

# Annual report 2023

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## La Strada International

### Vision, Mission, Working principles & Core work

La Strada International is a European NGO Platform against human trafficking, that works from a human rights perspective in support of trafficked persons, by preventing human trafficking and by providing adequate assistance and support and access to justice and effective remedies.

We believe in a world where all people are free to migrate and work in the labour sector of their choice, and are free from trafficking, exploitation, and abuse, knowing that their rights are respected at home, abroad, and on the way. Human trafficking can only be stopped if people's rights as human beings are recognised, respected, and realised.

La Strada International is active at a broad European level. While human trafficking is a global issue, the Platform focusses on the situation in Europe (both EU and non-EU countries) and on addressing all forms of human trafficking. The Platform comprises 32 member organisations, including 3 associate members, from 24 European countries.

Members provide (psycho) social, medical, legal and vocational counselling, safe accommodation, long-term reintegration and employment support, and other direct and indirect services for trafficked persons and at-risk groups. Furthermore, members build the awareness, knowledge and capacity of relevant stakeholders, conduct awareness campaigns and engage in policy advocacy on the national level to realise change.

LSI's international secretariat facilitates cooperation, capacity building and expertise sharing and provides support in setting standards and incorporating international developments into national actions. The secretariat collects and analyses this information for evidence-based advocacy and invites international organisations and other social movements to cooperate and support our work.

La Strada International aims to be a transparent, open-minded, and reliable knowledge actor, which takes up a critical watch dog role. As such, we engage independently with other actors to enhance and multiply our joint actions and ensure greater impact and accountability. We realise that counter-trafficking policies can have (unintended) negative effects on the rights of trafficked persons and affected groups. Hence, we call for impact assessments of all counter-trafficking actions, policies and legislation, built on evidence and adequate data.

## Human trafficking in Europe in 2023

Trafficking in human beings is a crime and a human rights violation. All over the world, men, women and children are brought, through coercion, abuse of power or vulnerability, into situations of severe exploitation. This can include sexual exploitation, forced labour, the forced removal of organs, and slavery or similar practices. Such exploitation occurs in particular in the most precarious sectors with weak labour rights, such as the sex industry, construction, agriculture, and domestic work. People are also trafficked for begging or illegal acts such as pickpocketing, drug dealing and cybercrime.

Trafficked persons experience a series of rights violations, ranging from restriction of movement and confiscation of pay to severe physical, sexual and psychological abuse. Trafficking does not always involve the crossing of borders; it can also occur within a country. Although trafficking is widely recognised as a serious human rights violation, support for trafficked persons is still inadequate, with only a small fraction of trafficked persons identified, and an even smaller portion receiving support.

Human trafficking is rooted in global inequality, (gender) discrimination, oppressive social structures, exclusion, poverty, political instability and (armed) conflicts. These factors lead large groups of people to seek work, safety, and stability away from their home. The demand for cheap labour and products, globalisation, and deregulation of labour have made workers more vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. Restrictive migration policies and the growing anti-migrant sentiments and xenophobia by public and political figures in many countries also lead to discrimination of migrants, further driving situations of exploitation and abuse.

The 2022 Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage<sup>1</sup> suggest that 50 million people are in a situation of modern slavery globally and that the number has risen by ten million in the past five years. These estimates reveal that approximately 28 million people are trapped in forced labour and 22 million in forced marriage. This translates to nearly one out of every 150 people in the world to be in a situation of severe exploitative. For the region Europe and Central Asia, it is estimated that 4.1 million people are in a situation of forced labour. For the EU (447.7 million inhabitants), that means nearly 3 million people to be in a situation of 'modern slavery', including 1.68 million in forced labour. However, only around 10,000 victims of human trafficking are identified annually within the EU<sup>2</sup>.

The five sectors accounting for most of the total adult forced labour (87 per cent) are services, manufacturing, construction, agriculture (excluding fishing), and domestic work. Migrant workers are estimated to be three times more likely to be in forced labour than other workers. LSI members reported cases related to these sectors in 2023. *See page 10.*

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<sup>1</sup> [Global Estimates of Modern Slavery: Forced Labour and Forced Marriage](#)

<sup>2</sup> On 24 January 2024, EUROSTAT published the 2022 statistics for trafficking in human beings. The newly released data show that 10,093 victims of trafficking in human beings were registered in the EU in 2022, representing a 41% increase compared to 2021.

## Operational environment and challenges

The LSI Platform operates in a challenging environment. The current anti-migration sentiment in European politics – *as noted from the last EU Parliament and national elections in EU MS and the strong support for the restricting EU Migration policies (new EU Asylum and Migration Pact)* - makes it difficult to advocate for greater rights for migrants who are victim of trafficking and those who are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Also in 2023, national and European policy measures often remain focussed on fighting crime, restricting migration, and repressing prostitution/sex work, rather than tackling the root causes of human trafficking and improving protections for victims and vulnerable persons. Indeed, the criminal justice framework often undermines the rights of trafficked persons and vulnerable groups, and its scope is far too limited to deal with the complexities of human trafficking.

Many of the people supported by La Strada International members – who have experienced often severe forms of exploitation, violence and abuse – are not officially identified as victims and are therefore excluded from accessing those rights. Through our members, we work diligently at the grassroots level and have a strong insight into the varying national situations on the ground and remaining gaps.

