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**Policy brief 2/2022 SARAH:** Safe, Aware, Resilient, Able and Heard – protecting and supporting migrant women victims of gender-based violence: Julia Korkman, Inka Lilja (heuni@om.fi)

# “You hear my concern and help me think of solutions”

This policy brief summarises findings from the European Commission funded project [SARAH](#) “*Safe, Aware, Resilient, Able and Heard – protecting and supporting migrant women victims of gender-based violence*” conducted in 2021 and 2022. The SARAH project takes place in 4 EU member states (Finland, Germany, Greece and Italy) and has the aim of developing tools and methods to improve access to victim support services for migrant women victims of gender-based violence. The project provides legal and psychosocial counselling for the women as well as information and support for actors working with them. The counsellors work for the partner NGOs [Solwodi](#) (Germany), [Greek Refugee Council](#) (Greece), [Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati](#) (Italy), and [Puijola Setlementti](#) (Finland) and the project is coordinated by The European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, Affiliated with the United Nations; [HEUNI](#). During the project, the experiences of both counsellors and beneficiaries have been collected through informal online and in situ meetings, and also through systematic data collection. Several important findings about this group of beneficiaries and how to best provide some of the services they need in a sensitive way have been made. The key findings are:

- The importance of working in a victim-centred manner: The situations, needs and vulnerabilities are different among beneficiaries but also differ from time to time.
- The need to be flexible and the appropriate availability of time: Talking about experiences of violence is difficult for many women and such encounters cannot necessarily be planned into a one-hour meeting.
- The role of empowerment: Giving victims a voice and agency, reinforcing their resilience rather than victimisation, is important (see the [SARAH podcast](#)). Within the counselling, the counsellors should focus on strengthening the women’s understanding of their own strengths and resources.
- The importance of trust and concrete action: Within the counselling, creating an atmosphere of trust is key to hear the voice of the beneficiary. Counsellors need to come up with pragmatic and supporting next steps through hearing the beneficiaries.
- The well-being of counsellors needs to be attended to. The work is taxing, and counsellors run the risk of secondary traumatisation and compassion fatigue if not given appropriate support in their important task. Helpful information for counsellors can be found in the SARAH [Toolkit for Enhancing Counselling for Victims of Gender-Based Violence](#).
- The importance of peer support: In SARAH, the informal sharing of experiences and possibilities to learn from each other and participate in training sessions together with other counsellors have been valuable.
- Prepare for unexpected turns: Unforeseeable changes and crises such as the pandemic and war in the Ukraine show counsellors need to be able to adapt to changing environments.
- The role of interpretation: The possible need for interpretation and how to respond to this need in the best possible way should be planned from the outset of counselling activities.
- The need for childcare: Many of the beneficiaries have small children they cannot leave behind during the counselling. This must be considered when planning counselling for this particular group. It is recommendable to have a ‘babysitting’ service for the duration of the counselling.

## Background: The core group of the SARAH project

The core group of the SARAH project are *women in migration facing gender-based violence*. This is a group with multiple possible obstacles facing them in accessing services, being detected as victims of GBV, finding appropriate assistance, and accessing services.

## Methods and data collection

Throughout the project, the work with the beneficiaries has been assessed in various ways, in particular through systematic data collection both by the beneficiaries and by the victim support providers who encounter and counsel migrant women. Data was collected from all the project partners, with the aims of:

- highlighting the impact counselling work has on beneficiaries,
- understanding bottlenecks in access to services,
- being able to describe the reality of counselling work, and share expertise for other counsellors to learn from,
- gaining a better understanding of women's own understanding of their needs, and
- feeding information into the project deliverables and advocacy.

The data was collected as a questionnaire over seven months (June 2021–January 2022). The data collection was linked to the [Toolkit for Enhancing Counselling for Victims of Gender-Based Violence](#), which was co-created with project partners and counsellors. Ethical concerns and practical challenges were discussed on several occasions and feedback was welcomed throughout the data collection period. The counsellors were provided with recommendations for how to request for consent. Data related to beneficiaries was only collected if an explicit consent was received from beneficiaries. All in all, data was collected regarding 551 beneficiaries.

## Results: The experiences of the beneficiaries

Based on the SARAH data collection, the large majority of the counselling sessions (83%) were face-to-face meetings, with most of the remaining encounters taking place via phone without a video connection (15%). Twelve counselling sessions were organized online with a video connection, and four sessions via chat where this was deemed the most appropriate.

