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## **Child Trafficking in Serbia**

Professional's Perspectives, Experiences, and Challenges

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## **Abstract**

In Serbia, children account for nearly half of all identified trafficking victims in recent years, a figure that significantly exceeds both European and global averages (CPTV, 2023; 2024; ASTRA et al., 2024; EUROSTAT, 2025; UNODC, 2024). While the country has formal anti-trafficking structures in place, including a multidisciplinary team (MDT) framework and a national referral mechanism, coordination among responsible institutions remains inconsistent and child-specific services are largely absent (GRETA, 2023; ASTRA et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025). Existing research relies primarily on institutional statistics and policy reports (CPTV, 2021-2025; GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025), and how frontline professionals actually experience this work remains poorly understood.

This qualitative study examines the perspectives and experiences of ten professionals involved in Serbia's child anti-trafficking response, including MDT members, NGO workers, child protection specialists, and anti-trafficking coordinators. Using semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, the study explores how professionals perceive current trafficking trends and vulnerabilities, how they navigate cross-institutional coordination, how they apply child rights-based principles in daily practice, and what challenges they encounter across ecological levels.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979, 1986), the Child Rights-Based Approach (UNICEF, 2018; UNCRC, 1989), and the principles of multidisciplinary collaboration (ILO, 2006), the findings show that professionals understand child trafficking not as an isolated event, but as a process shaped by interacting factors at the individual, family, community, institutional, and systemic levels. Identification remains one of the most fragile stages in the response, and child rights-based practice functions more as a personal professional orientation than a consistently implemented standard. Serbia's MDT is widely seen as essential, yet its functioning is frequently undermined by unclear roles, limited resources, staff turnover, inconsistent coordination, and heavy reliance on NGOs to fill gaps left by the state (GRETA, 2023; ASTRA et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

A theme that emerged across interviews was the range of professional strengths and capacities that allow frontline workers to sustain quality responses despite structural

constraints, including accountability to children, adaptivity, holistic thinking, and a strengths-based orientation toward the children they work with. Participants' recommendations consistently pointed to the need for MDT strengthening, decentralisation of local teams, specialised child-specific services, stable state funding, and legal reform backed by real accountability.

The study concludes that protecting children from trafficking in Serbia requires more than formal structures on paper. It calls for responses that are preventive, child-centred, adequately resourced, and genuinely accountable, where children are approached not merely as victims, but as rights-holders whose dignity, safety, and recovery matter in practice (UNICEF, 2018; UNCRC, 1989).

**Keywords:** child trafficking, Serbia, multidisciplinary team (MDT), frontline professionals, child rights-based approach, ecological systems theory, qualitative research

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## Introduction

Child trafficking destroys one's innocence and childhood. It is not only a crime, but a severe violation of children's rights. (UN Convention on Rights of a Child [UNCRC], 1989; European Commission, 2025; UNICEF, 2024). The Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), a key international legal framework guiding child-focused organisations, affirms that every child has the right to safety and protection from harmful work, sexual exploitation, sale, and trafficking: rights that are fundamentally violated when young girls and boys are trafficked.

In 2023, the number of child trafficking victims in Serbia was higher compared to that of adults. Moreover, statistics in the recent years have indicated a rising percentage of children among identified human trafficking victims in the country: from 37% in 2021 to 40% in 2022, and surging to 62% in 2023 (Centre for Protection of Victims of Trafficking [CPTV], 2023; ASTRA et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024). While the share of minor victims declined to 49% in 2024, the data nevertheless reveal that **nearly every second victim of human trafficking in Serbia is a child**. Information from the Centre also indicates that, in cases where children were identified as victims, the **exploitation lasted for more than three years** (Protector of Citizens, Ombudsman of Serbia, 2023). These figures remain considerably higher than the European average of 19% for child trafficking victims (EUROSTAT, 2025) and above the global average of 38% (except for 2021) (UNODC, Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2024).

Considering Serbia's role as a major country of origin, transit, and destination for trafficking (ASTRA et al., 2024; GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025), its response remains insufficient to meet the growing needs of trafficked children. The availability and accessibility of specialised services for child victims are currently limited. Serbia's government has yet to provide dedicated support and shelter for child victims of trafficking (ASTRA et al., 2024; Coalition for Monitoring Child Rights in Serbia, 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025). Although the government reported an increased budget for the social welfare institution and claimed to have allocated funds for anti-trafficking NGOs (U.S. Department of State, 2025), civil society organisations reportedly remain dependent on foreign donors, even though they provide most specialised victim assistance in practice (ASTRA et al., 2024; Coalition for Monitoring Child Rights in Serbia, 2024; CPTV, 2024; GRETA, 2023). On the contrary, GRETA (2023) notes that officials continue to rely on

NGOs to inform victims of their rights and to deliver essential support and services.

Issues regarding the application of child-centred approaches have also been raised. For instance, when it comes to criminal proceedings, an ASTRA (2023) case report describes a trial involving a minor that lasted more than three and a half years, raising serious concerns regarding the child's right to a timely trial. The report also notes that the defendants received minimal penalties, including up to one year of house arrest with electronic monitoring, while the child victim was subjected to humiliating questioning by defence attorneys during the proceedings, exacerbating trauma.

There is currently no consistent coordination mechanism, as reported both within government institutions and between service providers (GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025). Although Serbia has implemented a standard operating procedure (SOP) in anti-trafficking, has a national action plan, and established a multidisciplinary team of professionals to support child victims, these initiatives are not grounded in thorough evaluations of the current situation, trends, or needs (ASTRA et al., 2024).

Current reports on child trafficking in Serbia are largely quantitative, focusing primarily on statistics, identified cases, and institutional reporting (Centre for Protection of Victims of Trafficking [CPTV], 2021–2025; GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025). While these data are important for understanding the scale of the issue, they provide limited insight into how child trafficking is experienced and addressed in everyday professional practice. There remains limited in-depth empirical research examining the realities faced by professionals working within Serbia's multidisciplinary anti-trafficking response, particularly those directly supporting trafficked children and children at risk of trafficking. Exploring their perspectives and experiences sheds light on what truly happens in practice, including how professionals perceive recent trafficking trends, navigate institutional, resource, and coordination challenges, and apply child rights standards in daily work despite systemic constraints. Such knowledge is essential for strengthening Serbia's overall anti-trafficking response and promoting more child-centred and rights-based approaches.

This study provides in-depth insights into Serbian frontline professionals' lived experiences of responding to child trafficking across ecological levels and generates practitioner-informed recommendations to strengthen anti-trafficking multidisciplinary teams and the broader anti-trafficking response in Serbia.

## **Research Objectives**

This research aims to **explore the perspectives and experiences of professionals involved in child trafficking responses in Serbia**, including those participating in the multidisciplinary team (MDT) and those working with children at risk of trafficking, **and understand how their experiences are shaped by the multiple ecological systems in which children and professionals operate.**

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine how professionals perceive and navigate current child trafficking trends and vulnerabilities affecting children in Serbia.
2. Understand how professionals operate in the field, with particular attention to cross-institutional coordination (MDT).
3. Investigate how professionals apply and observe child rights–based principles in their daily work and in existing response mechanisms.
4. Describe how current challenges across different ecological levels (individual, institutional, cross-institutional, systemic), are experienced by professionals in the field.

## **Research Questions**

Drawing from these objectives, this study will address the following research questions:

1. How do professionals perceive and navigate current trends in child trafficking and the risk factors affecting children in Serbia?
2. How do professionals operate within the child trafficking response system, and how is cross-institutional coordination achieved or challenged in Serbia?
3. How do professionals apply and observe child rights-based principles (such as protection, participation, dignity, and the best interests of the child) in current child trafficking responses in Serbia?
4. How do professionals experience and interpret current challenges across different ecological levels (individual, institutional, cross-institutional, and systemic) within Serbia's child protection and anti-trafficking frameworks?
5. What recommendations do these professionals propose to strengthen multidisciplinary coordination and improve child-centred, rights-based support, services, and practices within Serbia's anti-trafficking system?

## **Literature Review**

Serbia currently holds Tier 2 status in the U.S. Trafficking in Persons Report (2025), indicating it has not fully met minimum international standards for eliminating trafficking but is making meaningful progress. Existing reports (GRETA, 2023; Protector of Citizens, Ombudsman of Serbia, 2023; ASTRA et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025) show that Serbia has formal anti-trafficking structures, but persistent problems remain in implementation, coordination, child-specific services, and victim-centred, rights-based protection. However, little is known about frontline professionals' field experiences, particularly in how they navigate child trafficking trends, practical challenges, and resource constraints.

The following sections detail current trends, formal structures, and reported challenges, providing essential context for understanding the real-world complexities professionals encounter daily and put emphasis on why their experiences and perspectives are critical for strengthening Serbia's child anti-trafficking response.

### **Child trafficking in Serbia: Context, Trends, and Vulnerabilities**

In 2022, children in the whole of Europe accounted for about 15% of all detected trafficking victims with the majority (75%) being female (Prpic, 2024). However, in Serbia, the proportions over the past five years have consistently exceeded this figure, ranging from 37% in 2021, 40% in 2022, rising sharply to 62% in 2023, followed by 49% in 2024 and 42% in 2025. These data were publicly available on the official website of the Centre for Protection of Victims of Trafficking (CPTV, 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024; 2025; ASTRA et al., 2024). On average, the proportion between 2021 and 2025 was 46%, with a particular peak recorded in 2023.

The average age of exploited minors in Serbia is 12 years old (CPTV, 2024). In 2024, forced begging was the most common form of exploitation among children (29%), followed by sexual exploitation (23%), with additional cases involving forced criminal activity and forced marriage (Statistical Report of the Center for Protection of Trafficking Victims, 2024). While forced begging emerged as the top form of trafficking during this year, children

continue to be exploited for sexual and labour purposes, forced criminal activity, and forced marriage (CPTV, 2024; ASTRA et al., 2024).

In cases where children are identified as victims, they are most often sexually exploited girls, who need continuous intensive support and whose recovery from the traumatic experience is long and uncertain. That being said, gender remains an important factor influencing who becomes a victim of trafficking. In recent years, most identified victims have been women and girls, primarily exploited through sexual exploitation and forced marriage, reaching as high as 80 percent in 2021 (ASTRA et al., 2024). However, it is important to recognize that trafficking in children also affects boys, though often through different forms of exploitation such as forced labour, forced criminality, and forced begging (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2022; 2024).

While there is no single group of children being subjected to trafficking, children from marginalized communities, minority or socially excluded groups are disproportionately affected and vulnerable to being exploited and trafficked (ASTRA et al., 2024). UNODC (2022) notes that economic hardship is the primary factor that makes people vulnerable to being targeted by traffickers, which is a common problem among such groups.

In most cases identified in recent years, parents were the exploiters of the child victims or were actively involved in helping the exploiters. Only in a few cases, children trafficked together with their parents (CPTV, 2024). At the same time, children who lack parental care also remain highly vulnerable to trafficking (CPTV, 2023; 2024), even when placed in social care institutions, foster homes, or kinship families. In several identified cases, children were living in institutional care at the time of their exploitation, although the exploitation occurred outside the institution. A few others had previously been in care before becoming victims of trafficking (CPTV, 2023; 2024; ASTRA; 2024).

Children with behavioral difficulties are also particularly vulnerable to being exploited through coercion to commit criminal acts. In 2024, five boys were identified as victims of this form of exploitation; traffickers took advantage of their pre-existing behavioral issues during recruitment. Among all children identified that year, five were of primary school age and not attending school, while six were of secondary school age and not enrolled (CPTV, 2024).

Children from the minority communities such as the Roma children remain at

exceptionally high risk of exploitation through forced begging, and forced marriage continues to occur more frequently within this group. In 2024, four girls were identified as victims of forced marriage, in which they experienced multiple forms of abuse, including sexual and labor exploitation (CPTV, 2024).

The majority of trafficking victims in Serbia are its own citizens, with most cases occurring within the country (ASTRA, 2024) (also referred to as “internal trafficking” (UN, 2014)), in contrast to media coverage which frequently emphasises cases abroad (ASTRA & Milošević, 2024, 2024; Stojadinović, 2024). Public perceptions remain highly stereotyped: many people still believe that child trafficking primarily affects foreign victims and happens “somewhere else,” even though foreign nationals represent less than 5% of identified victims in Serbia (NGO Atina, n.d.). Recent Serbian literature argues that media play a central role in shaping this misunderstanding, as outlets tend to prioritise high-profile or sensational stories over more typical cases, a pattern described as media sensationalism (ASTRA & Milošević, 2024; Stojadinović, 2024). This results in disproportionate coverage of arrests, court proceedings, and celebrity-linked cases, such as those involving Jeffrey Epstein or P. Diddy, while common forms of exploitation among trafficked children in Serbia, including forced begging and forced involvement in criminal activities, receive little attention (ASTRA & Milošević, 2024). Although sexual exploitation and prostitution remain prevalent (CPTV, 2023; ASTRA & Milošević, 2024), the media’s narrow focus on these forms risks rendering other types of trafficking, and the children affected by them, largely invisible. In this way, media representations help construct a narrow “ideal victim” profile that can obscure many children’s experiences, reinforce misconceptions, and restrict public awareness, with potential downstream effects on policy priorities and professional responses in the field (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2022).

Taken together, these data suggest that child trafficking risks in Serbia are multi-layered, comprising microsystem risks (parental exploitation, lack of parental care, behavioral difficulties), mezzosystem risks (institutional care gaps, school exclusion, Roma community marginalization), and macrosystem risks (economic hardship/poverty, media sensationalism creating victim stereotypes). An ecological lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), is therefore essential to analyze how these interconnected levels shape professionals' perceptions, practices, and responses in the field.

## Serbia's Anti-Trafficking Response for Children

### *International & Regional Frameworks*

Several international and regional instruments to which Serbia is bound define child trafficking as a violation of children's rights and establish a legal framework for their protection from exploitation (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child [UNCRC], 1989; United Nations, 2000; European Parliament & Council of the European Union, 2011; European Union, 2012). In this context, a *child* is defined as any person below the age of 18 and has an inherent right to safety, dignity, protection from all forms of abuse and exploitation (UNCRC, 1989), and the care necessary for their well-being (Article 24 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, 2000; 2012).

In an effort to abolish trafficking in human beings, the international community adopted the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children in 2000, widely known as the Palermo Protocol, a binding instrument designed to confront human trafficking in all its forms. According to this protocol, trafficking in human beings (THB) is established when three key elements are present: the *act*, the *means*, and the *purpose*. However, in cases where the victim is a child, the **means element is not required**: that is, any person under eighteen years of age who is recruited, transported, transferred, harboured, or received for the purpose of exploitation is considered a victim of trafficking, regardless of whether force, coercion, or deception is involved (López Peregrín, 2023). Unlike the trafficking of adults, the child's level of willingness or cooperation is irrelevant, as consent holds no weight in such cases (López Peregrín, 2023; Verdasco Martínez et al., 2024).

In congruence, Europe has also recognized trafficking in human beings as a major human rights problem, highlighting women and children as the majority of the victims who are being exploited within and across borders. With the establishment of the Council of Europe Convention on Action Against Trafficking in Human Beings (2005), trafficking is framed as a direct violation of human rights and dignity, and must be acted upon to prevent it, protect the human rights of victims, and prosecute traffickers. Following its entry into force in 2008, the Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA) was then established in 2009 (Council of Europe, 2014) as the main monitoring mechanism to

evaluate whether states, including Serbia, meet their obligations and whether the actions taken are sufficient to combat trafficking.

Europe's Directive 2011/36/EU recognizes that children are inherently more vulnerable than adults and, as a result, face higher risks of falling victim to trafficking (European Union, 2011). In the implementation of this Directive, the **best interests of the child must be first and foremost prioritised**, to complement the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (2000; 2012), as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989).

### *Serbia's Legal Framework*

Serbia currently does not have a comprehensive anti-trafficking law, although draft legislation is reportedly in the process of being developed (U.S. Department of State, 2025). This included 13 working-group meetings with state institutions and civil society organizations to draft the new anti-trafficking law (U.S. Department of State, 2025). However, the Criminal Code of Serbia describes human trafficking as the recruitment, transport, sale, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons for exploitation. It recognizes the forms of trafficking as including forced labour, forced criminality, prostitution, sexual exploitation, begging, pornography, slavery or slavery-like practices, organ removal, or armed conflict exploitation (Republic of Serbia, 2005, Art. 388).

When the victim is a child (ages below 18 years old), the offense is punishable even when no force, threats, or deceptive methods were used. In this case, the consent from the child is irrelevant in establishing the crime (Republic of Serbia, 2005, Art. 388), all of which align with the Palermo Protocol (United Nations, 2000). Serbia also recognizes children as a particularly vulnerable group under its *2020-2025 National Strategy For The Exercise Of The Rights Of Victims And Witnesses* (Republic of Serbia, 2018), in accordance with the 2011 EU Directive. By law, the minimum imprisonment of a perpetrator increases from three to five years when the victim is a minor or when someone knowingly uses the services of a trafficked minor (Republic of Serbia, 2005, Art. 388).

There is no explicit provision in Serbian legislation guaranteeing the non-punishment of victims of trafficking (GRETA, 2023), although guidelines exist on the implementation of

the non-punishment principle, which have been incorporated into the training of professionals dealing with cases of human trafficking. In relation to the two most common forms of exploitation (forced begging, and exploitation for sexual purposes), begging is classified as a misdemeanor under the Law on Public Order and Peace and is punishable by fines or other sanctions, without any distinction between adult and child begging. As a result, children subjected to forced begging risk being treated as offenders rather than as victims of exploitation. ASTRA, one of the two main NGOs providing specialised support and assistance to trafficking victims, has therefore recommended that law enforcement and social protection authorities shift their focus towards identifying victims of forced begging, rather than sanctioning individuals who beg due to poverty or coercion.

Similarly, prostitution is criminalised under the Law on Public Order and Peace and constitutes a misdemeanor punishable by fines or imprisonment. Within this framework, child victims exploited in prostitution may face criminal liability instead of being formally recognised as victims of trafficking. In practice, the current legal framework continues to allow for the penalisation of individuals engaged in activities commonly linked to trafficking. For instance, GRETA (2023) reports a case in which a trafficking victim is acknowledged as an “injured party” in criminal proceedings against the trafficker for trafficking in human beings (THB), while simultaneously being prosecuted in separate proceedings for theft which was committed under coercion. Such parallel proceedings illustrate inconsistencies in the practical application of the non-punishment principle and raise concerns regarding the extent to which Serbia’s anti-trafficking response is aligned with victim-centred and child-rights-based standards.

Furthermore, there is an absence of a comprehensive and up-to-date national strategy for children’s rights. As highlighted in the Serbia 2024 Progress Report (Coalition for Monitoring Child Rights, 2024), no national action plan for the rights of the child is currently in place, following the expiration of previous frameworks, leaving child protection policies fragmented and lacking clear strategic direction. At the same time, the Council for Children’s Rights (the only national-level coordination body) has reportedly demonstrated limited effectiveness, having failed to meet regularly, with no clear agenda and lack of implementation in practice, brought by insufficient institutional support and resources necessary to ensure its effective functioning (Coalition for Monitoring Child Rights, 2024).

### *Serbia’s Multidisciplinary Approach to Trafficking*

Serbia's framework emphasizes a multidisciplinary approach, aiming to ensure a comprehensive response that encompasses the identification of trafficking cases, the provision of protection and support to victims, the prosecution of perpetrators, the development of effective prevention policies, legal and regulatory improvements, and the strengthening of international cooperation (Protector of Citizens, Ombudsman of Serbia, 2023; Republic of Serbia, 2006, 2017).

