a noteworthy percentage had mental or physical disabilities – 30.2 per cent in 2003 and 31.2 per cent in 2004. The majority were mental disabilities. In Serbia, 8.3 per cent of foreign victims of sexual exploitation and 19 per cent of Serbian victims assisted in 2004 had mental disabilities (Surtees 2005: 62, 501, 516).

Always when I speak about trafficking I always say it is a very specific category of people... The first characteristic that I attribute to this group is great violence and victimisation at home... She is absent-minded, not independent, not self confident, even not mentioning the level of education. Very low self-evaluation. These are girls in general coming from the village, the country. These were their first visits out of the village. So they go to Turkey and think they are in Italy.

One example provides vivid illustration of how some services – like medical assistance – can be incomprehensible to clients with limited education or literacy skills. One service provider reported receiving an urgent call from the father of a victim who had recently been assisted with medical care. She underwent a series of tests and the results had been sent directly to the family by mail. The father called and was very upset because the tests were, as he described, “bad” and he was worried about his daughter. They had not seen the doctor but had read the test themselves. The service provider asked what the results said, knowing that the father had only primary school education and little contact with doctors in the past and would not likely be able to understand the results. He explained that the results said that everything was negative, meaning negative for the disease for which she had been tested. However, the father understood this differently – that negative results were bad news.

With this category of beneficiaries, service providers reported the need to package assistance in different (accessible) ways. One psychologist explained, “So I don’t say that I am providing her with psychological assistance. I simply say that we just talk... I don’t want to frighten her with these strange words. Her colleague made a similar point,

With a psychiatrist, we simply say this is our doctor and let’s talk. Because if we say that this is our psychiatrist, they will simply say ‘okay, I am okay, I am fine. Nothing is wrong with me’. At the same time, I cannot say that this is representative of all beneficiaries, but the majority. We have a group of beneficiaries with whom we can communicate in a different way and we can plan our work differently.

The issue of limited comprehension was brought home to us on different occasions during interviews with victims. On one occasion, having been informed about the project in advance by the service provider (including being provided with a written project description) and having consented to the interview, the respondent, upon meeting us, expressed confusion about research and what specifically researchers do. This contrasts with other beneficiaries of the same organisation we interviewed that day who fully understood the reason for the interview. In another instance we learned that one of the beneficiaries had risen at five in the morning to clean the house for our arrival because, in spite of having been informed of our role and our project, she had

misunderstood and thought we had come to inspect the shelter.²⁴ She had been exposed to an external inspection at a previous shelter and interpreted outsiders as potential inspectors. That the other residents (informed about our project at the same time as this girl) had fully understood the purpose of the project and the interview illustrates differential comprehension amongst beneficiaries, even in similar circumstances and with similar information.

Lack of knowledge and experience of assistance

Some of the confusion surrounding assistance seems to be linked, at least in part, to many victims' lack of experience with such assistance. This makes it difficult for many people to understand (and trust) what they are actually being offered. A large number of assisted victims expressed surprise that such services and assistance programmes existed, most never having received assistance or support in the past from either NGO or government actors.

One victim explained of her offer of assistance, "We all had our suspicions because it was the first time that we had heard of it and we did not believe that someone will care". Another explained that in spite of being offered the shelter, she preferred to go to prison. She thought that she would spend only a month there and she knew she could handle a month in prison. With prison she knew what to expect. But the shelter was, for her, an unknown entity and risk, a "leap of faith". Even after speaking with the programme staff she was not clear about the programme and still afraid. As she said, "I could never imagine that such a place exists".

Where families are not familiar with assistance, this can also be a factor in declining. In one case, it was mostly because her family did not see the use of assistance that the victim declined, never having benefited from such an intervention in the past. In another case, where the victim did eventually accept, her mother actively tried to discourage her, because she was suspicious of the assistance and afraid that her daughter would be ill treated. Her lack of exposure to assisting organisations made her deeply suspicious of any offers of help for herself or her daughter.

Limited experience of social assistance may be more pronounced in some countries, like Albania, where state assistance has been limited. One Albanian victim of trafficking explained that when she was abroad she had been informed about social work and social assistance at home and the possibility to get this assistance when she returned. But she was very sceptical: "I remembered what Albania was like before I left, so I could not believe that". Explained one NGO social worker in Albania, "Victims have

²⁴ Please see chapter 1 in which the methodology of the study is outlined, including how respondents were informed about the study, both verbally and in written form.

no sense of social assistance in Albania. This issue of social assistance is very new. In the past, there were no social problems, everything was denied”.

That being said, the deterioration of social assistance in the countries included in this study means that many victims (who were often quite young in age) had also grown up without access to social assistance and state support. Their lack of knowledge about assistance seems to play into their decisions about declining and accepting assistance. The comments of one returned trafficking victim illustrates the individual's lack of confidence in and reliance on the state apparatus for assistance:

No one goes there to work abroad because they have everything here. Every one lacks something. That's why they go. [This] is a very poor country. Who can help? Even if you go on the street and say “I don't have this” or “I need more”. They will say that you have your hands; you have your legs so go and work. No one will help but you yourself.

Many victims in all three countries expressed their disbelief and scepticism that assistance was available in their home country:

I did not think anything like this existed in [this country]...we had never heard of such things. I had heard of it in other places, but not [here], and that they helped so much. In Europe I had heard of organisations that protected women's rights.

At customs, when the police asked me why I had no money, I explained my situation, and he took me aside and explained about the organisation... I thought it was a gift from God. In our country you cannot get anything for free.

The victims' area of origin within a country may also play a role, with many rural residents unfamiliar with NGOs: “in rural regions they don't know what an NGO is. They have never heard of it in the village”.

Addressing this limited knowledge of assistance is often a matter of proactive exposure and outreach on the part of assisting agencies. One team of service providers explained how exposure to assistance is central in encouraging victims to accept assistance and support after trafficking. Explained the psychologist, “We have a case where there were a group of trafficking victims and they refused [assistance], but two accepted. But when the others saw the results, they came back one by one”. Her colleague went on to note that even minimal exposure to the benefits and opportunities of assistance can make this difference and overcome suspicion and fear:

If they stay here one night the other victims share their experience and attitude. If they leave from the airport it is difficult to get them back... When we have cases from [abroad], the plane came at 11pm and they did not have any choice. And in the morning they agreed to anything.

Similarly, one organisation observed, “There’s also a difference between trafficking victims that have been helped abroad. This is a big change and they already know that they can trust an NGO. But compared to those who self return, none are willing to call to us”.

Language obstacles

At a very basic level, some lack of understanding is related to language barriers in countries of destination. Some victims reported an inability to understand the services offered because staff in destination countries did not speak their language. After almost a decade of anti-trafficking programming, this is a distressing finding. Lack of language skills compromises service provision as counselling, legal assistance and other forms of support cannot be effectively provided without a common language or through translation.

One minor girl explained how she was informed about all of the services in the destination country in the local language (which she did not speak) and how her therapy was provided through translation, raising questions about the quality of care received. Similarly, one Ukrainian victim, when asked if any shelter staff spoke her mother tongue, replied, “No, not Ukrainian, not Russian. Not even Russian”. When asked how she communicated with staff she explained that she spoke some of the local language (as a result of her time trafficked in the country) and “also I used my hands... It was a good way to learn [the local language]”.

It is perhaps not possible to speak the languages of all potential beneficiaries. Nevertheless, at this point in each country’s anti-trafficking work, there is a high representation of victims from some countries that can be anticipated. And yet some service providers in destination countries could not communicate even in these more common languages.

While translation does not sufficiently overcome all language obstacles, it is nevertheless an important interim measure. And many programmes, particularly NGOs and IOs, do employ translators, finances permitting. That being said, translation is not always (or even widely) available. Lack of translation facilities is particularly acute for government agencies, like social workers and law enforcement, which do not have the resources to hire translators for each interview with foreign victims. This can lead to serious miscommunication, which, in turn, may lead to other issues, including misidentification and victims declining assistance. Take, for example, the confusion at identification of one trafficked woman, which resulted from lack of a common language: “I thought I would be re-sold again. I didn’t understand anything in their language... I didn’t feel safe... I needed a translator”. Explained another, “At the moment of identification I wanted to speak to a person who knew [my language]. To have

anyone who could speak my language... I didn't quite understand what was happening around me" (Surtees 2007).

In terms of actual service provision, language barriers may be isolating for women, something that may translate into dissatisfaction with the services and even dropping out of a programme. As one woman explained of her shelter stay:

It was difficult for me when they were all speaking. I don't know [their] language. They spoke [their language] so I was alone. When you sit alone, you think, when will this finish? It was crazy (Surtees 2007).

Language issues can also give rise to misunderstandings that undermine the assistance being offered, which may, on the one hand, account for some victims returning home with unrealistic expectations of assistance and, on the other hand, account for victims declining assistance upon their return home.

8 Organisation of assistance as a reason to decline

The experiences and background of trafficked women and girls are very diverse. Among our respondents were trafficked women and girls between the ages of 16 and 50, some with higher education and some who were illiterate with no schooling; some with strong family networks and others sold into prostitution by their own families; women whose traffickers had been stopped by the police before they left the country and women who had been brutalised and exploited for many years, and left with extensive physical and psychological wounds. Given the diversity of this target group it is not difficult to see that one size does not fit all in terms of assistance needs. This poses a great challenge for service providers working with victims of trafficking.

It is clear that many victims of trafficking decline assistance because they are either not able or willing to accept assistance in the form that it is offered. This can be because of different factors – that the assistance is not suited to their needs or the conditions of assistance may not be satisfactory, including paralleling, in some ways, their trafficking experience and not adequately taking into account their fear of the trafficker.

Declining assistance because services are not suited to victims' needs or situations

In some cases we found that trafficking victims declined assistance because the services they were offered were not adequately tailored to their needs. This may be because victim's specific assistance needs (i.e. with respect to training or victim's specific life situation) are not addressed by the programme. It may be less about the nature and contents of the assistance and more because of the way that it is organised and offered.

Specific care needs that may not be addressed

The assistance needs of trafficking victims are very diverse, as both personal history and trafficking experiences vary greatly. Victims of trafficking come from different backgrounds and have very different starting point in terms of financial and social

resources. We encountered women and girls coming from a wide range of social and family backgrounds – for example, from illiterate orphans with no social network to adult women with university education and solid family support. This poses a significant challenge for trafficking assistance providers, who will often have to deal with this diverse group of beneficiaries under the same programmatic framework and with limited resources. (cf. Surtees 2007).

Some individual needs and circumstances are particularly difficult to navigate in terms of assistance. Mental disabilities pose a particular challenge in reintegration of trafficking victims. Programmes are often focussed on providing job qualifications and finding employment, which can be difficult enough for beneficiaries without mental disabilities in a strained job market. Further, for service providers to deal with beneficiaries, who have serious mental illness within the same system as other victims, in particular with respect to shelter, can be extremely disruptive:

There were [two girls], grave mental disorder, they set fire to the floor, ruined the walls with glue. They cannot control themselves, they are ill. But the state cannot give them anything.

Another problem is the treatment of drug and alcohol addiction. We previously interviewed a young woman who was trafficked when she was a minor. She was injected with heroin by her traffickers as a means of control and, as a result, developed a serious addiction. When she was arrested by the police in the country of destination, she was offered assistance and then sent back to her home country. However, there was no assistance available to help her manage her drug addiction in her home country and she decided to go abroad to get what she called “medicines that could help me with the addiction”. She stayed abroad and financed her medication with prostitution before returning to her home country again where she was soon injecting drugs again.

It is a serious concern when victims of trafficking are not provided with assistance to deal with some of the most pressing and debilitating consequences of trafficking, as in this case, a heroin addiction. This illustrates a case of declining assistance because the assistance needs were simply not met, and where the individual was left to her own devices to solve her problem in a hazardous way.

In addition, in all three countries studied a substantial number of victims come from populations that are stigmatised or discriminated against, including victims from ethnic minority groups or individuals with mental disabilities. Originating from an already stigmatised group in addition to being a trafficking victim poses special challenges in assistance and reintegration.

Family has assistance needs

Former studies have documented that the need to provide for their family is one of the reasons that women are vulnerable to trafficking (Brunovskis and Tyldum 2004:52, Surtees 2003). Several of the women we interviewed sought work abroad in order to provide not only for themselves, but also for their families. Further, the financial situation had seldom improved when the women returned after trafficking, a factor that victims take into account when considering whether to accept assistance or a stay at a shelter. Indeed, often the situation has worsened as a result of trafficking, as women will have incurred debt or taken loans in order to finance their travel abroad. In many cases women have children or other dependents that they need to find the means to support.

There are usually very limited possibilities for earning money while receiving assistance and this is a problem in terms of the family that is left behind. When victims (and their families) are in a difficult financial situation, it can create an enormous financial (and emotional) strain if they accept a shelter stay. There is reason to believe that many women in this situation will decline assistance (particularly when it is residentially based), choosing instead to return home and assist the family as best they can. Those we spoke to who accepted assistance in these situations often felt compelled to do so because of grave security concerns and have had, in reality, few other options. However, this acceptance of assistance was seldom a panacea and, in some cases, served to impede their recovery, as worries about their families' well-being were often foremost in their minds.

While victims of trafficking will often have attempted migration because their family is in a difficult situation, families in general are rarely included in assistance interventions, except when direct dependants, like children. When families are not included in assistance, the victim may worry because of trafficker's threats, which, in our experience, are often also directed at family members as well as the trafficking victim herself. Danjiela stayed in a closed shelter where she felt safe, but transferred to an open one in order to be able to see her family more often. For Danjiela, her family's needs were the reason she had accepted work elsewhere and also was her primary concern when we met with her. That they were not being assisted was of great concern to her:

I came here because I wanted to see my family more, but I still can't help them. I think maybe they do not have any food to eat, that they are starving. But I must stay here not to put them in danger.

Q: What assistance would help you the most?

To have my family assisted. Because I never know when he will take his revenge. His sons are in the mob. I have sisters who are minors and I am afraid that he will

harm them. [...] I tell my family that I am all right, but my mother knows that I am not, she reads me like a book.

In the case of victims who have children, the option to bring them to shelters was considered an important factor in terms of accepting assistance. In all three countries, some programmes allow children to stay in shelters with their mothers, although the approach varies and is sometimes formal and structured, sometimes ad hoc and reactive. Several of the women we interviewed who were mothers said that they would never have considered accepting assistance if they could not have brought their children with them.

However, it should be considered whether a shelter for trafficking victims is a suitable place for a child, particularly in the longer term and in light of how this may inform their educational opportunities as well as their physical and psychological development. That often shelters were closed, with little to no freedom of movement, added an additional level of stress. For children, who, as a result, cannot play outside, make friends or attend school, questions need to be asked about the developmental impact, even when all of their basic needs are met. One woman had been in a closed shelter with her daughter for two and half years while custody papers were obtained and legal proceedings pursued. The girl – now ten years old – was not able to attend school or play freely and was being educated on an ad hoc and voluntary basis by one of the staff in the shelter. That one third of her life had been in a shelter and the remaining with her mother in a trafficking situation cannot help but have affected her (Surtees 2007). Children may have been traumatised by their mother's being away while trafficked or her trafficking experience if they were trafficked with her. Further, in a shelter there will be other beneficiaries who are traumatised by their experiences, which is not the ideal environment either for the children, or other beneficiaries. Furthermore, conditions in a shelter will sometimes be chaotic, as new arrivals are referred by the police and staff resources are often limited. This problem is described in Bjerkan & Dyrli's study, where one social worker recounts:

We cannot predict what will happen on a shift. For instance, the other day I was alone on the night shift. [...] One of the girls fell ill and I had to call for an ambulance. At the same moment, a severely beaten girl arrived at the shelter, and it was very chaotic. (Bjerkan & Dyrli 2005:130)

Many trafficking victims have described the shelter as chaotic at times and found it hard to cope with the stress of other people around them. To bring children into such an environment may be questionable. Finding ways to accommodate the needs of women and women with children requires careful consideration.

