

# ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH TO PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SHELTERS



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**List of abbreviations**

HTS – human trafficking survivor  
PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder

## Introduction

Understanding what human trafficking is and why it is such a complex phenomenon may begin with understanding trauma. Human trafficking is a form of dehumanization and can produce profound, prolonged, and often repeated trauma. The consequences on a person are very unique and affect the lives of survivors deeply. As Van der Kolk notes, ‘trauma is specifically an event that overwhelms the central nervous system, altering the way people process and recall memories. It's the current imprint of that pain, horror, and fear living inside people’.<sup>1</sup> Trauma experienced by trafficking survivors typically stems from psychological, physical, and emotional abuse; deprivation of basic needs; forced or coerced use of drugs; economic exploitation; and/or threats of deportation.<sup>2</sup> Having that in mind, the most common disorders are posttraumatic stress disorder, mood disorders, anxiety disorders, dissociative disorders, and substance use disorders. Some experts suggest that as a result of multiple traumatic experiences before, during, and sometimes after trafficking, survivors develop complex post-traumatic stress disorder which refers to a more complicated psychological reaction that includes - affect deregulation, dissociation, and changes in memory, somatic distress, changes in relationships with others, shifts in self-perception, and changes in systems of meaning. Some of the commonly presenting behaviors of trafficking survivors, such as guilt and shame, revictimization, hopelessness, aggression, emotional volatility, self-injurious behavior, and other risk behaviors, may be therefore related to complex PTSD.

Even though it is well known that survivors of human trafficking experience multiple forms of abuse and suffer a range of health consequences, there is limited evidence relating to effective treatments for this complex and highly vulnerable group, and little is known about their ability to engage in psychological therapy. Therefore, everyone included in recovery of human trafficking survivors<sup>3</sup> needs a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon, especially its impact on survivors to provide effective treatment and intervention.

The aim of the approaches is to provide practitioners (clinicians and non-clinicians) who work in shelters across the Western Balkans practical guidance to inspire further learning and action over time. More precisely the goal is to:

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<sup>1</sup> van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The Body Keeps the Core: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

<sup>2</sup> Burke, M. C. (2019). *Human Trafficking in the 21st Century: An Overview for Healthcare Providers*. In *Working with the Human Trafficking Survivor: What Counselors, Psychologists, Social Workers and Medical Professionals Need to Know* (pp. 1–16). Taylor & Francis Group. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/brandeis-ebooks/detail.action?docID=5741710>

<sup>3</sup> The terms ‘victim’ and ‘survivor’ are both used in different contexts to refer to individuals who were trafficked. ‘Survivor’ is used by many service providers to acknowledge the strength and resilience demonstrated by those who have been trafficked. Throughout this document, the term ‘survivor,’ rather than ‘victim,’ is used in a conscious effort to recognize the importance of empowering these individuals on the road to rebuilding their lives. Additionally, term survivor is used for both identified and potential victims of human trafficking throughout the document. Hockett, J. M., & Saucier, D. A. (2015). A systematic literature review of “rape victims” versus “rape survivors”: Implications for theory, research, and practice. *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 25*, 1-14.

- provide adequate interventions, i.e. empowerment to human trafficking survivors (HTS) in shelters in order to overcome trauma caused by human trafficking and consequently achieve a better quality of life;
- to provide adequate support to HTSs in shelters as to ensure easier and more successful coping with the life circumstances in which they find themselves, which have been shown to carry a risk for developing psychological difficulties and mental disorders.

This tool package is comprised of 4 approaches:

1. Organizational approach to providing support for survivors of human trafficking in shelters
2. Clinical approach to providing support for survivors of human trafficking in shelters
3. Approach for providing support for children survivors of human trafficking in shelters
4. Staff care approach

Recommendations from the approaches may be used interchangeably by all service providers working in the shelters. However, those that require additional psychological training and knowledge should be used only for trained staff in the field of psychology and psychotherapy including counseling.