## Developments that impacted and challenged our work in 2023

There were several important developments that had a huge impact on the work of La Strada International and that of our members. We highlight a few on these developments and challenges:

- The still **ongoing war of Russia against Ukraine** and the large number of displaced persons from the Ukraine, needing information and support in Europe. This has impacted the work of our member in Ukraine, but also the work of our members in neighbouring countries. LSI members also increasingly received request for support from refugees and TCN migrants from other parts of the world, who were often not entitled to protection and support and hence quite vulnerable.
- The large group of other refugees and migrants that are vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, especially as they have little access to rights in Europe.
- More **anti migration politics**, focusing on limiting access, return, and detention of migrants. European governments continued to externalize border control, seeking agreements on (offshore processing of) asylum seekers, such as the EU deal with Tunisia and Turkey and bilateral deals between Italy and Albania and the initially proposed deal between the UK and Rwanda.
- A growing **Shrinking Space** in parts of Europe, with civil society organisations in Europe being labelled “foreign agents” or “undesirable organizations”, limiting their participation in public life. Changes in the legal environment, challenges in funding and access to resources and obstacles in accessing policymaking have hindered our members in their work, especially in Turkey, Poland, Ukraine, Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia Herzegovina, and Belarus. LSI members from Belarus remain and continue to operate in exile for the third year.
- **Challenges to support victims and ensure access to justice** - Victims still have very limited access to protection, support and assistance, if they are unable or unwilling to cooperate with the authorities or if the criminal procedure has not started or is discontinued. Moreover, there is hardly any access to residence for victims, based on personal or humanitarian grounds.
- Despite international and European legally binding standards on non-punishment and the adoption of specific legislation in several countries, **trafficked persons in Europe are often still wrongly detained, prosecuted and punished** for offences they have been compelled to commit in the course, or as a result, of having been trafficked.
- **Many workers in Europe work without adequate protection or decent minimum wage**, and those in irregular work or in an irregular situation are especially at risk of severe labour exploitation and abuse, including human trafficking and forced labour.
- **Businesses find legal loopholes to avoid compliance with labour rights standards**, like abusive subcontracting practices and making use of letter box companies to deny responsibility for the exploitation and abuse. It is very difficult to hold businesses accountable, but the current legislative developments for EU legislation on due diligence (CSDDD) and the introduction of an EU Forced Labour Ban are promising practices.
- Adequate **safe reporting to report exploitation and access justice** remain lacking in most European countries, with people who are undocumented facing arrest, detention, and deportation if they approach the police to report violence or abuse.
- The number of **identified trafficked persons in Europe** remains low. Only a small percentage of the estimated high number of victims is recognised as such and some groups of victims or forms of human trafficking are hardly recognised.

## Addressing the impact of the war in Ukraine

The Russian invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 has led to the largest movement of people in Europe since the Second World War. Thus, much of our attention in 2023 continued to relate to Ukraine and the situation of the displaced persons.

LSI and members raised awareness and monitored the situation; provided information and direct support to refugees in the neighbouring countries (Poland, Romania, Moldova) as well as other EU and non-EU countries. Often, jointly with other stakeholders including governments, information was provided about the rights provided under the temporary protection directive (TPD), including the rights to financial support, housing and legal residence; as well as about the importance of registration for the TPD.

Online and offline materials were developed, including videos and an information Portal. The LSI portal includes information on (international and temporary) protection & asylum, housing, employment and exploitation and human trafficking and provides information on rights for Ukrainians and other displaced persons, support services and prevention of risks and links to LSI members websites, as well as to websites of other relevant stakeholders and information portals.<sup>3</sup>

Refugees from Ukraine were further informed – via counsellors and (voluntary) cultural mediators - about decent work, the risks of exploitation including human trafficking and how to seek help or report the crime. La Strada Ukraine continued the operation of their national helplines, counseling and other support services to trafficked and exploited persons in the country under difficult circumstances.

In Ukraine and in neighbouring countries national (emergency) tasks forces were set up by governments and international organisations, which LSI members joined. In Ukraine and Poland, LSI members co-organised these tasks forces with IOM, while LSI continued to participate in the UN Tasks forced on Ukraine and human trafficking and on Gender Based Violence.

LSI members further recruited and trained voluntary cultural mediators to conduct outreach and provide information to displaced persons from Ukraine. Also, social media channels were monitored and used to reach out and communicate with those looking for information, housing, employment etc. LSI and partners collected information and analysed data, next to conducting further research on assessment of the situation. LSI members organised trainings and events, as well as joint public event during LSI NGO Platform in Romania on the issue, next to numerous exchange meetings

LSI joined workshops of the OSCE (19/10/2023) and received a Ukrainian delegation of legal professionals (lawyers, prosecutors, judges and persons responsible for human trafficking), to the Netherlands on 18 October 2023, organised by UNODC. La Strada International and members further contributed to high level events and frequent meetings on the situation in Ukraine and human trafficking.

Helpline services were extended, promoted and data collected via the helplines was recorded via databases and analysed, direct support. Desk research was conducted for HEUNI, the European

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/displaced-from-the-ukraine/>



Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, including a stakeholder mapping in Poland and Ukraine, and collected data related to current labour exploitation and THB statistics, practices and challenges.