Serbia maintained several institutional mechanisms to coordinate anti-trafficking efforts, including the Anti-Trafficking Council (ATC), composed of six ministerial-level officials, which met once in both 2023 and 2024 (U.S. Department of State, 2025). The 2024–2029 National Program and Action Plan to Counter Trafficking (NPAP) was also implemented by The Office of the National Anti-Trafficking Coordinator (ONAC), although critics reported weaknesses in overall coordination and effectiveness, particularly at the level of the national coordinator and ONAC (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

MDTs typically bring together professionals from agencies involved in child protection, law enforcement, health and mental health, social services, education, judicial and prosecutorial bodies, as well as NGOs that offer specialised support. Depending on available resources, manpower and specific needs, teams may also include organisations working with asylum seeking and refugee children, street connected children, LGBTQ+ youth and marginalised ethnic, racial or religious groups. These teams often operate across several levels, including community, regional or municipal structures, national systems and international dimensions (International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children, 2025).

Serbia's response to child trafficking is grounded in a framework that combines international standards with national procedures designed to ensure a coordinated, child-centred approach. In its SOPs, the country follows a multidisciplinary model that involves social welfare, law enforcement, education, health services, and civil society organisations working together to identify and protect children at risk of trafficking (Republic of Serbia, 2017).

The 1st and only official Report of the Protector of Citizens – National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking in Serbia in existence (2023) notes that human trafficking is a multidisciplinary issue that requires the involvement of police, healthcare and social institutions, the judiciary, educational institutions and civil society organisations. The report

emphasises that cooperation among these actors is essential to ensure a comprehensive approach that covers both prevention and the full range of support needed by victims.

Serbia has an MDT structure at the national level (Republic of Serbia, 2006; 2017), and there are also 19 municipal governments that maintain informal multidisciplinary teams to carry out local anti trafficking efforts (U.S. Department of State, 2025). At the moment, there are no studies that provide further insight into how these informal multidisciplinary teams operate in practice. Their roles, coordination mechanisms and effectiveness at the local level remain undocumented.

On the other hand, Serbia's multidisciplinary team (MDT) structure on the national level brings together state institutions, specialised police units, prosecutors, social welfare authorities, health and education professionals and key NGOs to coordinate prevention, identification, protection and prosecution efforts in trafficking cases, including those involving children (Republic of Serbia, 2006).

At the *strategic level*, this MDT model is embodied in the Republic Team for Combating Trafficking in Persons, which unites governmental, non governmental and international actors in coordinated policy development and monitoring. At the *operational level*, MDT functions are carried out by judicial bodies, specialised police units and the Service for Coordination of Protection of Trafficking Victims within the social welfare system, which collaborates with NGOs, courts and shelters to ensure victim centred assistance (Republic of Serbia, 2006). This MDT structure plays a central role in Serbia's National Referral Mechanism (NRM), which provides the formal framework for identifying victims and referring them to appropriate support and services (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe [OSCE], 2007).

The NRM defines the roles, responsibilities and procedures for all actors who may encounter trafficking victims and ensures coordinated access to medical, psychosocial, legal and social support. (Republic of Serbia, 2017; ASTRA, 2024).

In 2012, the Center for Protection of Trafficking Victims was founded (Republic of Serbia, 2017) with the intention of improving the protection of human trafficking victims in Serbia (ASTRA et al., 2024). It has two units: the Service for the Coordination of the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking and the Shelter for Victims of Human Trafficking (Republic of Serbia, 2017; ASTRA, 2024).

The CPTV is responsible for assessing and formally identifying adult victims and developing individualized protection and assistance plans, while Centres for Social Work (CSW) carried out the assessment and formal recognition of child victims.

Currently, only one social welfare institution, the Centre for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking (CPTV), and two civil society organisations, ASTRA and Atina, all based in Belgrade, provide tailored support, service, and protection for victims of human trafficking (ASTRA et al., 2024). All have been actively involved in anti-trafficking prevention efforts to raise awareness among children about their rights. For instance, ASTRA developed and distributed information materials for adults and children on their rights and protection from trafficking in human beings (THB) during the COVID-19 pandemic (GRETA, 2023), and has been operating the European missing children hotline 116000 in Serbia since 2012. In addition, the Child Rights Centre (*Centar za prava deteta*) and Atina created an online platform with the goal to inform minors from 12–18 years old regarding the risks of THB and ways to protect themselves (GRETA, 2023).

### **Current Challenges in Serbia’s Anti-Child Trafficking Response**

Reports have noted positive measures taken by Serbia to build capacity amongst professionals and improve responses against child trafficking, including the development of practical interview guidelines for child victims and at-risk children and the provision of professional training through the Center for the Protection of Trafficking Victims (CPTV) (GRETA, 2023). Despite these advances, GRETA observed that Serbia must continue working to ensure child-appropriate procedures are uniformly implemented throughout the entire legal process, from investigation through court proceedings.

Several reports have highlighted that legal frameworks and resources for addressing child trafficking cases remain limited. Coordination among institutions responsible for child protection and anti-trafficking efforts is also often inconsistent or “lacking” (GRETA, 2023; ASTRA et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025). However, there is little in-depth insight into the nature of these coordination challenges, what exactly occurs in practice, and where collaboration breaks down.

There is a current lack of representation of civil society organisations, as GRETA urges the Serbian authorities to ensure CSOs are fully represented in all multidisciplinary

anti-trafficking teams. This includes NGOs, trade unions, diaspora organisations, and employer organisations. Initially, only two NGOs, Atina and ASTRA, were selected to join the multidisciplinary team, but four additional NGOs were subsequently added after a renewed public call: Group 484, Roma Centre for Democracy, Centre for Youth Integration, and the Serbian Association for Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) (GRETA, 2023).

There are currently no adequate screening procedures for victims among vulnerable populations (U.S. State of Department, 2025). Serbia's government has yet to provide dedicated support and shelter for child victims of trafficking (ASTRA et al., 2024; U.S. Department of State, 2025), instead placing children in foster care, orphanages, and group homes that were not equipped or trained to work with trafficking cases. Some minors were reportedly returned to their families despite evidence that their parents had been involved in their exploitation (U.S. Department of State, 2025). In 2023, there were reports of minors being exploited while in residential homes for children without parental care, and the identification process for six additional children was still ongoing (CPTV, 2023; ASTRA et al., 2024).

Current Serbian laws lack explicit legal protections that would prevent the prosecution of trafficking victims for crimes they were forced to commit during their exploitation, as noted by GRETA (2023). Congruently, reports indicate that some government officials have continued to impose criminal sanctions such as imprisonment, probation, or financial penalties on victims for offenses they were coerced into committing while trafficked (GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025).

Corruption and official complicity has been a concern within child protection institutions. In particular, the Serbian government recently investigated two Center for Social Work (CSW) employees for suspicion of accepting bribes from an organised criminal group to grant custody of a child victim to a member of the said criminal group (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

Despite the minimum three year imprisonment for perpetrators on child trafficking cases, courts seem to be lenient in sentencing. In the particular case documented by ASTRA (2023) below, the defendants received sentences that were considerably lighter than what the law prescribes:

### ***Case Study 1 (ASTRA, 2023)***

In 2018, a minor reported having been abused by her parents to the Center for Social Work, which referred her to the Center for Protection of Trafficking Victims, where she was identified as a victim of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. The girl, who was 17 years old at the time the crime was committed, was living with her mother, who was bringing older men and forcing her to have sexual relations with them for material and financial gain.

Four men were identified as perpetrators, and her mother was convicted in a separate case for trafficking the child, with later convictions for child neglect and for obstructing evidence.

From the time the victim reported the abuse, it took almost five years until the finalisation of the criminal proceedings against her perpetrators. This was mostly caused by the lengthy court proceedings, where the trial lasted over three and a half years.

It is important to mention that the victim had to testify multiple times but later changed her testimony because her mother promised to help with the baby while the victim was pregnant if she changed her statement, on top of threatening her that she would be prohibited from communicating with her brothers and sisters if she didn't. Defense attorneys also reportedly humiliated the victim during the proceedings, adding to her trauma. Expert evidence in this case later linked this situation to risks of **retraumatization of the victim**.

On the other hand, the case study also noted several child- and victim-centred practices, such as the rapid identification, assessment, and referral through the interagency work of the Center for Social Work and the CPTV, carried out within roughly two months of the initial report. Safe accommodation and continued education were also arranged for the victim. The court fully accepted the expertise and drew on expert opinions from psychologists, as well as rejecting defense attempts to delay the process through re-examination.

In the end, the defendants received lenient sentences and minimal penalties, including house arrest with electronic monitoring. It can be seen that the victim went

through a long and difficult process: from finding the courage to report the abuse she was experiencing, to enduring years of trial proceedings, only to learn that her perpetrators received sentences of house arrest, with the longest lasting 1 year and 10 months.

Below is the table of sentences for the defendants and the victim's parents. Note that separate proceedings were held for the defendants and the parents. (Table 1)

| Table 1. List of defendants' final sentences on ASTRA's case study |                                       |                                      |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Defendant                                                          | Criminal Offence                      | Sentence                             |
| Defendant 1                                                        | Human trafficking (Art. 388, st. 9)   | 1 year 10 months – house arrest      |
| Defendant 2                                                        | Human trafficking (Art. 388, st. 9)   | 1 year – house imprisonment          |
| Defendant 3                                                        | Human trafficking (Art. 388, st. 9)   | 1 year – house imprisonment          |
| Defendant 4                                                        | Sexual harassment (Art. 182a)         | 6 months – conditional sentence      |
| Victim's mother                                                    | Human trafficking (Art. 388, para. 3) | 5 years – unconditional imprisonment |
| Both of victim's parents                                           | Neglect and abuse of a minor          | Suspended prison sentences           |
| Victim's mother (separate conviction)                              | Obstruction of gaining evidence       | Suspended prison sentence            |

*Source: ASTRA's Case study report: Criminal offense of human trafficking—Article 388, paragraph 9 of the Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia (2023)*

In terms of funding, the government reportedly increased its financial allocation for the CPTV and, for the first time, have set aside funds for anti trafficking NGOs (U.S. Department of State, 2025). However, in previous years, NGOs such as ASTRA and ATINA, which provide most victim assistance services in Serbia, received no government funding and instead relied entirely on foreign donors.

Training initiatives for relevant professionals have been documented, including those provided by the Centre for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking (CPTV), particularly in the area of psychological support for victims, as well as efforts by ASTRA, which has established an informal network of approximately 30 trained lawyers across Serbia (GRETA, 2023). In addition, the government, at times in cooperation with international organizations, has delivered training to judges, police officers, and prosecutors on various anti-trafficking issues (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

Despite these efforts, GRETA has emphasized the need for continued and expanded capacity-building. Authorities are encouraged to further sensitise and train a broader range of stakeholders, including child protection professionals, teachers, Roma health mediators, and social service providers, particularly with regard to children's vulnerability to trafficking (GRETA, 2023).

Moreover, additional training is recommended for key actors within the multidisciplinary framework, including centres for social work, CPTV staff, local anti-trafficking teams, and personnel working in migrant reception centres and victim shelters. Such training should also address how to effectively communicate victims' rights in a manner adapted to their cognitive abilities and psychological condition (GRETA, 2023). Importantly, there is no available information on the evaluation of existing training programmes, raising concerns about their effectiveness, consistency, and long-term impact.

The official Report of the Protector of Citizens – National Rapporteur on Human Trafficking was produced only in 2023 despite years of anti trafficking efforts in Serbia. This suggests challenges in monitoring, data collection and accountability of the responsible institution. Additionally, experts note that the rapporteur's work has largely focused on documenting activities rather than monitoring or evaluating how policies and procedures are actually implemented. This further illustrates the broader issues in Serbia's reporting and accountability systems, where formal structures exist, but consistent oversight and evaluation remain limited (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

### **Why professionals' experiences matter**

Frontline professionals serve as the bridge between policy and practice. These experts play a crucial role in the anti-trafficking response as the primary drivers of support and service provision, advocacy, research, and policy development (Flick, 2022). Moreover, they encounter child trafficking's realities daily (identifying victims, coordinating responses, applying child rights principles) while experiencing systemic issues firsthand.

Therefore, their perspectives and experiences are essential to understanding how anti-trafficking systems actually function, not just how they are designed on paper (Kim et al., 2018). Their voices reveal hidden implementation challenges that reports cannot capture, providing critical insight into intervention effectiveness. Without these frontline accounts, reforms risk remaining theoretical.

Professionals experience how macro-level policy gaps (no dedicated child shelters, expired national strategies) play out in coordination failures between institutions and in the everyday limitations professionals face when trying to deliver support. In Serbia's context, where formal MDT structures exist but child-specific services remain inadequate, their lived experiences across ecological levels offer the most direct path to child-centred, rights-based improvements. Their accounts make it possible to move beyond what reports document and toward what actually needs to change on the ground. Moreover, since Serbia's anti-trafficking response relies on a multidisciplinary approach, professionals' experiences with the collaboration process play a crucial role in evaluating the effectiveness of multidisciplinary teamwork (Kim et al., 2018).

## Theoretical Framework

### Ecological Systems Theory

Ecological Systems Theory (EST) provides dual analytical value in this research: (1) understanding how professionals perceive child trafficking trends and vulnerabilities in the Serbian context, (2) and situating the experiences of professionals themselves within the anti-trafficking response.

#### *Child in environment*

Using an ecological systems lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), children can be better understood within the context of their environment and emphasise how different systems surrounding a child influence their vulnerability to trafficking and which systems are contributing to the rise of children being trafficked in Serbia. Recognising the multi-faceted nature of trafficking, risks do not arise from a single factor (United Nations, 2008) but from the interaction of multiple layers of influence across the micro, mezzo, exo and macro levels (Barner et al., 2018; Sanchez & Pacquiao, 2020).

A report from the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Krug *et al.*, 2002) on violence and health supports this by introducing an ecological model to understand how different environments influence experiences of violence, considering that trafficking in children can be classified as such (Krug et al., 2002). This model has identified four interconnected levels which can aid a holistic understanding of children victims of trafficking better: individual, relationship, community, and societal. In this study, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems framework (1979, 1986), comprising the micro, meso, exo, and macro levels, is conceptually aligned with the WHO model (2002), to enable a coherent multi-level analysis of child trafficking trends and vulnerabilities as viewed and experienced by professionals in the Serbian context.

The first level focuses on the individual, including a child's biology and personal history and how these can shape their vulnerability to violence, or in this case, trafficking. This includes, but is not limited to, demographics such as their age and family income, personality disorders, physical abilities, and whether they have a history of experiencing, witnessing, or engaging in violent behaviour (Krug et al., 2002). Secondly, children can be viewed at the relationship level, which pertains to the close ties they have such as family,

friends, peers in school, and teachers, and how these relationships may increase the risk of their victimisation (to trafficking, in this case) (Krug et al., 2002). The third level is the community, where children can be understood in relation to settings like schools and neighbourhoods, looking at how the characteristics of these communal institutions contribute to risks of violence and exploitation (Krug et al., 2002). Finally, the fourth level looks at the societal, broader cultural and structural conditions, including socioeconomic opportunities, inequalities, and public policies that shape the life chances and social relationships of children (Krug et al., 2002).

Take *poverty* as an example. Having been internationally recognised as a systemic risk factor (situated on the societal level of the ecological model) (UNODC, 2024; 2008; UNICEF, 2004). affects economic opportunities for families and hence limits their ability to support a child's physical, emotional, and cognitive development at the individual level. This can influence how the child interacts within their relationships and community, and vice versa, which can simultaneously heighten their overall vulnerability to trafficking (Sanchez & Pacquiao, 2020). Other macro level factors include social inequality, economic insecurity, and even climate change operate as broader risk factors that can multiply children's vulnerability to trafficking (Barner et al., 2018).

Several studies recommend applying the EST directly within anti trafficking work (Barner et al., 2018; Sanchez & Pacquiao, 2020). Given that the ecological systems perspective is person-centred (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), it places the child at the core of the trafficking context and supports a holistic, child-centred view for institutions working together to respond to trafficking. It moves the understanding of trafficking beyond a strictly legal or juridical matter and presents it as a systemic issue shaped by socioeconomic, cultural, and environmental factors, but most importantly, as a form of unjust oppression that violates the fundamental rights of children (Barner et al., 2018), which aligns with how several international entities define and interpret child trafficking (United Nations, 1989; European Commission, 2025; UNICEF, 2025).

An ecological systems approach suggests that professionals do not view nor assess a child's situation in isolation, but in relation to the multiple environments they interact with, including their immediate, cultural, national, and global contexts (Rafferty, 2008; Barner et al., 2018). This helps ensure that support and services for trafficking victims are not treated as a one size fits all response, but are instead shaped by the child's exo, macro, mezzo, and

micro contexts relevant to their needs (Barner et al., 2018). In this way, services become child-specific and tailored to their background, age, gender, and other factors that shape their experiences.

### *Professional in environment*

On another note, the professional is also positioned as the “person” within an ecological, person-in-environment framework, allowing their experiences to be analysed across multiple system levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986; Barner et al., 2018). A relevant example comes from research on professional burnout, which positions the worker within their wider environment and demonstrates how external conditions shape their capacity to perform effectively. Habeger et al. (2022), shows that the well being and performance of frontline professionals are influenced by interacting factors at the individual, relational, organisational, community, and societal levels. This provides a helpful reference point for adapting the ecological lens to understand how professionals in Serbia operate within MDTs and how their environments shape the quality of their response. Additionally, anti-trafficking responses in Serbia and globally require interprofessional and multidisciplinary collaboration that spans individual behaviours, team interactions, cross-institutional coordination, and the broader systems in which these actors operate (UNICEF 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025; International Labour Organisation, 2006; Republic of Serbia, 2017). As such, EST is an appropriate framework, as it enables the examination of influences across multiple levels simultaneously. For instance, in a study by Yann Foo et al. (2021) on interprofessional collaboration (IPC) in healthcare, the authors highlight that single-level explanations, such as those focusing solely on organisational or interpersonal factors, were insufficient to explain or address collaboration challenges. Instead, they emphasize the need for a systems-based framework capable of capturing the dynamic interactions across different levels, reinforcing the relevance of EST in analyzing complex, multi-actor contexts such as anti-trafficking efforts.

This research therefore adapts Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 1986) micro-to-macro system levels, drawing from how Habeger et al. (2022) applied them to analyse the multi-layered influences on behavioral health workers’ well-being and performance. At the **professional level**, the model considers the individual’s (in this case, the anti-trafficking professional) personal capacities such as their knowledge and perception of child trafficking trends, as well as their skills and attitudes, when participating in MDTs. The next two levels, institutional

and cross institutional, reflect the relational and organisational environments in which these individuals are embedded. The **institutional level** looks at what happens within each organisation, including supervision, communication patterns, team relationships, internal protocols, leadership support, workload, staffing, and the resources that shape how effectively an agency can contribute to MDT work. The **cross institutional level** then examines the MDT space itself, focusing on collaboration between agencies, information sharing, referral pathways, role clarity, and joint decision making. Finally, the **systemic level** situates MDT functioning within the wider system, including legislation, child protection policies, the National Referral Mechanism, funding models, and the political and social climate surrounding trafficking in Serbia. Using this layered model makes it possible to identify where strengths and constraints emerge across the ecological system, and how these shape the overall capacity of MDTs to protect trafficked children.

While this research specifically examines professionals' experiences within Serbia's MDT in the anti-trafficking response, interprofessional challenges are multilayered and interconnected across levels (Yann Foo et al. (2021). Therefore, understanding MDT functioning requires contextualising professionals' accounts within the broader institutional, cross-institutional, and systemic influences that shape its effectiveness.

