

EU strategy on combating trafficking in human beings

EIGE's Contribution to the Call for Evidence

The European Institute for Gender Equality (hereafter referred to as 'EIGE') is a decentralised agency of the European Union, established to contribute to and strengthen the promotion of gender equality, including gender mainstreaming in EU policies and the resulting national policies by providing technical assistance to EU institutions, in particular the European Commission, and the authorities of the Member States². The Agency also aims to raise EU citizens' awareness of gender equality. EIGE has become the knowledge centre and the primary source for information on gender equality in the European Union. EIGE contributes to making the European Union become a Union of Equality, where women and men, girls and boys in all their diversity are free to pursue their chosen path in life, have equal opportunities to thrive, and can equally participate in and lead our societies.

EIGE provides independent evidence-based expertise to the EU and Member States to promote gender equality, eliminate gender-based discrimination and combat gender-based violence. EIGE welcomes the development of a new EU strategy on combating trafficking in human beings 2026-2030, and the opportunity to provide input into the call for evidence. As the European Union Agency for gender equality, EIGE has published reports on key aspects of violence against women, including trafficking in human beings. Of particular relevance are EIGE's report and upcoming research on [gender-based violence in the context of migration](#), joint report with Eurojust on [cross-border protections for victims of gender-based violence](#); research on [cyber violence and abuse](#); and analysis of the [Anti-Trafficking and Victims' Rights Directives](#) from a gender perspective.

Trafficking in human beings (THB) remains a serious violation of fundamental rights and a persistent form of gender-based violence, disproportionately affecting women and girls. EIGE has consistently highlighted how THB, especially for sexual exploitation, is fundamentally rooted in gender inequality and must be understood and addressed as part of the continuum

¹ Established by the European Parliament and of the Council Regulation (EC) No 1922/2006 of 20 December 2006 (OJ L 403/9 of 30.12.2006).

² Article 2, Idem 2



of gender-based violence. Women and girls are the primary victims of THB, making up 63% of all registered victims in the EU in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025a). Women and girls also comprise the overwhelming majority of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation; with 3822 female victims compared to 263 male victims recorded in 2023 (Eurostat, 2025b). At the same time, EIGE notes that gender norms also shape other forms of trafficking, including labour exploitation and forced criminality which more frequently affect men and boys, underscoring the relevance of a gender-sensitive approach across all forms of trafficking.

Building on EIGE's research, the 2021-2025 EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings, the revised Anti-Trafficking Directive and other relevant legislation and policy, this contribution highlights priority areas where a gender-responsive and victim-centred approach should be further strengthened in the forthcoming strategy. EIGE further emphasises the importance of systematically applying gender mainstreaming principles across all anti-trafficking policies and measures, supported by robust gender equality institutional mechanisms. EIGE's research shows that gender equality bodies are routinely not consulted on policy/legislation across the EU and that tools to support gender mainstreaming are unevenly implemented (EIGE, 2025a; EIGE, 2025b). Strengthening the use of gender mainstreaming principles and institutional mechanisms for gender equality are essential to ensuring a gender-responsive Strategy and implementation.

From EIGE's perspective, the 2021-2025 EU Strategy on Combatting Trafficking in Human Beings has contributed to strengthening the EU anti-trafficking legal and policy framework, improved recognition of THB as a form of gender-based violence, and increased attention to victim protection and data collection. However, implementation challenges remain, particularly in terms of reducing demand for trafficking for sexual exploitation; ensuring early and consistent identification of victims; the provision of adequate, gender-responsive services; training for frontline professionals; and policy and stakeholder coordination. These are the core areas on which this submission consequently focuses.

Addressing the demand for trafficking in human beings for sexual exploitation

Trafficking for sexual exploitation remains the most prevalent form of trafficking in the EU and disproportionately affects women and girls. This crime is driven by a persistent demand for prostitution and sexual abuse of women and girls, and EIGE has consistently highlighted the links between this crime and gender inequality, gender-based violence, and social norms tolerating exploitation and abuse of women and girls. EIGE also recalls findings from the European Commission fifth progress report on combating trafficking, which identifies trafficking as the second most widespread illicit economy globally, driven by persistent demand, low risk levels in the form of impunity for perpetrators, and growing profits (European Commission, 2025). Reducing demand is therefore essential to effective prevention. In this context, EIGE welcomes measures introduced in the Anti-Trafficking Directive which oblige Member States to criminalise the knowing use of services provided by victims and stresses the need to ensure the consistent implementation and enforcement of

these measures across all EU Member States. Addressing demand also means dismantling the profits and business model that drive trafficking and EIGE encourages stronger financial investigations and confiscation of criminal proceeds which remain critical to disrupting trafficking networks.

