

Country Info Brief:  
Trafficking in Human Beings

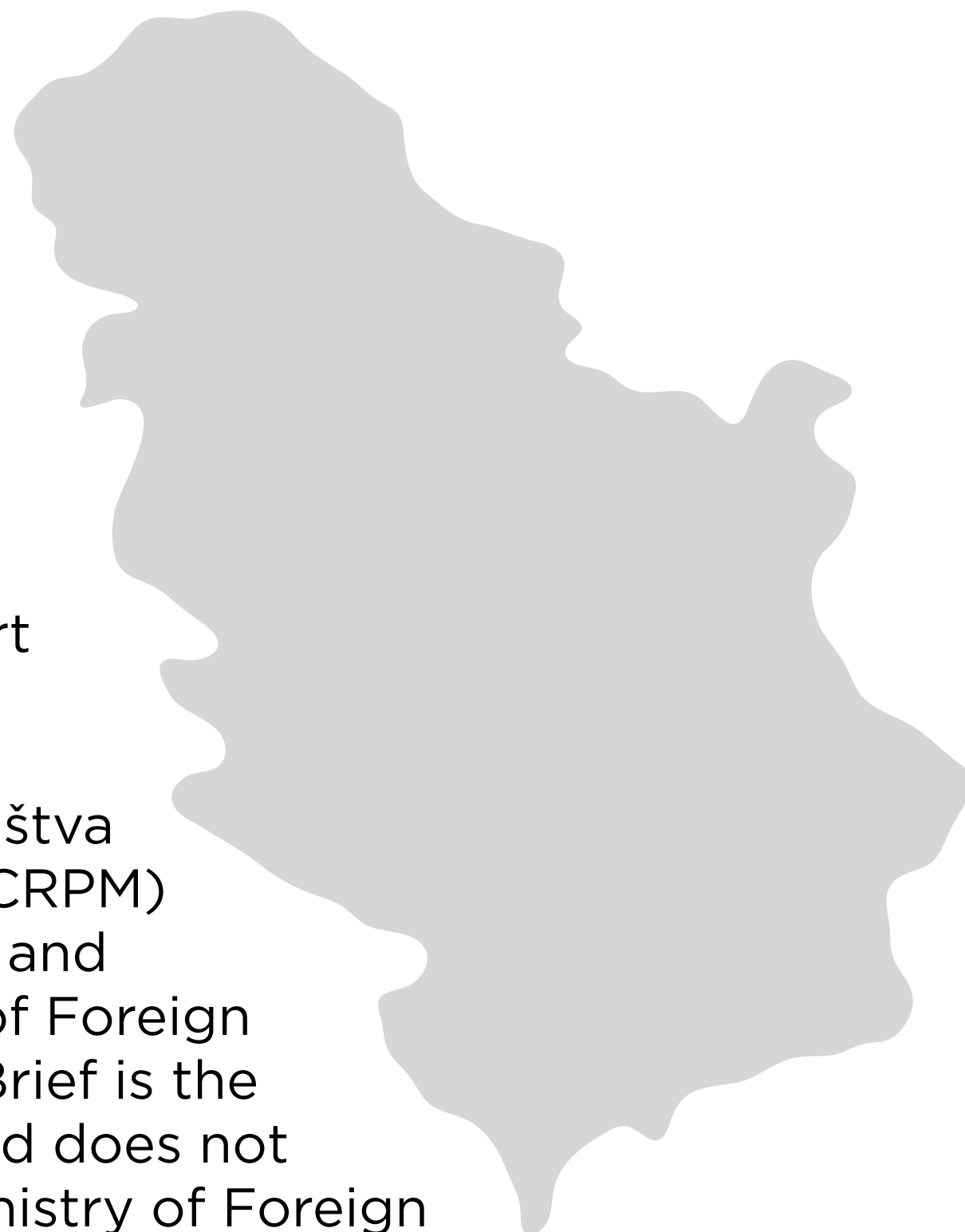
**Serbia**

# Serbia

**Population: 6.664 million (2022)**

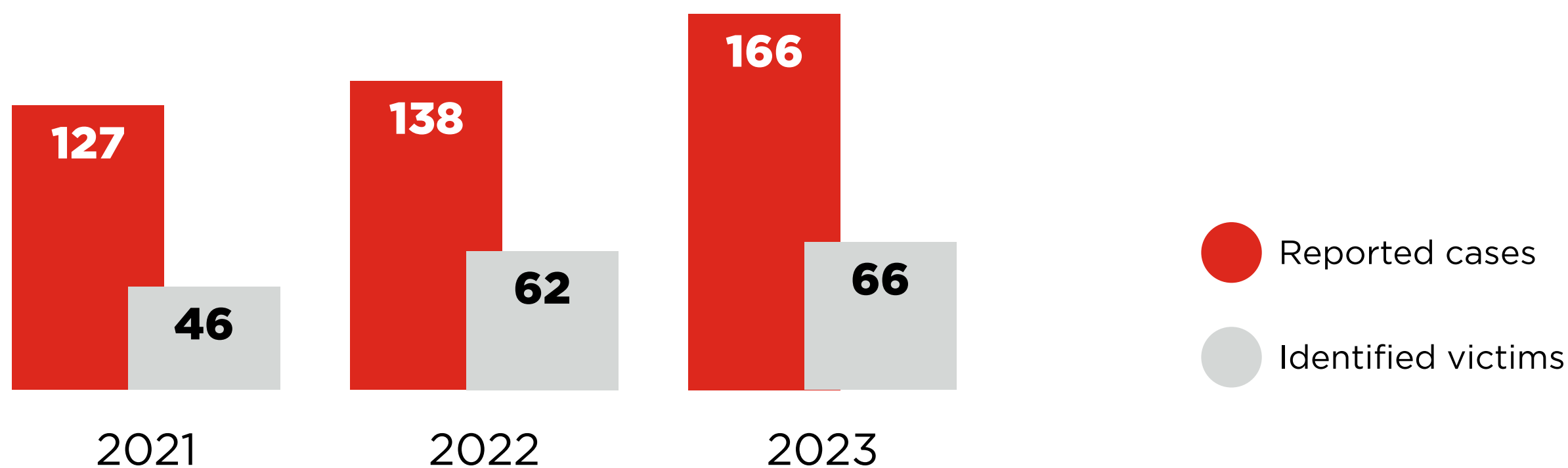
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*The Country Info Brief* contains similar and comparable types of information and data for three countries, relevant to the topic of THB, and provides insight into each country’s overall efforts in the suppression and prosecution of human trafficking.

