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Tackling Trafficking and Exploitation in Italy: A Human Rights Lens on the Evolving Role of Street-Level Practitioners

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Abstract

The Italian “Anti-Trafficking System”, made by the services to support and assist people who are victims (or at risk) of trafficking and severe exploitation, has often been distinguished by its strong performance by implementing actors, as well as by the congruence with the original policy design in terms of actions and achievement of policy goals. The victim-centred approach, a core principle guiding the System’s work coherently with the human rights approach and standard, has also been adopted by regional and European-level policies, thus confirming its relevance and effectiveness. This article analyses the characteristics and functioning of the System, and consequently the working practices of professionals involved in the 21 projects implemented across the national territory, through the lens of the Street-Level Bureaucrats perspective. The paper focuses on the factors that have led to differentiated implementation of the same Programme over time, in response to changes within the target population and, more generally, in the dynamics of the phenomenon. These shifts have, in effect, triggered a reconfiguration of the regulatory framework underpinning the work of frontline workers.

Severe forms of exploitation, Street level burocrats, Italian National Anti-trafficking System, Public Policy, Human Rights

This paper is a collective, joint and indivisible effort of the two authors. However, Paola Degani wrote the Introduction and paragraphs 2 and 5, Francesca Cimino wrote paragraphs 3, 4 and the Conclusion.

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1. Introduction: Analytical Approaches to Human Trafficking and Severe Exploitation

Human trafficking is a serious crime against the human person, as it is carried out through actions that severely undermine the dignity and fundamental rights of those subjected to grave exploitation. This situation occurs “through the use or threat of use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or a position of vulnerability, or through the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to obtain the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (UN General Assembly, 2000). The adoption in 2000 by the UN General Assembly of the Convention on Transnational Organized Crime, supplemented by the two additional protocols, respectively aimed at preventing, suppressing and punishing trafficking in persons, especially women and children (trafficking in human beings) - referred to as the Palermo Protocol (Bryant 2020), and at combating the illicit smuggling of migrants by land, sea and air (smuggling of migrants), provided a window of opportunity for the establishment of a new policy system in unfamiliar areas and contexts (Kingdom, 2003/1984) in the field of migration, such as those concerning victims of severe exploitation.

In light of the intensification and changes in migratory flows and routes in recent years, national and European migration policies have increasingly adopted a predominantly security-oriented approach that has progressively reduced the human rights perspective on this matter. This approach has become so restrictive regarding the possibility of entering and residing freely in a foreign country that it has eroded the right to asylum and, more broadly, the international protection system (Bertozzi and Consoli, 2017).

The progressive closure of regular entry channels has led to a growing reliance by migrants on services available in the smuggling market, resulting in a proliferation of situations marked by severe human rights violations, indebtedness, and grave exploitation. The precariousness, insecurity, and irregular status in which migrants now move, contribute to the spread of “situational” and “experiential” vulnerabilities, which become particularly undeniable upon arrival in the host country (FRA 2016; Fineman, 2017; Gilodi et al., 2022).

The adoption in 2000 of both the Palermo Protocol on human trafficking and, in parallel, the Protocol on smuggling marked the beginning of a regulatory expansion in terms of policy density (Bauer and Knill, 2012) at international, European, and national levels. Within this production, and from a process tracing perspective, it is crucial to observe how political and public discourse have often ambiguously instrumentalised the distinction between smuggling

and trafficking, using these terms in an evidently erroneous and deceptive way. Rather than recognising the potential interrelation between these two distinct and distinguishable phenomena, public narratives have tended to consolidate stigmatising discourses that facilitate discriminatory practices and distinctions between “categories” of migrants, often disconnected from the complexity of real-world dynamics (Castles, de Haas, Miller, 2014; Brambilla et al., 2022; Degani, 2017a; Wijers, 2015; Rodríguez-López, 2018) of migration flows.

The “intersectional” nature of the profiles and experiences of today’s migrants arriving in Italy (Collins and Chepp, 2013) also concerns those who come into contact with or are taken in by the Anti-Trafficking System. This has inevitably led to significant adaptations within the network and governance structures compared to their original configuration, resulting in the involvement of new institutional and different private actors. This development, particularly relevant in the broader context of migratory transformations, has led Anti-trafficking practitioners to adopt coping mechanisms that have extended the network of partnerships involved in the work of the Projects and governance, creating a broader and previously unprecedented collaborative framework.

This article aims to address, at least partially, the lack of analysis regarding the process of adaptation to the most significant transformations in the operational context within which Italy’s Anti-Trafficking System operates.

This manuscript therefore offers an analytical perspective on the origins, characteristics, and functioning of this System, focusing on the key role played by the street-level bureaucrats (SLBs) engaged in the “social” action it entails. These actors, mostly belonging to non-governmental realities, have long interacted institutionally with the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, responsible for promoting and coordinating assistance and social integration measures for victims of trafficking. Their involvement is crucial to the practice of social work (Fargion, 2018) aimed at this specific group of migrants, which unfolds in a multi-agency framework composed of local administrations, services, and other relevant territorial actors and organisations.

Public policy literature emphasises the importance of collaboration and coordination across various institutional levels and dimensions as key factors in the success of policy responses and crisis management (Christensen et al., 2016).

Following a brief reference to the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis, the article proceeds to outline the adopted methodology and describe the structure of the Italian Anti-trafficking system, before examining the changes and adaptations it has undergone in recent years in response to

the evolving nature of the migration flows and the restrictions posed by the most recent legal instruments adopted at different levels.

2. The Role of Street-Level Bureaucrats Between Migration Policies and Trafficking under a Human Rights Perspective

2.1. Migration Policies and Human Trafficking

Italian and European migration policies, shaped by a security-oriented and restrictive approach, have contributed to the current pervasiveness and recurrence of severe exploitation within contemporary migration journeys and experiences. This is confirmed by the gap between the estimated number of presumed victims of severe exploitation in Italy and those who are officially identified (GRETA, 2024), with the latter being significantly fewer than the former. Situations of vulnerability, urgency, and necessity to migrate create fertile ground for migrants to become involved in severe exploitation, which is often seen as an inevitable step and integral part of the migratory experience.

Migration policies represent a specialised area of investigation and research within the field of policy studies, yet they have struggled to find dialogue and full recognition within social science research (Caponio, 2020; Ambrosini Campomori 2024). In social science, issues related to migration control and integration have long been the most explored. In Italy, research on migration began to take shape in the 1980s as the phenomenon gained permanence, although the limited political interest in the growing migrant population did not provide a strong and prompt stimulus for academic reflection (Maciotti and Pugliese, 1991; Colombo and Sciortino, 2004).

