

STATEMENT

WORLD DAY AGAINST TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Trafficking for Forced Criminality: Victims Must Be Recognised, Protected and **NOT** Punished

La Strada International

On the occasion of the United Nations World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, La Strada International (LSI) calls on governments, law enforcement agencies, and criminal justice practitioners across Europe to strengthen efforts to identify and protect victims of trafficking for the purpose of forced criminality. Although this form of trafficking is increasingly reported, it remains significantly under-recognised.

Trafficking for forced criminality is a serious human rights violation. **Victims are recruited through deception, abuse of vulnerability, coercion or violence and forced to commit criminal acts for the benefit of organised criminal groups.** Increasingly, this includes cyber-enabled fraud, online scams and fraudulent call centres, alongside drug trafficking, theft, forced begging, benefit fraud, sham marriages and other criminal activities.

The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has highlighted the growing links between online scam operations and trafficking in persons. Victims are recruited through fake job offers, transported across borders, deprived of their freedom and forced to carry out large-scale cyber fraud, while this initially was mainly practice in Asia, we see such practices now also happening in Europe.

In January 2026, Polish authorities dismantled a fake call centre that recruited Ukrainian nationals through (deceiving) online job advertisements. Victims, many affected by the war in Ukraine, were promised legitimate employment but were confined, threatened and forced to participate in criminal activities. Nine people were eventually identified as victims of trafficking and received specialised support from the La Strada Foundation in Poland.

This case is far from unique

Our members have been increasingly assisting victims of forced criminality, who are subjected to multiple forms of exploitation, with criminal exploitation deliberately combined with labour or sexual exploitation to strengthen control and prevent victims from seeking help. Refugees, migrants, children and people experiencing poverty or social exclusion remain particularly vulnerable.

Cases of trafficking for forced criminality have been reported across Europe, including related to benefit and credit fraud in Denmark; fraudulent call centres in Croatia and Slovenia; drug-related offences in the United Kingdom, Lithuania, Ireland and Northern Ireland; theft, robbery and forced begging in Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Germany and Moldova; and the exploitation of children for criminal activities in Sweden, France and Romania. These cases demonstrate that trafficking for forced criminality is a pan-European phenomenon that needs a coordinated European response, including on prevention and ensuring that victims are adequately referred, supported and protected across borders.

Research from the [Response Against Criminal Exploitation in Europe/RACE project](#) (2012 – 2014), coordinated and implemented by our members Anti-Slavery International, La Strada Czech Republic, and MRCI Ireland, alongside other partners from their countries and the Netherlands, found that trafficking for forced criminality was far more widespread than official statistics suggested and that many victims were being prosecuted instead of identified and protected. More than a decade later, **victims continue to be misidentified as offenders while traffickers remain hidden behind the crimes they orchestrate**. They receive the profits, while legal consequences fall on those they exploit.

Lacking victim identification, inconsistent or non-application of the non-punishment principle, and significant barriers to protection and support remain the most persistent challenges, which prevent victims from accessing their rights. Frontline professionals, including police, prosecutors, judges, labour inspectors, prison staff, asylum authorities, and child protection services, often lack the knowledge and tools to recognise indicators of forced criminality. Victims rarely fit stereotypical perceptions of trafficking and may appear to have acted voluntarily when, in reality, they were controlled through threats, violence and/or psychological coercion.

As a result, victims are too often arrested, prosecuted and punished for offences they were forced to commit. This undermines their recovery, denies them access to justice and allows traffickers to continue operating with impunity. The effective application of the non-punishment principle is therefore essential.

Concerns that the non-punishment principle will encourage unfounded claims of victimhood are not supported by evidence. The principle does not grant automatic immunity; it requires a careful assessment of whether a person was trafficked and whether the offence was a consequence of their exploitation. Its purpose is to ensure that victims are not further harmed, while allowing authorities to focus accountability on the traffickers who profit from exploitation.

International and European legal standards require that victims should not be prosecuted or punished for offences they were compelled to commit as a direct consequence of their exploitation. This obligation was confirmed by the European Court of Human Rights in *V.C.L. and A.N. v. the United Kingdom*, where two trafficked Vietnamese minors were wrongly prosecuted for cannabis cultivation despite clear indicators of trafficking.

While awareness is improving, implementation remains inconsistent across Europe. Governments should ensure that trafficking for forced criminality is fully recognised within national anti-trafficking policies, provide specialised training for frontline professionals, effectively apply the non-punishment principle from the earliest stage of criminal investigations, strengthen data collection and cross-border cooperation, and work closely with civil society organisations that play a crucial role in victim identification, assistance and long-term recovery.

As trafficking for forced criminality is evolving rapidly, particularly through technology-enabled crimes such as online scams and cyber fraud, responses must evolve just as quickly.

On this World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, **La Strada International calls on governments and practitioners to place victims at the centre of all responses to trafficking for forced criminality and apply the non-punishment principle timely and consequently. Victims should never be treated as criminals for acts they were forced to commit. Recognising them as victims is both a legal obligation and a prerequisite for effectively combating trafficking in human beings.**