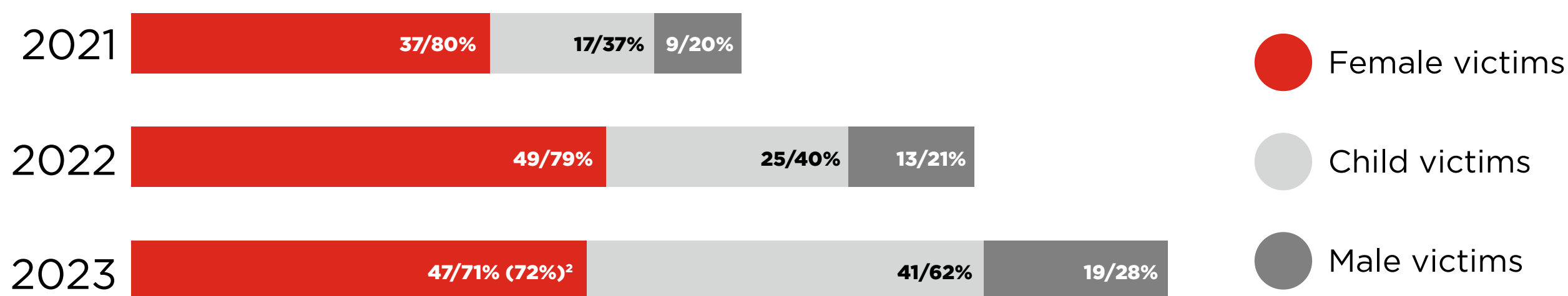


# I. The numbers - Key data on THB

**Number of reported cases to the Center for protection of victims of human trafficking<sup>1</sup> and identified victims in past 3 years.**



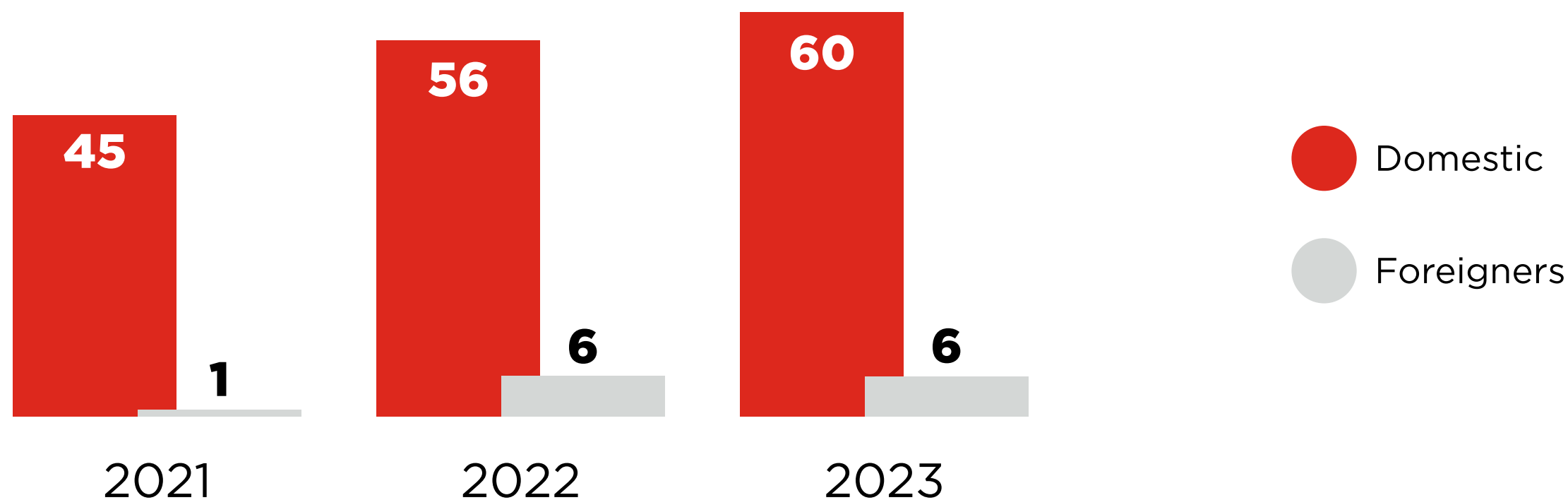
**Breakdown of data by identified victim gender and age, etc.**



<sup>1</sup> In April 2012, in line with the Law on Social Protection, the Government of the Republic of Serbia founded, via a decision, the Centre for Human Trafficking Victims' Protection as the social care institution responsible for the identification of human trafficking victims and coordination of the protection.

<sup>2</sup> In the report of the Center for Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, the percentage of female victims of human trafficking is stated as 71 in the first part of the text, but later in the text, it is mentioned that this percentage is 72.

## Breakdown of data by identified victim citizenship, in numbers.



## Trends in Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) and Exploitation Types

### General Trends

- THB trends and perpetrators' modus operandi evolve yearly, particularly with the rise of digital technology usage.
- Until 2023, sexual exploitation was the dominant type of exploitation.

### 2023 Data from the Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings

#### Total Identified Victims: 66



## **Victim Demographics**

- Domestic Citizens: Majority of exploited victims
- Foreign Citizens:
  - › India: 3 victims (2 exploited in Serbia, 1 in India)
  - › Ukraine, Iran, and Pakistan: 1 victim each

## **Exploitation Locations**

- In Serbia: 57 victims
- Abroad: 9 victims
- Key Insight: Serbia is primarily a destination country for trafficking. Its geographical position also makes it a transit country for smuggling and trafficking routes. Potential foreign victims often move quickly through the country, making them hard to detect.