As for trafficking, most research has focused on specific aspects or contexts (Russel, 2018), although there is a substantial body of literature within international relations and human rights, law, social sciences, and anti-discrimination studies concerning, above all, gender and race (Aronowitz, 2010).

Efforts to combat all forms of severe exploitation have traditionally relied on a human rights advocacy approach. However, these approaches have often been clearly gendered in their focus and, as Kapur (2005) points out, limited in scope—concentrating predominantly on the trafficking of women into the sex industry (sex trafficking), sex work, and sex workers. One of the key assumptions of this article is that there is significant value in exploring the potential of Anti-trafficking efforts that are grounded in international

human rights instruments. At present, such efforts are embodied in the activities of Anti-Trafficking System, and are most clearly observed through data on evaluations and the support provided by frontline professionals which play a very delicate role, having to consider the mandate and the aim of the organisation they work for, the needs of the users-to whom they provide personalised responses, the outcome of their interventions and the resources available (Ham and Hill 1986).

Human trafficking has long been classified, including by the United Nations (UNODC, 2017), as the third most profitable criminal activity, following drug and arms trafficking. This highlights the scale and economic significance of trafficking networks, which are fed by migrants' need to leave their countries of origin—further exacerbated by migration policies that allow increasingly limited access to regular migration channels (UNODC, 2020).

Fields of study and analysis, such as women's studies, social work, and more broadly, feminist research, have mainly concentrated on sexual exploitation and sex work (Degani, 2017b; Serughetti, 2019; Augustin, 2007; Musacchio, 2004; Gomes and Sani, 2023). In contrast, policy analysis has primarily focused on the policy-making process, with only limited attention to the implementation phase (Degani and Perini, 2019), mainly concerning a social work perspective exploring the gradual downsizing of asylum-related frameworks (Nordquist, 2023; Okech et al., 2012). It is within this space of inquiry that the few existing studies in Italy on the Anti-trafficking system are situated. Research tends to focus predominantly on the normative dimension of the instruments in place, including studies that explore the role of the EU policy and legal regime (Michelini, 2002; Giammarinaro, 2012; Spijkerboer, 2018; Degani and De Stefani, 2020).

The analysis of legislative outputs (Islam, 2023) tends to dominate over evaluations of outcomes or assessments of the characteristics of the system and the adaptive processes that have shaped the implementation of relevant policies in recent years (Prina, 2007; Castelli, 2014; Nicodemi, 2015; Nicodemi, 2020; Palumbo, 2022). From a human rights perspective, the identification process of victims of severe exploitation is considered a crucial phase in building protection pathways and promoting migrants' dignity (Cimino and Degani, 2024). We can assume that the phase of initial identification generally marks the starting point of the intervention—the moment of first contact between the operator and the recipient. At this stage, the professional's negotiation style and expertise become essential, given that migrant reception services require a constant re-examination of one's worldview in light of the rapid transformations in migration phenomena, and thus also in the characteristics of the people encountered (Accorinti et al., 2023; Degani and Della Rocca, 2013).

2.2. On the SLB Perspective and the Anti-Trafficking System

Administrative capacity, as expressed through the actions that represent a government's intent in a given public policy, is essential for the proper and effective implementation of those policies (Weible et al., 2020; Ongaro, 2017).

In this context, frontline workers in the Anti-Trafficking System (educators, social workers, psychologists, intercultural mediators, legal operators, and lawyers) are migrant-specific street-level figures who play a crucial role. They are responsible for managing the key moment in which rules—and more broadly, programs—are translated into concrete decisions to provide tailored responses to individual cases. This is the phase where decisions rooted in individual dimensions come into play, determining important consequences for the person involved.

Lipsky's (2010) theory of SLBs represents a significant contribution to the long-standing debate on the role of bureaucracy in policy implementation—a debate that began in the 1970s. By emphasising the importance of a bottom-up perspective in public policy analysis (Hjern and Porter, 1981; Ham and Hill, 1986), the wave of implementation studies that emerged during that period helped establish the relevance of this phase and notion as a dynamic and complex process. This process involves multiple actors who not only carry out policies, but also interpret, adapt, and at times reframe policy objectives, outputs, and outcomes based on the realities they encounter on the ground and on the resources at their disposal.

Such reframing reflects the discretionary power and professional evaluation of SLBs, who often mediate between abstract policy goals and the concrete, situational needs of individuals—especially in systems, such as Anti-trafficking services, where standardised procedures should respond to highly diverse and evolving cases.

Identifying Street-Level Bureaucrats (SLBs) as key actors for understanding the actual functioning of public policies implicitly refers to the observation of concrete organisational settings involving professionals who interact directly with users. These professional soften enable the needs expressed by beneficiaries to take shape through the co-construction of individual projects and the activation of services and resources. These relationships and the characters of the benefits are defined on the basis of the beneficiaries' backgrounds and of the policy frameworks that define the operational context: available resources, criteria for their allocation, service duration, and the margins of discretion applicable to individual cases (Brodkin, 2003, 2012, 2015; Bassoli, Dallara, Nesti 2024).

Interest in this type of approach has grown alongside the rise of New Public Management (NPM) and later New Public Governance (NPG), which

emphasise inter-organisational relationships, networks, and the role of policy targets themselves in the delivery of public services (Agranoff and McGuire, 2003; Osborne and Strokosch, 2013). Among the research themes adopting the SLB perspective, the issue of multilevel governance has recently gained prominence. The implementation of public policies results from decisions taken within a multidimensional institutional system (Hupe and Hill, 2007, 2015), in which SLBs operate and are held accountable. These dynamics unfold both vertically (bottom-up and top-down) and laterally, as their responsibilities—and the discretion with which they act—span multiple levels. Evans and Harris (2004) propose three dimensions of discretion: above the rule, when general principles or norms are adapted to specific cases and situations; within the rule, when decisions are made among a range of options provided by applicable frameworks; and beyond the rule, when the criteria for decision-making are left entirely to the evaluation of the frontline workers.

The SLB perspective has played a key role in understanding changes in governance and service management, particularly by examining how organisational practices shift, especially concerning working conditions and their consequences. By extending the concept of administrative capacity beyond efficiency and control to encompass “performance” and “accountability,” the SLB perspective has shed light on the variety of ways in which frontline professionals adapt to incentives—often reshaping policy implementation in ways that formal performance metrics struggle to capture (Brodkin, 2011).