With our member Anti-Slavery International (ASI) LSI worked on a **guidance** for the private sector, which was launched in May 2023. This guidance explains how businesses can mitigate some of the risks affecting displaced people and to guide their due diligence activities to prevent and remedy the exploitation of displaced people. LSI, LS Poland and Adpare Romania also contributed to research by the regional UN task force on THB and Ukraine (this report is to be published in 2024) and with IMPACT for the office of Ms Pramila Patten, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Both researches were partly funded with other grants.

Further a chapter on the situation of Ukraine was published for journalists and is part of a **handbook for journalists**<sup>4</sup> on human trafficking, published in December 2023. LSI contributed further to around 10 external researches related to the 'Ukrainian issue', through consultation groups and interviews.

Through desk research, interviews, online outreach, helplines and regular participation in task forces and other meetings with relevant stakeholders and grass root organisations, LSI received information about remaining challenges and gaps and collected information on recruitment, sectors etc.

In 2023:

- LSI gave interviews to around **20 media representatives** related to Ukraine.
- LSI organised 3 webinars on the situation in Ukraine; on 30 May with ASI to launch the Due Diligence Guidance<sup>5</sup>, on 9-20 September NGO Platform<sup>6</sup> and on 24 August, a webinar with HEUNI.<sup>7</sup>
- LSI further provided **two lectures for students** of international law that participated in either the summer or winter school in the Netherlands, organised by the University of Tilburg and IMPACT.
- **29 events** were attended live or online, that related to the situation of human trafficking and the war in Ukraine, where LSI provided contributions, including events of ELA - Platform subgroup on displaced persons/refugees from Ukraine and Solidarity Platform/
- In addition LSI attended **7** meetings of the national task force meetings of the Netherlands on Ukraine; **16** (UN) Regional monthly Anti-Trafficking Task Force (ATTF) on Ukraine and **8-10** Regional GVB tasks force meeting on Ukraine
- **4** PICUM members meetings on Ukraine, related to monitoring the situation on the group and advocacy for the prolonging of the Temporary Protection Directive (TPD)
- From 18 – 20 September, LSI organised a public event on Ukraine, during its **NGO Platform**, for which 35 participants travelled and additionally around 40 additional guests were invited.

LSI joined also the subgroup of PICUM on Ukraine and with PICUM, ECRE and their members, advocacy has been taken place – and is ongoing for extension of the Temporary Protection Directive (which was extended in June 2024, until March 2026<sup>8</sup>).

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<sup>4</sup> [handbook for journalists](#)

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/launch-of-human-rights-due-diligence-risks-of-modern-slavery-for-displaced-workers/>

<sup>6</sup> [LSI holds annual NGO Platform - La strada International](#)

<sup>7</sup> [La Strada International and HEUNI webinar on Ukrainian refugees - La strada International](#)

<sup>8</sup> [See joint NGO statement](#) - The EU must provide future-proof solutions for people displaced from Ukraine

## Providing assistance to trafficked persons and vulnerable groups

In 2023, our members assisted 5103 (presumed) victims of trafficking. The majority of our members (54%) reported an increase in assisted cases. The number of assisted female victims is still higher than the number of assisted men. While women are still often trafficked for sexual exploitation, they are also subjected to labour exploitation or forced criminality, though in those sectors most victims are males. Generally, increases are seen in identified male victims for labour exploitation and forced criminality.

### *Nationality*

Generally, the nationality of assisted victims differs widely among LSI member organisations; those that assist many foreign victims, see that victims originate from all parts of the world. Some Western European countries such as Germany and the Netherlands have assisted an increased number of presumed victims that are national citizens. However, many victims still have foreign origins, and come mostly from South-East Asia, Latin America or Africa.

In 2023 members noted:

- An increase in the number of Vietnamese, (female) South American<sup>1</sup> and African victims and victims from Guinea Conakry
- A decrease in cases involving persons from Afghanistan
- An increase in the number of non-EU workers (through posting) ♣ An increase in the number of Ukrainian men being exploited
- The number of Nigerian women benefiting from the assistance of NGOs is still high and concerns persons often requiring long-term assistance.

### *Assistance to (potential) trafficked persons from Ukraine*

At least 187 (potential) victims from Ukraine were assisted in 2023 by our members. However, there was no overall increase in the number of victims assisted from this country in comparison with 2022. The data from LSI as well as other international reports still shows that the number of assisted (presumed) trafficking victims of Ukrainian origin is rather low, given the number of displaced persons from this country. However, despite the continuation of the war, there is less attention, and several European countries have sobered their assistance for refugees from Ukraine, which might increase their vulnerability in the coming period.

## Building evidence: data collection and research

La Strada International and its members register and analyse data about human trafficking in Europe, in line with international privacy and data protection rules. All LSI members collect data related to victims assisted; including country of origin; gender; age; type of exploitation and the sector of exploitation. They provide this data, in anonymised form, to national and international bodies (particularly their national governments or GRETA) for statistical and analytical purposes.

