



**Housing solutions  
tailored for women:  
Continuity,  
Quality,  
Togetherness**







# **Housing solutions tailored for women: Continuity, Quality, Togetherness**

**Six-Year Evaluation Report  
on the Implementation  
of Assisted Housing Service  
for Victims of Human Trafficking  
run by NGO Atina**

Belgrade, 2024



**ATINA**

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UDRUŽENJE GRAĐANA ZA BORBU PROTIV TRGOVINE  
LJUDIMA I SVIH OBLIKA NASILJA NAD ŽENAMA

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**“How do I see Atina? It’s an institution for the protection of women. Only there did I feel like a real woman. I could finally relax; no one was breathing down my neck. I ate what I wanted and wore what I wanted...”**

*Dubravka S., a 28-year-old victim of human trafficking*

## Introduction

NGO Atina was founded in 2003 by a group of dedicated women activists in response to the need for comprehensive and long-term support programs for girls and women victims of human trafficking in Serbia. That summer, Atina opened the first safe house for girls and women, which has remained open every day for the past 21 years, providing a haven for those who have survived this severe trauma. Alongside the shelter, Atina’s team developed other key services such as psychological and legal assistance, economic empowerment, alternative education, and mediation. These services were adapted to the specific needs of women and girls, to help them recognize and use their skills and regain control over their lives as a key element in the recovery process.

From the beginning, Atina has focused on women and girls, applying a trauma-informed and inclusive support approach. A key component of this approach is the establishment of a partnership relationship. Each program beneficiary actively participated in developing her support plan, which was regularly adjusted to her needs and goals. Atina not only provided emergency assistance but also emphasized long-term empowerment and the creation of sustainable solutions that contribute to changing the circumstances that led to violence and exploitation.

**Editorial insert I:** Atina is especially proud of emphasizing the strength and resilience of women across all its programs, recognizing their ability to become change-makers. Over the years, Atina’s team has supported more than 1,100 formally identified victims, including domestic citizens, migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers.<sup>1</sup> Atina’s vision is to provide every woman with a safe space to reflect on her options, regain dignity, and take an active societal role. Through the work of Atina’s team, the licensed assisted housing service stands out as a key element of the long-term social inclusion and empowerment process. This service enables beneficiaries to fully integrate into society while reducing the risk of violence and exploitation.

The direct support program of NGO Atina provides various forms of assistance to women, girls, and children. This includes help in meeting basic needs such as housing and exercising their rights, such as obtaining personal documents, collaborating with relevant institutions, school enrollment, and job placement. It also includes psychosocial, legal, and medical support, family mediation and counseling, and support in all other areas vital to victims’ full recovery and reintegration. Atina’s support programs focus on creating a sustainable inclusion system, encompassing two key areas: first, emergency support in accessing rights and basic needs; and second, addressing the consequences of violence and providing support for independence, including access to education, healthcare, social protection, and the labor market.

The provision of safe housing, i.e., assisted housing for women victims of trafficking, is the lifeline of their recovery process—without it, recovery would be practically unimaginable. This service has proven essential for both reducing the risk of violence and exploitation and helping women escape multigenerational poverty. Assisted housing enables women to recognize their strengths and capabilities and to restore their dignity. In contrast to other support services, which often

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<sup>1</sup> NGO Atina began identifying victims of gender-based violence and human trafficking as early as 2011, focusing primarily on girls who had experienced rape, “survival sex,” forced marriages, and sexual exploitation among migrant, refugee, and asylum-seeking populations. Over the years, Atina established a support system that became fully operational in the summer of 2015, coinciding with the onset of the major European migration crisis. At that time, the organization took an active role in responding to the crisis and assisting the most vulnerable individuals arriving in Serbia—women and children who had survived gender-based violence and human trafficking. Since then, Atina has been continuously working to adequately responding to the specific needs of these groups, with a focus on reducing the risk of violence and exploitation, which includes, among other things, providing safe accommodation services.



remain ad hoc interventions, assisted housing represents a comprehensive recovery process. Since its inception, Atina's comprehensive social inclusion program has supported a total of 1,138 victims of human trafficking in Serbia. Over the years, the service has been sustained through donor funds from United Nations agencies—particularly IOM,<sup>2</sup> UNODC,<sup>3</sup> UNVTF,<sup>4</sup> UNTRUST<sup>5</sup>—as well as the Sigrid Rausing and OAK foundations, Oxfam, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).<sup>6</sup> It is important to emphasize that despite being a unique and specialized service for victims of trafficking in Serbia, NGO Atina has not received financial or professional support from the state of Serbia to maintain the functioning of this service.