Discretion in the implementation of public policies is particularly significant for SLBs working with vulnerable populations, to the extent that they can be considered policymakers of last resort (Lipsky, 1980). Since “street-level organisations” can be viewed as operational cores of public administration, their practices carry substantial social and political significance as vehicles for promoting social welfare, equity, and justice.

Lipsky, in identifying service delivery agencies as spaces where discretion becomes critical, refers to situations in which resources are typically insufficient relative to demand; policy goals are intentionally broad to allow for flexibility; outcomes are hard to measure; and there is considerable information asymmetry between providers and users—especially when working with fragile populations whose capacity to negotiate is often reduced (Lipsky, 1980; Sauris, 2015).

Within the field of social work, a transversal function across many professional roles involves providing support and guidance to disadvantaged individuals in achieving their goals of autonomy and social inclusion. If it is true that the way a social problem is defined determines how it

is addressed (Folgheraiter, 2020), then framing the risk of exclusion as situational, experiential, and intersubjective shapes intervention strategies. In this view, support becomes a tool not only for preventing and containing vulnerability but also for promoting the social reintegration of victims of severe exploitation.

3. Methodological Notes

This article analyses the factors that have shaped the evolution of the program's implementation over time, specifically within the projects constituting the Italian Anti-Trafficking System. The operational framework of this system has experienced only slight regulatory modifications, which have not altered the original objectives of the policy instrument. As extensively recognised in Street-level research, there exists a discernible effort to identify the organisational and contextual conditions that impact the actions of SLB (Yin, 2005; Hupe, 2019).

From a methodological standpoint, this contribution builds on the findings of numerous research projects conducted by the two authors in recent years about trafficking. It also builds on their privileged position, stemming from long-standing scientific collaboration and operational exchange with the Permanent Observatory on Trafficking in Human Beings and Severe Exploitation, which is coordinated by the National Anti-Trafficking Helpline under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, as well as with the Anti-trafficking entities that make up the Italian Anti-Trafficking System.¹ These collaborations, consolidated over time, ensure systematic close and ongoing contact with the target group of SLBs considered in this study.

This privileged access—enabling a research approach grounded in direct field observation—combined with the use of secondary sources (scientific studies, statistical reports, academic journal articles, and national and

¹ More specifically, Paola Degani serves as the scientific responsible in charge for the Collaboration Agreement signed pursuant to Article 15 of Law No. 241 of August 7, 1990, for the implementation of the activities related to the management of the Observatory of the National Anti-Trafficking Helpline. This agreement involves the Veneto Region, which manages the Helpline on behalf of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, Department for Equal Opportunities, and the “Antonio Papisca” University Centre for Human Rights at the University of Padua. Among the activities covered by the Agreement are those connected to the Observatory on phenomena related to trafficking in human beings and severe exploitation. Paola Degani is also a member of the Technical Committee supporting the Steering Committee of the same Department for Equal Opportunities at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. Francesca Cimino is a member of the Territorial Commission for the examination of international protection applications in Padua and Treviso, and collaborates with several anti-trafficking organizations in Italy and Europe, including Equality Social Cooperative, for the Regional Project of Veneto.

international publications), as well as access to unpublished data provided by the National Anti-Trafficking Helpline, makes it possible to investigate in depth how the attribution of benefits and their quality has changed in response to shifts in target populations. It also enables an examination of the corresponding adaptations in identification procedures and operational engagement with beneficiaries.

4. Architecture of the Anti-Trafficking System

4.1. The Anti-Trafficking System Between Multilevel Governance and the Relevance of Street-Level Work

The national protection system for victims of trafficking and severe exploitation has historically been managed by the Department for Equal Opportunities (DPO) of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, which is responsible for promoting and coordinating assistance and social integration interventions for victims with the protection of their rights, as also established by Law No. 228 of August 11, 2003, Measures Against Human Trafficking. It is important to note that the human rights framework remain – in the public declaration of politicians and administrator of this government body – the guide of this System. Moreover, it is relevant to consider also that policies relating to the reception system have always received little attention on the Italian political agenda (and elsewhere) due to the focus on issues related to border control and security, which are matters of national competence that take an overriding role in the regulatory system governing immigration.

The Italian institutional framework for action against human trafficking has remained essentially unchanged over the years. The Steering Committee, chaired by the DPO, acts as a national inter-institutional forum for programming, implementing, and funding measures designed to combat human trafficking within the National Action Plan against Trafficking and Severe Exploitation of Human Beings 2022-2025. This political and programmatic document outlines the actions, contexts, and objectives that define the framework within which the Anti-Trafficking System operates. Representatives from relevant ministries, public bodies, and regional and local authorities participate in the Steering Committee meetings, qualifying it as a political body tasked with overseeing the reference policies and providing guidance on implementation.

The Steering Committee relies on the Technical Committee, which includes participation from multiple stakeholders—both institutional and non-institutional—including representatives from Anti-Trafficking

Projects, International Organisations (IOM, UNHCR, UNICEF), and a limited number of experts. However, the DPO, somewhat contrary to the constraints set by the EU and Council of Europe legislation—as also highlighted in the recent GRETA report (2024)—continues to act both as the national Coordinator and the national Rapporteur on human trafficking. Over time, the Anti-Trafficking System has demonstrated a significant sensitivity to innovation and institutional collaboration opportunities, as well as a positive receptiveness to learning contributions derived from multi-agency work with other actors, public and private, who come into contact with individuals at risk or involved in situations of severe exploitation. In light of mixed migration flows, this circumstance has taken on a systemic nature, as engagement with front-line operators active in “border systems” has become indispensable in street-level work. This factor has enabled the System to respond over time to transformations in phenomena and the composition of target groups, providing essential skills and expertise also crucial for other systems engaged with migration, violence against women, unaccompanied foreign minors, and low-threshold services.

The DPO is thus the body whose political guidance determines the priorities of various intervention areas and oversees the strategic and operational coordination of actors responsible for the actions programmed as defined in individual calls for proposals. This results in a national system which, despite twenty years of operational continuity, remains structured around projects rather than the construction of stable services, as often pointed out by operators themselves. Territorially, the System largely mirrors the administrative subdivision of the Regions, with few exceptions. All projects feature forms of public-private partnership involving local administrations and private social entities.