The LSI secretariat and members conduct research at national and European level to build evidence for our advocacy work. To get more insight into the risks for Ukrainian refugees, we conducted research both at European level and national level in 2023. With our member Anti-Slavery, we further worked on a guidance for the private sector, which was published in 2023. This guidance explains how businesses can mitigate some of the risks affecting displaced people and to guide their due diligence activities to prevent and remedy the exploitation of displaced people.

### *Publications/research*

In 2023, La Strada International worked on five publications

- An academic paper on criminalising the knowing use of services by trafficked people (to be published in 2024)
- A 'Human rights due diligence: risks of modern slavery for displaced workers' guidance. This guidance developed with Anti-Slavery International, has been designed for businesses to support the employment of displaced people and address the risk of modern slavery in their value chains.
- A report on Shrinking Space in Europe (to be published 2024)
- Advocacy and Explanatory Papers on non-punishment<sup>9</sup>
- The Hidden at Work advocacy report (June 2023)<sup>10</sup>

In addition La Strada International and its members contributed to numerous studies of others.

### *Development of a data (collection) strategy*

In 2023, La Strada International hired a consultant to develop a data collection strategy. For this a survey was launched and interviews were conducted with several European NGO networks. The findings of the interviews were checked with LSI members via an online focus group. The strategy will be used to define LSI actions in 2024 and beyond on data collection and related fundraising efforts for data collection.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/new-lsi-publications-on-non-punishment-principle/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3493-Advocacy%20Report%20-%20Hidden%20at%20Work%20%20June.pdf>

## Contributing to policy and advocacy

Awareness raising and advocacy is an important part of LSI's work to promote victim protection and accountability. The Platform advocates for the rights of trafficked persons and vulnerable groups and promotes women's rights, labour rights and migrants' rights to ensure people are protected from exploitation and abuse. This also includes the protection of those working in irregular sectors like domestic workers and sex workers.

To ensure compliance with international legislation and accountability for the effective implementation of policies and regulations, LSI advocates for legislation that recognises and respects the rights of all trafficked persons and monitors the implementation of legislation to help ensure that those rights are realised. For this, the Platform targets European and inter-governmental bodies (European Union, Council of Europe, OSCE, and UN bodies) through news media and social media, petitions, statements and campaigns, and joint NGO advocacy.

### *Global Advocacy*

At global level, LSI continued following the UNTOC review mechanism. In July, LSI contributed in a penal UNODC organised a constructive dialogue for the Review Mechanism to brief stakeholders, including NGOs on how the review process has developed. LSI and members provided short interventions during the session on human trafficking. LSI further followed developments around the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration; ratifications of relevant ILO conventions; the work of the UN Special Rapporteurs; and CEDAW, as well as the work of IOM, ILO and the Alliance 8.7.

### *European Advocacy*

With the OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings and ODIHR. In November, a new OSCE OSR has been appointed. Kari Johnstone, with whom La Strada International met in December 2024. LSI also participated in the OSCE Alliance conference in April 2023 and meetings of the OSCE Alliance Expert Group as well as webinars. LSI further joined the OSCE campaign Be Safe to raise awareness about human trafficking among refugees from Ukraine.

With the Council of Europe and the GRETA secretariat, LSI was in frequent contact. LSI joined the meeting of the specialised Lawyers and NGO network, held in October and also followed the work of CINGO, the Conference of International Organisation to the CoE. LSI members were met during country visits and round tables of GRETA, including in Austria, Bulgaria, France, Denmark, UK etc.

### *Advocacy at European Union level*

In 2023, La Strada International closely monitored the EU legislative processes around the amendment of the EU anti-trafficking Directive, the recast of the EU Victim Rights Directive, the proposal for a revision of the EU Victims' Rights Directive and the new EU Directive on Violence against Women/Gender Based Violence as well as the Directive on Corporate Social Responsibility and the Forced Labour Ban regulation. LSI further followed developments around the revision of the Single Permit Directive, the EU care proposal and discussions around the EU action plan on smuggling. LSI contributed to submissions and feedback for consultations and closely cooperated with various NGO consortia for this advocacy work.

## Thematic advocacy

Next to more reactive work related to international legislation and policies, LSI's advocacy focussed around specific thematic priorities as per our 2021 – 2025 strategic plan: Countering shrinking space for Civil Society; Unconditional support; Recognition of all forms of human trafficking; Safe reporting; Access to Residence; Fair migration policies; Access to justice; Fair labour rights; and non-punishment.

With members working groups were set up on the issues of non- punishment and identification of victims. All members were further involved in LSI research on addressing shrinking space.

## Addressing Shrinking space

Changes in the legal environment, challenges in funding and access to resources and obstacles in accessing policymaking hinder our members in their work. To address and ask attention for the shrinking civil society space in Europe, La Strada International – supported by an intern - implemented a research project on 'Shrinking Civic Space in the Anti-Trafficking Field'. This comprised desk research, the development and roll-out of a survey, as well as conducting interviews and online focus groups sessions and the writing of a research paper in the period February – June 2023. The research report, which covers both the legal obligations of state's cooperation with civil society, as well as the practical side, analyses how 'shrinking space' has affected LSI's member organisations working in the anti-trafficking field in Europe over the past five years. It was discussed with LSI members during the General Assembly in September 2023, where further challenges and recommendations were shared. The report will be published in 2024. The issue of shrinking space was also taken up in LSI's international advocacy.