Many of the beneficiaries in SARAH were not dependent on interpretation, but in some cases, counselling was hampered by the fact that interpretation was not available although this would have been necessary. In some cases, interpretation was rendered impossible by the fact that the interpreter turned out to be an acquaintance of the beneficiary or was a man where some beneficiaries felt uncomfortable with not having a female interpreter. Interpretation was used only in a minority of the meetings

(13%, of which in 4% the interpreter attended by phone).

Of all the beneficiaries encountered at the point of the data collection (N = 551), only 43% gave explicit consent for a more detailed data collection. **Reasons for not consenting** included the counsellor not asking for consent because the beneficiary seemed too overwhelmed or unable to understand the information well enough to give real consent; having too little time to go through the issue of consent or prioritizing more acute tasks; having other persons (e.g. friend or family or other service providers) present in the session; the counsellor fearing that asking consent would compromise trust building. In spite of the challenges, the counsellors unanimously assessed that asking for feedback is in itself a valuable method for empowering victims of violence. Through the questions raised, topics that would have otherwise not been discussed were raised, and the beneficiaries were given a new means of expressing their views and opinions.

The information summarized here is based only on the information on beneficiaries who had been informed of the data collection and given their consent to the data collection. *The data may thus not be representative for all the SARAH beneficiaries*. However, collecting information directly from this group of beneficiaries is highly valuable to increase our understanding of how the beneficiaries experience the counselling. The experience showed that information can be collected from many beneficiaries in a way that takes ethical aspects well into consideration. This entails assessing whether the beneficiary is currently able to understand or take in the information regarding the data collection. In situations of acute crisis, the well-being of the beneficiary is naturally given priority.

The SARAH beneficiaries were mostly young adults (26-36 years; 46% of the respondents), with the second largest group being 18-25 years (29%). Almost all the beneficiaries were between 18 and 45 years of age, with only 6% over this age (and no under-aged direct beneficiaries, as the project focuses on adults only). All but two beneficiaries identified as women, with the two remaining identifying as transgender. Altogether, 26 different countries of origin were recorded, with Nigeria as the largest group, followed by Iraq, DR Congo and Afghanistan. The majority of the beneficiaries were either asylum seekers or had refugee status.

The most common forms of violence experienced by the beneficiaries were domestic / intimate partner violence (52%), sexual violence (33%) or trafficking in human beings (33%), followed by forced marriage (21%) and honour-based violence (19%). The most common legal service suggested for the beneficiaries following the counselling was legal assistance related to migration status (31%), with much lower numbers for legal assistance in family law (3%) or criminal cases (3%).

Many of the beneficiaries need more than one consultation meeting in order to achieve an understanding of their situation based on which to plan further steps. In some cases, the first meeting largely consisted of letting the beneficiary go through the emotions their situation evoked, before being able to look ahead and consider how

to deal with pragmatic issues. Many of the victims had difficulties talking about their experiences due to feelings of shame or guilt. The most common steps taken after the initial consultation were a new counselling session, legal assistance related to migration status, medical assistance or psychological support.

In the counselling sessions, where the counsellors felt it was appropriate, a possibility to give feedback was given. The beneficiaries largely felt the counselling had gone well or very well (77% of the respondents, with only 4 replying that it went bad and the remainder saying they were not sure how they felt it had gone). Similar amounts of respondents felt they had been able to ask the questions they had in mind and that they had discussed the issues they felt were relevant in the counselling. The beneficiaries gave informative open-ended responses, both negative and positive, although the more negative feedback was more often directed at their situation in general rather than the counselling. Some beneficiaries expressed anger with the long immigration process or stress about acute hardships, such as the illness of family members. The counselling itself was mostly positively evaluated. Among the most prominent themes emerging in the feedback was the importance of talking with someone who was willing to listen and believe the experiences the beneficiaries had gone through. According to many beneficiaries, the counselling increased their confidence, made them feel safer and improved their mood.