Assistance is a luxury they cannot afford

Assistance programmes often have centralised their services in the form of a shelter or a day centre where education or training can be provided. One problem is that not everyone is able to access assistance in these forms because they have other obligations, such as work. One girl told us how she had enjoyed the support she was able to get at an organisation but could not continue to access this assistance in the long term:

It was a very good thing that they came and offered help; it helped me a lot, psychologically. I felt calmer when I came here. Outside, everything felt dark, like people were saying bad things about me. But after a while I stopped coming here because I had to work.

The girl was living at home and had very strained relationships with her mother and brother and her primary aspiration was to be able to live independently. This, however, meant that she had to work many hours to earn money to pay rent and food costs and, thus, could not benefit from the psychological assistance and support offered by the organisation.

We also came across examples of how requiring residency at a shelter as a condition for receiving assistance could make it difficult to accept needed help. One woman was very much in doubt about whether to accept the medical assistance she needed for herself and her child, as this was only made available to her through a stay in a shelter. Her main doubt was tied to who would take care of her vegetable garden in her absence, as this was a main food source for her family. Paid work was not the only obstacle. The obligation to care for family members and undertake household tasks may also prevent some women from accepting assistance.

Insufficient availability of services

The physical accessibility of service providers and treatment facilities continues to be a problem for many trafficking victims. Much, although not all, of the assistance available to trafficking victims today is centralised in capitals and large towns. As public transportation is limited and people with limited financial means will often travel by foot, even the presence of an organisation in the nearest town may be of little consequence for trafficking victims, something we saw several examples of, both in Albania and Moldova. One woman we interviewed was clearly in need of psychological assistance, finding herself in a desperate situation with two small children to feed and the prospect of being evicted from her home. However, living in a small village and without transportation or a social network to help her, she was not able to travel to access assistance, relying instead on humanitarian assistance and food packs that were delivered to her by a service agency from time to time.

When the assistance parallels trafficking experiences

Where offers of assistance parallel the trafficking dynamic, this also leads to victims declining. From our interviews we identified some features of assistance that seem to victims to mimic the trafficking experience. This directly influences their ability to trust in these services and organisations.

Typically, victims trafficked for sexual exploitation have been deceived, often by someone they trust, with false promises of assistance and support in building a new life. They are moved to a new location, with hopes of realising this new life. However, in the end they are exploited and abused. Importantly, assistance offers may, in parts and to degrees, resemble this process in that similar promises are made, victims are transported and assistance toward a better life is offered (cf. Surtees 2007).

The act of movement alone may be suspicious to victims. One victim talked about being transported by police officers from one station to another. When asked what she felt and thought during this process, she explained that she was fearful and thought that perhaps they would now traffic her:

Afterward they drove me to the police station in [a nearby town] and at that moment I didn't trust them. Who knows where they are taking me. When I saw the police sign, I felt more at ease. They told that they will take me to the station and I will have food, drink and can relax and don't worry, that they will find these people.

Another woman we met explained how, for her, her decision about accepting assistance was linked to her fear of being re-trafficked. She had been told about the assistance by a neighbour of her sister but remained frightened that the assistance was nothing more than another trafficking trap:

First I was afraid. [She] was in Turkey in a house, she lived with [a man]; she was caught by the police and taken to [the organisation]. Later, she told me about [the organisation] but I was afraid because I knew that she drinks, so I was afraid that she might get me into another trap.

It was some time before she finally contacted the organisation – several months – and even at this later stage she was not entirely confident that this wouldn't turn into another trafficking experience. As she explained, she went to the office of the organisation and met with the social worker with much trepidation:

I was afraid, but decided to go and see what kind of building it was...There [the social worker] was, and I talked to her, and I was shocked to see a big food pack, I had never seen such a thing before. When she gave that to me I was frightened, but I still took it, because I had nothing at home. After we talked a little she told me in two days I could go to the shelter, I did not believe her but thought something

was wrong. My idea was to take the food pack, but not to go back, because they can take me to Turkey again.

That services and assistance are often free of charge seemed also to echo promises made prior to trafficking, as different social workers explained:

When we tell them [the assistance] is free of charge it's rejected because they were trafficked under the same situation.

They are suspicious that it is free of charge. Because it's the same thing the trafficker did. They took them to the market and they bought for them all of their necessary things. We had some cases where traffickers provided girls with all sorts of food, all kinds of food so they had everything available in their fridge. So when we offer them legal assistance, to get them some documents or to introduce some changes into the passport, they think we are like traffickers who promise to get all of the legal documents free of charge.

For some victims we met, assistance itself – and the various restrictions²⁵ (or perceived restrictions) involved – was felt to be like moving from the control of the trafficker to the control of the anti-trafficking actors. In such cases, the intervention and services may not always be perceived as “assistance” or even a meaningful change or improvement for the victim. A number of victims expressed frustration with programme restrictions, such as not having access to a mobile phone or rules about leaving the shelter, which, for them, echoed in significant ways the restrictions that they had experienced while trafficked (cf. Surtees 2007). This sense of *déjà vu* may be particularly the case in closed shelters where victims have restricted movement and communication with persons outside the programme. This may also be compounded by the loss of income, which, for the increasing number of trafficked persons who receive some pay from their traffickers, may be the delineating factor in accepting or declining help.

Fear of the trafficker

Some trafficking victims decline assistance because of fear of retribution from their traffickers. Victims reported being afraid to accept assistance both at home and in the destination country because they feared that accepting assistance would be seen by the traffickers as collaborating with the authorities and that, as a result, traffickers would carry out reprisals against them or their families. A recent study of trafficking in SEE (Surtees 2007) found instances of serious reprisals against victims and their families:

²⁵ The use of restrictions is further discussed in chapter 9.

I think about my mother and my sister and I am afraid of what could happen to them because of me. Just as they caught and beat my mother up, they could go at night in the house, beat them again and nobody would know.

The trafficker met me on my way to the police station and threatened me with a knife. I knew she wasn't joking because she even stabbed her husband. She threatened that she would kill me if I did not retract my testimony.

Returning home through an international organisation was, in some situations, also perceived as returning home with the authorities and accepting shelter accommodation was feared by some victims to be perceived in the same way. Service providers themselves echoed this as an issue:

If the trafficker knows she is assisted, he might fear that she might pursue legal proceedings. Sometimes, victims of trafficking even say, "I did it myself" because they're afraid of the traffickers.

When asked to what extent fear of traffickers is a reason to decline assistance, many counter-trafficking actors gave examples from their direct experience. One agency staff noted the frustration of the police that this fear is negatively impacting their work explaining, "The police say that families take the daughters back to prevent their involvement in prosecutions and police are getting more and more frustrated with this".

Fear of traffickers is linked, at least in part, to the lack of trust in institutions, like law enforcement and the judiciary, which are meant to protect victims. This lack of trust can be attributed, in many cases, to corruption within the state apparatus, which often impacts the investigation and prosecution of trafficking cases. Corruption may mean that law enforcement authorities do not investigate cases, may manipulate the investigative file or may tamper with evidence. Prosecutors may choose not to pursue cases through the criminal process or will reduce charges. Judges may rule in ways favourable to the trafficker, including throwing a case out of court or imposing light sentences. There may also be high level officials involved in the trafficking and/or exploitation of victims.²⁶ Some working on anti-trafficking argue that this issue is a factor in both the limited number of victims being identified and the limited number willing to accept assistance.

It is, therefore, reasonable for victims to conclude that they cannot be protected from their traffickers by corrupt legal and administrative authorities. Traffickers often exploit these fears, telling victims that they are cooperating with the police and that the police will simply return them to their trafficking situation should they seek their

²⁶ In December 2002, a trafficking victim identified in Montenegro alleged that several high-ranking Montenegrin officials, including the Deputy Prosecutor, were involved in her trafficking and exploitation, bringing the issue of corruption to the fore. More recently, the Moldovan government has been shaken by a corruption scandal that implicates high ranking officials.

intervention. Where victims originate from countries where government corruption is acute, this is likely to be a very salient threat. This fear impacts victims also in countries where corruption is not rampant and where victims would have a reasonable expectation of being assisted and safe from the trafficker. One victim trafficked to the EU was offered assistance there, including police assistance, a range of services, a lawyer and to be resettled in another city for her protection. However her experiences at home – where social assistance was minimal and corruption was rampant – coloured her perceptions of assistance and prevented her from accepting. Threatened by her trafficker, she did not feel sufficiently safe to accept the assistance offered although at different stages she had accepted basic assistance from the street outreach worker on an *ad hoc* basis – like medical assistance and advice. An additional complication in this instance was that the victim, while afraid of her trafficker, was also in love with him and had spent ten months living with him. A series of events – including being forced to smuggle drugs for her trafficker/“lover” – led her to be arrested by the police, at which stage she finally accepted assistance in her home country. However, her fear of her trafficker was well founded as he contacted her (having heard she was leaving) and again threatened her and cautioned against reporting him to the authorities.

In one case, the victim and her family faced very real safety risks. The assisting organisation explained how the case was handled:

She moved to a flat that we rented in a nearby city. But she comes from a big family and they all live together and run a farm so it was not possible to move all of them and someone needed to run the farm. The woman testified and she called one night because someone came to blackmail her parents and said that they would kill a member of the family if she testified. We called the police contact and she was brave and was ready to discuss options for the safety of her family. The decision was that she agreed with the police that they would provide a guard and accelerate the process at the court. But even with the guards the neighbours were threatened and her mother one day was contacted by the traffickers and the police from the village, who were in charge of her security, had to take the mother and hide her in the attic. The state has no resources to buy a flat, to rent something, even to provide physical security.

The case is still in process at the time of writing. But service providers report that most trafficking victims withdraw their testimony because they feel unsafe and fear the impact of corruption in the judicial system.

Fear and how risk/threats play out may lead victims to accept or decline assistance at different stages and when faced with different situations. Fear can, in some circumstances, result in the victim accepting assistance at a later stage, either after she feels the threat has passed or because she recognises that the threat is also present upon her return home. One victim who reported her trafficker to the police was offered legal

assistance and referral for shelter and services in the capital. She declined initially and it was only after she was physically assaulted by her trafficker in his efforts to have her change her statement that she agreed to accept assistance.

Fear does not always lead to victims decline assistance. In fact a number of the assisted victims we interviewed said that the main reason they had accepted shelter assistance was because they were afraid of retaliation. One victim explained how her mother was against her entry into the shelter-based assistance programme but the police had informed her that there could be a threat to her security and so she felt it would be better to go to the shelter. She thought she might be in danger and the trafficker would come back for her.

Whether this fear is based on concrete threats or not appears to be of lesser relevance. Even victims who have not experienced direct threats can be deeply affected by this type of fear. One victim, who had not been threatened, used security as the main rationale to accept assistance, "It could be the best choice, better than to be at home where you could be taken away again by the trafficker, rather than go back to where they are from or where they were".

While risk of retribution is real in many cases, there is some concern that law enforcement and the judiciary may, at times, use this fear of retribution also to their advantage, to press women to accept assistance. It was not always clear to us how risk was assessed by counter-trafficking actors, both law enforcement and service providers (cf. Surtees 2007). Given this situation, it is important to consider that some warnings about security risks are not based on full information and there are (negative) impacts that a generalised sense of fear and risk can potentially have on former trafficked persons. As concerning must be the possibility that real risks are not always adequately anticipated and measured in ways that provide sufficient protection. One social worker noted, "They all say that they offer assistance voluntarily but really they are pressured. They usually say that 'you will be killed if you decline, you will be raped, they will get you'. So it is not really voluntary of you say things like this".

From the perspective of law enforcement, it is generally preferable when women accept assistance as they have more regular and accessible contact with them, making it more efficient to investigate the case. Proximity to law enforcement and placement in the assistance framework may also decrease the likelihood that victims will be influenced to change or withdraw their statements, both of which serve the interest of law enforcement and judicial authorities but perhaps not always that of the victim. As one police officer conceded:

It is better for us [if they accept assistance] because she is available and at the shelter so we don't need to travel to get her and so she won't change her declaration because they threaten her. But sometimes there has been an agreement between the trafficker and the victim's family behind our back and then we can't follow the cases. So it is in the interest of the police if the trafficking victim accepts assistance. We have more success.

9 Interplay between service providers and beneficiaries – who is declining whom?

While the topic of our research focuses on victims of trafficking who decline assistance rather than those who were not given assistance (arguably an important topic in itself), we did find that the line between the two was sometimes blurred. In cases where beneficiaries had been excluded, it did, in some cases, appear that they had been rejected from the programme for breaking rules, behaviour which seems to have been intentional. In other cases, beneficiaries may have seemingly voluntarily left, but only because they found the programme conditions untenable. Some service providers also explained that they were sometimes obliged to decline beneficiaries as their resources were limited and they had to focus on those who showed the most potential for change. In all of these cases, the picture is more complicated than just one party rejecting the other and the tension and interplay between service providers and beneficiaries merits careful consideration.

Behaviour that leads to exclusion from the programme

In our discussions with service providers, a number of organisations told us about beneficiaries who had broken the rules of the shelter and had consequently been excluded from the programme. This was explained as a form of declining assistance on the part of beneficiaries, based on the victims' misunderstanding that the programme was compulsory and they were unable to leave independently. The decision to break the programmes' rules, then, was a conscious attempt by beneficiaries to be excluded. The service providers, therefore, read women's actions as an attempt to be thrown out of the programme in order to leave. The question is whether this behaviour is also open to other interpretations, and whether the beneficiaries who disregard rules are actually trying to get thrown out.

In some cases, being excluded from a programme did appear, or certainly was understood by social workers, to be a way to decline assistance, a de facto rejection of the services and the assistance framework. In other cases of a victim being excluded from

a programme, it was not so obviously the case. As one psychologist explained when asked if she would categorise misbehaving and breaking rules as a way of declining:

Maybe or maybe it is a way to push the professional. Children push boundaries. Maybe it is a way of testing you, to say “will you still accept me if I do this? Or this? Can you really help me? Do you really want to? Will you really accept me?”.

In cases of exclusions we must also be open to the possibility that this is a case of the service provider declining the victim. The psychologist quoted above stressed the importance of considering the issue also from this angle:

Everyone wants normal [beneficiaries] with no mental problems and then you can feel good and they will see that you care and they will love you. But it’s not life. Sometimes services chose their victims and no one admits to this. And there are not checks internally or externally.

For many service providers there is a certain reluctance to admit that beneficiaries are sometimes declined assistance by organisations and, therefore, it is difficult to say how common this pattern may be. Other service providers showed more openness and candidly discussed with us some challenges in providing assistance to beneficiaries who would not cooperate:

There is a woman we [worked with] and I can say that we declined her too. We invested in her 2000 US dollars in three months. This money went to transportation, alcohol treatment, food, renting a house, but she didn’t use this chance to change her life. So our psychologist said, “just leave her alone, she doesn’t want to change her life and we would be better off to spend this money on someone who can be helped”. She had a criminal past, but we still help her child.

It is arguably understandable that organisations with limited means need to assess how they can best spend their money, and in some cases, this may also mean cutting off assistance to someone who is not committed to the programme. As such, the behaviour of the beneficiary mentioned in the quote above may be seen as a victim declining assistance by default, by not adhering to the rules of the programme and not making an effort, thereby wasting service providers’ time and resources that could be better spent elsewhere.

That being said, it remains an open question as to how transparent programme rules are and how clear it is to beneficiaries that there are “offences” for which they can be removed from a shelter or excluded from an assistance programme. In the case of one woman it seems that she did not know the consequences of her actions when she chose to go abroad again to earn money. She had been helped with partial payment for a house and decided, without telling the social workers, to go abroad to earn the

money she needed for her portion of the house payment. Her social worker described to us how she felt when she found out that Maja had left and gone abroad to work:

I had a food pack and I went to her house. Her husband opened the door and told me that Maja was not at home. We were shocked to find out that she had gone abroad again. [...] I was standing there with the food packs, looking at her husband, and didn't know what to say. At that moment I really doubted [myself]; "am I doing this correctly?"