4.2. The Operational Dimension of the Anti-Trafficking Projects’ Work

The street-level work envisaged by the Call for the identification, assistance, and social integration of victims is embedded within an assistance architecture based on three essential pillars of action—identification, initial assistance, and secondary reception and social inclusion—entrusted for their realisation to the Program for Identification, Assistance, and Social Integration, as provided by Legislative Decree 24/2014 transposing EU Directive No. 36 of 2011 (recast 2024/1712), concerning the prevention and suppression of trafficking in human beings and victim protection. Within this system, several subsystems coexist and intersect, such as identification and first identification within the framework of multi-agency

and multidisciplinary work with Law Enforcement and Labour Inspectors; protection through case management and social inclusion of victims via support activities aimed at constructing projects to redefine the overall life situation of this migrant segment. The capacity for coordinated work has always been a distinctive element, even compared to the operations of systems with similar objectives in other countries.

Constant monitoring of the phenomenon and analysis of its evolution have enabled professionals to continuously adapt the service, making it organic and functional to the new difficulties and characteristics of the phenomenon, intensifying identification and assistance activities, and experimenting with diverse interventions to provide adequate protection for particularly vulnerable individuals. In other words, operators continually reflect on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998) as well as on the professional roles that have evolved within the diverse range of interventions carried out.

Operators serving people involved in situations of severe exploitation have indeed played a proper policy-making role over the years, showing a clear drive towards constructing rights-based pathways for victims aimed at increasing access to opportunities and potentially available services. In doing so, they participate to some extent in social programming from a bottom-up perspective, conveying their experiences and expertise into the policies in action and determining their concrete meaning in daily implementation (Brodkin, 1990) playing a pivotal role that street- in the governance of migration policies.

The SLB interpretative discretion—which can potentially have a restrictive or limiting impact on normative provisions (Merton, 1949)—within the Anti-Trafficking System experience has always tended to signify an effort to open and broaden opportunities for inclusion in the Projects and actions carried out by the System, especially to adapt to the changing nature of trafficking. Such circumstances are reported to the DPO in the report accompanying the accountability documentation and often form the basis for the construction of so-called system actions, or for programming innovative actions to be implemented territorially but replicable nationally, as Projects are bound to do, as provided by Article 3 of the D.P.C.M. of May 16, 2016.

Thanks also to the experiential heritage developed through these actions, front-line operators offer significant expertise to local and central politics, including advocacy, opposing attempts to reduce the complexities of social phenomena related to immigration, through systematic recourse to the legal and political paradigm of human rights and strengthening the multi-agency work and the complexity of the local partnerships. A human rights-based approach enables practitioners to provide services that genuinely respond to the needs of service users, rather than being guided by personal biases,

assumptions, or merely fulfilling organizational or funding requirements. Indeed, the dense network of formal and informal operational exchanges between the public and private sectors, aimed at providing holistic case management and optimising interventions, constitutes one of the key elements of this system's identity. On the one hand, it legitimises the people working in the Projects; on the other hand, it expands their operational discretion and broadens the range of possible actions through which policy interventions regarding this target of migrants can be concretely realised.

As Davis (1969) Cataldi and Cappellato (2020) remind us, SLB operates with a certain margin of decision-making autonomy whenever "the actual limits to their power leave them free to choose among possible courses of action or inaction." Discretion is thus (Evans, 2010) also a manifestation of the freedom perceived by SLBs in adopting solutions concerning the type, quantity, and quality of benefits delivered during policy implementation (Tummers and Bekkers, 2014). In this respect, the actions of Anti-Trafficking System operators regarding an all-around openness to the use of residence permits have been and remain entirely evident. According to this hypothesis, it becomes clear that the use of discretion by the street-level operators of the Anti-Trafficking System is influenced by individual and organisational factors that foster a strong inclusive attitude towards the migrant target groups they work with (Hupe, 2013). More precisely, SLB research has shown that frontline workers typically employ these coping mechanisms to successfully manage their work under challenging conditions (Lipsky, 1980), adapting objectives and rules to specific circumstances and leveraging the inherent ambiguity in goal-oriented programs (Tummers and Bekkers, 2014).

From this perspective, it is worth noting that the "Italian system" in recent years, especially starting from the refugees crisis of 2015, has not only carried out diverse activities in response to problems and needs arising from beneficiary groups, within a collaboration framework between public administrations and specialised private social organisations but has also contributed to the functioning of a series of "border systems". It has opened operational modes that have gone well beyond mere execution of institutionally mandated actions, fostering multiple initiatives mostly framed within a collaboration between public administrations and private actors, following a logic of multi-level governance defined by continuous negotiations among territorial at supranational, national, regional, and local levels (Hooghe, 1996). This fact does not mean that in some situations that in certain circumstances there is a clear evidence of decoupling governance (Scholten 2013); in fact, despite a specific government framework, subnational levels of government have sometimes followed different trajectories, or —

at least until recently—that the different narrative between the EU and the Italian government highlighted differences in political and interpretative views on regulations in this policy area.

Framing this system and its operating issues within the dimension of multi-level governance is relevant from the standpoint of international obligations and resulting normative constraints, which have important implications for policy instruments and referral mechanisms designed to address the complexity of severe exploitation phenomena, both in terms of combating trafficking and victim protection (OSCE/ODIHR, 2004).

Taking the social inclusion of beneficiaries as the ultimate goal of the Anti-Trafficking System, the experience of recent years seems to confirm that this is a field of public policy (Fischer, Miller, and Sidney, 2017) quite far from many cases of implementation deficit seen in other social service sectors. There is no doubt that the Anti-trafficking system has a niche character, even though today it consists of beneficiaries with very different histories of exploitation or risk of exploitation. Our hypothesis to justify this consideration is that in Italy, the legislative framework established at the end of the 1990s enabled the initiation of administrative interventions and practices, which were launched once the necessary resources were made available to SLBs, producing significant impacts at both individual and social levels for those who benefited.

4.3. Human-Centred Approaches in Anti-Trafficking Policy: Challenges and System Specificities

A particularly relevant issue, connected to policy design and the implementation of services for individuals involved in situations of severe exploitation, concerns the quality of victim support programs and how these are interpreted within various organisational contexts. The centrality of the rights of the person among the Anti-trafficking System operators has always been present, due to the central role covered by the human rights law on this matter.

In personal care services, the relationship between the beneficiary, the system, and the service provider is significantly more important than other qualitative parameters. All social workers working in the area of Anti-trafficking, referred to human rights and the person-centred approach as the core principles or values of the profession, reiterating the essence of this legal and political paradigm as the basis of their mandate. Human rights are a value-driven approach to working with migrants, encompassing social justice. Designing social work as a human rights profession has significant

implications for the procedures and methodologies adopted, especially in relation to beneficiaries.