After 15 years of continuous service provision, Atina applied for and was granted its first license in 2018 to support trafficking victims. On February 16, 2018, as the competent authority, the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veterans, and Social Affairs issued a decision confirming that NGO Atina met the conditions and standards for providing the assisted housing service for trafficking victims. The service was licensed by Article 178 of the Law on Social Protection and the Rulebook on Detailed Conditions and Standards for the Provision of Social Protection Services (Official Gazette of RS, no. 42/2013). Atina met the general minimum structural and functional standards, and the specific standards tailored to the needs and characteristics of the victim group.

This service is intended for victims of human trafficking, as well as persons suspected of being victims, aged 15 and older, who require secure accommodation and support. The program is conducted within defined time frames to ensure the victim's safety and help her develop the skills necessary for independence and full integration into the community. The licensed service aims to improve the quality of protection and accelerate recovery from violence and exploitation. According to the procedure, the assisted housing service was designed for up to one year. Still, in exceptional cases, support can be extended if it is in the woman's or girl's best interest, depending on her needs.

From 2018 to 2024, NGO Atina implemented this licensed service and became recognized in Serbia's victim protection and support system. During the first license period, 61 women and girls—including domestic citizens, refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers—used this service, with 78 admissions (some beneficiaries were admitted more than

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<sup>2</sup> IOM - International organisation for Migration

<sup>3</sup> UNODC - United Nations Office for Drugs and Crime

<sup>4</sup> UNVTF - United Nations Voluntary Trust Fund For Victims of Trafficking in Persons

<sup>5</sup> UNTRUST - United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women

<sup>6</sup> SDC- Swiss Development Cooperation

once or used the service in different calendar years). Following the expiration of the license, Atina began the process of re-licensing.

One of the most significant milestones in Atina's history occurred in July 2024, when the organization purchased a property that will serve as a hub for further service development. This achievement was made possible with the support of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), as the implementing partner of the EU-funded "Support to Social Housing and Active Inclusion" (EU SHA1) program under IPA 2018. With this step, NGO Atina left behind its status of organizational "homelessness" and finally secured a space that will become a central hub for providing support and protection to victims of trafficking in Serbia for years to come.

# Professional Procedures in Assisted Housing Service

**“I never believed I would be able to fall asleep so quickly without medication—it means I found peace here. ‘Peace’ is the word I would use to describe it all.”**

*Tatjana T., a 30-year-old trans woman,  
victim of human trafficking*

The professional procedure for providing assisted housing is designed to help women and girls become empowered and fully integrated into society. This process ensures high-quality service delivery and supports their recovery, development of potential, and acquisition of skills necessary for independent living.

The program aims to help beneficiaries recognize their abilities and open new opportunities for equal participation in the community. All steps in this procedure are based on contemporary social work practices and principles applicable in working with women and girls who have survived human trafficking, while respecting all relevant regulations and social protection standards. Each stage of the process aims to help them regain control over their lives and healing. In this way, the professional procedure meets the required formal standards and becomes a key factor in creating lasting change in the lives of women and their communities.

From its early years, Atina established supervision for its support staff, primarily within the direct support program team. The Atina team also documented this experience in the publication *“Stronger Together with Feminist Supervisory Support”*, based on two decades of experience in providing comprehensive support to women and girls who survived trafficking and/or male violence against women. Guided by feminist principles of care, Atina was founded by women who worked with other women to help them overcome traumatic experiences, recover from violence, and (re)gain control and choice over their own lives.

# Admission to the Service

Access to the assisted housing service is available to all women and girls who meet the criteria for using this service, including both presumed and formally identified victims of human trafficking. The formal identification process is conducted by the Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking (hereinafter: CPVHT), which assigns the status of either a presumed or identified trafficking victim.

