



**Violence  
against  
women and  
girls  
among refugee  
and migrant  
population  
in Serbia**



**VIOLENCE AGAINST  
WOMEN AND GIRLS  
AMONG REFUGEE  
AND MIGRANT POPULATION  
IN SERBIA**





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**Atina** – Citizens' Association for combating trafficking in human beings and all forms of violence against women

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## THANK-YOU NOTE

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS**

- UNFPA** – United Nations Population Fund
- NGO** – Nongovernmental organization
- FGM** – Female genital mutilation
- SPSS (IBM)** – Statistical Package for Social Sciences (International Business Machines Corporation)
- UNHCR** – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- GBV** – Gender-based violence
- SGBV** – Sexual and gender-based violence



## INTRODUCTION

Violence against women, as a gross violation of human rights, is prohibited by numerous international conventions, as well as national laws in various countries, including Serbia. It represents acts which cause physical, sexual and mental harm and suffering, and is based on socially established or assumed differences (gender) between men and women. Violence against women represents a dominant form of gender-based violence, and it increases in times of humanitarian crisis, such as this latest refugee crisis, due to a number of factors, such as militarization or lack of protection mechanisms.

Bearing in mind the geographical position, which dictated for Serbia to find itself in the middle of the refugee route, the country has, therefore, since the eruption of the European refugee crisis, been in its very epicenter along with other countries in the region. It should be emphasized that the state authorities have tried to show and maintain a humane approach in providing protection and assistance to refugees, despite the enormous daily influx of refugees and their rapid movement through the country. From the summer of 2015, to May 2016, more than 700,000 asylum seekers were registered in Serbia, and it is assumed that the number of people who entered Serbia irregularly in this period was even higher, that is, that they were not all registered. By the end of that year, the number exceeded one million, and continued to grow in the first months of 2017, given that armed conflicts continued in the refugees' countries of origin, and became even more intensified in some places (the Battle of Aleppo, Mosul siege).

The difficult position of women refugees requires special attention of actors in the protection system, and sensitized approach in the provision of necessary forms of assistance, creation of support programs, but also devising policies for (potential) integration. It is necessary to give women refugees special attention, because they are multiple marginalized and discriminated; moreover, a significant number of women refugees experienced physical, sexual and other forms of violence, as well as sexual and labor exploitation. On the other hand, services designed for women refugees are often inadequately treating their vulnerable position, which may inadvertently increase the risk of exploitation and violence against them.

Violence against women has, since the beginning of the European refugee crisis, been recorded on the ground many times by Association “Atina” (hereinafter: Atina) through the testimonies of refugees, and it was most often encountered in the form of: inflicting light and grievous bodily harm, domestic violence, forced and child marriage, forced prostitution, rape, sexual harassment, sexual intercourse with a child, human trafficking, and various physical assaults. It is important to note other recorded phenomena as well, such as attempts and threats of honor killings, revenge marriages, and survival sex (for food, shelter, protection). In the reports of Atina’s mobile teams from the ground, it was noted that women refugees suffered violence in various places, in their countries of origin, during the journey, but also in Serbia, in reception and asylum centers, as well as in other places where refugees were residing. Some women have been exposed to violence multiple times, in various forms, and by different persons. Perpetrators were, in most cases, their partners or other members of immediate or extended family, other refugees, smugglers and traffickers, but also employees in helping professions. In many of these cases, perpetrators remained unpunished, and the cases unprocessed.

Given the circumstances of a mass influx and rapid movement of refugees through Serbia at the beginning of the crisis, the actors in the protection system have not been able to always timely recognize and adequately respond to the occurrence of risks of exploitation and violence against women refugees, and to the acts of violence and exploitation, and they were mainly occupied with short-term rehabilitation of visible and acute consequences. The approach of the actors in the protection system, in 2015 and 2016, was mainly a humanitarian one, and was not directed toward long-term support programs. The acts of violence were viewed, and responded to, partially and often ineffectively, because these acts were perceived as isolated cases, not a broader phenomenon, which led to the lack of joint activities and measures for the effective prevention. However, the longer stay of refugees in Serbia (and they have now been in the country for several months), requires a different and more meaningful approach to this issue, and considerations of long-term policies for early detection, combating violence against women refugees and migrants, and minimizing negative consequences.

Results of the research we have conducted, and which is in front of you, point out to the prevalence of violence against girls and

women migrants and refugees. This means that those are not isolated cases, but a phenomenon that needs to be researched in a deeper and more comprehensive manner, in order for the system of support and protection to be able to respond adequately. On the other hand, this research also represents a good starting point for a comprehensive monitoring of the described phenomenon, as there are no precise data, nor aggregated statistics, on violence against women and girls among the refugee population.

Finally, our Association intends to transfer this research into a material everyone will be able to learn from, and to enable all the professionals, through the transfer of our experience and knowledge, to further reflect on their roles in the process of protection of girls and women who suffer violence in our society. We also hope to slowly pave the path for all the relevant actors, but for us as a society in a whole as well, to take equal responsibility and help those girls and women in need of our assistance in the best possible way.

*In 2016 alone, Atina has provided direct assistance to 3,715 refugees who were staying in Serbia, out of whom 250 were primary and secondary victims of gender-based violence, as well as potential victims of human trafficking; safe accommodation was provided to 58 victims; 71,6% of them were women. Finally, according to the results of pilot research on violence against women and girls which Atina conducted among women refugees in Serbia, in the first half of 2017, and which will be discussed in more detail in this text, the majority of women refugees had the experience of violence.*

For the Association Atina,  
Jelena Hrnjak,  
programme manager  
In Belgrade, June, 2017.

## **THE AIM OF PILOT SURVEY**

Association “Atina” has, within the project “Local support to the most vulnerable refugees”, with the support of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), developed an observational cross-sectional study which aimed to show the prevalence and forms of violence against women and girls refugees from war-affected areas or areas of periodic conflicts, primarily Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, but other countries as well. The main objective of this study is to acquire a fuller insight into the risks and challenges related to violence against women and girls among the refugee population, as well as to learn lessons and create recommendations for improvements of the existing system of protection and support.

## **LIMITATIONS OF PILOT SURVEY**

The interview was used as a method of collecting data from women and girls, which carries certain limitations and characteristics such as tension, aloofness, suspicion, and fear. Considering that the pilot survey was conducted on a sample of 162 women and girls, which is not representative, main findings are indicative and as such cannot be generalized and applied to the entire refugee and migrant population in Serbia. The limitation in conducting pilot survey was also the language barrier, but also the fact that respondents sometimes fail to recognize violence.

Research questions about the experience of violence were limited to physical and sexual violence, and questions which indicate forced or early marriage. They did not deal with all the forms of violence against women, and did not examine each form of violence individually. Given that this is a pilot survey, and that it was conducted in a one-month period (from April 13, to May 15, 2017) it primarily represents a starting point for further in-depth qualitative and quantitative researches that would include other forms of violence against women.

