

Step forward

A tool for developing an organisational strategy to provide victim-centred support for migrant women victims of gender-based violence



SARAH

Safe, Aware, Resilient, Able and Heard

Protecting and supporting migrant women victims of gender-based violence



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Authors:

Inka Lilja (HEUNI)

Anni Lietonen (HEUNI)

Julia Korkman (HEUNI)

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Editorial design and illustrations:

Frej Vuori (HEUNI)

Aleksandra Anikina (HEUNI)

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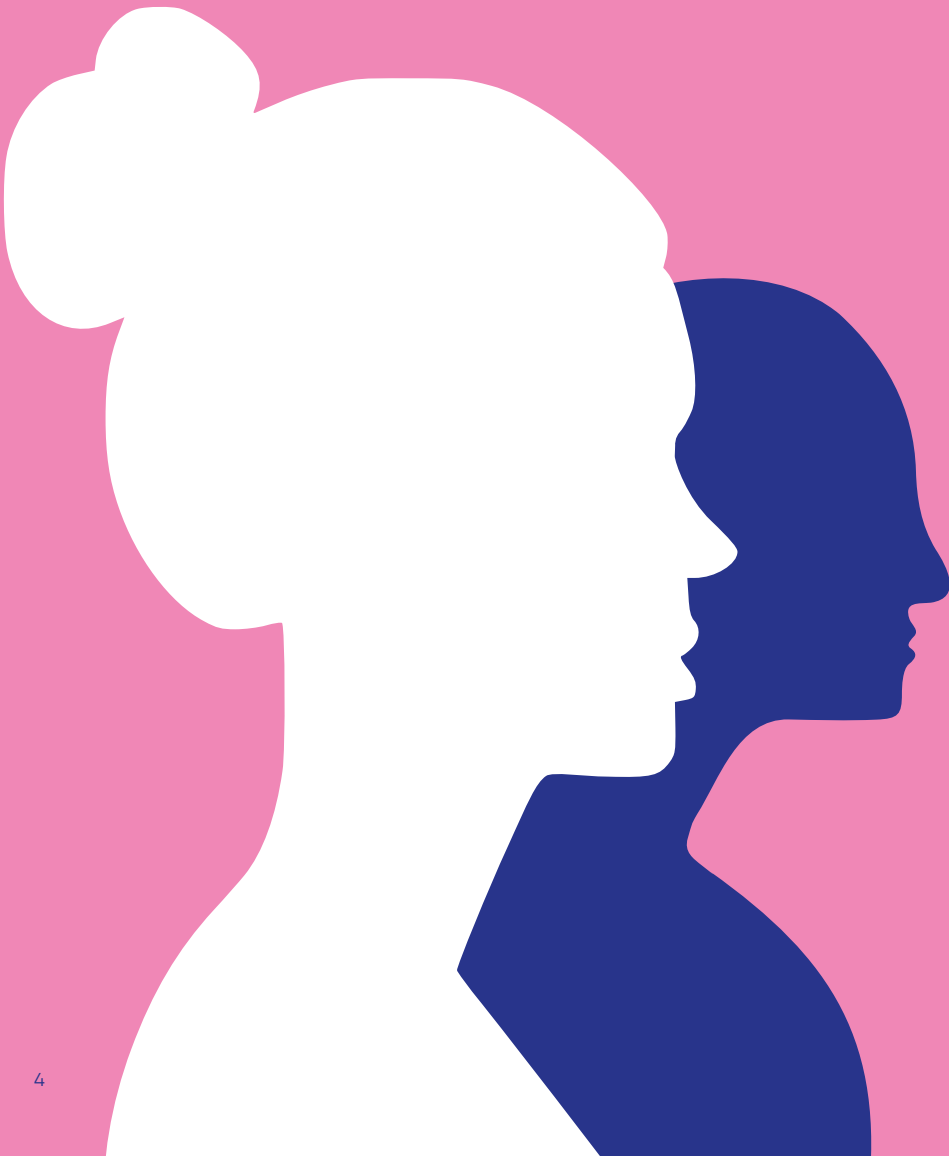
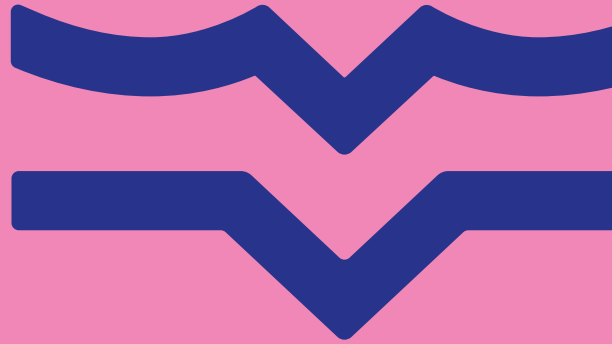
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Introduction