A comprehensive assessment is developed in cooperation with the CPVHT, forming the basis for admission into the service. This assessment covers the victim's risks, key problems, security concerns related to the perpetrators, and the potential danger of re-trafficking. The goal is to create a personalized support plan tailored to each woman's needs and circumstances.

Admission to the service may be initiated through various channels: requests from the CPVHT, the police, centers for social work (CSW), other organizations or institutions, or a direct request made by the woman or girl herself. This approach ensures that anyone who seeks help is recognized and supported most appropriately.

Given the complexity of the needs of women and girls with experiences of violence, who face diverse challenges in the recovery process, "zero criteria" have been defined for cases where service provision is not possible. This includes women who are suspected of having a substance dependency or for whom the service provider cannot secure adequate healthcare support.

Upon admission, every woman and girl receive detailed and precise information about the organization's work, the conditions and modalities of support, the procedures and activities that will be conducted, and the duration and location of services. Particular attention is given to rights and responsibilities, emphasizing establishing trust and laying the groundwork for joint work on recovery and empowerment.

The admission procedure includes the following steps:

- Receipt of referral documentation containing the findings and opinion of the case manager from the CPVHT or CSW, as well as any available medical documentation;
- Review of documentation, initial meeting, and admission decision; planning the adaptation period and preparation for service use; creating a preparation plan involving the case manager (independence counselor)—the responsible person from the service provider, the CPVHT or CSW case manager, the beneficiary, and other persons significant to her.

When a woman or girl seeks support without referral documentation, based on notification from the police, judiciary, other institutions or organizations, or via her request, an initial assessment of her needs is conducted. Based on this assessment, a decision is made on admission, the adaptation period is planned, and the preparation for using the service begins, which is developed in collaboration with the beneficiary.

The preparation includes creating a plan with participation from the case manager, independence counselor, psychologist, a responsible person from NGO Atina, the beneficiary herself, and other important people. This process ensures that each woman is informed about the support steps and actively shapes her future.

The first meeting, organized within five days of receiving the notification, is key to building trust and establishing cooperation. The case manager uses this opportunity to get to know the beneficiary, introduce herself, explain the service goals, and initiate the partnership they will build. During this meeting, the beneficiary receives all relevant information about the service, the work process, and available support, with particular attention given to her motivation and understanding of her needs and expectations.

This first meeting often also marks the beginning of collaboration with the beneficiary and the institutions that referred to her, such as the CPVHT, police, CSWs, judicial bodies, and other organizations. For this reason, the meeting is a mandatory part of the process, as it helps establish coordinated support and aids that addresses each woman's complex needs.

Direct professional work with the beneficiary begins with this meeting, and the intake, assessment, planning, and support provision processes are carried out in close cooperation with her. This ensures that each woman receives support tailored to her needs and feels empowered to take control of her life.

During the initial meeting, the case manager informs the beneficiary about mandatory reporting obligations to the competent institutions, by law, as well as about confidentiality and personal data protection rules, with her consent. The principles and regulations designed to ensure her safety and prevent violence are clearly explained. These steps form the basis of a Cooperation Protocol, which each beneficiary can sign.

Signing the protocol is not merely a formal activity symbolizing the beginning of a partnership between the case manager and other su-

pport actors. The protocol defines the shared responsibility of all involved parties, while giving the beneficiary clarity and reassurance about how the support process will unfold. If the beneficiary initially chooses not to sign the protocol, her decision is respected, and signing may be postponed later.

Since the service primarily focuses on the beneficiary's well-being, all procedures and activities are carried out voluntarily and with her consent. Throughout this process, she is continuously informed, consulted, and included in decision-making regarding her recovery and next steps. This approach builds trust and creates a space where she feels empowered and supported.

# Needs Assessment

**“I was in shock from the beatings. I arrived at Atina’s safe house in such a state that I wasn’t even aware of myself, I had serious physical injuries, wounds all over my body. They helped me survive. I think I would have died if it weren’t for them—they helped me to recover.”**

*Nevena P., a 20-year-old victim of human trafficking*

After being admitted to the service, a needs assessment is conducted. This assessment aims to understand and identify the specific needs of the woman or girl so that the support provided can be tailored to her life circumstances. Based on the collected information and findings, this assessment aims to define priorities and goals with the beneficiary and design activities that will contribute to her recovery, empowerment, and safety.

