

## **EMERGENDO-PROJECT: EMERGING FROM THE DARKNESS**

### **THE SOCIAL AND EMPLOYMENT INTEGRATION OF WOMEN VICTIMS OF TRAFFICKING IN ITALY**

#### **HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN ITALY**

Italy is both a transit and destination country for victims of trafficking. Trafficking for sexual exploitation has clearly become a problem since the early 1990s with the first trafficked women coming from Albania and Nigeria. In Italy, for the last 10 years, this issue has been fairly well researched and has received increasing political and social attention.

Trafficking is managed by highly organised criminal networks, active at international level with ramifications at the local level in all countries of the European Union. Traffickers' routes are changed constantly in response to the anti-trafficking strategies implemented by enforcement agencies.

According to research on the topic and operators' experience on the ground, the main countries of origin of women trafficked into Italy for sexual exploitation have been traditionally Nigeria, Moldova, Ukraine, Russia, Albania and Brazil. More recently, new 'source' countries have been China, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. There is evidence that the average age of the women trafficked has significantly decreased. Victims are often led to believe that they will be offered a job in Italy, as waitresses, nurses or baby-sitters, but once in Italy they are forced into prostitution. Women are prevented from escaping by debt bondage, confiscation of their passports and travel documents, psychological and physical abuse and threats of violence against their families.

The most effective Italian provision for fighting human trafficking is Article 18 of the 1998 Immigration Law. Article 18 provides for temporary residence permits to be issued to victims of trafficking on humanitarian grounds, as long as the persons agree to participate in a programme of social assistance and protection led by local governments and NGOs. The temporary residence permit lasts for six months and it is renewable for a further six months. At the end of the programme, the women can be issued another temporary permit for work reasons, if they have an employment contract, or a permit for study reasons, if they enrol in formal education.

Article 18 acknowledges the highly insecure and unsafe status of victims of trafficked persons and does not require their immediate co-operation with enforcement authorities. Co-operation is obviously fundamental for dismantling criminal organisations, and victims' testimonies are crucial for investigations, however, the Italian legislation, alongside the formal judicial procedure in front of a Public Prosecutor, envisages a 'soft approach' to co-operation. Under the soft approach the victims that are psychologically too fragile to appear in front of a Prosecutor, can submit a statement with key information for tracking down traffickers through the social services that are looking after them.

## THE EMERGENDO DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP

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The EQUAL Emergendo-Project has been developed and implemented in five different geographical areas of Italy, at municipality and provincial levels, which are affected by human trafficking. The project has been coordinated by the Province of Pisa and has brought together an extensive partnership of local authorities<sup>1</sup> and NGOs working at the grass-roots level<sup>2</sup>.

*“Working with so many different partners has been the most challenging and at the same time the most valuable element of the project.”* admitted Paolo Prosperini, the project coordinator *“The starting point of the different organisations have been very different, in terms of the variety of experiences in dealing with the issue, the number of NGOs working on the subject and the level of service provided to women. Nevertheless, in the end we have been able to put together a project that can be implemented in different geographical contexts, and to facilitate mutual learning, cross-fertilization and transfer of good practices”*.

The project has been developed around four key priorities:

- information gathering and research;
- psychological support and social inclusion;
- employment integration;
- raising awareness and extending the partnership with other local stakeholders.

Each of the five territorial units has been able to develop the four key intervention priorities according to the specific needs of their local context. At the same time, regular meetings amongst all the partners have enabled the development of common methodologies for implementing the different elements of the programme.

*“We wanted to create a working method which was agreed and shared by all partners”* explains Manola Guazzini, Councillor at the Province of Pisa *“that could become embedded in the working practices and be sustainable in the long run. I can say that we succeeded”*.

### INFORMATION GATHERING AND RESEARCH

Women victims of trafficking are not just the ones that can be seen in the streets. There is a growing trend of indoor prostitution that is invisible and often underestimated. People often assumed that there are no victims of trafficking in indoor prostitution: the reality however is rather different. Locked in apartments, women are more easily controlled by their masters, have no way of escaping a situation of violence and do not know who to turn to in order to ask for help.