Data for the approaches was gathered through different means. Best practices are collected through desk research. In addition, different examples are drawn from carrying out in-depth interviews with service providers in different shelters in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania, Kosovo\*, Montenegro and Serbia. The aim was to compare and contrast best practices in providing assistance to human trafficking survivors and complement them with different practices implemented worldwide as to contribute to developing new approaches that will help HTSs in the field. The approaches consist of evidence-based and best practice information for clinical and non-clinical service providers who want to work more effectively with HTSs who have been exposed to acute and chronic traumas and/or are at risk of developing traumatic stress reactions.

The approaches for working with vulnerable persons have been developed within the project *“Heal and Connect: Towards the improvement of mental health protection of vulnerable groups through networking and evidence-based practice”*, implemented by PIN – Psychosocial Innovation Network. This project is a part of the project *“Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings in the Western Balkans”* (PaCT) funded by the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and implemented in the region by the German Corporation for International Cooperation GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit).

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\* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence

## ORGANIZATIONAL APPROACH TO PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR SURVIVORS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SHELTERS

This approach is tailored for all service providers (non-clinical staff) that work in the area of human trafficking and provide direct support to survivors in the shelters, such as social workers, legal staff, pedagogist, as well as managers and directors who run shelters. This approach builds on the fact that staff members in the shelters attempt to implement support services without a proper support necessary for broad organizational culture change within shelters. When dealing with traumatized clients it is necessary to recognize how organizational structure as well as non-clinical staff can be critical to ensuring that survivors in the shelters feel safe. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for everyone working with HTSs to understand ‘the widespread impact of trauma and understand potential paths for healing; recognizes the signs and symptoms of trauma in staff, clients, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, practices, and settings.’<sup>4</sup>

In order to do so, this approach will focus on understanding a wide spread impact of trauma on survivors of human trafficking, creating a safe environment for survivors, ensuring sensitivity to traumatic experiences through policies and procedures, ensuring sensitivity to different needs of HTSs and providing psychosocial activities to HTSs.

### Understanding a wide spread impact of trauma in human trafficking survivors

As mentioned above, the impact of trauma has massive consequences on the individual. Trauma overwhelms a person’s coping capacity and has long-term effects on functioning and well-being. In order to provide services effectively, it is of utmost important to promote trauma awareness and understanding among all staff members that work in the shelters. Being attentive about trauma consequences that affect HTSs allow service providers to tailor their activities to clients’ needs.

More precisely, promoting trauma awareness and understanding can:

- Improve screening processes, treatment planning and placement while also decreasing the risk for retraumatization.
- Improve communication between the client and treatment provider.
- Decrease risks related to misunderstanding the client’s reactions or underestimating the need for appropriate referrals for evaluation or trauma-specific treatment.
- Attract and retain staff who are educated on trauma on all levels.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> SAMHSA (2014). *SAMHSA’s Concept of Trauma and Guidance for a Trauma-Informed Approach SAMHSA’s Trauma and Justice Strategic Initiative*.

<http://store.samhsa.gov/product/SAMHSA-s-Concept-of-Trauma-and-Guidance-for-a-Trauma-Informed-Approach/SMA14-4884>.

<sup>5</sup> Hopper EK, Bassuk EL, Olivet J. Shelter from the storm (2010): Trauma-informed care in homelessness services settings. *The Open Health Services and Policy Journal*.3:80–100.

Interview findings with eight organizations across the region suggest that trainings on trauma do exist but the knowledge about trauma is not entirely integrated in the planning of the treatment. Many employees in the shelters have received trainings that improve their knowledge on trauma related symptoms, however they are mostly aimed at clinical staff. There are also trainings that tackle the issue of trauma consequences but the issue as such is not in the focus. For example, these trainings are related to gender-based violence, nondiscrimination, sexual violence, stress and burnout. Although these educational opportunities are very significant, more attention should be given to those that deal with understanding the consequences of trauma and aimed at all employees at the shelters. Trainings need to go beyond elementary descriptions of trauma and responses to the reality of implementation. Trainings should be interactive and include real case examples as well as role plays that providers can practice during their work.