THIS FRAMEWORK provides an overview of how to create and put into practice an organizational strategy for assisting refugee and migrant women victims of gender-based violence. The strategy places a strong focus on improving the capacity of counsellors – the cornerstones of assistance – to provide the assistance. **The framework encourages organisations to assess their current practices, and to develop clear goals, policies, and management practices through participatory processes.** By following the steps in this guidance organisations can enhance their understanding of what is needed at the strategic level to develop truly victim-centred models of assistance and to implement and evaluate these regularly.

This guidance is aimed at supervisors and managers of organisations working with migrant women. Supervisors and managers are strongly encouraged to discuss each step presented here with the entire staff.

THIS GUIDANCE was developed as a part of the EU-funded project "SARAH: Safe, Aware, Resilient, Able and Heard – protecting and supporting migrant women victims of gender-based violence." In the project, short-term psycho-social and legal counselling services were

provided by counsellors (i.e., psychologists, lawyers, and social workers) at the Greek Council for Refugees, SOLWODI Deutschland e.V, the Italian Refugee Council and Setlementti Puijola in Finland to migrant women victims of gender-based violence. Organisational best practices as well as pitfalls were identified during the project, and this guidance was written to share some of the lessons learned with other organizations so that they can become more victim-centred and impactful.

We would like to thank the project partners for their valuable comments and observations as well as the women participating in the counselling for their feedback on the provided assistance.

ORGANIZATIONS NEED to find ways to maximize the positive aspects and reduce risks and possible negative aspects that might result from providing support to beneficiaries who are in a vulnerable position. Supporting migrant women victims of gender-based violence in a victim-centred manner requires knowledge, skills and persistence. **An organization's values and its ways of work affect how the organization addresses and encounters its beneficiaries.** This also significantly influences how efficient and impactful the provided support is. A victim support organization is as functional and sound as its staff. Therefore, an organization should have a strategy to **ensure that relevant structures and processes are in place to support the workplace wellbeing of its staff.** This is particularly important for organisations that work with difficult and potentially traumatising topics, such as violence. **A focus on staff wellbeing will build a stronger working environment, which will improve the quality and reach of assistance.**

The cornerstones of the framework for becoming a truly professional expert organisation champion in providing support- for migrant women who have experienced violence include working in a **victim-centred manner** within a **trauma-informed organization**, while ensuring the **wellbeing of the counsellors.**

THE FRAMEWORK consists of 5 steps and each of them includes discussion topics, questions for your consideration, some practical guidance and references to additional materials. You can use this tool as a step-by-step checklist and supplement the steps based on the needs and focus areas of your organization.

Step 1: Defining strategic goals

Step 2: Perspectives that support inclusivity

Step 3: Perspectives that support counsellors' wellbeing

Step 4: Measures for creating impact

Step 5: Continuous evaluation and adaptation

1

**Defining strategic goals in
an inclusive manner**

2

**Perspectives that
support inclusivity**

3

**Perspectives that support
counsellors' wellbeing**

4

**Measures for
creating impact**

5

**Continuous evaluation
and adaptation**



The cornerstones of the framework for providing support in a professional and sensitive way for migrant women victims of gender-based violence

Working in a victim-centred manner:

- Ensure that the rights and dignity of each individual/beneficiary are at the heart of all operations.
- Treat each beneficiary with respect, so that they are heard and listened to.
- Ensure the best interests of the person when taking decisions.
- Provide and deliver support rapidly and sensitively
- Adhere to the individual needs and aspirations of each beneficiary, make sure that all counsellors are aware of the root causes and risk factors related to gender-based violence, thus ensuring that issues around stigma and stereotypes are adequately acknowledged.
- Use the [SARAH toolkit](#) (see below for more information)
- Engage in feedback-driven work: At the end of each session, ask the beneficiary whether the counselling touched upon the matters they find crucial (e.g., by asking “Did we discuss the topics you wanted?” and similar)
- Understand what the particular challenges and factors such as racism, cultural stereotyping and on the other hand intercultural communication can imply for the women encountered

