



SafeBorders

Country Report

Italy



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1. Introduction

The present Country Report has been developed within the framework of the *Safe Borders* project, an EU-funded initiative designed to strengthen international cooperation and institutional capacities to prevent and combat child trafficking. The project responds to the urgent need for coordinated, cross-border strategies that equip judicial authorities, law enforcement, and social services with the tools and expertise necessary to identify and protect victims, prosecute perpetrators, and dismantle criminal networks. By integrating innovative technologies—including AI-based tools for detecting exploitation patterns and enhancing information exchange—*Safe Borders* seeks to close the persistent gap between investigation and conviction, and to ensure a more coherent protection framework for children at risk of trafficking across Europe and beyond.

This research activity forms part of *Work Package 2 – Cross-Border Cooperation and the Exchange of Best Practices*, which aims to generate evidence-based recommendations for improving prevention, identification, protection, prosecution, and partnership-building in cases of child trafficking. The ultimate outcome of this work is a practical *Handbook for Combating Child Trafficking*, designed to support professionals in applying consistent and effective responses.

In line with these goals, the Italian field research sought to deepen understanding of the dynamics of child trafficking, the operational functioning of the protection and justice systems, and the challenges and opportunities in cross-border cooperation. It also aimed to identify practices that could strengthen multi-agency collaboration and improve victim-centered approaches within judicial and social service systems.

Methodologically, the research combined **desk analysis** — drawing on national and European policy frameworks, legal instruments, and institutional reports — with **qualitative fieldwork** conducted through semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a range of key stakeholders. In total, around **25 professionals** contributed to the study, including representatives from the *Prosecutor's Offices of Trento, Palermo, Trapani, and Cagliari*; the *Juvenile and Ordinary Courts of Palermo*; the *European Public Prosecutor's Office*; *Carabinieri units in Basilicata*; *lawyers and members of the Juvenile Chamber of Palermo*; *specialised attorneys from ASGI*; *law enforcement officers from Palermo*; *social and legal operators working in Reception and Integration System (SAI) and Extraordinary Reception Centres (CAS) facilities in Marsala and Ragusa*; and professionals from *Save the Children Italy* and other non-governmental organisations. These voices collectively offered a rich and multi-layered perspective on how trafficking is identified, investigated, and addressed at local and transnational levels. The contributions have been collected through 3 separate focus groups, and individual interviews.

While the research sought to capture national-level insights, the **Sicilian context** emerged as particularly distinctive. In this region, the dynamics of child trafficking are closely intertwined with mixed migration flows and the operations of transnational smuggling networks. The island's geographical position along the Central Mediterranean Route makes it a key point of arrival for unaccompanied migrant children (UAMs) arriving from North Africa, particularly Tunisia and Libya. According to insights from prosecutors and law enforcement officials, these children often arrive in reception facilities with pre-existing contacts and instructions, suggesting prior involvement in organised criminal networks that coordinate their journey and onward movement across Europe.

The line between migrant smuggling and child trafficking is often blurred: situations that begin as facilitation of irregular migration can evolve into trafficking, especially when children are subjected to exploitation or coercion to repay debts incurred during the journey. This overlap is particularly evident

when children lack the financial means to continue their journey, making them vulnerable to forced labour, sexual exploitation, or forced criminal activities.

This complex reality underlines the necessity of developing more adaptive and interconnected systems of protection, capable of anticipating the transnational logic of trafficking and responding to it with equal coordination and agility. The findings presented in this report thus reflect not only the structural and legal frameworks underpinning Italy's response to child trafficking, but also the lived challenges of those working daily at its frontlines.

2. Legal and policy framework

2.1. Existing legal and policy framework on child trafficking

Italy represents both a destination and transit country for victims of trafficking in human beings (THB), with minors - particularly unaccompanied foreign children - being among the most vulnerable.¹ The Italian legal and institutional framework for combating trafficking is closely aligned with international standards, including the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*,² monitored by GRETA, and the *EU Anti-Trafficking Directive 2011/36/EU*.³

Italy criminalised trafficking in human beings under *Article 601* of the Criminal Code, with specific aggravating circumstances when the offence concerns minors.⁴ Additional offences, such as slavery-like practices (*Art. 600*), child prostitution (*Art. 600-bis*), and child pornography (*Art. 600-ter*), complement this framework.⁵

The primary national policy instrument is the *National Action Plan against Trafficking and Serious Exploitation of Human Beings (NAP)*,⁶ which defines a multi-annual strategy coordinated by the **Department for Equal Opportunities under the Presidency of the Council of Ministers**. The most recent plan (2022–2025) emphasizes a human rights-based and victim-centered approach, with particular attention to children and vulnerable groups. It also reaffirms Italy's commitment to the *National Referral Mechanism (NRM)*,⁷ a system of coordinated interventions across institutional and non-governmental actors.

Preventive efforts in Italy include awareness campaigns, training for professionals, and measures targeting the root causes of vulnerability among minors, such as poverty, unaccompanied migration, and lack of legal pathways.⁸ The *Law No. 47/2017 on the Protection of Unaccompanied Foreign Minors* is

¹ Council of Europe, *Group of Experts on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (GRETA): Report concerning the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings by Italy — Third evaluation round*, Strasbourg, 2024, p. 9.

² Council of Europe, *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*, Warsaw, 16 May 2005, CETS No. 197.

³ European Parliament and Council, *Directive 2011/36/EU of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA*.

⁴ Italy, *Codice Penale*, Articles 600–602, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, No. 251.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Italy, *National action plan against trafficking and serious exploitation 2022-2025*, Presidency of the Council of Ministers - Department for Equal Opportunities, Rome, 2022.

⁷ Italy, National referral mechanism for the identification, assistance and protection of victims of human trafficking and/or severe exploitation, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri – Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità, Rome, 2023, <https://www.integrazionemigranti.gov.it/AnteprimaPDF.aspx?id=6044>.

⁸ See (1), p. 36, 38.

a landmark piece of legislation.⁹ It guarantees access to reception, guardianship, education, and legal support, and plays a crucial role in preventing trafficking and exploitation.

