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empowering women

toolkit
for social workers
on approaches
and methodologies
to combat human trafficking



Project: IRETI – Empowering Women and Strengthening Socioeconomic Integration

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INTRODUCTION

IRETI “Empowering Women and Strengthening Socioeconomic Integration” is an **Erasmus +** funded project that was launched in November 2017. The **partner organizations are BB&R (Spain), Ubele (UK), and AUR (Romania), coordinated by HRYO (Italy).**

The project seeks to highlight and bring together the best practices of working with human trafficking for the common purpose of combating exploitation of women, and to allow victims from human trafficking to have an access to basic services through an **online platform.**

As part of the project, we have also developed a **Booklet of good practices** and the present **Toolkit on approaches and methodologies for social workers’ daily activities,** in order to gain knowledge from the work and the local realities in London, Bucharest, Salamanca and Palermo.

Since the **Toolkit** was not meant to be an extensive research on the topic, but rather a user-friendly tool, it was designed to allow an **easy reading, and possibly inspire social workers in their daily work, promoting a victim-centered approach where their wishes, safety and well-being are considered the priority.** Thus, besides the desk research conducted by the project staff, the content of the Toolkit was greatly enriched by the contributions of the social workers and survivors attending the IRETI international training in Salamanca on September 2019. A group of 26 frontline workers, in fact, had the chance to exchange successful approaches and challenges in their daily work with victims, potential victims and survivors of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

We have identified **four phases in the work with victims of human trafficking,** that is:

1. First contact
2. Establishment of a trusted relationship
3. Awareness raising and formal complaint
4. Empowerment, freedom and own life control.

Per each phase we present some tips and constraints related to four domains, which are **communication** (verbal/nonverbal), **setting** (safe environment), **connection to other services** (e.g. NHS, police, other), and **education, vocational training and activities proposed to the women**. As some suggestions are relevant in more than one phase, they are presented in multiple sections.

Lastly, considered that the aspect of communication emerged as the most sensitive and crucial one, thanks to the collaboration across project partners and with social workers and survivors, we have decided to include in the Toolkit a **Decalogue of good practices for communicators on the topic of victims of trafficking and sexual exploitation**.

Step#1: FIRST CONTACT

Acknowledged the complex and dangerous apparatus behind human trafficking and exploitation, it is essential to be very cautious and wise in the way we first identify and approach potential victims. The content of this chapter is particularly important for the workers engaged in street units activities, as in some cases, the first contact can be asked and mediated by the staff of reception facilities, and in rare cases, it can be the result of spontaneous contacts of the victims themselves with dedicated or general help services (maybe because someone else had previously approached and informed them).

The main tips and challenges remarked by the social workers who participated in the IRETI project activities are hereby presented according to the related category.

COMMUNICATION

- It is better to approach women in their **own languages**, getting the help of a well-**experienced cultural mediator**. It is essential to carefully choose the cultural mediator (try to know more about her engagement and position in the local diaspora community).
- Ask if she needs anything (e.g. water, a blanket). **Material needs** can represent a good way to first approach vulnerable women.
- Use an **informal language** and a calm/relaxed attitude.
- Keep a **non-judgemental approach** and pay great attention to your **body language**, especially involuntary facial expressions, which are easy to recognize (disgust, fear, sense of pity).
- Introduce yourself but avoid the expression “I/we can help you”. Probably tens of people have already told her so, and eventually she was betrayed and exploited.

- The approach risks to be not successful if carried out by non-professionals (although they might be highly motivated volunteers). If someone is interested in helping out, he/she should contact dedicated services.

SETTING (SAFE ENVIRONMENT)

- **Smile.** It contributes to create a comfortable environment and foster a sense of trust. It can also be encouraging for both you (the worker) and the woman.
- During street work, **respect if she doesn't want to talk**, your insistence might put her in danger. Try another day.
- If the social workers have been contacted by the staff of a reception facility or other services, for the first meeting with the woman don't involve them, and if it is possible, take her outside to **eat or drink something in a quiet place**. Do small talking.
- During the meeting be just a few people in order to have a more **intimate environment**.
- If the first contact is not in the street, give her privacy and highlight the dimension of confidentiality.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SERVICES (E.G. NHS, POLICE, OTHER)

The contacts with other services represents a **particularly challenging aspect** for the vast majority of the social workers who have contributed to the development of the present Toolkit.

- Cultivate positive relations with the different services and if possible, offer them **training opportunities to learn more about human trafficking**.
- Consider the possibility to propose thematic roundtables with the various stakeholders involved in order to develop and possibly **implement operational guidelines for mutual support** (MoU).