Being a trauma-informed organization:

- Make sure that counsellors work according to the definition of trauma-sensitive care i.e., using methods of work that are based upon an understanding of the harmful effects of traumatic experiences together with fundamental principles of evidence-based practise, compassion and respect.
- Establish a common trauma-informed language among the professionals – this gives direction to work and supports wider collaboration with professionals.
- Ensure the flexibility of your organisation and be ready to adapt to changes around you. Organisations providing GBV counselling to migrant women operate in changing environments. Different types of violence and trauma may become prevalent at different times and the organization accrues continuous knowledge on best practices. On the local level, there might be changes in attitudes towards marginalized groups and increased tension, or nationally developments in politics, policies and procedures.

Emphasizing the wellbeing of counsellors:

Counselling persons in precarious situations, including those suffering from grief, loss, and suffering, can be psychologically very consuming. Not the least because meaningful counselling requires empathy and compassion, which also makes it more difficult to distance oneself from the beneficiaries' emotions and suffering. On the other hand, in the best-case scenario, counsellors feel compassion satisfaction; the feeling of being able to help, which can be very motivating and professionally satisfactory.

- Ensure that staff receive sufficient support. Provide them with regular professional supervision and ongoing training opportunities.
- Take the risk of compassion fatigue, burn out or secondary traumatic stress seriously.
- Help counsellors manage the workload. The drive to help can lead to trying to assist more beneficiaries than the counsellors can manage with enough time to make sure they have time to assess their work and also not to work with a too rigid time pressure



Step 1: Defining strategic goals in an inclusive manner

ORGANISATIONS NEED to ensure that their leadership is characterized by collaboration and guidance. Such a coaching-based leadership is inclusive and supports staff to utilize and develop their expertise. This leadership style is based on the realisation that staff are the best experts of their own tasks. Where the organisational structure is heavily hierarchic, this might imply a need to develop the organisation towards a more open, inclusive, and democratic organisational culture (See e.g., [Karlsen 2020](#); [Bourke & Espedido 2020](#)).

Furthermore, organisations need to create an environment where employees feel confident to speak up. Inclusive organisations embrace the diverse expertise of its staff and embrace their knowledge when defining strategic goals for the organisation. In this context, inclusivity refers to asking advice and constructive feedback from counsellors and other team members when developing victim-centred and trauma-informed approaches.

In addition, strategic planning should ideally incorporate the perspectives and voices of beneficiaries to understand how strategic goals will impact counselling and eventually the wellbeing of the beneficiaries. Collecting feedback from the beneficiaries requires thorough planning, including considering how to ensure the safety, anonymity, and wellbeing of the beneficiaries. Read more from [“A Toolkit for Enhancing Counselling for Victims of Gender-Based Violence”](#) developed as part of the SARAH-project (which can be found on the HEUNI webpage under Projects – SARAH).

ORGANISATIONS SHOULD keep in mind that the topics discussed during a strategy process might be sensitive and that the willingness to share opinions might be linked to possible power hierarchies between the employees and management. An organisation striving towards inclusivity and coaching-based leadership must take the process seriously and convey this to staff through everyday practice.

Collecting opinions and feedback anonymously from the staff, being transparent about the motives of these efforts, and stating clearly how employees are included in the process will increase inclusivity.

Questions to support discussions with employees and increase inclusivity in strategic planning:

- How would you define your "primary" task?
- What support, tools etc would you need from the organization to strengthen the counselling/to be able to better support the beneficiaries?
- What would you need to support your own professional resilience, to cope with the topics encountered?
- What do you think are the warning signs that there are problems in work-place wellbeing?
- What kind of workplace wellbeing activities do you need that would best support you in your work?
- What steps should we take to make our organization more trauma-sensitive?
- How to tackle the challenges inherent in supporting gender-based violence in migration context? (If the challenges are not clear then first identify them).
- Do you receive sufficient information about the organisations' decision-making and are staff sufficiently included in organizational processes?
- How can and should resources be allocated in a most efficient manner? Where would you allocate more/less resources?

ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS:

MY NOTES:

TIP: There are plenty of online materials related to strategic planning, which could also be beneficial in creating strategic goals. Also, if you have the time and resources, consider collecting constructive feedback from other stakeholders, professionals, and organisations working in the field.

Step 2: Perspectives that support inclusivity

WORKING IN a victim-centred manner means in concrete terms that services are provided with sensitivity and by adhering to the individual needs and aspirations of each beneficiary. There are many factors and root causes for violence. Each beneficiary also has unique support and resilience factors depending on their socio-economic, educational, cultural, language and family background. Moreover, the background, socio-economic status and personal situation of the beneficiaries influence their understanding of, e.g., forms of violence, how one sets values and priorities, and whether a person is able to seek help. These intersectional, i.e. interconnected factors can create multiple experiences of marginalisation, discrimination and oppression. Also, stereotypes and structural inequalities and discrimination influence how people are categorized and can influence, e.g., what kind of support is offered. Therefore, it is important that each organization takes steps to acknowledge these structural and often deeply embedded notions and perceptions, so that counsellors will feel comfortable to bring up topics related to gender-based violence into discussions.

What are the current structures, processes and tools in place that enhance or inhibit inclusivity and what more is needed? Go through the checklist/points and discuss together with staff which are the most relevant and urgent needs to advance.

INTERSECTIONALITY AS AN ELEMENT IN UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT

OF VIOLENCE: Consider how intersectional factors may impact on how victims are able to access their rights? Intersectional factors include e.g., gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, immigration status, language skills, which together influence a person's vulnerabilities to violence and discrimination.

DIVERSITY AND LANGUAGE SKILLS IN RECRUITMENT OF STAFF: Could the diversity of the team be increased through recruitment practices to include more perspectives and backgrounds in the counselling practices?

INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE: Is staff aware of how culture might impact trauma and self-perception and what religious practice or gender equality issues are relevant in the countries of origin of beneficiaries?

TAKE DIVERSITY INTO ACCOUNT WHEN PLANNING ACTIVITIES: How do you choose the languages in which you offer your services? In which languages are outreach activities carried out, including any posters, flyers etc. describing your services? Do your activities cater for illiterate beneficiaries and/or is some of the information also conveyed via pictograms or in a verbal format? Do you offer services during hours and days that are suitable for your beneficiaries taking into consideration any cultural and/or religious practices, including e.g., religious holidays? (the importance of languages / translation questions from the point of view of empowerment / efficient information sharing / acknowledging religious and cultural aspects...)

GENDER SENSITIVE APPROACH IN PROVIDING SERVICES: Are your services offered only to persons who identify as women? Or are your services for everyone? In either case, is the reason behind this choice clearly outlined in the organisation's strategy and communication? Is it clear to all staff? Is it clearly also communicated to beneficiaries?

WORKING WITH SEXUAL AND GENDER MINORITIES: Does your organization consider in its practices that there is a multitude of genders and sexual identities? Is staff aware of different gender and sexual identities, and the needs and challenges different groups have in accessing service? Does staff have knowledge on how minorities are perceived and treated in their country of origin, including possible discrimination and traumatizing experiences?

RIGHTS OF THE CHILD: Is the best interest of the child considered when encountering children in the counselling context, and are there comprehensive child protection policies, including clear protocols on how to act in cases of concern in place in your organization?

WORKING WITH PERPETRATORS AND FAMILIES: Do you work with men, husbands, brothers, fathers, uncles, the whole family? Do you work with perpetrators? How do you work with families and/or perpetrators in a manner that considers power imbalances inherent in gender-based violence and how do you ensure the safety and wellbeing of all the parties? An important point of departure for working with perpetrators and families is that the perpetrator assumes responsibility for their acts and that the safety of the victim can be guaranteed. See e.g., the guidelines below:

- Domestic and sexual violence perpetrator programmes; Council of Europe
- Guidelines for working with perpetrators of domestic abuse; Respect
- Roadmap for frontline professionals interacting with male perpetrators of domestic violence and abuse

MAKING SURE THAT THE BENEFICIARIES' CONCERNS ARE HEARD: What kind of practices are in place that support a forum for feedback, and are there forums for giving feedback about the services offered in a safe and anonymous manner?

ADDITIONAL THEMES TO CONSIDER:

MY NOTES:

TIP: Search the internet for more detailed explanation of terms mentioned in this section if they are new or unfamiliar.