When asked if Maja fully understood when she went abroad that this would have implications for the assistance that she received, the social worker was clear:

No, of course not. [...] If she had understood, she would not have gone abroad, because she has lost a lot of things. She didn't understand; I saw that she didn't understand.

From the point of view of the organisation, it was Maja who has dropped out of the programme, and thereby declined assistance. At the same time, they acknowledged that she was not fully aware of the implications of her actions, that going abroad would mean losing the house. This may also illustrate that organisations may have expectations relating to non-migration that may be either at odds with the beneficiaries' interest or, in some cases, difficult to adhere to. Many trafficking victims come from areas with little or no economic prospects and may also face the added burden of stigmatisation upon return home. In such cases the only possibility to earn a living may be through (re)migration. When victims decline assistance to go abroad under such circumstances, it may be that they are not really declining assistance but rather perceive that they have no other options.

Another issue is the failure to convey to beneficiaries the specific rules linked to participation in the programme. What are the expectations and what are the demands? In the case described above, it seems that the social worker and the beneficiary were equally shocked by how the situation played out; the social worker that Maja would leave the country and Maja that she did not get the assistance she had been promised. To prevent miscommunication and differential understandings, it is necessary to have clear rules and parameters for cooperation and assistance, including what constitutes a breach of agreement between a service providers and the beneficiary.

Also salient is what is expected in terms of the beneficiaries' own efforts and development while taking part in assistance programmes. Many organisations seem to hold a clear idea of what their beneficiaries should turn into in the course of assistance, for example in terms of being a "good girl". This raises the issue of which behaviours are tolerated from women within this system – such as being a good girl, settling down to get married and ending all aspirations of migration. Where victims are obliged to conform to an identity that is at odds with how they see themselves and who they want

to be, they may choose to decline. At the same time, it is possible that some victims of trafficking temporarily assume this identity to smooth entry into programmes and access to services and may also not see themselves in these terms.

Biases and sensitivities

In the interaction between beneficiaries and service providers there is a considerable power differential that must be carefully negotiated, as in the case of social work and assistance in general. Our impression has been that many service providers are aware of this imbalance and treat it carefully and consciously. But, in some cases, boundaries are overstepped and some women have reported problematic behaviour and attitudes on the part of programme staff. One young woman told us about her stay at a shelter she later chose to leave:

[...] I didn't like one of the staff members. We had one bathroom and one girl was ill and we were not informed that a girl was ill and I asked [the social worker] why they did not tell us, because I was afraid that it was contagious. I had [already had] tests done and they were all clear, and I wanted to have more test done when that woman came. And [the social worker] said that I didn't [seem to worry about] this illness when I was sleeping with men and so why was I making a fuss now. And I said that she knew how I came into this situation.

Q: So you felt judged?

I felt horrible and judged. They were aware of my problems and I thought that the staff understood.

This social worker allegedly displayed clear prejudices against the victim, telling her that as a "former prostitute" it was too late to start worrying about disease. When asked about what could have been done better in this situation, this trafficking victim said that she wished that the people at the shelter had treated the beneficiaries as humans. Another woman staying at the same shelter explained that she had felt bullied by the psychologist to relive past experiences against her will and both women said independently that they, in hindsight, wished that they could have avoided the stay at the shelter. For the woman who was insulted by the social worker, however, this was not a real option, as she was a foreign national and her only alternative to staying at the shelter was deportation.

Such treatment raises serious concerns about attitudes and biases of some service providers. One problem may be that trafficking victim assistance, in many cases, is run by NGOs who are not necessarily monitored in terms of programme implementation;

are not required to adhere to set standards of care; and are not generally accountable to any institution regarding the quality of the services they offer. This means that victim assistance takes on the character of charity, which is shaped according to the ideas of the “benevolent giver”. Sullivan observes that as no one is actually *obliged* under the UN Protocol to provide assistance to victims, meaning that organisations are in principle free to grant or deny assistance to victims as they please (2003:84). International law will not on its own fully govern issues of how assistance to vulnerable groups is organised, as national laws and practice, have a greater impact on the situation in any given country. However, the lack of a rights based approach to assistance in international law may also affect how assistance is played out on the ground, and the newer Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings does for instance go further in securing rights for victims in connection with repatriation to their country of origin (Skilbrei and Tveit 2007:22). It is important to note that we are in no way under the impression that organisations routinely abuse their power by rejecting victims they do not like, or who turn out to be a challenge. Nevertheless, the fact that assistance to trafficking victims is still mainly the domain of NGOs, many with idealistic and over-worked staff, may contribute to the image many trafficking victims have; that assistance is not necessarily something they have a right to receive. In addition, the current set-up outside state bodies also means that there are no formal mechanisms for complaint, should mistreatment or negligence occur.

At the same time, Limanowska argues that, with some victims declining assistance, there is a “hunt for victims” going on with service providers trying to find women they can place in their shelters to prove their indispensability (2004:50). As a result, assistance providers are taking greater interest in borderline cases of trafficking and are willing to accept victims who comply even with the broadest definition of trafficking in human beings. This, in combination with the treatment reported above, raises the issue of whether assistance staff are able to adjust to a broader image of what trafficking is or whether some will have prejudices against prostitutes that surface, as in the case above.

While we cannot conclude that prejudice and biased behaviour is common in shelters or assistance programmes, it is an issue that has been raised by several key informants and, therefore, warrants concern. The tendency for organisations to be able to choose who (and how) they will assist, in combination with the lack of external control mechanisms, allows space for transgressions in the relationship between assistance workers and beneficiaries. Persons working on victim assistance in one of the countries acknowledged that the lack of quality control was a problem:

Q: Are there any mechanisms for quality control?

A: No, we don’t have extensive control within the anti trafficking sector, but it is not enough because they all say they are giving good services.

B: Some [service providers] are open, some are closed, but there is no licensing of [services] outside of funding control... The license should be checked and have an expiry date. Now [assistance providers] have a monopoly and it depends on whom the donors give the grants to, but nothing is dispersed to other [organisations than those who get the grants]. If we call for licensing, then we could have professional staff. This should have been done from the start and we should take responsibility for this. [...] We have had some audits when we were funding [a] shelter but this has had no impact. The funding is still there and even expanded.

The situation is the same in the three countries we visited and, to our knowledge, in many of the other countries affected by trafficking in the region. There are no formalised systems for quality control of services. The lack of professional exchange and follow-up is also seen as a problem by people working in this sector as well, as one shelter employee explained:

We don't cooperate with shelters in other Balkan countries, we have never met them, we don't know what they are doing and this is a serious problem, this worries us. We have been working six years. It would be interesting to have mutual enrichment, they would find out about our possibilities.

Stressful conditions and restrictions

We have observed that many shelters have very strict rules and restrictions for the girls and women who live there. To some extent this is a necessity in an environment where strangers have to live together following an often traumatic experience. Some women and girls may also be subject to threats and reprisals and, therefore, need protection. Still, in many cases, restrictions seem excessive and several assisted victims said that it was difficult and sometimes stressful to be subjected to these restrictions.

Many shelters are of the so-called "closed" type, which usually means that the residents have little or no freedom of movement and must be accompanied when they are outside the shelter. Originally this type of shelter was developed to accommodate foreign beneficiaries without legal residence in the country while emergency assistance was provided and documents processed for their return home. Another target group were victims considered to be high-risk cases, who needed protection at all times. However, the model is used more broadly in both countries of origin and destination and not always only in response to high-risk cases or foreign victims. Many service providers acknowledge that so-called "closed" shelters can be very stressful for victims:

The victims often have problems adjusting to not being able to go out. They want to go out without permission, go out in the morning and come back in the evening. And often there is confusion about understanding the services once their mind is somewhere else.

It was hard for her to go home because of the conditions, but she also didn't want to go to the shelter because of the conditions of it being closed and we had to put in the close type shelter because we didn't know if she would contact her trafficker if she were free to go. She has a low tolerance for frustration, so she can't handle a close shelter.

These quotes illustrate how the need for restrictions is often explained. Service providers will often refer to security concerns as the reason for restrictions. However, at the same time, there is the wish that beneficiaries focus on the programme and that this may be easier if the beneficiary does not have contact with anyone on the outside. It is also worth noting that when the woman referred to in the quote above found the conditions stressful, the service provider explained this as a deficiency on the victim's part, in that she has a low tolerance for frustration. However, a victim of trafficking interviewed for a different study explained how it was the restrictions themselves that were very difficult to handle:

I think the first thing is freedom. For two months and two weeks, I was locked between four walls. I was banging my head against the radiator and I was hitting the walls with my bare fists. I was simply going crazy. When I talked to the director and she told me I was supposed to stay for two or three more months, I was destroyed. I protested (Surtees 2007).

One woman rejected further assistance after having been assisted against her will while abroad. She told us how she had been kidnapped while on holiday and how her kidnapper tried to traffic her. She and her friend had managed to phone home and were rescued. However, they were not allowed to return home but were placed in a closed shelter. When, after four weeks, she was finally ready for repatriation, she was not sent to the country she lived in, but the country where she holds citizenship. Again, she was sent to a shelter and offered assistance she did not want and was not permitted to immediately return home. She was adamant that the (unwanted) assistance had been worse than her brush with trafficking.

Other restrictions are often connected with the use of telephones. Many shelters will not allow beneficiaries to have their own mobile phones and phone calls can only be made under supervision of staff. Again these rules are often explained with reference to security concerns:

They can't have mobiles because they don't understand that they are victims of trafficking and the bosses can call promising them money.

We are not letting them have the mobile phones for security reasons. Because for somebody that can come and she cannot assess that she can communicate with somebody that she thinks is not a dangerous person, so somebody that she loves... But for us to be just secure that nobody knows where is the centre, nobody is communicating with somebody that is a danger for the centre or the staff. Maybe she can communicate and say to somebody, like, I don't know what kind of information... And when they want to communicate with their family members or anybody else then we are having a social worker present when they are communicating and they use our telephone.

While it is understandable that shelters are concerned with security, it is striking how services for victims of domestic violence and for victims of trafficking differ. In some cases, organisations providing assistance to victims of trafficking also provide assistance to victims of domestic violence. Yet the kinds of restrictions described above are, to our knowledge, seldom applied to victims of domestic violence. This suggests that victims of trafficking are somehow seen as different, with higher security issues and risks. And yet, there are often substantial security concerns for victims of domestic violence for whom service providers do not apply the same rules and do not seem to feel the same need to restrict movement or communication.

In addition, other shelters operate without these restrictions and have not reported more problems regarding security than closed shelter models; even when beneficiary profiles and experiences are similar. We asked one social worker at an open shelter whether she saw any potential advantages of restricting free movement or monitoring phone calls:

Here we deal with rehabilitation and reintegration of the person into society. If the victim was behind locked doors when she was trafficked and is locked up again here, what kind of reintegration can we talk about?

It is difficult to conclude when and where closed shelters and rules and restrictions are a necessity. However, there is little doubt that many victims of trafficking find these conditions stressful and that closed shelters and restrictions will cause some victims to decline assistance. At the same time, some women have talked about the period in the closed shelter as a time when they were able to find peace of mind and felt protected. This again underlines the need for a diverse assistance system, taking into account the diverse experiences and preferences of trafficking victims.

A culture of gratitude or selection bias in trafficking research?

It is hard to assess to what degree restrictions cause victims to decline assistance. Still, based on reactions to and descriptions of restrictions, it would be reasonable to assume that some victims find the conditions untenable and decline for that reason. On the other hand, it could also be that victims who do accept assistance have so few alternatives that they will accept excessive restrictions simply because they have no other option.

One reason that it is difficult to decipher whether restrictions influence decisions to decline or accept is that there is what might be described as a “culture of gratitude” among assisted victims of trafficking, at least, amongst those with whom most organisations are willing to facilitate contact. Even in cases where organisations have told us that the victims have been dissatisfied with services they have received, victims have often been reluctant to admit this in an interview; actually being far more candid about sexual abuse and violence, which, to us, intuitively would seem more sensitive topics. One young woman told us that she had been disappointed when she had been promised assistance she later had not received, but then would not tell us what the problem had been and became more and more preoccupied with expressing her gratitude, assuring us that she fully understood why she did not get what she was promised:

Q: When you were [abroad], in the shelter, did you get information on the shelter [here] and what did they tell you?

A: They told me that they have a very good shelter here, that they provide some studies and that if you need medical assistance you can get it here, that when you come here the first step is that they buy you clothes for a certain sum of money. So maybe they told me a little bit more than people can do here, they told me a little bit more than people could do.

Q: Did you feel that when you came here you didn't get all that you had been promised [...]? *[She nods]* *What was promised that you didn't receive here?*

Maybe the programme exists, but they are limited somehow and that is why they couldn't... I don't want to offend anyone!

Q: This is a very important issue because if people break promises then how are people going to trust them?

A: This is true. Now at the moment I don't trust 100 per cent. My trust is lacking in hope a little.

Q: *Is that because of something that happened recently?*

They didn't give me what they promised, but I can understand them.

Q: *But it is important also when you are in a situation like that, we understand, but if people like you who weren't given something, if they don't tell, it is not going to change. So when people tell us that they haven't received something, we never think that they are ungrateful, it is important information.*

A: I am grateful.

This reflected a pattern in the interview – it was clearly important to the respondent that she had not received what she had been promised, which had disappointed her. However, each time we tried to clarify what had happened and how this had affected her choices and situation, she would underline that she understood that she could not get the assistance she had been promised and that she was grateful for what she had received. She is not the only one that displayed this insistent gratitude. Two other young women we met spoke about the initial stage of assistance:

A: When I came back I got to know about the organisation and they said I could get legal assistance. But there was no follow-up. In [the other country], I spent five months. I was arrested after one month.

B: I appealed to the police in [the country where I was trafficked], but instead they put a stamp in my passport and deported me. The case was closed. I consulted a lawyer here, but they said nothing could be done.

A: But now we are being critical...

Q: *But this is important information. Nobody is perfect and no organisation is perfect and if nobody ever tells what is wrong then it can never be better. I think that sometimes people who have received assistance feel that they have to be grateful and have no right to be critical.*

A: When I came here I felt I was dead. We got help. Now we have studies. [...] If someone sponsors my studies, I must also do something – I can't just sit around. B: I think I should do something so the assistance is not in vain.

A: I was helped, so I must help someone else.

B: If they help me, they trust me – that means I am not a lost person. I must do something. I never got anything for free. That is why this help is like manna from the skies. I am very grateful for the help; it means so much for us.

Both women had been promised assistance that they did not receive, which caused problems for them. However, they both retreated quite quickly after mentioning their

disappointment, noting that “now we are being critical”. They both also underlined how receiving assistance involved, to their mind, an obligation. They felt they had to prove themselves by succeeding, and also by helping others, so that the efforts of the service providers were not in vain.

There were some rare exceptions to this pattern of gratitude. One woman was both frustrated and disappointed with the assistance she received (or did not receive) and spent parts of the interview very agitated because of assistance that she felt she was entitled to and had not received. The organisation that put us into contact with her had a very specific reason for doing so. We spoke to the social worker who had forwarded our request for an interview to the respondent:

Q: We really appreciate you showing us the more complicated side of things...

A: I [asked her to participate] because I don't think it is right to say that we have victims and we are helping them, so everything is OK, because that is not really the case.

This comment hints that some service providers may not facilitate access to less satisfied beneficiaries and what seems to be a rather consistent gratitude for services could stem from selection biases in terms of who service providers facilitate access to.

At the same time, it is striking that in connection with some organisations, victims saw and characterized assistance as given by individuals rather than organisations and gratitude was directed at these particular persons, as an expression of their generous spirits, rather than assistance to which victims are, in fact, entitled. This manifests itself, for instance, through language when shelters are referred to as belonging to an individual – they will often be named by the first name of the director rather than the organisation, as in “Tatiana's shelter” (constructed example).