- If you are the first service approaching a woman, provide her **immediate assistance in any urgent matter** that might require the involvement of other services (especially health-related).
- Understand the impression and experience she had with the services leading her to you. They might have mined the **trust toward institutions and services**. If so, you will need to build a different narrative.

EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE WOMEN

In this phase there is generally no space for education and training, as the **psychological support is the priority**. Nonetheless, one social worker operating in a community center run by migrants reveals that leaflets and brochures on training, job opportunities and specialized services are very helpful as they are disseminated to women who can directly reach victims and potential victims.

Step #2: ESTABLISHMENT OF A TRUSTED RELATIONSHIP

COMMUNICATION

- In this phase you can start **disclosing more info** on your job and the organization you work for. Be honest, reliable and committed, placing yourself on the same level.
- Prefer an **informal discussion and attitude**, but always keep in mind the difference between being friendly and become a friend. In fact, it is important to be emotionally far enough to keep a better perspective.
- **Reaffirm your commitment** and continuity of intents.
- Discuss the **women's need** (material and not). It helps a lot to establish a positive relationship.
- Empathy is essential. Practice **active listening and** encourage **self-reflection** on what it is happening to her. If she uses a word to describe something, use that word as well. It will help to develop a personal connection.
- If you communicate with the support of a **cultural mediator, be sure that the client is at ease with her**. That can compromise the whole relationship and support service.
- Some women might be less approachable and eager to talk. In this case, **informative printed material** on human trafficking can be useful.
- Be honest in saying that building a new life is **a process that requires patience** and no-one is able to offer/achieve an overnight chance.
- Never neglect the importance of the **cultural dimension**. It is possible that there is **not a shared understanding and meaning** of things. If she talks about something you don't believe in or don't know much about, show interest and encourage the woman to explain more, also investigating what she (and you) can do to impact on that.

- If you mention **other women's stories** to encourage the clients, be sure you don't provide much info. She might think you would do the same with her story, compromising the relationship.
- **Share something about yourself** to develop a personal connection.

SETTING (SAFE ENVIRONMENT)

- **Engage a survivor during the meetings.** It can be extremely powerful.
- Always remind women their rights.
- Show **your availability** and tell her that if she needs she can contact you also beyond your working/counseling time.
- **Privacy** is very important during the whole process. Try to meet the women in a colorful, cozy and **inspirational space**.
- Don't ask potentially sensitive questions in open spaces or with other people around.
- In this phase it is likely that a woman is still facing coercion. **Wait for her to call you** and pay special attention to the places you go to.
- Don't think that the **worker's gender** is not relevant or interchangeable. During the meetings don't give for granted or impose your vision around gender roles and stereotypes, and always check if the client is at ease. One social worker engaged in street unit work found very useful the presence of a man in the car. She said: "that would allow women to interact with a man who is not a client, an exploiter or a complete stranger."

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SERVICES (E.G. NHS, POLICE, OTHER)

- **Accompany women to access other services** to encourage a trusted relationship and check the effective and appropriate delivery of the service. In this phase **focus on healthcare**, avoiding contacts with the police. Depending on the legal status of the women (more likely to be irregular), looking at the healthcare services, the situation can deeply vary across countries based on the schemes in place (e.g. in Italy, public healthcare assistance is universal, also for undocumented people, therefore anyone has the right to be treated without risking deportation or any legal consequence).
- Check if she had previously been in touch with other services and how was the experience.

EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE WOMEN

- Talking about **personal interests and experiences** is useful in this phase to establish a positive relationship, and it is also an important **self-reflection** activity to assess the skills and the competences on which building resilience and a new life.
- Prefer **informal and non-formal learning experiences** in this phase.
- Assess, and if needed, start working on the woman's **language** proficiency (better through games or in an informal way).

Step #3: AWARENESS RAISING AND FORMAL COMPLAINT

COMMUNICATION

- Besides the oral communication, in this phase **information material** on human trafficking and human rights is important.
- Depending on the country, the formal process of pressing charges can deeply differ in terms of how many times, where and with whom women are expected to tell their stories. That might cause a lot of stress, it is therefore essential to **explain all the necessary steps** (writing a checklist can be helpful to visualize and be more aware of the process). Inform them that a formal complaint is written, has legal value and will be used for further investigations.
- Give **info in a mindful way** and work to reinforce or build the **sense of feeling a human being, a woman with rights** to be affirmed and protected. Work on **identity**.