## **Recruitment Methods**

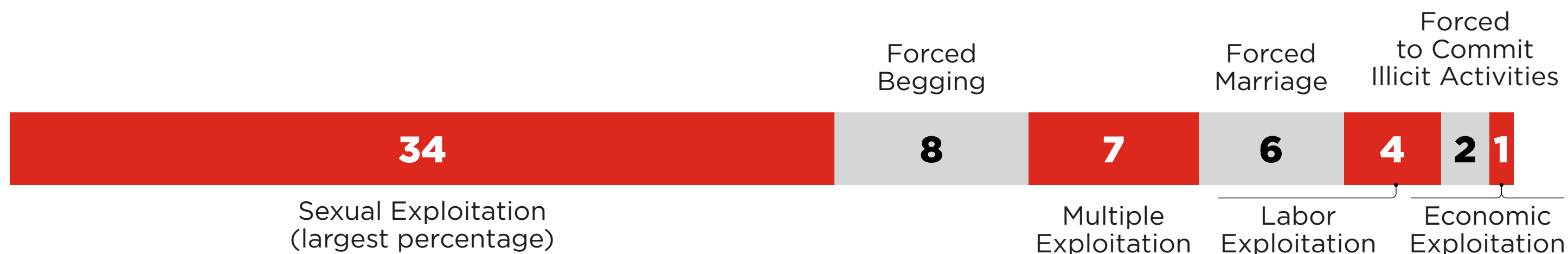
- Job Offers:
  - › Labor Exploitation: 53% of cases
  - › Sexual Exploitation: 25% of cases
- False Friendship and Lover Boy Method: Common for sexual exploitation
- Loans with Increasing Interest: Used to force victims into illicit activities

## **Control Mechanisms**

- Abuse of parental authority, threats, and physical violence are most common.
- Restriction of movement by confiscating passports.
- False debts and exploitation of victims' disabilities, especially intellectual.
- Use of explicit recordings for blackmail.
- Threats of physical harm to victims or their family members.

## 2022 Data from the Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings

### Total Identified Victims: 62



### Victim Nationalities

- Foreign Victims:
  - › Cameroon: 2 victims
  - › Bosnia and Herzegovina: 1 victim
  - › Uganda: 1 victim
  - › DR Congo: 1 victim
  - › Tunisia: 1 victim
- All identified foreign victims were women.

### Location of Exploitation

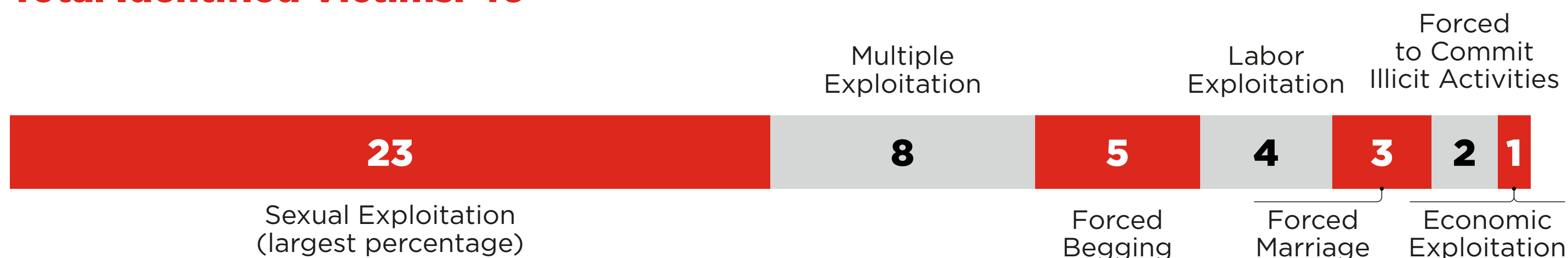
- Serbian Victims:
  - › 84% exploited in Serbia
  - › 16% exploited abroad
- Foreign Victims:
  - › 5 of 6 exploited during their migration route
  - › 1 exploited in Serbia

## Recruitment Methods and Control Mechanisms

- Recruitment and Control: Digital technologies and social network platforms were commonly used for recruiting and controlling victims, and for offering victim services.
- Familiarity with Perpetrator: In 88% of cases, the victim knew the perpetrator (family, partner, friend, or employer).

## 2021 Data from the Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings

### Total Identified Victims: 46



## Victim Nationalities

- The majority were domestic citizens exploited internally; 7 were exploited abroad.
- Foreign Victim: 1 from Eritrea, exploited in North Macedonia.

## Recruitment Methods and Control Mechanisms

- The Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings does not have extensive data on recruitment methods and control mechanisms.
- COVID-19 Impact: Increase in digital technology usage for recruitment, control, and exploitation.
- Preventive Information: Significant increase in calls about job offers due to job losses from the pandemic.
- Data on prosecutions and convictions of traffickers. *(the ones you can access via other public sources)*

## **STATISTICAL ANALYSIS OF COURT DECISIONS FOR THE YEAR 2022-2023 criminal procedure**

### **2023:**

- Total number of all court decisions subject to analysis: 42
- Number of first-instance judgments: 20 Judgments under the jurisdiction of the Basic Court: 3 Judgments under the jurisdiction of the Higher Court: 17
- Number of second-instance decisions: 22 (11 judgments and 11 rulings)

### **Charges**

- Total number of defendants: 25
- 4 individuals were charged with a criminal offense under Article 184 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 16% of the total number of defendants,
- 4 individuals were charged with criminal offenses under Article 346 of the Criminal Code and Article 184 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 16% of the total number of defendants
- 10 individuals were charged with a criminal offense under Article 388 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 40% of the total number of defendants,
- 4 individuals were charged with criminal offenses under Article 388, Paragraph 3 of the Criminal Code and Article 178, Paragraph 3 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 16% of the total number of defendants,
- 3 individuals were charged with a criminal offense under Article 388, Paragraph 9 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 12% of the total number of defendants.
- No individuals were charged with a criminal offense under Article 389 of the Criminal Code.

**Total number of minor victims: 3 Conviction judgments were issued in the case of all 3 minor victims, which constitutes 100%.**



## Sanctions

- For 10 defendants, an effective prison sentence was imposed, which constitutes 48%,
- For 1 defendant, a prison sentence and a fine were imposed, which constitutes 5%,
- For 3 defendants, a suspended sentence and a fine were imposed, which constitutes 14%,
- For 1 defendant, a suspended sentence was imposed, which constitutes 5%,
- For 4 defendants, house arrest without electronic monitoring and a fine were imposed, which constitutes 18%,
- For 2 defendants, house arrest with electronic monitoring and a fine were imposed, which constitutes 10%.

