

# National report

## BULGARIA

**Animus Association Foundation**



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## Abbreviations

AAF - Animus Association Foundation

CRW - Council of Refugee Women

IOM - International Organization of Migration

NCCTHB - National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings

NRM - National Referral Mechanism

SAR - State Agency for Refugees

RRC - Reception and Registration Center

THB - trafficking in human beings

VoT - victim of trafficking

UNHCR - United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The current report presents the final data from the implementation of the Tolerant project in Bulgaria, as well as the main conclusions, lessons and recommendations reached by our team in the process of this implementation.

### 1.1. About Tolerant project

The general objective of the TOLERANT project is to enhance the integration of third country national women victims of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation in the labour market in in the countries of implementation, and the EU in general, through employment support.

#### **More specifically, the project aims at:**

- Enhanced transnational cooperation and exchange on the integration of women VoT for sexual exploitation in the labour market
- Enhanced access of women VoT for sexual exploitation to integrated and gender-specific services supporting their access to employment (taking into account the specific needs of the victims of sexual exploitation) and
- Increased awareness of employers, recruiters and policy makers and/or other relevant stakeholders on the importance of facilitating access to the labour market for women VoT.

The need to implement TOLERANT project emerged from the fact that more than 16.000 victims of human trafficking were registered between 2013 and 2014, 95% of the victim being women and girls.

Following identification and meeting of the basic needs of victims of trafficking (accommodation, residence permit etc.), employment is perhaps the most important factor in the process of integration, enabling women to become financially independent and self-sufficient in the long-term. In order to address the above-mentioned challenges and deficiencies in assistance provision to women VoT in Austria, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy &



Romania, especially in terms of their integration in the labour market, the proposed action will build up on the experiences and activities of the project partners and on the need to target on trafficking of women for sexual exploitation (since very few previously funded projects have focused on this), via a victim-centred, and gender-specific approach.

Tolerant project is implemented by a consortium of 5 organizations from 4 EU countries. The main applicant for the project is the Greek organization KMOP. Partners are Animus Association Foundation (Bulgaria,) LEFO (Austria), CESIE (Italy), Differenza Donna Associazione (Italy) and AIDROM (Romania).

## **1.2. About Animus Association Foundation**

In 1997, Animus started working against trafficking in human beings and in support of the victims. In 1998, it became member of La Strada International Association for prevention of trafficking in women in Central and Eastern Europe. Since then, the organization has supported hundreds of victims of trafficking and implemented more than 60 projects on the topics of violence against women and children, including trafficking. Animus has managed to achieve a widely recognized position as an organization presenting and defending the human rights of trafficked persons in Bulgaria. The organization has always had a significant influence in building national anti-trafficking policies. It pushed forward the development of the Bulgarian Anti-trafficking Act and its implementation. In 2008 Animus initiated and took the responsibility of developing the National Mechanism for Referral and Protection of Trafficked persons.

The activities of Animus are divided in 3 main areas of work:

- Direct support to survivors of violence, including trafficking; For the last 25 years Animus Association Foundation (AAF) has proved to be the biggest and one of the most reliable providers of social services in Bulgaria. Presently the organization operates the following programmes for victims of violence and children at risk: 24-hour National Helpline;



24-hour Crisis Centre which works as Transit centre for trafficked persons; Trauma Centre for Children and Families; Centre for Reintegration, Counselling and Psychotherapy; Sofia Municipality Social Services Complex for Children and Families, including a Mother and Baby Unit.

- Advocacy and prevention. Based on the organization's practical experience in providing services to victims of trafficking, Animus participated in the establishment of the Anti-Trafficking Act and later initiated the development of a National Mechanism for Referral and Support of Trafficked persons in Bulgaria. The organization is a member of the Permanent Expert Group of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and participates in the development of the Annual National Program for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. In all its actions, Animus promotes victim centered and human rights approach.

- Training Unit through which the organization transfers its experience and model of work to other organizations and institutions.

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The current project is of particular importance as it gave Animus the opportunity to expand activities towards victims from third countries and to enrich the knowledge of the team on how to successfully apply the NRM to this group.



### 1.3. Target group

The TOLERANT project targets women from third countries who are victims of trafficking with the purpose of sexual exploitation. It foresees supporting around 50 women in Bulgaria.

At the same time, institutions in Bulgaria have not identified a single victim of trafficking (man, woman or child) among refugees, migrants and asylum seekers. Prior to the project, Animus Association Foundation's team had the opportunity to work with women from third countries who were referred to our services due to the fact they had suffered other forms of gender-based violence. The long term contact and the carefully built trusting relationship with these women allowed them to share their traumatic experience which, in many of the cases, also included being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation or being forced into a marriage (which also includes sexual violence and trafficking).

Our team faced a great challenge having to reach 50 victims of sexual exploitation from third countries. Some of the reasons for this are:

- Institutions fail to proactively identify victims of trafficking in human beings among refugees and migrants and there are still not a single victim identified.
- Victims do not want to be identified out of fear of being detained or deported; they do not want to take part in complex criminal proceedings they have no control over; they do not want to delay their journey to Western Europe as to them Bulgaria is a transit country; they are concerned to share their traumatic experience in a new and unknown environment; they are ashamed and afraid they will be excluded from their community, etc.
- Our experience shows that that only a long-time trusting relationship as well as a longer stay in a safe and secure environment (a shelter, a crisis centre) can help victims share their experience in trafficking in human beings with the purpose of sexual exploitation. Such a relationship was built with only a small number of women who were accommodated in the services provided by Animus. The beneficiaries



found it much easier to share experience when it comes to labour exploitation. The team assumes based on observed psychological symptoms, without having any other definitive proof, that some of these women suffered psychological trauma and were victims of several forms of violence and/or exploitation, including sexual exploitation, but they refuse declaring it.

- The COVID-19 pandemic hindered the personal contact and online communication had put additional challenges to building a trusting relationship and to the possibility of sharing painful experiences.
- Due to the anti-pandemic measures we did not have the opportunity to work on the territory of the Reception and Identification Centres and identify victims among the newly accommodated women, which was the initial idea.
- Involving a third person, an interpreter, turned out to be a challenge when it comes to confidentiality, especially during online service provision.
- On the other hand, our belief is that the project beneficiaries should not be put into a situation where they have to disclose and share painful experiences to get access to services. This would be retraumatizing and revictimizing to them.

In order to overcome these dilemmas, the team decided that when implementing project activities we would stick to our major principles applied to working with victims of trafficking which correspond to the principles stated by the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, namely: immediate and unconditional support, confidentiality, anonymity, consent and free integration services for all affected women aimed at preventing trafficking and re-trafficking.

Due to the lack of clear identification of victims of sexual exploitation among women from third countries, the team focused on identifying vulnerabilities that might lead to increased risk of trafficking and different forms of exploitation. Such indicators can be unemployment, not knowing Bulgarian language, lack of labour experience, complex



family situation, isolation, financial dependency and domestic violence, emotional instability, untreated psychological trauma, lack of child care by the state, lack of primary education (at least), lack of housing, lack of basic income, lack of social skills, lack of cultural adaptation to the Bulgarian society, etc. These indicators for vulnerability could be identified during assessment interviews conducted with the beneficiaries (see p. 2.8).