SETTING (SAFE ENVIRONMENT)

- In all phases it is essential to keep a **victim-based approach**, where her needs, fears and expectations are the starting point for the whole process. Openly ask her where and with whom she prefers doing things, and constantly check if she feels **comfortable in the different situations**. If not, identify and work on the reasons of the discomfort.
- Some women might decide to start a new life without pressing charges against their traffickers and exploiters. Eventually, **respect this decision**.
- Women **safety** must be the priority. Don't disclose aloud any sensitive information with your colleagues or other service staff.

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SERVICES (E.G. NHS, POLICE, OTHER)

- Build **alternative narrative** on the existing services that might not work perfectly. They are also part of the system where they live and that is supposed to help them, therefore they will need to interact with it.
- When interacting with other services, define the roles in order to **avoid redundancies and confusion**.
- Give the client some **emergency numbers** and be sure she can easily hide them (e.g. a piece of paper to be placed in a condom box).
- The cooperation with other services is crucial if the woman is an asylum seeker or decides to **seek asylum**. It is important to well assess the legal implications of the different form of gender and sexual based violence in terms of international protection, and a **multisectoral report** can be useful in this sense.

EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE WOMEN

- If they have **language barriers**, an essential starting point is the enrollment in a language course. Remark that language proficiency is important not only for job, but also for a greater awareness and participation in the process.
- Assess literacy, prior education and competencies, giving also some **preliminary information** on available training opportunities.
- Not overwhelm the process of entering this arena, although it is clear that for the **women who are not under a protection program** providing shelter and services, the **economic dimension** becomes a big constraint that is likely to jeopardize the whole process.

Step #4: EMPOWERMENT, FREEDOM AND OWN LIFE CONTROL

COMMUNICATION

- In some cases women are not used to think about the **agency** they have on their own life, and dreaming is also an exercise for a **creative brainstorming on their future**.
- It is very likely that women who have been enslaved have **little or no idea of the outside world** in terms of job market, immigration law, social services, school system. Inform them and discuss such aspects.

SETTING (SAFE ENVIRONMENT)

- Build or make women join a **group of survivors**. The peer dimension is very important to overcome issues and find constructive support.
- During the meetings have a room or take with you **photos of people who have radically changed their lives**. It could be very inspirational and encouraging.
- Besides the activities and counselling with you, women in this phase are expected to get in touch with other actors like school and training centres staff, employers etc. **Check that the new environment is safe** to avoid any form of further exploitation (e.g. labour rights violations).

CONNECTIONS TO OTHER SERVICES (E.G. NHS, POLICE, OTHER)

- In order to accompany women towards a full independence and autonomy, during this last phase, social workers should carefully combine different dimensions of support **to avoid dependency**.

- In this phase, the cooperation with other services and organizations can be activated to engage the woman in **training and volunteering**.
- **Inform families and the local communities** about human trafficking and sexual exploitation, offering the possibility to host a woman at home (one of the IRETI training participants was a young woman who had the chance to host a survivor at home for five years, as a **foster family**). Considered the still huge vulnerability of the women in this phase, the organization of a foster families network is very delicate and challenging.
- Give talks in schools and training to teachers. Take any occasion to spread information on the phenomenon, promoting **awareness and a prevention approach**. **Engage survivors in such activities.**

EDUCATION, VOCATIONAL TRAINING AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE WOMEN

- Encourage **volunteering and training** based on their interests and attitude.
- Help them to **use their acquired skills** and foster the **gaining of new ones** to enter the job market, build resilience and get full life control.
- Support in writing the **CV** and accompany them to **open days and job interviews**.
- **Support individual interests and goals** without offering ready-made solutions. Some social workers remarked that unfortunately, often the opportunities offered to migrant women are very much limited (e.g. cleaning services, waitress, home assistance) without encouraging new solutions and entrepreneurial ideas.
- Some professionals have remarked the importance of **financial education**, also in relation to the expectations and requests of the families in the origin country.

- Encourage and support survivors in **developing a personal project related to awareness raising** on human trafficking and sexual exploitation. Tell them they can promote information and help other women who are experiencing similar situations.

10 POINTS FOR A POLITE COMMUNICATION

A decalogue of good practices for communicators on the topic “victims of trafficking and coercive prostitution”.

Besides the considerations expressed in the previous sections in relation to the communication with victims, potential victims and survivors, the linguistic and communicative register around the topic is very diverse and controversial.

Acknowledged that it is essential to **always use words which are appropriate to the context** (institutional, youth work, students, other migrants etc.), in this last section we present some reflections based on a desk research and the feedback received throughout the project by social workers and survivors.