During these decades, the possibility, provided for by law, for exploited individuals or victims of trafficking to cooperate for justice purposes may have represented a genuine experience of agency. At the same time, it has certainly served as a general source of legitimacy for social services—particularly for specialised implementing bodies within the non-profit sector—regarding efforts to combat criminal trafficking networks. This was especially the case during the 1990s and 2000s, when the primary goal was dismantling criminal organisations involved in forced prostitution and trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation

In this context, the work of Anti-trafficking front-line workers, in cooperation with law enforcement and the judiciary, to remove young women subjected to extreme violence and severe human rights violations from exploitation, has been widely acknowledged.

The identification phase has always been a critical turning point in the migration journeys of people arriving in our country, as the hybrid nature of individual projects makes the application of the “labels” that determine a person’s legal status particularly complex. Especially in recent years, the absence of legal entry channels and the impossibility of moving freely and legally along migration routes and through transit countries, have meant that nearly all migrants must rely on smugglers’ services, significantly increasing their vulnerability and indebtedness that can determine a situation of trafficking or severe exploitation (Cimino and Degani, 2024).

Identification takes place within a social work process of “translating” the lived experiences tied to the migration project and to the constraints that these individuals are subject to. The emergence of a person at risk of, or subject to, severe exploitation—a condition that, in the context of mixed migration flows (UNODC 2018a, 2018b), may occur across all migrant categories—is particularly challenging. This is because exploitation increasingly occurs in informal, unregulated, or illegal settings, such as petty crime, the sex industry, drug cultivation and guarding, and drug trafficking; as well as in labour sectors that rely heavily on severely exploited labour.

Additionally, several factors contribute to the difficulty of bringing such situations to light and properly identifying individuals’ true conditions. These include the victims’ own unwillingness to report their condition of subjugation—sometimes due to a calculation that links the meagre proceeds of exploitation to a potential way out of the situation—or their inability to articulate or express externally what they are experiencing, particularly in the absence of adequate support.

5. Adapting the System to Evolving Trafficking Dynamics

5.1. System Responses to the Shifting Dynamics of Human Trafficking

If we were to retrace the path of the Anti-trafficking system from the perspective of the target groups and beneficiaries, without a doubt, the main activities of the Projects and SLBs would include outreach, identification, case management, and the implementation of social reintegration programs for women involved in situations of sexual exploitation. However, the data also reveal a growing presence of male victims, which coincides with the increasing relevance of Anti-Trafficking Projects focused on individuals subjected to severe labour exploitation (see Chart 1).

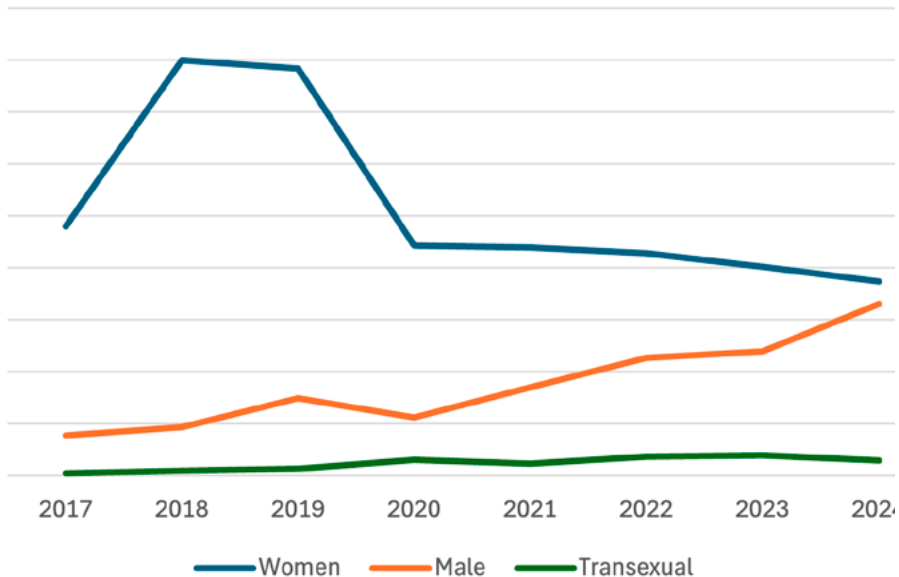


Chart 1. Assessments and support interventions carried out by the Anti-trafficking projects by gender, 2017–2024. Data from the Anti-trafficking Toll-Free Number National Observatory, processed by the authors

Female Invisibility in Severe Labour Exploitation

The invisibility of women in situations of severe labour exploitation reflects their greater isolation, as they are mostly concentrated in the domestic sector, personal care services, hospitality and food service as well

as agriculture (Palumbo and Sciurba 2018; Giammarinaro 2022). The lack of women visibility is also due to the greater attention that Anti-trafficking policies have traditionally given to situation related to sexual rather than labour exploitation until a few years ago (Cimino and Degani 2020), and more broadly to the level of “social disvalue” regarding foreign prostitution. Moreover it is important to note that the significant predominance of women among the front-line workers during the first decade of the System life, have fostered the development of a great deal of sensitivity, including political awareness, to this type of exploitation while other contexts, such as work, did not receive similar attention and were not subject to intervention by front-line operators in the same way.

The reality of mixed migration flows, starting from 2011 with the so-called “Arab Spring” and then the outbreak of the war in Syria, but especially from 2015 onward, has created unprecedented difficulties in identifying migrants mostly in transit through Libya, nearly all asylum seekers with evident trafficking risk factors. This phenomenon affects not only Nigerian and now Ivorian women, but also many adult men, mainly of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin, as well as thousands of minors (Giammarinaro 2018).

Chart 2 reflects the work with the Nigerian target group but also shows the relevance of working with people from countries that today are considered safe countries of origin for international protection applicants.