While it is true that NGOs do organise most assistance for trafficking victims in the region, this has another consequence beyond just overstressing organisations with limited funds. It can also mean that there is a lack of professional development in some organisations, as they are not necessarily accountable to any particular body in terms of providing a set standard of care and employing a certain type of professional. The one current mechanism for accountability – donors – is not generally strong in this regard, as donors may have limited criteria for what is considered “successful assistance”. This is reflected in the tendency for assisted victims to feel that they are assisted based on the good will of individuals, rather than by an accountable organisation with obligations within the social framework and as a civil society organisation. Also, the criteria for receiving assistance and the rules of the programme will not necessarily be transparent when assistance is provided by organisations that are not obliged to provide assistance or monitored in the implementation of these services.

You can't decline what you are not offered

A very serious issue in terms of the organisation of assistance is who is offered assistance in the first place. The definition of trafficking in human beings includes abuse of a vulnerable position and is not confined to cross-border exploitation. This means that many women who are exploited in local prostitution may also fall within the definition of trafficking victims and, as such, would be entitled to assistance. However, our research suggests that this is not generally a group that is considered potentially eligible for or offered assistance in a systematic way.

Interviews with 20 street prostitutes in Belgrade revealed a bleak picture: seven described entries into prostitution that were clearly cases of trafficking. The story of one minor street prostitute in Belgrade illustrates just such a case:

When she was eleven her uncle sold her to a strange man. The uncle came to school, took her out of her classes, put her into a car and drove away to that man, left her there and took money. She was told she is going to stay for a month or two, but she stayed much longer, about a year. By that time, this man kept bringing customers to her and drugged with psychoactive substances, like alcohol, cocaine, ecstasy tablets, to enable her to work. No one knew where she was. On one occasion a man, a regular customer, offered her a phone to call her mother. She called her mother and let her know where she was. With the same man (the customer) she ran away and he took her home. Later, the man she was sold to came to her home, beat them up (her, her mother and her grandmother) and threatened to kill them. He took their things from home. She went with her mother to denounce him to the police and he was convicted to jail (She does not know how long). While he was staying at pre-trial confinement he called her, threaten her, offered money to take her denunciation back.

After getting away from her trafficker, she stayed at home for some time, but the relationship with her family was too difficult:

She started to prostitute at the age of 14. Her reasons are mostly economic, she wanted to get away from her parents and this was the only way for her to make money. She fell in love with a man of 24 [years of age]. We suspect he was a pimp and that he works with juvenile girls. He manipulated her feelings and started to use her. She is not aware of it and she believes he is doing the best for her.

In addition to the seven women and girls who had clearly been trafficked into prostitution, an additional three had entered prostitution while under 18 years of age, were currently exploited by pimps and, thus, were likely to have been trafficked at some point. Nevertheless, women and girls in this category were not systematically offered services or assistance available to victims who had been trafficked across bor-

ders. In addition, different law enforcement entities may be utilized in interactions with prostitutes, with different training regarding trafficking and different objectives. In Serbia, for example, while the anti-trafficking police generally handle trafficking victims, the public order police deal with the local street prostitution. Some of the women have mixed experiences with the police. Some encounters had been good; they had sometimes been treated respectfully and been helped when they were in trouble. However, very serious allegations were raised by several prostitutes, outreach workers and independent sources about the behaviour of police officers from this department. One woman explained:

Policemen also harass me verbally and physically. Policewomen are more aggressive than men. On arresting days I and other girls are commonly beaten up twice; the first time by policemen who capture us and second time at a police station by policewomen. At the police station, two policewomen often beat one arrested woman, both with nightsticks. When I ask why they are beating me, they answer it is because I am a prostitute. They hit me even when I tell them I am ill.

An underage girl in prostitution said:

About the police, they asked for sex not to take me to the police station, humiliated me for my nationality and beat me up.

Said another:

My experiences with the police are mostly bad. They used to ask sexual services from me pretending to be civilians and then showed their identity cards and refused to pay.

As a result, street prostitutes generally do not trust the police and many reported that they would not go to the police if they were in trouble. Similar treatment of prostitutes was also reported in other places in the country. Further, we have detailed information about the mistreatment of one underage victim of internal trafficking, details of which cannot be repeated here due to concern for her anonymity.

In Albania and Moldova we were not able to access the prostitution arena to interview women and girls in the same situation, but there is reason to believe that the situation is similar. There is much exploitation, and consequently trafficking, to be found in local prostitution markets in both countries. In Moldova during the summer 2006, the so-called "Shalun case" uncovered and dismantled a trafficking network which was found to exploit a substantial number of minor girls in prostitution in Chisinau, most of them Moldovan nationals. Descriptions of prostitution in Albania, though an extremely stigmatised and underground activity, also show the same expected pattern of exploitation and vulnerability.

At present, there is a clear distinction between external and internal trafficking in terms of who gets offered assistance and how the police treat victims, seemingly contingent on the sensitivity to trafficking issues within different parts of the police. While we have seen examples of so-called potential victims of trafficking (i.e. women and girls who were intercepted before they were exploited) being enrolled in assistance programmes involving medical and legal assistance, accommodation and education, victims of internal trafficking in local prostitution markets have been routinely exposed to abuse and arrest and not offered any real assistance.

Part IV: Social context and personal experience as obstacles to assistance

10 Trust

The issue of trust underpins all of the findings in this report, as it is a pivotal part of the decision making process for trafficking victims in choosing whether or not to accept assistance. Trust is at the very foundation of the work that trafficking assistance organisations do, when asking trafficking victims to enter into unknown programmes, relocating to shelters they have never been to before. There are, however, two particular aspects of trust that we will discuss separately – distrust in or suspicion of certain forms of assistance and how previous assistance experiences may inform decisions about whether to accept assistance in the present.

Suspicion of some forms of assistance

Some victims are suspicious of certain forms of assistance, which may not be valued in the society or have negative associations for some people.

Many victims expressed at least some suspicion and insecurity about the different types of intervention and assistance. One victim explained of her return, “At customs, when the police asked me why I had no money, I explained my situation and he took me aside and explained about the [assisting] organisation”. When asked about her reaction to this she said that for her, “I thought it was a gift from God. In our country you cannot get anything for free”. Her friend and also a trafficking victim echoed her suspicions, “But who am I to be helped? Especially by a policeman”.

Other victims also described their suspicions and lack of trust and how they felt in the early days of receiving assistance:

I was supposed to trust her 100 percent. I don't know why I did not have this complete trust in what she was saying. The day I met with [the social worker] we went to [the store] and we bought some winter boots for my daughter. I was afraid that moment because I thought she is giving me this now, but maybe later she will ask for double back. She asked me maybe you need something else, some tights, some trousers, but I said no. I was very glad I got something for my daughter for winter.

She went on to say,

As for me, I thought that it was just one of the lies that surround us every day. If you drink more beer and get a lucky cap, you can get a car, I didn't believe until I really saw that people here really help.

It is not only victims but also their families who were suspicious of assistance. One victim's husband discouraged her from seeking assistance, suspicious that services would not be free and would somehow cost them later on. When she received a business grant after some months of other forms of (positive and free of charge) assistance, he remained suspicious: "he didn't even believe in this biz plan. He said so they will give you 2000 lei and you will have to pay 5000 lei". When asked if her husband had now changed his mind at the time of the interview, which was some months later still, she explained:

No he hasn't changed. He is waiting for these [business implements] to be taken away. He likes doing everything with his own hands and he says that I don't believe that anyone can give you something free of charge... He doesn't think that someone can give you something for free and he always says that in future you will have to pay for this.

Similarly, when one victim was asked about her family's reaction to the offer of assistance, she explained that they had discussed it as a family and that her parents did not interfere or try to prevent her from going. Nevertheless, they were suspicious:

My mother was scared by the offer because she says, "cheese is free of charge only in a mousetrap". So her initial reaction was suspicious. But my father was the first to be supportive. My parents are elderly and there are six children in my family so he felt that could revive life again, to help me re-establish my life. He said it was okay and even got enthusiastic.

A social worker noted another case in which the victim's relative was suspicious:

So yes, people are suspicious in [the country] and now we have quite a fresh case. A legal assistant together with a beneficiary went to her place to take some documents to fix her passport. The thing is that the father is in prison; the mother had disappeared for a period of time so the aunt grew very suspicious. "Where do you want to take my niece?", "Why do you need these papers?" So people are very suspicious.... The mentality of people is that if someone gives me something free of charge, it means that that person has a kind of aim. People are not very well informed about trafficking in general and they do not know a lot of organisations and people who can help in such cases.

She added that suspicion was a logical reaction: “if we take NGOs, they are quite young in our country and that is why people are suspicious”. Suspicion may also be a greater obstacle for some forms of assistance than others. As one social worker explained, “there is a lot of reluctance at the start. We tell them about the different types of help and many women reject when they hear the word ‘psychological’”. Legal assistance also appears to be a case in point. One social worker explained about this dynamic:

It is hard as a social worker to have the first contact with the victims, but in my experience no one refused assistance. They need it, sometimes humanitarian aid, they have small children, they need jobs, so we get them involved in vocational training. It is harder to get them involved in legal assistance. It depends very much on the lawyers. But they are trained in this. All the lawyers are part social workers, to get closer to the victims.

One woman described how she came to terms with her suspicions and fears and made her first contact with her social worker:

I met one of my sister’s neighbours, she told me about this organisation, she went abroad two years ago, and she told me. First I was afraid. [The woman] was in Turkey in a house, she lived with [a man]; she was caught by the police and taken to [the organisation]. Later, she told me about [the organisation] but I was afraid because I knew that she drinks, so I was afraid that she might get me into another trap. After she told me it took about eight months and I was afraid of calling. I didn’t call, I was afraid, but decided to go and see what kind of building it was. When I came to the door, I saw a caller, a button, and I said I wanted to talk to [one of the social workers] and they told me to go [upstairs]. There [the social worker] was, and I talked to her, and I was shocked to see a big food pack, I had never seen such a thing before. When she gave that to me I was frightened, but I still took it, because I had nothing at home. After we talked a little she told me in two days I could go to the shelter, I did not believe her but thought something was wrong. My idea was to take the food pack, but not to go back, because they can take me to Turkey again. Then she herself came to my place because I left my address, but I said no, she said take your children, you are safe, you can go with your children. So we went to the shelter, I liked it very much; I did not want to leave. They have very good food there, and I gained nine kilograms in three weeks.

Suspicion can be attributed to different things, although a key underpinning is that of trust. As one service provider noted, “Maybe because she does not trust in people, she wants the assistance but does not know who is on the line... In many cases when victims of trafficking call they have our number from friends. And if someone they trust gives them the number it also depends on how this person explains the services. Our number has been given by embassy representatives, police, priests, NGOs, employment agen-

cies, and in these cases when we have intermediaries we have no problems with trust". A social worker from an organisation managing the help line in Moldova explained,

For instance a woman who called the help line for a year, and didn't want to meet with us, when we explained to her what we could do, but what I see is improving is that she can tell a little bit more every time she calls, but it is so traumatic for her that she will not do it in person. She is still in the decision making process. The other one who was calling us for six months, the counsellor would pick up and she would hang up – she came to me in the evening – they really only come in a crisis situation – because she didn't have anywhere to stay. So it really was her last option. To find some opportunity to help herself. But they are really checking you, whether it is true or for free. Because with some of them you are talking and talking and asking them how you can help them and you still see in their eyes that they do not really believe you and that it is like a questions in their eyes, "is it really for free?" And you ask them, "What are your fears" and they say, "how much do have to pay for it?"

Even where trust is sufficient to mitigate this suspicious it often only applies to a specific individual or organisation. As one prostituted youth explained to us of her relationship to services, she would only accept help from the outreach workers who assist prostitutes in the capital. It is only to them that she will turn for medical assistance or any other type of support. Further, for her there is only one outreach worker who she really trusted: "I have very good relations with [the outreach worker], I like her and I like to talk to her. Now when the other women come to give condoms I do not talk to them, I always talk only to [that outreach worker]". This dynamic complicates referrals when assistance and services need to be accessed from another organisation and it is necessary once again to overcome the victim's suspicions. As one social worker noted,

Another problem is that when after a long time they start trusting you, you have to tell them that I am not a service provider and have to refer them on to someone else. We say, "They will not ask you what has happened to you, they will focus on your particular problem, like medical or other". And when I went to the shelter with them they usually took someone else with them to see that nothing bad will happen to them there. And you explain that another person cannot enter the shelter. So we say that they can go to the shelter and the first thing they will do is to pick up the phone and tell the other person you are OK, or I will call that person, and only if you feel that you need to be called from time to time you can give the phone number of the shelter and they will call you.

Past experience of assistance

In some situations, a victim's decision to decline assistance is linked to their past experiences of assistance, both within the trafficking framework and more generally. In our interviews it was clear that negative assistance experiences influenced declining patterns. The case of Jelena illustrates this point. Jelena is a young woman we met in street prostitution in her country of origin. She had been trafficked into prostitution when she was still very young (pre-teen) and had been involved in prostitution ever since. She explained that her past encounters with authorities made her very reluctant to access even the most basic services, even those that might help her leave prostitution. She explained that the police often came and took underage prostitutes to the shelter for minors but that she didn't like these places:

I don't like to stay at the shelter, I am afraid there. They might steal things from me. Before when I stayed there people stole from me. Also the staff are mean and they hit and abuse us and also the other people at the shelter can be violent.

In another case, a young woman who had been working in prostitution sought assistance only when the police threatened her with criminal charges. In part, this reluctance to accept assistance was because, as an abused child, the intervention of social workers did little to protect her from her parents. And the assistance she had received was far from satisfactory. As a teenager she briefly lived in a centre, which was not an altogether positive experience (at one stage she got into a fight with another resident and required emergency medical care), although also not an altogether negative experience (she was able to study and get good grades and was not molested by her parents). What was particularly negative was that she was returned by social services to live with her family home after only two months and again subjected to abuse. Social assistance did little to protect her and offered few alternatives. It was left to her to solve her problems, which she did by leaving home and eventually entering prostitution as an economic, survival strategy. It was only when she was arrested for prostitution and pressured by the police to testify against her pimp that she considered some form of assistance. And even this took some time. When she called the assisting organisation she said she was afraid that she would end up in an institution for minors. After visiting the residence and meeting with the other beneficiaries, she still went away to consider her options and agreed to accept their assistance only after some time.

Negative assistance experiences were noted in different sectors in each of the three countries.²⁷ One doctor explained a serious situation in which a victim had faced a very

²⁷ A recent five country study in SEE (Surtees 2007) found instances of poor treatment of trafficking victims, ranging from negligence and insensitivity to outright abuse. Poor treatment was noted by medical personnel, lawyers, social workers, law enforcement, psychologists and so on. In one extreme case a girl trafficked into prostitution was placed in a centre which housed unaccompanied minors and (continues...)

intrusive and traumatic experience when being tested for HIV/Aids. In her first test, she tested positive for the disease, HIV/Aids, requiring that she take a second test.²⁸

Under Moldovan regulation they have to send the letter to her home to invite her to another HIV test. And usually this letter goes to the polyclinic and the chief doctor there and then to the family doctor. And finally the family doctor, the social worker, the police and all of the neighbours come to her house to invite her to test, to the second HIV test that finally was negative. So it was really, really horrific. Of course it was a breach of confidentiality and so on. It's a serious problem especially in small villages... This is a mistake of the system.

The victim was understandably angry and we should be concerned about the impact this might have on her willingness to access future assistance. In this case she did continue to accept assistance but, as her psychologist observed, only out of necessity: "There was no other way out for her. She was not likely to get anything from other places".

Similarly, it is possible that the handling of cases in destination countries has resulted in victim's reluctance to access or accept assistance in their country of origin. Take, for example, the case of three women identified in a destination country in SEE. They were initially arrested as illegal migrants but then referred as victims of trafficking. Their return home was delayed because of their participation in the prosecution of their trafficker. The police did not issue their exit visas in a timely fashion (a process which generally takes a matter of days), nor were the victims permitted to return home and then come back to testify in the case. The delay was also caused by the presiding judge who did not appear in court on two occasions. The women had families waiting for them at home and were very stressed by their delayed return. Significantly, a man who was arrested (as an illegal migrant) at the same time as these women, imprisoned and subsequently deported, arrived home long before these "assisted" victims. Said one service provider of the case,

juvenile offenders. Over her three week stay she was exposed to violence at the hands of the other minors in the centre, which the staff did nothing to address: "After the guardian left, all the boys started jumping on me, so that I would 'go' with them, and if they were catching us in the toilet, they would try to rape us. Then I told the guardian but he said 'what would the damage be?... [The centre guardian] did nothing about it". This abuse continued over the duration of her stay, with the guardian failing to intervene at any point. She explained how, for her the conditions of this "assistance" were worse than her experience of trafficking. "Even now, after all of this time, I still have the fear in me. It's still not completely out of me. And then I pray a lot".

