



Italian Blueprints: Three transferable approaches for the anti-trafficking sector

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Authors

Marine Messina

Technical Advisor

IRC Italia

Marine.Messina@rescue.org

Paola di Martino

Project Manager

Dedalus

P.Dimartino@coopdedalus.org

Fiorella Liotti

Lawyer

Dedalus

F.Liotti@coopdedalus.org

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International Rescue Committee IRC Deutschland gGmbH

Wattstraße 11, 13355 Berlin

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Editorial Lead and Layout: Filip Mitrovski

<https://de.rescue.org>

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Italian Blueprints: Three transferable approaches for the anti-trafficking sector

Italy has developed a comprehensive anti-trafficking system based on a long-standing legal framework, a National Referral Mechanism (NRM), and close cooperation among public authorities, NGOs, and specialised service providers. While the NRM has contributed to structured victim identification and referral processes, effective protection ultimately depends on frontline actors' capacity to identify vulnerabilities, build trust, and connect victims with appropriate support. This report highlights three transferable good-practice approaches that are rooted in the Italian anti-trafficking landscape.

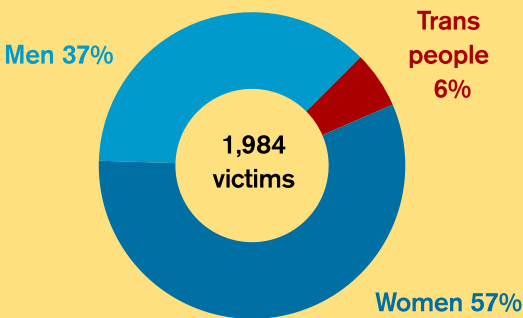
8 questions and answers on trafficking in Italy

1 What is trafficking in human beings?

Under the Palermo Protocol – reflected in Italy's Article 601 – trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a person, by means such as force, deception or abuse of vulnerability, for the purpose of exploitation.¹ Italy is both a destination and transit country, meaning victims – often from Africa, Eastern Europe, and Asia – are brought into or through the country. Traffickers target migrants and vulnerable individuals, taking advantage of irregular immigration status or economic hardship.²

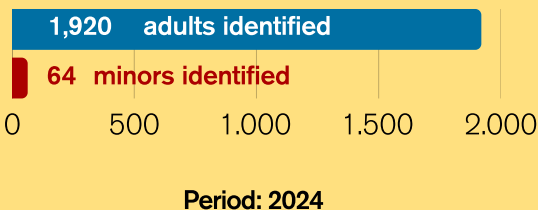
2 What do we know about the victims?

Data from the National Anti-Trafficking Database (SIRIT) show that, among 1,984 victims assisted in Italy in 2024, the majority were women.³



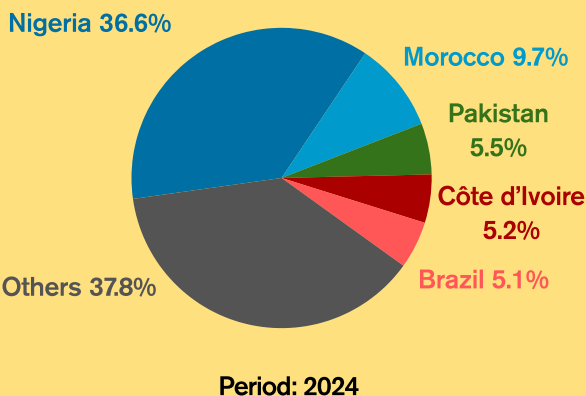
3 How many minors are affected?

In 2024, only 3.2% of all assisted victims of trafficking were minors.⁴ This might reflect a significant underidentification of minors. The U.S. TIP Report cites a previous NGO estimate suggesting that children may account for around one-third of all trafficking victims in Italy.⁵



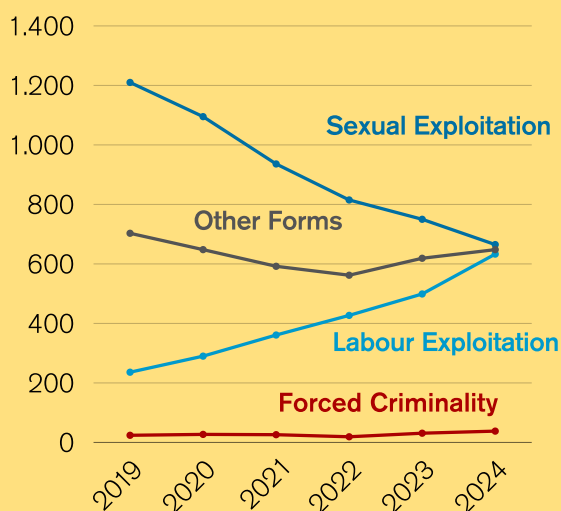
4 Where do the victims come from?