Moreover, by using an ecological systems lens, trafficking is positioned as a systemic violation of rights (United Nations, 2000, 2010; UNICEF, 2018), not mere "risk exposure" for children. The next section discusses the Child Rights-Based Approach and its relevance to this framework.

### Child's Rights-Based Approach

Child's Rights-Based Approach or CBRA interprets access to specialised support and services not as an optional provision but rather an obligation arising from children's rights. From this perspective, states, such as Serbia, must ensure that trafficked children receive tailored assistance, recovery support, and protection measures that meet their specific needs (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights [OHCHR], 2010).

At present, it has been reported that many social norms in Serbia related to minors are still not grounded in a rights-based perspective, and children are not consistently recognised as rights holders (UNICEF, 2025). It is therefore essential to emphasise that children, in any situation, are rights holders, and that child trafficking, as a violation of children's rights, must

be approached from the perspective of the rights of the child (European Commission, 2025; UNICEF, 2025; Sanchez & Pacquiao, 2020; Barner et al., 2018; UNCRC, 1989).

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), which Serbia is a party to, emphasises, among many rights, the child's right to grow up free from all forms of violence, and must be protected from abuse, neglect, and any harmful treatment (Article 19); the right to be safeguarded from every form of sexual exploitation, including activities that take advantage of them or violate their dignity and safety; the right to be protected from work that exploits them, disrupts their education, or harms their health, safety, or overall development, whether physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social; and the right to be protected from being sold, abducted, or trafficked in any form or for any purpose (Article 35) (UNCRC, 1989). Moreover, it is specifically stated that States bear the responsibility to take all appropriate national, bilateral, and multilateral measures to prevent all of these from happening to children and to protect them (UNCRC, 1989).

Grounding the analysis in children's rights matters because the UNCRC (1989) requires that all policies and interventions affecting children be guided by a child-centered rationale. In the context of child trafficking, this shifts the focus from seeing children as passive or vulnerable victims to recognising them as individuals with agency, evolving capacities, and enforceable rights (UNICEF, 2018). It also has concrete implications for practice, such as the need for child-sensitive procedures, trauma-informed support, and mechanisms that prioritise safety, dignity, and participation of children throughout identification, assistance, and recovery (UNICEF, 2018; United Nations, 2010).

*4Ps International Strategic Model of Anti-Trafficking.* Serbia's anti-trafficking framework is built around the international 4Ps model: *Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnerships*. This means that an effective response to human trafficking should aim to prevent trafficking, protect and assist victims, prosecute perpetrators, and strengthen partnerships (United Nations, 2000, 2010).

To adapt this framework specifically for children, the Child Rights-Based Approach (UNICEF, 2018) can be applied, with its guiding principles. The first four stem from the general principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: *best interests of the child, life, survival and development, non-discrimination, and child participation* (UNCRC, 1989). While these are complemented by broader human rights principles including *dignity*,

*interdependence and indivisibility, and transparency and accountability* (UNICEF, 2018), this study focuses on the four core child-centered principles to maintain analytical clarity and relevance. Together, these principles can guide and strengthen the work of multidisciplinary teams in Serbia in fighting against child trafficking. Their integration ensures that each of the 4Ps framework (United Nations, 2000, 2010) is operationalized through a child rights lens.

### Multidisciplinary Approach

Although Serbia already has an MDT for addressing trafficking (Republic of Serbia, 2017) following a multidisciplinary approach, there is a need to revisit how this functions in practice by situating it within an ecological systems framework and Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA). The ecological systems framework reveals MDT functioning as multilayered and interconnected, not isolated to team dynamics alone, but capturing how professional capacities, institutional constraints, cross-agency collaboration, and systemic factors (legislation, funding, NRM) cumulatively shape effectiveness, enabling identification of precise intervention points across levels that single-level analyses miss (Yann Foo et al., 2021). This is especially important given Serbia's documented gaps and limitations in the child trafficking response (GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025; ASTRA et al., 2024; UNICEF, 2024), as discussed throughout this study.

“Multidisciplinary” evolved from Richard Meeth’s (1978) concept of “interdisciplinary”, which involves the effort/s to integrate insights from multiple disciplines to address a real-life problem, issue, or theme (Newell, 2013). Earl McGrath (1978) on the other hand, emphasised that the primary aim of interdisciplinary work is to bring together relevant knowledge from various fields to address a significant issue holistically. Thus, interdisciplinarity serves as a guiding theory for organizing and integrating multiple disciplines to effectively address a specific societal problem (Newell, 2013).

The multidisciplinary service approach began to take shape in the 1980s. As interestingly relevant to this study, it was driven by the need to reduce the negative impact that criminal justice procedures were having on children. At the same time, to improve justice outcomes and strengthen the effectiveness of support services provided to child victims (UNICEF, 2025; Herbert & Bromfield, 2017).

International bodies recommend a multidisciplinary approach when providing comprehensive protection and support for trafficked children (UNICEF 2025; U.S.

Department of State, 2025; International Labour Organisation, 2006). The United Nations has categorised human trafficking as a type of human insecurity, more specifically, one of the root causes of personal insecurity (United Nations Human Security Unit, 2016). To address this, the UN highlights that the human security approach was intentionally designed to be interdisciplinary, integrating multiple perspectives to ensure protection from such threats. It also emphasises the value of working with civil society actors to ensure the protection of individuals (Burke, 2022).

A project by the International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children funded by the European Union (2025) notes that children affected by trafficking and exploitation often have overlapping health, mental health, social, legal and immigration needs. Because of this complexity, a coordinated group of professionals from different agencies is highly recommended to work together to prevent, identify, protect, support, investigate and ensure justice in cases of child trafficking, child sexual abuse and child sexual exploitation (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2025).

The International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2006) outlines several core principles that guide effective multidisciplinary work with trafficked children. First, team members must demonstrate a **clear willingness to collaborate, engage in teamwork, and work toward a common goal**. Each professional is expected to understand the broader multidisciplinary framework, including the system in which the team operates and the roles and responsibilities of all participants. **Professionalism and objectivity** are essential, meaning that decisions should be grounded in professional judgement rather than personal emotions, beliefs, or biases, and members must exercise emotional control throughout the process (ILO, 2006).

Effective multidisciplinary work also requires ensuring **equal opportunities for participation**. All members should be able to contribute their expertise, present their analyses, and be heard within the team. **Clear role definitions** are crucial, but flexibility is also necessary when decisions require expertise beyond an individual's disciplinary boundaries. A participatory approach underpins the process, with planning and task allocation drawing on each member's unique knowledge. The team leader has a key role in encouraging balanced participation and fostering constructive dialogue (ILO, 2006).

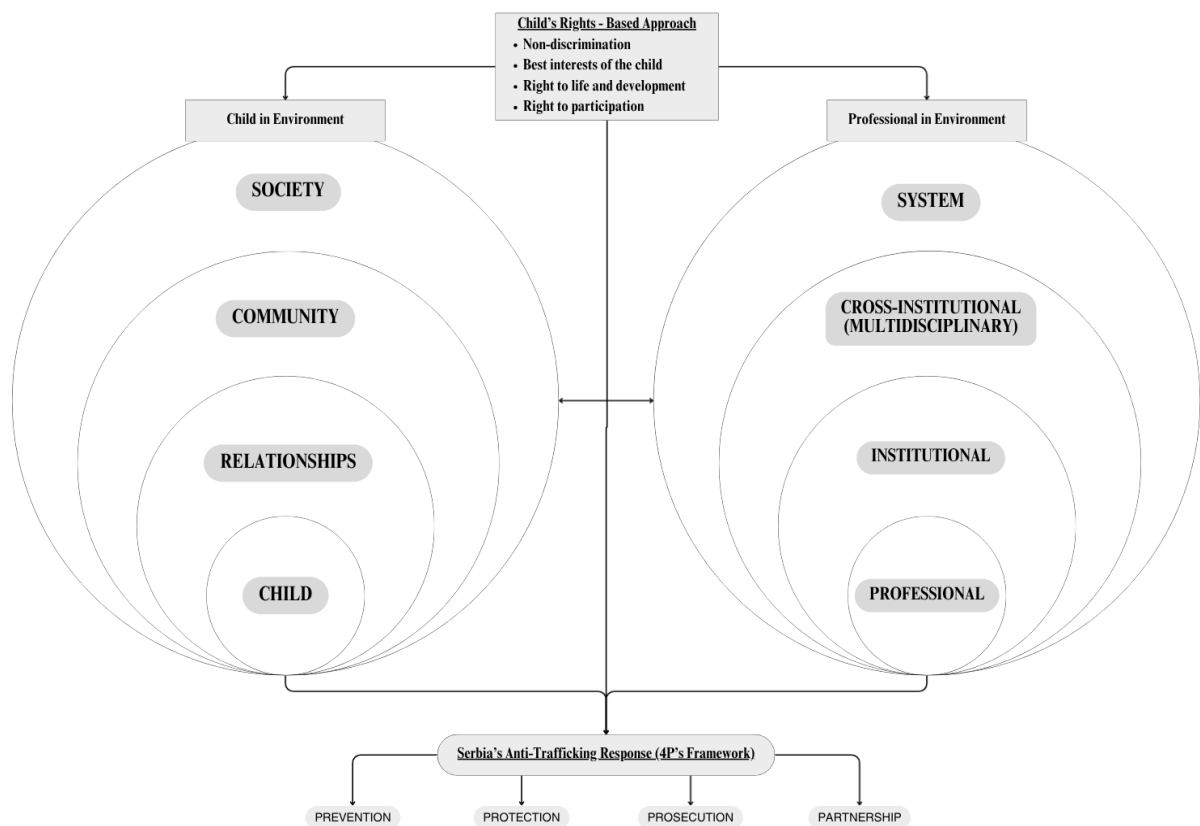
**Conflict resolution** is another essential principle. Differences in opinion must be addressed transparently and resolved based on evidence and factual analysis rather than authority or personal influence. Ultimately, the team must be able to reach clear, well supported conclusions, with the team leader synthesising discussion points and ensuring that agreed decisions are accurately captured and acted upon (ILO, 2006). These core principles provide analytical criteria for evaluating "effective MDT functioning" when examining Serbia's multidisciplinary teams in the context of the anti-child trafficking response.

Considering the complex and multifaceted needs of child trafficking victims, it is essential to involve a diverse range of professionals from various sectors in their protection and care (United Nations, 2010; Surtees & Johnson, 2021). This approach also supports the understanding that child trafficking is a complex, multidimensional issue that cannot be addressed by one sector alone, and an effective response to human trafficking necessitates a coordinated and collaborative approach (Palmiotto, 2015). Collaboration among public health, legal, and social services is essential to support victims as they work toward reintegration into society (Jain, et al., 2022).

Successful MDTs depend on trust, shared understanding of roles, and clear protocols (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2025). Importantly, the design of an MDT should be shaped by the cultural, geographic, social and economic conditions of the context in which it operates. There is no universal or prototype model that can simply be transferred from one setting to another, so flexibility is essential when applying the MDT approach (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2025).

## Theoretical Framework Diagram

Figure 1. Theoretical framework diagram



*Source: Author's ownership*

The diagram illustrates how this study's theoretical framework integrates Ecological Systems Theory, the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), and the Multidisciplinary Approach within Serbia's child anti-trafficking strategy.

The two sides of the model reflect the dual application of the ecological lens: On the left side, the model places the child at the centre of concentric ecological layers: the child, their relationships, community, and society. This illustrates how vulnerability to trafficking emerges from the interaction of multiple environments rather than from individual circumstances alone. On the right side, the model mirrors this structure but places the professional at the centre. This reflects the understanding that frontline workers also operate within layered environments that shape how they engage with the MDT and how effectively they can respond. The inner level reflects the professional's individual contexts, specifically, their individual roles and experiences working in the MDT, as well as their knowledge and perceptions of child trafficking trends and vulnerabilities. The second level represents the

institutional environment, capturing what happens within their own organisation, including communication, supervision and support, internal protocols, caseloads, and resources available to them. The third layer introduces the Multidisciplinary (cross-institutional level) approach, which is central to Serbia's anti-trafficking framework and is visually represented as a distinct ecological layer. This includes the collaborative space where different agencies interact through information sharing, joint decision making, referral pathways, role clarity, and coordinated case management. Positioning MDT collaboration as its own ecological level underlines that effective multidisciplinary work requires structural support, trust, consistency, and shared understanding across institutional boundaries. The outermost circle represents the broader system-level environment, which includes national legislation, child protection policies, the National Referral Mechanism, available funding, and wider political and societal conditions. These systemic factors shape the possibilities and limitations of MDT functioning.

The diagram shows a two-way link between child and professional ecological models: children's environments (direct relationships, community, societal) shape professional assessments and MDT responses, while professionals' environments (institutional, cross-institutional, systemic) determine service delivery and child protection outcomes. This interaction makes simultaneous analysis of both contexts essential for child-centred system strengthening.

At the centre of the diagram is the Child Rights-Based Approach (CRBA), which acts as the guiding principle that connects the child's ecological environment and the professional/MDT ecological environment. CRBA signifies that both child assessment and MDT functioning must be grounded in children's rights as defined by the UNCRC, prioritising the child's best interests, dignity, safety, participation, and recovery.

Finally, the base of the diagram incorporates the 4Ps anti-trafficking strategy (Prevention, Protection, Prosecution, and Partnership), to which Serbia's anti-trafficking response is anchored, representing the operational foundation through which ecological and rights-based principles are implemented.

Overall, the diagram captures the framework's core idea: working with trafficked children in Serbia requires understanding both children's and professionals' multi-layered environment, alongside the operational contexts of MDTs, all grounded in CRBA.

## **Methodology**

### **Type of Research**

This study adopted a qualitative design, as it sought to explore the perspectives and personal experiences of professionals working with children who are at risk of, or victims of, trafficking (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Qualitative research aims to develop an understanding of the “meaning and experience dimensions of humans’ lives and social worlds” (Fossey et al., 2002). It is particularly suited to exploring complex and insufficiently understood phenomena and to examining individuals’ experiences within their social and institutional contexts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Lim, 2025). Drawing on existing qualitative research on trafficking and related child protection contexts, this approach is necessary for an in-depth understanding of the complex nature of trafficking and the lived realities of practice for frontline professionals (Gearon, 2022; Nichols et al., 2025).

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews (Burgess, 1984; May, 2011), conducted either face-to-face, online, or via written format, depending on participant availability and preference. Interviews were conducted in English, lasted approximately 45–60 minutes (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) when verbal, were audio-recorded and transcribed with participant consent, and were guided by a semi-structured interview guide (Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) developed in line with the research objectives and questions.

The interview guide explored professionals' roles, perceptions of child trafficking (i.e., perceived trends in the Serbian context & vulnerabilities of children to trafficking), experiences of working in a multidisciplinary team, perceived challenges, and needs in practice. As May (2011) emphasises, qualitative interviewing is not only about asking questions but also about listening attentively and interpreting meanings as they emerge in dialogue, which informed the way the researcher followed up on participants' statements and probed key themes as they arose. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across all formats while allowing participants the freedom to elaborate on issues they considered significant.

## Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit 10 participants who have direct experience working with children at risk of trafficking, or who have handled child trafficking cases in Serbia and are involved in the anti-trafficking multidisciplinary team.

The inclusion criteria required that participants:

1. Currently work or have worked in the field of anti-trafficking, specifically within Serbia's Multidisciplinary Anti-trafficking Response Team, and have experience handling cases involving child trafficking; or
2. Have worked with children at risk of trafficking, such as unaccompanied minors, children living on the streets, or children from minority communities (such as Roma children) (ASTRA et al., 2024; GRETA, 2023), and
3. Have had such experiences within the last five years

Additional snowball sampling was used to identify further participants through recommendations from professionals already engaged in the study.

## Data Analysis Method

Data were analysed using a hybrid thematic analysis approach, combining deductive coding based on the study's theoretical framework with inductive coding to allow themes to emerge from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The analysis was supported by MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software, which was used to organise the transcripts, code the data, and develop the final themes. These themes guided the structure of the findings and discussion sections, namely: *(1) Child Trafficking Vulnerabilities; (2) Multidisciplinary Functioning (MDT); (3) Child Rights-Based Approach in Practice; (4) Challenges Faced by Professionals; (5) Professional Strengths and Capacities of Frontline Professionals Against Challenges; and (6) System Improvements and Recommendations*

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the analysis process by anonymising transcripts and removing all identifying information.

## **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection to ensure the research adhered to accepted standards of professional and academic integrity. Participation was voluntary, and each participant received an information sheet and consent form online, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Informed consent was secured online, through Google Forms, before each interview. The content of the informed consent form was also read to the participants, which they agreed to, in the beginning of each interview.

Participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. No identifying information was disclosed in transcripts or reports, and pseudonyms were used in all documentation and analysis. Interview recordings and transcripts were stored securely and were accessible only to the researcher. Participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without penalty or the need to provide an explanation.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, special care was taken to minimise emotional distress. Interviews were conducted in a respectful and supportive manner, and participants were informed in the beginning of the interview that they were free to pause or skip any questions they found uncomfortable, or stop completely at any point in time.

All data were handled in accordance with ethical research guidelines of the academe ensuring the responsible management, use, and disposal of collected materials.

## **AI Use Disclosure**

Artificial intelligence tools were used, namely: (1) Otter AI, to transcribe two audio-recorded interviews, which were further reviewed and refined by the author, and; (2) ChatGPT and Perplexity AI to support language refinement, phrasing, and editorial clarity. Artificial intelligence was not used to generate data, codes, themes, and analysis, interpret findings, or determine the study's results or conclusions. All substantive analytical decisions, thematic development, and final academic judgment remained the responsibility of the author.

## Limitations of the Research

*Scope limitation:* Participants were professionals providing direct child support and services (e.g., NGO workers, state social services staff), field researchers, social workers, and child protection workers. The study did not include other key actors in Serbia's multidisciplinary anti-trafficking response, such as law enforcement, judiciary, or border control personnel. Although these excluded actors are vital to the broader system, this research intentionally focused on frontline support providers and oversight professionals working closely with child victims. Findings therefore reflect this specific subgroup's perspectives rather than the complete multidisciplinary team.

Purposive sampling targeted information-rich cases (Patton, 2015) whose daily work with child victims provides the most relevant insights into child-centred practice, rights-based service delivery, and MDT coordination challenges from the support/services perspective.

*Potential response bias:* Participants may respond in ways that reflect what is socially desirable. Socially desirable responding (SDR) is characterized by a “tendency to give positive self-descriptions” (Paulhus, 2002, p. 47). They may therefore describe themselves or their organisations in a more positive light, emphasising strengths and downplaying difficulties or shortcomings. To address this, participants were assured of strict confidentiality and of the non-evaluative, academic nature of the research. The interviewer emphasised that the study sought honest reflections on both strengths and challenges, rather than “good” or “bad” appraisals, and avoided language that framed the research as an audit or inspection. Questions were worded neutrally, and participants were reminded that they could skip any question or pause the interview without consequence. During data analysis, the researcher remained attentive to patterns of overly positive accounts and triangulated participants' descriptions with documented case material and secondary sources where possible, so as to balance participants' self-presentations against broader contextual evidence.

*Language:* Conducting interviews mainly in English may affect expression for participants more fluent in Serbian. Participants were encouraged to express themselves freely, even if they mixed Serbian or used terms that felt more natural. The interviewer checked understanding throughout the interview, and follow-up questions helped clarify meaning. Summaries were validated by the participant during the interview to ensure accuracy.

*Context specificity:* Findings are specific to Serbia and cannot be generalised to other regions without caution. The study does not aim for broad generalisation. Instead, it aims for contextual depth, offering insights into Serbia's anti-trafficking and child-protection system and contributing to knowledge in the relevant field. The thesis clearly situated findings within the Serbian context.