The assessment process consists of an initial assessment and an in-depth needs assessment. Although both assessments focus on collecting information in key areas such as safety, health, and psychological well-being, they differ in depth and the time frame they are conducted.

The initial needs and risk assessment is carried out during the first meeting with the beneficiary—with her consent and in cooperation with relevant institutions, including the Ministry of Interior (MOI), centers for social work (in the case of underage beneficiaries), and other organizations and institutions that protect victims of human trafficking. This assessment focuses on the beneficiary’s urgent needs, creating an initial support strategy, and identifying areas requiring additional assistance. The beneficiary is also consulted on her preferences regarding the support program and her desired place of residence—whether returning to her community, staying in a shelter, or another option best suited to her needs.

The initial assessment results include identifying priorities, creating a preliminary activity plan, and collaborating with the beneficiary and all involved actors. This plan contains clearly defined tasks, responsibilities, and timelines as a foundation for future steps. The assessment’s conclusions identify the beneficiary’s challenges and needs and form the basis for planning support for her recovery, empowerment, and active participation in the community.

# Planning

Planning is a joint decision-making process between the beneficiary and the service provider, focused on setting goals that will contribute to the beneficiary's recovery and empowerment. Within this process, specific activities are defined, tasks are assigned, responsible people are designated for implementing each task, and a timeline is established. Like the needs assessment, planning is a continuous process adapted throughout the service, starting with the initial evaluation when the first individual plan is developed.

The individual plan is a written document and a partnership between the beneficiary and the service provider. The initial individual plan aims to address the beneficiary's urgent needs, provide support in dealing with immediate challenges, and activate the beneficiary as an active participant in problem-solving. The plan includes agreed-upon priority tasks that are realistically achievable quickly, enabling the beneficiary to see concrete results and gradually build trust and a sense of safety.

Priority selection is made through agreement between the counselor or case manager and the beneficiary, focusing on basic, less complex, and more easily achievable tasks. The aim is for the beneficiary to recognize her strengths and resources, overcome traumatic experiences, and avoid further victimization, while ensuring her safety and quality of life. All available resources are used in this process—from the social protection system, police, and judiciary to local communities, civil society, and individuals.

The individual plan is based on clearly defined long-term goals, carefully chosen priorities, and precisely determined timelines for each activity. It also identifies the beneficiary's strengths and potential risks that could impact the plan's implementation, including contingency measures if they are not followed.

The planning process covers 12 key areas related to the beneficiary's life, providing a framework for assessing results and ensuring that each step leads to sustainable change. In this way, the individual plan becomes a tool for support provision and an instrument for empowering the beneficiary and ensuring her equal participation in society.

The twelve areas are:

1. Civil and legal status
2. Legal issues and court proceedings



3. Family relationships
4. Educational status
5. Economic status
6. Professional orientation and employment
7. Security status
8. Experiences of discrimination – broader social context
9. Health status
10. Peer relationships
11. Intimate relationships
12. Self-perception – level of self-acceptance

From these elements of the individual plan, the entire assisted housing program is designed to empower beneficiaries for independent living in all aspects, enabling them to overcome trauma caused by violence and exploitation. The system of psychological support is additionally developed and includes participation in a self-help group (Advocacy Group of Women with Experience of Violence and Exploitation),<sup>7</sup> when beneficiaries are interested.

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<sup>7</sup> In 2019, NGO Atina established an Advocacy Group of girls and women survivors of human trafficking or gender-based violence. The idea for this group emerged from the need to provide individuals who had gone through the protection system with a space to participate and engage in shaping policies and practices—specifically, to advocate for the rights of trafficking survivors, victims of gender-based violence, and people from at-risk groups. Through this initiative, girls and women publicly advocate for equal status in society and for changes in protection policies, by speaking at conferences, trainings, and public events, and by holding regular meetings with decision-makers.