## METHODOLOGY OF PILOT SURVEY

The pilot survey used a brief and structured questionnaire and guidebook, previously prepared within the project. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions, four open-ended and 11 closed-ended questions. In addition to basic information about the respondents, the questionnaire also served to gather information about the experiences of women and girls when it comes to physical and sexual forms of violence, early and forced marriage, as well as their knowledge about the protection system in cases of violence. Responses have been obtained through short interviews (lasting 10 to 15 minutes) carried out by researchers with the support of cultural mediators. During the interviews, the following principles were respected: voluntariness, informed consent, and full participation of the participants. All the participants were previously informed about the purpose of the interview, that it was anonymous, about the way in which collected data will be used, but also that they are not obliged to participate in the interview if they do not want to, nor to respond to all the asked questions. Each participant was informed that they can ask all the questions of interest to them, related to the survey, and that all the necessary information can be obtained before, during, or after the interview. Interviews were conducted exclusively by women, in the participants' native language. All the data were collected impartially and in agreement with the participants.

The research was conducted during the months of April and May 2017, in the following reception and asylum centers: Presevo, Bujanovac, Belgrade (Krnjaca, Maternal Home, Miksaliste), Bogovadja, Banja Koviljaca; beneficiaries residing in Adasevci also participated in the research. Descriptive statistics and T test were used in the analysis of the collected data. The entire analysis was conducted using SPSS, version 20.0.0 (IBM).

Excerpts from five life stories collected on the ground, which reflect direct experience of violence women and girls refugees suffered, are also an integral part of this report. Reports from the ground, made by researchers, and written in a diary form, represent a special addition and contain researchers' personal views on this issue.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SAMPLE

Pilot survey was conducted at 6 asylum and reception centers, in Presevo, Belgrade, Bujanovac, Bogovadja, Banja Koviljaca, Adasevci, as well as Maternal Home and Miksaliste in Belgrade. The research included 162 women and girls who resided in Serbia in the period from April 13 to May 15, 2017.

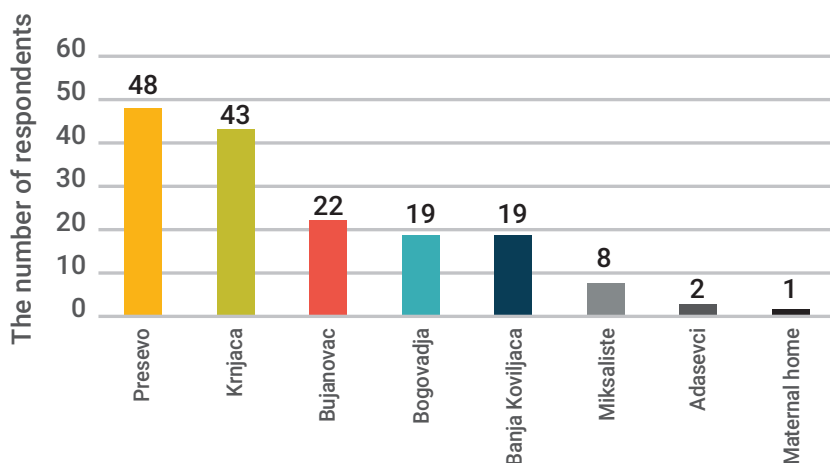


Chart 1 – display of the distribution of respondents in the centers in Serbia

A majority of participants - 110 women and girls (68%) were under the age of 30, while 52 of them (32%) were over the age of 30. The average age of participants was 28,6 - the youngest participant was 15 years old, and the oldest 60 years old.

Most of the participants were from Afghanistan, then Syria, and Iraq. The number of participants is in line with the general frequency of women per the country of origin of the refugee population in the centers in Serbia during the research period. According to UNHCR statistics, the majority of refugees and migrants, asylum seekers in Serbia, are women who come from Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria and Pakistan, of whom the percentage of adult women is 15%.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Interagency Operational Update Serbia April 2017– UNHCR.

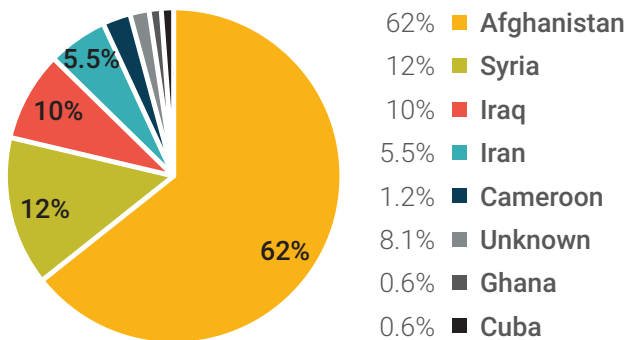


Figure 1 – percentage of women and girls, migrants and refugees in Serbia, per their country of origin

According to the data women themselves gave, most of the participants in the research (87% of them) are staying in centers in Serbia with their husbands and children. These data should be taken with caution, due to the fact that, per Atina’s experience, women traveling alone often say they are traveling with a partner to “protect themselves”, although the man is actually only a member of the group they travel with.

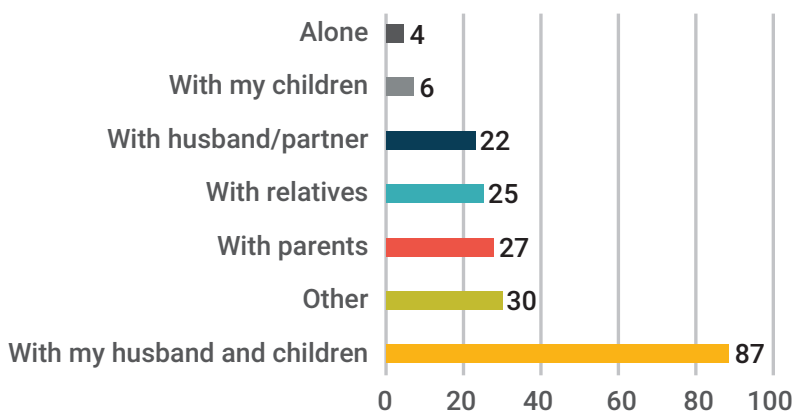


Chart 2 – women and girls migrants and refugees in Serbia, per their travel companions

## RESULTS

The previous chapter presented general information about the participants, collected during this pilot survey. This section will serve to present results of the research relating directly to the suffered violence: experiences, as well as responses, and support mechanisms related to the protection from violence.

### Experience of violence

#### – Physical violence

According to the collected and processed data, out of the total number of participants, 64,8% of them experienced some of the following forms of physical violence: being pushed, shaken, thrown objects at, arm-twisting, hair pulling, being slapped, punched, kicked, strangled, threatened or attacked with a knife, gun, or other weapon. Statistical analysis of this distribution is shown in Figure 2.