Italy also implements preventive labour migration policies through annual immigration quotas.¹⁰ However, these systems have been criticized for potential misuse. In some instances, migrants are charged large sums by intermediaries in exchange for fictitious job offers, exposing them to exploitation.¹¹ *GRETA* and national observers have called for tighter monitoring of such schemes to reduce trafficking and/or re-trafficking risks.¹²

According to the NRM, the identification of child victims of trafficking shall occur through a multi-agency approach, as initial indicators may emerge in reception centers, asylum procedures, or through law enforcement.¹³ Victims formally identified as trafficked are entitled to specialized support under *Article 18 of Legislative Decree 286/1998 (the Immigration Act)*, which provides a residence permit for social protection.¹⁴

Italy's criminal justice response includes specialized anti-trafficking units within the **National Anti-Mafia and Counter-Terrorism Directorate** and local prosecutors' offices.¹⁵ The Italian anti-trafficking system is characterized by multi-level coordination among national, regional, and local actors.¹⁶

With the adoption of the new *EU Directive on trafficking in human beings in 2024*,¹⁷ which updates and strengthens the 2011 Directive (2011/36/EU), Italy is expected to undertake a series of legislative and policy adjustments to align with the revised European framework. One of the main changes introduced by the Directive is the explicit inclusion of emerging forms of exploitation, such as online sexual exploitation, forced criminality, and the exploitation of particularly vulnerable persons, including those targeted on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation. Italy will need to ensure that its criminal code and operational practices reflect these expanded definitions, particularly by addressing online-facilitated trafficking and reinforcing its capacity to identify and prosecute such cases. The *Directive* also reinforces the protection of child victims, requiring the adoption of child-sensitive identification and assistance procedures. For Italy, this entails strengthening multidisciplinary approaches involving child protection services, psychologists, and social workers, and ensuring that children are not detained for migration-related reasons. Support services will need to be more tailored, accessible, and trauma-informed, with improved access to education, legal assistance, and long-term integration paths.

Italy's model is broadly aligned with the obligations set out in international and EU instruments, establishing a comprehensive legal and institutional framework to combat trafficking in human beings, with specific protections for children. However, challenges persist, particularly in early identification, data collection, and the prosecution of offenders. Continued alignment with international standards,

⁹ Italy, Law of 7 April 2017, n. 47 - Provisions on measures for the protection of unaccompanied foreign minors, *Gazzetta Ufficiale della Repubblica Italiana*, No. 93.

¹⁰ Italy, Decree-Law 145/2024, - Urgent provisions on the entry into Italy of foreign workers, protection and assistance to victims of trafficking, management of migratory flows and international protection, as well as related judicial proceedings.

¹¹ See (1), pp. 44-45.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ See (7).

¹⁴ Italy, Legislative Decree 25 July 1998, n. 286 - Single Text on immigration, Official Gazette of the Italian Republic, 18 August 1998.

¹⁵ See (1), pp. 33-34.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ European Parliament and Council, *Directive (EU) 2024/1105 of 11 April 2024 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims*, OJ L, 2024.

coupled with proactive and coordinated national action, remains essential to ensuring effective protection and justice for child victims of trafficking.

2.2. Effectiveness of the framework

Italy has developed a comprehensive legal and policy framework to combat child trafficking, aligned with international and European standards. The country has ratified key international instruments, including the *United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol)*,¹⁸ and the *Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings*.¹⁹ These commitments have been translated into national legislation, notably through *Legislative Decree No. 24/2014*, which transposed *EU Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims*.²⁰ Additional protection is provided under *Article 18* of *Legislative Decree No. 286/1998*, which allows for the issuance of residence permits to victims of trafficking, facilitating their access to assistance and integration services.²¹ Furthermore, Italy has implemented the *NAP*.²²

In its most recent evaluations, *GRETA* has highlighted the fact that, despite this relatively solid legal foundation, several challenges persist in the implementation and enforcement of anti-trafficking measures, particularly with regard to minors.²³ One of the main issues is the lack of a unified and comprehensive *NRM* that addresses all forms of child trafficking. Although sectoral mechanisms exist — for example, for unaccompanied minors within the asylum system — a standardised, nationwide framework for the identification, referral and protection of trafficked children is still missing.²⁴

Access to legal assistance is formally guaranteed to all victims, including minors, yet in practice it is often delayed or limited due to bureaucratic inefficiencies, insufficient dissemination of information, and a general lack of specialised legal professionals trained in anti-trafficking law.²⁵ This situation weakens the capacity of child victims to fully access their rights and participate meaningfully in legal proceedings. *GRETA* has urged the Italian authorities to ensure that free, specialised legal aid is provided from the earliest possible stage and throughout the entire assistance and protection process.²⁶

Inter-agency coordination remains another critical area of concern. While Italy benefits from a wide range of competent actors — including public institutions, regional authorities, law enforcement agencies and NGOs — the anti-trafficking response continues to be fragmented. The absence of a centralised coordination mechanism and clear procedural standards hampers effective information-sharing and joint intervention, particularly in cross-border or transregional cases.

Moreover, there is no specific recruitment or selection process that ensures the assignment of personnel with expertise on trafficking in human beings, particularly in relation to child victims. Appointments within public institutions and law enforcement agencies are generally made through standard public competitions, without consideration of specialised skills in this field. In practice, expertise often depends on the individual preferences and professional commitment of officers, who choose to specialise in child

¹⁸ United Nations, *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (Palermo Protocol), adopted 15 November 2000, entered into force 25 December 2003.

¹⁹ See (2).

²⁰ Italy, *Legislative Decree 24/2014 - Implementation of Directive 2011/36/EU, on the prevention and punishment of trafficking in human beings and the protection of victims*.

²¹ See (14).

²² See (6).

²³ See (1), pp. 56-58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ See (1), p. 37-38.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

trafficking and related issues through self-training or participation in external initiatives. While this demonstrates personal dedication, it also reflects the absence of institutionalised training and career pathways on trafficking, resulting in uneven levels of knowledge and capacity across regions.

The field research revealed a significant gap between Italy's legislative progress in combating human trafficking and its practical implementation. Although the national framework is formally aligned with international and European standards, stakeholders noted that the early identification of trafficked children remains inconsistent and heavily reliant on local discretion. The absence of a standardized, nationwide referral mechanism specifically designed for child victims leads to low identification rates, delayed assistance, and insufficient long-term support. Civil society representatives also highlighted the persistent shortage of cultural mediators and child psychologists, particularly in southern regions.

Law enforcement and judicial authorities reported considerable difficulties in prosecuting trafficking and related forms of exploitation. These challenges stem primarily from the complexity of evidentiary requirements and the fragmented nature of victim testimonies. As a result, prosecutors often resort to alternative charges, such as coercion or bodily harm, which are easier to substantiate. While this practice may improve conviction rates, it risks undermining the seriousness of trafficking offences and denying victims formal recognition as such, thereby increasing the likelihood of secondary victimisation.

Across all stakeholder groups, weak inter-agency coordination emerged as a critical concern. Both judicial representatives and NGOs stressed that the absence of a central coordinating body and of clear procedural standards hampers effective information exchange and joint interventions, especially in cross-border cases. This institutional fragmentation generates inefficiencies and undermines victim protection — a finding reiterated in recent GRETA evaluations.