# Other Aspects of the Service

In addition to ensuring the safety of beneficiaries and appropriate housing conditions, the assisted housing service also includes expert assistance and support in developing the skills necessary for successful (re)integration into the community. This support consists of the following activities:

1. Informing victims about their rights, legal status, and recovery options.
2. Obtaining the necessary documentation related to the victim's legal status, in cooperation with relevant institutions.
3. Recovery and treatment – identifying the appropriate model of assistance and protection for the victim: providing health-care and psychosocial support.
4. Developing problem recognition and problem-solving skills.
5. Developing communication skills.
6. Developing self-protection skills.
7. Developing life skills needed for living in the community.
8. Support for engaging in education.
9. Support for acquiring new skills and knowledge for job seeking.
10. Support for employment.
11. Monitoring the reintegration process of victims of human trafficking.
12. Support in building and maintaining positive relationships with other people.
13. Organizing occupational and educational activities that encourage the development of new knowledge and skills.
14. Developing work methods that encourage beneficiaries' participation in community activities.
15. Organizing leisure time by beneficiaries' needs and interests.

These elements form the core of the assisted housing service, ensuring its effectiveness and relevance for each beneficiary. Atina is committed to providing support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to help beneficiaries overcome the trauma they have endured, recover, and live more dignified and fulfilling lives.

- 18 At the end of the service provision, an evaluation of the effects on the beneficiary's life is conducted, which leads to a decision on whether

the service should be concluded, based on whether the defined goals have been successfully met. Evaluation of the service also includes feedback from the beneficiaries, which ensures continuous improvement and adaptation of the program to their needs. The findings from this evaluation are used to eliminate any difficulties in providing support and to develop the service further to remain relevant and empowering for all beneficiaries.

## Statistical Indicators of Service Provision from March 2018 to March 2024

During the six years mentioned, a total of 61 women used the assisted housing service, including 47 victims of human trafficking from the local (domicile) population and 14 women originating from other countries. In total, 78 housing placements for women and girls were realized (some women used the service more than once or accessed it in two different calendar years).

### Assisted Housing for Victims of Human Trafficking

*Number of placements/service admissions per year:*

Year	Local citizens	Foreign nationals, refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers	Total (women who used the service that year)
2018	14	5	19
2019	11	2	13
2020	12	1	13
2021	8	/	8
2022	4	1	5
2023	7	3	10
2024 (until March)	3	7	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>78</b>

The service was used by girls and women aged between 16 and 62. The age distribution of service beneficiaries over the observed period was as follows:

- Aged 18 to 26 – 32% (20 beneficiaries)
- Aged 26 to 35 – 17% (10 beneficiaries)
- Over 35 years – 17% (10 beneficiaries)

In other words, the assisted housing service was predominantly used by young girls and women up to 26, nearly two-thirds of all service beneficiaries.

Additionally, three women from the LGBTQ community used the service, two of whom were trans women.

It is important to note that many professionals within the protection and support system view this service as the primary—and often the only—safe housing option available. Due to the lack of adequate accommodation for victims of human trafficking under the age of 16, such individuals are often referred to this service.

Although NGO Atina received requests for the placement of girls as young as 14 who had experienced human trafficking, these requests could not be fulfilled due to licensing restrictions that do not cover this age group. Nevertheless, such requests highlight the significant and urgent need for a safe accommodation service tailored specifically to children who have survived trafficking.

# Evaluation

## What Has Licensing Service Brought?

Since its founding, Atina has provided safe housing for victims of human trafficking—this has been one of the essential support services available to this beneficiary group. Therefore, this service existed long before it was formally licensed as an “assisted housing” service. One-third of all victims of human trafficking require safe accommodation, that is, assisted housing. This means that within Atina’s comprehensive support program for trafficking victims, this is just a fraction of the total services needed in Serbia.

While governments in the region have addressed the issue of safe accommodation by securing physical spaces and infrastructure for such services and delegating program implementation to civil society organizations, the government of Serbia has yet to take a similar step.

In this context, licensing has brought only nominal equalization of this service with others in the social protection system, mainly those provided by state bodies and institutions. However, if we look at how other similar services within the system are implemented, it becomes clear that this service is not treated equally in terms of financing. State-licensed services are funded from the budget, while this service, provided by Atina and many other licensed services run by civil society organizations, receives no budget funding and relies solely on donations, placing them in a highly disadvantaged and unequal position compared to public services.