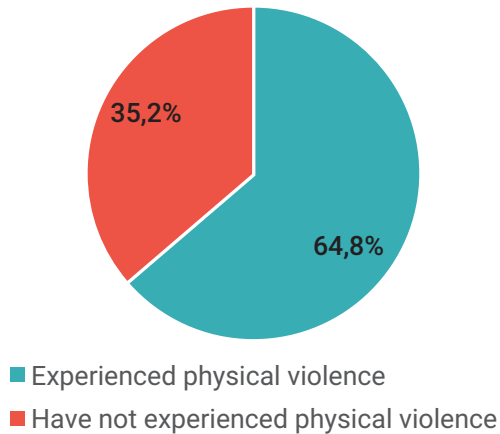


Figure 2 – The percentage of respondents who experienced various forms of physical violence, such as being pushed, shaken, thrown objects at, arm-twisting, hair pulling, being slapped, punched, kicked, strangled, threatened or attacked with a knife, gun, or other weapon



Based on these findings, we can conclude that physical violence is widely present among the surveyed population of women and girl refugees and migrants.

#### – Sexual violence

When it comes to sexual violence, 24% of the participants confirmed that they were exposed to this form of violence, in a way that they were forced to have sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual activities, as shown in Figure 3. A total of 94,8% participants who experienced sexual violence also survived some of the before mentioned forms of physical violence.

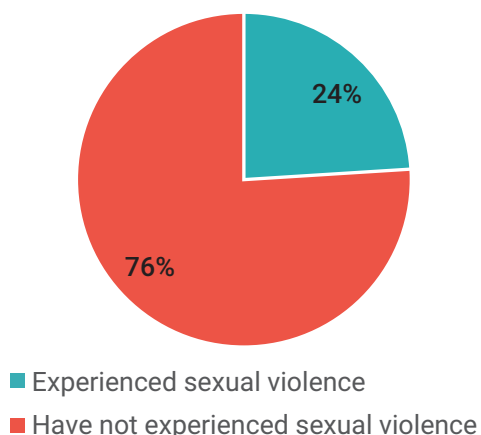


Figure 3 – Percentage of respondents who were forced to have sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual activities

A part of the questionnaire was also a control question referring to injuries sustained during sexual intercourse. A total of 12 participants, 7,4% of the total number, and 9,9% of the number of participants who replied that they have never had forced sexual intercourse, responded affirmatively to the question about the injury during sexual intercourse, as shown in the Table I of the Annex.

Based on these results, it can be concluded that the presented percentage respondents who experienced sexual violence is higher than

24%, which can be noted in the percentage which refers to injuries, and which is 7,4% of the total number, but also in the observations of data collectors, which will be further discussed in the next section.

– Combined statistics related to physical and sexual violence

According to the processed data related to physical and sexual violence, a total of 109 participants (66,9% of them) survived some form of violence, which represents a high, statistically significant sample, and is shown in the table 2 of the Annex, and in the Figure below. ( $p < 0,001$ )

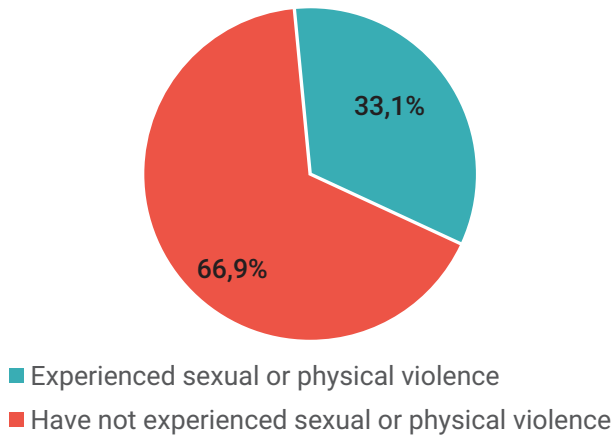


Figure 4 – Percentage of respondents who survived sexual or physical violence

– Forced marriage and early, i.e. child, marriages

Above all, it should be noted that, during this survey, the phenomenon of forced and early, i.e. child, marriages could not be examined to the extent in which other forms of violence were explored. Based on the collected data, the actual situation and statistics related to this phenomenon can only be speculated. It was found that 52,5% of women could not choose to whom and when they would marry. Average age when participants entered into marriage is 17,5 years old. Among them, the youngest was only 7 years old when she was married, and the oldest

- 32 years old. Based on the sample, therefore, we can conclude that early marriages are present among the refugee population, and to the extent of more than 50% of the population surveyed. Schematic representation is shown in Figure 5.

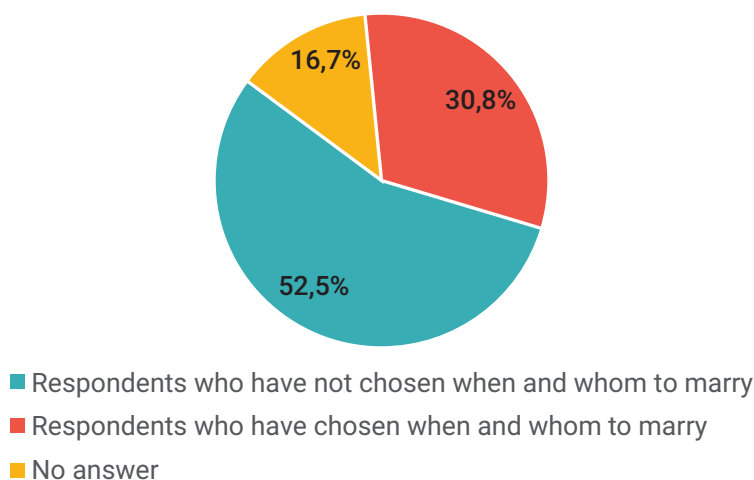


Figure 5 – Percentage of respondents who have, and have not, chosen when and to whom they would marry

Of the participants who said that they had no right to choose the partner and time of entering into marriage, 13 of them (8,02% of the total number) stated that they have not experienced any form of violence, as shown in Table 3 of the Annex. Based on this, it can be concluded that 8,02% of the participants do not perceive the lack of right to choose partners and the time of entering into marriage as violence; in other words, they do not recognize the practice of forced and early, i.e. child, marriages as violence. Further, this analysis also indicates that the percentage of women and girls who survived violence, physical or sexual, and the lack of right to choose a partner and the time of entering into marriage is 74,9%.

### - Visibility of violence

One of the questions in the survey was related to whether women and girls migrants and refugees witnessed the aforementioned forms of violence happening to other women and girls. A total of 55,5% of participants said that they saw that often, 21,6% - sometimes, and 21,6% - never, as shown in the following Figure 6. Based on this, it can be concluded that 77,1% of participants witnessed other women and girls experiencing violence, which therefore indicates a broad presence of violence in the given sample.

