

8 March 2024

International Women's Day 2024 Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress by empowering against abuse and exploitation

“Invest in Women: Accelerate Progress”, is this year’s UN slogan of International Women’s Day. Today, La Strada International, the European Platform against trafficking in human beings, seeks to highlight the importance of female empowerment and the integration of women into our European societies, encompassing economic, social, and cultural dimensions. Particularly essential is the empowerment of migrant women and those at risk of exploitation and abuse.

There are many reasons to advocate loudly for equal rights and investments in (migrant) women. Gender roles and gender discrimination in our labour markets create vulnerabilities for human trafficking. Discriminatory practices and unequal power dynamics between men and women not only pervade society but also permeate the professional sphere, affecting the economic standing of women and leading to their disproportionate representation in informal or low-paying occupations. Due to the feminisation of poverty, many women are more prone to work under poor labour conditions and accept unfair job offers or low wages to make a living.

For example, many women, especially migrant women, work as domestic workers. Domestic work often does not provide access to legal protection. Employees face a high threat of (sexual) harassment, coercion, poor housing and living conditions, all while being paid little. The UN highlights that approximately 80% of domestic workers globally are women, emphasizing the undeniable urgency of addressing this as a matter of gender equality.¹ In addition to trafficking for sexual exploitation, trafficking for domestic work remains the predominant sector where a significant number of female victims are exploited.

This underscores the urgency to move beyond mere political discourse and prioritise investments in women’s well-being, guaranteeing fundamental human rights for all.

Unfortunately, a strong commitment is not reflected in current political decisions. The gender pay gap is still a reality all over the world and is not decreasing. Care work which is predominantly provided by women is still not recognized as work. Furthermore, we continue to see a high prevalence of domestic violence, including instances of fatal violence and sexual exploitation against women, persisting across Europe. Moreover, recent statistics from Eurostat reveal that 63% of the registered victims of trafficking in the EU are female.²

¹ https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Trust%620Funds/FundGenderEquality/FGE_Domestic_Work_2017-2018_Annual_Report.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Trafficking_in_human_beings_statistics

Political agreement has been achieved on an EU directive aimed at addressing violence against women and domestic violence. Nevertheless, France, Germany, Hungary and several other countries have opted against incorporating a consent based definition of rape in the Directive, leaving victims of sexual violence to continue their struggle for recognition of their rights. Moreover, the recast of the EU Trafficking Directive failed to progress in securing victims' rights related to unconditional support, safe reporting, compensation, residence or unpunishment.

A lack of legal protection places undocumented women more at risk and thus makes them vulnerable to trafficking in human beings.

Improving and promoting women's rights is the only way to create a long-lasting new equilibrium in world society in which women are free from violence, exploitation and abuse and empowered to determine their own futures.