3. Institutional landscape

3.1. Public institutions

In Italy, the fight against human trafficking, including child trafficking, involves a multi-level institutional framework coordinated by several key public bodies. At the national level, the primary coordinating authority is the **Department for Equal Opportunities**, which is responsible for defining and monitoring the implementation of national anti-trafficking strategies. This includes the *NAP* (currently 2022–2025), which aligns with international and EU standards. The Department also manages funding for victim protection programmes under *Articles 18 and 13 of Legislative Decree 286/1998* and *Law 228/2003*,²⁷ supporting regional projects implemented mainly by civil society organisations and NGOs.²⁸

The **Ministry of the Interior** plays a crucial role, especially through its **Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration**, which coordinates migration policy and international protection procedures. Within this framework, law enforcement authorities — particularly the **Polizia di Stato** and its mobile squads and anti-mafia investigative units — are tasked with investigating trafficking crimes and identifying potential victims, including minors.²⁹ The **Carabinieri** and the **Guardia di Finanza** also contribute to detecting trafficking networks and financial crimes linked to exploitation.³⁰

Child protection services fall under the responsibility of the **Ministry of Labour and Social Policies**, which oversees national and regional child welfare systems and is involved in the reception and care of

²⁷ See (14); Law 228/2003 - *Measures against trafficking in persons and slavery*.

²⁸ *Ibid.* § 23.

²⁹ *Ibid.* §§ 139-143.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

unaccompanied foreign minors. Through its **Directorate General for Immigration and Integration Policies**, the ministry supports the development of reception standards and integration pathways, including for trafficked children. The Judiciary, through local **Juvenile Courts** and Public Prosecutors' Offices, plays an essential role in initiating investigations and ensuring legal protection measures for minors identified as potential victims of trafficking. In particular, juvenile prosecutors are responsible for appointing legal guardians for unaccompanied children and authorising protective measures under the Italian civil and criminal codes.³¹

Other institutional actors include the **Ministry of Justice**, which coordinates the judiciary and supports international judicial cooperation on trafficking cases, and the **Ministry of Health**, involved in providing physical and psychological care to victims, including access to specialised support services. Additionally, the **Ministry of Education** has a preventive role in promoting awareness among educators and students and identifying early signs of vulnerability within the school system.

During the fieldwork, representatives of public institutions pointed out significant obstacles to the investigation and prosecution of human trafficking crimes. Despite Italy's multi-level legal and institutional framework, professionals encountered and reported various challenges, including the complexity and multifaceted nature of trafficking dynamics, which complicate the legal qualification of cases as human trafficking or enslavement. Additionally, the absence of specialized investigative methodologies tailored specifically to trafficking-related crimes, combined with insufficient training and staffing, significantly undermines prosecutorial effectiveness.

Professionals from the **Office of Social Services for Minors (USSM)** reported that their units often represent the final point of institutional support for minors at risk of trafficking, compensating for earlier gaps in child protection and early intervention systems. This reveals persistent structural weaknesses in the national child welfare framework.

The withdrawal of embedded psychologists has further limited the USSM's capacity to provide trauma-informed care, a key element in supporting children exposed to exploitation. Stakeholders also pointed to the lack of cultural mediators trained in both intercultural and legal procedures, which hampers victim engagement and cross-border cooperation. Without these mediators, law enforcement and judicial actors struggle to build trust with victims, especially those from communities with different understandings of abuse, gender, and authority.

Common limited financial autonomy prevents public institutions, agencies, and other actors from managing project funds directly. Complex authorization procedures and rigid budget structures often delay or restrict participation in innovative interventions, reducing flexibility and the sustainability of local initiatives.

Despite these limitations, some promising practices emerged. The Memorandum of Understanding signed in Trento in 2024, led by the Public Prosecutor's Office, was cited as a replicable model. The protocol brings together judicial authorities, law enforcement, social services, and civil society organizations, alongside partners such as the University of Trento's Faculty of Law, the EU Agency for Asylum, UNHCR, and IOM. It establishes clear procedures and shared responsibilities for identifying and protecting victims of trafficking and severe exploitation, while fostering joint training and research opportunities. Although further assessment is needed, it is seen as a promising example of structured and sustainable cooperation between national and international partners.

³¹ *Ibid.* § 262.

3.2. Civil society organisations

In Italy, civil society organisations play a pivotal role in combating human trafficking, particularly concerning child protection, victim support, and awareness-raising initiatives. These organisations operate across various regions, offering services that complement governmental efforts and often address gaps in the national anti-trafficking framework.³²

Save the Children Italy³³ is dedicated to protecting children from trafficking and exploitation. It develops and implements training activities to support social workers in identifying and protecting minors who are potential victims.

The Osservatorio Interventi Tratta³⁴ serves as a national observatory monitoring human trafficking cases in Italy. It provides data on sexual and labor exploitation and supports the implementation of social protection projects at the territorial level, as outlined in agreements with the Department for Equal Opportunities. The Numero Verde Nazionale Antitratta (National Anti-Trafficking Helpline)³⁵ is a 24/7, anonymous, and free service available throughout Italy. It aims to facilitate the emergence of trafficking cases and support victims by providing information on assistance options and connecting them with local social services.

Civil society organisations in Italy not only lead national advocacy efforts but they also deliver critical frontline services, particularly in high-risk or border areas. A prime example is the Agorà cooperative³⁶, which — together with other organisations in the Liguria region — provides essential support to individuals attempting to cross the border Italy-France at Ventimiglia, a well-known transit point. These organisations offer shelter, legal assistance, medical care, and psychosocial support to victims or potential victims of trafficking, often in extremely precarious conditions. Many NGOs operate through projects co-funded by the **Department for Equal Opportunities** or the **European Union**, reflecting a multi-level commitment to supporting victims.

However, focusing solely on a few prominent organisations does not capture the full scope of the anti-trafficking response in Italy. A wide range of smaller, locally-rooted organisations operate along key migration routes across Italy — from frontline actors in Sicily and other parts of Southern Italy, up to critical border areas in the Veneto and Piedmont regions in the north. These organisations are vital players in the national anti-trafficking system, offering tailored support based on local needs and contexts.³⁷

Indeed, civil society organizations (CSOs) play a central and often compensatory role in Italy's anti-trafficking system. Operating on the frontline of victim identification and assistance, they manage shelters for minors, provide individualized care, and facilitate long-term integration through housing and employment opportunities — in some cases using assets confiscated from organized crime. CSOs also lead prevention and awareness initiatives, including educational programs, artistic advocacy, and mediation within the penal system. Through multidisciplinary training and legal capacity-building, particularly via associations such as the Unione Nazionale Camere Minorili (UNCM), they strengthen knowledge transfer and professional development across sectors.

³² *Ibid.* § 35.

³³ Save the Children Italia, <https://www.savethechildren.it/>.