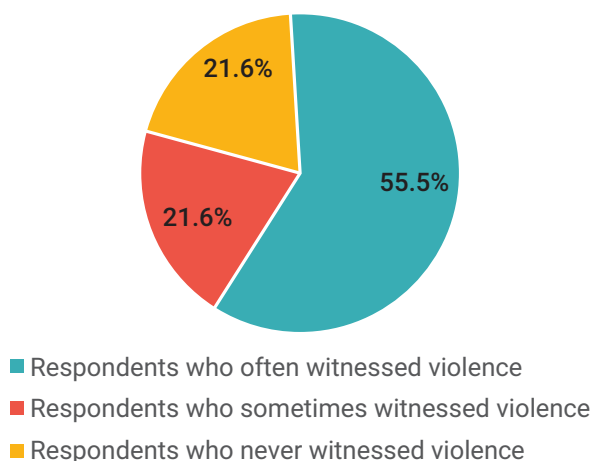


Figure 6 – The incidence of participants witnessing violence against other women refugees

Research findings indicate that participants who responded affirmatively when asked whether they experienced violence speak more openly about the violence they witnessed, compared to women who answered that question negatively. This is numerically shown in the table 4 of the Annex, and in the chart 3; they clearly display the difference between the responses of participants, that is, the mutual correlation in their responses. Of the 61 participants who answered that they have not experienced any form of violence, 26,2% responded that they often witnessed violence against other women, 32,8% - sometimes, and 39,3% - never. Based on this, it can be concluded that 29 participants, or 17,9% of the total number, fully deny the existence of violence during their entire life, both when it comes to them and others.

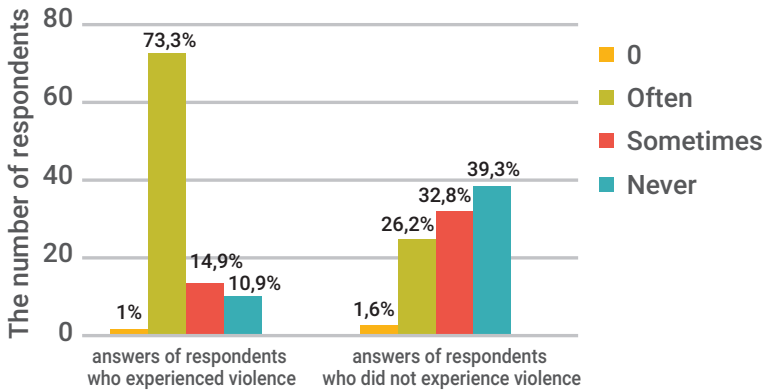


Chart 3 – Correlation between the answers related to experienced violence and to witnessing violence against other women

– Whom have they experienced violence from and where?

Based on the processed data, it is clear that women and girls refugees most commonly experienced violence in the country of origin, as well as during the journey, by police officers, partners, and smugglers, as shown in the following Chart 4.

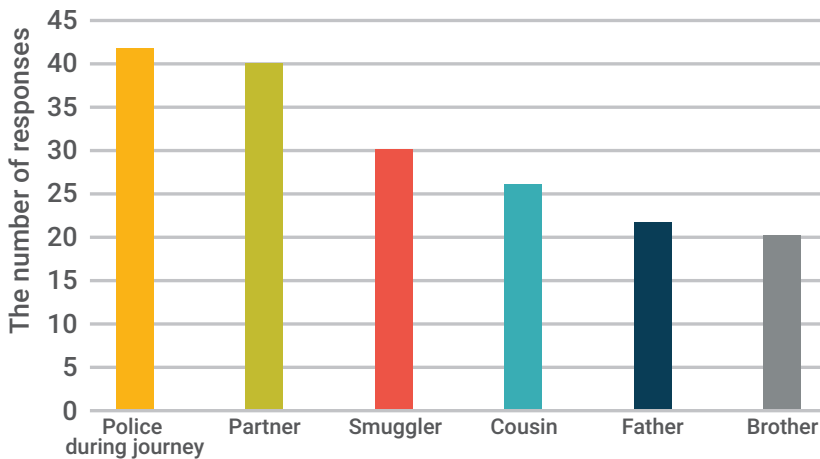


Chart 4 – Responses to question related to perpetrators of violence

In addition to these, most common responses, participants also cited persons they travel with, friends, strangers, and others as perpetrators. It should be noted that participants had the opportunity to give more than one answer to this question, i.e. to specify more than one perpetrator.

Once the obtained data are compared, some new, interesting observations can be made. Women traveling with a partner and children were the ones who suffered most violence, while those traveling alone experienced it least (3:43), which is shown in Table 5 of the Annex. Women traveling with a partner usually suffered violence by smugglers - 21 of them, police officers - 17, partner - 8, followed by other answers. From these data, it is clear that women traveling with a partner, or a male family member, are not necessarily protected against violence to a higher extent, nor does that make them less vulnerable. It is important to take into account a possible assumption that women traveling with a partner and children talked more openly about violence compared to women traveling alone, because they feel safer accompanied by family members. Atina's experience should not be ignored either, and it suggests that victims often conceal the perpetrator if it is a husband, and talk about the violence committed by smugglers, which may be the case here as well, although not necessarily. This is only an assumption, and as such requires a deeper analysis.

Furthermore, based on data analysis it can be determined that women refugees most often suffered violence in their country of origin and during the journey, but it is also important to note the fact that 16 of them survived some form of violence in Serbia. This is clearly displayed in Chart 5.

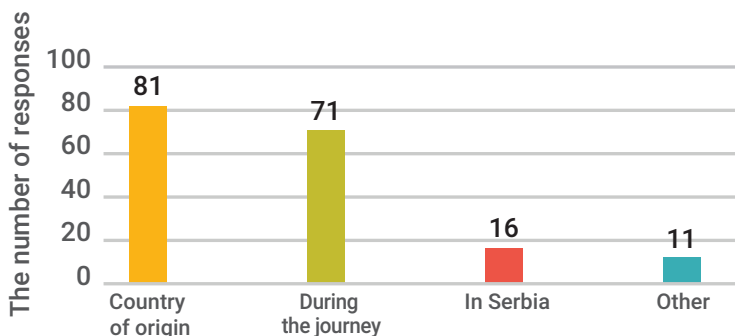


Chart 5 – Places where participants suffered violence

### – Response to violence

Most of the women and girls who participated in the survey, 80% of them, are aware that violence is prohibited by the law, both in Serbia and in other European countries. The fact that respondents know that violence is prohibited by the law does not necessarily mean they would report it, or ask for help. We should bear in mind the fact that some of the participants do not recognize violence as a negative phenomenon, and a behavior that harms and is not allowed, at least not within the framework provided by our law. This can be concluded only partially from the statistics, as well as reports from the field.

