

18 October 2025

EUROPEAN ANTI-TRAFFICKING DAY

Address all forms of human trafficking and ensure that all (presumed) victims have equal access to protection and support

La Strada International

On this European Anti-Trafficking Day, La Strada International calls for immediate and sustained attention to tackle all forms of human trafficking.

All severe forms of exploitation and abuse must be unequivocally recognized, addressed, and eradicated across Europe. All trafficked persons should have equal access to victim-centred protection, assistance and support as soon as there is a reasonable-grounds indication of human trafficking and irrespective of their willingness to act as witnesses, and or their formal identification. Such access should be guaranteed, regardless of their nationality or of being stateless, of their citizenship, their place of residence or residence status, as well as their form of exploitation or whether their work was formal or informal, and regardless their race, gender, sexual orientation or age.

This goes for victims of sexual and labour exploitation, as well as victims of often overlooked exploitative practices, including forced criminality, or the forced removal of organs, but also the forms that have now been added to the amended EU Anti-Trafficking Directive - namely, the exploitation of surrogacy, of forced marriage, or of illegal adoption. Such abuses, when meeting the legal definition of trafficking (involving an act, means, and purpose), constitute human trafficking.

On 13 June 2024, the European Union adopted the amended **EU Anti-Trafficking Directive**, which entered into force on 14 July 2024, which creates a binding obligation for EU Member States to take action on these forms of exploitation as part of their anti-trafficking response.

Importantly, the revised Directive does **not** imply that all cases of surrogacy, forced marriage, or illegal adoption are inherently exploitative or constitute human trafficking. Instead, these practices fall under anti-trafficking law only when they involve **coercion, deception, abuse of power, or other exploitative means**. Thus, governments must ensure that national policies **do not infringe upon fundamental rights** - including the right to marry, form a family, or adopt - while still effectively combating instances where these practices are abused for exploitative purposes.

EU Member States must now transpose the new provisions into national legislation by the transposition deadline of 15 July 2026. While, the legal framework is already expanded and transposing is ongoing, significant questions remain about the **practical enforcement and interpretation** of these provisions, particularly due to a lack of sufficient debate and exchange as guidance, and hence a lack of knowledge and expertise about the interpretation and application of the legislation.

La Strada International has conducted extensive research across 38 European countries, examining national laws and policies on surrogacy, forced marriage, and illegal adoption, and their intersection with exploitation and human trafficking.

Our forthcoming reports highlight that many questions remain about the scope of these practices as 'emerging forms of human trafficking', also due to the absence of reliable and relevant data, and about the legal definition and application in practice, especially when exploitative practices amount to human trafficking.

To effectively prevent all exploitative abuses, Member States must adopt robust legal safeguards and ensure that those affected - often vulnerable individuals - are recognized as victims and provided appropriate protection and support.

Our Call to Action

On this European Anti-Trafficking Day, we call upon the **European Commission, EU Member States and other European countries** to take bold and coordinated action to prevent and address exploitation, including in the context of surrogacy, forced marriage and illegal adoption. We specifically call for:

1. Strengthened Legislation and Legal Frameworks

- Ensure the effective transposition and implementation of European and international legal instruments, including the revised EU Anti-Trafficking Directive; the EU Directive on Violence Against Women/Domestic Violence, the CoE Istanbul Convention and other.
- Criminalize severe forms of exploitation and abuse, including forced marriage as standalone offences.

2. Clear Definitions and Distinctions

- Recognize abusive and exploitative practices as forms of human trafficking when the elements of the trafficking definition are present.
- Provide unambiguous definitions and distinctions between legitimate practices (e.g. legal surrogacy, adoption, and marriage) and trafficking-related exploitation, especially in the absence of a legal definition of exploitation.

3. Non-Legislative Measures and Prevention

- Complement legal reforms with (inter) national strategies, action plans, NRMs awareness and education campaigns to build resilience and prevent human trafficking
- Address the social, cultural, and economic drivers that allow exploitation to flourish, through comprehensive prevention strategies, and address economic pressures that make persons vulnerable to coercive arrangements.
- Promote due diligence and ensure sanctions to address malpractices.

4. Build Capacity and Engage Communities

- Involve and engage all relevant stakeholders that can detect, report, and refer presumed victims of all forms of human trafficking in national referral mechanisms.
- Deliver specialized training for law enforcement, social workers, legal professionals, and other key stakeholders to identify and respond to all forms of human trafficking.
- Empower affected communities to recognize exploitation and access available support.

5. Victim Protection and Support

- Guarantee access to free legal aid, protection services, and specialized, trauma-informed support for **all victims**, including those trafficked for the exploitation of surrogacy, of forced marriage and/or of illegal adoption.
- Ensure that victims can safely report and file complaint mechanism and claim justice including compensation.

6. Enhanced Data Collection and Research

- Establish robust systems for collecting, analysing, and annually reporting data and statistics on all forms of human trafficking, including the exploitation of surrogacy, forced marriage, and illegal adoption.
- Use this evidence to further inform policy and legal development and monitor the effectiveness of interventions.
- Support ongoing research, facilitate public discussion, and promote interagency collaboration to share knowledge, data and best practices.

7. Sustainable Funding and Resources

- Secure consistent funding for organisations supporting victims of trafficking and groups at risks of human trafficking, including for shelters and helplines.
- Ensure service providers are adequately resourced to reach and inform victims, identify victims, and deliver comprehensive care and assistance.