

World Day Against Trafficking in Persons 30 July 2023

Defend and promote civic space to ensure that no victim of trafficking is left behind

Today, on World Day against Trafficking in Persons, La Strada International brings attention to the shrinking space for civil society and calls on governments to defend and promote civic space.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) are at the frontline of working with trafficked persons and those at risk of this grave human rights violation. They contribute to policy and legislative developments, awareness raising and prevention, capacity building, and psychosocial and legal assistance, and other direct (shelter) support. CSOs advance the rule of law and human rights values by monitoring and advocating for human rights-compliant responses to human trafficking and promoting access to justice for all victims.

The important role of CSOs in preventing and combating human trafficking is recognised by all international and European anti-trafficking legislation and related guidelines. However, La Strada International is observing a shrinking space for civil society, which risks leaving many victims behind.

Several European governments have imposed administrative, legal and political measures, such as strenuous registration processes and restrictions on CSOs obtaining foreign funding, which limit their ability to conduct their day-to-day activities. In addition, governments do not inform, consult or engage CSOs in the development of anti-trafficking legislation, strategies, and national action plans, or ignore their views. Across Europe, CSOs are largely excluded from the formal victim identification process, despite the fact that they, as independent organisations, are well-placed to gain the trust of marginalised groups. At the same time, international organisations are given greater responsibility for the identification, referral and return of persons, as well as the development of cross-border referral mechanisms, further limiting CSOs' access and support to victims. In some European countries, we also see how CSOs that provide life-saving assistance to refugees are prosecuted for facilitating migrant

smuggling, and how feminist CSOs are maligned for 'promoting gender ideology'. These developments are exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of anti-migration sentiments, and the war in Ukraine – which led to an increasing number of new actors, ad-hoc structures and extra coordination layers and further competition for funding. Moreover, the growing influence of religious and socially conservative organisations also impacts CSOs' service provision and 'watchdog' functions.

To reach every victim and ensure that no one is left behind, La Strada International calls on national governments, EU institutions, international organisations, donors, and other anti-trafficking actors, to defend and promote the civic space for CSOs. In particular, they need to:

- Remove all policies limiting the advocacy and operational functioning of anti-trafficking CSOs.
- Ensure that anti-trafficking CSOs are heard, and their feedback is meaningfully considered, during national legislative processes and in the development of national strategies and action plans.
- Provide CSOs with long-term, sustainable funding to allow them to offer direct services to victims and monitor the national implementation of anti-trafficking laws.
- Include CSOs in the process of identification of victims of trafficking.
- Include CSOs in the development and implementation of all national and international mechanisms that organise the referral of trafficked persons.
- End the prosecution of CSOs as facilitators of irregular migration and migrant smuggling.
- Actively oppose the vilification of feminist CSOs as promoters of 'gender ideology'.

La Strada International is conducting research into the shrinking civic space environment of its member organisations and assessing the influence of both national authorities and other actors on the anti-trafficking field. This research will be published in autumn 2023.