*Anonymity constraints:* Due to the small professional community, full anonymity is challenging even though every reasonable measure was taken to protect identities. No names, institutions, job titles, or other identifying details were included in transcripts or analysis. Participants were referred to only in general terms (e.g., "social worker," "NGO professional"). Data were stored securely, and sensitive details were paraphrased where necessary to prevent identification.

## **Findings & Discussion**

This chapter presents and discusses the main findings from the interviews with frontline professionals working with child trafficking victims, as well as child groups vulnerable to trafficking in Serbia. It brings together the empirical results and links them to the study's theoretical framework, particularly the ecological perspective, the child rights-based approach, and the multidisciplinary approach. The chapter shows that trafficking is understood by professionals not as a single isolated event, but as a process shaped by individual, family, community, institutional, and broader structural factors. At the same time, the professionals also function in a multi-layered environment, and encounter challenges on the individual, institutional, cross-institutional, and systemic levels.

The findings are organised around several interconnected themes. First, the chapter examines perceived patterns and trends in child trafficking, including changing forms of exploitation, at-risk groups, and ecological factors shaping vulnerability. It then explores the difficulty of identification and entry into the response system, followed by an analysis of child rights-based practice and multidisciplinary team functioning. The chapter further examines the challenges professionals face when participating in multidisciplinary responses, analysing these across ecological levels and considering their consequences for children. Finally, it highlights an emerging theme concerning the strengths and capacities of frontline professionals, as well as their recommendations for improving policy and practice.

### Perceived patterns & trends in child trafficking

This theme captures professionals' observations of emerging changes and recurring patterns in child trafficking in Serbia, including who is affected, how exploitation occurs, and how the phenomenon appears to be evolving in practice.

Participants emphasized that child trafficking in Serbia is changing in both form and visibility. While some patterns remain stable, such as the continued exploitation of girls for sexual purposes and the involvement of parents or relatives in certain cases (CPTV, 2024; GRETA, 2023), professionals pointed to newer dynamics such as digital recruitment, grooming, and online blackmail. Their accounts indicate that trafficking is no longer confined to familiar offline routes or highly visible street-based exploitation, but increasingly takes place through digital spaces where children can be contacted, manipulated, and controlled

with greater concealment. This makes identification more difficult and increases the risk for children who may otherwise appear to come from stable or functional families.

For instance, one participant explained that *“normal children in functional families” can be recruited “online, some video games, chats, and places like that,”* while another noted that *trafficking is increasingly using “IT” and “high tech” resources, meaning that “all children” are now at risk.* (P1)

Another particularly important trend was the rise of multiple and overlapping forms of exploitation. As told in detail by one professional, *“Children [are exploited] in different ways. But very often it's not just that something (not just one type of exploitation). Now it comes to the situation, those mixed types of trafficking, multiple exploitation... girls that [have] been sexually exploited. Also has been forced to... smuggle arms, you know, or drugs or something across the border...”* (P8)

Participants reported cases of children who were forced into several forms of abuse at once, including forced begging, forced labour, sexual exploitation, criminal activity, and smuggling. This shows that trafficking is often not experienced as a single category of harm, but as a layered process in which one child may be exposed to different exploitative roles over time. In that sense, the data challenge any narrow or linear understanding of trafficking and instead point to more complex and fluid patterns of abuse.

Professionals also noted that the *“average age of trafficked children appears to be decreasing”.* (P5) Borrowing from the theory of cognitive development, children’s thinking develops in stages, meaning that younger children have less advanced logical reasoning and are less able to judge danger or fully understand exploitation (Piaget, 1952; Pakpahan & Saragih, 2022). It suggests that children are being exposed to exploitation at earlier developmental stages, when dependency is greater, agency is more limited, and recognition of danger is less developed.

As one of the participants said, *“Another challenge in practice is that children themselves may not recognize or name their experience as exploitation. Some may normalize it, feel loyalty toward the exploiter, or perceive the situation as a necessary strategy for survival.”* (P10)

From an ecological perspective, this reinforces the idea that vulnerability is not only about exposure to harmful environments, but also about how those environments interact

with a child's developmental capacity (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Younger children may be especially vulnerable because their developmental stage, relational dependence on adults, and limited autonomy can increase susceptibility to manipulation and exploitation (Bagattini, 2019).

Gender remained a key dimension in the accounts, particularly in relation to girls trafficked for sexual exploitation. Professionals recognized this as a persistent pattern rather than a new one, indicating continuity in the gendered nature of trafficking. The interviews support this through the observation that *"girls and women and the most of them are the victims of sexual exploitation,"* (P2) while Participant 5 referred to *"particular risk Roma girls,"* showing how gender intersects with ethnicity and vulnerability. Participant 10 added that there are *"adolescent girls at risk of sexual or labour exploitation"* and stressed the necessity for a support that is *"specialised, trauma-informed and strongly gender-sensitive,"*. These accounts show that gender is an important component of trafficking and professional response. At the same time, the mention of *"boy brides"* (P7) by one professional shows that exploitation in the form of early marriage is no longer limited to girls in a narrow sense. This was linked to practices in minority groups such as Roma and migrant or refugee communities, although they pointed out that *"some traditional practices are not even perceived as harmful,"* even though they should be *"forbidden and a criminal practice."* Taken together, the interviews show that trafficking remains deeply gendered, but also more complex than a simple girls-versus-boys divide, since professionals described both the persistent sexual exploitation of girls and the way early marriage and other harmful practices now affect children from both genders, across different minority and migrant communities.

The excerpts further show that professionals perceive trafficking as often remaining hidden from official systems. They believe that the number of identified cases is likely much lower than the actual extent of the problem, especially when exploitation does not fit the most familiar profile. One participant noted that institutions in Serbia appear to recognise sexual exploitation more readily than forced begging or other forms of exploitation, explaining that *"if [it is] sexual exploitation that maybe institution recognise[s]... [but] when you [are] forced to beg and other different kind of exploitation they don't recognize very well".* (P3). Another professional gave more context on invisibility of certain groups: *"Children living in extreme poverty, especially those from Roma communities, are among the most at risk in the Serbian context. Also, children living or working on the streets, children without adequate parental care, and children on the move, such as migrants or refugees can be particularly*

vulnerable. [However], these groups are often less visible because they may not be consistently engaged in education, may lack personal documentation, or frequently change their place of residence. This makes early identification and continuity of support more difficult.” (P10) The second quote suggests that children most at risk are often also the least visible to professionals because of poverty, mobility, missing documentation, and disrupted schooling. Together, the excerpts show that invisibility is produced both by the type of exploitation and by the social position of the children involved.

Internal trafficking emerged as the main current trend, which is consistent with the findings in the literature, including ASTRA (2024). At the same time, one participant drew attention to children moving through the Balkan route, particularly unaccompanied minors from Egypt and other countries transiting the region. The participant suggested that these children may be difficult to identify while in transit, especially because they “*move quickly across borders...*” and “*...official age assessment procedures are not clearly established*”. (P10) This indicates that, alongside internal trafficking, border and transit settings remain important spaces of vulnerability that require stronger identification and protection mechanisms.

Participants described parents as common perpetrators. They mentioned cases in which parents were involved in “*sexual exploitation, forced begging, and forced marriage*” (P2), which corresponds with CPTV (2024), where parents were reported as perpetrators in a large number of cases. However, participants also expressed discomfort around the boundary between survival-driven begging and exploitative family conduct, highlighting how difficult it can be to distinguish coercion, poverty, and abuse in practice.

One participant stressed that “*it is really important for us, even though we deeply believe that children being on the street is a terrible experience and it is horrible, but not every that horrible experience is really part of human trafficking.*” (P7) Another participant similarly noted that when children accompany parents who work on the street or collect recyclable materials, the situation cannot be judged in isolation, since the family may have no realistic alternatives, stating that it might be the “*only way they’re earning money*” (P6), and that the child’s presence may be tied to survival rather than intentional exploitation.

This blurring of categories is important to dissect as it shows that vulnerability is also embedded in family survival strategies, not just in overt forms of criminal exploitation. On the other hand, it also reflects an ecological perspective, as professionals are viewing the

child holistically, in relation to their family circumstances, rather than as an isolated victim (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

### At-risk groups of children

Professionals identified several groups as being particularly exposed to trafficking risks, including children from dysfunctional families, children living in poverty, Roma children, street-involved children, unaccompanied minors, migrant and refugee children, LGBTQ+ children, and children in residential institutions. Their accounts are consistent with official reports, which similarly identify these populations as being at heightened risk (ASTRA, 2024; GRETA, 2023; U.S. Department of State, 2025). At the same time, participants emphasised that trafficking is becoming more hidden and more difficult to detect, especially through digital spaces.

One of the most frequently identified groups was children from dysfunctional families and children without adequate parental care. Participants linked vulnerability to violence in the home, unstable caregiving, and harmful early childhood experiences. Drawing on attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969/1982), exploitation risk may develop over time through disrupted child development, emotional neglect, and the absence of protective adult relationships.

As one participant noted, “...*they didn't have trust in their parents or caregivers to discuss with them some situations which eventually led them in [this] situation.*” (P4)

This suggests that trafficking vulnerability is shaped not only by direct abuse, but also by the lack of a trusted adult relationship that could otherwise provide protection and guidance. Similarly, from an attachment-theoretical perspective, children with unstable or unsafe caregiving are less likely to have a secure base, may be more vulnerable to coercion & grooming, and may struggle to recognize or disclose exploitation (Bacon & Richardson, 2001; Contreras et al., 2026). Moreover, although parents are frequently recorded as perpetrators of trafficking in Serbia, this should not be understood as every case involving direct parental intent to exploit. Rather, parents may also unintentionally contribute to vulnerability and exploitation indirectly, through family instability, poverty, neglect, or survival-based practices that place children at risk.

Children in “*residential institutions (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6)*”, *shelters (P1)* , and *foster care (P3, P4)*” were also repeatedly identified as being at heightened risk, aligning with reports from GRETA (2023) and the U.S. Department of State (2025). Importantly, participants did not describe institutional placement as automatically protective. Instead, some accounts suggested that exploitation can continue or emerge even while children are formally within the protection system, and that signs of trafficking may remain visible without prompting an adequate response. As expressed by one of the professionals “*a whole process is happening in plain sight of those who are supposed to protect children who are in foster cares and shelters. And we don’t... We as a system don’t have [an] adequate answer to that.*” (P4) This finding is especially important because it exposes a gap between formal child protection structures and actual safety, indicating that placement alone does not ensure meaningful protection from trafficking.

Several participants also identified children from socially marginalized groups as particularly vulnerable, especially Roma children, migrant and refugee children, unaccompanied minors, street-involved children, and LGBTQ+ children. For Roma children, professionals frequently referred to risks linked to forced begging, forced marriage, and family survival strategies under extreme poverty. For migrant and refugee children, vulnerability was associated with mobility and weak system visibility, as one participant noted that many refugees avoid official camps and services, making trafficking victims “*super invisible,*” while another explained that children often did not know where they had travelled, because “*for them, it was all hazy*” (P6, P9). For LGBTQ+ children, vulnerability was connected to rejection and isolation, as one participant described how children who are gay or trans are “*pushing... away (being pushed away)*” by the community and “*don’t have support [from] their family,*” leaving them “*very alone and after that... very vulnerable*” (P3). Across these examples, participants highlighted that vulnerability is often intensified when children are positioned outside dominant systems of belonging, recognition, and care.

A particularly notable finding was that some professionals also identified children from seemingly more stable backgrounds as vulnerable when exposed to digital spaces without supervision. As one participant noted, “*I think that we have higher risk for children who are just, how should I say, normal children in functional families, who don’t have economical problems, you know, but they are recruited online, some video games, chats, and places like that.*” (P1)

This complicates more traditional assumptions that trafficking only affects children facing obvious socioeconomic hardship. Instead, it suggests that professionals are increasingly aware of trafficking as an evolving phenomenon that can extend beyond conventional vulnerability markers and into everyday online environments.

### Ecological level factors shaping children's vulnerability to trafficking

Professionals perceived children's vulnerability to trafficking as shaped by conditions operating across individual, family, community, and societal levels. Rather than treating risk as the result of one isolated factor, participants linked vulnerability to the interaction between a child's developmental stage, their family environment, the support or neglect present in their community, and wider structural conditions such as poverty, unemployment, migration, and social tolerance of harmful practices.

At the individual level, participants emphasized that children are vulnerable because of their age, dependency, and developmental immaturity. They described children as not yet physically or psychologically mature enough to fully understand risk, resist manipulation, or make informed choices in exploitative situations. As one professional noted, *"I think the problem definitely is that children are vulnerable just because they are children. They are not mature enough. They are not independent. And that puts them in high risk."* (P1) Professionals also linked vulnerability to low self-esteem, unmet emotional needs, and the desire to belong, suggesting that emotional needs can create openings for grooming and coercion. As participant 3 mentioned, *"...children that are easier (the easiest) target for perpetrators, [are those that] don't know what to mean love, care..."*, referring to children who did not experience a loving and caring environment growing up. The interviews suggest that vulnerability is not simply about age, but about being at a stage of life where dependence, emotional need, and still-developing judgment make children easier to manipulate. This aligns with attachment theory, which highlights how children's need for stable care and secure relationships shapes their sense of safety and trust (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bacon & Richardson, 2001; Contreras et al., 2026). Participants also implied that unmet needs for care, belonging, and recognition can deepen this vulnerability, since exploitation often takes hold by filling emotional gaps rather than only by using force. In that sense, vulnerability appears as something shaped both by a child's developmental stage and by the social and emotional conditions surrounding them.

At the family level, participants frequently pointed to dysfunctional family relations, violence, neglect, unstable caregiving, joblessness, and economic status. Some accounts suggested that children may already be escaping one violent environment only to enter another, which makes family instability a central background condition for trafficking risk. Professionals also described situations where children are *“trying to contribute financially to their families or simply to survive [economically],”* (P10) through street work or begging, showing how family poverty can blur the line between survival strategies and exploitation. Family vulnerability is therefore, not only seen by the professionals as the absence of parental or guardianship care, but also about the pressure that the family situation may or may not consciously put on children to contribute economically despite harmful conditions.

At the community level, schools emerged as one of the most important protective institutions. Participants argued that schools are often the first actors in direct contact with children every day and therefore play a key role in prevention, reporting, reintegration, and long-term support. As one participant explained, *“Schools are [the] most important actor here” because they are “the ones who are going to be in direct contact with [the] child every day.”* However, they also said that *“there are some cases where school wasn’t that supportive,”* making the *“come back for the child (referring to the child’s educational and community reintegration)”* (P4) much more difficult when school staff do not fully support the process. Professionals additionally mentioned *“social exclusion, discrimination, and limited community awareness of trafficking”* (P6, P10), suggesting that vulnerability increases when children are surrounded by communities that do not recognize, respond to, or actively challenge exploitation.

At the societal level, participants identified broader structural conditions that heighten vulnerability, including poverty, migration processes, and social tolerance of child labour and begging. As some of the participants mentioned, *“At the wider societal level, structural poverty, unemployment, migration processes, and at times even the social tolerance of child labour or street involvement all contribute to children becoming more vulnerable.”* (P10) and *“Some data actually show that 35% of all children in Serbia are on the line of the poverty, you know, or below the line of the poverty... what do you expect to have the less number of children, victims of trafficking, you know, or some other types of violence... It’s an interconnection.”* (P8)

Some also discussed early marriage as a normalized or culturally defended practice in certain contexts, especially where harmful traditions are not recognized as criminal or abusive. As accounted for by two professionals, *"We as a society, we don't react to that" when referring to harmful practices that are associated and normalized within certain cultural groups (P2), and "The impact of cultural background... for example in Roma community in Serbia we have early marriages... we have some traditional practices that are not even perceived as harmful but they are [perceived to be] part of inherited [culture]..." (P7).* These accounts indicate that trafficking vulnerability is embedded in wider social and economic structures that shape children's opportunities, visibility, and access to protection. In this sense, professionals saw trafficking not just as a child-level problem, but as a symptom of broader inequality and institutional failure. As also mentioned in the interview, *"We really cannot look at trafficking in isolation. It needs to be understood as part of the broader child protection context and linked to social inequalities and gaps in preventive support for families and communities."* (P10)

Taken together, these findings show that professionals understand vulnerability as cumulative and ecological. Children were seen as becoming at risk not because of a single trait or event, but because individual dependency, family instability, institutional settings, community exclusion, and broader structural inequalities interact over time. This interpretation closely reflects the ecological framework guiding the study (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986), as the risk of trafficking was consistently described across multiple environments rather than within the child alone. At the same time, the findings raise important child rights concerns, parallel to one of the objectives of this study, because many of the groups identified by participants appear to face compromised dignity, safety, equal protection, and access to tailored support across the very systems that should protect them.

#### Difficulty in identification and entry into the response system

*"Somehow, you know, very often... [that] those potential [victims] are not identified properly."* (P8)

Professionals described identification as one of the most difficult points in the anti-trafficking response, since children are not always recognized as victims when exploitation is hidden, mixed with other forms of abuse, or expressed through behaviours that

can be misread. Their accounts suggest that the challenge is not only to respond once trafficking is confirmed, but first to notice when a child may be at risk, interpret the signs correctly, and decide whether the case should enter the protection system. In this sense, identification appears as a critical threshold between vulnerability and intervention.

A recurring theme in the interviews was that children are often difficult to identify because trafficking does not always present in an obvious or linear way. Some participants recalled cases in which exploitation was mixed with neglect, violence, homelessness, school disengagement, or other forms of abuse, making it harder to distinguish trafficking from broader child protection concerns. It shows that identification depends not only on the presence of harm, but on professionals' ability to interpret complex and overlapping indicators. When those indicators are missed, children may remain outside the formal response system for longer than they should. Nevertheless, participants also suggested that support did not always depend on formal identification, as professionals and NGOs often continued to assist children through their own organizational resources even when the system had not officially recognized them as victims. As one participant noted, *"We [will] remain the place where we can support [children] further, whether [as] a potential victim or a real [formally identified] victim..." (P7)*

Several participants suggested that children themselves may not name their experiences as exploitation. As Participant 10 observed, *"children themselves may not recognize or name their experience as exploitation... some may normalize it, feel loyalty toward the exploiter, or perceive the situation as a necessary strategy for survival" (P10)*. This was echoed in Participant 10's account of how, in practice, children's participation in protection processes can remain limited *"because of fear, shame, loyalty to family members or exploiters, or simply a lack of understanding of the process" (P10)*. Beyond cognitive barriers, Participant 3 described how children who have been exploited can internalize guilt so deeply that they feel *"like a bad person"* and *"responsible for everything that happened"* (P3), suggesting that self-blame can prevent children from recognizing their own victimization. This connects to the individual-level vulnerability linked to psychological immaturity in the earlier discussion. Moreover, as Participant 10 also noted, *"because of their developmental stage, children cannot give meaningful or informed consent to exploitative situations, even when they appear to be participating voluntarily" (P10)*. Furthermore, as the average age of victims appears to be declining, a trend Participant 5 observed directly in

practice (P5), this becomes even more important, since younger children are often less able to identify abuse and more dependent on adults and professionals to recognize what is happening on their behalf.

In the earlier discussion under the theme, *Perceived patterns & trends in child trafficking*, professionals emphasized that some groups of children are especially difficult to identify because they are less visible to institutions. Migrant and refugee children, children in informal settlements, street-involved children, and children in residential care were all described as being at risk of remaining outside the protection system. This suggests that identification is unevenly distributed across social and institutional spaces. Children who move frequently, lack documentation, are outside school systems, or are already living on the margins are less likely to be noticed early, even when exploitation is present.