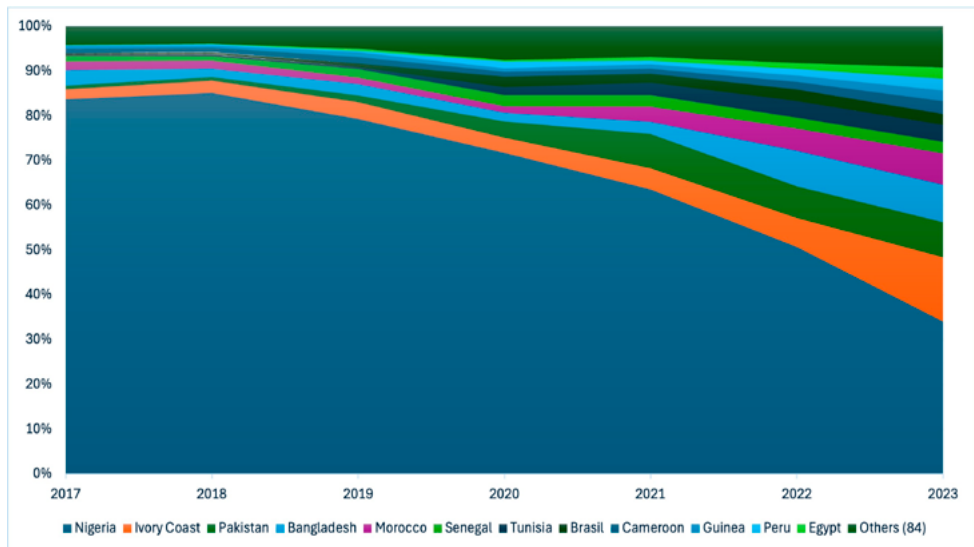


Chart 2. Percentage of assesments carried out by the Anti-trafficking projects between 2017 and 2023 by nationality. Data from the Antitrafficking Toll-Free Number National Observatory, processed by the authors

In fact, since 2015, coordination between trafficking and asylum in terms of referral has involved not only the front-line workers and other operators, of the two “systems” – the Anti-trafficking as well as the international protection system – but also a variety of public administrations, and intergovernmental agencies. This circumstance has grown so significantly as to bring about substantial changes in the procedural work of the Projects. Indeed, the arrival of many young women, predominantly of Nigerian origin, almost always with traumatic experiences and migration plans linked to a current or potential situation of severe exploitation, mostly in the sexual sphere (Charts 3 and 4), marked the beginning of a new phase of work for the Anti-Trafficking System also because all these women applied for asylum request. This fact determined a new path of work for front-line workers of both Anti-trafficking and refugees systems in terms of partnerships that implied practically different solutions in the implementation of the rules of reference both for the identification of migrants and the application for regularization in our national territory and for the reception of migrants. This phase was characterised by the construction of referral mechanisms, initially as a good practice and non-standardized, with the Territorial Commissions (CT) for the recognition of international protection, the taking charge of persons entering the System with a status distinct from that used for victims of human trafficking, and above all, by interaction mechanisms with the asylum system hampered by the structural inadequacy of that system in handling arrivals of migrants, sometimes in large numbers, in our country. These results were of course the outcome of the System’s operators capacity to adapt to the new characters of the flows and the “massive” requests for international protection. The quantitative significance of this target group often led, between 2015 and 2018, to the exhaustion of available places in the Anti-Trafficking System’s reception facilities, thus effectively forcing the Projects to invest many resources “unidirectionally” towards the beneficiaries (Chart 3).

The intervention carried out by the Anti-Trafficking Services has mitigated the difficulties caused by the institutional delay in recognising the issue of people potentially placed in a situation that crosses their “status,” and consequently also the different protection statuses accessible according to the type of vulnerabilities expressed. However, operating in a pioneering way—outside not only any legacy framework but also any formal mandate—and with an intersectoral logic, has made the work of the Anti-Trafficking Projects less effective in terms of genuine protection from situations of severe exploitation. This is because the number of assessments imposed by the contingent situation implicitly reduced the attention given to other target groups, other forms of exploitation, and especially to outreach and identification work (see Charts 3 and 4).

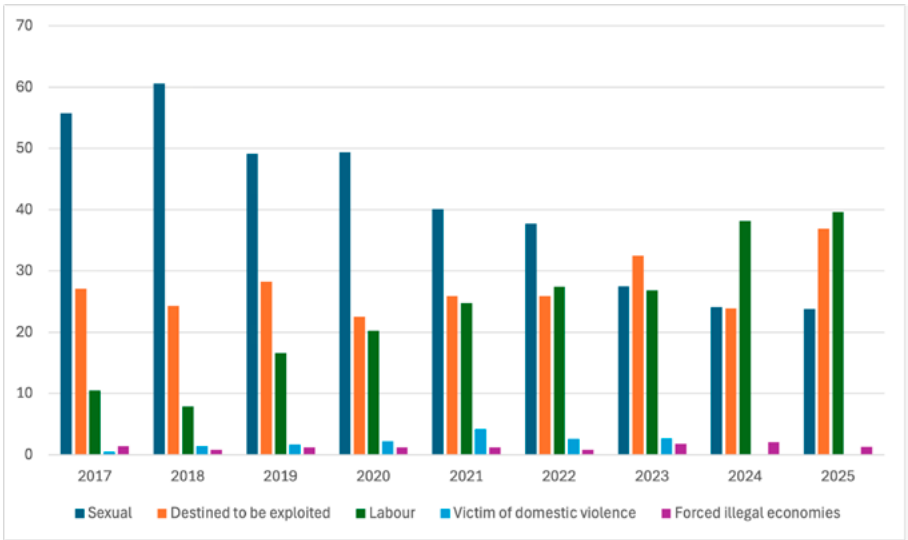


Chart 3. Percentages of support interventions carried out by the Anti-trafficking projects between 2017 and 2025, by main types of exploitation. Data from the Anti-trafficking Toll-Free Number National Observatory, processed by the authors.

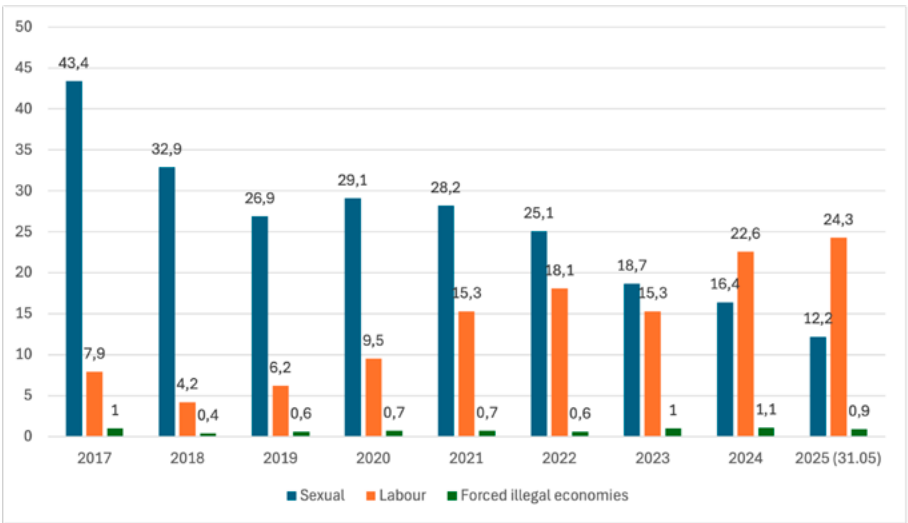


Chart 4. Assessments carried out by the Anti-trafficking projects between 2017 and 2025, by main types of exploitation. Data from the Anti-trafficking Toll-Free Number, National Observatory, processed by the authors.