Data from SIRIT show that the largest group of assisted victims in 2024 came from Nigeria, Morocco and Pakistan.⁶



5 In what forms are victims of trafficking being exploited?

Sexual exploitation remains, over the years, the predominant identified purpose of exploitation, but is decreasing.⁷ Labour exploitation is strongly on the rise and affects a growing number of persons each year in Italy. The number of cases of forced criminality is in the low double-digit range.⁸

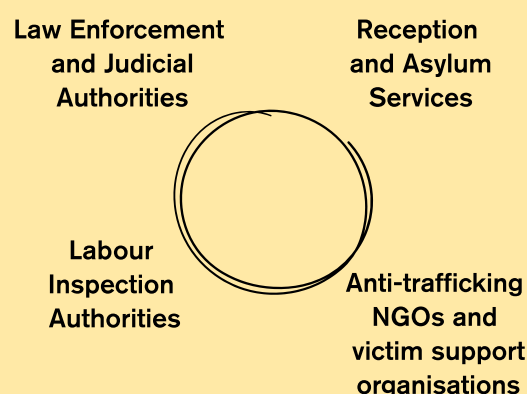


Source: SIRIT Databank

6 Who detects victims of trafficking?

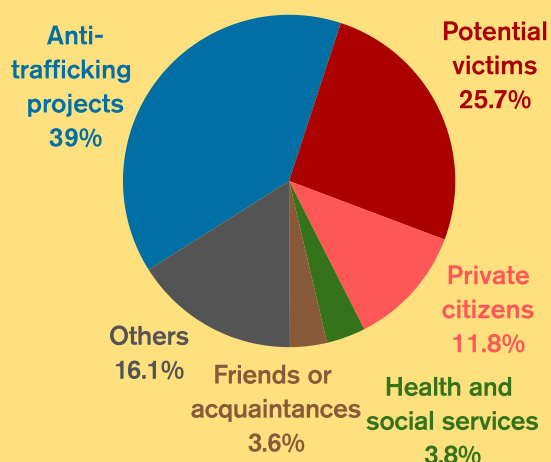
The NRM is a formal framework for coordination through which public authorities and civil society organisations jointly identify, refer, protect, and support victims.⁹

A defining feature of the Italian model is the institutionalised partnership between public authorities and specialised NGOs, combining investigative powers with community outreach and long-term assistance.



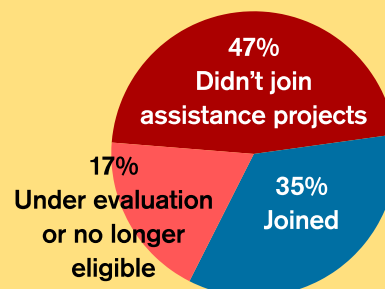
7 Who calls the anti-trafficking helpline?

In 2025, the main callers of the anti-trafficking helpline were anti-trafficking projects, followed by potential victims and private citizens.¹⁰



8 How many presumed victims join assistance projects?

The Council of Europe's latest evaluation report states that 47% of the presumed victims covered by the available data were not interested in, or refused to join, assistance projects. The main reported reasons included unwillingness to stay in protected shelters with movement restrictions for security reasons and a wish to remain within their ethnic community.¹¹



Approach 1: Numero Verde Antitratta – One central anti-trafficking helpline for Italy

Italy has developed a coordinated anti-trafficking helpline that connects relevant support services and is anchored in the National Referral Mechanism. The national “Numero Verde Antitratta” (800 290 290) was established by the Department for Equal Opportunities and operates 24 hours a day, every day of the year, providing anonymous and free assistance to potential victims of human trafficking and severe exploitation.¹²

Who the helpline reaches

The service is multilingual and connects callers with specialised operators who provide initial assistance and referrals relating to trafficking and severe exploitation. Not only can victims of trafficking call the helpline, but also citizens, employers, healthcare workers, social workers, police officers, or neighbours who want to report a suspicious situation. The profiles of the victims emerging from the calls are diverse: women exploited in prostitution networks, migrant workers subjected to forced labour in agriculture, and minors forced into begging are only a few examples of the many cases being reported each year.