²⁸ The system used in Moldova is a two test method, which can record a 'false positive' in some cases. The test, called 'Elisa' (enzyme linked immuno sorbent assay) seeks to detect the presence of HIV antibody through a first test. Where these anti-bodies are detected a second test is required to confirm results. Step two uses immunoblot technology and when the test is positive also at this stage, the individual is HIV+.

I doubt that this approach has helped the programme because I would be really traumatised if I were them and would have made a big drama just to speed up the investigation to go home... and it is also not a good example for others in the shelter programme who saw this.

Additionally, it is questionable whether beneficiaries subjected to this kind of treatment would be willing to accept further assistance upon their return to their home country, constituting a missed opportunity for assistance and reintegration. This is consistent with observations elsewhere in SEE. In Romania, one service provider attributed some recent cases of victims declining assistance to substandard treatment in the country where they were identified and initially assisted. When, after some time, one of the victims accepted assistance, she explained that she and her friends had initially declined assistance because of the poor treatment that they had received while in a shelter in the destination country (Surtees 2005).

When asked about negative experiences of assistance, one service provider explained issues faced by those returning through assistance programmes:

So the negative moment is that usually women get in this transit centre. For the employees there the main things there is that these people should be quiet and not make so much fuss and not create problems and should wait for their identity to get home. And that's all. And even [our partner] centre abroad make promises, makes unreal promises. For example to buy a flat, to buy a house. It was very evident especially when we have beneficiaries from the Balkan countries. Now beneficiaries who come from Turkey do not have these illusions but still there are some. But they have great expectations. If we talk about medical services, they just get emergency help there. Sometimes they pass some test for sexually transmitted diseases but never efficient treatment. For example, for syphilis they need three weeks of treatment and they don't know exactly how long they will stay in the shelter and they don't want to start the treatment.

In part, it seems that negative assistance experiences could be addressed by better communication and cooperation between countries of destination and origin. Service providers themselves in all three countries highlighted the unsatisfactory level of exchange of information and cooperation between countries of origin and destination, even within the same cooperating networks. Said one service provider, "We almost never share experiences with shelter organisations abroad. If we did not have medical cases, I would never see my colleagues in [destination countries]. It is by accident when it happens".

Problems were also reported in EU countries. When we asked one service provider in Albania about trafficking victim's experiences of assistance when identified abroad, she reported that in recent returns from Greece the experiences had not been good ones,

although, as she observed, Greece is a developed country with high living standards. One victim was in five different detention centres over a period of two to three months, was not identified as a victim of trafficking at any stage of the process and did not receive adequate food or care while in detention. She was only identified in Albania upon her deportation. As another anti-trafficking actor observed, “If they are in an EU country where everything is good and they get bad or no services, why would you think that you would get any services at home?”. This sentiment was echoed by one respondent trafficked to Italy who was consistently informed about the services available in her home country, information which she treated with great suspicion. She explained that the social worker in Italy had told her about social services in Albania, but she remembered what her country was like before she left, so she could not believe it.

One medical professional in Moldova observed of that the quality of care that some women received abroad was substandard,

I want to add, we mention, we talk about medical assistance in the place that they were. I want to tell you about women who came to use with traumas, either Turkey or Russia, Ukraine or the Balkans countries. They are treated very badly there, very bad assistance in terms of professionalism. A girl came to us, she had a fracture of her spine and she had an operation and they left a serviette in that wound. So during a year there was infection. We have a very nice woman here, she has an already a grown up child. She suffered a lot in Turkey. She was traumatised in Turkey, especially her face and there she had an operation and there they sewed it very roughly... So even if they do some operation, they do it in a very rough way. For example, one girl had very rough stitches. Her body was with a lot of scars.²⁹

Negative experiences may be situation specific rather than representative of the general situation in the country. But they nevertheless affect the individual involved, impacting their confidence and trust in services and assistance.

It is not only service providers who may inform how victims experience assistance. Law enforcement was another key player in this regard. One victim trafficked to Turkey from Moldova related her bad experience with police,

Our police differ from the police abroad. Ours can do both good and bad. Abroad I was followed because someone threatened to kill me. The police in Turkey treat girls from Moldova as prostitutes. I said “if I were a prostitute, I would not go to you for help”. At first they did not believe me, but during the time from Friday to Monday when I stayed there it got better.

²⁹ It is unclear whether substandard treatment was, in any way, linked to the beneficiaries being foreigners (and therefore not entitled to quality care) or being “prostitutes” (and therefore not worthy of quality care).

Another victim explained how she faced problems in Belarus:

I stayed in prison there for six months because I had false documents because the trafficker took my passport and gave me false documents... I got ill there, and spent one month in hospital. I still have a scar from the operation. I was in the hospital with handcuffs.

Another victim observed,

I think that the police in all countries have pluses and minuses. But I think that the police in Turkey have more minuses than pluses. So on the other hand we can understand them because the stream of the flow of the girls from Moldova and Ukraine is a very big one and certainly they do not trust all of the girls. There were girls that were beaten there and so but we had to insist that it was true what we were saying. For example, bad point was that we were not allowed to call home. It was bad.

When we explained that other victims we had interviewed had said similar things, about the stress of not being trusted and believed, she went on to add:

Yes it is really very stressful. It is difficult. Because they don't believe and many girls that got there make up their stories. So maybe they try to check to see if the stories are really true but I just prayed to them to believe me. I even told them that I have some relatives in the police here and I prayed them to let me call home to call my mom. And so I even told them that I have an uncle here at the police and they believed me. It was a long wait for me before to go to this organisation in Turkey. So I was in prison there. I can't say it was a long time for me because some girls can stay there for several years. The conditions were not good.

We also found in interviews with street prostitutes in Belgrade that their negative interactions with the police – including police abuse and harassment, being forced to provide sexual services to police, being arrested, law enforcement's failure to protect them from clients and pimps – impacted their willingness to turn to the police in cases of difficulty. Take, for example, the case of Svetlana, who, while working in street prostitution in Belgrade experienced many terrible situations at the hands of the police, fellow prostitutes and clients. In 2005, she was assaulted and beaten up by two passer-bys to which no one reacted or provided any assistance. When she reported the incident to the police, nothing was done. While she reports that some police that behave appropriately, she stresses that others do not. Some maltreat her and others demand money from her so as not to be arrested. The likelihood that women like Svetlana would accept any assistance offered by the police is very low.

It is worth considering the degree to which negative experiences in the past are linked to other factors, like, the specific profile of beneficiaries. For example, one arguably salient variable may be ethnicity. As one anti-trafficking actor noted:

Roma, that's a group that doesn't have as much referral or seek it out assistance. I'm not sure if referrals are lacking because [Roma] are so marginalized. If they have never been assisted before by the state, only stigmatised by it, why would you seek it out now when you have faced such a terrible trauma?

Similarly, in the prostitution arena, a number of respondents expressed extreme scepticism of assistance because of problems they had faced in the past or because of prejudices and problems they are currently facing because they are in prostitution. Sladjana, a street prostitute in Serbia, reports being harassed verbally and physically by the police and how on "arresting days" she is commonly beaten up.

The flip side is that some women and girls have had a very positive experience of assistance in the country of destination and are, as a result, dissatisfied with the level of care they receive in their country of origin. As a corollary, it is worth considering the degree to which cases of accepting assistance are a result of past positive experiences. One service provider in Albania observed that when comparing beneficiaries who've received assistance abroad with those who did not, they saw a difference in their integration in the programme. Generally it is noted that those who had been assisted abroad were more informed and adapted more easily.

11 Different aspects of stigma and exclusion

One explanation for why some victims decline assistance is that they want to avoid social stigmatisation or exclusion. Stigmatisation occurs when a specific social environment – whether family or community – disapproves of the behaviour or activities of an individual or group. While many respondents felt that stigma was associated with having worked (albeit forcibly) in prostitution, stigma seems also to be linked with other “characteristics”, like failed migration and failure to return home with money. Where individuals are seen as failing in these latter two ways they are sometimes characterized as “socially deviant” in their local communities and become the subject of stigma.

When assistance identifies victims to the community

One particular challenge in offering assistance to trafficking victims is that receiving assistance – whether shelter based or even community assistance from anti-trafficking organisations – can identify women as victims of trafficking (seen by many as “deviant”) and, therefore, lead to stigmatisation. Explained a social worker,

We recently had a lot of cases of girls from Turkey and even at the rehabilitation centre in Turkey they are told about us and who will meet them but still about 20% of victims refuse, decline the assistance. So usually they don't want their parents to find out their real experience, what they really did. They usually deceive their parents by saying they are going to Russia but they go to Turkey. They don't want their parents to find out about their past and also that any members of family to find out the truth. Especially brothers have influence on sisters and usually don't want their brothers to find out about their real experience.

Another service provider explained, “Sometimes there are relatives in the airport and they are afraid to tell the whole story and then they refuse to come with us. Usually they say that they have been in jail or else how to explain that she did not send money

or call?”³⁰ This trend has been noted in other countries in SEE, like Montenegro and Croatia, where victims have declined assistance because as one respondent explained, “it is a small country and after a shelter she is known and gets a bad reputation”. In Montenegro, where victims were inclined to accept assistance, service providers found that families often refused to avoid stigmatisation: “They don’t want the women to be assisted. If they are in the shelter, then everyone will know what happened. And the families are ashamed” (Surtees 2005: 423). It has also been noted in Asia where women assisted by anti-trafficking organisations suffered community stigma because of the general assumption that persons assisted by these organisation had been trafficked (see *Beyond Trafficking* 2004: 23, Derks 1998).

Some specific forms of assistance are likely to be key identifiers of one’s status as a victim of trafficking. In recent years in SEE, assistance for young women has often been linked to sex trafficking, thereby signally assisted women as prostitutes/trafficking victims. IOM’s assisted return of trafficked women has been one of the more overt examples of this, with the IOM bags identifying women as victims not only to IOM staff assisting in the transportation and reception but also potentially to airline personnel, customs and border officials, traffickers and receiving families (Limanowska 2003, Kvinnoforum & Kvinna til Kvinna 2003).³¹ However, victims can equally be “outed” in other ways – through outreach in communities, police inquiries in communities or association with specific organisations. As one NGO staff put it,

I’m not sure what the girls tell their families about the shelter. The stigma of being in Italy alone is enough of a problem. In Albania, psychiatry is non-existent and no one seeks help with anything so assistance itself is not seen in a good light.

Residential facilities may also be key identifiers in a country, like Albania, where institutions have not traditionally formed a part of the social assistance framework and where extended family support has filled this gap. It may also identify persons in Moldova and Serbia where many people have negative experiences of residential care and opt for residential care only in an emergency.

It is not only through accepting assistance that “deviancy” manifests. Those who return home without assistance may also behave in ways that identify them as victims of trafficking. “Deviancy” may be inadvertently signalled by non-normative behaviour manifested in language, appearance, attitude and actions. One social worker noted that sometimes the way of dressing is sufficient to mark her as “deviant”: “some trafficking

³⁰ In chapter 5 we discussed the problems many victims of trafficking have in their family relationships as a consequence of not being able to tell what has happened to them and the distrust that may result.

³¹ IOM changed its policy in 2004 and currently returns take place without any identifying bag or signs; IOM staff prearranges confidential and anonymous returns. However, a recent study in SEE found that other organisations continue to arrange meetings and pick-ups with trafficked persons in ways which may identify them to others present, including using organisational t-shirts and signs (Surtees 2007).

victims return with the clothes that she escaped in, her prostitution clothes, and when she returns in these clothes, they reject her". Another observed,

When a woman comes back she had a traumatic experience, her behaviour, emotions, relationships change and very often they don't understand. And she will not tell what happened, she is crying all the time and she cannot prevent from aggressive manifestations, or she is smoking all the time, drinking coffee and alcohol, staying in bars all the time, changing men, these are like feedbacks or reactions or symptoms of severe post-traumatic stress disorder, and the relatives don't understand and try to figure out why she is like that. So what would I think of my child or my wife if she comes back with a lot of gynaecological problems and she will not tell me what has happened, she is crying all the time or very aggressive, something bad has happened but maybe did something wrong, she came with a deportation, or without documents, she is not answering the phone or leaves the house for several days and I have to look for her, she is not a good person anymore. This may be why the society sometimes has such a reaction to these women.

One former victim noted how initially upon return she would keep bad company, smoke and swear. Another noted she was more aggressive: "recently I have been having quite a lot of arguments with the [neighbours]. In general since I came from Turkey I have become more irritable and nervous and now I am a conflict person".

Receiving services and support which others in the community may want (and need) may also lead to jealousy and resentment, which can amplify stigma, an issue in social assistance and development work generally as well as with other marginalized groups.³² When asked whether the neighbours ever questioned her about the assistance she receives, one trafficked woman replied in the affirmative:

The neighbours were quite indignant and why someone comes into the house and walks here and there and installs a stove... maybe we can say it is jealousy, maybe envy. But they thought "she got everything installed free of charge and why don't we get that".

This highlights the need for less conspicuous interventions as well as the strategic advantage of helping the community at large (for instance, with education, food security or awareness-raising) rather than targeting only one individual or family (Surtees

³² This has been an issue, for example, with the reintegration of persons formerly associated with fighting forces, generally children who had been forcibly taken by combatants. These returning children were often seen by many within their community to be at least partially "culpable" for their actions while in the fighting forces, not unlike the situation of many trafficking victims. Reintegration programmes in Sierra Leone were found to be only successful when assistance had some positive impact on the community as a whole, like equipment for the school as a whole rather than the returning student. For details on obstacles to reintegration for former child combatants, please see Save the Children 2004.

2000). Explained one social worker, “when the girls ask us what they should tell people about where they live, we just tell them to say that they are friends who are just living and working together in the city”. Some programmes have been specifically designed to mitigate the risk of identification by receiving assistance, with some organisations targeting socially vulnerable groups including, but not limited to, trafficking victims. In smaller towns and communities, this serves as an important form of camouflage. For instance, one organisation working in a very conservative environment, where there was little sympathy for trafficking victims, offered their trafficking specific assistance within a broader framework of assistance to unemployed people, offering classes and counselling to trafficking victims alongside others. In this way they successfully approached victims without exposing them as trafficked even in the presence of their families who generally knew nothing about the trafficking experience.

To be identified (and stigmatised) as a trafficking victim impacts the individual’s opportunities for reintegration – within her immediate family, amongst relatives and within the community. As one service provider observed,

Supportive families understand that someone sold their girl. However, this is not so often the case. In other cases, families don’t understand at all – although families are usually more understanding than the community.

The mother of one victim who declined assistance expressed it as such, “If she stayed at the shelter and was away from home for a while, the neighbours will think that she was a prostitute. Every time she leaves the house, they assume she is a prostitute”. This, in turn, may result in victims declining assistance:

Most are afraid their environment will find out – every time the woman receives some assistance it becomes suspicious to their environment so they think it is safest not to get any. They want to hide that from their families and friends in small towns.

One agency reported a case of a victim declining assistance because the office guard was her relative. Generally victims have a hard time telling their families about their experience. As one social worker noted, “there is a problem for the women in telling their families that they have been trafficked. Some will never tell, they are embarrassed and fear rejection”. Asked how this impacts the individuals, the social worker further explained:

It is not easy to move on in this situation. Girls who remain longer will usually tell their family after some time. Rosa had no contact with her family for two or three months. Then she told her uncle that she was in [the city] and that she was okay. Later, she told him that she was in a safe house and gradually she explained the

situation. But usually victims say that they worked abroad and say that they spent all the money, that life was expensive there.