Licensing assisted housing has brought formal recognition within the social protection system, but not equal financial treatment. While both licensed and unlicensed public services are funded from the state budget,<sup>8</sup> licensed services offered by Atina and other CSOs must de-

<sup>8</sup> This issue is clearly illustrated by the situation regarding safe houses for women who are victims of domestic and intimate partner violence. According to an analysis **Functioning and Operation of Shelters for Women Victims of Violence in Serbia - Analysis of the Current Situation** conducted in 2022 by the NGO Atina on the availability and functioning of shelters for women victims of violence in Serbia, it was found that out of 13 operational shelters for victims of domestic violence, only five have obtained a license, one shelter is in the process of renewing its license, while seven are in the process of obtaining one. This means that the majority of safe houses operating within the state system (which is also the authority responsible for issuing licenses) are admitting women victims of violence and providing other essential support services without a valid license to operate. At the same time, due to the lack of adequate accommodation capacities at the local level, many of these shelters are also admitting victims of human trafficking, even though this is not within their official mandate (with the exception of two safe houses that are licensed to accommodate trafficking victims), nor do they have trained staff capable of providing the specific support required by this group of service users.

pend exclusively on donor support. This approach puts such programs at a severe disadvantage despite their importance and contributions.

In addition to Atina's center and its assisted housing service, Serbia also has a state-run emergency shelter for victims of human trafficking, managed by the Center for the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking, with a capacity for six beneficiaries. This shelter opened in February 2019 but was closed in August 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic. All beneficiaries from the state shelter were then referred to Atina's shelter, which took on additional responsibility. Despite these challenges, Atina ensured continuous support and never ceased operations, not for a single day.

The state shelter reopened in early 2022 and received its first operating license. However, it has since been closed several more times due to construction and sanitary issues. When the state shelter was shut down, beneficiaries were redirected to Atina's assisted housing service. These situations further burdened Atina, who repeatedly had to accept additional beneficiaries without prior notice but maintained service continuity and quality.

Atina's ability to respond to such challenges despite lacking institutional support speaks volumes about her dedication and professionalism. Throughout the periods of interruption in the state shelter's work, Atina continued to provide essential services to women and girls, reaffirming its crucial role in Serbia's anti-trafficking support system.

While the state shelter was closed for almost a year and a half, the Center for the Protection of Victims did not mention this in its monthly or annual reports. Their published data gave the impression that the shelter remained operational throughout. The only official acknowledgment that the shelter was closed appears in a 2021 report by the Ministry of Interior's Office for Coordination of Anti-Trafficking Activities, which was written as part of a public consultation for the draft Action Plan 2021–2022 (which was never adopted). The report stated that the Emergency Shelter for Victims of Trafficking was "currently not accepting beneficiaries due to the licensing process for a specialized social protection service" and that the process was expected to be completed by the end of the year.

This mention only appeared because the Ministry was required to respond to inquiries from civil society organizations regarding why licensing the state shelter was not listed among the planned activities in the draft Action Plan for 2021–2022.

## The Need for Sustainable Funding and Transparency in the Protection of Victims of Human Trafficking

The risk of unsustainability has been recognized by international organizations working on the protection of women's rights, particularly those focusing on vulnerable and marginalized groups of women, such as victims of human trafficking. These organizations have repeatedly recommended that Serbia ensure the sustainability of specialized services provided by civil society organizations.

For example, GRETA,<sup>9</sup> the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings, in its 2018 report to Serbia, called on the authorities to "take steps to improve assistance to victims of trafficking, particularly through: ensuring specialized support and services for victims of trafficking," as well as "by providing adequate funding for services delivered by specialized NGOs."

In its most recent report, June 2023, GRETA once again urged "Serbian authorities to take steps to improve assistance to victims of trafficking, especially by allocating adequate resources to services provided by specialized NGOs offering shelter and support to victims of human trafficking" (paragraph 224).

Similarly, in 2020, GREVIO,<sup>10</sup> the expert group monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence), addressed Serbia, urging it to ensure adequate funding "such as long-term grants based on transparent public procurement procedures, to ensure sustainable financing for women's NGOs providing specialist support services for women victims of all forms of violence."