## **2022:**

- Total number of all court decisions subject to analysis: 24
- Number of first-instance judgments: 16
- Judgments under the jurisdiction of the Basic Court: 6
- Judgments under the jurisdiction of the Higher Court: 10
- Number of second-instance judgments: 8

## Charges

- Total number of defendants: 17
- 11 individuals were charged with a criminal offense under Article 184 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 65% of the total number of defendants.
- 6 individuals were charged with a criminal offense under Article 388 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 35% of the total number of defendants.

**Total number of minor victims: 5 Conviction judgments were issued in the case of all 5 minor victims, which constitutes 100%**

## Sanctions

- For 16 defendants, a prison sentence was imposed.
- For 4 defendants, a suspended sentence and a fine were imposed, which constitutes 25%.

For 12 defendants, an effective prison sentence was imposed, which constitutes 75%.

## **II. Description of the context, framework and practices**

### **1. Overview:**

Serbia is a major source, transit hub, and destination for individuals—both women, men, and children—who fall victim to sex trafficking and forced labor, including domestic servitude and coerced begging. There is no single profile for victims of trafficking, but it disproportionately affects the most marginalized individuals and those from minority or socially excluded groups. Factors such as poverty, domestic violence, limited local opportunities, lack of education, unstable social and political environments, economic inequality, and exposure to conflicts and natural disasters significantly increase the risk of exploitation.

Only one social welfare institution and two civil society organizations (all located in Belgrade) provide specialized support and protection services for victims of human trafficking. All three providers offer licensed services and have licensed and/or specially trained service providers. The only provider in the public sector is funded through the budget, which reduces the sustainability of services among providers in the non-governmental sector. Considering the number of presumed and formally identified victims of human trafficking, it appears that the service capacities of these three providers are insufficient, and there is a definite lack of appropriate geographical availability of specialized services.

There are significant gaps in the institutional approach to supporting trafficking victims. Currently, all specialized victim assistance is provided by civil society organizations (CSOs) and funded by foreign donors. There is no dedicated shelter for children victims of trafficking in human beings, despite them constituting up to 40% of identified victims annually. Additionally, identification procedures and criteria are unclear, there are no specialized services or shelters for male victims of labor trafficking, and there is a low rate of trafficking convictions. The data collection system is inadequate, and there is no official comprehensive national overview of available services, nor is there any assessment or analysis in planning

activities, services, capacity building, or networking. Improved coordination among cross-sectoral institutions and organizations could enhance the overall response and inclusion of victims. Although Serbia has implemented an anti-trafficking program and national action plan, these are not based on thorough evaluations of the current situation, trends, and needs.

Actors involved can be separated on two levels: strategic and operational.

The key entities on strategical level include:

- The Council for Combating Human Trafficking as an expert advisory body to the Government (The Council consists of various Ministries).
- The National Coordinator for Combating Human Trafficking, appointed by the Government's decision, simultaneously performs the duties of the head of the Office for Coordination of Activities in Combating Trafficking. The Office was established within the Cabinet of the Director of Police, the Police Directorate of the Ministry of Interior. The Office performs expert tasks for the needs of the Council for Combating Human Trafficking.
- A special working group for monitoring the implementation of the Program for combating thb is established for the purpose of implementation, monitoring, reporting, and evaluating the Program and accompanying action plans.
- The Ombudsman who performs the duties of the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings.

On operational level there are<sup>3</sup>:

- Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings – in charge for formal identification and coordination of victim's support
- Specialized CSO's ASTRA and ATINA – as service providers<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Standard Operating Procedures for Handling Victims of Human Trafficking (SOP) are crucial for protecting the human rights of victims and arrangements of stakeholders relation. According to the defined provisions, the procedures include recognition, formal identification, emergency and continuous support, including support in criminal proceedings, and the voluntary return of victims. <https://media.srbija.gov.rs/medsrp/dokumenti/01.SOP+final+250119.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Besides two specialized NGO there are other NGO's providing direct support to trafficked victims on a local level. More about networking and its impact is available on: <https://astra.rs/umrezavanje/>

- Criminal Police Directorate and the Service for Combating Organized Crime, first response and in charge of safety

## **FORMAL IDENTIFICATION - Centar for protection of victims of human trafficking**

### **2. Background:**

From March 2002 until December 31, 2023, ASTRA has received a total of 61,523 calls from 7,128 callers through its SOS hotline. This specialized line has helped (pre)identify 616 victims of human trafficking: 485 females (including 175 girls) and 131 males (including 15 boys). Among these victims, 478 were Serbian nationals, while 138 were from other countries.

Dominant trends:

- Victims are predominantly women
- Percentage of minors among victims is increasing each year (in 2021: 37% in 2022: 40% in 2023: 62%)
- Until 2004 majority of trafficked victims were foreigners and then predominate nationality of identified victims is domestic citizens
- Before usage of violence and torture was common as control mechanism while nowadays perpetrators use more perfidious ways as blackmailing, silent stocking, grooming etc...
- Frequent use of digital technology, including various platforms and communication channels, for recruitment but also as control mechanism and for exploitation (web cameras, pornographic website, selling and sending photos or video etc.)
- Change of dominant type of exploitation\*
- Migration Trends: Serbian workers are increasingly leaving the country for better job opportunities abroad, while the government is facilitating the entry of migrant workers from the Near and Far East.

- **Legislative Changes:** Amendments to the Law on Foreigners and the Law on Employment of Foreigners came into force in February 2024, with their impact to be assessed after a year.
- **Labor Rights Concerns:** The Serbian government is performing poorly in protecting the basic human and labor rights of both domestic and foreign workers, with ASTRA uncovering increasing cases of labor exploitation among foreign workers.
- **Human Trafficking Legal Framework:** The existing legal framework is solid, but there is a need for more consistent application of provisions to protect victims' rights in criminal proceedings.
- **Ongoing Legislative Updates:** New legislation is being drafted to combat human trafficking, and updates to the Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for handling victims are in progress, with the last revision in 2019.

\*A Human trafficking in Serbia increasingly involves labor exploitation, with men more frequently victimized, particularly in construction and agriculture. There is also a rise in the exploitation of minors, especially boys. Women's labor exploitation, however, often occurs in more hidden sectors like domestic work, hospitality, and textiles. Additionally, women who are sexually exploited often face multiple forms of exploitation, including forced labor.