The data also showed that schools, social welfare institutions, and other frontline actors play an important role in the identification process. Participants recognized schools as one of the key places where *“children can be observed daily and where early signs may first be noticed”* (P4) . At the same time, they noted that recognition is weakened when *“...schools are not sufficiently involved by the system... ”* or *“...aren’t participative...”* (P4), when *“...professionals lack training...”* (P2), or when institutional responses are inconsistent. This emphasizes the importance of early detection as a community-based and multi-agency process rather than a task that can be handled by one institution alone.

At the institutional level, identification sometimes does not happen or is delayed because some professionals feel that the system cannot provide adequate support once a child is formally recognized. As one participant explained, social welfare institutions often only *“check” the situation, call parents, or offer “some small material support,”* but *“don’t actually react... or really [take] measures against parents or against some men who are involved... and report to police or start procedure because they can’t provide the help [for] them...”* (P2). In this sense, non-identification may reflect not only uncertainty about the case, but also limited confidence in the institution’s capacity to respond effectively.

Taken together, these findings suggest that identification remains a highly vulnerable stage in the response chain to child trafficking in Serbia. Professionals are working with children whose exploitation may be hidden, normalized, or mistaken for something else, while the institutions around them do not always have the resources, knowledge, or

coordination needed to recognize the problem in time. This makes identification not only a technical process, but also a decisive point at which vulnerability can either be interrupted or allowed to continue.

### Child rights-based practice

The interviews suggest that a child rights-based approach was an important normative framework for many professionals, but one that was implemented unevenly in practice. Participants consistently described their work as needing to be guided by the child's rights, dignity, voice, and best interests, yet they also made clear that these principles were not always easy to translate into everyday institutional action. In this sense, **CRBA appeared less as a fully established practice and more as an orientation** that professionals tried to uphold within systems that were often slow, fragmented, and procedurally demanding.

One of the most visible ways in which CRBA was operationalized was through efforts to inform children about what was happening to them. Participants highlighted the importance of explaining rights, procedures, next steps, and the roles of different professionals in a way that children could understand. As one professional explained, *"We always have to inform them about their rights, about who do[es] what, and what is the next step, what is the next procedure, what will be next, who will contact them, who will speak with them..."* (P2) Hence, this shows why participation cannot be reduced to simply asking a child for an opinion. The best interests of the child cannot be upheld unless meaningful participation is supported through accessible, age-appropriate information and opportunities for children to contribute to decisions affecting their lives (Gerdtz-Andresen, 2021; UNCRC, 1989).

A second key theme was the effort to involve children in decisions that affected their lives. Participants recounted situations in which children were included in case conferences, support planning, and decisions about shelter, schooling, or other forms of assistance. Some noted that *"older children"*, in particular, were given *"more say in whether they would enter accommodation or participate in certain interventions"*. (P1) These accounts suggest that child participation was not merely a symbolic principle, but something that some professionals actively tried to build into practice. At the same time, the interviews also show that participation remained uneven, since children were not always in a position to express

preferences freely mainly due to lack of specialised accommodation and support for children who are victims of trafficking. Other reasons are *“because of fear, shame, loyalty to family members or exploiters, or simply a lack of understanding of the process, their [children’s] participation may remain quite limited.”* (P10)

Participants also strongly linked CRBA with child-friendly and trauma-informed procedures. This aligns with literature, emphasizing the need for child-sensitive procedures, trauma-informed support, and mechanisms that prioritise safety, dignity, and participation of children throughout identification, assistance, and recovery (UNICEF, 2018; United Nations, 2010). Professionals mentioned the need to avoid repeated questioning, reduce the risk of secondary victimization, and create conditions in which children could feel safe enough to engage with professionals at their own pace. As one participant noted, *“They [the children] are often expected to trust the system very quickly, even though they may already have experiences of betrayal or manipulation by adults.”* (P10) In response, they described trying to build rapport gradually, explain things carefully, and use communication methods adapted to age, cultural background, and emotional state. These practices suggest a real effort to move away from punitive or extractive systems of engagement and toward forms of support that are more respectful and protective for children.

Another important dimension of CRBA in the data was the emphasis on the dignity of the child and a strengths-based perspective. Participants often stressed that children should not be understood only through the label of a “victim”. Instead, they spoke of children as rights-holders, developing persons, and individuals with capacities, resilience, and agency. As one participant observed, *“Maybe institutional (referring to the system) look [at] them as victims, but many professionals are [instead] putting them in the centre of the work.”* (P6) Another stated, *“Somehow people treat that child or adult as a victim, like that person does not have other aspects of the life, you know, and all other aspects being, I don't know, sister or mother or grandchild.”* (P8), while a third expressed, *“In professional practice, I try not to define the child primarily through the label of victim,”* and explained, *“I understand the child not only as a victim in need of protection, but as a child with capacities, resilience, and rights.”* (P10)

This mattered especially in relation to reintegration and long-term support, because several professionals warned that treating a child only as a victim can freeze that child in a narrow identity and make it harder to rebuild a broader life. From this perspective, a

rights-based approach means recognizing harm without reducing the child to harm alone. It requires attention to education, relationships, development, and the child's longer life beyond the immediate crisis. That being said, the professionals emphasized on the importance supporting children's reintegration, which also connects to the child's right to life, survival, and development (UNCRC, 1989). Participants characterised support as extending beyond immediate protection toward helping children imagine and pursue a future beyond exploitation. As one participant stated, *"If the child says I want to, I don't know, be a hairdresser, we will try to engage him or her in that kind of school, that kind of course or something like that to support them in what they want."* (P4)

At the same time, the interviews reveal clear limits to CRBA implementation. One recurring problem was that institutional procedures did not always respect the child's readiness or pace. As one participant explained, *"For them it is important that they punish the perpetrators and in order to do that they need, for example, the victim to testify, and they will push the victim... even if we, for example, assess that victim is not ready and that is better for one who to wait. It's like a reflection period, but they don't respect that. That is one important point of our disagreements."* (P4). Another one quoted *"If the beneficiary doesn't want to cooperate, we leave (giving the victim as much space and autonomy to decide) as long as it's necessary."* (P5) These suggest that professionals sometimes recognized the need for slower, more careful engagement but other professionals and the system in general pushed for faster action. Others referred to repeated interviews, long court procedures, and administrative demands that could retraumatize children and undermine trust. In one account, the prolonged legal process was described as *"very traumatizing for the victim,"* (P3, P4, P8) while another participant noted that *"the whole system... it's not in the favor of victims,"* (P8) and suggested that it often seemed to favor perpetrators more than children. This concern also resonates with the earlier ASTRA case from 2023, in which the most severe sentence imposed on the male defendants was only one year of house arrest. In these situations, the gap between the ideal of child-centred practice and the realities of institutional routine became especially visible. Professionals often appeared to struggle working against, rather than through a system that fully supported CRBA principles.

A further challenge was that professionals did not always share the same understanding of what child rights-based practice actually meant. Participants emphasized child participation as central, but they perceived that other professionals they work with in the MDT focused more strongly on protection, control, or legal procedure. As one participant

noted, “...we have different institutional priorities...” (P10) and the other, “For them it is important that they punish the perpetrators and in order to do that they need, for example, the victim to testify.” (P4) describing how the prosecution system prioritizes punishment first, even if it means using a child as a means to that end.

Differences also emerged in how institutions interpreted the best interests of the child, especially when decisions had to be made about care, placement, or legal follow-up. As one participant explained, “the best interest is very broad... we understand it differently... and that is a problem.” (P3) This means that CRBA was not only uneven because of resource constraints, but also because it was interpreted differently across professional settings. In practice, children’s rights could therefore be supported more fully in one setting and less so in another, depending on the professional culture involved.

Overall, participants’ accounts revealed that CRBA was present as a strong professional value and was reflected in their everyday practices. However, its implementation remained partial, fragile, and heavily dependent on individual sensitivity, institutional flexibility, and available resources. As one participant observed, “if you look at [the child] as a victim or if you look at [them] as the center... the result is pretty much the same if you have really few options,” (P6) highlighting how limited resources can constrain even rights-based approaches. The data indicate that professionals were often trying to work in ways that protected dignity, participation, and best interests, but that they were doing so within systems that still contained procedural rigidity, uneven coordination, inadequate resources, and limited opportunities for genuine child empowerment. Hence, CRBA in practice should be understood not just as a concept or an approach, but as an ongoing effort that is continually negotiated in relation to the institutions responsible for its implementation and the broader system in which they operate.

### Multidisciplinary Team (MDT) in practice

Participants consistently framed anti-trafficking work as inherently inter-institutional and described MDT as the only realistic way to respond to child trafficking cases in Serbia. As participant 8 mentioned, “The number of actors [who work together] could be very high... and if you want to work on the support of that child in the process of integration or reintegration, you know, that number of actors becomes much bigger.” (P8)

The Centre for Social Work was described as having the main mandate for formal identification procedures for children, coordinating child protection measures in individual cases, acting as guardians when parents were absent or unable to provide care, and arranging accommodation in social institutions. The Centre for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings (CPTV) was described as responsible for the formal identification of adult victims, coordinating specialised assistance at the national level, and training professionals on trafficking-related cases. Specialised NGOs such as ASTRA and ATINA were frequently mentioned as the main providers of specialised support for both children and adults, as well as training providers, similar to CPTV. Psychologists were also important actors within the response, particularly in counseling and psychosocial support for the children. In parallel, police and prosecutors were responsible for criminal investigations and evidence gathering, while the courts handled legal proceedings in child trafficking cases. Schools, health services, socio-civic organizations, the broader community, and civil society also played an important role in early identification, monitoring children's wellbeing, and supporting reintegration into education, health care, and their community. This reflects the literature, which shows that anti-trafficking responses depend on a network of institutions rather than a single team (UNICEF 2025; U.S. Department of State, 2025; International Labour Organisation, 2006).

Central to the MDT, from the professionals' perspective, is the child, which reflects the child-centered logic outlined in the theoretical framework. Quoting one professional, *"when there were indicators that a child might have been exposed to trafficking or serious exploitation, the very first step was usually an internal assessment of safety and immediate needs."* (P10) This was followed by further internal collaboration: *"We regularly discussed cases within the team in order to adjust the support plan and ensure continuity of care,"* and, eventually, coordination with other institutions. (P10)

Several professionals described structured mechanisms that are intended to make this cooperation possible. One example is the *"SocialPET model"*, (P1) where the specialised centre for trafficking victims leads the formal identification and is positioned as the hub of a wider network. In this model, preliminary identification is shared across frontline systems such as schools, police, social welfare centres, hospitals and NGOs, which are educated to recognise trafficking indicators and have an obligation to report suspicions. Once a case is flagged, professionals often organise interdisciplinary conferences or case conferences, bringing together relevant institutions to share information, discuss the situation, and agree on an individual protection plan for the child. These practices demonstrate that, at least on paper

and in some practice, MDT is understood as a process that includes “*joint assessment*” (P3), “*shared planning*” (P7), and “*coordinated responses*” (P10).

Within organisations, particularly NGOs, professionals put a strong emphasis on team-based case management. Case managers or lead workers conduct initial safety assessments and coordinate the support process, while colleagues are involved depending on the situation. As one participant explained, “*Basically I need to know the basic information about her cases and she needs to know about my cases and etcetera.*” (P4) She also noted that “*All the other colleagues are involved or at least informed about all the cases.*” (P4) Teams therefore maintained close internal communication and shared information to support continuity of care. Another one noted, “*we regularly discussed cases within the team in order to adjust the support plan and ensure continuity of care.*” (P10) This internal collaboration was experienced as crucial so that no one feels alone with difficult cases, and so that the organisation can remain a reliable partner within the broader MDT.

NGOs, in particular, described their role as both service providers and connectors between systems. They often enter cases early, sometimes at the stage of risk or initial concerns, and then stay with children and families through police procedures, social welfare decisions, court processes and reintegration. In this sense, NGO professionals position themselves as the link between different institutional mandates and as advocates for decisions that align with the child’s best interests. Participants also stressed that multidisciplinary collaboration is not only external: being part of a cohesive team and having a shared understanding of roles and goals was itself an important protective factor for professionals and for the quality of MDT coordination. As one professional quoted, “*It’s also important that we really work as a team. Nobody feels like that he or she is alone in this case. We all [have] the time and changes information, collaborate, make decisions, put together... we are in a dynamic communication all the time...*” (P5)

At their best, these arrangements mean that cases are identified through multiple entry points (i.e. schools, hospitals, NGOs, social services, etc.), referred through clear mechanisms, and discussed in joint meetings where institutions share responsibility. However, the effectiveness of MDT in practice was repeatedly described as contingent on individual motivation, existing relationships between professionals, and the availability of time and resources to participate in joint processes. This is where ecological challenges begin to shape how MDT actually functions.

## Challenges in MDT Functioning

Professionals viewed their work in the field as highly relational, practical, and dependent on coordination across institutions rather than on the actions of any single actor. As mentioned by one professional, *“In the Serbian context, the response was always inter-institutional.”* (P10) Their accounts show that responding to child trafficking is not a linear process, but one that requires constant communication between social welfare centres, police, schools, shelters, NGOs, health services, and the judiciary. As affirmed by another participant, *“It’s the only way how to respond [to] human trafficking issues.”* (P2), referring to multidisciplinary work as an essential component in addressing trafficking. In practice, the processes of identifying, referring, protecting, and supporting trafficked children are shared responsibilities distributed across these actors. However, the effectiveness and consistency of this collaboration vary considerably due to challenges encountered at different levels.

The findings identified limitations, gaps, and barriers operating across the individual, institutional, cross-institutional, and systemic levels, all of which collectively shape the functioning of Serbia’s multidisciplinary team (MDT) in anti-child trafficking and constrain professionals’ capacity to fulfil their intended role effectively.

### *Individual challenges*

At the individual level, participants reported observing professionals they work with or themselves feeling angry, powerless, and emotionally exhausted when they could not offer adequate solutions, or when institutions appeared to *“close their eyes”* to trafficking. (P3) As one participant started the interview by expressing, *“I think I’ll start with my feeling... I’m very angry and powerless,”* (P3) and another added, *“what [makes me feel] powerless is that when we try to help the children in Serbia [but] we don’t have the solution.”* (P4) Work overload, burnout, secondary traumatisation, and limited time for proper assessment were described as everyday realities, reducing the capacity to engage in preventive work and to give each child the level of individualised attention that CRBA would require. This was reflected in comments such as *“Secondary traumatized by day, everyday work,”* (P8) *“the people who work there are burnout (referring to the Centre for Social Welfare in general),”* (P3) and *“you don’t really have time to do a proper assessment [of children] always.”* (P9) These individual-level pressures mean that even when MDT structures exist, professionals

may not have the time, energy or psychological space to participate fully and thoughtfully in case conferences or inter-agency coordination.

### *Institutional/organizational challenges*

At the institutional level, participants pointed out “*lack of funding*” (P6, P9, P10) chronic shortages of resources, “*staff*” (P10), and specialised services. Many institutions, including the Centre for the Protection of Human Trafficking Victims, still lack their own child-specific accommodation facilities and rely on limited shelters or general child welfare institutions, where children with trafficking experiences were placed alongside children with different needs or behavioural issues. From some of the interviews, professionals mentioned: “*We have the cases where victims are 12 and 13 years old. We don't have [a place] where to put them, so we put them in regular shelters.*” (P4); “*No accommodation, no safe accommodation for child victims, no special educational program, no special psychology treatment for them. Many times they're placed in facilities where abandoned children are or children who have problems in their behaviour, and many times actually they're again recruited for trafficking from those facilities.*” (P5). In general, there are still no specialised accommodation options for either trafficked girls or boys in Serbia.

### *NGO-Specific Constraints*

Participants also described a specific institutional challenge in which NGOs are particularly, simultaneously relied upon and marginalised. Several noted that although their organisations are licensed and formally recognised, they remain almost entirely dependent on international funding, while state financing is absent. This supports reports from GRETA (2023) and the U.S. Department of State (2025) about the lack of funding for anti-trafficking organizations. NGOs are frequently expected to fill gaps in service delivery while remaining dependent on donor funding and constrained in their ability to drive structural change. This often requires them to align their strategies with donor priorities and interests, even when these do not fully match their own goals or the needs of the communities they support (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015)— in this case, the tailored needs of trafficking victims.

At the same time, participants were concerned about the serious decline in donor interest, which intensified the lack of resources available for their organisations. One participant noted, “*we are facing [a] serious lack of resources, especially for direct support,*” (P4) while another explained that “*there's less and less donors interested in supporting*

NGOs.” (P9) This produced a situation in which NGOs were expected to fill critical service gaps without being structurally supported, even as they faced political hostility and negative public perceptions. As one participant put it, “*they see them as political enemies,*” (P5) referring to how the state views civil society organizations. Such political stigmatisation makes cooperation more fragile and could create unequal power between institutions, which complicates joint decision-making and coordinated action. This also aligns with a research on state stigmatization and civil society, which suggests that political hostility can weaken trust, restrict cooperation, and position NGOs as less legitimate partners in public service delivery (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015).

Another participant remarked, “*we cannot be everywhere at the same time,*” (P4) showing the strain created by staff shortages and overextended teams. Such downsizing could mean that small teams were overburdened and had to choose between being in the field with victims or attending meetings, training, and cross-sector events that MDT work requires. All of these limits institutions’ ability to participate consistently in MDT structures and to follow through on agreed plans, even when the will to do so existed.

Nevertheless, NGOs emerged as particularly important actors in this field-based work. Participants repeatedly indicated that civil society organisations often provide continuity, expertise, and flexibility that state institutions cannot always offer. They support children through accommodation, psychosocial assistance, advocacy, accompaniment, and long-term engagement, and they often do so even when formal recognition by the system is delayed. This suggests that professionals in NGOs are not merely supplementary actors, but essential contributors to the functioning of the anti-trafficking response. In fact, one of the recommendations by GRETA (2023) was to ensure the involvement of relevant civil society organisations in Serbia’s anti-trafficking MDTs. Their role also highlights a broader gap between formal responsibility and practical action, since NGOs frequently compensate for weaknesses in the official system.

### *Cross-institutional challenges*

Cross-institutional challenges further hinders effective MDT functioning. Participants described different definitions of who counts as a trafficking victim and what level of risk should trigger support, with some state bodies recognising only those who have already survived trafficking while NGOs start providing support as soon as there is a risk of

exploitation. There were also examples of prosecutors framing a 15-year-old trafficked girl as voluntarily engaged in prostitution, illustrating deep differences in how institutions understand childhood and victimhood. As one participant clarified, *“under 18 you cannot have voluntarism in prostitution, not at all.”* (P5) Victim-blaming attitudes were also reported. As one participant explained, blame was sometimes placed on the child, with professionals questioning *“why they did not call the police or seek help.”* (P3) One account of labeling a child as *“manipulative”* (P4) by social service professionals, lack of child-friendly practices, and the criminalisation of children at risk were all reported.

One case described by a participant involved a ten-year-old boy living in residential care who had escaped from the institution and was subsequently groomed and exploited by an adult man. The man gained the child’s trust by presenting himself as someone who understood the boy’s experiences and vulnerabilities, initially offering him food, cigarettes, and small tasks in exchange for help. Over time, the relationship became increasingly exploitative, with the child being pressured into committing theft and later more serious criminal activities, including drug delivery. The participant explained that the boy was manipulated through emotional dependence, promises of belonging, and the perception that, due to his age, he would not be suspected by authorities. In the end, *“He was treated as a criminal offender... They put him in some other institution... And they didn't dig deeper into what happened to the boy before? No. And what happened to the guy who was ordering the boy to do this? Nothing.”* (P3)

When the child was eventually apprehended by police, professionals reportedly focused on his offending behaviour rather than recognising indicators of exploitation and trafficking. According to the participant, the boy was treated primarily as a juvenile offender and placed in a more restrictive institution, while little attention was given to investigating the adult responsible for exploiting him. The participant further noted that the child did not initially recognise himself as a victim, illustrating how coercion, grooming, and prolonged exploitation can obscure children’s understanding of their own victimisation.