The revised Anti-Trafficking Directive and Directive (EU) 2024/1385 establish that forced marriage is both a form of exploitation for trafficking and a criminal offence linked to violence against women. The new EU strategy on combating trafficking must build on these instruments by pursuing harmonised definitions, coordinated victim-identification frameworks, and robust cross-border cooperation. Prioritising gender-specific indicators and policy coherence will strengthen prevention, data collection, and monitoring of forced marriage as both a harmful practice and a trafficking offence.

Traffickers are increasingly using online platforms to advertise and recruit for sexual exploitation (European Commission, 2025). EIGE's research on cyberviolence (EIGE, 2024a) highlights the existing gaps in tools and methods of online platforms to prevent and detect exploitation, and the need to engage with and build the capacity of these platforms to identify and disrupt exploitation online. EIGE stresses that demand-reduction measures must be accompanied by awareness-raising and education to dismantle the societal norms that sustain sexual exploitation and gender-based violence.

Strengthening the identification of victims of trafficking, particularly marginalised victims

Early identification is essential to ensuring trafficking victims' access to protection and support, yet many remain undetected, particularly migrant women, children, and those exploited in hidden or informal settings. Recent EU trafficking data indicate a shift towards a higher proportion of non-EU national victims, reflecting the impact of global crises, including armed conflicts at the EU's borders (Eurostat, 2025b). EIGE's 2025 study on gender-based violence in the context of migration highlights persistent gaps across Member States in the identification of gender-based violence, including trafficking within migration and reception systems. Council conclusions (Council, 2025) similarly highlight the increased risk of human trafficking among migrants and persons seeking international protection. Within this context, EIGE stresses the need for prevention and identification measures to be more systematically embedded into broader policy responses, including migration management, asylum systems, humanitarian assistance, crisis and conflict responses (Yonkova et al., 2017). The Strategy should explicitly recognise the increased risk of trafficking faced by women and girls in crisis contexts, and promote preventive actions, such as targeted training for frontline personnel and early risk-identification mechanisms. In support of the objectives of the new Strategy, EIGE will develop in 2026 practical guidance and a checklist to support the early identification of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation, in asylum and reception contexts. This work could contribute to strengthening early identification and referral pathways for trafficking victims, particularly women and girls, within migration and asylum systems.

EIGE's research also highlights persistent barriers to self-identification of GBV victims (EIGE, 2024b), including fear and lack of trust in authorities which are often compounded for migrants with irregular status (EIGE, 2025c). The new Strategy should therefore place greater emphasis on proactive identification measures, including targeted outreach in sectors known to present high risks of exploitation, such as prostitution and domestic work. Particular attention should also be given to the identification of young women and girls recruited and controlled through the 'lover-boy method', which remains the most common method of recruitment for trafficking for sexual exploitation (European Commission, 2025).

In developing the new Strategy, further attention is needed to emerging and/or increasing forms of exploitation, including exploitative surrogacy, forced and sham marriages, and the increasing shift towards online sexual exploitation. This should include enhanced data collection, support for research on these issues, targeted training for frontline professionals to identify victims and law enforcement to prosecute these crimes, and consideration of legal penalties.

Reinforcing the support and the assistance for victims

EIGE emphasises the need for accessible, adequate and gender-responsive support services for all victims of trafficking, irrespective of residence status. EIGE's research on migration highlights persistent gaps in access to support and protection for migrant women, including barriers linked to migration status. EIGE urges attention to ensuring that the requirements of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) are met – namely, that all victims of violence regardless of residence status have access to basic services such as safe accommodation and healthcare; gender-sensitive procedures such as gender choice of interview and recognition of gender-specific harms; and autonomous residence permits.

Victims of trafficking, especially those subjected to sexual exploitation, often experience severe physical and psychological trauma and require specialised, trauma-informed support delivered by trained services in line with Directive (EU) 2024/1385 (European Commission, 2025). According to preliminary findings of EIGE's project on [Mapping support services for victims of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in the EU-27](#), some Member States have developed gender-responsive support measures for women and children trafficking victims including protocols, referrals, frontline training and specialised helplines and shelters. Yet availability remains uneven across the EU. The Strategy should encourage the expansion and consistent provision of specialised services.