Examples of training content that may contribute to service providers' understanding of trauma<sup>6</sup>:

- Explanation of harm reduction and how it feels when a survivor makes a choice that feels unsafe/unproductive to providers (i.e., how to provide judgment-free support while promoting agency)
- Examples of how relationships with survivors have been harmed by not engaging in harm reduction (i.e., what not to do)
- Identification and understanding of the possible meanings behind traumatic behaviors and how not to take them personally
- Details on the physical impact of trauma on the brain
- Help for service providers to become aware of their own biases
- Guidance on how to avoid triggering survivors (what not to do)
- Grounding techniques
- Tools for building empathy
- Training on the complex interactions of trauma, substance use, emotional disorders and physical illness
- Basic safety issues in working with victims and approaches to treatment.

### **Best practice – recognizing trauma consequences in HTSs**

*Service providers should understand the wide-spread impact of trauma and therefore recognize trauma-related reactions. For example, one case of a woman who was a HTS showed how difficult it was for service providers to manage her stay in the shelter. She refused to collaborate with the shelter's staff, as well as with other clients. Her behavior was rude and inappropriate. However, since the staff had a comprehensive knowledge on the symptoms related to complex traumatic experiences, they were more patient with her in their daily activities, helped her feel safer and had an understanding of how to conduct psychosocial interventions and when to make treatment referrals for psychotherapist and psychiatrist.*

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<sup>6</sup> Examples are retrieved from Kaitie Chakoian, Resham Sethi, and Jessica Santos (2021). *Trauma-Informed Practice in the Field: Recommendations for Human Trafficking Service Providers*, IERE.



### Recommendations on trauma awareness

- All employees in the shelter should undertake comprehensive trainings on understanding the widespread impact of trauma on HTSs.
- It is recommended to develop guidelines on how to deal with highly traumatized individuals that may assist service providers in their daily practices in the shelters.
- All staff members should recognize that the HTS' experience of trauma can greatly influence their receptiveness to and engagement with services, interactions with staff and peers and responsiveness to program guidelines, practices, and interventions.

### Creating a safe environment

Establishing physical and psychological safety is considered a pre-requisite in working with HTSs. In order to make HTSs feel safe, service providers may collaboratively with them assess their level of safety and develop plans to improve it. It is important to consider how the physical environment promotes a sense of safety. For example, environment stimuli may generate strong emotions and reactions among HTSs (e.g., triggers such as lighting, access to exits, panic buttons, or visual or auditory stimuli)<sup>7</sup>. Since the physical environment may be traumatizing for HTS, the ways staff members recognize and address aspects of the physical environment is very relevant. Therefore, service providers need to ensure monitoring of the shelter, presence of security guards, and low level of noise.

Not only is physical safety important but working with service providers who are respectful, understanding, nonjudgmental, plays a major role in securing wellbeing for HTSs. **Best practices** show that all individuals who work in shelters should build collaborative relationships with clients in order to provide services that meet HTS' needs. For example, greeting people in a welcoming manner when they first walk into the shelter may help foster feelings of safety and acceptance, initiate positive relationships and increase the likelihood that they will engage in treatment. Moreover, keeping consistent schedules and procedures and being aware of body language is very important as well.<sup>8</sup>

Interview findings show that physical safety is on a high level in the targeted shelters. Service providers pay attention to safety of HTSs in different ways: 24h presence of the staff in the shelters, security guards, panic tasters, isolated location of the shelter etc. In addition, many interviewed service providers believe that establishing close and caring relationships with clients is of significant importance for building trust and ensuring their recovery.