## Identification of trafficked persons

The number of identified trafficked persons in Europe remains low. Only a small percentage of the estimated high number of victims is recognised as such. Many persons, facing severe forms of exploitation – with clear indications for human trafficking – are not recognised as victims of trafficking. To address this issue, La Strada International set up a special members Working Group on the issue of identification. A template was developed to collect information from LSI members about good and bad practices in their countries. This template was tested and filled by members of the working group and later also other LSI members were asked to submit responses.

The input collected will be used to develop a best practice guide for further guidance for the direct work of LSI's members and for further advocacy. Hence also the development of a policy paper/advocacy paper is planned to be published in 2024 or 2025. This issue will continue to get attention, also related to the EU plans to strengthen NRMs, establish focal points and possibly develop a European Referral Mechanism, as foreseen in the amended EU anti Trafficking Directive. LSI members further worked on trainings for different professional groups to enhance the detection and identification of trafficked persons, next to direct and online outreach work.

## Promoting the Non-Punishment principle

Despite international and European legally binding standards on non-punishment and the adoption of specific legislation in several countries, trafficked persons in Europe are often still wrongly detained, prosecuted and punished for offences they have been compelled to commit in the course, or as a result, of having been trafficked. This is a serious human rights violation and a denial of justice. It serves to reinforce distrust towards the criminal justice system by victims and others.

Overall, we observe a variety of interpretations, a lack of awareness among legal professionals, and serious shortcomings in the implementation of the non-punishment provision. Successful applications of the non-punishment provision do exist, but these positive experiences are far more often the exception than the norm. LSI members report failures to apply the non-punishment provision for all forms of human trafficking, but particularly in cases of trafficking for forced criminality, where victims seem more likely to be automatically regarded as perpetrators.

To address the issue, the LSI members working group aimed to further promote the non-punishment principle at national and international level. Firstly the group developed an Explanatory Brief and an Advocacy Document on Non-Punishment, for awareness raising and advocacy towards (legal) professionals and policy makers. Both documents have been translated into German, French, Italian, Spanish, Serbian and Danish and more translations are foreseen. All are available on the LSI website. In addition, a template was developed to collect non-punishment cases to showcase how the principle of non-punishment is applied in practice (or its lack of application). This collection should illustrate the implications this principle has for the victims of human trafficking and how national authorities could, by applying this principle, protect these victims from further harm.

The assessment report, assessing the practical application of the non-punishment principle, will be published in July 2024. La Strada International and its members further actively push for legislative changes and more guidance at European level to promote a better application of the Non-Punishment Principle across Europe.

## International projects in 2023

In 2023, La Strada International was involved in 5 international projects.

### *Cross-Continent Collaborations to Protect Asian Trafficking Victims in Europe (Porticus Disrupt Program)*

2023 was the final year of the *project Cross-Continent Collaborations to Protect Asian Trafficking Victims in Europe* started. La Strada International coordinated project activities in Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic, which focused on reviewing relevant legal frameworks and jurisprudence and identification of practical challenges in legal formulation and its interpretation, next to networking and engaging other stakeholders to raise awareness on these issues. Bi-monthly meetings were held with the project consortium. On 18 December, on Migrants Rights Day, LSI launched the findings of the project and its final report, as well as stories of victims assisted.<sup>11</sup>

### *Postcare – Posting of Third Country Nationals in Care work*

LSI continued working on the project Postcare<sup>12</sup>, focusing on research related to the posting of third-country nationals in European care services. Funded by the European Commission and coordinated by the Italian trade union association CONFESAL, the project was implemented by an international consortium of trade unions, universities and research institutes and expert organisations in eight European countries; Italy, Spain, Serbia, Slovenia, Poland, Germany, Greece and the Netherlands. LSI conducted research on the posting of third-country national care workers in the Netherlands and their possible exploitation, which included desk research, nine interviews and one focus group meeting, as well as the developments of an information portal, focus group meetings and reports.<sup>13</sup>

### *Trainings to enhance trafficking investigations and prosecutions*

In 2023, LSI further cooperated with the Academy of European Law (ERA) for the project “Countering Trafficking in Human Beings – Practice-oriented training on measures to enhance investigations and prosecutions, disrupt the financial business model and intensify preventive measures projects.” This project foresaw in the training of around 300 EU practitioners (judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, financial and compliance officers and NGOs) in how to effectively counter human trafficking from a perspective that encourages better cooperation between Member States. Together with other partners, La Strada International joined this project to support the organising of a total of six training events. La Strada International contributed to two of these trainings in 2023.