Serbia has been without a formal Action Plan for combating human trafficking for nearly three years, especially following the expiration of the previous Strategy at the end of 2022. This significant delay has contributed to the vulnerability of victims and raised concerns about the government's commitment to adequately address such a complex crime. **In March 2024, the Program for Combating Human Trafficking in the Republic of Serbia (2024-2029) and the Action Plan for 2024-2026 were adopted.** The Program itself predicts Drafting and Enactment of the Anti-Human Trafficking Act (target year 2029).

**Some of the challenges (policies) faced by ASTRA Human Trafficking Victim Support Team include:**

- **Principle of Non-Punishment of Victims:** There is a need for consistent

application of the principle of non-punishment of human trafficking victims, addressing existing barriers to justice and protection related to criminal acts committed during the period of exploitation.

- **Lack of Compensation Fund for Victims of Violent Crimes:** Besides establishing a Compensation Fund, there should be a guarantee that victims will have their civil claims addressed through criminal proceedings rather than being referred to civil litigation.
- **Secondary Victimization:** There is a need for sensitization of professionals. Representatives of institutions should be trained to support victims with empathy and understanding, rather than perpetuating stereotypes or belittling their experiences.
- **Identification of Human Trafficking Victims:** This is particularly relevant for identifying victims of labor exploitation or foreign nationals. Consistent application of existing human trafficking indicators by professionals is necessary to identify victims regardless of their country of origin or age group.
- **Absence of Protective Measures:** Institutions should regularly assess the risk levels faced by victims and adapt protective measures according to their needs and circumstances.
- **Lack of Political Will and Determination:** There is a need for greater political will and commitment at various levels to address human trafficking as a form of organized crime.
- Although the processes of amending and improving public policies are slow, their achievement is not impossible. One example is the years-long advocacy for the **introduction of The National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings**. The regional working group, composed of representatives from national institutions in Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia, within the framework of the regional project “BAN 3 – Balkans Act Now” implemented by ASTRA, contributed to the inclusion of a new function in the Law on the Protector of Citizens. This new role is the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings, who handles tasks related to combating human trafficking.

### 3. Quotes and Reports:

- The GRETA report (Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings) commends Serbia for positive legal changes regarding trafficking victims, including the introduction of a recovery period, humanitarian residence permits, and provisions in health care and legal aid laws. It also praises the appointment of the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings. However, the report highlights the need for improved access to justice and effective remedies for trafficking victims. Specifically, it suggests that lawyers should be knowledgeable about trafficking issues, that the state should cover legal aid costs provided by NGOs, and that a state compensation scheme for victims should be established. The report notes the rise in migrant workers and labor exploitation in Serbia, urging the government to enhance efforts to prevent and combat labor trafficking. This includes improving labor inspector capabilities, investigating trafficking allegations, and ensuring timely identification and assistance for trafficking victims. The full report available [here](#).
- The Annual progress reports of the European Commission for Serbia for 2023 highlight the following:

In 2022, Serbia recorded no convictions for human trafficking connected to organized crime, mirroring the situation in 2020/2021. However, there were 9 convictions under general jurisdiction, a decrease from 15 in 2021. Additionally, there were 14 convictions for mediation in prostitution under organized crime jurisdiction, and 11 under general jurisdiction, up from 3 in 2021. Given the high number of migrants passing through Serbia, there is a need to improve the identification of trafficking victims from third countries. While progress has been made in tackling organized crime, Serbia has made limited advancements in implementing last year's recommendations, especially in detecting and preventing migrant smuggling and human trafficking. Full report is available on [this link](#).
- The Republic of Serbia has been placed on the Tier 2 Watch List for the third year in a row (US State Department Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report). Despite some efforts in combating human trafficking, Serbia has avoided being downgraded to the lowest level (TIER 3). The number of suspects under



investigation has decreased, and charges have mostly been for lesser offenses. The government has not financially supported NGOs, which are crucial for victim support, and has failed to provide specialized assistance for child victims. Additionally, victims have been penalized with prison sentences, probation, and fines for illegal activities resulting from their trafficking. The government did not thoroughly investigate allegations that around 500 Vietnamese and 14 Indian workers faced forced labor in a factory owned by the People's Republic of China, instead dismissing them as non-victims of human trafficking. Full report is available on this [link](#).

#### **4. National Reports:**

Annual National Report from the Center for the Protection of Victims of Trafficking in Human Beings stresses that in 2023 the biggest increase of referrals and reports come from the police and social protection system. The largest percentage of victims identified was from reports that the police referred to the Center. Center highlights particular increase of cases and identification of minor victims who are without parents and protégés of Shelters and Homes for children (during 2023 three minor identified victims were exploited while they were in Home for Children without parental care, and identification process for 6 more children was still ongoing).

Symbolically, on the World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, July 30<sup>th</sup> [First Report](#) from National Rapporteur in the field of human trafficking was published. Report observe, analyze and give recommendations in three crucial parts of human trafficking: investigation and prosecution, identification and protection of victims and finally, prevention and collaboration among stakeholders.

Regarding investigation and prosecution majority of recommendations concern: Continuous Education. Specialized Training, Mandatory Education Programs, Increase in the Number of Prosecutors.

In terms of identification and protection recommendations are:

- Urgently intensify the training of educators for the preliminary identification of victims of human trafficking within the education system.
- Ensure the education of healthcare workers for the preliminary identification and recognition of human trafficking indicators.
- Improve early identification and prevention of long-term exploitation by training social workers who work with families and children.
- Strengthen proactive action by labor inspectors in detecting cases of human trafficking.
- Involve misdemeanor courts in the preliminary identification of human trafficking victims and ensure training for judges to recognize victims and respond appropriately where there are indications of trafficking.
- Ensure regular communication and updates to victims of human trafficking regarding steps taken against suspects.
- Establish networks of translators for rare languages to enable the identification and protection of human trafficking victims, and conduct training to sensitize translators to the issue of human trafficking.
- Simplify the procedure for accessing free legal aid through local government units and provide specialized training for lawyers to support victims of human trafficking.