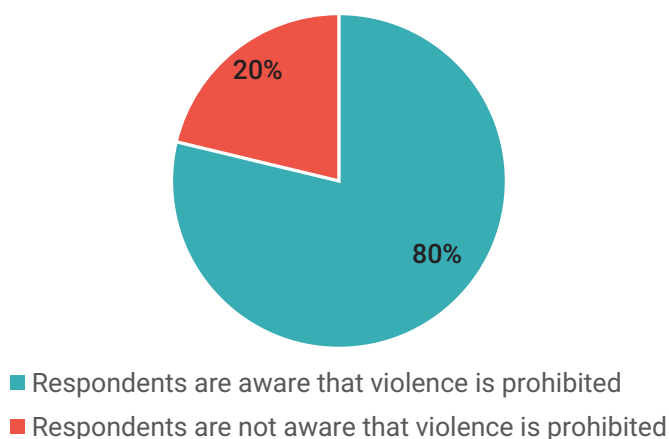


Figure 7 – Are women refugees aware that violence is prohibited by the law in Serbia/Europe

### – Support system

One of the research questions was whether women refugees know which institutions/NGOs, or service providers, in Serbia can help them in case of violence. The fact that respondents are aware that violence is prohibited by the law does not mean they will report it and seek assistance. In total, 23% of the participants said they did not know, while other participants mostly answered: the police, Association “Atina”, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, UNHCR, family members, as well as other actors on the ground, as shown in Figure

8. It should be noted that the fact these women know someone they can seek help from does not necessarily mean they would actually ask for help. However, it is encouraging to know that women are aware of a certain support system that can help them in case they experience violence.

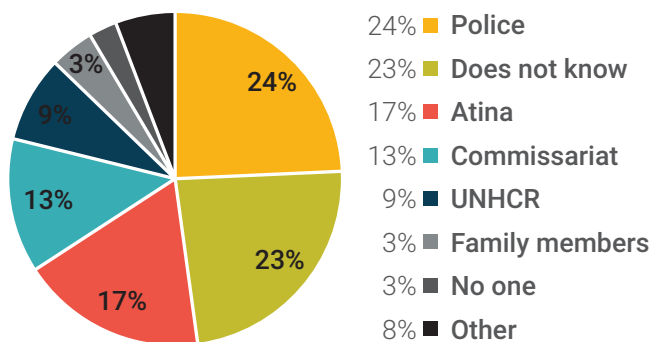


Figure 8 – Responses to the question who can provide assistance in case they are suffering violence in Serbia



## FIELD REPORTS OF RESEARCHERS

Association “Atina” has, through this pilot survey, obtained answers to a set of questions related to violence against women and girls refugees, as well as observations of researchers which are summarized in field reports prepared after the interviews. As a part of the consent process, and with the aim of reducing any possible distress caused to the participants by the study, Atina created special activities in the design stage which consist of instructions for conducting interviews, and informing about confidentiality procedures, as well as psychological support where necessary. Once they stated that they experienced violence, participants had the need to speak about it in detail, although, according to the contents of the questionnaire, it was not required of them. One participant said, “I do not know any woman who has not experienced someone wanting to touch or hit her, either in the country of origin or during the journey, but that is not wrong, it is simply a normal thing. We, women in Afghanistan, live in a male society, and it must be so”. It is precisely this statement that refers to a key obstacle which became obvious while conducting the pilot survey, and that is the participants’ perception of violence, i.e. perceiving violence as a part of life which is normal and implied. One of the researchers shared the following observation, “One of the participants answered negatively to all the questions related to violence. When asked how old she was when she married, she replied that she was 7 years old, that she was married to a man who was 20 years her senior, and that she gave birth to her first child when she was 11 years old”. The difference in language and cultural context represented another obstacle which made the research more difficult.

The researchers also noted that women who have answered questions related to violence negatively, usually reacted in two ways: either they immediately responded with a no, smiling and denying the existence of violence in any form, or they responded with a no, while displaying obvious unease, nervousness, shame, lowering their head, sweating and cracking knuckles. The issue of violence against women represents a taboo topic in all the societies, including those the participants are

coming from, and it was thus clear that such questions cause them discomfort, and they cannot openly talk about this topic.

*Recent research of UNFPA suggests that rates of disclosure are linked to the manner in which questions are worded. Generally, questions should not consist of words such as “abuse”, “violence”, “rape”. For each form of abuse, questions are recommended about a range of behaviors along with specific cues directing the respondent to think of relevant setting, e.g. during the journey, in the center, etc.*

The awareness of women about forced marriage, child marriages and the choice of partners represented another obstacle during the interviews. Most of the women responded that their parents chose their partner in advance. One of the participants said that she freely chose her partner, and further commented, “Yes, it is well known. You cannot choose from all the men. You have a few relatives and friends of the family, your family will choose someone who is most suitable for you. How can you, as a woman, know who would be a good partner? This is on your family to decide.” What researchers noticed is the fact that most women felt the need to share the experience they survive each day, related to sexist comments, insults, and various forms of psychological harassment by men in the centers, which causes them fear. This should certainly be researched separately, given that psychological violence was not the subject of this research.

Potential secondary victimization, related to opening the topics that are painful for women who participated in the survey, represented another challenge during the research. This aspect was particularly taken into account, and all the researchers have previously attended briefing on how to collect data in a way that will not harm the participants. For some participants, this was the first time in their life they spoke about the violence they suffered. One of them said, “My husband used to cut me with a knife whenever I was ‘disobedient’. I will carry those scars forever. I never told anyone how I got them, because no one has asked me before.”

Researchers have noted that women talked about the violence they suffered by the organizers of the journey (smugglers) numerous times, and that they are aware such experiences will happen again, given that they want to continue their journey, and they have no choice but to

turn to smugglers. “This journey is die or survive!”. On the basis of this, it can be concluded that women have a high tolerance for violence, and that some of them experienced it so often that it has become normal.

According to field reports, it can be concluded that most women would not report violence, because it would result in shame and humiliation. Survey participants indicated they would certainly not report violence their daughters suffered, because it would make it impossible for them to marry, and their future would be destroyed.

This, is a summary of field reports submitted by researchers, which should further portray issues related to violence against women and girls in the migrant and refugee population. It represents a phenomenon difficult to recognize even by professionals in this area on the ground, but it is even harder to assess whether, and to which extent, survivors themselves recognizing it. Violence against women is almost always hidden, and it is most often discovered only after the most severe consequences occur. We are reminding that the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of 2011 (so-called Istanbul Convention) obliges the States Parties to take the necessary legislative and other measures to exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate, punish and provide reparation for acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention” (Article 5, paragraph 2), and to “take the necessary legislative or other measures to protect all victims from any further acts of violence” (Article 18).<sup>2</sup> A number of domestic regulations are in place in Serbia to deal with the prevention and sanctioning of discrimination against women, gender-based violence, and domestic violence. Amendments to the Criminal Code entered new criminal offenses that have not been recognized by the law previously, and therefore could not have been prosecuted, such as: female genital mutilation (Article 121a), persecution (Article 138a), sexual harassment (Article 182a), inducing a minor to attend sexual acts (Article 185a), forced marriage (Article 187a). In addition to the amendments to the Criminal Code, the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence was adopted that regulates the prevention of this offense, but also the mechanisms that should protect the victims of domestic violence in a timely and comprehensive manner. In order to discover the true extent of violence against women,

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<sup>2</sup> The Istanbul Convention was signed and ratified by many European countries, including Serbia.

as well as all of its forms, it is necessary, therefore, to conduct a broader research, as well as an in-depth survey. The implementation of such a research would certainly affirmatively influence the more effective application of existing regulations pertaining to this area.