The project also included few Bulgarian victims accommodated in the Crisis Centre or the Mother and Baby Unit in order to prevent exclusion and discrimination against them compared to the accommodated women coming from third countries.



## 2. QUANTITATIVE DATA

### 2.1. Number of VoTs

48 women were supported through the TOLERANT project. They were either victims of trafficking or at risk of exploitation and violence.

The project was implemented during the Covid-19 crisis and this created challenges in terms of access for the target group. A significant part of the work was done on-line. Some beneficiaries, for whom this format of work was not suitable, dropped in the process of work. Online format of work required new procedures, flexibility and adaptation by both the beneficiaries and the counsellors and made the establishment of trusting relationships more difficult. As a result women were less inclined to share about traumatic experiences. Despite that we think we had the opportunity to support sufficient number of women with many trafficking-related problems or similar issues to get to know this target group and to draw conclusions and make recommendations for the work with them in Bulgaria. Our conclusions are specific for the region.

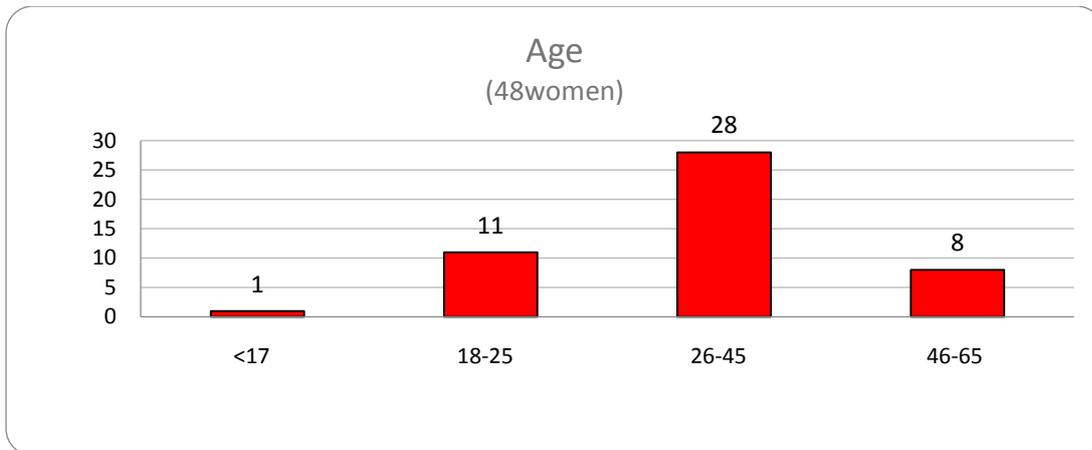
### 2.2. Age groups

As Chart 1 shows most of the assisted women fall into the age group between 26 and 45 years. The next most represented age group is between 18 and 25 and then the one between 46 and 65, but the numbers are much lower. One client was underage (17y) and was included in the program due to high risk of trafficking.

From this data we can draw the conclusion that the most affected age group are the women in their late adolescence up to their mid 40ties. This is not surprising as they are most likely to move to a different country.



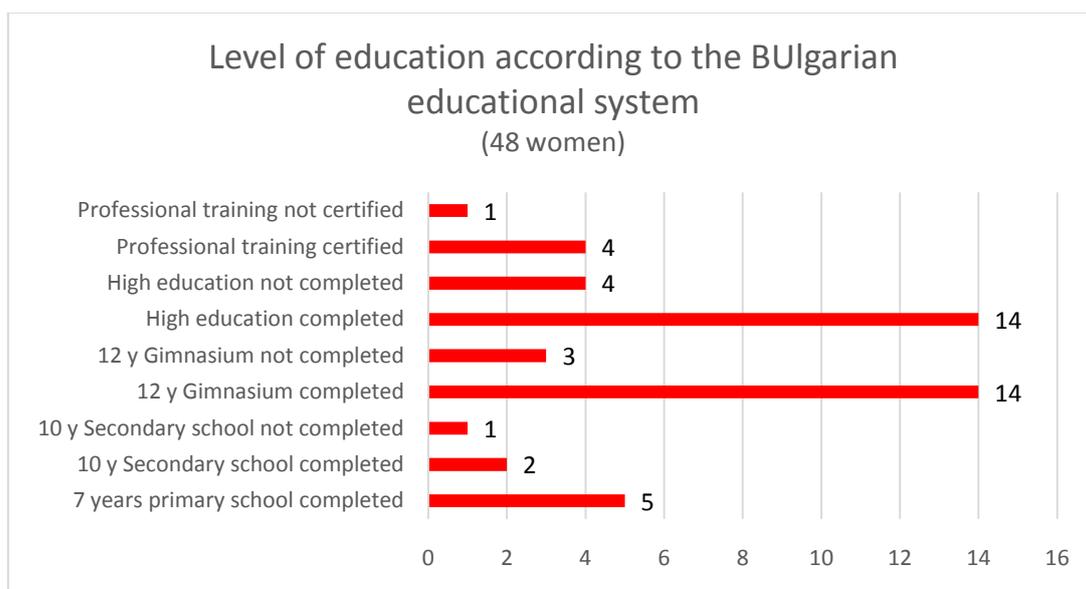
*Chart 1: Age groups*



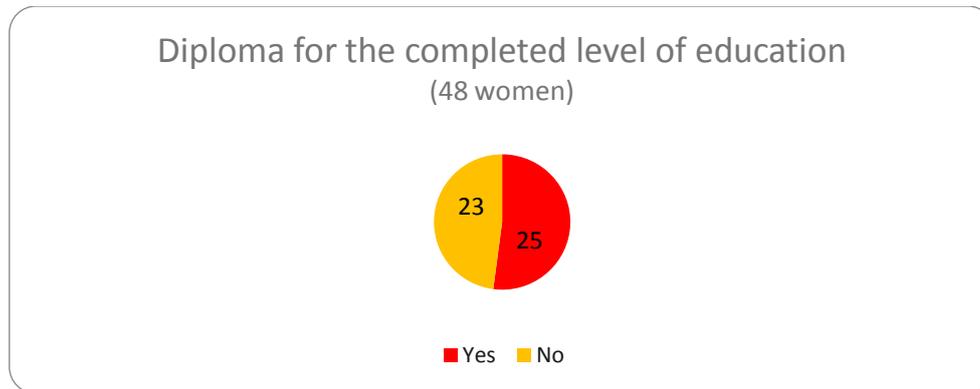
### 2.3. Years of formal education

Charts 2 and 3 show the educational levels of the assisted persons – most of them have relatively good level of education – high school (10 years of formal studies), gymnasium (12 years of formal studies). Some of them have not finished the respective course of study. The numbers of those with professional training are very small. Most of them have diplomas for the completed educational level – which is very important as it is not enough to have gone to school, but need to be able to prove it here in Bulgaria.