This not only leads to victims declining assistance but also many result in many victims leading a double life, one where they have to construct a “cover story” for where they have been and what they have been doing, which can place enormous strain on them psychologically and, by implication, their relations with others (Bjerkan & Dyrliid 2005).

Stigma affecting family and community

One reason for this strong reaction against victims is that stigma can spread to the family as a whole. One returned victim explained how her family rejected her because they were fearful that her cousins would not get married because she had brought shame on the family. What is striking is that shame in this case seemed to be both associated with her having abandoned her husband (she fled his abuse which made her vulnerable to trafficking) and having been trafficked (and sexually exploited).

Stigma also arguably attaches to communities. Some organisations noted cases where communities as a whole refused to admit that returned women (legally identified cases of trafficking) were victims of trafficking because of the shame it would bring to the community. Explained one organisational staff working in these communities:

We have known cases where they didn't accept the women were trafficked, where the community refuses to hear bad words about their community. But the community refused to admit just because they want to have a healthy reputation among other villages, because it is quite a shame for them.

Similarly, in another situation, where local level anti-trafficking actors were meeting to discuss case handling in their communities, one of local village leaders present took issue with the subject and refused to acknowledge that trafficking occurred in his community. According to another representative present at the meeting, he saw it as a challenge to the dignity of his community. This unequivocal position came in spite of (or perhaps because of) a report from the police officer present that he had identified three victims who originated from that area. It is unclear and worth considering whether this type of reaction can potentially serve to protect victims of trafficking as the issue of trafficking is publicly ignored (thus, mitigating stigma) or whether victims are nonetheless ostracised by the community and it is only vis a vis the “outside” that this façade is constructed.

What kinds of behaviours are stigmatised?

To better pinpoint the role of stigma in trafficked persons declining assistance, it is important to try to disentangle how stigma intersects with the trafficking. While the most obvious source of stigma for trafficking victims is social norms attached to prostitution, another, perhaps less striking but still important source, is failed migration. Both issues are discussed more at length below. It is also important to keep in mind that reasons for stigma are not distinct but rather are mutually reinforcing. When women return with little or no money this is difficult to hide, and at the same time, the failed migration may be associated with having been trafficked and working in prostitution. Interestingly, the balance for returning female migrants is a fine one, as returning with what people may perceive to be too much money may cause the same result – having earned a lot of money can mark someone as a (successful) prostitute. Both of these points are discussed below.

Strikingly, stigma can also occur for what a woman is *perceived* to have done, rather than what she *has* done. In many environments, including in SEE, to leave the village or town under certain circumstances may be sufficiently “deviant” to merit stigma, as she will have moved outside the sometimes complicated boundaries for what is acceptable behaviour for women, although the stigma may also result from the fact that leaving the village causes speculation that she has been a prostitute. As different agency staff explained:

It is enough to have just left [the village] the first time. The family wouldn't look well on that, even if they never left the country.

The mentality is that if she has left, not trafficked, but just left to be with someone else, the mentality is to think it's bad.

Stigma because of prostitution

In all three countries studied, prostitution was neither legal nor socially condoned. Stigma attaches to women working in prostitution,³³ as service providers observed:

³³ Acute (and seemingly irrevocable) stigma associated with prostitution in some countries in SEE stands in contrast to other environments, such as South East Asia, where prostitution may, at least in part, be overlooked where it allows women to fulfil social obligations to support families. See Derks 1998; Muecke 1992; Surtees 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Beyond Trafficking 2004: 38, 41. It also seemingly stands in contrast to victims of other forms of trafficking who may not suffer the same stigmatisation. One service provider, when asked about the role of stigma in declining assistance, replied: “It influences, no doubt. We try to convince them to say that they have had labour exploitation. It is a lie, but a white lie”

Prostitution is not a part of [local] culture, customs and traditions. A priority objective of our work involves rejoining victims with their families. When we work with families, we never tell the families what she's done. Otherwise, the family will not accept the girl back. We simply say that the victim lacked documents.

No one should know [about the prostitution]. If the community knows, you'll be seen through a different eye. They'll know she was trafficked sexually and might think that she wanted it. The family will be stigmatised. So, sometimes, the girl's sisters are stigmatised, too.

One organisation reported many cases where victims had shared their experience with neighbours or friends who then told others. When news of their situation became public, they were socially ostracized and many were also rejected by their families. There is also a tendency to see prostitutes as "diseased" in many countries in SEE and service providers reported that one bias about women trafficked for sexual exploitation, even among service professionals, was that they have sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV/Aids. Said one service provider:

People tend to think that all trafficking victims have HIV, are crazy – a lot of people are afraid of working with trafficking victims. Trafficking victims can't get jobs in small villages and towns because people are afraid they'll catch a sexually transmitted disease. There is also the fear of addiction and [the misconception] that all trafficking victims are addicts.

In some areas the stigma associated with prostitution is acute. In Moldova, for example, service providers referred to the practice of identifying "prostitutes" (and, by implication, often also trafficking victims) by painting the woman's gate black. The tradition is closely connected with prostitution, with women working in prostitution seen as "dirty". This organisation had assisted several victims who had been subjected to this ostracism. One woman contacted the organisation but was reluctant to receive assistance, as her gate had been painted black by villagers when she returned to her house two years earlier after having been trafficked. After a long period she had managed to convince her local community of her "innocence" and was worried that if someone found out that she received assistance from an organisation working with trafficking victims the harassment and stigmatisation would all start again.

Stigma can also have very real physical consequences. One psychologist explained that one of her clients who had been abroad was brutalised in her community because of the stigma associated with her (forced) prostitution:

[She] did not tell anything, but there were a lot of people suspecting because she had been away four years. She went to a party in the village and guys there took her out

and raped her – “you were there and did this for money, why not do it for us free of charge”. She came here very depressed. So stigmatisation is a very serious problem.

Significantly, knowing the full story of the individual’s victimisation does not always or even often serve to mitigate the stigma associated with her (forced) prostitution. There is a general lack of awareness of, or an unwillingness to acknowledge, the distinction of being trafficked into prostitution and entering prostitution independently. As one service provider explained, of a girl deceived through a false marriage, “her family didn’t accept her back. Her parents thought she had a regular marriage and didn’t know that the pimp exploited her. Now [that] they know the story, the family won’t accept her back”. One victim, who had been sexually exploited in a bar in her home country, described how such stigma manifested in her community:

The case was covered in the media and my initials were printed in the local newspaper. They knew it was me. Now people avoid me. Even I feel dirty. I wonder if I can sue the newspaper.

As discussed above, fear of stigma can lead victims and their families to reject any assistance. In at least one instance the fear of being socially ostracised had fatal consequences. One NGO related how a father had approached them after he had heard about the organisation on the radio:

He had a girl who had come from abroad and was a victim of trafficking. She had come back half a year before and she was very ill and they spent a lot of money, almost all the money they had in the family, on her treatment but she was still dying. He wanted us to help her but her mother and she mother refused categorically. We discussed it quite a lot, how to convince his wife and daughter to come... I was shocked by the fact that the mother wanted to make it so secret although she saw that her daughter was dying. I suppose now that she didn’t even imagine that her daughter could die.

Over time, the mother finally agreed to receive assistance, due, at least in part, to the fact that the family could not afford the expensive treatment she required. That treatment was also undertaken in the capital (not their home town or region) may also have played a role in accepting assistance, as did the gradual development of trust in the service provider. Tragically, treatment came too late and the girl died.

Victims may also fear stigmatisation from service providers, something which merits careful examination. In Kosovo, one research report found evidence of prejudicial views related to women and prostitution and paternalistic ways of viewing and treating victims. In that vein, one foreign victim of trafficking, who escaped before she was forced into prostitution, said that if she had been forced to work as a prostitute she

would never have gone to the police to seek assistance, as she would have been too ashamed (UNICEF 2004: 4, 28).

An outstanding question is whether the cultural environment differentially impacts stigma attached to prostitution. That is, is it possible to identify whether some social groups have different attitudes connected with stigma surrounding prostitution? Interviews with key respondents yielded different results. One man, belonging to an ethnic minority group in his country, asserted that, for his community, prostitution, while socially unacceptable, was not impossible to forgive. He felt that most community members would not judge the victim and that the family would not reject her. It would be a greater shame to not care for the family member (see also the discussion on this topic in chapter 5). That being said, it is unclear if this sentiment can be attributed to this individual, the specific community or the particular minority culture in general. Similarly, there may be differences in attitudes and stigmatisation in different countries, between larger and smaller towns, according to religion and so on. More precise consideration of how stigma manifests in different environments would be an important step in identifying entry points for intervention.

Stigma because of failed migration, failure to earn money

Given the importance of migration as an economic (and even family survival) strategy in the three countries studied, failed migration may potentially result in stigma for the victims.³⁴ This is exacerbated by the many “migration success stories” which circulate in sending communities, suggesting that a migrant is incompetent if he or she has failed where so many others have succeeded.

Foreign victims assisted in Serbia were reportedly stressed by long stays in the shelter (generally due to their involvement in criminal procedures against their traffickers), because it was hard for them to explain to their families at home why they didn’t return and/or were not sending money home. In a Norwegian study of prostitution and trafficking, one respondent who had been exploited in a non-sexual way described her shame at having been deceived about her immigrations status as well as having never received any payment. Another respondent observed,

³⁴ The ability of trafficking victims to contribute economically to their families plays a role in reintegration in SE Asia. In Cambodia, some organisations working in the area of reintegration reported that the few victims of trafficking who manage to return with substantial amounts of funds are “befriended”, whereas the majority who do not are stigmatised, isolated and looked down upon in their village” (Derks 1998a: 39, cf. Surtees 2000). This is consistent with data from elsewhere in SE Asia where women’s responsibility to economically support her family potentially mediates the culturally problematic dimensions of prostitution (Muecke 1992, Surtees 2003a, 2003b).

If you come home with a lot of money, you are a hero around here. However, if you come home with nothing, they look at you as one of the lowest of the lowest, since you have ended up in such a situation. It is humiliating (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004a 2004: 10).

To receive assistance, then, arguably highlights one's failure as a migrant and the stigma associated with this. Explained one service provider,

People talk, these are small communities where everybody knows everybody. They will say Maria's girl was abroad, and she comes back with no money, she does not call for a year, maybe the parents will complain to someone, she does not send me money and here I am with her child, so I think the parents contribute to this.

Debt, incurred to fund a victim's migration, may amplify frustration (and fear) when a woman returns without money and unable to repay the debt. This may lead to greater stigma directed at the woman who, through her "failure", has amplified rather than remedied the family's economic vulnerability. Chinese migrants intercepted in Albania, who manifested strong indications of trafficking, were unable to return home precisely because their families refused to receive them due to their migration debts. Debt may also lead victims to migrate again, exposing them to more risks and potential re-trafficking.

To be too successful a migrant may also be stigmatising in the community in that it may identify one as a prostitute, an economic arena where it is possible to earn large sums of money. As one psychologist noted,

When a woman who doesn't work comes home with big bags with a lot of food, neighbours start thinking, "Where did she get all of these things?" Or when a woman gets a new hat or a new jacket, certainly neighbours can start thinking a lot of things. Our mentality maybe is different from the mentality of the people who live abroad because a woman doesn't want to be a target of the neighbours' rumours. But if this woman comes from a village, rumours spread very quickly. So in the village, people are quite more limited and they can say to a person's face "you are a prostitute".

About those who return home with money, she added, "they don't come for help; they don't turn to us for help if they have money". Therefore, accepting assistance in a *de facto* sense identifies one as a failed migrant.

While for many victims stigmatisation was inevitable, it did not appear to be irrevocable. Stigmatisation seems, in many situations, to be time bound. Reintegrated victims reported that often it was a matter of time – two and three years – before the community accepted them back and treated them normally. One victim who returned

to her home community was shunned each time she went to the village shop, treatment that continued for two years before the situation finally normalised.³⁵

There are also behaviours that likely mitigate stigma, thereby allowing the family or community to “forgive”. This requires a consideration of the central factors in stigmatisation – whether different forms of trafficking are less stigmatising; what factors increase and decrease gossip/stigma; to what degree time effects stigma and reintegration; what factors (i.e. sex, age or economic success) mitigate stigma; to what degree the victim is seen as culpable; what precisely causes stigma (i.e. leaving home, prostitution, failure to contribute to the family income; whether stigmatisation is linked to community status and the sense of community within the village; etc (Surtees 2000: 190-91). Culturally acceptable community reintegration requires an examination of the social obstacles and facilitators to successful reintegration. In one traditional community in northern Albania, it was argued by a local organisation that “the most important thing is that she understands her mistake” and “changes her behaviour”, suggesting that adjusting her behaviour (including language, appearance, attitude and actions) to local conditions is sufficient to counteract stigma. Similarly, one social worker in Moldova discussed how changing behaviour may be part of an effort to reintegrate. For some victims who return to their families they seek advice on how to fit back into their society: “some go back and then ask the psychologist to maybe talk to my mother or tell me how to behave, I do want to improve”.

³⁵ Similarly, in Cambodia, while the initial return was noted by all, this attention generally abated or disappeared over time, particularly when there was a shift in behaviour or it concerned the wife/family of villagers that neighbours don’t want to hurt through gossip. One woman who had been reintegrated after trafficking explained, “Everywhere I went, I heard people talking about me...After two or three months they stopped. Now I go to the market to sell firewood as before” (Derks 1998a: 43, cf. Surtees 2000: 190-191).

12 Identification with the victim of trafficking role

During the course of our interviews it became increasingly clear that different aspects of assistance influence the victim's life and relationships with family and society in general. Moreover, accepting assistance in many cases fundamentally changed the beneficiary's view of herself. Many of respondents spoke about their identity and how they saw themselves to explain their different choices regarding assistance. Interestingly, sometimes opposite constructions were used in a justification of choices; one woman justified her acceptance of assistance by underlining that normally she managed on her own, saying "I am not the kind of person who just receives"; while another justified her choice by saying, "I am not the kind of person who says no to anything", indicating that she would not foolishly waste an opportunity to improve her life.

Many also spoke of a change in how they viewed themselves after having accepted assistance. Many women were happy to report these changes, stating, for instance, that they had grown more confident, that they were now able to see themselves in a different light – as someone who deserved better than the abuse they had suffered – and having shed feelings of guilt and inferiority. However, for others, the picture was more complex and not always unequivocally positive. This chapter, therefore, deals with the issue of identity and its role in victim's decisions to decline assistance.

Accepting trafficking specific assistance means to accept the role and identity of trafficking victim. This role is multifaceted and holds seemingly contradictory elements. On the one hand, trafficking victims are often stigmatised, while, on the other hand, the rhetoric surrounding the issue sometimes involves a near glorification of victims. It is, therefore, not an easy role for women to assume and carry. In addition, to accept assistance also, at some level, involves acknowledging the gravity of what has happened, which, in itself, may be a difficult hurdle to overcome given that a very natural defence mechanism for traumatic experiences is repression and denial. Problems in relating to the role of trafficking victim have both to do with the trafficking term itself and that of being a victim in general and a recipient of assistance.

Relating to the trafficking term

The concept of trafficking in women for sexual exploitation is an ongoing subject for discussion in political and academic circles. While the definition in the internationally ratified Palermo protocol states that trafficking in women is not confined to forced prostitution, the idea that most “real victims” are in prostitution against their will still prevails, both in countries of origin and destination. When asked about who is a trafficking victim, whether they carry any of the responsibility themselves for what happened, and who has the real responsibility, most institutional representatives were unanimous. They generally stated that it does not matter whether the victim consented to prostitution – if she was exploited she should not be blamed or stigmatised and the real responsibility lies with the traffickers.

However, another picture of attitudes emerges when exploring other topics in interviews with key informants. Consider this statement from a representative of the police who explicitly stated his understanding of trafficking in women as described above, i.e. that trafficking in women was about exploitation and that it did not matter whether they had entered prostitution knowingly:

The majority of those that claim they are victims of trafficking went of their own free will, and the reason they denounce the traffickers is that [the trafficker] broke their agreement. (...) Sometimes victims have used the police to make better deals with the traffickers. (...) We can't say that they are victims in the pure definition of the word. (...) They have not been grabbed and forced.