## SLICES OF LIFE STORIES

As much as the figures, percentages, and statistical research may, to a certain extent, portray this issue, it is necessary to also gain an insight into the consequences violence has on every woman and girl, as well as their strength to overcome these challenges. Below are five slices of life stories recorded by our researchers, which represent the confessions of interviewed women and girls. Stories have been selected based on the desire of these women and girls to make their voices heard and have their life stories told.

### If we weren't strong and brave, we wouldn't have survived

- I grew up in a family that never cared for me. In early childhood, I became ill of a disease that has led to permanent physical damage and constant pain I still suffer. When I went to a doctor for examination, he would sexually abuse me, touch me in intimate places. I never told my parents about it, because I knew they would put the blame on me. When I was 15, my family forced me to marry a man who comes from a neighboring country. At first, I thought he was different, and that it might not be so bad, but I was wrong. It all began with him forcing me to drink alcohol, and engage in sexual behavior I was not comfortable with. I realized that I could not tolerate it any longer, and I refused him. That is when my hell began. He constantly insulted and humiliated me because of my illness, forced me to watch pornography and to pose naked, although I did not want to. He would then send my nude photographs to his friends who would rape and abuse me in the house, in front of him. When that became boring to him, he forced me to have sexual intercourse with women with whom he was having sex in front of me, and whom I had to serve. At one point, he decided to go on a journey to Europe, and left me pregnant. I knew that, even though I was alone and pregnant, I would be better off without him. I lived in fear, because women who are alone face many problems. After three years, my husband's brother, who already

had two wives and who was much older, said that I had to live with him in order to preserve the family honor. That is when I realized that I had to leave my country and run, that it was the only way to save myself. After a long journey, I arrived to Serbia with my child and the faith that we will find peace. Sometimes I think everything that happened to me was not so terrible, and that I should forget it all, but I am haunted by the images. I realized that I need new images of me, strong and powerful! Therefore, I am gladly helping women refugees in Serbia, while waiting for a final solution. What I want to say to all those who work with women like me, who survived violence, is that they need to know we are strong and brave, and we wouldn't have survived if we weren't. All we need is your support to find our strength after so much time and after our long journey.

*Tuba 28, survived multiple violence*

## We should live in a world of equals

- Women must know that they are human beings! They must know that they have rights, just like everyone else, and it can only be achieved through knowledge and learning! This is my mission! I want to empower women of Iraq to become independent, achieve their freedom, and have their rights back. I began this fight several years ago when I established a nongovernmental organization dealing with women's rights. I graduated psychology, and publicly performed in order to create a bridge between culture, religion, women's rights, people, and psychology. I have successfully worked on that, and then one day I fell in love with a man who seemed like a good person. However, that was not the case. Soon after our marriage began, he started restricting my movement, prohibiting many things. I thought he was jealous, and that I will be able to solve it, but violence was becoming more and more intensive. It simply turned from psychological into physical violence one day. I thought it was the stress of the journey, and I was trying to rationalize his behavior, but then one day he locked me in a room, and started beating me with an intention to kill me. His family supported him in that. Fortunately, my cries were heard in the center and I was saved. I continued my life in a safe housing, where I managed to enroll in the master studies, continue to work in my organization, although I am outside of Iraq, return to myself and start living again. I want to tell all the women, "Do not let anyone limit you; work on yourself, learn, develop, defend your rights and the rights of other women! We do not live in a men's world, they impose it on us! We should live in a world of equals, we just need to make it such!".

*Jasmin 26, survived domestic violence*

## “Good” or “happy” girl?

- Women and girls should become aware that they do not have to agree to such life, and that they can free themselves from unfair cultural restrictions and family rules that make them completely dependent. Be brave and choose the life you want. Take action!

I grew up in Syria, in a closed community where strict rules apply. I was not allowed any contact with men, nor looking them in the eye. It is forbidden, a sin. They taught me to be obedient and modest, and that means looking down, not talking, and doing what I'm told. I was a good student, and my parents allowed me to go to university. My father was constantly checking how I acted at school, and controlled everything he could. When I missed one lecture, he beat me and said he would kill me. In the Muslim community, when you want to kill a woman because she dishonored the family, all the leaders gather and make a decision which they always say is justified, because a woman deserved it. Luckily for me, they decided I am to live, because it was not enough of a reason for murder, absence from a single lecture. My father had to put down his knife for a while, but he forbade me to continue my education. Under punishment, I spent my time in the countryside with my family, looking for a job, and in constant fear they would kill me. My father was telling my brother, “Kill her if she bothers you, no one is allowed to ask why you did it, because everyone knows she is bad.” In the meantime, I found a young man whom I fell in love with, but I did not dare be with him, because that is something that the family and community were to decide, not me. So, I was perpetually in the struggle between trying to be a “good” or “happy” girl! One day, I finally made my choice, and went on the journey to never return. I'm still on that journey, and beyond. What I want to say to women is to follow their path, because that is their life, not their father's, or brother's! Only theirs, and they are important!

*Rima 27, survived domestic violence*



## I thought it was love, not violence...

- In my country, a man's decision is the law. We women do not have the right to think, our voice is virtually non-existent. That's what it is like in Afghanistan. I grew up as one of 26 children who, aside from bread and water, also needed understanding and love, and someone to care about them. My parents were never there for me, or my sisters, they did not even know what was happening with us. When I was 12 years old, I had my first child. At the time, I thought that it wasn't wrong, and that it is how it should be. I thought it was love, not violence. Even now I'm not sure. Am I capable of being in love at the age of 12, and sleeping with someone who is 20 years older than me? Am I a child at 12, and am I capable of understanding what's going on? I had no one to protect me and explain it to me. To save the family honor, because of my pregnancy, my father decided to marry me off against my will to an old man. That is when I ran away from home, and I have been on the road for almost four years. I grew up when I was supposed to go to school. I gave birth to a child when I was supposed to learn about life. I left my child when I had to build my own future, and ruined his. I am desperately fighting for a life that I am not even sure is possible, but I still have hope. Still!

*Nuris 16, survived sexual violence*

## Our, not their, lives

- When I was 14 years old, my father came and said that I became a woman and that I needed to get married. I did not really understand what he was talking about, and did not know whether it was the truth. Several days later, what he said happened. I'll never forget that first night. Old man's hands on my body, my disgust, anger, sadness, helplessness, despair! I was thinking prisoners had a better life. I was thinking how worthless I was! The only support was my sister who lived in Sweden. She ran away to avoid being married off like me, and succeeded in doing so. We made a plan for me to run away as well. After two years, she collected some money, sent it to me, and I ran for my life. The moment I arrived to Serbia, I learned from my mother that my little sister, who is 9 years old, had to be my replacement, and was given to my husband. Now she is going through what I went through. My life has been destroyed once again in that moment, but I live with the hope that I will help her, like my sister helped me. I have to do it! I want to tell all the girls of Africa that there is a solution for us, and that we need to teach others that these are our, not their, lives!