Some specific considerations regarding the collaboration that over the years has taken place between the Anti-Trafficking Services and the reception systems for asylum seekers and holders of international and humanitarian protection, particularly concern the issue of the emergence, identification, and referral of trafficking victims.

Chart 5 highlights the importance of referrals made by the CT and the refugees reception centres (CAS/SPRAR/SIPROIMI/SAI), as well as the decline in this phase.

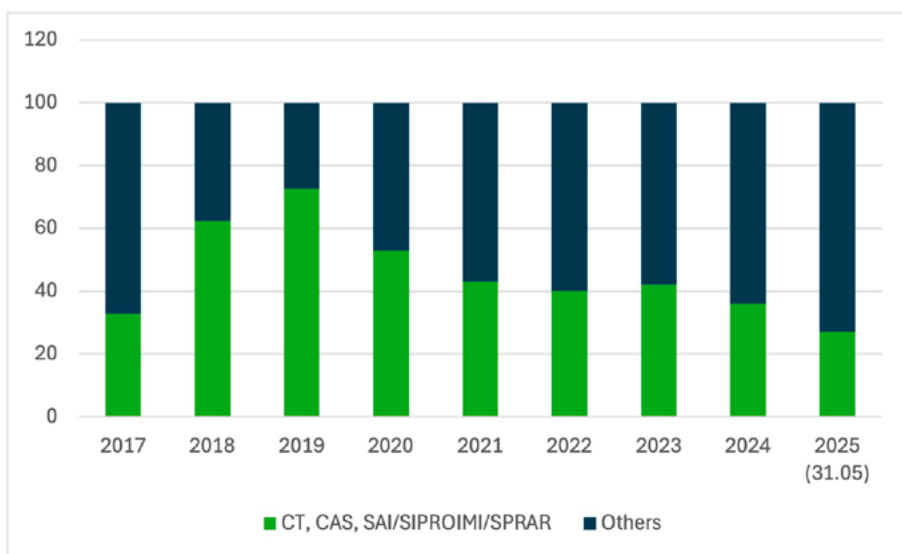


Chart 5. Percentages of assessments carried out by the Anti-trafficking projects between 2017 and 2025 upon referral. Data from the Data from the Anti-trafficking Toll-Free Number -National Observatory, processed by the authors.

After the adoption of Decree 2014/24 (Article 10), collaborations and pilot initiatives were launched between CAS (Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers managed by the Prefettura) and Anti-Trafficking Projects. These included distributing multilingual informational materials about trafficking to raise awareness of debt bondage and sexual exploitation, as well as offering support services for victims. These collaborations enabled Anti-Trafficking Project front-line operators to connect with asylum seekers even before exploitation has fully materialised.

Over time, local networked partnerships between the asylum and Anti-trafficking systems have flourished, supported by guidelines and protocols (UNHCR 2017, 2021) on the identification of trafficking and/or severe

exploitation indicators to be used during evaluations process by the CT legitimizing the procedures already informally adopted by the front-line operators. On the basis the individual concerned, the Commission refers the case to the territorial Anti-trafficking agency and simultaneously suspends the international protection procedure, unless sufficient elements are found to recognise a residence title to the asylum seeker. The purpose of this suspension is to allow Anti-Trafficking System operators to conduct interviews with the individual, with the assistance of cultural mediators. These interviews aim to guide the presumed trafficking victim asylum seeker towards the appropriate service, for reporting to the CT a comprehensive information picture, considering the difficulty trafficking victims often have in providing a coherent narrative of their experience and their frequent distrust of authorities. The synergistic work and case management of individuals referred by the CTs have effectively made Anti-Trafficking Projects one of the most significant practical actors in multi-agency work with international protection seekers and with the Italian System for Asylum and Refugees.

The disembarkation phase could have represented a crucial opportunity for the preliminary identification of victims and potential victims of trafficking and severe exploitation. However, only after the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the subsequent exodus of Ukrainian citizens were operational synergies between mixed teams from the diverse protection systems (asylum, trafficking, gender-based violence.), supported by international organisations, observed at the Italian eastern border (Cimino and Degani, 2023). These practices and procedures were not systematised for other borders.

Another element that in recent years has significantly altered the modus operandi of Anti-Trafficking Projects—and which may have had repercussions concerning the recognition of the DPO as the sole political reference actor—is the visibility of the phenomenon of severe labour exploitation and the increase in the number of people taken into care by the Projects thanks to the expertise of many operators to intercept migrants who work in a condition of subjugation and to the capacity of networking to favour the identification of these situations.

Far from being reducible to an exceptional event or a pathological dimension of contractual relations linked to deregulation and the contractual jungle that governs labour today, severe labour exploitation represents a structural component of work in contemporary economies (Geddes, Hadj-Abdou, Brumat, 2020; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Situations of subjugation affecting foreign persons are also clearly linked to immigration policy choices, which exacerbate situational or existential vulnerabilities.

5.2. New Challenges raised by changes in the phenomenon and the Anti-Trafficking System

The Anti-Trafficking System's ability to support collaboration and dialogue with professionals operating within the contexts of international protection — including the CT — can only be partially inferred from data collected by the National Toll-Free Number. This is because the disappearance of traditional profiles commonly used to define migrants has made the activities of frontline workers significantly more complex and more challenging to document, as they are often aimed at “harm reduction.”

In recent years, trafficking and severe exploitation have undergone substantial transformations — in trafficking routes, the organisational structures of criminal networks, forms and contexts of exploitation, countries of origin, transit, and destination of victims, methods of recruitment, control and exploitation, and connections between organised crime and other illicit (e.g., drug, weapons, or migrant smuggling) or even legal activities (e.g., money laundering through legitimate businesses). Moreover, the sectors in which trafficked persons are exploited have also become increasingly diversified.