1. Use words such as “sex worker”, “woman practicing prostitution”, “woman in situation of prostitution” or “women in situations of trafficking” or “woman in situation of sexual exploitation”. **Do not use the word “prostitute”** since it reduces the person to one activity in her live that has a negative cultural connotations.
2. Distinguish between **“consensual prostitution”** and **“forced sex work”**. Show forced sex work as a human right violation against freedom, equality, integrity and dignity of the person and as a way of violence against women.
3. Do not refer to the **country of origin** of the woman if not strictly necessary. It should only be mentioned in case it has informative value.

4. **Johns and Clients.** Some people call patrons of sex workers johns, while others call them clients. The term john is a historical term that holds meaning for sex workers, “it’s a nameless, generic and dehumanizing word used to refer to a homogenous group of men and does not represent the individuality and diversity of the clients”. Using the term “clients” is more respectful and accurate and it reinforces the labour dimension of sex work. (source: www.nswp.org/sites/nswp.org/files/StellaInfoSheetLanguageMatters.pdf)
5. The terms **“forced prostitution”** or **“enforced prostitution”** appear in international and humanitarian conventions such as the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court but have been insufficiently understood and inconsistently applied. “Forced prostitution” refers to conditions of control over a person who is coerced by another to engage in sexual activity.
6. **Avoid stereotyping and stigmatizing the prostituted women**, avoid including images of high heels or streetlamps.
7. Employ specialized sources, **giving voice and authority to women** who exercise prostitution. Make their experiences and opinions visible (always with their consent) and give special visibility to the stories of women victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. Use information from specialized sources (information and opinions of experts and entities in the field).

8. Request **permission** to the women before spreading their identities or images. Images are part of identity right and personal data protection laws, regardless of whether they exercise prostitution voluntarily or forcedly.
9. Be careful not to use **images** of operatives or police raids where women can be identified, to avoid their criminalization.
10. **Avoid the term “baby prostitute”** when talking about underage girls (sometimes even children) who are sexually exploited. The term recalls the dimension of job rather than the one of exploitation.

CONCLUSIONS

Working with people is never easy, and working with people in a condition of vulnerability is even harder. With this Toolkit we hope to offer useful suggestions for the daily work with victims of human trafficking. Big differences are linked to the submission/not submission of a formal complaint and to the possibility or not to be hosted in a dedicated shelter providing a whole-round support by specialized staff.

In this conclusive section we want **to recall some main aspects, principles and recommendations** that emerged from an analysis of the suggestions and constraints in the work with victims of human trafficking:

- Within your organization and across other organizations and services, promote **greater knowledge** on how to recognize situations of vulnerability that could be linked to human trafficking.
- Pay great attention to the **intercultural communication** dimension. Be sure that the client is at ease with the cultural mediator and in the meeting setting. Do not assume that you have the same understanding of things.
- The **contacts with other services** represents a particularly challenging aspect for the vast majority of the social workers who have contributed to the development of the present Toolkit. Cultivate positive relations with the different actors and services, and if it is possible, offer them training opportunities to learn more about human trafficking. Share with them this toolkit!
- Propose thematic roundtables with the various stakeholders (police, NHS, street units) in order to **develop**

and possibly implement operational guidelines for mutual support (MoU).

- Don't take any decision or action without the woman's consent and do not impose your preferences because "it's your job". Respect her decisions and be sure you don't involuntarily cause harm to the person when trying to help her.
- Unfortunately, often the **opportunities** offered to migrant women are very much limited (e.g. cleaning services, waitress, home assistance) without encouraging new solutions and entrepreneurial ideas. The **economic dimension** is likely to become a big constraint that can jeopardize the whole process, especially for the women who do not join a protection program providing shelter and services. **Be encouraging, optimistic and supportive**, but do not promise things that you cannot do/give.
- Lastly, always **promote a victim-centered approach where their wishes, safety and well-being are considered the priority.**

IRETI TOOLKIT

Approaches and methodologies for the daily work combating human trafficking

	FIRST CONTACT	ESTABLISH A TRUSTED RELATIONSHIP	AWARENESS RAISING AND FORMAL COMPLAINT	FREEDOM, EMPOWERMENT AND OWN LIFE CONTROL (FOCUS ON ENTREPRENEURSHIP, IF POSSIBLE)
Communication (language, attitude etc.)				
Safe environment (setting)				
Connection to other services (NHS, police, other)				
Education, vocational training, and other activities proposed to women				
Other				

*This matrix was used during a training session with beneficiaries in Salamanca (Sep 2019)



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