³⁴ Osservatorio Interventi Tratta, <https://osservatoriointerventitratta.it/en/the-service/>.

³⁵ Numero verde Antitratta, <https://osservatoriointerventitratta.it/en/helpline-800-290-290/>.

³⁶ Agorà coop, <https://www.agoracoop.it/homepage-en/>.

³⁷ See (1), §§ 219, 222-224.

At the same time, CSOs underline persistent weaknesses in the institutional response. These include the chronic lack of psychological support within public services — exacerbated by the removal of psychologists from juvenile justice teams — as well as ongoing fragmentation between civil and criminal justice systems and insufficient international coordination to protect victims' families in countries of origin. CSO representatives also report vulnerabilities within the reception system, such as disappearances and suspected cases of internal exploitation of unaccompanied minors, sometimes linked to corruption or organized criminal networks. Collaboration with public authorities remains uneven and often depends on individual leadership or political will, constrained by bureaucratic inertia and the difficulty of sustaining partnerships with schools and local administrations.

Despite these challenges and recurring funding instability, CSOs continue to develop innovative practices. Notable examples include the holistic rehabilitation initiative in the countryside of Palermo, in Partinico (Sicily), which combines housing and employment for victims of labor exploitation on confiscated mafia land; multidisciplinary training that integrates legal, psychosocial, and neuroscientific approaches; and creative advocacy tools such as theatre performances to raise awareness of trafficking. Increasingly, CSOs are also investing in the well-being of their own frontline staff, experimenting with therapist-led supervision and nature-based retreats to prevent burnout — recognizing that sustainable anti-trafficking work requires care for both victims and practitioners. Finally, CSOs play an active role in policy development, contributing to the establishment of voluntary guardianship frameworks and promoting the replication of national projects across different territories.

3.3. Coordination and cooperation

Italy has established a multi-level system of inter-institutional coordination to address trafficking in human beings, governed by both national legislation and policy frameworks. Among other tasks, the **Department for Equal Opportunities**, is tasked with the overall coordination of anti-trafficking efforts, including monitoring the implementation of the *NAP*.

The legal basis for this coordination is primarily found in *Law No. 228/2003 on measures against trafficking in persons*,³⁸ and *Legislative Decree No. 24/2014*, which transposed *EU Directive 2011/36/EU*.³⁹ These instruments mandate cooperation between governmental bodies, law enforcement, judicial authorities, and service providers. Notably, *Article 18* of *Legislative Decree 286/1998* institutionalised a referral system by allowing both judicial and social pathways for victims to access protection programmes, thereby formalising collaboration between the judiciary, police forces, and civil society organisations.⁴⁰

Coordination at the operational level is further supported by regional and local referral mechanisms, often implemented through joint protocols between prefectures, social services, health authorities, and anti-trafficking NGOs. These protocols outline the procedures for identifying, referring, and assisting victims — particularly minors — and often include multi-agency working groups.⁴¹ Local anti-trafficking networks, known as “progetti antitratta”, funded by the **Department for Equal Opportunities**, are key actors in this system, bringing together public and private stakeholders to implement victim protection and reintegration services across the national territory.

³⁸ See (27).

³⁹ See (20).

⁴⁰ See (14), Art. 18.

⁴¹ See (1), § 225.



Although these mechanisms are well-established in principle, several evaluations,⁴² including *GRETA*,⁴³ have highlighted challenges in practice, such as fragmentation of services, uneven regional coordination, and limited formalisation of cooperation between child protection services and law enforcement.

Field research revealed that Italy's anti-trafficking response remains highly fragmented across regions, with significant disparities in resources, expertise, and operational capacity. Practitioners consistently highlighted several systemic challenges: a shortage of trained professionals, the absence of formal coordination mechanisms among institutions, insufficient long-term protection pathways for victims, and legal uncertainty—particularly in cross-border cases.

At the same time, the research identified notable strengths and emerging best practices. Across all regions, NGOs were recognized as pivotal in building trust with victims and facilitating their engagement with institutions, particularly in cases involving minors and women reluctant to report abuse due to fear of retaliation or prior negative experiences with authorities. Such fears—especially when victims' families remain in their countries of origin—continue to hinder reporting and cooperation, complicating the dismantling of trafficking networks.

Practitioners further emphasized the growing importance of community-based and school-focused prevention strategies, as well as multidisciplinary collaboration among professionals from different sectors. Several bottom-up initiatives were cited as promising, including educational theatre projects, arts-based awareness campaigns, community activism, and targeted NGO programs addressing specific vulnerabilities.

In addition to these approaches, formalized frameworks such as the Trentino Protocol (2024) demonstrate the benefits of structured, multi-agency cooperation.

Collectively, these practices and frameworks contribute to addressing critical gaps in Italy's anti-trafficking system, offering replicable models that enhance institutional coordination and empower both victims and frontline professionals.

4. Child trafficking in context

4.1. Patterns and trends

In recent years, Italy has witnessed increasingly complex and evolving patterns of child trafficking, shaped by both global and regional dynamics. While a temporary decrease in the number of identified cases was observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, emerging data suggest a rebound, coupled with a transformation in the modes and structures of exploitation. Despite sexual exploitation and forced labour continuing to be the most prevalent forms of abuse, the phenomenon of “e-trafficking” — which involves the use of digital platforms for recruitment, online grooming, and distribution of exploitation material — has grown significantly since the pandemic.⁴⁴ According to *GRETA*'s 2024 evaluation, minors represented 12% of trafficking victims in 2018 but accounted for only 3.4% in 2021.⁴⁵ However,

⁴² U.S. Department of State, *Trafficking in Persons Report: Italy*, Washington D.C., 2024, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/italy/>.

⁴³ See (1).

⁴⁴ Save the Children Italia (2024), *La punta dell'iceberg - I minorenni accolti nel sistema di protezione antitrattra*, pp. 13-14, <https://www.savethechildren.it/cosa-facciamo/pubblicazioni/piccoli-schiavi-invisibili-2024>.

⁴⁵ See (1), § 15.

these official figures likely underrepresent the actual scope of the phenomenon, as underreporting remains a critical issue.

Save the Children's 2024 report *Piccoli Schiavi Invisibili* estimates that one in three trafficking victims identified in Italy is a child. In 2023, minors identified as potential victims were 3,1%, an increasing result compared with the 1,6% of 2022.⁴⁶

Child trafficking in Italy is deeply intertwined with migration flows and smuggling of migrants. In 2024, a pilot initiative was launched in collaboration with Italy's Anti-Trafficking Projects to expand outreach efforts to new contact areas, particularly at disembarkation ports and informal settlements. As part of this multi-agency approach, Anti-Trafficking Projects began conducting contact activities at these ports to identify individuals at risk of trafficking. In partnership with major NGOs involved in sea rescue, good practices were established for the early detection and referral of persons showing trafficking indicators. In 2024 alone, 68 outreach interventions were conducted across ports in eight provinces, reaching a total of 3,605 individuals. Among them were 295 presumed minors, underscoring the importance of targeted identification and referral procedures for children at risk of trafficking.⁴⁷

These cases reflect both enduring systemic challenges and the emergence of increasingly organised and transnational trafficking networks. The risk of re-trafficking also remains high among children returned to Italy under the Dublin Regulation, especially when adequate support and monitoring are lacking.