Sexual exploitation is now significantly less relevant in the work of SLBs as the characteristics and modes of implementation of the phenomenon have changed considerably over the years: alongside a gradual increase in nationalities of origin, sexual exploitation in apartments or nightclubs has been witnessed. This has led to the need to orient contact work toward the indoors according to the “proximity” model, since prostitution exercised in indoor places is characterised by forms of invisibility and masking strategies that make the people involved difficult to intercept for the purposes of social intervention and that have forced SLBs to make important operational adaptations. This condition has been determining an evident change not only under an operational perspective but also for politicians involved in the monitoring of the implementation of this policy's area

Indeed, in recent years, trafficking victims have been exploited in multiple ways: in non-traditional sectors of Italy's economy, where forms of severe labour exploitation and forced labour seems to be really widespread (FRA, 2015).

It is clear that responding to this phenomenon cannot rely solely on criminal law. Timely intervention requires flexible tools that can ensure immediate protection — including effective forms of compensation and reparation.

Among the possible opportunities to identify victims or presumed victims of trafficking, labour inspections allow Anti-trafficking entities to work in synergy with regulatory authorities. These collaborations help uncover

formal violations that, without a deep understanding of the coercive mechanisms affecting workers, would likely remain hidden. Multi-agency work here demands a redefinition and expansion of practical collaboration with actors and agencies operating in both administrative and criminal enforcement fields. It is essential to develop referral and reporting systems aimed at building inclusion pathways for migrants who experience violence and abuse akin to that found in sexual exploitation.

Unlike recruitment for sexual exploitation, labour exploitation is rarely initiated through acts of coercion and primarily affects adult males, often arriving in Italy independently of trafficking networks. Travel costs vary depending on the distance and the type of journey, with the money often borrowed from acquaintances who act as intermediaries with those who later manage the person's exploitation in Italy. The resulting debt becomes the strategic tool used to legitimise different forms of servitude, depending on nationality, even in labour exploitation scenarios – much like in cases of sexual exploitation. The pressure to quickly repay the loan fosters involvement in situations akin to slavery or severe economic and psychological subjugation to employers and possible intermediaries (“caporali”). Most exploited individuals seem to leave their home countries without the necessary information to find legitimate employment in Italy.

Unlike sexual exploitation, labour exploitation is rarely portrayed as a public security emergency or social alarm, which results in less attention. These segments have long remained in the shadows, even in terms of investigations and judicial responses. As a result, there is a notable delay in understanding and monitoring the dynamics of severe labour exploitation and sometimes a knowledge gap among professionals responsible for assistance and social intervention when dealing with victims.

Exploitation in forced begging on behalf of others shares similarities with labour exploitation, though begging cannot be classified as work since there is no entitlement to payment. The cultural component of begging necessitates understanding when it is used to extract unjust profits from others and when it is a result of marginalisation and social exclusion.

Although few in-depth studies have been conducted in this area, some notable references can be found in older case studies, parliamentary reports, and reports on various forms of social exclusion, extreme poverty, or deviance. While current data is insufficient to paint a complete picture – especially regarding minors – some cases suggest that individuals forced into begging are also exploited in prostitution or coercive illegal activities (Ferraris 2007; Degani and Donadel 2013).

The current state of knowledge is inadequate to fully understand and correctly identify the dynamics and various manifestations of this under-

recognised phenomenon, even among Anti-trafficking professionals. Interventions on (forced) begging – particularly involving minors, women, and persons with disabilities – require a holistic approach, combining tools for crime prevention and repression with social support and protection mechanisms for individuals forced into begging due to poverty and marginalisation, often worsened by exclusion from reception systems or loss of residence permits.

Trafficking for the purpose of exploiting foreigners in forced illegal activities is a form that has emerged in recent years. Severe forms of exploitation in this context mainly affect minors forced into pickpocketing, burglary, street sales of counterfeit goods, drug dealing, or transporting/storing large quantities of narcotics – sometimes serving as couriers with drugs concealed inside their bodies.

Due to the limited research in Italy on this form of trafficking, an updated and comprehensive picture of its scope and evolution is lacking (Degani and Pividori 2016). More detailed information is available on minors exploited in illegal economies, mostly from Eastern Europe, North Africa, and South America. According with the information collected by frontline operators, these are predominantly male adolescents from difficult backgrounds who may seek to escape their conditions to pursue dreams or support their families. Recently, cases have been reported of young Nigerian men (and women too) forcibly involved in drug dealing across Italian cities, often in situations of “flexible” exploitation resembling other forms of severe trafficking. Also in these cases the expertise of SL workers has been fundamental also during the phase of trial.

Nationality, criminal group needs, and age all influence the diversity of recruitment methods and sectors of exploitation. However, exploitation in illegal activities remains multifaceted and hard to delineate even if investigations on these cases and judgements that recognise the acting of crimes due subjugation and exploitation as for now start to be registered in Italy.

6. Conclusion

This article contributes to the analysis of adjustment process of the Italian Anti-Trafficking System concerning recent changes in the phenomena of trafficking and severe exploitation, from a SLB perspective. Recent transformations regarding both the composition of migratory flows and related policies have profoundly altered the work of professionals involved

in this area of social work, interpreting the discretion of their role to support the target group of migrants they serve successfully.

The intersectional nature of the individual identities who have come into contact with the Anti-Trafficking System in recent years has required not only adaptations by SL workers but also the development of increasingly comprehensive and efficient multi-agency collaboration. This has been achieved through the networking and the relationships with “border systems” that have enabled severely exploited persons to be identified and, more or less promptly, referred to specialised services.

However, the significant investment required by these activities—particularly in relation to work with the asylum system—against a backdrop of almost unchanged project funding, has resulted in a scaling back of efforts focused on the identification and care of other target groups and forms of exploitation. Currently, it could be that the same commitment is favouring the contact with people in conditions of severe work exploitation rather than in other contexts.

SL operators working within the Anti-Trafficking System have promoted, initiated, and implemented adaptive and innovative capacities in policy responses and policy implementation in response to the evolving phenomena of trafficking and severe exploitation. Emerging new forms of exploitation and severe abuse, increasingly appearing in Italy and Europe, will necessitate a redefinition of their work—one that, now more than ever, appears challenging due to regulatory orientations shaping not only the national but also the European landscape, as well as difficulties in identifying migrants during the immediate phases following their entry into national territory, including from a prevention perspective.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI- AI-assisted technologies.

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