Some callers initially contact the service seeking information rather than explicitly identifying themselves as trafficking victims, which is why the operators are specifically trained to recognise indicators of coercion, fear, debt bondage, document confiscation, psychological manipulation, or threats against family members.¹³

The helpline at the heart of Italy’s referral system

The Numero Verde can be understood as the operational core of Italy’s broader anti-trafficking framework. The NRM provides this overarching structure, within which the helpline operates as the primary identification and referral entry point. The NRM for the identification and protection of victims of trafficking evolved from multi-agency cooperation practices developed under the national anti-trafficking system from 2000 onwards.

Building on the experience gained through assistance and social inclusion programmes, the NRM was formally adopted for the first time in 2016 as a national framework to ensure coordinated identification, referral, protection and assistance for victims of trafficking and severe exploitation. In 2023, the mechanism was updated to strengthen inter-institutional cooperation, improve victim-centred procedures, and align operational practices with emerging forms of exploitation and international standards.¹⁴

Throughout its development, the National Anti-Trafficking Helpline has represented the core operational component of the Italian NRM and is a structured, centralised victim-identification mechanism. Acting as its main referral device, the helpline facilitates the early identification of potential victims, activates local anti-trafficking services, supports referrals among competent authorities and specialised organisations, and ensures access to protection and assistance measures across the national territory. As such, it serves as the central entry point and coordination hub within Italy’s referral system.

From first contact to referral and protection

Once a person calls the helpline and is considered a presumed victim, a detailed step-by-step process begins. First, the operator conducts an immediate risk assessment to evaluate the urgency of the situation: whether the caller is in physical danger, under surveillance by traffickers, homeless, injured, or in need of urgent medical care. If there is an emergency requiring first aid, the service activates a rapid coordination procedure with law enforcement or emergency healthcare services.

If the situation is not immediately life-threatening, the operator gathers information confidentially and tries to build trust with the victim. This phase is essential because many victims fear deportation, retaliation, or criminal consequences. With consent, the operator contacts the anti-trafficking organisation within the national network nearest to the person and arranges a referral.

Depending on the case, the victim may be transferred to a safe house, temporary shelter, specialised healthcare services, psychological counselling, legal assistance, or social protection programmes. In many situations, victims are also assisted in obtaining residence permits under Italian anti-trafficking legislation. The process is therefore not limited to a phone conversation; the helpline functions as the entry point into a broader national protection system.¹⁵

Strengths and potentials

A key strength of the Italian model is its integration with the National Referral Mechanism and the national anti-trafficking database (SIRIT). Italy has also invested in multilingual accessibility and nationwide coverage.¹⁶

However, challenges remain. Awareness and access are uneven, particularly in isolated labour sectors such as agriculture or domestic work. Some people do not recognise themselves as victims or their situation as exploitation and therefore do not report it. Other barriers include fear of the consequences and the effects of previous violence and trauma.¹⁷

Despite the strong Italian framework, victim assistance remains project-based, with funding provided for fixed periods. This requires periodic renewals and creates challenges for the continuity of long-term assistance.¹⁸

BLUEPRINT 1: A CENTRAL ANTI-TRAFFICKING HELPLINE

- Establish a free, anonymous and multilingual helpline available nationwide 24/7.
- Make it accessible to potential victims, professionals and anyone seeking advice or reporting concerns.
- Train operators to recognise possible trafficking indicators, identify urgent needs and provide confidential initial assistance.
- Obtain consent before sharing information or making referrals.
- Connect callers with relevant anti-trafficking projects and specialised protection, healthcare, legal and social services.
- Embed the helpline in the National Referral Mechanism and a national data system, and secure sustainable public funding.

Approach 2: Street Outreach – The experience of Dedalus Social Cooperative

From harm reduction to anti-trafficking outreach

Street outreach work is one of the most significant tools within social interventions aimed at people who are victims or potential victims of trafficking and exploitation. This practice emerged in Europe during the 1980s and 1990s within harm reduction interventions with the aim of reaching people involved in prostitution and substance users, intending to reach individuals who were unlikely to access services on their own initiative.