Furthermore, children are reportedly being interrogated in ways that place heavy pressure on them to provide clear, consistent narratives despite the effects of trauma. As one professional importantly pointed out, *“They always treat [children] like they are like an investigator; they always interrogate the child. Okay like blue or green, blue or green, no, choose. And child always give answer. They don't have like, you know, that opportunity to say*

*'I don't remember'. Because they think they are not okay, they feel like pressure, they need to be clear.'* (P3)

The data further suggest that professionals differed in their interpretations of the child's best interests and, more broadly, in their conceptualisations of what a child is. Participants emphasised that children should not be viewed solely as victims requiring protection, but also as rights-holders with agency and as survivors entitled to reintegration, recovery, and meaningful opportunities to rebuild their lives. These differences were particularly visible in relation to adolescence, as some participants suggested that police did not always perceive older teenagers as children in the same way that child protection professionals or NGOs did. One professional noted that it felt wrong to rely on personal examples such as *"but you have children"* or *"do you have a baby girl"* (P3) to provoke empathy amongst other professionals. But also, one professional mentioned that some social service professionals have become *"hard and part of the system... that don't like NGO language. They don't want to participate and sometimes I really understand them. They're overwhelmed with their yes, yes. And they're like "[the] best interest of the child. OK, don't talk."* (P7). This suggests that for some frontline state professionals, rights-based language may have lost some of its practical force and can feel more like routine jargon than a guiding principle, empirically, as a result of burnout and consistent heavy workload.

Delays in other institutions also affect the quality of holistic support for children. For instance, access to psychological support was described as slow and insufficient, with examples of suicidal adolescents waiting months for an appointment or being placed in general psychiatric institutions without tailored care. As one professional noted, *"we have [an] institution for young teenagers and children, like [a] mental institution... they schedule your meeting for two months... it actually puts the child in further harm."* (P3) Lengthy case proceedings were also described as *"traumatizing for the victim."* (P3, P4, P8) As one participant observed, *"some of them last for 5 to 6 or 7... even 10 years."* (P8)

There have been instances in which institutions operated in parallel rather than in coordination, which led to uneven information sharing, delays in collaboration, and the retraumatization of the child. Children are often asked the same questions multiple times by different professionals, or are required to retell their story repeatedly. This problem is partly linked to insufficient technical equipment, such as recording devices, which could reduce the need for repetition. As one professional reflected upon, *"they [the children] need the same*

*professionals who are with them from beginning to the end,” since being passed “into different professionals” may cause “re-traumatization” and confusion, particularly when they must repeat their story “again and again.” (P2)*

Centralisation of communication through a national coordinator was perceived as slowing down urgent information exchange and perceived to create a bottleneck problem in communication which in return, slows down the collaboration of actors within the MDT. According to one professional, *“We mustn't call only one guy in the police national coordinator. We should talk to all police officers that are in charge of human trafficking all over Serbia.” (P5)*

Frequent staff rotation in key positions created discontinuity in support provision. Participants emphasized that cross-institutional work functions best when professionals know one another and have already built trust with each other, but also when the professionals they work with have an in-depth level of experience in trafficking. As one participant explained, *“they change them all. So basically you have some kind of a discontinuity of work, of knowledge as well, and you have to again begin with this from the scratch.” (P5)* This constant turnover meant that even when some level of trust and relationship had been reached between institutions, the arrival of a new person with a different perspective or level of expertise often required the process to start again. In practice, this affects continuity, slows down collaboration, and weakens the development of stable working relationships across institutions.

### *Systemic challenges*

At the systemic level, professionals pointed to low allocation of resources for social protection and child rights, describing lack of funds as a *“widespread challenge” (P6)*, heavy dependence on EU and international funding, and a general lack of political will to prioritise trafficking and child protection. They described an underdeveloped and reactive social protection system that was already struggling with local needs before the migration influx in 2015. As mentioned by one participant, *“social protection systems have [already] been underdeveloped even before the increase in, you know, number of arrived migrants and refugees.”, (P9)* and that became further strained when large numbers of refugees and migrants transited through Serbia.

Policy changes, such as the drafting of a new anti-trafficking law, were linked to external pressure and EU conditionality, yet adoption remained delayed and existing standard operating procedures were described as outdated, legalistic and poorly implemented. As one professional claimed, *"We moved to drafting the law because they [the State] promised to the European Commission that this will be one of the laws that Serbia will adopt in order to receive some money from the European Union based on this... the state spent it all without adopting this law."* (P5)

Professionals also criticised the disconnect between formal anti-trafficking frameworks and the broader political context of corruption, weak democracy and lack of accountability, arguing that laws and strategies often exist "on paper" but do not translate into effective, victim-centred practice. This perception was reflected in statements such as: *"A lot of criminals in power, political power, which is insane"* (P6); *"Lack of freedom, democracy and so on"*; and *"what is on the paper actually does not function"*. (P8) Another important point mentioned by the same participant was: *"Somehow all those anti-trafficking policies are actually observed as a part that is outside of the whole system in one country... If we have that Serbia is one of the country with the highest rate of corruption, if you have Serbia as a country with lack of freedom, democracy and so on... somehow different experts here have some expectation that anti-trafficking field would work like in Scandinavia."* (P8), suggesting that the effectiveness of anti-trafficking responses cannot be assessed in isolation from the broader sociopolitical environment in which they operate.

The criminalisation of children was also highlighted as a significant concern. One participant (P3) described a case in which a child was coerced by an adult into stealing on the streets; however, when the child was apprehended, the institutional response focused primarily on the act of theft rather than on the exploitation and coercion underlying the behaviour. In another case, a prosecutor accused a minor of "voluntarily" participating in prostitution. The professional who shared this story explained, *"Sometimes prosecutor does it, sometimes judge and court does it because they think that human trafficking might be too complicated to prove. And they say mediation in prostitution is easier to prove... then many times you need to punish the victim who was in prostitution according to another law."* (P5) These examples show how punitive institutional logics can obscure coercion and exploitation, shifting attention from victim protection to the criminalisation of children.

Participants further criticised the securitisation of migration, describing a system that prioritises border protection over the protection of vulnerable individuals. These broader systemic trends were experienced as shifting responses away from care and protection and toward surveillance and control. As one professional stated, *“They are protecting the borders instead of protecting people arriving at borders... They also decreased significantly budgets for social protection services and increased budgets for anti-smuggling policies and securitisation... This really affected the support system in Serbia and in the Balkans... Irregular push backs at the borders have been used for a long time as a strategic intervention to demotivate people to cross borders... they're pushing children into the hands of smugglers.” (P9)*

These ecological challenges have direct implications for MDT. For instance, when different institutions use different definitions of trafficking or hold stigmatising views of adolescents, MDT meetings can become spaces of conflict rather than collaboration, and decisions may not reflect a shared understanding of the child’s rights and needs. When NGO participation in MDT is essential but financially precarious, the sustainability of coordinated responses becomes vulnerable to donor priorities and political shifts. When laws, SOPs and national strategies are outdated or not implemented, MDT lacks a clear, practical framework for child-friendly procedures, and individual professionals must improvise workarounds based on their own ethics and experience. Finally, when professionals are overwhelmed, under-supported and sometimes afraid of institutional repercussions, they may be less able to challenge victimblaming narratives or to insist on truly child-centred decisions in MDT settings.

In this light, MDT in Serbia appears as both a necessary and a fragile structure: it is widely recognised by professionals as the only way to respond to trafficking, but its functioning is constantly negotiated against the backdrop of ecological constraints that limit what can be done in each case. As the theoretical discussion suggests, MDT effectiveness depends on multilayered coordination, shared roles, trust, and clear context-sensitive protocols, all of which are shaped by broader institutional and systemic conditions (International Centre for Missing & Exploited Children, 2025).

## Evaluation of MDT principles

Drawing from the theoretical discussion earlier on this study, the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2006) principles provide a useful normative standard, but the Serbian MDT only partly approximates that ideal. The MDT functions less as a fully integrated, equal, and evidence-based mechanism and more as a fragile coordination space shaped by institutional fragmentation, unequal capacities, and broader systemic constraints. In that sense, the principles are valuable not because they describe current practice, but because they make visible the gap between what MDT is supposed to be and what it can realistically achieve under present conditions.

### *Collaboration and teamwork*

This principle is only partially realised in practice. Professionals clearly understand anti-trafficking work as inter-institutional and generally describe collaboration with other institutions as generally good, but its effectiveness often depends on professional relationships, individual commitment, and the capacity and resources of institutions. As one participant noted, professionals in local institutions “*realize how much we [NGOs] are important*” (P2) when they need NGO support, which shows cooperation, but also reveals “*dependence*” (P4) rather than equal teamwork. Moreover, although case conferences and coordination mechanisms exist, plans are not always implementable because institutions lack resources, time, and/or capacity.

### *Shared roles and responsibilities*

This principle is relatively clear on paper, but less secure in practice. The roles of the Centre for Social Work, CPTV, police, prosecutors, courts, schools, and NGOs are described in distinct terms, yet the findings also show that these mandates do not always translate into smooth coordination. The existence of formal roles therefore does not guarantee effective cooperation, especially where institutions hold different understandings of a case or different priorities.

### *Participation and inclusion*

The principle of shared roles and responsibilities is relatively clear on paper, but less secure in practice. Although the Centre for Social Work, CPTV, police, prosecutors, courts, schools, and NGOs all have distinct mandates, these do not always translate into smooth

coordination. In some cases, responsibilities are shifted onto NGOs in very basic ways, such as when professionals “ask us to pay for the petrol” so they can travel “to make identification,” and “if you don't give the money for the petrol, ... the victim will not be identified.” (P5) This suggests that formal role allocation does not necessarily produce effective cooperation, especially when institutions lack the resources to carry out their functions.

### *Professionalism and objectivity*

This principle is clearly challenged by the findings. Victim-blaming narratives, stigmatising views of adolescents, and conflicting interpretations of whether a child can be considered “voluntarily” (P5) involved in criminal acts such as prostitution, while being trafficked at the same time, weaken the assumption that professional decisions are purely objective. The case of the 15-year-old girl is especially significant, because the prosecutor rejected the trafficking charge and described her as voluntarily involved in prostitution despite her age. This shows how such a type of judgement can displace a child-centred interpretation of the case.

### *Conflict resolution*

The ILO model assumes that differences should be resolved through transparent, evidence-based discussion, but findings show recurring disagreements about trafficking definitions, the meaning of childhood, and the best interests of the child. In practice, conflict seems to be managed through procedure or delayed rather than genuinely resolved through shared understanding.

### *Flexibility and adaptation*

This principle is both present and strained. Professionals often improvise, draw on experience, and compensate for gaps in the system, which shows real flexibility. As one participant mentioned, “because we are responsible to them we can't say sorry girls we don't have money for that or we don't have a license... we can't just put them on the street... we have to provide protection and help to them.” (P2) At the same time, that flexibility is often necessary precisely because formal structures are weak, outdated, or insufficient, so it reflects both professional commitment and systemic failure.

## Consequences for children

The findings suggest that the consequences of trafficking are shaped not only by the exploitative experience itself, but also by the quality of the response that follows. When support is delayed, fragmented, or not specialised, children may remain trapped in uncertainty long after the initial exploitation has ended. Professionals reflected on this as affecting children's sense of safety, trust, and recovery, and in some cases their broader life trajectory. From a child rights perspective, it indicates that harm can be prolonged or intensified by system failure rather than resolved by formal identification alone.

A key consequence is **retraumatization**. Participants repeatedly described how children are required to retell their experiences to multiple professionals, including police, social welfare workers, prosecutors, and judges. This repetition can be exhausting and destabilising, especially when the child is still trying to make sense of what happened and does not yet feel safe. The interviews also indicate that child-friendly procedural safeguards are not consistently followed, despite awareness that children should not be repeatedly questioned. In CRBA terms, this shows a gap between the principle of the best interest of the child (UNCRC, 1989), preserving their dignity (UNICEF, 2018), and the practical reality of institutional routines. One professional therefore emphasized on the importance of having the *"same professionals who are with them from beginning to the end"* (P2) to mitigate the risks of re-traumatization.

The data also point to the emotional consequences of shame and self-blame. Some children were described as feeling like bad people, blaming themselves, or even hating themselves for what happened which can be viewed in CRBA terms as a violation of the child's dignity (UNICEF, 2018). As one professional mentioned, *"I think that he (referring to the child they were working with) feels like he's a bad guy, he's a bad person... they deeply hate themselves... they feel guilt and they are responsible for everything that happened."* (P3) Professionals linked this to fear, trauma, loyalty conflicts, and the absence of stable adult support, as repeatedly supported by attachment theory all throughout the discussion (Bowlby, 1969/1982; Bacon & Richardson, 2001; Contreras et al., 2026). This matters because self-blame can weaken recovery, reduce help-seeking, and make children more vulnerable to further exploitation. In other words, trafficking can damage not only children's safety but also their self-understanding and sense of worth.

Another major consequence is the breakdown of children's trust and attachment, towards the professionals themselves, and adults in a general sense, which directly affects participation in a child rights-based approach (UNCRC, 1989). Professionals stressed that children often need one trusted person who stays with them throughout the process, understands their trauma, and does not disappear after one intervention. Yet children frequently encounter multiple institutions, changing caregivers, and fragmented communication. When that happens, the system can feel impersonal and unsafe, making it harder for the child to build a reliable relationship with professionals. This weakens meaningful participation, because children are less able to engage openly when trust is not established

The interviews further show that children can be pushed back into vulnerability when the system lacks specialised placements and services. Some participants mentioned children being placed in general institutions with other vulnerable groups, including children with behavioural problems or children without parental care. Others noted that trafficked children may end up in settings where traffickers already know how to reach them, which increases the risk of re-exploitation.

*"Many times they're placed in facilities where abandoned children are or children who have problems in their behaviour, and many times actually they're again recruited for trafficking from those facilities." (P5)*

This is one of the strongest examples of how institutional weakness can translate into concrete harm for children. Instead of protecting them, the system may reproduce the conditions that allowed exploitation in the first place, and ultimately fail to uphold the child's best interests (UNICEF, 2018; United Nations, 2010).

Another related consequence is the disruption of recovery and development. Professionals explained that late identification, weak follow-up, and lack of tailored psychosocial support can affect schooling, motivation, behaviour, and the child's willingness to remain engaged with services. According to one professional, *"From what I have seen in practice, systemic challenges can have a very direct impact on children's recovery and overall life trajectory. When support is delayed, fragmented, or difficult to access, children often remain in a prolonged state of uncertainty."* (P10) Some children disengage altogether when the process feels too slow or too difficult to navigate. Over time, this may shape their future opportunities and life chances, especially if trauma, interrupted education, and unstable

care become long-term patterns. This is why several participants spoke about the overall life trajectory of children, not only immediate recovery.

The consequences are especially severe when trafficked children are mixed with other groups in institutions or services that do not recognise their specific needs– a practice that professionals are against. Participants argued that *“children who have experienced trafficking require intensive, specialised, and often individualised support, particularly in the early period after identification.”* (P4) When they are treated as just another child in care, or as one more vulnerable case among many, their distinct trauma and legal needs may be overlooked. This creates a mismatch between the child’s lived situation and the service response, which can further deepen harm and undermine the child’s rights to life, safety, survival, healthy growth, and development (UNCRC, 1989).

Finally, the interviews suggest that invisibility itself is a consequence. As one participant noted, children can remain “invisible” to the authorities, and that *“no one actually has an idea what is going on... with unidentified victims or with the people who weren’t recognized by the system.”* (P8) This lack of visibility means that risk can continue unchecked, and children may move further away from support. In CRBA terms, this shows a gap in the child’s right to protection and best interests (UNCRC, 1989), because under-identification leaves children beyond the reach of care and accountability, and are being failed by the systems that are supposed to be helping them (Durán, L., & Davison, L., 2025).

Overall, the data show that consequences for children are cumulative and interconnected. Findings show that trafficking-related harm does not end at identification, but is often extended by the way institutions respond. A child rights-based perspective makes clear that effective protection must be timely, specialised, and consistent, because without that, children remain exposed to retraumatization, shame, broken trust, re-exploitation, and long-term disruption to recovery and development. In this sense, the central issue is not only whether children are recognised, but whether the system is able to uphold their best interests, dignity, participation, among many other rights that children have in practice.

## Recommendations from professionals

### *MDT improvements*

A large cluster of recommendations concerns MDT strengthening. Professionals want clearer referral pathways, more regular case conferences, designated contact points, better information-sharing, and more frequent cross-institutional meetings so that collaboration is not dependent on personal ties alone. As one participant articulated, having clear structures in place matters for the quality and consistency of the response: *“In practice, having clear referral pathways and formally defined roles between institutions is very important. In urgent situations, these procedures provide a sense of structure and help professionals understand who is responsible for which part of the response.”* (P10) The same participant also highlighted that networking and relationship-building are what make coordination actually work in practice, *“In my current role, collaboration is still essential, but we rely more on external specialised services. Good networking and mutual trust between organisations make a significant difference in how smoothly support is organised.”* (P10)

Participants emphasised in particular the value of cross-institutional trainings as a vehicle for building these relationships. One participant explained how joint training sessions enabled smoother case management: *“On that cross training we actually establish connection and it is good in that cases we can follow the person that we met on that training and everything goes smoother. But unfortunately, it's not always the case that we know somebody and that we crossed paths with somebody from that institution.”* (P4)

At the same time, participants warned that collaboration must not depend on personal ties or informal goodwill. P5 pointed to the dysfunction caused when even formal coordination mechanisms are rendered inactive: *“We have the Council for human trafficking victims. But they meet once in two years. You need all of these mechanisms to make functional. So they should convene, they should meet each other, they should meet within the institutions and within the system.”* (P5)

### *Decentralisation and local team capacity*

Decentralisation and local capacity were mentioned by several professionals. Participants argue that anti-trafficking work is overly centralised and that local teams should be made functional with local budgets, clear mandates, and people who actually know the work. P5 was direct on this point and said, *“Everything is being centralised, so they have to*

*decentralise everything. We mustn't call only one guy in the police national coordinator. We should talk to all police officers that are in charge for human trafficking all over Serbia. We have so-called local teams for anti-trafficking... in many municipalities and cities in Serbia, they should be made functioning, they should be in charge, assigned budgets so they can do their prevention activities.” (P5)* This is especially important in smaller towns, where local social welfare centres may have only a few workers who are expected to do everything, from material support to complex protection work. In practical terms, decentralisation would make responses faster and more responsive to local realities. P4 described this reality vividly, when they mentioned, *“Some local social welfare centres in smaller towns, it's only three expert workers and they do everything from material support through the divorce to the child trafficking. You can't be doing everything at the same time with the same quality. So basically some serious reorganisation, some serious investment, resources, technical and more is needed.” (P4)*

P10 similarly observed that uneven availability of services across municipalities creates structural gaps that frontline professionals must then compensate for individually: *“Differences in resources between municipalities, limited capacity of some services, or reliance on project-based support can create gaps in continuity of care. As a result, professionals often need to invest additional effort in coordination and advocacy in order to secure timely and adequate support for the child.” (P10)*

#### *Funding, Resources, and Child-Specific Services*

Professionals call for better support, resource expansion for their organizations, and specialised services for children. Participants repeatedly call for proper funding for accommodation, biopsychosocial support, educational support, and child-specific services. They are clear that children cannot be treated as just one more category within general services, because trafficked children need specific, intensive, and sustained support.