*Chart 2: Level of education*



*Chart 3: Diploma*



#### **2.4. Nationalities**

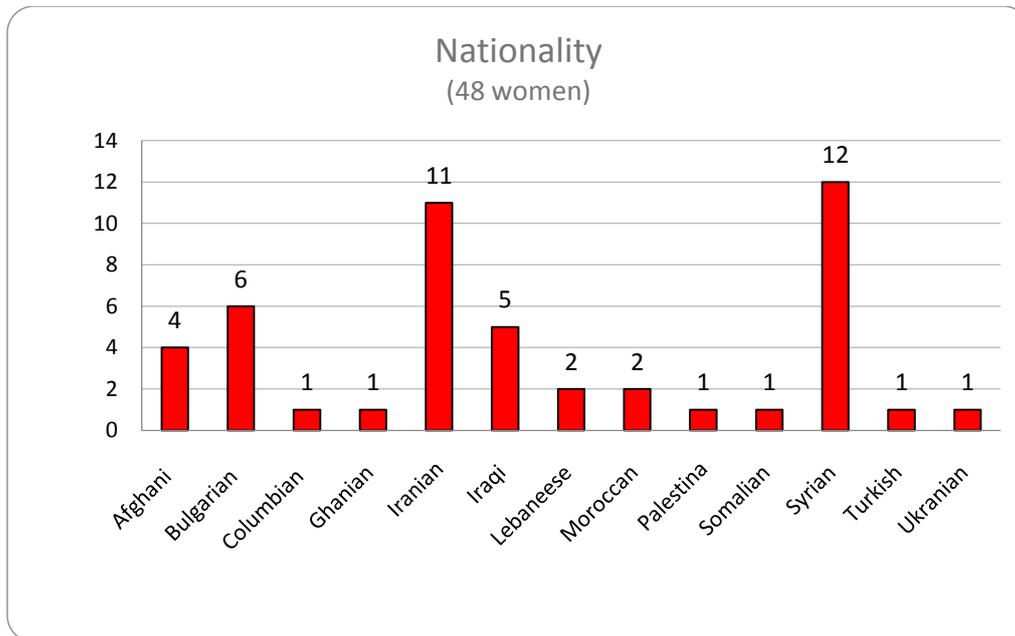
The nationalities of the assisted persons vary – the third country nationals are mostly from Iran, Syria, Afghanistan and some are from Ghana, Iraq, Lebanon, Morocco, the Ukraine, and Turkey (see *Chart 4*). The variety of countries of origin create specific issues related to cultural differences, the challenges of multicultural communication, difficulties in providing translation., etc.

Most of the women from Syria, Lebanon, Turkey are in Bulgaria with their families. This does not make them though less vulnerable – due to cultural and religious reasons they often stay at home, isolated to a large extent, without the chance to really integrate in the Bulgarian society. Especially worrisome is the situation of women who are alone. They are mostly from African nations (but not only) and are escaping from domestic or sexual violence or denigrating practices in their countries of origin. They are more vulnerable due to the lack of support systems and family ties.

Six Bulgarian victims of trafficking were also supported thanks to the TOLERANT project.



Chart 4: Nationality



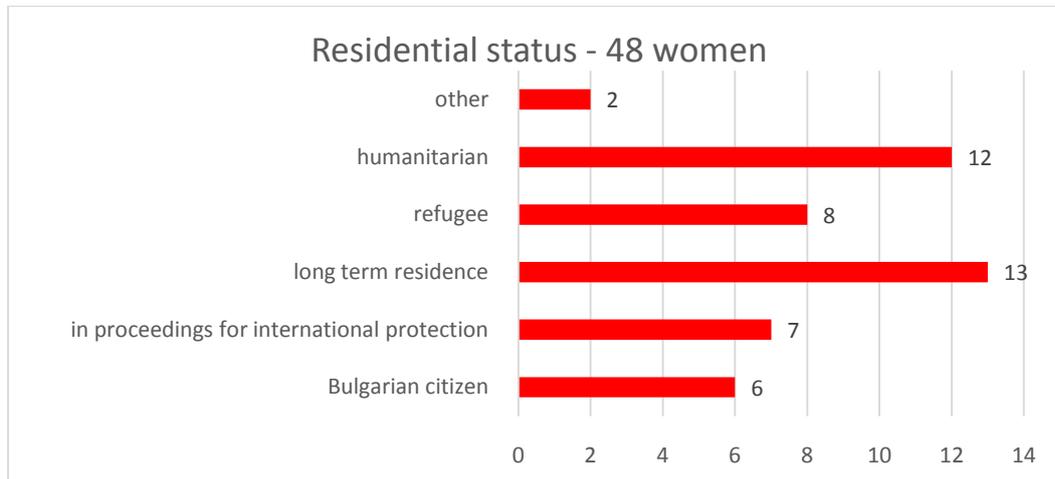
## 2.5. Legal Status

Chart 5 shows the status of the assisted persons – the third country nationals were mostly granted humanitarian status. Humanitarian status is granted by the Chairman of the State Agency for Refugees to a foreigner forced to leave or to stay outside his country of origin or residence for reasons of threat to his life, security or freedom as a result of violence arising out of situations such as armed conflicts, or who faces a threat of torture or other forms of inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Humanitarian status may also be granted for other humanitarian reasons or on other grounds stipulated in the Bulgarian legislation, as well as on the grounds indicated in the Conclusions of the Executive Committee of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Some of them have acquired the right to long term residence. Some have refugee status - refugee status in the Republic of Bulgaria is granted by the Chairman of the State Agency for Refugees to a foreigner who has a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a specific social group or political opinion and/or conviction. And some were in the process of applying for international protection – these cases needed more assistance for administrative procedures, interpretation, making of calls to institutions, etc.



During the implementation of the project no un-documented women were involved. One explanation for this is that the beneficiaries were referred mainly by the RRCs of the State Agency for Refugees and from other NGOs that work with refugees with legal status.

*Chart 5: Status*

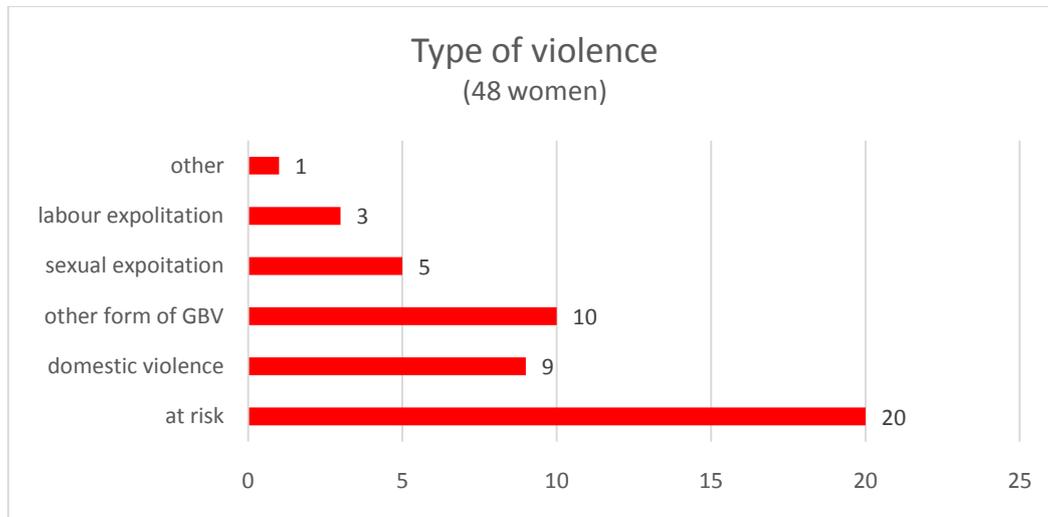


## 2.6. Type of exploitation

Most of the assisted women can be described as 1) migrant women with not clear (presumed) history of trafficking or at high risk of trafficking, with serious vulnerabilities to victimization and abuse – many women who have received counselling and support as part of the Tolerant project are at different levels of risk of trafficking due to various risk factors and vulnerabilities like traumatic history, lack of support, etc.; 2) Bulgarian victims of sexual exploitation (in Bulgaria the leading form of exploitation) who were identified in countries of destination or by the Bulgarian authorities. A significant proportion of the women are victims of domestic violence or other forms of gender based violence, which also places them at higher risk of trafficking. Labour exploitation is rarer and refers to work in unregulated sectors. Majority of the beneficiaries present multiple factors of vulnerability to THB.