Regarding prevention and collaboration National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings stressed:

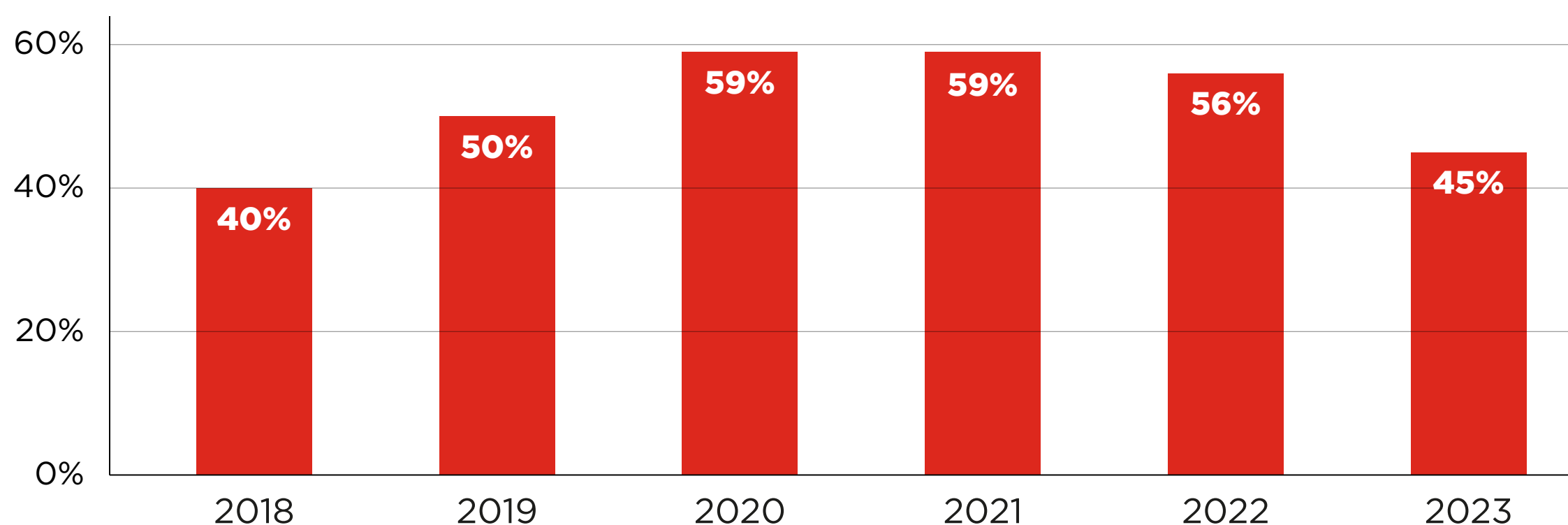
- Allocate a dedicated budget for human trafficking prevention within media project funding.
- Implement accredited training programs to strengthen the capacity of professionals in combating human trafficking.
- Actively involve relevant associations in the institutional framework to ensure sustainable victim support services.

- Enhance the operation and engagement of local anti-trafficking teams.
- Increase awareness among youth about human trafficking to help them recognize risks and avoid dangerous situations.
- Engage the media in responsible and educational campaigns to raise public awareness about human trafficking and its indicators.

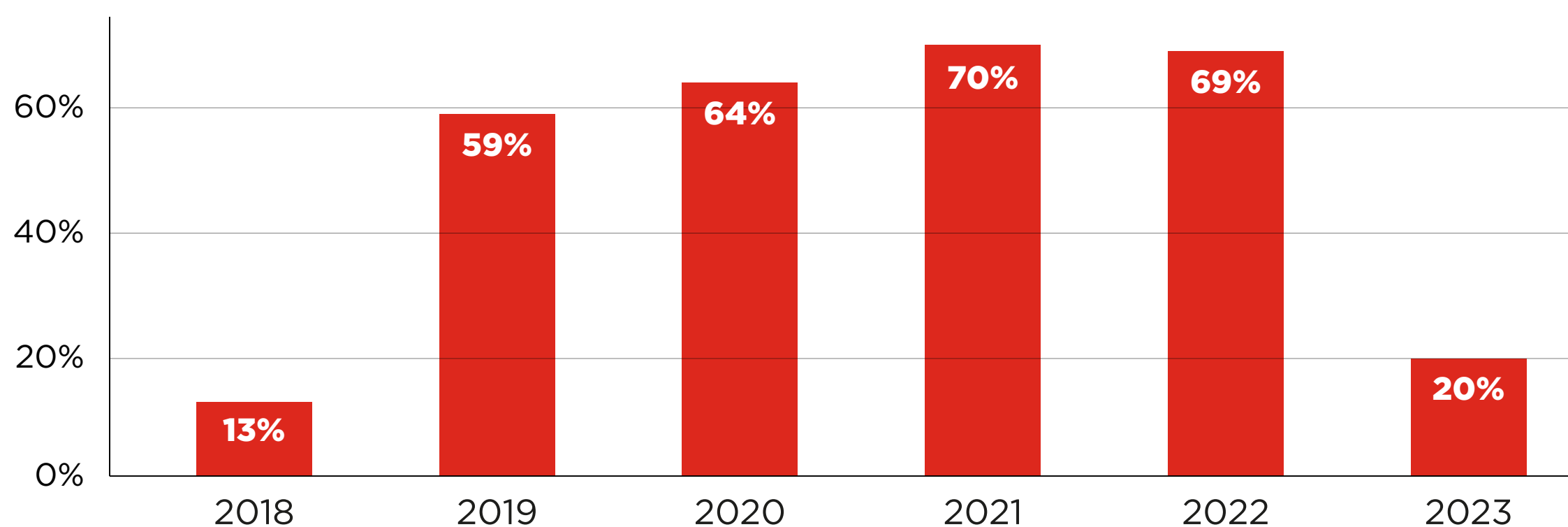
## 5. Court Practice:

### Trends in Court Practice (2018-2023)

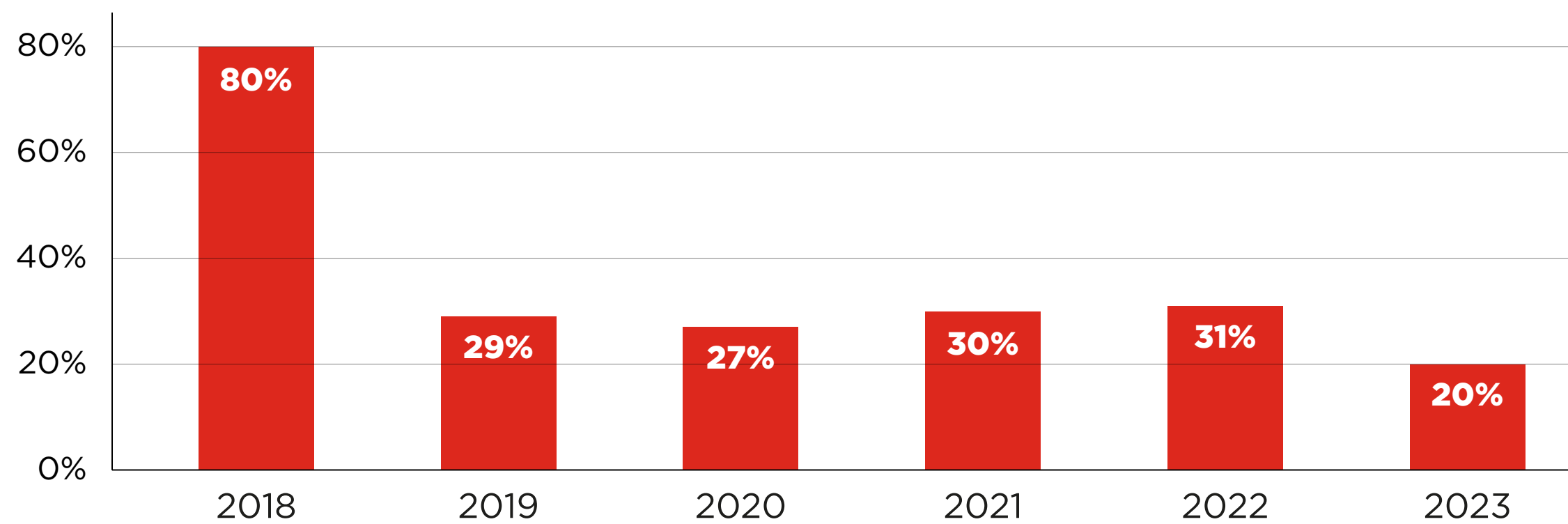
#### Plea Agreements:



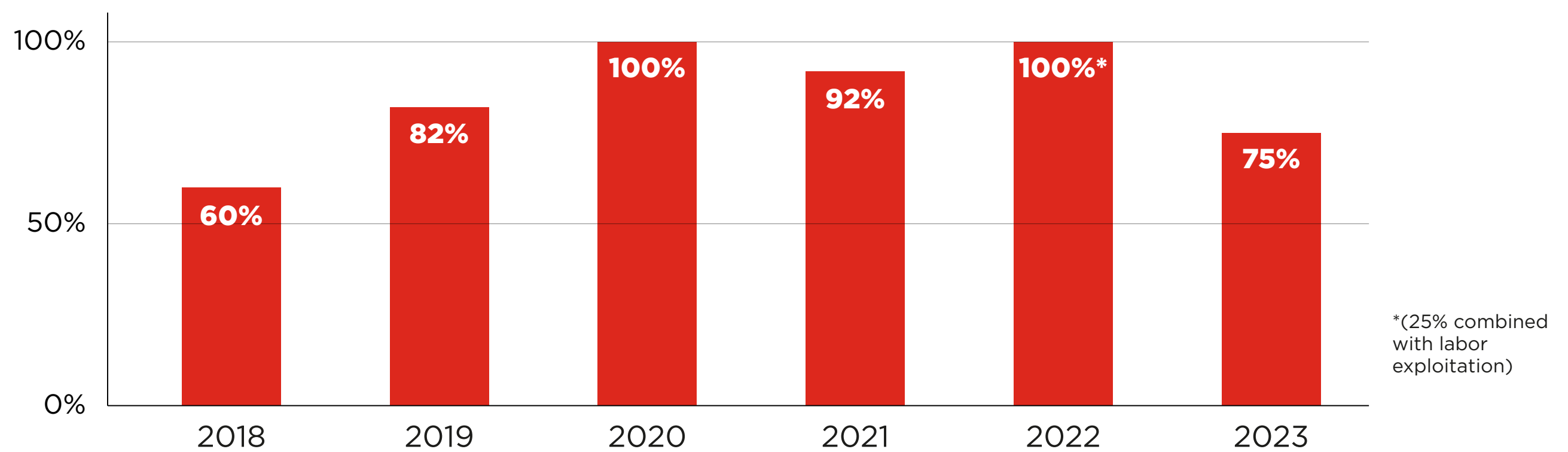
#### Mediation in Prostitution – first instance verdicts (Article 184 CC):



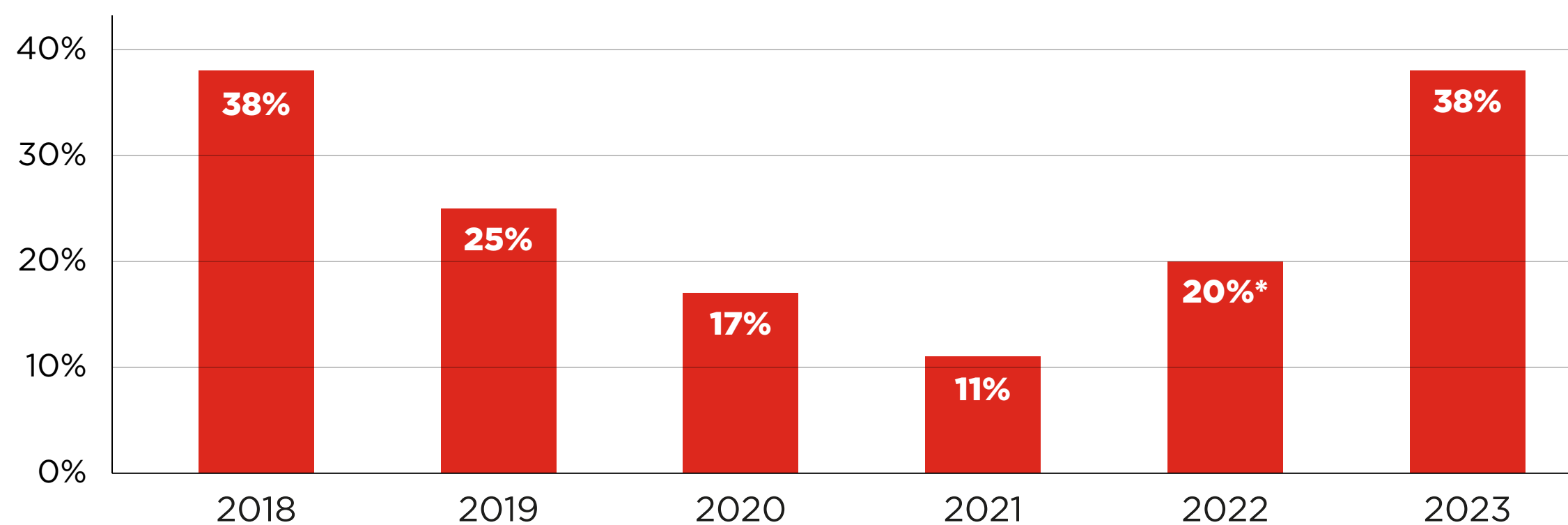
## Trafficking in Human Beings - first instance verdicts (Article 388 CC):