Step 3: Perspectives that support counsellors' wellbeing

A VICTIM support organization is as functional and sound as its staff, and therefore your organization should have a strategy to ensure that relevant structures and processes are in place to support the wellbeing of your staff. This will help building a stronger working environment that will significantly improve the quality and reach of assistance.

What are the current structures, processes and tools in place that enhance or inhibit wellbeing and what more is needed? Go through the checklist/points and discuss together with your staff which are the most relevant and urgent needs for your organisation. Perspectives to consider:

1. COMPASSION AT THE CENTRE OF ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES:

Even though compassion (to support) is rightfully at the core of victim-support organizations' aims and vision as well as the main motivating factor for counsellors' work, this should not lead to staff working only for their passion for the work, but the employing organization should adhere to fair and supportive employment practices and benefits. Supporting the wellbeing of staff starts with fair and equal employment benefits, including a competitive salary, reasonable working time and case load, including enough time to "breathe" between counselling sessions. Furthermore, counsellors need to have enough days off to fully recover and rest, as well as to review the work done and to plan forthcoming work. Also, continuous training and supervision are crucial for the well-being and professionalism of the counsellors.

2. WORKING IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAMS AND PEER TO PEER SUPPORT:

A multidisciplinary team, including e.g., a psychologist, a lawyer, and a social worker, is most efficient in tackling the multitude of challenges migrant victims of gender-based violence face. In a team, professionals can exchange opinions and support each other. Peer to peer support is one of the biggest support factors at work. Consider developing organizational structures for peer support, including developing national and international networks for professionals working on similar topics/cases. Also organize regular opportunities for debriefing, either informal opportunities for sharing with colleagues or in the form of professionally facilitated debriefings, for example after particularly challenging cases.

3. INDIVIDUAL SELF-CARE PLANS:

In addition to having an organizational staff care plan, each counsellor should have an individual self-care plan, and dedicated resources for implementing it. A good way to start to create an individual self-care plan is to take a self-reflection test on mental burden, for example the Professional Quality of Life Measure. The ProQoL test can be found in several languages at [ProQOL Measure | ProQOL](#). On the page, there are also many other useful resources related to the topic of compassion fatigue and self-care.

4. PROFESSIONAL WORKPLACE COUNSELLING:

It is the responsibility of the employing organization to offer counsellors continuous support, and in particular an opportunity to receive professional supervision. The opportunity for professional workplace counselling should be offered to all counsellors irrespective of their educational/professional background, and the staff should be encouraged to take part in the counselling, as it might not feel like a priority amidst busy schedules.

5. TRAINING: Ensuring that staff continuously learn and develop new skills is important for many reasons; to ensure quality assistance, to adapt to emerging phenomena and changes in the operating environment as well as to take new models of assistance and best practices into use. Continuous learning can also support the wellbeing at work by improving professional competence and abilities. It is important to map the counselors' training needs at regular intervals. In addition to providing structured training programmes, also offer alternative options for learning such as peer-to-peer learning, mentoring or other forms of training blending formal and informal learning activities. An example of such training is the WHO migrant health courses: [Migration and Health: Enhancing Intercultural Competence and Diversity \(openwho.org\)](https://openwho.org/). Remember that new skills will only become part of the working models and daily routines if there are structures in place to support the newly acquired skills. One way of facilitating taking into use of newly acquired skills is to support peer-to-peer sharing of new knowledge and reflecting as a team on how to develop the work in line with what has been learned.

6. DOCUMENTS AND TOOLS SUPPORTING COUNSELLING: Ensuring that employees working with gender-based violence have access to tools and resources that support the counselling of migrant women victims of violence. In practice, this could mean creating a (online) data bank on the topic which includes, e.g., information on asylum procedures and rights of victims of gender-based violence, victim assistance organisations, multilingual materials to support interaction in one-on-one counselling or group work, materials on women's rights, gender rights and reproductive health, and other sources related to migrant women and gender-based violence like fact sheets, research, documentaries and media sources. The creation of a data bank could be tasked to a specific employee as part of a job description, or it could be developed as part of specific project activities. Also, external funding opportunities should be considered (see e.g. EU-funded project [GBV-TUVA](#) (in Finnish), where information on how to combat GBV in the context of asylum processes has been collected).