Field research highlighted several evolving dynamics shaping human trafficking in Italy. A recurring concern among stakeholders is the expanding use of digital technologies in both recruitment and exploitation. Online grooming, sextortion, and the use of encrypted messaging platforms have become standard tactics, often combined with traditional trafficking methods for sexual and labour exploitation. These digital forms also enable new types of coercion, including the circulation of child sexual abuse material and the involvement of victims in online fraud schemes.

In southern reception areas and northern transit corridors, these developments intersect with persistent vulnerabilities: unaccompanied minors, weak protection systems, and the influence of organised crime create conditions where digital exploitation can thrive. Labour exploitation remains the most prevalent form, especially in agriculture and construction, where illegal labour intermediation systems (caporalato) persist despite legal prohibitions.

Regional variations are evident. In Mestre (Veneto), prosecutors reported cases of minors aged 11–12 groomed and recruited into drug distribution networks — a pattern unique to this area. In southern regions, younger victims from Eritrea and Côte d'Ivoire have been increasingly identified, many deceived with promises of safety in other EU countries but ultimately subjected to domestic servitude. Authorities also expressed growing concern about trafficking involving “minors with children” and “very young children,” whose exploitation purposes remain unclear.

Street-based prostitution is reportedly declining, shifting toward indoor and online contexts that are harder to monitor. In rural or smaller communities, limited capacity and inadequate training hinder the detection of hidden forms of exploitation such as domestic servitude or coerced criminality.

Highlights from Sicilian prosecutors prove the evolving sophistication of criminal networks operating along the Central Mediterranean Route. These networks often use high-speed boats to transport small

⁴⁶ See (44), p. 20.

⁴⁷ Report Numero Verde Anti-tratta, 2023, pag. 24, <https://osservatoriointerventitratta.it/report/>.

groups, including families and children, from Tunisia to Sicily in a few hours. While such cases are typically framed as migrant smuggling, the same logistics and actors are frequently linked to other forms of organised crime, including trafficking for sexual or labour exploitation.

Investigators describe “economies of scope” within these networks — meaning that criminal groups involved in smuggling can easily diversify into trafficking and other illicit trades (such as contraband or extortion), leveraging the same routes, resources, and corrupt local partnerships. This multi-purpose criminal structure creates a high-risk environment for children, who may be moved across borders under the guise of migration but later subjected to exploitation in Italy or other EU countries.

4.2. Victim profile and groups at risk

Between January and May 2024, 62 minors were assessed for indicators of trafficking, representing 5.4% of all cases evaluated during this period. This marks a significant increase compared to 4.2% in the same period of 2022 and 3.8% in 2023.⁴⁸ The vast majority (81.3%) of these minors were aged between 16 and 18 years. In terms of nationality, the main countries of origin were Tunisia (19.4%), Côte d'Ivoire (12.9%), Bangladesh and Pakistan (11.3% each), Nigeria (9.7%), Egypt (8.1%), Sierra Leone and Guinea (6.5% each), and Gambia (4.8%). Boys accounted for 62.7% of the assessed minors, and girls for 37.3%.⁴⁹ The main referring bodies included reception centres (CAS), NGOs, local social services, and contact units. However, it is important to note that 25 assessments (40.3% of the total) were still ongoing at the time of reporting, suggesting that the final number of minors taken into care may be higher.⁵⁰

Key vulnerability factors include socio-economic hardship, disrupted family networks, precarious legal status, and lack of access to essential services. Many of these children are excluded from formal education and healthcare systems and lack effective legal guardianship.⁵¹ As highlighted by both Save the Children and GRETA, the absence of child-sensitive protection mechanisms and the deterrent effect of restrictive immigration policies often prevent minors from seeking help, increasing their exposure to exploitation.⁵²

Gender plays a decisive role in shaping the forms of abuse experienced. Girls, particularly from West African countries, are disproportionately affected by sexual exploitation and online grooming, while boys are more frequently subjected to forced labour or coerced into criminal activities.⁵³ Data from ECPAT Italy indicate that approximately 40% of trafficked children exploited for sexual purposes were abused by someone within their family or social environment, revealing a pattern of domestic or community-based trafficking in addition to cross-border dynamics.⁵⁴

Stakeholders reported that the profile of trafficking victims in Italy varies widely across regions and forms of exploitation, reflecting the adaptability of trafficking networks. Adult men make up the majority of identified victims — particularly in agriculture, construction, and meat processing — revealing a still under-recognised dimension of trafficking: the vulnerability of men in precarious labour

⁴⁸ See (44), pp. 20-22.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Save the Children, *Piccoli Schiavi Invisibili, Dentro lo sfruttamento: un'indagine sui figli dei braccianti a Latina e Ragusa*, 2023, <https://www.savethechildren.it/cosafacciamo/pubblicazioni/piccoli-schiavi-invisibili-2023>.

⁵² See (44), p. 51; see (1), § 168.

⁵³ See (44), pp. 19-22.

⁵⁴ Council of Europe (2024), Country Overview: Italy – *Ending Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation: State-of-play in light of the Lanzarote Convention*, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, pp. 11-13, <https://ecpat.org/story/country-overview-italy/>.

systems. Exploitation is often mediated by compatriots (such as Romanians, Pakistanis, or Africans) who act as recruiters or intermediaries, reproducing dynamics of hierarchy and dependency within migrant communities themselves. This blurs the conventional distinction between “perpetrator” and “victim,” showing how exploitation can be internalised within marginalised groups under conditions of structural inequality.

Professionals working in juvenile justice and protection services consistently identified unaccompanied foreign minors as one of the most at-risk groups. Their situation exemplifies the intersection of multiple disadvantages: lack of documentation, limited access to legal protection and assistance, and fragmented life histories that hinder proper identification. Practitioners describe this as a “state of administrative invisibility,” where minors remain excluded from both social services and formal protection systems.

Testimonies from victims from Algeria and Egypt further illustrate the continuum of violence that precedes arrival in Europe. Many recount being detained in Libya, subjected to debt bondage to finance their journey, and forced into exploitative arrangements that persist even after reaching Italy. These experiences often result in deep psychological trauma, leading to substance abuse and mental health disorders, which in turn reinforce cycles of vulnerability and re-exploitation. The absence of identity documents further prevents access to protection and assistance, even when consular cooperation is attempted. Fear of retaliation against family members and ongoing debts discourage many victims from reporting their exploiters, exposing the transnational reach of coercion.