In addition to gender and immigration status, EIGE urges adequate attention and measures to support victims who experience other intersecting forms of discrimination such as poverty, ethnicity, age, and disability. EIGE notes the Council conclusions that persons seeking international protection, including women and children, are facing various risks of exploitation due to economic hardship and limited integration (Council, 2025) and highlights the need for economic and social inclusion programmes to safeguard these groups from exploitation. EIGE notes that although several Member States have strengthened access to compensation for

victims, obstacles and low award amounts persist. Therefore, EIGE stresses the need for measures to support access to adequate compensation for all victims of trafficking irrespective of residence status, including state compensation funds, early access to legal advice, representation and intervention, standards for ensuring compensation, and explicit and adequate recognition of psychological harm.

Improving data collection and training

The collection of regular, harmonised and disaggregated data is essential to understand trends, allocate resources and monitor progress. At a minimum data should be disaggregated by sex, age, form of exploitation, relationship between victim and perpetrator, and the provision of support services. Efforts should be made towards the inclusion of other parameters in data collection such as disability, ethnicity, immigration status and socioeconomic status. Under Article 44 of the Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, EIGE has been tasked with supporting Member States in administrative data-gathering, including through the establishment of common standards. EIGE also has extensive experience in developing indicators to enhance data collection on gender-based violence. In this context, EIGE stands ready to support the objectives of the new Strategy by contributing expertise on gender-sensitive data collection, including enhancing the gender-sensitive measurement of trafficking, and supporting alignment between trafficking data and gender-based violence frameworks. EIGE highlights the need for data and research to fill key gaps in current knowledge, such as information on emerging trends in trafficking like exploitative surrogacy and online exploitation, barriers to early identification of victims, and the quality and availability of training and specialised support.

For training, EIGE's research highlights both the shortage of and need for regular mandatory training for frontline professionals, including legal practitioners, the Judiciary, police force, immigration officials and medical and health practitioners who may come into contact with cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation and/or forced marriage. Such training must be gender-responsive and include specialist knowledge and expertise on all forms of gender-based violence. Training should also be trauma-informed, culturally competent and regularly evaluated to ensure effectiveness and highlight where improvement and resources are needed (Yonkova et al., 2017). EIGE also highlights the need to strengthen awareness and practical use of the European Protection Order (EPO) as a key tool for ensuring cross-border protection of victims of gender-based violence, including trafficking. The EIGE-Eurojust joint report shows that limited practitioner awareness continues to restrict its use (EUROJUST & EIGE, 2025). Targeted training on the EPO should therefore be included in capacity-building efforts under the new Strategy.

Strengthening the cooperation at local, regional, and international levels

With a view to effectively combating THB, there is a need to promote cooperation between authorities and establish partnerships. The 2021-2025 Strategy provided a foundation for

integrating THB into broader security, migration and external relations policies. The forthcoming strategy should build on this by fostering closer collaboration between local, regional and international stakeholders to ensure more effective responses. EIGE stresses the need to recognise the role of gender equality bodies and other relevant institutional mechanisms in promoting the consistent application of gender-responsive approaches across prevention, victim support and criminal justice responses.

At national and local level, cooperation should systematically involve a wide range of stakeholders, including law enforcement, migration and asylum authorities, health and social services, child protection, education and labour authorities. EIGE highlights the critical role of civil society organisations, particularly those working with women and victims of sexual exploitation in victim identification, support and referral, and stresses the importance of their meaningful involvement in partnership structures.

EIGE welcomes the strengthened requirement in the revised Anti-Trafficking Directive for Member States to establish national referral mechanisms and highlights the need to ensure that gender expertise and organisations representing victims of trafficking (including trafficking for sexual exploitation) are included, to support gender-responsive and victim-centered responses. EIGE welcomes the launch of the EU Anti-Trafficking Hub and the opportunity to contribute its gender analysis and data expertise to the work of the Hub. Research highlights the increased risk that conflict, humanitarian disasters and poverty pose for trafficking and exploitation, particularly of women and children. The new strategy should ensure the integration of funding and measures to address the root causes of trafficking in EU external actions. Finally, at a broad level the new Strategy should promote greater coherence between anti-trafficking policy and related EU frameworks, including gender-based violence prevention, migration and asylum policy, external and development action, victims' rights frameworks, digital safety frameworks and crisis responses.

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