### Best practice: Building trust between service providers and HTSs

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<sup>7</sup> Finkelstein, N., VandeMark, N., Fallot, R., Brown, V., Cadiz, S., & Heckman, J. (2004). *Enhancing substance abuse recovery through integrated trauma treatment*. (ResID Number: 13734). Sarasota, FL: National Trauma Consortium.

<sup>8</sup> Harris M, Fallot RD (2001), editors. *Using trauma theory to design service systems*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

*Getting survivors to trust service providers and accept help is a huge obstacle and it often takes time and patience. Many interviewed organizations have positive examples on how to build trust with their clients in shelters. For instance, service providers emphasized that using a friendly and warm approach means a lot to their clients. Moreover, since they are spending a lot of time with them in the shelters (there is 24h staff presence), they might start acting as parent role model for HTSs. Undertaking this role might be helpful in their treatment as this can give them an opportunity to experience parental relationship for the first time in their life and contribute to their healing process.*

#### Recommendations for safety

- It is recommended for service providers to create guidelines on how to ensure physical and psychological safety of survivors of human trafficking.
- It is recommended for service providers to collaboratively with clients assess their level of safety and develop plans to feel safe.

#### Policies and procedures that ensure sensitivity to traumatic experiences of HTSs

Policies and procedures are necessary in the shelters as they help structuring and organizing the work with clients. Sometimes, however, the lack of policies/procedures or their insufficient sensitivity towards trauma issues can have the unintended impact of limiting the choices survivors have over their own lives or more seriously retraumatize the HTS (loss of control, being trapped, or feeling disempowered). Therein, it is important to examine the written policies and procedures in the shelters and see which of them focus on trauma, issues of safety and confidentiality. **The best practices** with regard to policies and procedures show that HTSs should be included in the review of policies and treatment requirements in order to provide feedback that will tailor their specific needs.<sup>9</sup> For instance, policies or standards that are directly focused on shelter functioning (e.g., curfew) can have a negative impact on HTSs who had to limit their freedom of movement so it can reinforce the power and control dynamics in regard to their traumatic experience. It can resonate with them in a way that would create anger and resistance that should be acknowledged by service providers. Therefore, it is important to review policies and procedures in order to avoid retraumatization and act in accordance with the best interest of HTSs.

Study findings show that interviewed shelters have wide range of procedures and policies. Most of them cover organizational structure: job descriptions, contracts, guidelines on confidentiality, rules and obligations for employees and code of ethics. However, many of them lack procedures that are specifically targeted at HTSs and consequences on mental health caused by trauma experiences. Shelters do not have procedures or any type of guidelines that will help them in dealing with self-harm, addictions or other forms of trauma-related symptoms. Moreover,

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<sup>9</sup> Knight, C. (2019). Trauma informed practice and care: Implications for field instruction. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(1), 79-89.

policies are not trauma-sensitive which means that they may reinforce abusive dynamics. There is an example of a specific rule in a semi-open shelter which states that whenever a new person arrives in the shelter, other survivors need to be in a lockdown as much as this new person is required to stay in (app. 7 to 10 days). Staying in may retraumatize other survivors who previously had experiences of limiting their autonomy and freedom of movement.

#### Recommendations on policies and procedures

- All procedures and policies should be evaluated for their potential to re-traumatize a client.
- Evaluation/reexamination of policies and procedures should include HTSs who serve as advisors or consultants in order to provide feedback that will tailor their specific needs.
- New policies and procedures that are directly focused on reduction of trauma-related symptoms should be introduced.