*Chart 6: Type of violence*



## 2.7. Type of identification

Only 2 Bulgarian victims of trafficking were formally identified. None of the third country nationals were identified formally or non-formally as a trafficking victim when referred to the project. In the course of the work our team detected clear trafficking indicators in the stories of at least three women from third countries. They were offered accommodation and had the chance to work on their traumatic experience and to feel secure enough to share about trafficking experience and sexual exploitation.

The Bulgarian NRM distinguishes between **formal** and **informal identification**. The two types of identification are performed by different authorities and confer different rights to victims of trafficking. **Informal identification** is performed by various institutions and organizations that have made the first contact with the victim. These may be police officers, social workers, helpline counselors, volunteers, field workers, including experts at the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB). The informal identification gives victims immediate access to the support services and programs envisaged in the Bulgarian NRM such as short-term accommodation in a crisis centre or shelter, psychological support, urgent social, medical and humanitarian aid, and legal

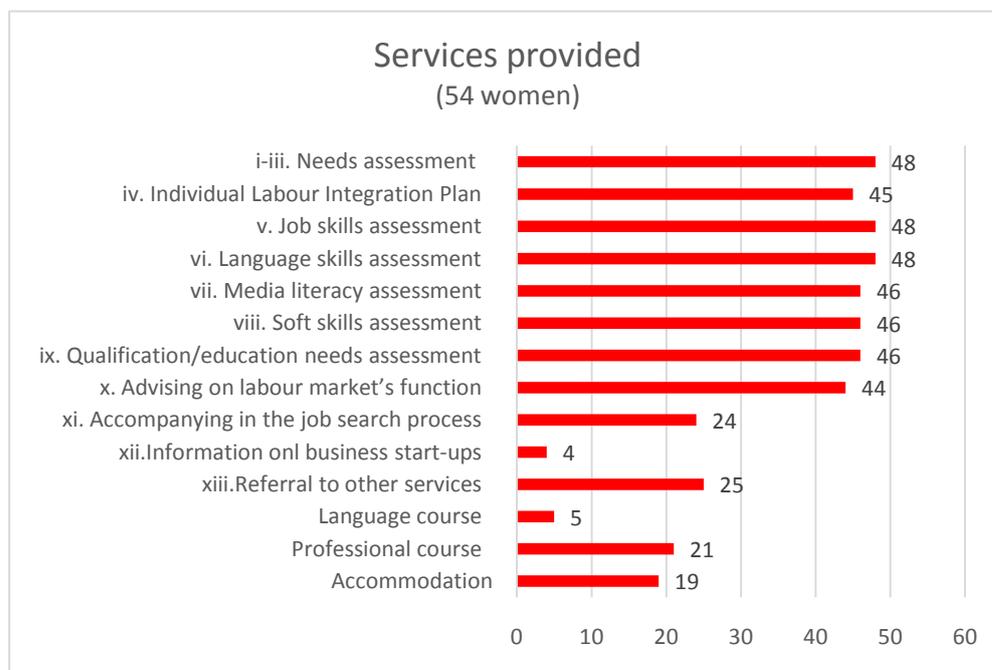


counseling. **Formal identification** is performed by the authorities conducting the pre-trial proceedings (investigating police officers, prosecutors or investigators) and is aimed at launching investigation and criminal proceedings. The interview method is mainly used for the identification of victims of trafficking.

## 2.8. Provided services (according to the Guide):

The assisted persons have received a number of different services, as is shown in Chart 7. It displays the number of cases in which the service was provided. The number of sessions varied depending on the needs of the person and the possibilities. In all the cases needs assessment was carried out, as well as job skills assessment and language skills assessment (for the foreigners). In most cases the persons received advice on job options and market specifics, labour regulations and laws in Bulgaria, media literacy assessment, educational needs assessment. A large number of the assisted persons received the chance to engage in professional courses, many were also referred to other services, and in many cases they were accompanied in the process of job search.

*Chart 7: Types of services provided*



### 3. QUALITATIVE DATA

#### 3.1. Introduction

##### 3.1.1. Availability of services

The Asylum and Refugee Act stipulates four types of special protection granted in the Republic of Bulgaria: **asylum, refugee status, humanitarian status and temporary protection**. The person seeking protection can be accommodated in one of the Reception and Registration Centers (RRCs) of SAR while they are awaiting the decision about their status and can start basic language courses (this can happen also if they are using other accommodation).

After receiving protection status, the person should apply for agreement for integration – it is signed between the person and the municipality, in which he/she plans to settle - and it should serve as a basis for a plan for integration. The signing of the agreement gives the person the right to participate in language courses with a total duration of 600 hours free of charge and a possibility to reach levels A2 or B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages and participate in orientation consultations provided by SAR aiming to introduce the person to the social system, the political system, the cultural and social characteristics of the Bulgarian society. If the person has children they should start school.

So, the process can be described as twofold: **the first stage** is the stay at the RRCs and the **second stage** – the agreement for integration when the task of integrating the migrant transfers to the municipality where they will reside. These arrangements seem good on paper, but, as our work with the beneficiaries of TOLERANT shows, in reality there are many difficulties and barriers: access to services only while on the territory of the RRC; no access to services for those who have not been accommodated in a RRC; much more limited access to services and support once the person leaves the RRC.

After leaving the RRC the options and procedures become much less clear due to lack of coordination between the institutions and lack of services and preparedness on the level of



the municipalities to work and integrate migrant populations. Much of direct work with migrants and refugees therefore, especially after they leave the RRCs (or have never been accommodated there) is done by different NGOs, who try to provide the most urgent and vital help and compensate for the deficits of the system. Thanks to TOLERANT project Animus Association became one of these NGOs. Around 90 % of the migrant women we worked with are at this second stage, after they have left the RRCs. The assessment on these cases has shown serious neglect on variety of issues related to their wellbeing and social security, like health, housing, social integration, childcare, etc. In many of TOLERANT cases a lot of social work needed to be done before labour integration became possible to address.

The services provided by Animus Association, including those developed under the TOLERANT project, are available to all persons in need. They are offered immediately after an identified or stated by the woman herself need for support, and are provided unconditionally, voluntarily and with adherence to the principles of anonymity and confidentiality.