The experiences of unaccompanied minors clearly demonstrate the intersectional nature of trafficking. Economic marginalisation, foreign nationality, unaccompanied status, and lack of documentation combine to perpetuate structural vulnerability. Emerging forms of exploitation risk extending these cycles, especially as educational gaps intersect with digital exposure. Practitioners observed that young people with limited sexual education—often relying on online pornography as a reference—are particularly vulnerable to online grooming and sexual coercion. Some minors also show patterns of indebtedness and involvement in petty criminality, suggesting how economic and social precarity can become intertwined with exploitation.

4.3. Factors leading to vulnerability

Understanding the drivers of child trafficking in Italy requires a multi-layered analysis of economic, systemic, and technological factors that together create high-risk environments for minors. Economic insecurity, exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis, has intensified children's vulnerability in certain areas, particularly in agricultural zones like Latina and Ragusa.⁵⁵ Here, many children of migrant farmworkers grow up without legal identity, access to education, or medical care, effectively rendering them invisible to institutional protections.

At the same time, Italy's reception system presents structural weaknesses that traffickers are quick to exploit. *GRETA* also notes the absence of coordinated, child-friendly referral mechanisms, particularly at border entry points and in initial accommodation facilities. The fear of deportation or detention, coupled with a lack of trust in institutions, often discourages children from reporting abuse or engaging with support services.⁵⁶

Digital exposure has emerged as a critical risk multiplier. Both ECPAT and Save the Children report significant increases in online grooming and child sexual exploitation. Italy ranks among the European countries with the highest intensity of digital trafficking activity. In 2021 alone, over 5,300 cases of

⁵⁵ See (51).

⁵⁶ See (1), § 239.

child pornography and more than 500 instances of online grooming were documented—a 47% increase compared to the previous year. These digital threats, combined with socio-economic exclusion and institutional shortcomings, create an ecosystem of vulnerability that traffickers systematically exploit to recruit, manipulate, and entrap children.⁵⁷

Stakeholders identified several structural factors that increase vulnerability to human trafficking in Italy. A concerning trend is the decreasing age of victims, with unaccompanied minors under 14 increasingly represented among new arrivals. Many come from fragile socio-economic or family backgrounds; some are orphans, while others are described as “second-class daughters”, reflecting entrenched gender hierarchies and neglect. Exposure to forced conscription, early marriage, domestic violence, and political instability further heightens their risk of exploitation. Poverty, limited education, and low digital literacy create enabling conditions that traffickers readily exploit.

Fear of retaliation and cultural coercion, including spiritual intimidation through practices such as juju⁵⁸, frequently deter victims from reporting abuse. These psychological control mechanisms sustain exploitation and erode trust in public institutions. Emerging risks are increasingly digital: younger children are highly exposed to online grooming and exploitation, particularly without parental supervision or digital awareness. Prosecutors report rising cases of online abuse and child sexual material, while social workers call for targeted digital education and psychosocial support.

At the systemic level, insufficient cross-border cooperation continues to hinder prevention and prosecution. Law enforcement agencies face operational barriers in collecting digital evidence across jurisdictions, and NGOs and child protection services report gaps in training and weak coordination with judicial authorities. These shortcomings delay victim identification and reduce the effectiveness of multi-agency responses.

5. Practical aspects of anti-trafficking efforts

5.1. Detection, investigation and prosecution

Child trafficking cases in Italy are typically identified through formal channels such as asylum and migration procedures, reception centres, and referrals from NGOs. However, *GRETA*’s 2024 evaluation points to persistent shortcomings in the early detection of trafficking indicators, particularly among unaccompanied and asylum-seeking minors.⁵⁹ It recommends the systematic application of binding *Standard Operating Procedures* at key reception points.⁶⁰ Despite these recommendations, restrictive migration policies and the widespread fear of detention continue to discourage minors from disclosing their experiences, thereby undermining identification efforts.⁶¹

Once a minor is identified as a potential victim, the **Minors Prosecutor’s Office** assumes responsibility for the investigation, working in coordination with specialized law enforcement units such as **anti-trafficking divisions of the police** and the **Guardia di Finanza**. Effective investigations require the consistent application of child-sensitive procedures, including pre-trial video-recorded testimony, protective anonymity measures, and the involvement of child psychologists during questioning.

⁵⁷ See (54).

⁵⁸ For further details, check: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/juju-magic>.

⁵⁹ See (1), §§ 257-258.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ See (56).

According to recent findings, such measures, provided by different provisions under Italian Law, remain unapplied in practice.⁶²

Training and capacity-building for investigators remain critical weaknesses. The European Commission has noted that trafficking cases involving children demand specialised expertise and cross-border cooperation. Yet in Italy, investigations are often under-resourced and subject to delays, hampering the overall effectiveness of the justice response.⁶³

The GRETA report also raises concern over persistently low prosecution and conviction rates.⁶⁴ In addition, although victims are legally entitled to claim compensation as civil parties in criminal trials, compensation remains rare and payments are frequently delayed.⁶⁵

An additional concern is the prosecution of child victims for crimes committed as a result of their trafficking experience. While Articles 46 and 54 of the Criminal Code provide grounds for non-punishment in cases of coercion or necessity, it is highlighted the inconsistent application of these provisions.⁶⁶

Stakeholders working on human trafficking in Italy report significant challenges in victim identification, evidence collection, and ensuring effective access to justice, particularly for minors. Prosecutors note that the complexity of trafficking cases, combined with limited investigative resources, often results in cases being classified as lesser offenses, such as bodily harm or threats, leading to chronic underreporting of true exploitation.

Following major tragedies such as the 2013 Lampedusa shipwreck, Italian prosecutors began shifting from a case-by-case approach focused solely on smugglers to broader investigations targeting the organised criminal networks behind repeated crossings. This change of perspective — treating smuggling and trafficking as part of an integrated criminal ecosystem — led to stronger inter-agency cooperation between prosecutors, law enforcement, and anti-mafia units.

However, experts note that cases involving child victims remain under-investigated due to evidentiary challenges and the mobility of victims, who often leave reception centres within days of arrival. Enhancing identification and protection mechanisms for unaccompanied minors within this framework remains a key priority.

At local level, according to officers from the Palermo Squadra Mobile, investigations into human trafficking in Sicily are primarily handled by specialised sections focused on foreign criminality and prostitution, distinct from the Anti-Mafia Directorate. Over the past decade, institutional priorities have shifted towards migrant smuggling, reflecting political and humanitarian pressures linked to maritime arrivals. Nevertheless, investigations into trafficking—particularly of Nigerian women and minors—continue to emerge mainly through information shared during asylum procedures before Territorial Commissions. These statements, however, are confidential and cannot be directly used in criminal proceedings unless victims voluntarily reiterate them to law enforcement. This structural limitation, combined with the victims' fear and dependency, often impedes the initiation of investigations.