This quote illustrates how trafficking victims can be classified as more or less justified, or even “pure”, as in the quote above, depending upon the degree to which they entered prostitution knowingly. This type of statement is fairly common and is found also among different kinds of key informants, both law enforcement and service providers.

Furthermore, this understanding of trafficking in women is also reflected among trafficking victims themselves and there is no reason to believe that the complicated definition should be any less confusing to trafficked persons. It is clear that many who would be defined as victims by national and international laws do not define themselves in this way. For instance, we have, in the course of this study, interviewed several minors who were exploited in prostitution, which, in itself, qualifies them as trafficked, and who, in addition, were very vulnerable when they were recruited into prostitution by factors other than their young age. Nevertheless, some did not see themselves as trafficked and, consequently, questioned why they should enter assistance programmes for trafficking victims.

The image of trafficking as forced prostitution – who is “forced enough”?

The general public's view of what constitutes trafficking is often shaped by information campaigns as well as media coverage of specific cases. Both of these sources of information tend to focus on the most extreme and shocking cases and underline aspects of coercion and violence as a means of bringing attention to the issue. This, therefore, seeps into the general understanding of what trafficking in human beings really is and what the most pressing issues are.

The consequences of this have become very visible to some service providers. A few years ago in Moldova a trafficking awareness-raising campaign was run, using, among other tools, the movie *Lilja-4-Ever* by Swedish film director Lucas Moodyson³⁶. However, IOM found after some time that the message conveyed in this movie was not very conducive either for preventing trafficking or in encouraging trafficking victims to seek assistance because the story was viewed as too extreme and implausible for people to identify with. Many young people who saw the movie as part of a prevention programme apparently did not believe that Lilja's experience could happen to them. Further, service providers also observed that women who had actually been trafficked and exploited, but not in the extreme manner shown in the movie, thought that the assistance available was not directed at them and that they did not deserve assistance when compared to the imagined others who had gone through a “Lilja experience”. As a consequence, IOM in Moldova changed its approach to be more in accordance with people's experience of migration and the vulnerabilities inherent in irregular migration. The current campaign includes several different stories rather than one scary image, and reportedly, seems to be more consistent with people's lived experience.

Some victims of trafficking assume that assistance is directed at people who were “forced more” than they were, while others may feel that their own romantic involvement with the trafficker means that they are not really victims. At the same time, a much-reported means of recruitment and control by traffickers is precisely to feign an intimate relationship with the victim. This appears to be more common in areas where women would not easily consider migrating for work, but where they will readily migrate for marriage. This is particularly common in Albania, but has also been observed in other countries in SEE. This is the way that Rosa understood her relationship with the man who trafficked her, although it was also a very complicated relationship. But in spite of the fact that he exploited her in prostitution, had her moved to another city when she came into contact with social workers who wanted to help her, used her to smuggle drugs, had her videotaped, threatened her, threatened to kidnap her sister,

³⁶http://tcc.iom.int/iom/artikel.php?menu_id=43&artikel_id=57&history_back=true. *Lilja-4-ever* is a very graphic movie depicting the fate of a young girl in a post-Soviet country falling prey to traffickers and being exploited in the most horrific ways. She is kept behind a locked door, repeatedly raped by customers and finally escapes, only to commit suicide. The movie is based on the true story of a Lithuanian girl trafficked to Sweden and had substantial political impact when it was released.

and claimed that she owed him 10.000 Euro, Rosa still felt that, as she said: “He is not guilty [of trafficking] in my case.” and: “I will not report him to the police because I left of my own free will”. Although she now recognises that she needs help and is receiving assistance, it appears that her love for this man meant that she did not see his actions as trafficking.

While Rosa in this case chose to accept assistance, others have expressed grave doubts about whether the assistance is actually meant for them, even when it seems clear to an the outside observer that they have been trafficked. We interviewed a young girl in her mid-teens, who, after having run away from home to get away from abuse, was exploited in prostitution by a man from whom she rented an apartment. In her case, although she did not say so explicitly, it seems that prostitution was a survival strategy in trying to cope on her own, rather than something she felt that this particular man had forced her into. She did not consider herself a victim of trafficking and was vacillating about her interest in and commitment to the assistance programme she had entered. She also received snide comments from the other girls in the shelter about her past and hints that she should take customers again. Unfortunately, although shelters are meant to be havens of support and safety for trafficked persons, we have in this and other interviews learned about women’s past being used against them, both by fellow shelter beneficiaries and by shelter staff.³⁷

In many cases, victims of trafficking are forced into their situation not necessarily by another person but by the circumstances they find themselves in. These cases pose particular challenges in terms of the trafficking definition, as it is difficult to determine sometimes where unfortunate circumstance ends and manipulation and exploitation begin. The inherent problems in the practical application of the trafficking definition are discussed in a forthcoming article by Skilbrei and Tveit based on interviews with Nigerian women in prostitution in Norway. The challenges of self-identification become poignant in the case of women who have accumulated debts upwards of 60,000 Euro, often to several different actors, that have to be repaid through prostitution, but who categorically decline to see themselves as victims of trafficking or even of exploitation in general. The most common view seems to be that borrowed money must be repaid and that they accepted the terms because they felt it was the only way to get out of Nigeria (Skilbrei & Tveit, forthcoming). As in the case of the minor discussed above, these women and girls may be reluctant to classify their survival strategies as ones of victimisation and may, therefore, decline trafficking specific assistance.

It was quite common in our interviews for trafficking victims to emphasize that they did not enter prostitution voluntarily. Several respondents in assistance underlined how they were different from other women who knew what they were getting into. The question, then, is how someone who has entered prostitution knowingly and willingly,

³⁷ See also chapter 9 on biases in the assistance system

but who still has been exploited, would feel in an assistance programme together with others who tell stories of kidnappings, force and violence. While a woman may feel that she was exploited, it is very common for trafficking victims to blame themselves and look to their own actions for explanations of what happened, even where they have been subjected to coercion, threats or deceit. It is difficult to say whether women who knowingly entered prostitution are more likely to blame themselves if they were exploited, since few beneficiaries of assistance will say that they did, in fact, know they would be working in prostitution.

When exploitation seems like the best available opportunity

Related to not feeling that one has been “forced enough” to qualify as a trafficking victim are women and girls who may feel that the situation they are in may be the best deal they can hope for, if the alternative is to be at home (sometimes in difficult circumstances) and have no means of income and no opportunities. Assistance with the aim of removing women from the “work situation”, however exploitative, will sometimes not seem a solution or good alternative to the trafficked person.

One of the key components of the definition of trafficking in human beings is exploitation. Exploitation can have an objective meaning, for instance, in regulated areas of work life, where minimum standards for pay and working conditions are imposed, and where the breaking of these regulations can be defined as exploitation. However, prostitution in most countries is far outside the realm of regulated work and the concept of exploitation takes on a subjective quality. This, again, is the source of much debate in terms of what trafficking for sexual exploitation should include. That is, whether all prostitution is exploitation and consequently trafficking in human beings, or whether prostitution can be organised in acceptable ways, securing sex workers’ rights and defining trafficking as what falls outside a regulated norm. While exploitation can, in certain connections, be defined by a set of objective parameters, it will also have a subjective component, which, in the case of deciding whether to accept assistance, will be the most important: Does the person in question *feel* exploited? This will often differ from person to person, even in identical circumstances. In a former study we interviewed a young girl who had been exploited in prostitution together with another girl, two or three years her senior. When the girl, after quite a substantial period of time, contacted the police and both girls were removed from the situation, her companion was furious with her because she was in love with their exploiter. She beat the girl so severely that she was hospitalised, before running away from the shelter and back to the trafficker (Brunovskis & Tyldum 2004).

The perception of exploitation will also be contingent upon what one can compare one’s situation to. People are more likely to accept an exploitative situation if there are other conditions that (sufficiently) compensate them for the adversity of exploitation.

For instance, a very poor woman coming home after having been forced into prostitution talked longingly about how every time she opened the fridge when abroad, there was food, “even chicken”, as she said. Another factor that may mitigate the exploitation and serve to justify one’s situation is if it is possible to help one’s family financially, even a little bit. While many trafficking victims never see any of the money generated by their prostitution, others do get a share, though usually very small. Only in very rare cases, though, will victims interviewed while in assistance admit openly to this. We have, however, in some interviews been told by women that they received no money, only to later tell how they bought airplane tickets to go home. Receiving money does seem to diminish their validity as a trafficking victim, both to the women themselves and to their surroundings. Albanian key informants have reported that at some point it became more common for traffickers to send some money to the women and girls’ families in order to convince them that their relatives were okay, which was useful to the perpetrators in furthering their trafficking objectives. In a recent court case in Norway where two men were convicted of trafficking in women and one child, the traffickers promised women and girls 25 per cent of their earnings, to be paid towards the end of their stay. Several of the women in this case did not see themselves as victims, in contrast with the ruling of the Norwegian Supreme Court.

Victims who were intercepted before exploitation

Increasingly in SEE, counter-trafficking actors have been identifying and assisting “potential victims” – persons who are either perceived to be acutely vulnerable to trafficking or who have been identified in the process of a perceived trafficking experience.³⁸ The decision to decline assistance, therefore, may be informed by whether the individual has been trafficked or was a potential victim of trafficking. Some potential victims do accept assistance and in our fieldwork we met with “potential victims” being assisted within the assistance framework. Some had been identified in transit prior to being exploited; others were from vulnerable families who might be considered susceptible to trafficking. In these cases the girls/women often accepted assistance for want of a

³⁸ In Serbia in 2004, law enforcement authorities identified a number of “potential victims”. These women were identified as “at risk”, having manifested strong signs of being in the trafficking process. Examples of potential victims are, for instance, four Moldovan women were travelling in the company of one man who held their passports and documents. They had been promised employment as domestic workers in Italy, had paid large amounts of money to the recruiter, and knew little about their route, destination or the work to be undertaken. They were identified at the Croatian border by border officials. In another case, a minor Iraqi girl was identified while in transit at Belgrade airport en route to Denmark. She was travelling with a male relative who promised to adopt her and take her to study in Denmark. She accepted and left without the consent of her parents, travelling on false documents (Surtees 2005: 496). Potential victims have also been identified in Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Moldova, Montenegro and Romania (Surtees 2005).

better option. As one girl explained, she couldn't go home because of the security risks involved: "we had no other solution. It's either home or we had information about this centre and we accepted".

However, "potential victims" also decline assistance and this may be a more common decision given that they may not require the specific interventions offered to victims of trafficking. For example, in Kosovo in 2003, 15 victims screened by IOM were potential victims of trafficking but declined assistance (Surtees 2005: 269). In some cases, potential victims do need assistance – many of the potential victims we met came from very vulnerable situations – however, the assistance they require may not always (or entirely) be consistent with the services available to trafficked persons. This is not to say that there are not similarities between potential and actual trafficking victims. Potential victims talked about their feelings of insecurity and lack of trust as a result of having been deceived, often by someone known to them, feelings that are similar to those of trafficking victims. Often individuals were traumatised, although trauma may also have been a result of their vulnerable background. However, it is worth considering whether individuals who have not yet been exploited have the same assistance needs as those who have been trafficked and exploited and how assistance might be more responsive to this particular category.

Another reason that potential victims decline is that they may not have been exposed to abuse yet and so do not perceive their own vulnerability. According to the Agency for the Coordination of Assistance to Human Trafficking Victims in Serbia, higher numbers of potential victims decline assistance than accept. In large part, the Agency attributes this to the fact that some individuals do not perceive their situation as one of vulnerability. They do not accept that they were (almost) trafficked and, therefore, do not want (or, arguably in many cases, need) assistance. Some potential victims will even be acutely hostile to offers of assistance and the intervention of social workers. The anti-trafficking police in Serbia related one case in which an investigation led to the interception of potential trafficking victims from Ukraine en route to an EU country. The alleged traffickers were under police surveillance and their phones tapped. Evidence gathered indicated that while the women had been promised work in Germany, they were to be taken to Italy for sexual exploitation. The police intercepted the women and their traffickers when they set out for Italy, arresting the men. The police officer noted that the women were very upset with the police because they still thought that they were to go for work in Italy where they had been promised 700Euros a month as waitresses to pay for their education. They did not believe that they would be trafficked and it was only after the women heard the taped phone conversations between the trafficker and his wife that they believed the police. Similarly, in Albania, a social worker explained,

We've had cases and the centres aren't helpful for all victims. Not all victims have the same risk perceptions. For example, a woman who was intercepted at the border en route to be trafficked – and she's now aware and still thinks the trafficker's a nice guy – she still has these feelings and trusts him. So, these victims don't feel threatened and simply leave.

Relating to the victim role

While the trafficking victim identity may be problematic for some for the reasons outlined above, our respondents also touched a great deal upon the victim role *per se* and related very differently to it. Receiving assistance is to enter into an unequal exchange, playing the part of recipient to someone else's giver. Social workers often told stories of how beneficiaries tried to mitigate this inequality through different behaviours, including by giving something back to them.

Rejecting a victim identity

As already established, to enter into an assistance programme is also to accept the identity of trafficking victim. While this victim status affords certain rights, it may also be at odds with the way that the woman or girl views herself. We have found this in particular to be connected to problems of feeling passive when receiving assistance and to wanting to leave the traumatic past behind.

Several women we interviewed expressed discomfort with the role of victim. Some also found it problematic to be on the receiving end of assistance and told us that they were used to providing for themselves. Some expressed feelings of anxiety about the assistance they were receiving. Explained one woman who had been in the programme for about one year,

Sometimes I had a feeling that I am like a handicapped. So why should anyone help me if I have legs and arms? Why should anyone help me if I have legs, if I have hands, this is the only thing that I have. This help, for example, was brought, but in the beginning I felt not quite comfortable, because I was used to doing everything on my own.

In many cases, victims of trafficking migrated in order to improve their own living conditions and often those of their families. This means that they have shown initiative and a willingness to take chances in entering into the unknown, meaning that they are far from passive. One woman we interviewed displayed, unsurprisingly, clear discomfort

when describing the traumatic experiences she had been through abroad. However, we also found it striking that her body language and demeanour was very similar when she described receiving assistance, indicating that she was perhaps as uncomfortable discussing the assistance she received as she was discussing her bad experience abroad. This particular woman was in her 50s, had an alcoholic husband and was effectively taking care of her children and her ageing mother-in-law on her own. She took great pride in having been able to earn enough money to help her sons study. When she talked about accepting assistance, she underlined that she only accepted it when she realised that her daughter could also receive some medical assistance and she would be able to first harvest her vegetables to ensure that her family's winter food supply was secured. For someone whose main purpose has been to take care of others, it may be problematic to acknowledge that they themselves may need to be taken care of. Assuming a victim identity may, thus, be experienced as relinquishing agency or a positive self-image as a provider or caretaker.

A psychologist working at a shelter talked about issues of dependency and autonomy as complicated ones for many beneficiaries. She felt, for example, that it was problematic that her organisation could no longer provide assistance in the form of cash that the beneficiary could spend as she wanted, as this impacted the individual's autonomy:

When she has 50 dollars she can do what she needs to do, phone, electricity, services, money is at her disposal, buy something for a child. It is a possibility to feel an owner of the money. Some confidence. When you are always accompanied by an assistant to the shops, it is secondary victimisation. As a psychologist, I don't think this is right.

Some women may also want to distance themselves from the traumatic experience and move on with their lives. One woman recruited by someone close to her family was subjected to extreme violence and degradation while trafficked. At the time of the interview, she was still suffering from resultant physical injuries and was not able to work. The person who had recruited her still lived nearby, a considerable source of stress to her. However, she had not reported this person to the police, nor did she plan to. When we asked her why, she said: "I just want to be a mother". This may be read as a desire to leave her traumatic past behind, exclude it from her identity and rather choose the more positive identity of mother (over that of victim). Key informants confirmed that many victims who were heavily traumatised after brutal trafficking experiences declined assistance in an attempt to "just leave everything behind them".