### 3.1.2. Accessibility and challenges

Most of the women who received support reached our services via referrals from partnering organizations (Caritas Bulgaria, the Council of Refugee Women, IOM, the Red Cross) and institutions (SAR – the State Agency for Refugees and their Reception and Registration Centers). In some cases the women learn about our services from other migrants – the word-of-mouth line of information flow and may decide to try these services. In both cases the initial referral from a person they trust – from another program/service or a friend/acquaintance is important in order to build up some initial trust and readiness to reach out for help. As many of these women come from a very different context where they were not used to rely on support outside the family and from official structures/organizations this is a major step for them.



We have taken on all referred or self-referred cases after an assessment of their vulnerabilities. As none of the migrants self-identified as a trafficking victim our team started to focus on identifying vulnerability to trafficking as most of these clients fall into this category, even if they do not realize it at first. In order to encourage easier access to our services Animus became member of the Migrants Integration Task Force set up by the Bulgarian office of the UNHCR where all NGOs and state institutions engaged in the process of integration of migrant take part. In this group information about our services is shared which results in more referrals and cooperation.

In the case of third country nationals very often a serious language barrier exists. The language barrier is one of the major problems when assisting these persons. That's why we gathered a team of experienced translators/interpreters that we instructed on how to work with victims of violence and they were used throughout the project (see 3.4. Translators).

## **3.2. Methodology**

### **3.2.1. Environment during the provision of services**

The premises of the Animus Association are used for the counselling sessions; the Crisis center offers accommodation, psychological and social work. When the Covid-19 pandemic started we initiated online counselling sessions.

### **3.2.2. Case workers**

Four social workers are involved in the work on cases, as well as two translators – form Arab and Farsi. Each case is assessed and plan for work is created. After that counselling and empowerment sessions take place - their frequency depends on the specific case (how often the client can come, does she have children, does she work, does she has Internet and a device with which to access the Internet, is there a translator that is available at a certain time, etc. are all factors taken into consideration).



### 3.2.3. Services offered

The services we offer follow the **Guide for integrated service provision to support access to employment for Third Country National Women Victims of Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation**, which are:

- I. Counselling and/or informal group sessions to get to know women VoT and to build a supportive environment
- II. Individual first session(s)/ orientation session to assess the needs of the women
- III. Needs assessment: Focus on the desires, expectations and dreams of the women
- IV. Setting up the objectives of the individual integration plan together with the woman
- V. Competences assessment: Job skills
- VI. Competences assessment: Language skills
- VII. Competences assessment: media literacy
- VIII. Competences assessment: Soft skills
- IX. Competences assessment: Additional qualification and education opportunities
- X. Advising on labour market's function
- XI. Accompanying in the job search process
- XII. Information on social business start-ups or micro enterprises, including access to financing to support an entrepreneurship path
- XIII. Referral to other services.

Some women were accommodated at Animus Crisis Center and at "Mother and baby" Unit and received the whole set of available services there.

### 3.2.4. How we reached women VoT

In most cases through partnering organizations – like Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria, Caritas Sofia, IOM, RRCs of SAR. They refer certain cases to Animus.



### 3.2.5. How they reached us (if applicable)

In very few cases the clients reach to Animus themselves – usually after hearing about the organization and its services from other migrants and persons they trust.

### 3.2.6. Partners involved

Partnering organization are UNHCR, Caritas, the Council for Refugee Women, the Red Cross, IOM, UNICEF, the State Agency for Refugees.

### 3.2.7. Referrals to others

Most referrals are to the abovementioned organizations with which the partnership is two-way. Имаме насочвания към социални обучителни центрове, ОЗД, медицински заведения и др.

## 3.3. Insights from clients and service users: focus groups and interviews

For the purposes of the current report we conducted a series of meetings, interviews and focus groups with both service users and professionals. The following paragraphs will present a summary of the results and findings.

### 3.3.1. Focus group with the participants in a professional course for hairdressers

We conducted a focus group with the participants in the course for hairdresser and gathered some direct insights from the beneficiaries themselves. The focus group was carried out online, via Zoom. 9 women took part in the discussion – some of them spoke some Bulgarian and they also took on an interpreter role for the others who understand some Bulgarian, but have difficulties speaking it. Here are the main conclusions.

#### *Main priority: job opportunities*

The participants clearly emphasized on the importance of securing a job. In relation to this the chances to participate in courses for professional training and to learn the Bulgarian language are also key. When a migrant person is trying to integrate and find a job there are many obstacles – for example even when they have job skills, they may lack the specific words/terminology for some materials, procedures, etc., so they cannot practice their



profession in Bulgaria. General knowledge of Bulgarian is not enough, professional language is needed.

### *Language studies and professional practice*

The participants stated that there is a need for more hours of practice – both language practice and professional practice, in order to develop the necessary skills. The current numbers of hours appear to be insufficient for them to feel secure in the acquired skills..

Some mentioned that they do not find it so hard to get accustomed to Bulgaria as they do not find the context so very different from that of their own countries. Typically language is the most difficult part. It is not enough to learn it by hearing, language courses are needed, especially to learn how to read and write in Bulgarian.

Online learning of language according to them has proved to be especially challenging and the progress is much slower. For the proper language acquisition direct contact is a better option. Also, more translators/interpreters are needed.

*'If we know how to speak, we will be able to work' said one participant*

### *They need assistance for:*

- How to apply for and receive the documents they need for residency and work in Bulgaria.
- For language studies.
- For integration in general.

Women were satisfied that the project tackles their main needs related to labour integration.

### *Important factors for integration according to the migrant women themselves*

- Establishment of contacts and friendships in Bulgaria



- Understanding of some rules and regulations that may seem obvious to the people in Bulgaria, but are different in their countries of origin – for example, that you need a travel document in order to use the public transportation or you may be fined.
- Access to bank accounts and services, so that they can start a job and receive their payment via bank transfers.
- Assistance to understand and then initiate administrative procedures.
- The mothers with small children need assistance for kindergarten – in Sofia the access to such is limited and difficult.
- In order to settle they need help with transportation (access to it – tickets, travel cards), household expenses (heating, etc.). They think integration would be easier if there is some initial access to vouchers for food, transportation, etc.
- One of their concerns is that they do not have enough information about medical insurances and what are the procedures for them in order to cover them. Also, there are many questions related to social assistance that are not clarified – for example, does a woman who has become a widow recently and has small children have access to some sort of financial aid.

Significant part of supporting beneficiaries within the project was focused on this type of practical issues directly related to their social security.

### 3.3.2. Interview with M. S., a migrant woman from Moroccan origin accommodated at the Crisis Center

This woman has only used the services of the Animus Association and is in the process of organizing her return to the Netherlands – this woman is of Moroccan origin but has family and support system in the Netherlands so she was in the process of organizing her and her children's travel to this country after becoming a victim of violence in Bulgaria. She received support for administrative procedures, for contacting the embassy, for the issuing of a birth certificate and other documents for her small toddler, as well as counselling for her emotional trauma. She can communicate in English with some of the staff, but not with the other clients in the center.



## *Main priority*

As this client had escaped a situation of violence in a foreign country (Bulgaria) she pointed out shelter and safety as the most important thing for people in situation of violence or trafficking or risk of trafficking is to have a safe place to stay and someone to talk to about their traumatic experiences.