#### Sensitivity to different needs of HTSs

**Clients as experts of their experience:** HTS' protection needs should be tailored through their individual history. Many factors need to be taken into account such as gender, cultural differences, social background etc. Trafficking survivors must be trusted and given the tools to make decisions about their own safety. It is vital for service providers to believe that HTSs have enough agency and therefore are best situated to make decisions about the best options for themselves in their lives. Regaining HTS' autonomy is a valuable resource to other survivors. They can be role models for survivors who do not yet see what is possible for themselves.<sup>10</sup>

#### Best practice: Employing Peer Role models

*During the participation in occupational activities, a survivor placed in a shelter had an opportunity to obtain important information on how to get a job, and become familiarized with steps that need to be taken in order to reach that goal. What is more important, shelter employed a career coach who was also a human trafficking survivor and who could understand the needs of other survivors who were looking for a job. In that way, service providers showed that they value their clients who were previously placed in the shelter. It also had a strong positive impact on a survivor as she was able to validate her experience by someone who was able to fully understand her and help her in the process of job finding.*

**Gender sensitivity:** This aspect builds on the fact that it is important to see human trafficking survivors as experts and fully validate and understand their experience. It also emphasizes the importance of awareness among service providers about the difference between women and

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<sup>10</sup> Knight, C. (2019). Trauma informed practice and care: Implications for field instruction. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 47(1), 79-89.

men regarding their involvement in the human trafficking chain.<sup>11</sup> For example, survivors of trafficking for sexual exploitation often face severe health issues, such as unsafe abortions, complications with their reproductive system and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases. A gender-sensitive approach requires addressing the concerns and fears that prevent trafficked persons from seeking out services and help. Female trafficked survivors can face particular issues with sharing her experience due to different factors such as: fear of lack of confidentiality, fear of stigmatization from their community or the staff. On the other hand, men, due to the patriarchal role in the society, may not reveal their mental and emotional struggles they face on a daily basis because of the assumption and cultural norm that men need to be strong and do not show emotions.

### **Feminist approach as an example of care for HTS**

*Some organizations reported that they engaged in a feminist approach towards their clients which they consider to be significant in effective provision of services. This means that staff members treat HTSs equally, with respect and no privileges among them. Staff members approach their clients with the idea that they are 'all on this journey together', jointly aiming for survivors' full recovery. In order to do so, a lot of effort is invested to make every woman feel worthy in all respects, foster her sense of trust and fully accept her feelings, thoughts, choices and needs. For example, it is essential to carefully listen to clients' needs and if they claim that instead of psychotherapy they prefer to go to the church on a daily basis, it is crucial to understand and accept that. This approach also emphasizes transparency. Service providers should make promises they will be able to keep.*

**Cultural sensitivity:** Good practice show that cultural sensitivity is important to integrate in working with HTSs placed in the shelters. Service providers should be aware of assumptions they made about clients' cultural beliefs or practices. It is crucial that clients have enough time and space to disclose whatever makes sense for them without judgment or pressure. Staff should understand and support that clients might choose not to disclose any of this for a myriad of reasons.

### **Best practice: taking into consideration cultural diversity**

*A case worker in the shelter explained that sometimes it can take a long time for the survivor to understand their experience regarding some forms of human trafficking such as work exploitation. There may be cultural differences between service providers' understanding of human trafficking and how some members of Roma community understand this phenomenon. Therein, the task of the service provider is to fully understand another culture and not to act based*

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<sup>11</sup> OSCE Office of the Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (2021) *Applying Gender-sensitive Approaches in Combating Trafficking in Human Beings*. [https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/4/486700\\_1.pdf](https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/7/4/486700_1.pdf)

on stereotype or prejudice. Only by time, patience and help from the service provider can HTSs learn that they have been exploited.

#### Recommendations on sensitivity to different needs of HTSs

- It is recommended for service providers to take a gender sensitive approach – to treat survivors equally, with respect and no judgment. It is also important to take different needs of trafficked men and women into consideration and tailor and direct their activities in shelters accordingly.
- It is vital to see HTSs as experts of their experience in order to reinforce their sense of agency and autonomy over their lives.
- It is recommended for service providers to treat all HTSs with respect and dignity in relation to their cultural identities, expressions and practices.
- It is recommended to engage peers, human trafficking survivors as role models and employ them to give presentations, act as career coaches, lead workshops etc.