In Italy, the first structured experiences of street outreach units dedicated to engaging with people involved in prostitution and trafficking spread during the 1990s, initially in several Italian regions, particularly Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Lombardia, Piemonte, Toscana and Campania, where street prostitution linked to trafficking was more visible and where well-established social intervention networks were already in place.

Over time, street outreach has become a fundamental methodology within projects operating under the Italian anti-trafficking system, coordinated by the Department for Equal Opportunities of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. It enables practitioners to establish contact with people living in conditions of severe vulnerability, social isolation and control by exploiters. Through a consistent presence in locations where exploitation occurs – streets, industrial areas, indoor and outdoor prostitution venues, informal settlements and contexts of labour exploitation – outreach workers can identify situations that would otherwise remain invisible to institutional services and provide information, listening, guidance and, when required, immediate support through referral to qualified services.

The Dedalus model in Naples

A significant best practice of street work within the Italian anti-trafficking system has been developed by Dedalus Social Cooperative, which has been active in Naples for more than forty-five years in the fields of social inclusion and the protection of vulnerable people's rights. As a leading partner of one of the anti-trafficking projects in the Campania region, Dedalus carries out first-contact street activities and outreach work with people at risk of being victims of trafficking and exploitation, operating in close coordination with the National Anti-Trafficking Helpline and the local service network. Furthermore, the project provides multi-agency victim identification, listening centres, legal assistance, psychological support, social and healthcare services, protection in shelters, and individualised pathways towards social and labour inclusion.

Since 2000, Dedalus' street units have operated across the metropolitan area of Naples, where sexual and labour exploitation are most prevalent. Nonetheless, the outreach teams encounter different forms of trafficking and exploitation, including sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, forced begging and exploitation in criminal activities.

Principles that make street outreach effective

The effectiveness of Dedalus street outreach is based on a number of essential methodological principles. Among these, a central role is played by a non-judgemental approach, which allows practitioners to engage with individuals in all their complexity

without making moral judgements about their choices, circumstances or behaviours. This attitude fosters an environment of listening and mutual respect, which is indispensable for building meaningful relationships.

A second fundamental element is harm reduction, understood as a set of strategies aimed at limiting the physical, psychological and social risks associated with conditions of exploitation, even when a person is not yet ready or able to leave the situation immediately. From this perspective, the intervention does not focus exclusively on exiting exploitation, but rather on the concrete improvement of the person's safety and wellbeing.

Proximity is another cornerstone of street outreach. Practitioners reach people directly in the places where they live or work, overcoming the barriers that often prevent access to services. This approach promotes proximity-based assistance, characterised by flexible, timely interventions tailored to the specific needs of the individuals encountered.

Particularly important is the development of a horizontal, trust-based relationship. Outreach workers do not position themselves as an authority figure or a source of control, but as a reliable interlocutor capable of recognising and valuing the individual's resources and strengths. Trust, built over time through repeated and consistent encounters, often represents the essential precondition for a victim to disclose their situation, seek help and access protection and social inclusion pathways.

A distinctive feature of Dedalus' streetwork and outreach methodology is the extensive use of linguistic and cultural mediators. Mediation plays a crucial role not only in overcoming language barriers but also in facilitating cultural understanding, building trust and supporting communication with individuals coming from diverse migratory backgrounds. The presence of mediators enables outreach workers to engage more effectively with people who may be fearful, isolated or distrustful of institutions.

At night, Dedalus' outreach van, provided free of charge by the Metropolitan City of Naples, travels to locations where street-based sexual exploitation occurs to provide information and assistance.





Street work on labour exploitation occurs during the day, especially in the early morning, on sites where day labourers are recruited by gangmasters.

Changing patterns of exploitation and visibility

Historically, the majority of people contacted through outreach activities have been women subjected to sexual exploitation, particularly from Nigeria and Eastern European countries. However, the organisation increasingly encounters men and women exploited in agricultural, domestic and other labour sectors, reflecting the diversification of trafficking patterns in Italy.