*Marion 16, survived forced marriage*

## THE MOST IMPORTANT FINDINGS

Atina has, based on the pilot survey, which consists of an observational, cross-sectional study and reports from the field, drew conclusions which cannot be generalized to the entire refugee population, but represent significant findings necessary for further, future in-depth analysis that should be conducted on all forms of violence against women, not just those covered by this report.

- Of the total sample, 64,8% of the participants experienced some form of physical violence, both in their countries of origin, during the journey, and during their stay in Serbia, which represents a high, statistically significant sample.
- A total of 24% of the participants experienced some form of sexual violence, and 9,9% of the participants who said they did not survive any form of sexual violence confirmed that they had injuries which occurred during sexual intercourse, which indicates that this percentage is much higher.
- Out of the total sample, 66,9% of the participants survived some form of violence - physical or sexual, which is a high statistically significant sample. It should be taken into account that this number is certainly much higher, as the survey had limitations due to the fact that, during the interviews, there was obvious presence of fear, but also shame to share such sensitive information; especially if we take into account the cultural patterns participants come from, where it is not socially acceptable to talk about this topic. On the other hand, we can conclude that the percentage is higher if we add the statistics for the choice of partners, or read reports made by data collectors.
- It has been discovered that 52,4% of the participants could not choose when and to whom they would marry. Average age when participants entered into marriage is 17,5 years old. The participant who was married youngest was only 7 years old when she entered into marriage, and the oldest - 32 years old. Based on this, we can conclude that early and child marriages are present among the refugee population.

- A total of 13 participants, i.e. 8,02% of the entire sample, who did not have the right to choose a partner or time of entering into marriage, cited that they have not survived any form of violence. Based on this, it can be concluded that 8,02% of the respondents do not perceive the lack of right to choose partners and the time of entering into marriage as violence, which shows that they are not able to recognize this form of violence, or are not able to place it in the aforementioned forms. Furthermore, this analysis shows that the percentage of women and girls who survived violence, physical or sexual, and the inability to choose a partner and time of marriage is 74,9%. Pilot survey determined that 77,1% of the participants witnessed violence against other women and girls, which indicates a broad presence of violence in the given sample.
- Based on the processing of data, it was found that the participants who responded affirmatively to the question whether they have experienced violence, talk about the violence they have witnessed more openly, in comparison to those participants who have answered that question negatively. In 17,9% of the total sample, it was found that there is a complete denial of the existence of violence throughout their entire life, both when it comes to them and others. Based on the findings of the pilot survey, it was determined that women and girls most commonly experienced violence by the police officers, during the journey and in their country of origin, as well as from partners and smugglers.
- The research also produced the following conclusion: women traveling with a partner and children have experienced violence the most, and those traveling alone have experienced it least, in relation 3:43. Women traveling with a partner usually suffered violence by smugglers, police officers, and the partner. These data show that women who are traveling with a partner, or a male family member, are not necessarily protected against violence to a higher extent, nor does that make them less vulnerable. It is important to take into account a possible assumption that women traveling with a partner and children talked more openly about violence compared to women traveling alone, because they feel safer accompanied by family members. Atina's experience should not be ignored either, and it suggests that

victims often conceal the perpetrator if it is a husband, and talk about the violence committed by smugglers. This is only an assumption, and as such requires a deeper analysis.

- A total of 16 participants said that they experienced violence in Serbia. This data indicates that violence happens in Serbia as well, not only in the countries of origin and transit, and that protection mechanisms, as well as criminal prosecution, which exist should apply to the refugee population equally, regardless of the individual status of the persons from the refugee population.
- A majority of women, 80% of them, is aware that violence in Serbia and in the European countries is prohibited by the law, but this does not necessarily mean they would report violence.
- A total of 23% of the participants said they did not know whom to turn for help, while other participants mostly responded: the police, Association “Atina”, Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, UNHCR, family members, as well as other actors on the ground.
- Researchers have established that there is a high tolerance for violence and that some participants have experienced violence so often that it has become normal and everyday occurrence.
- Life stories illustrate examples we see in the figures, and show the complexity of violence against women. Based on these life stories, we can conclude the following:
  - Violence against women and girls occurs on all the continents, independently of war or life conditions, and represents a global phenomenon.
  - Women who have survived violence often use helping other women who have the same experience as a mechanism that eases their recovery. Association “Atina” has peer support in their programs, a support program that is crucial for empowering every woman who survived violence.
  - A child cannot give consent for violence, exploitation that is happening, and often cannot understand that they are in a situation of violence and exploitation. Child neglect can lead to a situation where the child is looking for attention, and finds

the attention of a predator who manipulate them, without ever being aware that they are in a situation of violence, but thinking that someone loves them. Children who are neglected, who come from dysfunctional families, who are excluded from the health and education system, etc, are common targets of predators - pedophiles.

- The self-image these women and girls who have survived violence have, is commonly the image others (offenders, families) instilled in them - that they are bad, worthless, no good, and the process of breaking up that image and creating a positive one is long, and requires the work of the victims themselves, and professionals, in a comprehensive and individual, tailor-made, approach.
- Women and girls who have survived violence have a strength that allows them to survive and recover, and that should be the main focus of all the field workers. Empowerment is one of the most important processes - highlighting the strength in every situation.
- Women and girls want to live in a world of equals, even though the “men’s world” is imposed on them, and for that they need the support of every single individual.
- Violence is often transgenerational, which means that it is transferred to each new generation, and follows a family as a vicious circle.
- Honor killing phenomenon is a murder of a family member, or community member, by other members, due to the belief of the perpetrator that the victim caused shame to a family or community. According to the presented life story, we can see that the reasons may be banal, such as non-attendance of university lectures, and that the power men in the community have is being instrumentalized to the highest level, so they decide who and until when is to live. This phenomenon is most present in North Africa, Southwest Asia and the Indian subcontinent. Bearing in mind that refugees, migrants, are coming from these exact areas, and that such customs may take place in Serbia, it is necessary to work on the prevention of this crime, as well as on adequate response.