### Quotes

*I feel comfortable. Before I was traumatized with all the things that happened to me, but now I feel ok. I feel at ease in the session.*

*You helped me organise my concerns and to think about solutions.*

*I am happy that she explained me in a very detailed way which are my rights and my opportunities here.*

*I liked the fact that even when I was delayed for the appointment, the psychologist proposed me to do the session via phone. This session, even via the phone, helped me emotionally. Someone cares about me.*

*I have seen a big change in me in comparison with the beginning. I am calmer, I have found a mental stability thanks to your advice. Before, my mood was down, but now I feel much better. You have made me feel comfortable, you changed me a lot.*

*I don't have anyone to talk to and to get all my thoughts out of my system. The counselling is really important for me. The moment I return home from the session I feel better. Yes, I have problems but at least I am sharing them with someone.*

*I feel safe. There is understanding. And the most important for me is that there is someone who listens to me, and all the details of my life.*

### Experiences by the counsellors

Within informal discussions among and in responses provided by the counsellors, several concrete findings appeared. One was the **importance of carrying out the interview in an intimate form without the presence of the beneficiaries' children**. This measure can safeguard the general well-being of the beneficiary and allow her to express her emotions freely. While the SARAH project is focused solely on adult women, many have their children with them and have no access to services providing childcare. Unfortunately, due to lack of structure and resources, it has not always been possible to guarantee this form of interview within the project activities.

Another important aspect is the need to **allow the necessary time** for enabling effective assistance and allowing the creation of a relationship of trust and respect between counsellors and beneficiaries. Sensitive communication requires active listening, ease, avoiding feelings of guilt and shame, the building of trust, and absence of judgment. When interviewing women victims of gender-based violence, it is essential to avoid the sense of guilt and shame, culturally associated with violence of a sexual nature, and to avoid leading questions.

The importance of **supervision sessions** for the counsellors was also pointed out. Within the project, supervision was included in the activities budgeted for from the outset. These sessions can be carried out as group sessions, during which counsellors present their concerns on any aspect of the counselling work and, together with the other group members, seek advice and potential solutions. The supervisors should provide emotional and practical support, as working with vulnerable clients on a regular basis can be mentally demanding. Maintaining professional and ethical boundaries, focusing on self-care and on supporting each other is vital to build collegial well-being and to avoid „burnout“ experiences.

Many system-level challenges were also noted, such as a lack of systematic focus on this group of victims, and in some cases, harsh attitudes towards some of the victim groups. One example was that of female victims of trafficking who are particularly vulnerable and who had experienced harsh attitudes by authorities who did not recognise their right to international protection. Another critical point was found to be the lack of mother-baby services that take into consideration mental health needs. A further system-level challenge is the poor understanding of the suffering of these women in the service system and society at large. Giving them a voice in society is crucial.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is well established that violence against women in migration is a typical form of hidden crime where disclosure is hampered by several factors, including the intersectional aspect of their situation, cultural and intercultural aspects of understanding and talking about violence, in particular sexual violence which in many cultures remains taboo, and attitudinal barriers. In order to ensure a truly victim-sensitive approach to working with this group of beneficiaries, the following key points are crucial:

- The voices of the beneficiaries need to be heard: What do they want and need help with? How can they be supported to achieve those goals?
- The well-being of the beneficiaries should always be given priority: While collecting information from the beneficiaries, it is important to further guide them to activities aimed at helping them. In cases where the women are overwhelmed with their situation it might not be ethical to add the task of responding to data collection questions and in these cases, the ethical solution often is to collect the information from the counsellors rather than the beneficiaries.
- Structures are crucial for providing support: Women need childcare at the premises so that they can partake in counselling and freely talk about their, often traumatising, experiences without harming the children or feeling worried that the children may suffer from being present.
- Build structures to support the well-being and skills of counsellors: Ensuring the well-being and skills of counsellors through possibilities to systematically, in safe environments, share their experiences with other professionals and organise training for all project members, tailored to their needs.

## Thank you

Heartfelt thanks to all the counsellors for all their fantastic work, and to all the beneficiaries who have given their time to provide feedback on their experiences.



**For more information, see the SARAH home-page or contact the partners directly:**

**SARAH:** <https://heuni.fi/-/sarah>

**Contact information:**

**HEUNI:** The European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control, Affiliated with the United Nations: <https://heuni.fi>

**Setlementti Puijola:**  
<https://www.puijola.net/home/>

**Solwodi:** Solidarity with women in distress:  
<https://www.solwodi.de/>

**Centro Italiano per I Rifugiati:**  
<https://www.cir-onlus.org/>

**Greek Council for Refugees:**  
<https://www.gcr.gr/en/>



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