## *Language barrier*

The language barrier is an especially big challenge – even more so when the person is traumatized and needs more human contact and support. In the initial period of emotional crisis the need to express and verbalize the experience is typically greater, the counselling sessions are not enough and the person wants to talk to other people as well – for example other women in the crisis centre. But when they come from different countries this is not possible and communication remains nonverbal or through Google translate and other such apps. This is not enough. The woman underlined the importance of regular communication for the recovery of traumatized people: the use of sign language or basic common words *‘is never enough to express what is inside you’*. Also, when communication remains on this basic level it is very hard to address more difficult and complicated topics, which also require more time, but they need to be addressed as *‘life is not only about laughing and smiling’*.

What this woman shared with us highlights two important aspects of the integration process for victims of violence and trafficking – being able to address and trauma and heal and being able to communicate, use a common language in order to overcome the negative emotions and to integrate for the surroundings – even if she will not stay in Bulgaria. She will seek options and integration elsewhere, but those things remain important for her.



### 3.3.3. Interview with O. A., a migrant woman from Lebanon accommodated at the Crisis Center

This particular woman has used the services of three NGOs – CRW, Caritas and Animus. She communicates in Arab with the help of a translator for her sessions and with Google translate for everyday conversations.

#### *Main priority*

Language acquisition as well as studying and understanding the culture and context of the country are her main priorities. She explained that she had been in Bulgaria for two years, but living closed in an apartment and under the control of her abuser and so isolated that she did not know anything about Bulgaria. Now she hopes to learn more. Language is also necessary in order to start work – she currently hopes to take part in a professional course for tailors, so that she can find a job afterwards. Finding a job will allow her to start building up a life, not to remain closed and isolated, she said.

#### *Her recommendations to professionals working with migrant women and victims:*

- To know how to establish first contact with the persons in need who are foreigners
- To provide translators and help with the language
- To always take into consideration the gender of the counsellor/social worker – she emphasized how for her and many women it would be impossible to share the same things with a man as she would with a woman. For example, when she first contacted the CRW both the social worker on the case and the translator that was called were men, so it was difficult for her to talk. But they did ask her if she preferred to talk to a woman and this was provided afterwards. But in some cases the professionals may not take this into consideration.
- To understand the typical experiences and problems of a refugee or a migrant in order to offer the proper help.



### 3.4. Main challenges

To assess the challenges in labour integration from the point of view of professionals several meetings, interviews and focus groups were conducted with social workers and consultants working at 1) the Animus Crisis Center (3 professionals – two social workers and the coordinator), 2) the Complex for Social Services/Mother and Baby Unit (the director of the programs) and 3) the Council of Refugee Women as a main partner of Animus in the reintegration work (2 social workers). The main findings and conclusions are summarized below.

#### *Access to services*

The access to services and support options depends in a large degree on the distinction between refugee and immigrant. The refugees may go to the refugee centers where they have direct access to variety services. Immigrants do not go to these centers and remain excluded from support programs and services. The social workers from the Animus crisis center gave an example of a woman of Afghan origin who had spent over five years in Bulgaria without any access to services even though she had two children with disabilities. In such cases the lack of awareness and readiness to reach out to social programs is a serious obstacle. Such persons may not even know about these options. This kind of social isolation and lack a support creates serious risks of abuse and exploitation including human trafficking.

We can draw the conclusion that in Bulgaria usually the migrants who need assistance learn about the available services from other migrant persons - people who they trust. Otherwise they may not even realize that such options exist. That's why, as was stated above, the ***referrals from both our partnering organizations and other migrants*** who have already used our services are of key importance for our work and the accessibility of our services.

In general, the refugee centers offer access to services but outside them this access may often cease. After migrants leave the center they often have to fend for themselves without many possibilities and with lack of support. The temporary documents that they have are



for a period of three months - this way it is almost impossible to rent a room or sign a job contract. If they receive refugee status they have to leave the center in two weeks – in this short time they have to get identity cards, but often cannot as a permanent address is required. This vicious circle pushes many women look for job options in less regulated or unregulated sectors, including the grey economy, which places them at risk of exploitation. The State agency for refugees is responsible for some aspects of integration, but 1) many people remain outside their centers and 2) there is no transition period after leaving such a center. To a large extent NGOs try to fill the existing gaps in services and programs gaps but integration is very hard this way. The NGOs are engaged in many aspects of support and integration, but this depends on their funding and projects. For example, there is limited funding for hostels, but this is temporary and only for crisis cases. Some of the women we assisted within TOLERANT project need at least temporary accommodation.

### *Case complexity*

Most of the cases are very difficult and complex in their social dimension and our team worked in partnership with other service providers. We consider integration as a complex process that requires holistic approach. UNHRC has set a **Working Group on Integration of Beneficiaries of International Protection** with the aim to encourage closer cooperation between relevant actors. As member of this group Animus established an image of an organization that supports migrant and refugee women who are victims or at risk of violence and trafficking. The work of this group has resulted in generally better cooperation. For example currently if a vulnerable woman accommodated at a Reception and registration center is about to receive some form of legal status in Bulgaria and will have to leave the center, the State Agency for Refugees informs in advance UNHCR (a month earlier), so that the case can be discussed within the work and group and organizations like ours can offer support.

Our work is realized in close cooperation with the Council for Refugee Women, the Red Cross, Caritas, IOM – each organization contributes in different ways.



All of the women included in the project were victims of multiple forms of discrimination (because of their gender, nationality, etc.) and required intensive social work in order to cope with issues related to their social stability – like health, living arrangements, childcare, domestic violence, etc.

### *Lack of job opportunities*

It was well known from the beginning of the TOLERANT project that job opportunities for refugees and migrants in Bulgaria are limited and sparse. At this moment this situation has not changed, it may even have worsened due to COVID-19. Now, at the end of the project, both clients and professionals continue to state how hard it is for migrants to find a job – this is usually recognized as the main challenge for our clients as well. Few employers in Bulgaria are likely to hire a migrant person – the reasons are various, but mainly due to stigma, prejudices, negative attitudes, unrealistic expectations but also difficulties related to the lack of valid documents required for the job. The result is that many of those migrant women who actually work do so in the so called *grey economy* (without regular contracts and payments by hand, not through bank transfers, therefore without taxes and social security contributions) risking exploitation.

Many migrant and refugee women arrive in Bulgaria without diplomas and other documents that prove educational status or professional qualifications. That means most job options are closed to them and they can rely on very low-skill jobs or they may be employed in some cases by their compatriots who have settled in Bulgaria long time ago. Even when they do have some documents proving their education and professional skills, they lack the language skills needed for many jobs – this, for example, was discussed at length in the focus groups.

Even if they find a job there are many document-related issues: while they await the determination of their status they only have a temporary identity document with which they cannot for example open a bank account. Currently, according to the representatives of the Council of Refugee Women, it is even harder than before to open such an account (even for person who have worked for international organizations). Such difficulties with the banks are



due to the legal acts against money laundering. Another complication arises from the fact that all bank documents in Bulgaria have to be in Bulgarian.

A positive example here can be given with a case from the Animus Crisis center - a single mother from Ghana, who was a victim of several forms of gender based violence, was connected to an employer who is socially engaged and offered work in a factory and an apartment at a very low rent. The employer and staff have created a kind of support system for the woman and contact the Center regularly. But they have had negative experience before as some other women also received such help but then left the job without warning due to trauma, lack of work experience and habits, etc.