This also includes a strong urge for financial support for NGOs by the state, since many of the services currently depend on donors rather than stable state funding. As one of the professionals mentioned, *“Everything is on NGOs. The state hasn't covered any of them and donors don't want to give the resources for direct support because the state should have covered that and we are like in this circle.” (P4)*. P5 reinforced this, noting that NGO-delivered services are structurally precarious: *You need to finally pay for the services provided by the civil society organisations. Many times you have only these services, but*

*they're not sustainable. If you do not receive money from a donor tomorrow, there will be no service."* (P5)

### *Child-centred reform*

A second major recommendation cluster is about making the response more child-centred and trauma-informed. P10 outlined what a genuinely child-centred approach would require in practical terms:

*"A more child-centred approach would mean adapting procedures to the child's pace and level of understanding. This includes reducing the number of interviews, ensuring safe and child-friendly environments for meetings, and providing consistent emotional support throughout the process. Trauma-informed practice also requires continuity... children benefit when they can build stable relationships with a smaller number of professionals."* (P10)

Several participants raised the problem of secondary victimisation as a persistent failure of the current system. P7 described how children can be subjected to repeated intrusive questioning: *"Sometimes you need to emphasise that it is really important not to talk in front of children about the hard experience, not to use certain words. When a state attorney uses such language in front of a child, or makes them give the same account ten times instead of once... that causes secondary victimisation."* (P7)

Participants also emphasised that children's voices and survivors' perspectives should be integrated into policy and practice, not just mentioned symbolically. P5 stressed out that *"You need to integrate the voices of survivors. Through our advocacy group or any other... no matter... but you need to listen to these people, what they have to say, in order to have the best laws and everything in this field."* (P5) P9 echoed this, describing how specialised NGOs have built their work precisely around including children's perspectives in decision-making: *"They understand the vulnerabilities. They understand the need for including the perspective of the child in the interventions... to tailor interventions based on what we hear from children, to include them in decision making, to include their feedback into whatever we do."* (P9)

There is also a strong recommendation to stop mixing trafficked children with other groups that have different needs. P3 emphasised how the best interest of the child must be the guiding principle in this sense: *"The most important thing is that the children be good and better. The best interest of the child is what's important. Sometimes we ask ourselves what is*

*the best interest in that case. I think it is important to think about that and change opinion about that.” (P3)*

#### *Prevention and awareness*

A third theme is prevention. Participants want responses to be more proactive, with earlier identification, stronger outreach, poverty reduction, inclusive education, and community-based support. P10 stated this plainly as a systemic priority: *“I think one of the key areas for improvement is strengthening early identification and prevention. In practice, we still tend to react once the situation has already escalated. More consistent outreach work, stronger support for families in situations of poverty and social exclusion, and better inclusion of children in education could reduce long-term vulnerability.” (P10)*

Schools are repeatedly identified as key partners, both for early detection and for everyday contact with children. P4 was emphatic on this: *“Schools are very important in these cases. I think that there is not one case of a minor child victim or potential victim that excludes schools. Basically, schools are the most important actor here. Because they are the ones who are going to be in direct contact with the child every day. So basically they’re important in this first phase – for example, they are the ones who report the case.” (P4)* Meanwhile, P5 described how the system has tried to operationalise this by developing targeted tools for school staff: *“We also cooperated with educational institutions. We had some trainings for them and we also as a system made indicators on how to recognise human trafficking victims, particularly for teachers.” (P5)*

P7 similarly stressed that placing specialists directly within schools, alongside broader community education, is essential for prevention: *“When you have the social worker or human trafficking specialist providing more educational activities in the school, then you are minimising the potential risk... You also need to educate parents not to be part of harmful practices... even when these have been present in their family for generations. (P7)”*

One professional further advocated for community-level mobilisation as fundamental, going beyond individual awareness-raising: *“It’s just a matter of the resources you need to invest in educating people, helping them with their parental responsibilities, motivating service providers to provide those services, and coordinating the whole response in the community... I think that’s the core of our work, not just labelling something as trafficking or not trafficking.” (P6)*

### *Capacity building and better support for professionals*

Another cluster of recommendations concerns training, supervision, and mental health support for practitioners. P10 stressed that effective training must go beyond one-off events and engage with the complexity of the work: *“Professionals would benefit from more continuous and practice-oriented training. It is not only about learning to recognise indicators of trafficking, but also about understanding how trauma affects behaviour, communication, and decision-making. Training that includes real case examples, role plays, and joint learning between different sectors can be particularly useful. These are not things that can be learned only from guidelines – they develop through experience and reflection.”* (P10)

P3 made a pointed observation about the gap between what professionals learn in training and how they behave in actual cases: *“Sometimes I feel ‘oh my god, this is the same person who blamed children yesterday, and at the training they speak about children’s rights’. They don’t need just a one-day training... they need to be constantly reminded what is important, what the job is. It will not change their perspective otherwise.”* (P3)

P7 similarly noted that resistance to change within established institutions remains a significant obstacle to meaningful capacity building: *“Meaningful capacity building needs to go more into the system, to the workers from Centres for Social Welfare who are not willing to participate in anything new. Sometimes it is really problematic when you put those people on the training and they’re like ‘OK, I will sit there, but I know better than all of you.’ That approach is abandoned. You need to change the approach.”* (P7)

Participants also recommend regular professional supervision and emotional support to reduce burnout. P1 described the current situation: *“About supervision or some sort of mental health help – that is something that we do not have regularly. From time to time, when we have resources through some project, we have supervision, but it’s not constant. And I think that is definitely a problem because this is a job that has a really high risk of burnout.”* (P1) P10 framed the absence of institutional support not only as a professional wellbeing issue but as a direct risk to service quality: *“Regular professional supervision is therefore extremely important. This type of work can be emotionally demanding, especially when professionals are exposed to stories of violence, exploitation, or chronic poverty. Without space to process these experiences, there is a risk of burnout or reduced sensitivity in practice.”* (P10)

Moreover, professionals also highlight the need to recognise civil society organisations as equal and knowledgeable partners. P5 articulated what this means in practice: *“You need to include NGOs who are providing specific support in all different phases of the identification and support provision and recovery of formally identified victims. Because they have knowledge, they have resources, they have services.”* (P5) P6’s statement supported this from a field perspective, noting that NGOs are often the primary source of practical guidance for statutory workers: *“NGOs are often the only help that the public worker in the institution gets regarding some case. So when you are talking about some person and some concrete activities, then you see a lot more cooperation.”* (P6)

#### *Address broader structural problems*

Some recommendations go beyond the MDT itself and point to wider systemic change. Professionals emphasise the need to challenge criminalisation, border securitisation, and the tendency to treat trafficking as separate from other structural issues. P8 described this disconnect as a fundamental flaw in how the system represents its own achievements, that *“Sometimes those two things are just looked at separately and it’s not possible. Because as a result we will have country representatives who present like a checklist the achievements... the standard is to have that body, that law, that procedure... and implementation is, I don’t know, a disaster.”* (P8) They went further, linking child trafficking directly to macro-level structural conditions: *“If some data show that 35% of all children in Serbia are on or below the line of poverty... what do you expect? You will have more children who are victims of trafficking or some other types of violence. It’s an interconnection. Working like we are working, we just tackle one part, one segment, one number of the victims.”* P8)

P7 expressed a similar view, arguing that the responsibility for addressing trafficking must be understood as a shared societal obligation: *“The strongest advocacy message that we are providing is to make that narrative a bit different, because it is the responsibility of everyone. All parts of the puzzle when it comes to the well-being of one child need to be more involved.”* (P7)

P10 further articulated this holistic framing clearly, grounding it in the lived trajectories of affected children: *“It is important to see trafficking not as a single incident but as part of a broader continuum of harm. Many children who are identified as trafficked have already experienced neglect, family violence, poverty, social exclusion, or disrupted*

*schooling. In that sense, trafficking often builds on pre-existing vulnerabilities and unmet protection needs.” (P10)*

#### *State accountability & policy improvements*

The final important theme is legal and policy reform. P5 called for the new anti-trafficking law to be adopted without further delay, saying, *“The first recommendation is: as we now have this draft law, adopt it as soon as possible. Because after that you need to bring lots of bylaws and we don’t have time to lose.” (P5)* The same professional also identified the inconsistent definition of a child across legal frameworks as a recurring operational problem: *“As a recommendation, make the same definition of a child in different laws. Generally, a child is under 18, but for some matters it is under 16. They should have the same understanding. Under 18 you cannot have voluntarism in prostitution, not at all.” (P5)*

Participants also want monitoring mechanisms and state accountability so that laws do more than exist on paper. P4 described the current situation as fundamentally untenable for an EU candidate country: *“Services that our country, our state should have covered long ago... it’s unimaginable that a country in this position has reforms that are not specialised for intensive trauma like human trafficking. Everything... medical support, psychosocial support, psychotherapy, psychiatric care and so on... is on NGOs. The state hasn’t covered any of them.” (P4)*

There is also a very clear call for decriminalising children at risk and their families. P9 described how criminalisation approaches in neighbouring countries reveal the logic that professionals in Serbia are pushing back against: *“In Greece, children are being criminalised. They introduced a law by which children identified as driving the boats, for example, can face criminal charges. This is really about criminalising all these people in need and children in need... it misses the point. It only strengthens smuggling, because people will continue to come as long as there is a need for them to come.” (P9)*

Taken together, the recommendations show a strong demand for accountability and tangible action from the state of Serbia, and a conviction that child protection and anti-trafficking work can only improve if the structural, institutional, and legal conditions that shape them are also addressed.

## Professional strengths & capacities

While this theme was not part of the study's original objectives, it emerged as analytically significant through the consistency with which frontline professionals mentioned it, unprompted and repeatedly, across interviews. The frequency with which they spoke about these capacities reflects how committed they are to sustaining child protection work despite systemic constraints. These professional capacities encompass:

### *Accountability to children*

Participants made clear that they felt responsible to the children they supported and that it was unacceptable to leave a child without protection simply because resources, licences, or administrative conditions were missing. This sense of accountability also came through in the view that professionals cannot simply “*say sorry girls we don't have money for that or we don't have a license,*” because “*we are responsible to them*” and “*we have to provide the protection and help to them.*” (P2) This suggests that professional practice in this field is guided not only by institutional rules, but also by a strong ethical commitment to the child's safety and well-being.

### *Adaptivity in changing contexts*

Another strength that stood out was professionals' ability to adapt quickly to changing realities. The interviews show that migration routes, needs, and available resources can shift very rapidly, which requires constant adjustment of programmes, budgets, and interventions. One participant explained that organisations often need to keep “*adapting programs*” and “*adapting interventions,*” because situations can change “*overnight,*” leaving services with supplies that are no longer relevant, such as one example by a professional, with the uselessness of a “*thousands of blankets*” when the route of smugglers and traffickers in the borders has shifted and the weather has changed. (P9) In this sense, effective frontline work depends on flexibility and practical judgment, not just on fixed procedures or formal planning.

### *Rights-based and holistic understanding*

Professionals also demonstrated strong child-rights-based and holistic orientation. Participants did not describe trafficking as an isolated issue, but as something connected to poverty, family vulnerability, interrupted schooling, and broader gaps in child protection. As

one participant put it, “*we really cannot look at trafficking in isolation,*” (P10) because it must be understood within the broader child protection context and linked to social inequalities and gaps in preventive support. This broader view is important because it allows professionals to respond to the child’s situation more realistically and to consider the wider conditions shaping vulnerability. It also shows that many professionals understand the child not only as a victim, but as a person whose rights, development, and social context must be taken seriously.

### *Field-informed practice and negotiation*

A further strength was field-informed practice, meaning that professionals rely on direct experience to shape interventions rather than applying rigid models without adjustment. One participant described this as using “*direct support to inform policy and organisational practice*” (P5), while others stressed that intervention should be shaped by what is happening on the ground. Several participants also showed strong negotiation skills, especially when working with institutions that do not fully share their principles. As one professional explained a particular duality in practice: “*We don’t collaborate with institutions that we don’t have the same principles with it,*” but they also recognise that they cannot work without certain institutions, so they try to “*push some of our agenda*” while deciding “*what is important that we can leave it and what is the most important that we will not leave at any cost.*” (P4) This is a significant professional capacity because it allows them to protect core values while still operating within a difficult institutional landscape.

### *Strengths-based orientation*

Perhaps the most distinctive theme was a strengths-based approach to children. Rather than seeing children only through trauma or vulnerability, participants viewed them as survivors with “*capacities, resilience, and rights*” (P10). All participants agreed that professionals should not look at children only as victims, but place them “*in the centre of the work,*” while one described how working with victims made them feel empowered, recognising that they are now “*strong, happy, and independent women of today*” and that the professionals are “*here because of them.*” (P2) This framing matters because it shifts the focus from what has been lost to what can still be supported and strengthened. It also gives the discussion a more hopeful dimension, showing that frontline professionals are not only responding to harm, but also helping children recover agency and dignity, while

simultaneously drawing inspiration, motivation, and a sense of purpose from the resilience of the children themselves.

## Conclusion

This study explored the perspectives and experiences of frontline professionals working with children at risk of, or victims of, trafficking in Serbia. The findings show that child trafficking is understood not as a single isolated event, but as a process shaped by interacting factors at the individual, family, community, institutional, and societal levels. Children from dysfunctional families, children without adequate parental care, Roma children, migrant and refugee children, street-involved children, children in residential institutions, and children exposed to unsupervised digital spaces were all identified as being at heightened risk.

A key contribution of the study is that it shows how vulnerability develops over time through disrupted child development, emotional neglect, unstable caregiving, and the absence of protective adult relationships. This means that trafficking risk is shaped not only by direct abuse or poverty, but also by relational and developmental factors that can make children more susceptible to grooming, coercion, and delayed recognition of exploitation. In this sense, the findings suggest that vulnerability cannot be understood through individual characteristics alone, but through the relational and developmental conditions that shape a child's life over time. Moreover, the findings strongly support an ecological and attachment-informed understanding of vulnerability.

On the other hand, while child-in-environment perspectives are often emphasized in practice, it is equally important to consider the professional-in-environment perspective. This recognizes that professionals' responses are shaped by their own institutional, relational, and systemic contexts, and that effective child protection depends not only on children's vulnerabilities, nor in the professionals' own capacities, but more importantly, on the conditions under which professionals are able to work.

The study also demonstrates that identification remains one of the most fragile stages in the anti-trafficking response. Professionals described situations in which signs of exploitation were missed, normalized, or misread, especially when trafficking was mixed with neglect, family survival strategies, or other forms of abuse. In practice, non-identification often reflected not only uncertainty, but also limited institutional confidence in the ability of the system to respond effectively once a child was formally recognized.

At the same time, the findings reveal that child rights-based practice functions more as a professional orientation than a consistently implemented standard. Participants demonstrated genuine commitment to children's dignity, participation, and best interests, and many described concrete efforts to build trust, adapt communication, and support children's involvement in decisions about their own lives. Yet these individual efforts consistently ran up against institutional routines that did not follow the child's pace, legal procedures that prioritised prosecution over recovery, and a placement system that mixed trafficked children with other vulnerable groups rather than providing the specialised, intensive support they require. The result, as the data show, is that CRBA principles are most visible where individual professionals carry them, and most absent where structural conditions do not support them. This is important because it shifts where the problem lies: the gap between rights-based ideals and daily practice is not primarily a training or awareness deficit, but a governance failure. When accountability is weak, political will is absent, and laws exist to satisfy international obligations rather than to protect children, rights-based language risks becoming little more than formal obligation with no real impact on children's lives. Under those conditions, child-centred practice depends almost entirely on the commitment of individual professionals working against the grain of the system, which is neither sustainable nor, from a rights perspective, sufficient.

The study further highlights that Serbia's multidisciplinary anti-trafficking response is necessary but fragile. Cooperation across social welfare, police, courts, schools, health services, and NGOs is essential, yet it is frequently weakened by unclear roles, uneven resources, limited trust, staff turnover, and inconsistent implementation of procedures. NGOs in particular often compensate for state system gaps by providing continuity, expertise, and flexible support, but their role remains underfunded and politically precarious. Moreover, it can be concluded that MDT coordination is not only about multiprofessional collaboration and sharing of information across institutions, but also about negotiating different professional cultures and different assumptions about age, maturity, vulnerability, and entitlement to protection of children. Where these views diverge too sharply, coordination becomes more difficult and the response can become inconsistent.

The emergent theme deserves further study because it may help explain why some professionals are able to maintain high-quality practice despite structural limitations. Future research could explore how accountability, adaptivity, negotiation, and strengths-based thinking are developed and sustained over time. It would also be useful to examine whether

these capacities depend more on individual qualities, organisational culture, or professional training. A deeper focus on these strengths could add an important dimension to the literature on child trafficking and frontline practice.

Overall, the findings suggest that effective protection from child trafficking requires more than “what is on paper”, or the formal legal structures. It is crucial to have early and preventive action, services that are specifically designed for trafficked children, stable and trusted relationships amongst professionals, stronger coordination across institutions, and a state that is genuinely accountable for the system it is supposed to run. Finally, the study advocates the need for an anti-trafficking system that is more consistent, decentralised, and grounded in children's rights approach, that can respond to children not only as victims, but as rights-holders whose safety, dignity, and recovery must be protected in practice.

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## Annex

Figure 2. Participant information sheet and consent form

### Participant Information Sheet & Consent Form

**Research Title:** Child Trafficking in Serbia: Professional's Perspectives, Experiences, and Challenges

This study is part of a graduate research being carried out under the [European Joint Master in Social Work with Children and Youth \(ESWOCHY\) Program](#).

This research aims to **explore the perspectives and experiences of professionals involved in child trafficking responses in Serbia**, including those participating in the multidisciplinary team (MDT) and those working with children at risk of trafficking, **and understand how their experiences are shaped by the multiple ecological systems in which children and professionals operate**.

Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine how professionals perceive and navigate current child trafficking trends and vulnerabilities affecting children in Serbia.
2. Understand how professionals operate in the field, with particular attention to cross-institutional coordination (MDT).
3. Investigate how professionals apply and observe child rights-based principles in their daily work and in existing response mechanisms.
4. Describe how current challenges across different ecological levels (individual, institutional, cross-institutional, systemic), are experienced by professionals in the field.