## RECOMMENDATIONS<sup>3</sup>

- General approach of actors in the system of protection and support with the aim of combating violence against women and girls
  - It is necessary to conduct an in-depth research of high scale to determine the actual extent of prevalence of all the forms of violence among the refugee population, and develop a combined statistics;
  - Safety and security measures should be conducted in refugee camps to monitor the potential GBV risks and vulnerabilities. The role of security sector (police) is of crucial importance in this regard. Safety audit can be found in UNFPA publication Minimum Standards<sup>4</sup>
  - It is necessary to, within the standard operating procedures, create special procedures for each individual form of violence;
  - It is necessary to strengthen the capacities of actors in the field, and work on additional education and sensitization of all the professionals, so they can timely identify violence and provide an adequate response, given the fact that violence is widespread among refugee and migrant population, and given its power of “mimicry” - many forms are difficult to recognize; In this regard, a multisectoral and coordinated approach should be created by frontline service providers.
  - Police, health, legal, psychosocial and other sectors should be sensitized and trained on guiding principles while providing services and protection to the survivors of violence. Safe referral pathway should be organized by service providers.
  - Perpetrators of violence should be prosecuted, regardless of whether they are in “transit” in Serbia, and regardless of their legal status;

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<sup>3</sup> Some of these recommendations do not necessarily arise from the research, but also include recommendations from relevant international guidelines, standards and researches developed by UNFPA and other international partners active in the field of protection and prevention of GBV, which can be applied to the current context in terms of the protection of women and girls migrants and refugees in the Republic of Serbia.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/GBVIE.Minimum.Standards.Publication.FINAL\\_.ENG\\_.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/GBVIE.Minimum.Standards.Publication.FINAL_.ENG_.pdf)

- Approach to work with refugees and migrants, with the aim of combating violence against women and girls
  - The empowerment and raising awareness of women and girls on violence is necessary, in order for them to identify it and seek help. Work with boys and men is also much needed, when it comes to prevention of this issue;
  - It is necessary to open the topic of violence against women and girls refugees in a way that is adapted to the gender, culture, and age. This topic should be discussed with everyone in order to break the vicious circle of transgenerational violence;
  - Opening an intercultural dialogue with all the refugees, migrants, asylum seekers is the key to prevention, in order to eradicate the established social patterns - honor killings. Association “Atina” has, in its work so far, encountered other forms of violence against women and girls as well, which represent a pattern of behavior in certain societies - revenge marriages, survival sex, etc. for which intercultural dialogues should also be opened to help eradicate them;
  - Introduce women and girls to the legal framework concerning their protection, in order for them to become fully aware of what violence is, and what norms protect them;
  - Work on the recovery with women and girls who have survived violence should be comprehensive, networked with all the support systems, and individually designed considering that each victim comes from a specific cultural, social, and family framework;
  - It is necessary to work on the prevention of violence in the centers, due to the fact that respondents indicated they suffer sexist comments and threats by men refugees, which causes fear and secondary victimization of the victims of violence - for this reason, standard operating procedures need to be implemented in terms of prevention, response to violence in all aspects of organizing the lives of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers. It is of utmost importance to use a participatory approach because it involves their full participation in the process.



- Given the high percentage of women and girls in refugee and migrant population, it is necessary to increase the capacities of the system in terms of response to violence - in the number of trained personnel, strengthening capacities - human, technical, and material.
  - Safety audits of centers should be conducted to identify potential risks and concerns related to GBV and Sexual GBV and mitigate those risks by, for example, organizing separate and safe latrines for women and girls and men and boys (special attention needs to be paid to lighting the center's environment, separate rooms, privacy that should exist...).
  - Safe spaces for women and girls should be organized so that women and girls can: socialize and re-build their social contacts; acquire appropriate skills; have access to GBV response services (services should above all be safe, multisectoral - psychosocial, legal, medical - and avoid stigmatization);
  - Women migrants and refugees should have unrestricted access to rights and all the issues relating to women's rights, sexual and reproductive health, and services in the receiving communities. It is necessary to create services intended for women and girls separately, as their needs are different as well.
- Approach to work in combating child marriages
- It is necessary to work on the prevention of child marriages and raising awareness due to the lack of recognizing it as violence;
  - It is necessary for the protection system to timely respond to the neglect of a child, so that children are protected from severe forms of abuse and violence; Child and forced marriages should be addressed at the policy level, as part of a government action plan in addressing the protection needs of the refugees and migrants in the country;
  - Prevention campaigns and awareness raising at different levels are needed to challenge forced and early marriage myths, promote rights of victims and gender equality and ensure availability of services to victims;

- Multisectoral response is critical by frontline professionals working directly with refugees and migrants, as potential victims of forced and child marriage have multiple and complex needs that include medical care, safe accommodation, psychosocial counseling, child and police protection and/or legal counseling;
- Effective reporting mechanisms should be in place in order to encourage victims of forced and child marriage to report the offense. These mechanisms should prevent further stigmatization and discrimination.
- Professionals should follow the principles of non-discrimination, reducing prejudice among service providers and building trust. All those providing sexual and reproductive health services, or child-friendly services, in crisis settings should work directly with girls and boys in order for them to acquire knowledge and skills on sexual and reproductive health that will help them throughout life.

## ANNEXES

Correlation between the answers related to forced sexual intercourse or other sexual activity, and answers related to injuries which occurred during the sexual intercourse

			Injuries during sexual intercourse			Total
			0	yes	no	
Forced sexual intercourse	0	number	2	0	0	2
		% forced sexual intercourse	100%	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%
	Yes	number	0	20	19	39
		% forced sexual intercourse	0.0%	51.3%	48.7%	100.0%
	No	number	4	12	105	121
		% forced sexual intercourse	3.3%	9.9%	86.8%	100.0%
Total	number	6	32	124	162	
	% forced sexual intercourse	3.7%	19.8%	76.5%	100.0%	

Table 1

Combined statistics for survived forms of physical and sexual violence

		Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Total percentage
Valid	No	53	33,1	32,7	32,7
	Yes	109	66,9	67,3	100,0
	Total	162	100,0	100,0	
Total		162	100,0		

Table 2

Correlation between the answers related to survived violence and the right to choose a marriage partner

			Marriage choice			Total
			0	yes	no	
Violence	No	number	11	29	13	53
		% violence	20,8%	54,7%	24,5%	100,0%
	Yes	number	16	21	72	109
		% violence	14,7%	19,3%	66,1%	100,0%
Total		number	27	50	85	162
		% violence	16,7%	30,9%	52,5%	100,0%

Table 3

Correlation between the answers related to survived violence and the answers related to witnessing violence against other women and girls

			Witnesses of violence				Total
			0	often	sometimes	never	
Violence	Yes	number	1	74	15	11	101
		% violence	1,0%	73,3%	14,9%	10,9%	100,0%
	No	number	1	16	20	24	61
		% violence	1,6%	26,2%	32,8%	39,3%	100,0%
Total		number	2	90	35	35	162
		% violence	1,2%	55,6%	21,6%	21,6%	100,0%

Table 4

## Correlation between the answers related to survived violence and the respondents' travel companions

			Whom they traveling with							Total
			Alone	With partner	With partner and children	With children	With cousins	with parents	Other	
Violence	Yes	number	3	10	43	16	8	8	10	98
		% violence	3,1%	10,2%	43,9%	16,3%	8,2%	8,2%	10,2%	100,0%
	No	number	1	10	31	4	2	4	9	61
		% violence	1,6%	16,4%	50,8%	6,6%	3,3%	6,6%	14,8%	100,0%
Total		number	4	20	74	20	10	12	19	159
		% violence	2,5%	12,6%	46,5%	12,6%	6,3%	7,5%	11,9%	100,0%

Table 5

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