The other problem is that such arrangements are temporary and cannot be guaranteed and reproduced for other persons in need.

Job and the place to live remain the main factors for successful integration – according to both clients and professionals.

### *Translators/interpreters*

The situation with translators is very complicated – first of all, there are very limited number of translators, and also their job is extremely difficult and they may not be prepared for all aspects of it. Their services are needed in so many occasions that they literally jump from meeting to meeting, without rest in between. This may leave them not only tired, but mentally exhausted as they often hear very traumatic stories and recollections from the refugees. It is well known in the psychological literature that being exposed to painful retellings of somebody's experience creates secondary (vicarious) traumatisation –translators are often not aware of this phenomenon or trained in ways of self-care in order to avoid burnout. We have tried to address these challenges by working with a selected number of translators and we have offered them instructions about the specific groups of clients we are working with and debriefing after difficult sessions. Some people prove not to be suitable for this aspect of the job – the sensitivity to the target group – or the stress has been overwhelming to them. We acknowledge these limitations and have stopped working with some of the interpreters for such reasons.



As was shared by a social workers participating in the TOLERANT project, the translation/interpretation itself creates many difficulties - it is not completely clear how the translator hears something and how they reproduce it in the other language. The topics are delicate but even more is lost in the translation. The counselors and social workers choose carefully their words, but are not aware about the connotations in the other language, the way to speak about a painful and sensitive topic, etc.

Another difficulty arises from the fact that good translators are very busy and it is hard to coordinate the meetings so that they can be convenient for both the women and the interpreters. Some problems arise also from confidentiality issues – the translators in Sofia are few and are well-known and used in different situations, but it is harder for the women to share about their traumatic experiences if they know the translator from before.

A good practice that can make matter easier is to use translators who are also trained mediators. For example one of the translators with who the Crisis center works is a cultural mediator in the Red Cross, the other - in IOM. Thus they serve in a way as representatives of these organizations and may offer additional ideas for help and services.

### *Homelessness*

More and more migrants and refugees have hardships in finding places to stay – the situation is more difficult because of COVID-19. Many social programs and services do not accommodate clients or do so at limited capacity. There is lack of places in crisis centres, shelters, social services.

Renting a place to stay is made complicated again by documentation issues – you need a permanent address in Bulgaria to sign such contracts and most migrants do not an address – even if they receive refugee status. For it they need the permission of a home owner who agrees officially that someone will be registered at their address. Few people are likely to give



such permission. There is apparently a 'black market' for address registrations where people pay to be registered, but this is another risky arrangement which exposes them to more risks.

In this regard it is a serious advantage of the Animus Association that we have a Crisis Center that can offer accommodation to women victims of trafficking and violence. Some of them stayed at the Center for quite a long time, as the process of integration is not quick and there is a serious need for long term support, including in terms of shelter. Until the migrant persons find a job they cannot pay for accommodation and have to rely on programs and services.

### *Access to medical care*

More limited and hard access to medical care and social services, including on issues related to Covid-19. Many services are currently accessible only through the telephone.

The State Agency for Refugees covers the medical insurance of those who have applied for special protection under the Law on Asylum and Refugees and if they are residing in their centers (RRCs). In such cases some medications can also be covered.

Both the representatives of our Crisis center and of the Council for Refugee Women explained that this process is very slow and in many cases the approval to cover medications comes too late – for example a pregnant woman may have to wait for two month for approval of medical exams and in the end Animus (and other organizations) use emergency funds to cover the costs or the medical insurances. But this means that such funds need to be available – at least for urgent situations.

Those who receive refugee status have to cover their medical insurances – but most of them cannot because they do not work. This creates a number of problems – without medical insurances they can access only emergency care, as is typical around the world. Currently this raises questions around Covid-19 vaccination – in Bulgaria all medically insured should have access, but it is not yet clear what will happen with people without such coverage – including migrant populations.



### *Social assistance*

Migrants do not have access to social benefits – for example single mothers in Bulgaria with low income can receive financial aid for heating through the winter season, but refugee and migrant women cannot. This was also an issue discussed in the focus group with the participants in the hairdresser's course. Some of them shared how they have directly met with these obstacles.

Some additional problems arise from the refusal of the Social Assistance Directorates to pay child benefits to refugee and migrant families, especially those from Syria and Afghanistan – this is a right provided to these families by the Law on Asylum and Refugees, but it is not synchronized with the Social Assistance Act and the Directorates follow the latter and they also work on the premise that there is no mutual agreement on social assistance between Bulgaria and Afghanistan and Bulgaria and Syria. So they do not pay the child benefits. The problem has led to legal proceedings in some cases and even a Social Assistance Directorate has been fined for such refusal, but the problem persists. Currently the Helsinki Committee gathers data on such cases and plans legal actions.

### *Covid -19 and the challenges it created*

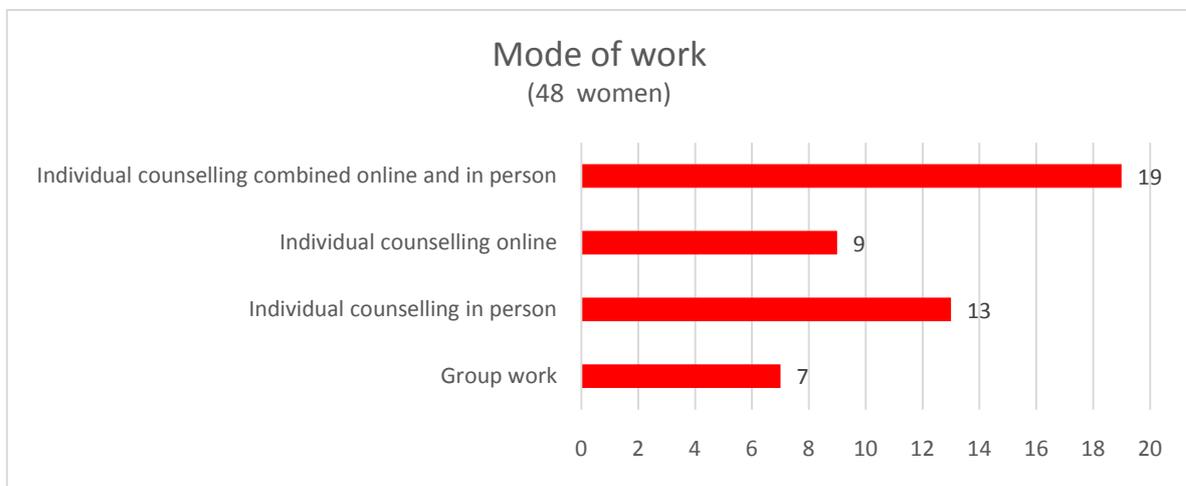
We need to also focus on the specific additional difficulties and challenges created for this vulnerable group by the pandemic. Many aspects of the work were affected negatively or became harder. First of all, many sessions (or all sessions at certain times) needed to be carried out online. This makes the communication in general and the build-up of trust more difficult. Also, not all migrant women have devices with which to access the Internet (or cannot pay for Internet access) – all this impacts negatively their children as well, who may not be able to participate in distant learning. The coordination with the interpreters is even harder under these conditions – for the purpose of social distancing they are often available through telephone which makes the process very complicated, with longer waiting times and risks of more breaks-up and noise in the communication, due to both technical issues and psychological factors. It is important to emphasize that the situation is better (according to our interviews



and experience) if initial trust was already established and then the communication transformed to online/distant. But if work with a new client is initiated in this manner the build-up of trust is much harder.