## Sexual Exploitation in Human Trafficking:



## Prison Sentences Over 5 Years:



## **Victim Position and Rights in 2022**

### **Victim Demographics:**

- All 18 victims are female
- 4 individuals are victims of the criminal offense under Article 388 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 22%,
- 2 minors are victims of the criminal offense of human trafficking, which constitutes 40% of the total number of minor victims.

### **Property Claims:**

- 3 injured parties (16%) have been referred to civil litigation to pursue property claims which constitutes 16%,
- 4 injured parties (21%) did not submit a property claim, which constitutes 21%
- For the remaining 12 injured parties (63%), there is no data on this aspect in the first-instance verdicts.

## **Victim Position and Rights in 2023**

### **Victim Demographics:**

- 14 victims are female, which constitutes 82% (total number of victims is 17),
- 11 individuals are victims of the criminal offense under Article 388 of the Criminal Code, which constitutes 65%,
- 3 minors are victims of the criminal offense of human trafficking, which constitutes 100% of the total number of minor victims and 25% of the total number of victims of human trafficking.

### **Property Claims:**

- 3 victims have had decisions made regarding their cases, which constitutes 18%,
- 9 victims have been referred to litigation, which constitutes 53%,
- There is no data available for 5 victims, which constitutes 29%.

## 6. Law Enforcement Data:

### Criminal charges filed by the police officers:

**Total: 20**

To the Public Prosecutor's Office for Organized Crime

19

1

To the Higher Public Prosecutors Office

According to the Trafficking in Persons report for 2022 police filed criminal complaints against 21 suspects, a significant decrease compared with 63 suspects in 2021. The Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO) investigated 31 suspects, compared with 35 in 2021. The PPO prosecuted 20 defendants, compared with 26 in 2021. Courts convicted 14 traffickers, compared with 16 traffickers in 2021. Judges sentenced 15 traffickers to imprisonment between two and 11 years and sentenced one trafficker to one year of house arrest. Courts also acquitted five individuals, compared with 10 in 2021.

The government continued to not fully investigate allegations that 500 Vietnamese workers endured forced labor, including inhumane working and living conditions, and passport confiscation at a construction site of a PRC-owned factory in Serbia. In 2021, the European Parliament adopted a joint resolution calling for an investigation into forced labor at the factory, and the UN and civil society organizations similarly urged the government to take immediate action. Observers alleged police officers intimidated whistleblowers trying to collect additional information on the living and working conditions of the Vietnamese workers, and other credible sources alleged the government prioritized PRC investments and, as a result, dismissed the allegations, which delayed government responses. While the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings visited the factory and called for an investigation, the government was slow to respond to the allegations of forced labor and did not fully adhere to its protocols. The investigation of the allegations remained "ongoing," yet the government maintained the Vietnamese workers were not trafficking victims. In 2022, the PRC-owned factory replaced the majority of the original 500 Vietnamese workers with new foreign workers and published plans to increase the size of the factory

and number of workers. In addition, the PRC workers at the factory went on strike in July 2022 because the PRC-owned factory failed to pay their wages.

## **7. Conclusion:**

### **Common Recommendations Across Various Reports**

#### **1. Legal Amendments:**

- Amend the Criminal Procedure Code and the Law on Juvenile Criminal Offenders and Criminal Protection of Juveniles to align with international standards for victim protection.
- Mandate the award of especially vulnerable witness status to all underage injured parties.
- Prohibit the confrontation of especially vulnerable witnesses and underage injured parties with perpetrators.
- Exclude the possibility of especially vulnerable witnesses and underage injured parties being heard in the courtroom and in the presence of perpetrators.

#### **2. Victim Compensation:**

- Ensure consistent application of legal provisions to protect victims' rights to compensation in criminal proceedings.
- Harmonize the existing legislative and institutional framework with relevant international standards by adopting a Law on Compensation to Victims and establishing a State Fund for Compensation to Victims.

#### **3. Victim Punishment:**

- End the practice of punishing victims for illegal acts committed as a direct consequence of human trafficking.

#### 4. Prevention of Minor Exploitation:

- Engage organizations, independent bodies, and competent institutions, especially those in the social protection sector, to prevent the exploitation of minors, particularly sexual exploitation.
- Focus on reducing risk factors and susceptibility among minors, especially those in high-risk groups such as ethnic minorities, wards of social protection institutions, and families recorded in the social protection system.

#### 5. Support Services:

- Provide specialized support services for child victims and male victims.

#### 6. Proactive Victim Identification:

- Continue efforts to proactively identify victims, including migrants, individuals providing commercial sex services, refugees, asylum seekers, and unaccompanied children who beg on the street.

#### 7. Justice and Help for Foreign Victims:

- Ensure access to justice and support for foreign victims.

#### 8. Regulation and Oversight of Employment Agencies:

- Develop and consistently enforce strict regulations and oversight of employment agencies.
- Abolish employment benefits that charge migrant workers and seek criminal liability for fraudulent recruitment and hiring agencies.

#### 9. Data Collection:

- Standardize data collection and create a database for statistical data on punishments and victim protection measures.