- Financial Investigation of Trafficking in Human Beings  
23-24 March 2023, Sofia, Bulgaria
- Reducing Demand and Preventing Trafficking in Human Beings  
5-6 June 2023, Krakow, Poland

During these trainings, European legislation, standards and forms of cooperation that are applied in the field of addressing human trafficking are debated and assessed, in particular, related to intensifying investigations, including intelligence-led ones, and prosecutions to dismantle the trafficking chain.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/projects-campaigns/protecting-asian-trafficking-victims-in-europe>

<sup>12</sup> [Postcare](#)

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/postcare-project-posting-of-third-country-nationals-in-care-services/>  
<https://www.lastradainternational.org/posted-in-the-netherlands/>

Moreover, financial investigations into human trafficking and disrupting the business model of criminals is also examined.<sup>14</sup>

### *North Korean forced labour case and appeal against two Dutch companies*

On 4 December 2020, La Strada International with (legal) support of Prakken D’Olivera and Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) filed a complaint with the Dutch Public Prosecution against two Dutch shipbuilding firms. These two companies are suspected to have acquired ships from Polish shipyards, aware that these ships were constructed at wharfs employing North-Korean workers under inhumane, slave-like conditions that are in clear violation of international labour laws. On 8 December 2021, the complaint was dismissed by the Dutch Public Prosecution.

La Strada International decided to lodge a written complaint with the Court of Appeal in The Hague, pursuant to Article 12 of the Dutch Code of Criminal Procedure. On 16 December 2022 – one year after the dismissal by the Dutch Public Prosecutor’s Office – an appeal challenging the Dutch government’s failure to investigate the use of North Korean forced labour in the shipbuilding supply chains of two Dutch shipbuilding firms has been filed by La Strada International with support of Prakken d’Oliveira, Global Legal Action Network (GLAN) and Freedom Fund.<sup>15</sup>

### *Consultancy for HEUNI – ELECT THB project*

The ELECT THB project aimed to enhance the identification and investigation of trafficking in human beings (THB) for sexual and labour exploitation and increase collaboration between law enforcement authorities and other key actors to combat it. The project has been developed in close cooperation with law enforcement and other authorities in Finland, Estonia and Latvia to strengthen the knowledge of and approach to human trafficking. Evidence shows that trafficking criminality spans across the countries. Criminals use complicated structures to hide their activities – e.g. fronts, cascade sub-contracting, posting of workers – and to launder and hide the illicit flows and proceeds of crime. Human trafficking and the wider shadow economy and financial crime are also closely linked. Therefore, the project aims to disrupt the financial business model of trafficking which will help counter the impunity of traffickers, exploiters, profit makers, users and abusers and untangle the trafficking chain. ELECT THB. Enhanced Law Enforcement Cooperation and Training on Trafficking in Human Beings; LSI together with LS Ukraine, LS Poland conducted consultancy and wrote the reports on Poland and Ukraine.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/nkforcedlabour/> and <https://era-comm.eu/countering-thb/>

<sup>15</sup> See further information about the case and the appeal on <https://www.lastradainternational.org/nkforcedlabour/>

<sup>16</sup> [https://heuni.fi/-/elect\\_thb#9fd8fb6a](https://heuni.fi/-/elect_thb#9fd8fb6a)



## Visibility and (social) media work

Awareness of the problem of trafficking in human beings has significantly increased and has gained more attention, including of national and international governmental bodies and the media. However, the way that human trafficking is portrayed and discussed by the media, governments and other actors is often one-dimensional and primarily focussed on exploitation in the sex industry. Therefore, LSI contributes to the creation of a more realistic picture of human trafficking, its root causes and different manifestations.

In 2023, LSI tried to develop new and interactive communication strategies, and enhance its social media work. LSI secretariat's social media work has been extended and its outreach is clearly more noticed. Next to two webpages<sup>17</sup>, LSI maintains two Facebook pages, and a Twitter and LinkedIn account. Information on new developments and related LSI and LSI members activities was regularly shared via LSI's social media channels and monthly newsletter. LSI also developed website pages related to the North Korean appeal case, EU posting and Ukraine, *see projects*.

In 2023, LSI provided over 35 interviews to the media (mainly related to the war in Ukraine) including to quite well known media agencies, such as CNN, BBC, the Guardian, Reuters, Euractiv and many others. Like in 2022, much of the media attention related to the risks of human trafficking for Ukrainian refugees, including related to surrogacy and forced adoption of children.

In addition to the website, linked in and Facebook updates, the following statistics can be provided:

- 12 newsletters published
- LSI hotlines numbers shared via EU, and OSCE and many other websites. LSI members support services also available now via the EU victim support service
- 64 Website posts
- Adventscalendar with posts for a series of 24 days from 1 till 24 December 2023.

### Campaigns

La Strada International joined several campaigns by others in 2023

- #PayYourWorkers/#RespectLabourRights campaign
- Forced labour ban campaign<sup>18</sup>
- Campaign PICUM - #ProtectNotSurveil - calling on EU institutions and EU MS to ensure that the Artificial Intelligence Act protects the rights of all people, including migrants.<sup>19</sup>
- EU Victims' Rights Campaign 'keep your eyes open'<sup>20</sup>

### Statements

LSI published the following statements in 2023

- In January, a joint statement on 30 January with HRDN members, raising concerns about proposals to freeze all activities of the European Parliament's DROI Subcommittee and stop all urgency resolutions on human rights abuses in third countries in the wake of the "Qatargate" corruption scandal.<sup>21</sup> The same month, LSI also joint a NGO statement,

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<sup>17</sup> [www.lastradainternational.org](http://www.lastradainternational.org) and [www.justiceatlast.eu](http://www.justiceatlast.eu)

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/eu-parliament-makes-progress-on-forced-labour-ban/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/campaign-against-eus-use-of-ai-in-migration-and-border-control/>

<sup>20</sup> "I will keep my eyes open"

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/01/30/joint-ngo-letter-european-parliament-decision-shrink-urgency-resolutions-human>

coordinated by ATLEU, urging the UK government to act without further delay to remove this exemption.