⁶² *Ibid.* §§ 130-137.

⁶³ *See* (42).

⁶⁴ *See* (1), §§ 103-106.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* § 87.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* §§ 119-124.

At the operational level, fragmented data systems and the absence of shared registration mechanisms hinder identification. Unaccompanied minors, frequently undocumented or using multiple aliases, are difficult to trace, delaying interventions. Many minors disappear from reception centers shortly after arrival, demonstrating the effectiveness of criminal networks in re-exploitation. Victims often refrain from reporting due to fear of retaliation against family members abroad or debts owed to traffickers. Online exploitation, including grooming and child sexual abuse material, introduces further challenges requiring specialized digital expertise and cross-agency coordination.

Inter-institutional communication remains weak. Municipalities, social services, and judicial bodies lack standardized information-sharing protocols, while international cooperation is slow and bureaucratically complex, limiting protection for victims' families abroad. Training for law enforcement is often overly technical and insufficiently trauma-informed.

Despite these gaps, promising practices exist. Multisectoral roundtables and joint analyses among prosecutors, police, courts, and NGOs have fostered better coordination. Examples are reported in the area of Trapani, in Sicily.

5.2. Victim support

Victim support in Italy is primarily structured around the *Single Programme for the Emergence, Assistance and Social Integration of Victims of Trafficking and Exploitation (Programma Unico)*, coordinated and funded by the Department for Equal Opportunities. This programme represents the central pillar of Italy's victim assistance system and is implemented through a network of public and private actors — primarily anti-trafficking NGOs and social cooperatives. The latest funding cycle (2022–2024) allocated approximately €27.2 million to 21 multi-regional and regional projects, ensuring coverage across all 20 Italian regions and autonomous provinces. The services provided include identification and outreach activities, legal counselling, medical and psychological assistance, emergency and long-term accommodation, and socio-occupational integration paths.⁶⁷

Despite the comprehensive nature of the programme, several structural and operational challenges persist, particularly with regard to the identification and protection of child victims. Accommodation facilities for victims, while geographically distributed, also reflect this gap in responsiveness to the needs of minors. As of 2023, the Department for Equal Opportunities-funded victim assistance network included 369 shelters with a total of 1,256 beds, but only 44 places were specifically designated for minors.⁶⁸ This limitation is further compounded by the fragmentation of responsibilities between national and regional systems and the overlapping competencies in the child protection, asylum, and anti-trafficking sectors. In many cases, identified or presumed child victims of trafficking — especially unaccompanied foreign minors — are placed in general reception centres for asylum seekers (SAI), which often lack specialised staff or adequate child protection mechanisms. This not only risks retraumatization but may hinder proper victim status recognition and access to appropriate assistance.⁶⁹

From a policy standpoint, Italy's *NAP* includes specific objectives aimed at strengthening victim support, including improved identification of vulnerable groups such as children, training for

⁶⁷ *Ibid.* §§ 242–243.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* § 244.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.* §§ 64, 236.



professionals working with minors, and greater coordination with child protection systems. However, the implementation of these objectives remains uneven and slow.⁷⁰

Another concern relates to the temporal and financial stability of victim support mechanisms. The funded projects operate on short cycles (17 months in the current round), which undermines the continuity of care and the possibility of long-term planning, especially for children who require sustained and multidisciplinary interventions. Moreover, the lack of harmonisation between anti-trafficking assistance and other relevant frameworks creates fragmentation that might lead to missed opportunities for referral, increased risk of re-trafficking, and insufficient follow-up during key transitions (e.g., from childhood to adulthood or upon return to the country of origin).⁷¹

Field evidence indicates that Italy's system for protecting and assisting trafficked children is highly uneven. Access to quality support depends largely on specific anti-trafficking projects and the individual commitment of professionals rather than a consistently applied national framework. Specialized NGOs, such as Associazione Penelope in Sicily, provide structured care pathways including initial assessments and ongoing psychosocial support. Early identification mechanisms in reception facilities, based on standardized indicators used by organizations like Save the Children and the Red Cross, enable rapid detection of trafficking risks. However, these services are project-based and geographically limited, forcing the transfer of children across regions and disrupting continuity of care.

Staff training, trauma-informed practices, and management of complex vulnerabilities are inconsistent, particularly for very young or pregnant girls and women. Services are concentrated in urban and coastal areas, leaving rural and peripheral regions under-resourced. The protection system often operates more slowly than trafficking networks, with minors frequently disappearing shortly after arrival, highlighting the persistence of criminal control.

5.3. Prevention

Italy has adopted a number of prevention measures to address human trafficking, including policy initiatives, awareness-raising campaigns, outreach to at-risk communities, and support mechanisms such as hotlines and help desks. While these efforts show signs of progress, significant gaps remain, especially in terms of strategic coherence, independent evaluation, and targeted education campaigns for the general public and vulnerable groups.

The *NAP* still lacks key components such as a timeline for implementation, an independent monitoring and evaluation body, and the designation of a ministry with enforcement authority.⁷²

Outreach and awareness campaigns in 2023 focused primarily on labor exploitation in high-risk sectors such as agriculture. These initiatives were implemented with a multidisciplinary approach, involving cultural mediators, labor inspectors, and international organizations. The government also funded projects to raise awareness among migrant workers, who are particularly vulnerable to trafficking, and partnered with labor inspectors and NGOs to strengthen field-level engagement.⁷³

Local-level interventions were less systematically documented but included continued efforts by labor exploitation task forces active in various regions. These groups — made up of local law enforcement, labor inspectors, and NGOs — focused on preventing trafficking through inspections, training, and

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* § 245.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* § 253.

⁷² *Ibid.* § 23.

⁷³ See (42), Prevention.

community outreach. However, limitations remain: labor inspectors lack the legal authority to identify victims formally and cannot inspect private households without consent, which undermines efforts to uncover domestic servitude. Moreover, migrant communities, including unaccompanied minors and Ukrainian refugees, were frequently exposed to risks of exploitation due to gaps in monitoring and services.⁷⁴

Education and school-based prevention programmes were not systematically reported at the national level. There is no evidence of the implementation of large-scale educational campaigns aimed at children, youth, or educators, despite GRETA's ongoing recommendations. Similarly, efforts to reduce the demand for sexual exploitation — especially involving minors — were minimal. No specific measures were reported to discourage Italian citizens from engaging in commercial sexual exploitation abroad, despite past allegations and calls from civil society.⁷⁵

Current measures demonstrate uneven effectiveness and limited reach, with structural and operational gaps undermining consistent implementation. Barriers are predominantly systemic, though temporary resource limitations and lack of awareness also contribute, underscoring the need for sustained and coordinated interventions.