The first step of the project involved identifying suspicious advertisements in newspapers and making a first telephone call, pretending to be a client. During the second telephone contact, the social workers presented themselves and provided information on health care access and sexual health.

*“The best way to break the ice was to give information on health care”*, explains Santa Bellomia street unit operator from the Province of Genoa *“in order to gain the trust of women. After that, we asked questions about their nationality, age and legal situation, and told them of the social integration and protection programme”*.

Similar research has been carried out in all five geographical areas. In the case of Turin, the research has been developed by the association Tampep, in cooperation with trans-national French partners, and has focused on women of Chinese nationality.

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<sup>1</sup> Municipality of Genoa, Province of Genoa, Province of Ascoli Piceno, Province of Teramo and Province of Torino.

<sup>2</sup> Associazione Donne in Movimento, Pisa; Associazione Compagnia delle Opere del Piemonte; Associazione On the Road, Teramo; Associazione Tampead, Turin; Casa Carità e Mestieri Turin; Cooperativa il Cerchio, Pisa, Pubblica Assistenza, Pisa, S&T Società Cooperative, Turin.

Gathering information on indoor sexual exploitation has proven to be extremely difficult. However there is a success story. A young woman, trafficked from South America was contacted through the telephone. She had health problems and was interested to hear what type of health care she could get. *“Alongside with health care advice, we explained to her that she could get social protection under Article 18.”* says Francesca Martini from the province of Genoa *“It took us a month to build up the necessary trust, but after that she was able to open up and tell us her story.* This young woman was lured into Italy with the promise of a job as a cleaner, but once in Italy she was forced into indoor prostitution with little possibility of escaping. The woman also agreed to testify in front of the police, which led to the arrest of members of a criminal network trafficking people and drugs from South America into Europe.

## **PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSISTANCE AND SOCIAL INCLUSION PATH**

When victims of trafficking ask for help, they are accommodated in ‘houses of first reception’.

*“Women who have taken the decision to escape from the traffickers tend to be terrified that their masters will come and get them”* says Elena Mezzetti, from the association Donne in Movimento of Pisa, *“they are psychologically very fragile and need a safe and secure place. In Pisa, we have been able to have a first reception centre in a cloistered convent that gives a sense of security to women”*.

In ‘houses of first reception’ women are given professional psychological support and are engaged in activities to help them recover from the traumatic experience they have gone through. Creative and artistic workshops, such as painting, have been prepared to help women in dealing with their past, managing their emotions and increasing their self-esteem.

There is no ‘one size fits all’ programme when dealing with women that have been severely abused, both psychologically and physically, so the project has developed a comprehensive programme tailored to the individual needs of each woman. A very innovative element is that each woman is given an individual cultural mediator with the task of providing support and assistance throughout the process of obtaining a temporary residency permit and of cooperating with the police and other enforcement authorities. Cultural mediators are professional social workers, sometimes from the same nationality of the women they are supporting. Their principal aim is to establish a personal relationship, encouraging women to trust the people that are looking after them. All partners agree that the role of the cultural mediator is crucial for the psychological rehabilitation of the women and for building up the mutual trust that helps women to decide to cooperate with the police.

After a period of four months, when the women feel stronger, they are moved into ‘houses of second reception’. Here they can attend Italian language and culture courses, as well as vocational training courses. The type of training provided is decided in consultation with the women, on the basis of an analysis of their skills and aspirations. Generally, women follow computer courses, knitting and tailoring, and employment orientation, such as preparing a curriculum vitae, seeking employment, attending job interviews, dressing appropriately for the workplace, Italian working culture and legislation and types of working contracts.

## **PATH TO EMPLOYMENT INTEGRATION**

At the end of the social inclusion path, women are equipped with some basic skills that make them more employable. However, it is very unlikely that they get a job: these women tend to have no work experience, there is social stigma attached to their past and they are likely to doubt their own capacities.

*“We realised that after the social inclusion path, these women still needed some support, some sort of accompanying measures to get them the labour market”* explains Martina Sabbatini from S&T Società Cooperativa of Turin, *“Left without support they have very few chances of finding a job and might even become victims of traffickers again”*.

The partners have worked with job centres to enable women victims of trafficking to participate in job placement schemes which already exist for ‘hard to employ’ people, such as ex-drug addicts and disabled people. Under these schemes, people are hired by a company for three months.