Since 2019, the street outreach work carried out by Dedalus has had to adapt to profound changes in trafficking and exploitation patterns, driven above all by the increasing digitalisation of the methods used to recruit, control and exploit vulnerable individuals. With the spread of digital technologies, social media platforms, online advertising websites and instant messaging applications, this dynamic has undergone a profound transformation. Today, meetings are increasingly arranged online through advertisements published on the internet, social media profiles and direct contact via smartphones.

At the same time, exploiters have also begun to use these tools to exercise forms of remote control, monitor victims' movements, manage appointments and further restrict their autonomy. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated this process even further. Restrictions on movement and the closure of public spaces encouraged the relocation of many forms of exploitation into private flats, private residences, accommodation facilities and other indoor settings, making the phenomenon even less visible.

The disappearance of exploited individuals from public spaces did not mean a reduction in exploitation. On the contrary, it often resulted in increased isolation and vulnerability, depriving victims of opportunities for contact with the outside world and making victim detection more difficult. Thus, new forms of intervention are required, capable of operating both in physical and digital environments.

Taking proximity-based work into digital spaces

In response to these changes, Dedalus began experimenting with new intervention methodologies, transferring into the digital sphere the principles and practices that have long characterised its proximity-based work. This led to the development of forms of digital streetwork, designed to reach individuals directly within the virtual environments they use in their everyday lives.

Dedalus is building upon the expertise acquired through decades of street outreach work in order to create digital spaces for contact, listening and support within the online environment. By using private, secure and confidential communication tools such as Facebook, WhatsApp and other messaging platforms, outreach workers establish contact with migrants from third countries whose online interactions may display indicators of vulnerability to trafficking or exploitation.

The innovative aspect of this experience lies not simply in the use of new technologies, but in the transfer of the methodological principles that have made traditional street outreach effective into the online environment. In the digital space, engagement is likewise based on a non-judgemental approach, respect for individual self-determination, the gradual development of trust and the ability to provide information and support without exerting pressure, by cultural mediators or peer operators.

Digital streetwork therefore represents a natural evolution of proximity-based work: not a replacement for traditional street outreach, but an adaptation of it to the contemporary transformations of trafficking and exploitation. In a context where control and coercion are increasingly exercised through digital technologies, prevention, information, support and awareness-raising aiming at self-assessment and self-referral of potential victims of trafficking must also take place within those same spaces, while preserving the core values of proximity, trust and a person-centred approach.

BLUEPRINT 2: COMBINING PHYSICAL AND DIGITAL OUTREACH

- Maintain a consistent presence in streets, workplaces, private settings and online environments where exploitation occurs.
- Use a non-judgemental, harm-reduction approach that prioritises safety and wellbeing, even when leaving exploitation is not immediately possible.
- Build horizontal, trust-based relationships through repeated contact, respect for self-determination and support without pressure.
- Involve linguistic and cultural mediators or peer operators to overcome barriers, strengthen communication and facilitate trust.
- Connect outreach with multi-agency networks providing immediate support, protection, healthcare, legal assistance and social inclusion.
- Adapt methods as recruitment, control and exploitation shift between physical and digital environments.

Approach 3: Mobile Outreach – The REACHing project in Southern Italy

A key good practice emerging from IRC Italy's work is the use of mobile outreach teams combined with simple, participatory information sessions to support the early detection and identification of potential victims of trafficking among asylum seekers. This approach shows that identification does not happen only through formal procedures, but also through trust, presence, and clear communication in places where people already live.

Bringing early identification to reception settings

To formalise this approach, the REACHing project was launched in Sicily and Calabria in 2025 as a two-year project.¹⁹ The idea behind REACHing is simple: go where people are, provide clear information, and build trust early. To do this, IRC set up mobile teams that visit reception centres and first-arrival facilities (often called “hotspots”, meaning places where migrants stay shortly after arrival). These teams explain people's rights, warn about risks of exploitation, and help connect them to services.

Before starting outreach activities, IRC carried out a needs assessment in 2025. Through surveys and interviews with organisations and frontline workers, it identified gaps in how potential victims were detected and supported. The project was then designed to complement existing services, not replace them.

In practice, this meant creating simple workshops for asylum seekers and clear information materials, such as brochures explaining rights and available services in Italy. Activities started in December 2025, with mobile teams working across 10 provinces in Sicily and Calabria.²⁰

The core role of the mobile teams is early detection and referral. They meet people in group sessions and, when needed, in one-to-one conversations. During these meetings, they explain rights, listen to experiences, and look for signs of trafficking or exploitation.