Chart 9 shows how much of the work was carried out online with all the above mentioned issues – difficulty in building up trust, lack of devices and regular Internet connection, difficulty in engaging the interpreter via telephone. That’s why some of the beneficiaries dropped from the process earlier than planned.

*Chart 9: Modes of work*



Other issues created by Covid-19 affected the employment possibilities as mentioned above. Many businesses had to stop working and to lay down people, especially in the hospitality sector and restaurants sector (where many migrant work as both sectors offer low-skill position in kitchens or restaurants that serve ethnic cuisine). It is also less likely for these sectors to hire new staff, so the process of job search is even harder currently.

### *Gender based violence issues*

We need to pay some attention to other issue that arise from cultural and religious specifics and practices and that affect the work with migrants. Many women normalize the violence, including domestic violence, and due to this normalization it can take more drastic forms in migrant communities. On the other hand, there is some limiting effect on the violence due to



the Bulgarian context and the realization that there is lower societal tolerance towards acts of violence.

The cases of violence and abuse against migrant and refugee may often go unreported. Some communities follow their customs and part of them is that violence within the family is a family issue and should be dealt with in the family – often by denying it, minimizing it, but not by sharing it with other people outside the family. Such sharing is viewed as shameful and against the family honour. The family has a central position, including in relation to such matters. Perceived threats to family honour may even lead to killings. This is even more pronounced in the cases of sexual violence or trafficking which are considered taboo topics.

Other problems that have cultural roots are early marriages and marriages among relatives which frequently lead to the birth of children with disabilities – in combination with a lack of readiness to seek for support and specialized services leads to even more complications and difficult integration. Forced marriages and the selling of brides are cultural phenomena who bear all the signs of human trafficking. Our team has worked with such cases as well.

As was already mentioned in this report, none of the migrant women from third countries self-identified as a victim of trafficking or other GBV – not because none of them were such victims, but mostly due to normalization of violence and coercion and to shame to reveal such problems to ‘outsiders’ – people from institutions, programs, services.

### *Mental health issues*

Mental health is a significant factor of vulnerability that is often neglected due to cultural attitudes. It is not viewed as an aspect that requires special care, mental health issues may be minimized or explained as something that the person needs to deal with by themselves. Therefore in many cases the people do not receive any help and support. Here the country of origin is very important and many differences exist – for example women from Iran are more likely to seek help for their mental health in comparison with women from Afghanistan.



Our experience clearly points out that refugees, trafficking survivors – usually they are in a constant crisis – they have no security, no idea what they will do in the future, no support system. In many cases no mental health care is provided. In the RRCs there are many suicide attempts, but because minimum survival is the current priority these aspects of their wellbeing are neglected. Also, the lack of language knowledge is a serious barrier for the provision of mental health services.

### 3.5. Recommendations and lessons learned

#### *Specific observations for Bulgaria*

In Bulgaria, the project was implemented in circumstances that seriously hindered access to victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation from third countries. Most of these circumstances exist beyond the project time frame and relate to problems that have not been solved over the years, although they have been repeatedly pointed out by civil society organizations.

- Bulgaria remains mostly a **transit country** for refugees and asylum seekers and very few of them seek integration in the country – most of them try to continue on their route to other European countries.
- There is a huge disproportion between men and women who arrive in Bulgaria – only about 1/6 are women. This **gender profile** creates specific gendered vulnerabilities that can lead to victimization and risk of trafficking and require timely support and services.
- There are **no officially identified** (no formal identification) trafficked women who are migrants. The reasons for this are complex: a) authorities are not proactive in the identification of victims; b) the interactions with migrants are typically very short and there is no time to build up trust (mostly due to language barriers, lack of preparation, etc.); c) the VoT themselves often do not want to be identified because they do not want to be involved in investigations and prosecution as many of them



fear other problems like deportation, family separation, not being able to continue on their way to another country. Also they feel they have no control on how they will be treated during the criminal proceedings.

- The Covid-19 pandemic deepened the vulnerabilities of the migrant women even more and became another factor that places them at higher risk of abuse, including trafficking.

### *Recommendations*

- The situation of migrant populations and respectively the situation of victims of trafficking from third countries is rather complex. Well-known anti-trafficking frame does not fit well to their realities. In most of the cases we are working in the zone between anti-trafficking and migration/asylum. This is particularly visible while the persons are in transit.
- Another important aspect of the work in Bulgaria stems from difficulties related to identification. For most migrant women we will never know if they are victims of trafficking. Therefore **identification of vulnerabilities to trafficking is more relevant** rather than identification of trafficking experience (as required the trafficking definition used for criminal proceedings). All vulnerable women need to be involved in integration activities, not just those that we know for sure are victims of trafficking. We have to be careful not to follow narrow definitions that may lead to further exclusion and victimization. Instead in countries like Bulgaria much of the focus should fall on integration as key factor of prevention – preventing further risk and exploitation in the EU.
- Integration is a complex process and requires a constant balance between desires and opportunities. Integration in context of the region and in the complex context of migration shall be considered in a broader sense – not just as integration in Bulgaria (or any country of stay), but in the EU as a whole. Fostering integration in the EU as a whole and providing vulnerable women more opportunities should be our goal as



most of the women state that they will continue their journey to other destination countries in EU.

- We can conclude from our work and the interviews with professionals that ***holistic state politics about integration*** are needed to prevent trafficking. Many of the current problems arise from the fragmentation of the work and the lack of connection between different institutions (SAR, municipalities, and social system) responsible for the process of integration, which do not follow common strategies, standards and algorithms of work. Safety, access to services, to language and professional training should be prioritized and realized in a manner that takes into consideration the needs and specifics of the migrant populations.
- The language barrier and the preparation and training of interpreters remains a serious issue that needs special attention.
- Another problem is the lack of sustainability of many efforts. Often work is partial, project-bound. The cooperation among programs, institutions and organization in the non-governmental sector is not so well developed and needs to be strengthened.
- A detailed, step by step methodology like the one provided by TOLERANT Guide could be very helpful in the process of integration. It needs to determine further who is responsible for what.
- There is a serious lack of research on the mental and psychological state of refugees, migrants, trafficking victims among them. Professionals and experts are not culturally sensitive and do not realize what is like to be a refugee, to have to abandon everything and go to a completely different country. Due to suspicions toward foreigners and focus on more urgent survival needs this aspect is often neglected. The mental functioning of the individuals, the trauma in the context of migration need to be studied in more depth. Professionals are not always aware of these aspects. Often the work remains on superficial level – it is about basic survival and on temporary basis.



- Cultural specifics, differences in customs, in communication patterns are not studied enough as well. They also need additional focus – this can be even done as part of academic research and specific allocation of funds and projects.
- There is a need of training of more professionals on how to work with migrants and trafficking victims. These groups and their needs and specific still remain generally unaddressed - very few people have received special training on how to work with them. Additionally, training is needed on how to connect the Social protection system and the Migration and refugee system for the benefit of people in need from third countries.