Step 4: Measures for creating impact

THERE ARE several reasons why it is important to try to measure, and to communicate, the impact organizations are creating. Firstly, organisations are likely to be committed to making a positive impact on beneficiaries, but how can the impact be verified and how to increase transparency of their performance? Secondly, donors are interested in knowing whether work is conducted in an efficient and impactful man-

ner. Naturally, there might be structural, legislative, or resource-related challenges that prevent achieving the desired impact, however, impact considerations should be integrated throughout organizational activities in order to make the most of it. The ability to advocate for change is often linked to the knowledge and the expertise your organization has in supporting a vulnerable population. **Conveying information to decision and policy makers on the key concerns, best practices, and experiences from the field will not only advance societal change, but also increase your opportunities for more resources for support work.** The underlying structures that create and maintain violence against women, as well as the barriers in accessing and receiving assistance, are manifold and complex, and therefore these issues cannot be solved, nor impact created, without **strategic partnerships**.

What are the current structures, processes and tools in place that enhance or inhibit creating and communicating impact, and what more is needed? Go through the checklist/points and discuss together with staff which are the most relevant and urgent needs. Measures to consider:

- 1. EVERY TIME YOU ARE ASSISTING A VICTIM OF VIOLENCE YOU ARE IN PRACTICE CLAIMING HER RIGHT TO ENJOY THE FULFILMENT OF INTERNATIONALLY AGREED HUMAN RIGHTS.** Use international instruments, such as the Istanbul Convention, CEDAW, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the EU Victims' Rights Directive, and the policymaking, research, and advocacy work around these instruments, as a leverage to raise the topic of gender-based violence on the agenda of policy and decision makers.
- 2. COLLECT DATA TO SHOW YOUR IMPACT.** We live in an age of evidence-based decision-making. Violence against women, and even more so violence faced by migrant women, is a largely unseen phenomenon. The experiences, as well as the existing barriers in accessing rights and services, should be made visible to influence the policy-making agenda. Victim-support organizations have unique access to data on vulnerable populations and their needs. Data collection efforts in this kind of setting do not require distinctive research abilities but they do require thorough ethical consideration. Find out more about collecting data in this setting from "[A Toolkit for Enhancing Counselling for Victims of Gender-Based Violence](#)" developed as part of the SARA-project, and consider creating your own research code of ethics following e.g. [the Code of Ethics](#) created by the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM).

3. **ETHICAL AND IMPACTFUL COMMUNICATION:** It is important to think how to communicate impactfully and ethically on the phenomena of violence against migrant women. This includes respecting the code of ethics/standards that guide the professional conduct of counsellors, and privacy of the supported women. Beneficiaries should not be portrayed merely as victims, but also as persons with agency. You can also break stereotypes related to victims of violence and to migrant women by carefully considering what kind of stories and visuals are used. Counsellors will have important insights when it comes to communication, including ethical considerations. Try to be as inclusive as possible in all your communications, including providing as much information as possible in the beneficiaries' languages. A good resource is The Fundamental Rights Agency's toolkit "[10 Keys to Effectively Communicating Human Rights](#)".

4. **STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS:** How could other stakeholders help you in reaching your strategic goals? Migrant women who have been victims of violence often need a variety of services, and therefore support organizations should have strong networks with different authorities and other assistance providers to be able to correspond to the multitude of needs. Create networks and share the workload. Moreover, establish relationships with key stakeholders to improve awareness on the topic of gender-based violence in the migration context and to ensure the flow of information between different stakeholders. Also, consider establishing collaborations with researchers to enhance data creation which can be used both for improving quality of services as well as to advocate for policy change. Collaboration and communication with other service providers, particularly within other European countries have within the SARAH project found to be particularly fruitful. An easy and cost-beneficial means of sharing experiences and solve common problems and challenges encountered is to organise online mutual learning workshops among different actors working with these topics.

Step 5: Continuous evaluation and adaptation

You can evaluate the implementation of your strategy also by conducting interviews or surveys among staff or beneficiaries, or evaluation questionnaires from sessions, conferences or other group activities, or organising focus groups consisting of beneficiaries that explores issues and limitations as well as stakeholder surveys. The SARAH impact tool, which has been positively evaluated by the project beneficiaries and the SARAH policy brief can be used for this purpose.