Finally, in March 2019, in its Concluding Observations on Serbia's Fourth Periodic Report, the CEDAW Committee of the United Nations,<sup>11</sup> tasked with monitoring the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, recommended that the Serbian authorities "improve services for the protection of trafficking victims by allocating sufficient and sustainable human and financial resources and strengthening coordination and cooperation between state institutions and civil society."

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<sup>9</sup> GRETA - Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

<sup>10</sup> GREVIO - Group of experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence

<sup>11</sup> CEDAW - Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

Thus, all these reports explicitly call on the state to ensure the sustainability of support services for victims of human trafficking, emphasizing the need to finance specialized services provided by civil society organizations.

Despite repeated promises by the state itself to find a way to provide financial support for these services, that has not happened. The state failed to ensure such funding in all prepared or adopted Action Plans related to the Strategy for the Prevention and Suppression of Human Trafficking, especially of Women and Children, and Protection of Victims (2017–2022).

Consequently, the assisted housing service provided by NGO Atina continues to exist only due to the organization's efforts and the financial resources it secures from the donor community.

The Center for the Protection of Victims did not report this fact in its official documents during the period when the state emergency shelter for victims of trafficking was closed (from August 2020 onward). This omission created the false impression that the shelter remained operational. Only in a 2021 Ministry of Interior report did it become evident that the shelter had not been accepting beneficiaries due to the licensing procedure, and even that information was made public only thanks to inquiries from civil society organizations.

This case highlights the pressing need for greater transparency. For state-run services to be fully functional and aligned with legal standards, their status and operation must be communicated transparently and truthfully.



## Evaluation of the Service by Girls and Women Who Used Assisted Housing

*“Atina is my first real home and the only family I have. That’s how I feel.”*

— Biljana, a 17-year-old victim of human trafficking

Interviews conducted with beneficiaries who used the assisted housing service provided valuable insights into how the women perceive the service, what they see as its key value within the protection and support system, and their suggestions for potential improvements in the future.

All participants unanimously expressed satisfaction with the assisted housing service. They especially emphasized a high level of satisfaction with the living conditions, but more importantly, they highlighted the sense of safety and certainty they experienced thanks to the service. Given the trauma they had endured, the beneficiaries confirmed that during their stay, they had everything they needed for recovery.

Their initial expectations when entering the program were primarily related to safety, protection, and meeting basic needs such as shelter, food, clothing, and personal hygiene. They also confirmed that their health needs were addressed, many of them having been in poor health or suffering from serious injuries upon arrival.

All beneficiaries reported feeling completely safe from day one. This feeling of security gave them the “peace they needed” to begin healing from trauma and regain control over their lives. The service also allowed them to address pressing health concerns and start thinking about their future.

Compared to their initial expectations and the information they received about assisted accommodation, all the women said they “*couldn’t have imagined it would be so exceptional.*” Many added that the conditions and furnishings of the apartments exceeded all expectations. One woman, who had previously stayed in a shelter abroad, said the accommodation in Atina’s program was of equal quality. However, adjusting to sharing space with other beneficiaries already living in the apartment was challenging. She expressed a need for more solitude, which was impossible then, but she emphasized that she had been “*properly informed about that in advance.*”

Another beneficiary shared her surprise, saying she expected the apartment would have bars on the windows, and she could hardly believe how “*beautiful and well-furnished*” it was. Three respondents who had

previously stayed in domestic shelters for victims of violence in Serbia described the clear difference between those facilities and Atina's housing. They said that Atina's program gave them more freedom and sincere support from the staff. They emphasized that despite the heavy stories and serious problems among the women, the emotional burden *"felt lighter than it did in regular shelters."*

*"It left a strong impression on me. That was the nicest period of my life. I liked the freedom, I wasn't locked inside four walls."*

*— Mirjana I., a 24-year-old victim of human trafficking*

In addition to safety, the beneficiaries stressed the importance of support from professional staff, who provided warmth, understanding, and space for personal development. When comparing Atina's service to domestic shelters, several women said they received more genuine attention and respect, which helped restore their sense of dignity and self-worth.