- A statement on the revision of the Victim Rights Directive revision on 22 February<sup>22</sup>
- In March, we contributed and co-signed a joint statement on the forcible transfer, deportation, and adoption of children from Ukraine by Russia<sup>23</sup>
- A joint statement with PICUM and EDRI on developments around the AI Act<sup>24</sup>
- A joint statement urging the European Commission to scrap plans for a directive on foreign-funded organisations.
- In May, a joint letter to the Spanish Secretary of State for the European Union asking to speed up the process of the Forced Labour Ban regulation negotiations.
- In May, La Strada International is one of 50 NGOs that signed a joint statement urging the UK government to abandon the Illegal Migration Bill.<sup>25</sup>
- 30 July a statement on Global Human Trafficking Day<sup>26</sup>
- In September, LSI joined a Red lines document related to the Forced Labour Ban<sup>27</sup>, a joint NGO open letter to MEPs on prostitution report<sup>28</sup> and cooperated on a Joint civil society position on the Proposal for a Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence 2022/0066 (COD)<sup>29</sup>
- On 18 October, we launched our statement for EU Anti Trafficking Day, related with the revision of the EU THB Directive.<sup>30</sup>
- On 28 November, another statement urging progress on the forced labour ban was launched<sup>31</sup>
- In December, LSI published joint statements with other NGOs on the revision of the Victim Rights Directive, and on surrogacy in relation with the amendment of the THB Directive

### *(Public) Events*

In 2023, LSI (co) organised 3 webinars and a public event during the LSI NGO Platform in Romania. Moreover, LSI attended 81 events and spoke at 44 of these events (over 50%); average 6-7 events each month. LSI further engaged in over 60 networking events.

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<sup>22</sup> <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3481-Statement%20Victim%20Rights%20Day%20-%20La%20Strada%20International.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3484-Joint%20statement%20on%20forced%20deportation%20and%20adoption%20-%20Final.pdf>

<sup>24</sup> <https://edri.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/PDF-FINAL-Statement-European-Parliament-Make-sure-the-AI-act-protects-peoples-rights.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/statement-on-uks-new-illegal-migration-bill/>

<sup>26</sup> <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3498-Statement%20%20World%20Day%20Against%20Trafficking%20in%20Persons%20-%20-%20280723%20-%20FINAL.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/civil-society-red-lines-on-eu-forced-labour-regulation/>

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/open-letter-to-meps-reject-the-prostitution-report/>

<sup>29</sup> [https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3506-Joint%20Position\\_Civil%20Society\\_Directive%20VAW.pdf](https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3506-Joint%20Position_Civil%20Society_Directive%20VAW.pdf)

<sup>30</sup> <https://documentation.lastradainternational.org/lisidocs/3508-Statement%20on%20EU%20Anti%20Trafficking%20Day%20-%20-%2018%20October%202023%20revision%20Directive.pdf>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.lastradainternational.org/news/civil-society-urges-eu-council-progress-on-forced-labour-ban/>

## Cooperation and partnerships

The La Strada Platform has built an extensive network of contacts and allies over the last 27 years. These include law enforcement, legal professionals, service providers and NGOs, media, and governmental actors. LSI is a member of the Human Rights and Democracy Network (HRDN), the OSCE Alliance Expert Coordination Team (AECT), the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), the Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM) and the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA). LSI has observer status to the Council of Europe and the UN (ECOSOC) and is a member of the EU Civil Society E-Platform on trafficking in human beings.

LSI's advocacy work is done in close cooperation with, in particular, PICUM, ESWA, Victim Support Europe (VSE) and the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW). In 2023, LSI undertook several common advocacy actions with these networks and held regular exchange meetings. LSI joins two working groups of PICUM and is also part of VSE's NGO round tables that discuss and prepare actions related to Victim Rights (including the VR Strategy and evaluation of the VR Directive). Through membership of HRDN, LSI mainly follows human rights issues at EU level and related to EU's cooperation with third countries.<sup>3233</sup> With GAATW, cooperation relates to European advocacy and joint monitoring of the UN Review Mechanism.<sup>34</sup>

With ESWA, La Strada International follows policies that impact sex workers' rights. La Strada International jointly with 14 other organisations part of a coalition calling for decriminalisation of sex work and meaningful inclusion of sex workers and sex worker rights defenders in decision-making.<sup>35</sup>

In 2023, La Strada International developed and strengthened strategic partnerships with new relevant stakeholders, in particular child rights organisations and other European networks with whom LSI started to cooperate related with monitoring EU law and the situation in Ukraine. La Strada International is also member of the specialized THB lawyers and NGOs network (around 45 lawyers and legal representatives of NGOs) established by the Council of Europe. LSI also tries to engage businesses more in its work.

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<sup>32</sup> <https://enr.eu/find-my-victim-support/>

<sup>33</sup> See for example this [statement](#).

<sup>34</sup> [UN Review Mechanism](#).