POSSIBLE LIST OF QUESTIONS TO ASSESS STRATEGY:

1. Are we fulfilling the goals and aims that we have set for the organisation?
2. Do we need to revise/amend the goals, esp. if there are changes in the operating environment?
3. What are the additional/new goals that we need to set for the organisation?
4. Are we living up to our values (provided the organisation has some agreed and explicit values)? How are the values visible in our day-to-day work?

WHEN DRAFTING OR REFINING STRATEGY YOU MIGHT FIND THE FOLLOWING EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT MEASUREMENT CRITERIA USEFUL:

- Number of beneficiaries reached by services provided
- Number of group events or activities organised for beneficiaries
- Number of visits on website or a specific page that is likely used by beneficiaries
- Number of disseminated flyers or other awareness raising materials
- Number of awareness raising events for decision makers or other
- Number of letters, comments or testimonials written for policy makers
- Surveys/feedback among beneficiaries on how they perceive the support provided
- Staff wellbeing surveys
- Stakeholder surveys on how key stakeholders perceive the organization's work and its impact

In conclusion

MIGRANT WOMEN victims of gender-based violence constitute a highly vulnerable group. Going through the five steps suggested in this tool can hopefully help your organisation assist these women while simultaneously making sure that the professionals providing the assistance will also receive the support they need in their demanding tasks.

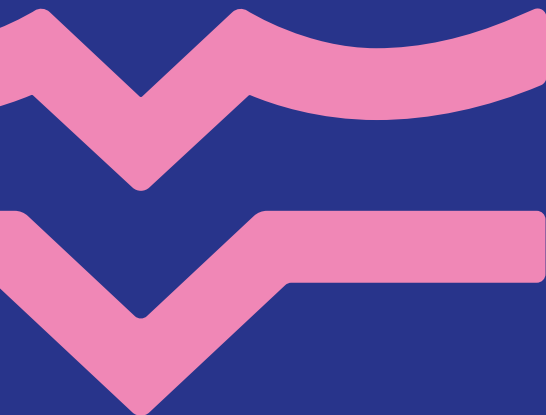


BELOW, FIND LINKS TO OTHER DELIVERABLES PRODUCED AS A PART OF THE SARAH-PROJECT (PUBLICATIONS FROM 2021 AND 2022)

In the [SARAH-podcast series](#) migrant women discuss gender-based violence and encourage others to speak up. In each of the podcasts (one in Arabic, Farsi, Somali and English) different marvellous women share their thoughts. You can use a podcast as a discussion opener by sharing it with someone who is going through violence. The podcasts are available in Soundcloud and Spotify.

[Toolkit for Enhancing Counselling for Victims of Gender-Based Violence](#) - Empowering Counsellors and Beneficiaries to Assess the Needs and the Impact of Counselling with Women in Migration. The toolkit can be used to improve the quality and impact of counselling by assisting

- a.** beneficiaries to understand their own strengths, resources and priorities,
- b.** counsellors to make informed decisions about the possible steps in supporting the beneficiaries, and
- c.** organisations to collect data for impact evaluation and for advocacy.



The toolkit is available to download in English, German, Italian, Greek and Finnish.

Policy brief: You hear my concern and make me think of solutions.

Key messages derived through direct feedback collected by the women and the counsellors of the SARAH project.

Handbook on counselling asylum seeking and refugee women victims of gender-based violence. The handbook describes a counselling method for assisting refugee women who have been victims of gender-based violence. The handbook was developed during 2017-2019 in a project titled “Co-creating a counselling method for refugee women GBV victims” funded by the European Commission.

Unseen Victims Why Refugee Women Victims of Gender-Based Violence Do Not Receive Assistance in the EU. This HEUNI report presents the manifestations and consequences of gender-based violence and the challenges in assisting victims of violence in the migration context. With this report we aim to increase the understanding of policymakers on the structural challenges asylum-seeking and refugee women who have experienced gender-based violence face.

For more information, see the [SARAH homepage](#) or contact the partners directly:

SARAH: www.heuni.fi/-/sarah

CONTACT INFORMATION

HEUNI

The European Institute for Crime Prevention and Control,
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www.heuni.fi

Setlementti Puijola

www.puijola.net

Solwodi

Solidarity with women in distress
www.solwodi.de

Consiglio Italiano per I Rifugiati

www.cir-onlus.org

Greek Council for Refugees

www.gcr.gr/en