The company does not have to pay a salary; it is the job centre that provides a minimum wage to the working person.

*“It has been a bit of a challenge to persuade job centres to include victims of trafficking.”* says Paolo Prospering, the project coordinator. *“The main problem was bureaucracy as the job placement scheme does not cover this category of disadvantaged people. It is positive, however that in the end we have been able to create a fruitful collaboration, even if only as a pilot project”*.

To support job centres in finding a work placement with private companies for these women, the partners have held information seminars with business associations. It has been clear since the beginning that victims of trafficking are more vulnerable than any other category of disadvantaged persons and that intensive mediation is necessary to convince companies to give these women a chance and to support women during this transition stage.

*“We knew it was not going to be easy for either side. Another innovative element of this project was that we assigned each woman a professional tutor”* say Santa Bellonia and Francesca Martini from the Province of Genova. *“On the one hand, the women had to adapt to the working culture, while on the other, the managers had to understand the emotional burden and the special needs of these workers. The cultural mediators had the role of bridging the gaps and bringing the two sides to a mutual understanding”*.

Overall, companies have responded rather well and have particularly appreciated the role of the tutor that supported employers every time an issue or concern arose. In the end, all the women have been able to participate in a job placement scheme. What is even more positive is that most of them were hired or offered a job somewhere else, and several others decided to enrol in formal education. A small number of women have opted for voluntary repatriation.

Commenting on the added value of the project, all partners share the view that although a certain structure for the protection and social integration of victims of trafficking was already in place in Italy, Equal has enabled to create a comprehensive, individualised and innovative path for the social and employment integration of women victim of trafficking.

## **EXTENSIVE PARTNERSHIP AND AWARENESS-RAISING: THE KEY INGREDIENTS FOR A SUCCESSFUL PROJECT**

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The successful outcomes of the Emergedo-Project would not be understood without mentioning the successful awareness raising activities that led to the creation of an extensive partnership including local and regional actors in destination and source countries who were originally not involved in the project.

Awareness-raising mainly focused on conveying the message that these women are first of all victims and therefore in need of social protection. The target audiences of the campaigns included schools, communities and citizens associations, as well as public institutions such as the police, public prosecutors, business organisations and other local governments.

Targeting the police and other enforcement authorities has been particularly useful. *“In the beginning the police were rather sceptical and did not really see these women as victims.”* points out Elena Mezzetti, from the association Donne in Movimento of Pisa, *“We had to work on raising the awareness of enforcement authorities on the right of trafficking victims to have a temporary resident permit under Italian legislation”*. The outcomes have been very encouraging, with the police becoming very co-operative, even bringing women found in the streets to the ‘houses of first reception’. Humanitarian considerations aside, enforcement authorities have also realised the significant contribution that these women can make in cracking down organised crime.

Alessandro Giuntini, the Head of the Police of Pisa, got so much involved in the project, that he decided to write a novel *“Lilya and the others”* inspired by a real story of a young women who was trafficked from Moldavia and brutally forced into prostitution in Italy. The novel has proven to be an effective tool in raising awareness amongst stakeholders. Alongside with this novel, videos and illustrative leaflets have been produced and used.

Information materials and communication efforts have been crucial in focusing the attention of public institutions on this problem and have led to the main stakeholders at local level of the signing of a Protocol of Agreement for the integration of women victims of trafficking.

*“We wanted other stakeholders such as job centres and business associations to engage in the project and provide their support and contribution, which is essential for the success of the project” emphasises Paolo Prosperini, project coordinator “In addition we also wanted national and regional governments to take on more responsibilities and introduce a specific budget line to finance the social integration of women victims of trafficking, with a view to guaranteeing the financial sustainability of the project”.*

Ensuring the sustainability of this project is going to be the most challenging part of the whole programme. However some positive results are already visible. The regional government of Marche has introduced the possibility of using ESF funds for the integration of victims of trafficking. Even if only a few other regional governments follow this good example, the partners are determined to not give up their efforts, both at regional and national level. Hopefully, their energy, commitment and the excellent results obtained within the Emergendo-Project will help to move mountains.

## CONTACT DETAILS

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