#### Psychosocial interventions for HTSs

Psychosocial interventions for HTSs consider different techniques, or strategies that target biological, behavioral, cognitive, emotional, interpersonal, social, or environmental factors with the aim of improving health functioning and well-being.<sup>12</sup> The specific objectives of psychosocial support are reducing the impact stress and trauma has on the survivor of human trafficking and strengthening individual coping mechanisms and healing processes. There are many interventions that proved to be beneficial and some of them are the following:

Social skills training is a type of psychosocial intervention that involves learning and practicing specific social skills in order to improve a person's ability to interact with others. Human trafficking survivors have been given an opportunity to learn how to behave in different social situations and how to control their impulses appropriately. This type of training can help survivors to learn how to make friends and feel more comfortable in social settings as well.

Vocational trainings include: tailoring, hairdressing, cosmetics and English language classes and other different forms of occupational therapy.

Recreational training sessions may consist of art therapy and yoga.

Psychosocial support as a non-therapeutic intervention is enormously significant for survivors of human trafficking and have a positive effect on improving their quality of life and mental health. However, these activities should also be trauma-sensitive and take into consideration the impact of the specific activity on the trauma survivor. For example, women who were involved in sex trafficking may have difficulties with any kind of body-oriented activities or workshops that are focused on movement (dance, massage therapy, etc.). That being said, service providers need to

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<sup>12</sup> Montgomery P, Grant S, Hopewell S, Macdonald G, Moher D, Michie S, Mayo-Wilson E. (2013) Protocol for CONSORT-SPI: An extension for social and psychological interventions. *Implementation Science*:8(99):17

work together with survivors to create an individual plan for recommending them a type of psychosocial activity that will benefit them and improve their mental health altogether.

**Examples of activities delivered in different shelters:**

- Developing personal, family and social skills
- Business development
- Occupational activities (culinary skills, photo therapy)
- Art therapy (painting on canvas and glass, finger painting, collage, work with clay, knitting, jewelry making, origami, decoupage, Points of You)
- Sport activities (volleyball, swimming, tennis, cycling, dancing)
- Educational and cultural activities (cinema and theatres, museums, historical sites, planetarium, zoo, natural science museum)

Recommendation on psychosocial activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service providers are recommended to provide as many psychosocial activities to HTSs as possible. However, they have to be trauma-sensitive and take into consideration individuals’ specific needs in order to avoid retraumatization.</li> </ul>

INDICATORS FOR M&E OF THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE APPROACH	
Understanding a wide spread impact on trauma in human trafficking survivors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of capacity building trainings on understanding widespread impact on trauma among HTSs.</li> <li>• Existence of guidelines on how to deal with highly traumatized HTSs in shelters.</li> </ul>
Creating a safe environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of guidelines on how to ensure physical and psychological safety of HTSs in the shelters.</li> </ul>
Policies and procedures that ensure sensitivity to traumatic experiences of HTSs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Existence of policies and procedures that are trauma sensitive.</li> <li>• Existence of policies and procedures that are directly focused on reduction of trauma related symptoms.</li> </ul>
Sensitivity to different needs of HTSs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff members demonstrate a willingness to treat all HTSs with respect and dignity, including in relation to their cultural identities, expressions, and practices.</li> <li>• Staff members understand what it means to work with survivors in truly collaborative and nonhierarchical ways.</li> <li>• Number of peers, human trafficking survivors who are employed to act as role models and give presentations, act as career coaches, lead workshops etc.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of presentations, workshops that are delivered by peers, human trafficking survivors.</li> </ul>
Psychosocial interventions for HTSs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of psychosocial interventions for HTSs</li> </ul>

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### Project:

Preventing and Combatting Trafficking in  
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### Adress:

Antonie Grubisikj 5  
1000 Skopje, North Macedonia

**T +389 23103560**

**E martin.hiebsch@giz.de**

**I www.giz.de**

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