Figure 3. Research interview guide

| <p style="text-align: center;">ESWOCHY Master's Thesis</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Child Trafficking in Serbia: Professional's Perspectives, Experiences, and Challenges</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Research Questions Formulation: Analysis Model</p> |                                               |                                                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Objective                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | Concepts                                      | Dimensions                                                        | Indicators                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                | Questions                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                    |
| 1. Examine how professionals perceive and navigate current child trafficking trends and vulnerabilities affecting children in Serbia.                                                                                                                                 | Child trafficking vulnerability, risk factors | Ecological Levels: Individual, Relationships, Community, Societal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Personal characteristics (age, disability, behaviour)</li> <li>- Family dynamics, caregiver functioning</li> <li>- School and institutional environments</li> <li>- Broader systemic issues (poverty, inequality, online risks, climate change, discrimination, etc.)</li> </ul> | <p><b>Introductory question:</b> From your professional perspective, how would you describe the current situation of child trafficking in Serbia?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>How do you see or understand a child in the context of trafficking?</i></li> <li>• <i>What individual factors do you think contribute to a child becoming vulnerable to trafficking?</i></li> <li>• <i>How do family situations or caregiver relationships influence a child's vulnerability?</i></li> <li>• <i>What role do you and your organisation play in identifying,</i></li> </ul> |

Figure 4. Initial code table

| Family Codes                         | Sub-Codes                                | Code Definitions                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |
|--------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Child Trafficking Vulnerabilities    | Individual Factors                       | → Personal characteristics that increase vulnerability (e.g., age, disability, behaviour)                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                      | Family Factors                           | → Family dynamics and caregiver relationships affecting vulnerability                                                                                                                                                                     |
|                                      | Community Factors                        | → Influence of schools, institutions, and local environments                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                      | Societal/Systemic Factors                | → Broader structural issues (poverty, inequality, discrimination, online risks)                                                                                                                                                           |
|                                      | At-Risk Groups                           | → Specific groups identified as more vulnerable or less visible                                                                                                                                                                           |
| Multidisciplinary Functioning (MDT)  | Recent Trends and Patterns               | → Observed changes in trafficking profiles or cases over the last 5 years                                                                                                                                                                 |
|                                      | Role Clarity                             | → How clearly roles and responsibilities are defined across institutions                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                      | Referral Mechanisms                      | → Processes used to identify and refer cases                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                      | Interagency Communication                | → Frequency and quality of communication between actors                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|                                      | Collaboration in Practice                | → How professionals and institutions work together in real cases, actual vs. expected collaboration, willingness to collaborate                                                                                                           |
| Child Rights-Based Approach          | Decision-Making Processes                | → How decisions about children are made across institutions                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                      | Participation of Institutions            | → Involvement of key stakeholders in the MDT                                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                      | Child Participation                      | → Extent to which children have access to information, a space to express their views and feelings, and opportunities to ask questions                                                                                                    |
|                                      | Best Interests of the Child              | → Whether actions prioritize the child's wellbeing; best interests of the child must be a top priority in all decisions and actions                                                                                                       |
|                                      | Non-Discrimination                       | → Equal treatment of all children regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, religion, language, family background or any other status                                                                                                         |
| Challenges Faced by Professionals    | Dignity                                  | → Inner dignity and worth are being valued; children should be treated with care and respect in all circumstances; to take into account each child's individuality and the unique nature of their situation                               |
|                                      | Right to Life, Survival, and Development | → Ensure that children not only survive but also develop to their full physical, mental, spiritual, moral, and social potential; access to essential services for victims and children-at-risk                                            |
|                                      | Trauma-Informed Practice                 | → Sensitivity to trauma in procedures and interactions with children                                                                                                                                                                      |
|                                      | Child-Friendly Procedures                | → Use of communication and processes appropriate for children                                                                                                                                                                             |
|                                      | Privacy and Safety                       | → Protection of confidentiality and physical/emotional safety                                                                                                                                                                             |
| System Improvement & Recommendations | Individual-Level Challenges              | → Challenges at the individual level, including workload, emotional stress, capacity limitations, and gaps in training and supervision that affect professionals' ability to respond effectively                                          |
|                                      | Institutional-Level Challenges           | → Constraints within organisations, including internal procedures, mandates, workload, fragmentation, and availability of institutional support such as training, supervision, and resources                                              |
|                                      | Cross-Institutional Challenges           | → Difficulties in coordination between institutions, including communication gaps, unclear roles, inconsistent collaboration, conflict within MDTs, and barriers to effective joint decision-making                                       |
|                                      | System-Wide Challenges                   | → Broader structural barriers such as policy gaps, legal limitations, funding constraints, and lack of specialised services (e.g., shelters, psychological support), affecting the overall functioning of the system and service delivery |
|                                      | Impact on Outcomes                       | → The effects of professional, institutional, and systemic challenges on the quality of protection, support, and long-term outcomes for child victims                                                                                     |
| System Improvement & Recommendations | MDT Strengthening                        | → Suggestions to improve coordination and teamwork                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|                                      | Policy and Practice Improvements         | → Recommended changes in laws or procedures                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|                                      | Service Enhancement                      | → Improvements in shelters, support, or specialised services                                                                                                                                                                              |
|                                      | Training and Capacity Building           | → Suggested professional development needs                                                                                                                                                                                                |
|                                      | Child-Centred Practices                  | → Ways to make responses more aligned with child rights                                                                                                                                                                                   |
| System Improvement & Recommendations | Good Practices/Models                    | → Examples from Serbia or other contexts                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                                      | Ideal System Vision                      | → Description of what an effective system should look like                                                                                                                                                                                |

Figure 5. Coding structure in MAXQDA

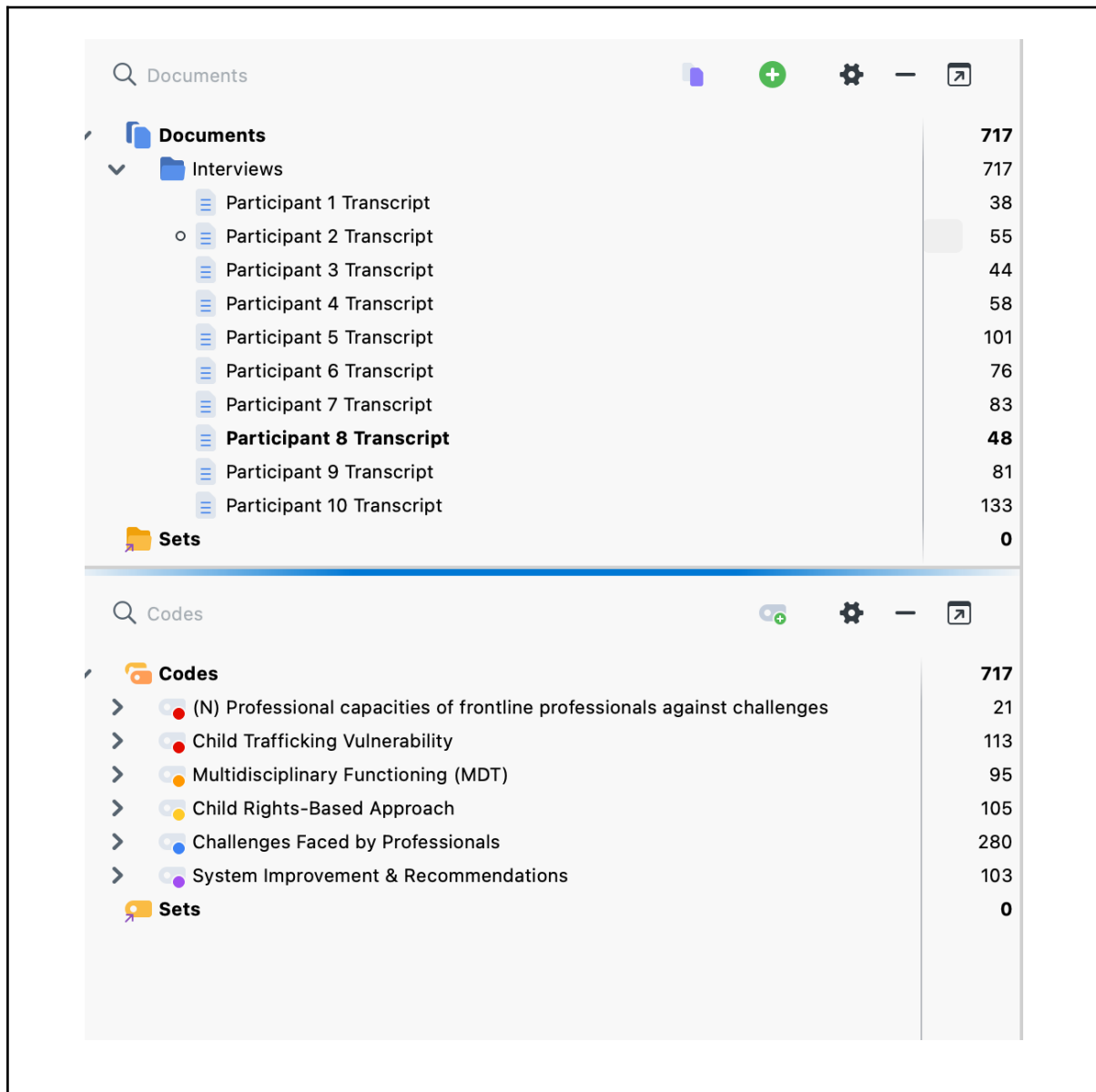


Figure 6. Final code system

| Code System                                                                       | Frequency |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| Code System                                                                       | 717       |
| (N) Professional capacities of frontline professionals against challenges         | 0         |
| (N) Professionals are empowered by the clients they work with                     | 1         |
| (N) Accountability to the children they are supporting                            | 1         |
| (N) Child rights principles knowledge                                             | 1         |
| (N) Holistic approach                                                             | 1         |
| (N) Children in environment                                                       | 1         |
| (N) Professionalism                                                               | 1         |
| (N) Negotiation skills                                                            | 2         |
| (N) Field informed practice                                                       | 1         |
| (N) Strengths based approach                                                      | 3         |
| (N) Specialised knowledge & training on child trafficking & working with children | 6         |
| (N) Strategic communication                                                       | 1         |
| (N) Adaptivity to fast paced changes                                              | 1         |
| (N) Flexibility                                                                   | 1         |
| Child Trafficking Vulnerability                                                   | 0         |
| Recent Trends and Patterns                                                        | 1         |
| (N) Numbers are more than what is in the official statistics                      | 1         |
| (N) Parents as perpetrators for sexual exploitation and forced be                 | 3         |
| (N) Girls are trafficked mainly for sexual exploitation (gender issu              | 1         |
| (N) Digitalization of trafficking                                                 | 7         |
| (N) Trafficking victims are mixed with victims of other violence                  | 1         |
| (N) Decreasing average age of trafficked child                                    | 1         |
| (N) Internal trafficking                                                          | 2         |
| (N) High number of children victims                                               | 4         |
| (N) Relatively lower human trafficking cases than identified victirr              | 0         |
| (N) Price of smuggling increase which poses more risks for traffi                 | 2         |
| (N) Boy brides                                                                    | 1         |
| (N) Children are trafficked in multiple forms at once                             | 2         |
| (N) Use of the balkan route for transit                                           | 1         |
| At-Risk Groups                                                                    | 1         |
| (N) LGBTQ+ Children                                                               | 2         |

|                                                                    |   |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---|
| (N) Unsupervised children in digital spaces                        | 2 |
| (N) Children from dysfunctional families                           | 3 |
| (N) Children from residential institutions                         | 6 |
| (N) Young boys                                                     | 2 |
| (N) Unaccompanied minors                                           | 2 |
| (N) Children living in poverty                                     | 3 |
| (N) Street involved children                                       | 3 |
| (N) Roma children                                                  | 8 |
| (N) Street involved children                                       | 1 |
| (N) Migrant & refugee children (children on the move)              | 7 |
| Societal/Systemic Factors                                          | 1 |
| (N) Unemployment                                                   | 1 |
| (N) Structural poverty                                             | 1 |
| (N) Social tolerance of child labor and begging                    | 2 |
| (N) Early marriages as part of culture                             | 3 |
| (N) Lack of children's access to education, support, services      | 2 |
| Community Factors                                                  | 0 |
| (N) Social exclusion, discrimination                               | 1 |
| (N) Unsupportive schools                                           | 1 |
| (N) Lack of public awareness of trafficking                        | 1 |
| (N) Insufficient involvement of school system in prevention & ider | 6 |
| Family Factors                                                     | 3 |
| (N) Dysfunctional families                                         | 3 |
| (N) Living in poverty/Socioeconomic instability                    | 4 |
| (N) Low educational attainment                                     | 1 |
| (N) Joblessness                                                    | 2 |
| Individual Factors                                                 | 0 |
| (N) Low self esteem, unmet emotional needs                         | 1 |
| (N) Overall dependency on an adult as a child                      | 2 |
| (N) Psychological maturity                                         | 4 |
| (N) Age of the child                                               | 4 |
| (N) Cultural background                                            | 3 |
| Multidisciplinary Functioning (MDT)                                | 0 |

|                                                                                |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| (N) Importance of being part of a team (cross institutional and institutional) | 1  |
| (N) Multidisciplinary collaboration is essential to fight against trafficking  | 1  |
| (N) Training provision                                                         | 5  |
| (N) Preventive work                                                            | 2  |
| (N) Evaluation of MDT                                                          | 4  |
| (N) Victim Identification Mechanisms                                           | 12 |
| Boundaries on the participation of institutions                                | 6  |
| Decision-Making Processes                                                      | 4  |
| Collaboration in Practice                                                      | 21 |
| Agency & Interagency Communication                                             | 10 |
| Referral Mechanisms                                                            | 14 |
| Role Clarity                                                                   | 15 |
| Child Rights-Based Approach                                                    | 2  |
| Privacy and Safety                                                             | 3  |
| Child-Friendly Procedures                                                      | 13 |
| Trauma-Informed Practice                                                       | 14 |
| Right to Life, Survival, and Development                                       | 24 |
| Dignity of the Child                                                           | 10 |
| Non-Discrimination                                                             | 4  |
| Best Interests of the Child                                                    | 19 |
| Child Participation                                                            | 16 |
| Challenges Faced by Professionals                                              | 0  |
| Impact on Outcomes                                                             | 0  |
| (N) Children feel that they are bad people/self blame for their situ           | 1  |
| (N) Children who are victims of trafficking are mixed with victims             | 3  |
| (N) Less and less younger professionals want to work in social w               | 3  |
| (N) Difficulty in forming/ broken relationship of children with the p          | 2  |
| (N) Affects the overall life trajectory of children                            | 1  |
| (N) Individualized intervention for every children are not achievec            | 1  |
| (N) Children have already been trafficked instead of preventing it             | 1  |
| (N) Retraumatization                                                           | 8  |
| (N) Restricted access to justice and rights                                    | 1  |
| (N) Disempowerment of professionals themselves                                 | 0  |

|                                                                         |    |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| (N) Lines are becoming blurred between trafficking and other iss        | 4  |
| (N) Less visibility of children in the field                            | 5  |
| (N) Pushing children to be re exploited/ trafficked                     | 5  |
| System-Wide Challenges                                                  | 0  |
| (N) Gaps in application of theory (law) in practice (field)             | 1  |
| (N) Gap between formal protection systems and lived realities of        | 1  |
| (N) Reactive rather than preventive                                     | 1  |
| (N) Lack of specialized support and services for children who are       | 10 |
| (N) Lack of proper monitoring mechanisms                                | 0  |
| (N) Deprioritization of child trafficking in SOP                        | 1  |
| (N) Varying definitions of children in policy                           | 3  |
| (N) Delay in the passing of the Anti-trafficking law                    | 4  |
| (N) Dependency on NGOs for support provision                            | 4  |
| (N) Persistent invisibility of trafficking                              | 2  |
| (N) Racial discrimination                                               | 1  |
| (N) Overgeneralisation of trafficking                                   | 1  |
| (N) Lack of accountability                                              | 4  |
| (N) Lack of possibilities for empowerment and reintegration             | 2  |
| (N) Lack of victim centeredness on policy level/prioritizing prosec     | 8  |
| (N) Disconnected anti-trafficking framework                             | 4  |
| (N) Lack of democracy                                                   | 3  |
| (N) Corruption                                                          | 3  |
| (N) Criminalization of children at risk of trafficking & their families | 13 |
| (N) Child rights issues are globalized and internationally depende      | 2  |
| (N) Lack of perspective of children as rights holders                   | 3  |
| (N) Lack of age assessment procedures                                   | 1  |
| (N) Lack of an adaptive and sustainable system                          | 4  |
| (N) Lack of political will on trafficking                               | 13 |
| (N) Pressure from migration influx                                      | 2  |
| (N) SOPs related to child protection are outdated and lacking pre       | 4  |
| (N) Low allocation of resources                                         | 13 |
| Cross-Institutional Challenges                                          | 0  |
| (N) Lack of child friendly practices                                    | 1  |

|                                                                       |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| (N) Lack of understanding of children's behaviour brought by their    | 1  |
| (N) Victim blaming                                                    | 3  |
| (N) Professionals being put in position don't have well knowledge     | 1  |
| (N) Lack of proper coordination of case information                   | 2  |
| (N) Lack of resources                                                 | 4  |
| (N) Administrative delay                                              | 4  |
| (N) Lack of trust between institutions                                | 7  |
| (N) Lack of coordination during criminal proceedings                  | 1  |
| (N) Dependency on NGOs for resources                                  | 3  |
| (N) Politicisation of anti-trafficking efforts                        | 1  |
| (N) Different definitions of a human trafficking victim               | 1  |
| (N) Frequent changing of people in position leading to discontinu     | 7  |
| (N) Lack of institutional responsibility / accountability             | 2  |
| (N) Lack of strengths based approach                                  | 2  |
| (N) Delays and Backlogs in the court system                           | 4  |
| (N) Individual biases of professionals                                | 4  |
| (N) Lack of will to cooperate and full commitment                     | 9  |
| (N) Different level of prioritization of issues affecting children    | 5  |
| (N) Different principles and view of children                         | 11 |
| (N) Centralization of MDT                                             | 5  |
| (N) Lack of will from social welfare institutions to act on forced be | 1  |
| (N) Lack of clarity in roles and responsibilities                     | 2  |
| Institutional-Level Challenges                                        | 1  |
| (N) Continuity of support                                             | 2  |
| (N) Bad perception of NGOs due to political propaganda                | 5  |
| (N) Dependency on foreign donors/ lack of support from the state      | 7  |
| (N) Lack of donor interest                                            | 2  |
| (N) Lack of resources                                                 | 12 |
| (N) Downsizing of operations but not workload                         | 3  |
| (N) Under-identification of child trafficking victims                 | 5  |
| (N) Reliance on international pressure for policy change              | 1  |
| Individual-Level Challenges                                           | 0  |
| (N) Helplessness/ disempowerment of professionals                     | 1  |

|                                                                    |    |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| (N) Children are not able to name their experience as exploitation | 1  |
| (N) Difficulty identifying trafficking                             | 2  |
| (N) Lack of adaptivity/willingness to adapt to changes             | 1  |
| (N) Secondary traumatization                                       | 2  |
| (N) Work overload & burnout                                        | 9  |
| (N) Challenges in implementing CRBA                                | 2  |
| System Improvement & Recommendations                               | 1  |
| (N) Relationship building of institutions involved in MDT          | 1  |
| (N) Realignment of professionals' perspective and view of children | 1  |
| (N) Mental health support for professionals                        | 2  |
| (N) Clearer referral pathways                                      | 1  |
| (N) Professional supervision for the practitioners                 | 1  |
| (N) Poverty reduction measures                                     | 1  |
| (N) Early intervention with families                               | 1  |
| (N) State accountability                                           | 2  |
| (N) Cross institutional trainings                                  | 5  |
| (N) Better facilitation of children's reintegration in society     | 4  |
| (N) Vulnerability assessments for children                         | 1  |
| (N) Financial support to NGOs                                      | 1  |
| (N) Decentralization of MDT                                        | 6  |
| (N) More opportunities for collaboration in practice               | 3  |
| (N) Prioritize the new anti-trafficking law                        | 1  |
| (N) Make the same definition of children in all criminal laws      | 3  |
| (N) Monitoring mechanisms must be improved                         | 1  |
| (N) Degenaralizing of trafficking                                  | 1  |
| (N) Strengthening advocacy work & public awareness                 | 8  |
| (N) Education & involvement of the community                       | 11 |
| (N) Holistic view of trafficking as an interrelated issue          | 5  |
| (N) Decriminalization of children at-risk and their families       | 3  |
| (N) Victim centered approach/ child participation                  | 4  |
| (N) Prioritization of children                                     | 2  |
| (N) More inclusion of NGOs and CSOs working with children          | 3  |
| Shared/interrelated responsibility                                 | 1  |

|                                                    |    |
|----------------------------------------------------|----|
| (N) Make responses preventive rather than reactive | 1  |
| Child-Centred Practices                            | 5  |
| Training and Capacity Building                     | 6  |
| Allocation of resources to support and services    | 12 |
| Laws & Policy Improvements                         | 1  |
| MDT Strengthening                                  | 4  |