<sup>35</sup> The organisations who make up the Coalition are leading European civil society networks and human rights organisations. Next to La Strada International and the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), the coalition includes Aids Action Europe (AAE), Amnesty International, Correlation European Harm Reduction Network (Correlation EHRN), European Aids Treatment Group (EATG), European Digital Rights (EDRi), European Network Against Racism (ENAR), Equinox – Racial Justice Initiative, Fair Trials, Human Rights Watch, International Planned Parenthood Federation European Network (IPPF EN), International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Europe (ILGA-Europe), Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), and Transgender Europe (TGEU). See more information on [ESWA's website](#).

## LSI Membership and exchange among members

In 2023, La Strada International comprised 33 member organisations and six associate members in 24 European countries (Currently there are 32 members including 3 associate members). La Strada aims to further grow into a platform with membership in all European countries. To ensure we maintain our role and capabilities in the field, it is not only important to build our cooperation with the 'outside world' and extend our membership, but also to continuously invest in the organisation, in the expertise of our staff, and in our member organisations.

In 2023, we actively reached out to, and sought cooperation with, NGOs from multiple strategic European countries where La Strada International is not yet represented. We also worked on capacity building programmes and exchange for LSI members by organising monthly members meetings and other regular live and virtual events, including capacity building training and events and (bi-)annual NGO Platform meetings.

Twelve monthly exchanges were organised for LSI members by LSI secretariat. At these meetings, updates were provided related to international policy developments, next to regular exchanges via LSI's members mailing list. In addition, over 40 bilateral meetings online or live were held with LSI members. In particular, the membership provides them with more access to (strategic) information and updates, joint advocacy, and a bigger voice at the European level.

We further worked on developing joint policies and strategies related to due diligence, diversity and gender, and staff and volunteer policies to invest in the capacity and quality of the platform and its members. We initiated common projects and (advocacy) actions with members and have supported the formation of self-organised groups of survivors of human trafficking and sex workers, and support them in their work, alongside engaging trafficked persons in LSI's work and organisation.

## Annual NGO Platform (General Assembly) meeting

From 20 – 22 June 2023, the annual NGO Platform meeting was organised in Bucharest, Romania. Next to plenary sessions on strategic LSI actions, European advocacy and legal developments, 9 workshop sessions were organised, as well as a public seminar and meetings with several relevant Romanian anti-trafficking stakeholders, including the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator and the National Rapporteur on human trafficking, the research institute HEUNI, and representatives of law enforcement, lawyers, media etc.

The workshops focussed on various themes including access to residence on personal grounds, non-punishment, data collection; NGO involvement in the identification of trafficked persons; the impact of criminalisation of the knowing use of trafficked persons; labour migration schemes; strengthening migrant and trafficked women's rights to inclusive re/integration, and identification of labour and sexual exploitation and harassment of women in the (private) work sphere. Members also discussed challenges of civil society at the national level, including the shrinking space in Europe, but also the war in Ukraine and the difficult political situation in Belarus and several other countries which negatively impacts the work of LSI members.

## LSI board and board meetings

The LSI secretariat and board ensured exchange and knowledge building between the members through regular email updates and policy exchanges; monthly online exchange meetings and webinars; as well as joint (advocacy) actions, related to new proposed legal and policy measures. Six board meetings were held in 2023, next to consultation calls with board members, including one live board meeting in September in Bucharest.

## LSI staff

In 2023 La Strada International staff comprised an International Coordinator, also responsible for Public Affairs; a Project Manager; Nuala Keyser, Financial manager and a Communication Manger for social media work. For marketing, design, website and internet facilities, as well as for salary administration, La Strada International makes use of external agencies and freelancers. From February until June 2023, a legal intern worked for LSI for a report on Shrinking Space.

- Suzanne Hoff, International Coordinator
- Merel Brouwer, Researcher and Project Manager
- Nuala Keyser, Financial Manager
- Borislav Gerasimov, Communication Manager
- Shana Perumal, Communication Manager (from December 2023)
- Ria Meinema, Office Manager
- Kelys Malouda, intern (February till June 2023)

Two consultants were contracted to work with LSI in 2023:

- Veronika Pišorn (consultancy for LSI data strategy)
- Maria Grazia Giammarinaro (consultancy for revision EU THB Directive)

LSI also works with freelancers for communication design, website maintenances and developments of websites and campaigns.

### *Engaging trafficked persons*

Both at the international and national levels LSI aims to ensure more engagement of trafficked persons in our work, in order to inform our services, policy and advocacy. LSI has been working to further integrate the voices of trafficked persons in our services through self-monitoring and the participation of trafficked persons into our daily work. Following workshop sessions in 2019 and 2021 on how to engage victims more in the work of the Platform and its members, the LSI board has been developing a policy on how to engage the target group in LSI's work and several LSI members have involved trafficked persons in their work as well as in participatory research.

## Financial management and fundraising

In 2023, LSI invested more in fundraising strategies and worked on LSI's donor and due diligence policies. The following donors supported La Strada International, European Commission (Postcare II and Hidden at Work); Porticus, OAK, WP fund, Chooselove, HEUNI and the Freedom Fund.

Four EU funding applications were unfortunately rejected. In general it seems quite difficult to obtain EU funding. See also LSI's financial report.