It is also possible that accepting assistance in a way confirms or makes real their trauma. In a few cases, the women tried to diminish what they have been through. One young woman had been through a very difficult experience, first being tricked out of a substantial amount of money, then sent off to a completely different country from what was promised, forced into prostitution and later arrested. While in prison she fell

seriously ill and had to have an operation. While in hospital, she was handcuffed to her bed. Nevertheless, when talking about this experience she partially made light of it:

I am surprised I could [take] it, after six months of being closed then, not seeing the sky... I left home in September, in winter it was very cold, I had no good clothes. You can only imagine, the cold, the hunger. But then again, I could need to lose some weight!

Although we, as researchers, felt that this young woman's story was among the more brutal ones, she continued to underline that she felt lucky in many ways. She also said, "If I hear about more serious cases, I think that I'm not doing so badly." Her friend agreed:

We have this acquaintance; I thought my situation was bad... I would go, "oh, poor me, I have no parents". But when I saw her and her situation that she is still in, I said thank God my situation is not worse than it is. It turns out that some people are worse off.

These quotes may be seen as an indication of the complexities of managing a victim identity. We saw many times that trafficking victims who have been subjected to extensive violence and traumatising experiences often try to diminish the significance of what they have been through. In some ways, this may be seen as a form of denial, but it may equally be a healthy way of managing their traumatic past. Comparing their traumatic experiences to those of others may, thus, be a form of protection and function as a coping mechanism.

One pattern we noted that appeared to be specific to Moldova, at least in our interviews, was that of people feeling that they could not accept assistance as long as there were other people who were in a worse situation. One victim said that she had heard from someone that the cost of one night in the shelter was USD 200 and this horrified her. Although she had been pleased to get the opportunity to stay in the shelter and was both amazed and grateful that she could get this assistance for free, she said that had she known beforehand how much it (allegedly) cost, she would never have accepted. Service providers in Moldova have also reported that some women from very difficult financial situations declined the reinstallation grant of USD 50 because they felt others needed it more than they did. When we asked service providers how they understood these decisions, they interpreted it as a manifestation of maturity and intelligence by the women. One service provider said that she had seen this in some more mature women, with education.

In line with the above points about understanding trafficking as forced prostitution and how this may prevent some people from seeing themselves as trafficked, there are also women who may feel that they are victims but that their experience wasn't "bad

enough” for them to be admitted into an assistance programme. A service provider told us about one such case:

We had this one lady; she had a five-year history of being trafficked and still has nightmares and so on. Although she knew about us before, she thought she could manage on her own [before she finally came to us]. I remember that she said one afternoon, after receiving counselling; “why did I suffer for five years? I knew about you providing assistance but I thought that maybe mine is not like the worst cases”.

One of the elements in this woman’s story is that she thinks her story was not “bad enough”, compared with others to warrant counselling. There may be some sort of cultural explanation to this, as this pattern of not accepting services because others may need it more was only noted in Moldova. Another aspect of the story related above is that the woman thought she could manage on her own and, therefore, did not seek assistance.

Embracing a victim identity

People manage victim identities differently and some victims of trafficking seem to embrace their victim status rather than reject it. In some cases, however, adopting a very strong victim identity may lead to discontent with assistance on offer and sometimes even to declining. This happens when the beneficiary develops very high expectations of what she should rightfully receive. Some women and girls we interviewed seemed to completely embrace the victim identity and these girls were largely younger than those who found the victim role problematic. It may be that young women in their late teens and early twenties have less often developed a self-image based on providing care for others – which we often found in more mature women and those who had children of their own – and consequently it may be easier for them to accept an identity as a victim. Some young women seemed to develop a sense of entitlement extending beyond the assistance system due to their trafficking experience. Said one girl, “It would be good if the police had something in the computer so that they knew we were victims of trafficking. I got a fine the other day for jaywalking”. This indicates a certain sense of privilege, in that normal rules and regulations should not apply to a victim of trafficking. Several social workers also found that some beneficiaries had great expectations of what they should receive:

There is another group of girls here, it’s like the whole world owes them something. They are hostile, not willing to change. This hostility is not directed towards individuals, but the whole world. They say, “You must give me a job, you must teach me”. Usually they don’t stay long.

Others confirmed the same picture:

There was this girl who came back and faced the same problems she had before and even more problems. When she came home she expected, like other girls, golden rain from our organisation. So she said that “you have to give me this or give me that or I will complain to your donors”. It wasn’t easy for us to talk to her.

There are a number of different explanations for individual’s feeling entitled to more than what is often possible. Several service providers told us that a big problem was the lack of communication between assistance organisations in different countries and also between organisations and law enforcement. This had sometimes led to victims being given misleading information about what was available and had caused disappointment and distrust. Some service providers also suspected that the police in certain destination countries would sometimes knowingly mislead the women regarding what they could expect to receive at home in order to placate them and make repatriation easier.

The adoption of a strong victim identity and high expectations of assistance may also be a stage in the process of receiving assistance and figuring out what can be expected. One woman who had been in a very difficult situation told us of her strong emotional reaction to the first food package she was given:

When I came home, I took that pack home; it was everything that I needed. There was cereal, sugar, oil, soap, and shampoo, everything that I needed. I got home and I cried [*she starts crying*]. I had suffered a lot during those years. Where ever I used to go people used to try to take something from me, and suddenly I was given things, a lot of things. At that moment I realised that my escape is that organisation.

While it is quite common for beneficiaries to be shocked and grateful at the same time in the initial stages when they realise that assistance is for real, it is also quite common for expectations to grow over time. In the case of the woman above, she would gradually call the organisation more and more often, asking for more and more things, and for help to solve most of her problems, entering into a stage of what her social workers later described to us as “learned helplessness”, which was often accompanied by discontent with the services when the beneficiary felt that she did not get help when she needed it.

Conclusion

We set out in this report to analyse why and under which circumstances victims of trafficking decline assistance. Unsurprisingly, we have found that victims decline assistance for a multitude of reasons and often feel that accepting is not a real option for them, leaving many with unattended assistance needs and problems that may result from this. In some instances, this continued vulnerability and lack of assistance will also be the basis for continued trafficking and exploitation. While some victims do decline assistance because they do not want or need to accept it, others decline because they feel they are not able to enter assistance programmes. In this final chapter we will focus on what could, in our view, be changed and improved in order to increase the likelihood that victims who both want and need assistance will accept it.

Looking at the situations that frequently occur when victims are initially identified and offered assistance, it is very common that this first contact happens under relatively chaotic conditions and involves substantial confusion about what is happening as well as who the prospective helpers actually are. This pattern manifested clearly in so many of our interviews and was also in accordance with our impressions from our previous research with trafficking victims. A substantial number of women and girls were, in fact, at least initially afraid of those who wanted to help them and thought they were being transported to a new venue of exploitation. We have found again and again that success in offering assistance depends on the ability to provide information and build trust, as well as on the specific situation the victim finds herself in when she receives the assistance offer.

In many cases it is difficult to avoid confusion, for instance, in the case of police raids or similar interventions. However, the quality of the information that is given needs to be carefully considered. Victims need to receive realistic information about what they are offered, who the different actors in the process represent (for instance, whether they are law enforcement or social workers) and what their rights are, as foreign and national trafficking victims.

One challenge, though, is that, in many cases, it is difficult also for those who first come into contact with victims to know exactly what can (and should) be offered, and what is available. This makes a strong case for providing written materials (which are age, language and educationally appropriate), as many victims are in a confused and often traumatised state when they first receive information about assistance and consequently have limited capacity to process the consequences of accepting and declining

assistance. Written materials can be accessed at a later and hopefully more stable stage of the victim's post-trafficking experience, even if she has initially declined assistance. This could also facilitate better information to foreign victims or victims who do not speak the local language, as it may be difficult to obtain translators for the initial stage. The initial information could potentially be improved if victims were provided with basic information about assistance in their own language.

Nevertheless, no leaflet will provide the solution to the main challenge of information, communication and trust building. Particularly for victims who are approached with offers of assistance while they are still in a trafficking situation it may take a long time to make the decision to accept. One small step in the right direction could be to identify specific problems that victims need help with, for instance documents, nutrition or health concerns, and solve these issues, thereby providing specific experience that the assistance is not only real but also efficient. Many service organisations initially provide a set of hygiene articles or basic humanitarian package, with a certain success. The point at which many of our respondents received the first concrete and specific assistance was when they decided to put their trust in the organisations offering help, this being endlessly more convincing than any number of words and assurances of good intentions.

While victims sometimes decline assistance, a worrying number of our respondents were under the impression that the assistance that they were offered was, in fact, mandatory and that it was not up to them whether or not to accept. This is reflected in the fact that a number of women "run away", that is, stage escapes from shelters as if they were incarcerated there rather than taking part in a voluntary programme from which they are free to leave of their own volition. Needless to say, such an introduction to assistance can and often does seriously impair the relationship between the beneficiary and the service providers.

The issue of assistance being experienced as mandatory also brings us to a related topic. It is clear that there are some questionable practices in some of the assistance programmes for trafficking victims, which many victims reported to be problematic, if not outright traumatic. Some service providers use strict restrictions with beneficiaries, in the form of limited opportunity to leave shelters (some women reported not being allowed out for several months) and only supervised (and sometimes restricted) phone and personal contact with family members. Some were only allowed visits by their families once a month and then only in a police station. The use of restrictions is an established element in therapeutic efforts for other groups, most notably within psychiatry and treatment of addictions. However, any use of restrictions must be guided by a clear rationale for their use, strict supervision and guidelines for appropriate use, ensuring individuals' rights and ethical treatment, and that violations of victims' rights do not occur. Such guidelines are not in place today.

Further, there should be a serious discussion as to whether this type of intervention is appropriate for trafficking victims, what therapeutic effect it is meant to have, as well as its efficiency. If restrictions of this type are to be used at all, there should also be formal bodies where complaints can be directed and to which organisations and individuals can be held accountable in cases of abuse or problems. The anti-trafficking assistance sector is largely run by NGOs and IOs who are often not held accountable to anyone but their donors, who may or may not choose to make conditions for further funding. In many cases, though, donors also change quite frequently, further eroding accountability over time. There are no systems for licensing service providers in this sector and consequently no way to revoke permission to provide this type of assistance, even if the quality of services is substandard. Further, there are few formalised mechanisms for complaint in the case of maltreatment. This, in combination with the fact that many victims thought the assistance was mandatory, creates a worrying picture as to whether victims' rights are respected in all instances and also creates potential for assistance to become a second form of victimisation, as was the case for some of our respondents and which causes others to decline.

It is our impression that the majority of service providers do not use restrictions in the form described above and several expressed scepticism verging on incredulity when this approach to assistance and reintegration was described to them. Many service providers struggle with a rather different problem; shortage of financial resources. One very central reason for victims of trafficking to decline is that their families and loved ones are also vulnerable and have assistance needs, but, in many cases, service providers are not able or mandated to help persons other than the victims. Sometimes even that can be a tough call; one organisation explained that while they might encounter 300 victims in need of immediate help with basic nutrition, they would only be able to assist 20 of them. In such circumstances, service providers have to make strict priorities and to help persons other than victims is often beyond their means. Nevertheless, as a common reason for declining assistance is the need to return home and support one's family, it should be considered whether trafficking assistance could, to a larger extent, be applied to the victims' family as well. Including the family to a larger degree could also help alleviate the often deep distrust and scepticism families have with respect to the veracity of the assistance.

Further, in cases where victims have their own children, it is of crucial importance that shelters afford the option for parents to bring their children with them while in care or facilitate some other family-oriented arrangement. This is currently the practice in many shelters in the region, although foreign victims assisted in destination countries often face a more complicated situation due to immigration laws on family reunification. It should be considered whether children could, where appropriate, be reunified with a parent during the course of assistance outside her own country, particularly in light of the provision of temporary resident permits in many countries in SEE.

Families' scepticism of assistance also sometimes stems from a fear that the community will know their wife or daughter's trafficking experience. We have documented one such case where reluctance to receive assistance for fear of identification and stigma was fatal for the victim who, not having received the necessary medical treatment, died. Stigmatisation in the local community involves complex social processes and it is difficult to address these quickly, easily or directly. Although many countries have run information campaigns in the hopes of changing attitudes and ease trafficking victims' return, the results so far appear to have been meagre. It should be noted that information campaigns on many topics generally have very limited and, at best, temporary effects, as social norms are more deeply seeded and usually only change over a very long time. However, assistance to trafficking victims could potentially be less stigmatising if integrated to a larger extent within social services for the general population, in order that assistance can be received on the grounds of social vulnerability rather than being a trafficking victim. Organisations taking this approach, for instance offering services to unemployed or poor women in the community, appear to have had a certain success in reaching trafficking victims. On the same note, lower threshold assistance - i.e. assistance that does not necessarily involve leaving the community and staying in a shelter - may be a good alternative for the numerous victims who feel unable to leave parents or children behind, or who cannot afford not having an income while they receive assistance.

Many service providers involved in day-to-day work with victims expressed their frustration that there was little or no contact or cooperation between service providers in different countries and they would also be very interested in learning from the experiences of other organisations. Professional development and exchange would be an important investment in terms of offering assistance and ensuring that only those who really do not want assistance actually decline it. Nevertheless, donors are reportedly generally reluctant to fund longer-term professional competence development, preferring to finance activities directly aimed at beneficiaries. At the same time, professional development and activities that allow service providers to meaningfully learn from the experiences of others will ultimately benefit victims of trafficking, in the form of better and more efficient assistance.

The majority of victims who accepted assistance said they did so because they had no other option. Several women said that, looking back, they do not know what they would have done had they not been offered assistance; some have even suggested that they considered suicide. This clearly demonstrates the important function filled by assistance providers in all countries that have a trafficking problem. This also, however, illustrates the very high threshold for some women to enter into an assistance programme, as many of those who accepted did so only when they felt that they had no other options. Conversely, we also found that people with alternative mechanisms for support were more likely to decline trafficking specific assistance and seek help in

other places. This could mean that some of the characteristics associated with profiles of victims of trafficking may be more representative of assisted trafficking victims than of trafficking victims generally. One common idea is that most victims come from dysfunctional families. Our data, however, indicates that trafficking victims who have good family relationships will return home rather than enter into assistance. Victims with family support are, therefore, less likely to be registered in the assistance system, where most information about victims of trafficking comes from today and on which new programmes and approaches are built.

The difference between assisted and unassisted victims is a finding that has implications both for policy and research. Concerning policy and programme development, there is a great need for proper assessments and analysis of trafficking assistance efforts, what works and what does not. However, these evaluative efforts must not stop at looking at the effect on assisted victims, but also include the question; is anyone not assisted, and why? What happens to them in the longer term? Are there systematic differences between the victims that are assisted and those who are not? Do the victims who are not assisted need different types of assistance from what is available within the programme? If these questions are not asked and answered, there is a danger that research and policy perpetuates an assistance system that may cater only to the needs of one specific type of trafficking victim. As we have established, to decline assistance does not always mean that one has left the experiences of the past behind and has fully recovered.

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Leaving the past behind?

While many victims of human trafficking for sexual exploitation are assisted within the numerous anti-trafficking programmes developed in countries of destination and origin, an increasingly noted trend has been that many identified victims decline the assistance offered to them. To date, little systematic knowledge has been available on why this is so, and what the consequences are. This report analyses the issue based on interviews with 39 victims of trafficking and 13 women and transgender persons in street prostitution whose status with respect to trafficking could not be determined, as well as a large number of anti-trafficking actors, in Albania, Moldova and Serbia.

The authors found that victims decline assistance for a large variety of reasons, stemming from their personal circumstances; because of the way assistance is organized; and due to factors in their social surroundings, including negative assistance experiences in the past. Many do not accept because they feel it is not a real option, and are left to cope on their own with unattended post-trafficking problems. The insight that victims who decline often have other assistance needs than those catered for within the assistance system today should be incorporated into future assistance planning and design.



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