CASE EXAMPLE: EARLY IDENTIFICATION THROUGH TRUST

During one of the group sessions, the team met a Nigerian woman travelling with her two children and a man who appeared to be her partner. She mentioned that he had helped her leave a detention centre in Libya. While this might appear as assistance at first, for trained staff this can signal a possible situation of control or exploitation. This is a key example of how seemingly neutral information, when discussed in a safe and open setting, can reveal indicators of trafficking.

After the session, the team spoke with the woman privately. Based on the indicators identified, they activated the referral system. With her consent, her case was shared with Proxima, a specialised anti-trafficking organisation in the area, which carried out a more detailed assessment and confirmed that she was at risk of trafficking. The woman and her children were then supported to move away from the man and to a safe place, where they received accommodation, basic assistance, legal support and psychological care.²¹

From identification to referral and protection

Key elements are strong referrals and close coordination. When indicators of a potential trafficking case are identified, mobile teams refer the person to appropriate actors and services, including specialised anti-trafficking projects (e.g. INCIPIT in Calabria, Proxima and Penelope in Sicily)²², reception centre staff, and local health and social services.

Referrals are always made with the person's consent. After the referral, specialised organisations take over the case and provide further support, including legal assistance, protection programmes, or access to the asylum system.

This shows that the mobile teams do not work alone. The effectiveness of their work depends on a well-connected network of actors who can respond quickly and appropriately.

Adapting outreach to different reception settings

Five months after the start of operations, the project had reached 577 people.²³ Activities took place both in first-arrival settings – where people stay only briefly – and in reception centres, where there is more time for deeper engagement. Each context required a different approach. In first-arrival facilities, sessions were short and focused on key risks and available help. In reception centres, teams could organise longer workshops and individual meetings, allowing for deeper discussions and better identification of vulnerabilities.

Another important factor in the implementation of the approach was close coordination with other organisations. This avoided duplication and ensured that gaps in services were addressed. Finally, the teams' ability to answer practical questions – such as how to apply for asylum or how the reception system works – helped build trust. Without this trust, potential victims may be less likely to come forward or accept referrals.

In conclusion, the REACHing project highlights a clear lesson: early detection of trafficking risks among asylum seekers can be particularly effective when it combines outreach, simple information, trust-building, and strong referral networks. Rather than relying only on formal systems, this approach brings protection directly to people, making support more accessible and responsive to their needs.

BLUEPRINT 3: MOBILE OUTREACH FOR EARLY DETECTION AND REFERRAL

- Go where asylum seekers already live, including first-arrival facilities and reception centres.
- Base activities on a needs assessment and complement existing services rather than replacing them.
- Deliver simple, participatory information in languages participants understand.
- Combine group sessions, one-to-one conversations and cultural mediation to build trust and identify trafficking indicators.
- Adapt the format and depth to the setting, length of stay and participants' practical questions.
- Facilitate consent-based referrals through coordinated networks of anti-trafficking organisations, reception-centre staff, and local health and social services.

ABOUT TIES

The TIES project, co-funded by the European Union, supports third-country nationals in Italy, Germany and Greece who are at risk of, or affected by, labour exploitation or exploitation through forced criminality. In Italy, IRC implements the project in partnership with Dedalus Social Cooperative.

TIES helps people at risk to recognise exploitative situations at an early stage and to safely access protection and specialised support. The project combines digital street-work on social media with in-person outreach and counselling. It also equips professionals in public authorities, law enforcement and social services to recognise indicators of exploitation and make safe referrals to specialised support services. Events, webinars, policy recommendations and publications such as this one complement this direct work by strengthening identification, referral and protection mechanisms at national and European level.

Footnotes

- 1 United Nations, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, adopted on 15 November 2000, Art. 3(a), p. 2, <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/ProtocolonTrafficking.pdf>. See also: Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana, Codice penale, Art. 601, “Tratta di persone”, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/dettaglio/codici/codicePenale/601_1_1.
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- 5 U.S. Department of State, 2025 Trafficking in Persons Report: Italy, “Protection”, 2025, <https://www.ecoi.net/en/document/2130626.html>.
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