The women also reported positive changes in their lives—thanks to the assisted housing program, they could access healthcare, exercise their rights, and plan the direction of their lives. Access to the healthcare system was identified as a significant benefit, especially since many had never had access. They emphasized the importance of assistance from the case manager in scheduling appointments and accompanying them to the doctor, and the fact that medical examinations, particularly gynecological, were paid for, along with other treatments and medications.

All participants emphasized the value of psychological support, saying it helped them to *"empty their soul," "release pain," "let go of fear,"* and feel stronger and more empowered. They particularly appreciated the dedication of the case managers, the trusting relationship they developed, the constant availability of staff, and the fact that their opinions were considered when planning activities.

One woman said that before entering the program, she was *"scared and disoriented,"* but now she feels good and enjoys hearing from her case managers that she is valuable and capable. Several also appreciated the opportunity to support new women entering the program, making them feel useful and proud of their ability to empathize. At the same time, some mentioned that this could also be emotionally demanding, especially when adjusting to new residents, which sometimes required additional support from the staff.

Some participants mentioned that the service taught them practical skills like cooking or making jewelry.

*“At Atina, I realized I wasn’t alone. Other Girls’ve gone through the same things as me. I feel supported, like someone cares, someone asks me what I like and want. I’m discovering myself here.”*

— Stanislava Š., 18-year-old victim of human trafficking

Some beneficiaries saw Atina’s Reintegration Center and the assisted housing service as one continuous system providing comprehensive daily care and support.

When asked how to improve the service, some suggested organizing more recreational activities, such as field trips, theater tickets, or sports. Others suggested better access to clothing and personal items.

Nevertheless, the vast majority stressed that the most important thing moving forward is to ensure the continued availability of psychological support and access to other rights and services they had received through the program.

*“Now I’m living the part of life that was taken from me. I’ve never felt this kind of freedom and safety before. I grew up in fear and violence. I still have consequences, but I’m much better now.”*

— Sanja N., 22-year-old victim of human trafficking

## Concluding Remarks

Over the past five years, the licensed assisted housing service provided by NGO Atina has been used by 61 women and girls, victims of human trafficking, including domestic citizens, foreign nationals, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, and their children. This service has proven to be a vital component of the protection and support system for trafficking victims in Serbia, offering the necessary conditions for their recovery and social inclusion. Its importance has been repeatedly affirmed by numerous actors within the protection system, who referred to beneficiaries specifically to this service.

The significance of assisted housing is further underscored by the fact that it was often the only available accommodation option when the state-run emergency shelter for trafficking victims was closed. Since 2019, the state shelter has experienced multiple operational interruptions due to the pandemic, construction issues, or other challenges. Atina's service continued without interruption, consistently accepting beneficiaries from the public system. In September 2023, the state shelter was once again closed, highlighting the critical role of Atina's resources and commitment.

Although the service is licensed and thus nominally equal to other services within the social protection system, it faces serious sustainability challenges in practice, as the state has not provided any funding for its operation. Atina is left to bear the burden of meeting strict licensing standards while continually seeking support from unreliable donor sources. This pressure jeopardizes the service's survival despite its evident necessity.

International bodies—including GRETA, GREVIO, and the CEDAW Committee—have repeatedly called on Serbia to ensure stable and adequate funding for licensed services provided by civil society organizations. Yet, despite these recommendations and the demonstrated need, the state has not taken any concrete action in this direction. Without stable financing, licensing becomes a mere formality, adding to the burden of service providers instead of improving the protection and recovery of victims.

Regardless of these institutional challenges, the assisted housing service remains indispensable. Beneficiaries who have gone through the program consistently affirm its impact, emphasizing that it enabled them to survive, recover, and rebuild their lives. This service is not

only a barrier against re-trafficking, but also a foundation for broader anti-trafficking efforts.

Considering its value, the service should be further developed and adapted to the evolving needs of beneficiaries, with their voices and experiences placed at the heart of planning and improvement processes. Their perspectives must remain central to all efforts, ensuring that the service continues to be a pillar of support and a model of good practice in the fight against human trafficking.

*Belgrade, December 2024*

*Team of NGO Atina*