The National Anti-Trafficking Plan provides early detection mechanisms through territorial commissions, but these remain underutilized. Risk assessment is further complicated by unaccompanied minors disappearing from reception facilities and the continued influence of organized criminal networks.

Stakeholders highlighted key unmet needs: institutionalizing successful pilot projects, providing systematic and specialized training for first responders, recruiting culturally and legally trained mediators, developing technological tools to trace minors, strengthening cross-border cooperation, and creating sustainable structures to ensure long-term prevention and early intervention.

6. International cooperation mechanisms

Italy's framework for international and cross-border cooperation against child trafficking is shaped by multiple international and regional instruments. Collaboration occurs through bilateral agreements, multilateral mechanisms, and regional law enforcement platforms, including **EUROPOL**, **INTERPOL**, **EUROJUST**, and participation in EU priority actions such as **EMPACT** (European Multidisciplinary Platform Against Criminal Threats) on trafficking in human beings. Italian authorities—including the **Department for Equal Opportunities**, the **Central Directorate for Immigration and Border Police**, specialized police and Carabinieri units, and the judiciary—actively engage in joint investigations and intelligence-sharing to dismantle transnational criminal networks. Joint Investigation Teams have been particularly instrumental in cross-border operations targeting child exploitation.⁷⁶

Bilateral and multilateral agreements with countries of origin and transit, such as Nigeria, Albania, Romania, and Tunisia, facilitate information exchange, joint risk assessments, and the deployment of liaison officers.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, GRETA and civil society actors have highlighted shortcomings in the implementation and evaluation of these agreements, particularly regarding the identification and

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ See (1), §§ 149-151.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

protection of child victims.⁷⁸ The Memorandum of Understanding with Libya (renewed in 2023) has been controversial, as reports document serious human rights violations against minors intercepted at sea and returned to Libya.⁷⁹

In practice, judicial authorities rely on Eurojust, the European Arrest Warrant, and letters rogatory for transnational cases. However, chronic personnel shortages and limited structural support frequently delay or restrict the effective use of these instruments.

Cross-border cooperation remains uneven and often depends on the initiative of individual actors rather than standardized procedures. Investigations tend to focus on isolated cases rather than broader criminal networks. Regional disparities exacerbate these challenges: northern regions benefit from multidisciplinary teams and guardianship models, yet these initiatives are often short-term and underfunded. In less structured areas, such as agricultural zones, informal settlements, and ports, responses rely heavily on NGOs. Prosecutors in these contexts frequently report unaccompanied minors disappearing shortly after arrival, suggesting targeted criminal exploitation.

Overall, institutional responses remain fragmented and reactive, contrasting sharply with the agility and transnational reach of traffickers. Entry points such as Sicily, Lampedusa, and Ventimiglia reveal high rates of disappearances, highlighting the urgent need for strengthened early intervention and protection systems. Even in northern regions where pilot initiatives are more advanced, sustainability is constrained by short-term funding and limited institutional integration.

Finally, weak inter-agency coordination persists as a systemic barrier. Collaboration among social services, law enforcement, the judiciary, and local authorities is often informal and reliant on personal commitment, undermining effectiveness in complex and transnational cases. Addressing these gaps requires adaptive, context-specific strategies that account for regional vulnerabilities, demographic shifts, and the evolving tools traffickers employ.

7. Conclusion

The research conducted within the Safe Borders project reveals a complex picture of Italy's response to child trafficking — one marked by strong local expertise and committed professionals, yet hindered by structural fragmentation, uneven implementation, and persistent resource constraints.

A consistent finding across stakeholder interviews was the **absence of a coherent national framework ensuring continuity of protection and coordination** among institutions. The quality of assistance depends heavily on temporary, project-based funding and the personal commitment of professionals.

At the operational level, **weak inter-institutional communication** and the **lack of standardized data-sharing mechanisms** delay both victim identification and prosecution. International cooperation, though formally structured through EU and bilateral instruments, often functions reactively and depends on individual initiative rather than institutionalized procedures. Prosecutors repeatedly highlighted procedural delays and limited resources as major barriers to implementing tools such as the European Arrest Warrant and letters rogatory.

Another recurring theme was the **limited integration of trauma-informed and child-sensitive approaches** within both the justice and reception systems. The removal of psychologists from reception

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, §§ 154-155.

⁷⁹ Human Rights Council, Detailed findings of the Independent Fact-Finding Mission on Libya, A/HRC/52/CRP.8.

centres has severely undermined early detection and psychological support. Victims' testimonies are often fragile, and without sustained psychosocial assistance, retraumatisation and withdrawal from proceedings remain common.

Despite these challenges, stakeholders identified several strengths that could serve as **replicable models**:

- **Multi-agency roundtables** at regional level, enabling dialogue between law enforcement, judiciary, and NGOs.
- **Community-based and school-focused prevention** initiatives that raise awareness through arts and participatory methods.
- **Specialized training and peer supervision** for professionals, which improve both capacity and staff well-being.

Based on the evidence gathered, the following recommendations emerge:

1. **Institutionalize coordination mechanisms** such as regional multi-agency tables and protocols to ensure continuity and accountability beyond project cycles.
2. **Strengthen early identification systems**, especially in reception facilities and border areas, through standardized indicators, trauma-informed staff, and digital monitoring tools.
3. **Reintroduce and expand psychological support** in child reception centres to guarantee comprehensive care and effective participation in judicial proceedings.
4. **Enhance cross-border cooperation** by streamlining communication between prosecutors, law enforcement, and consular authorities, and by formalizing informal networks that have proven effective in practice.
5. **Sustain professional training** on trafficking dynamics, digital exploitation, and child-sensitive procedures for all frontline actors, including police, judiciary, and social services.
6. **Scale up and replicate successful local models**, ensuring their integration into the national protection framework through stable funding and policy support.

Ultimately, Italy's response to child trafficking requires a shift from fragmented, project-based interventions to a **systemic, victim-centred approach** grounded in coordination, continuity, and transnational cooperation. Only through sustained institutional commitment can prevention, protection, and prosecution be effectively aligned to address the evolving dynamics of child trafficking.

Annex: Exemplary cases

Country <i>Name of the country where the case occurred or was identified.</i>	Italy
Source of information <i>Court decision, official report, NGO case file, media article, interview respondent (generalised to preserve confidentiality).</i>	GRETA 2024 Report; NGO case file (PIAM Onlus, Asti)
Date of case (or period)	2016-2018

<i>Month/Year or date range if exact date is unknown.</i>	
Victim profile <i>Age at time of trafficking, gender, nationality, vulnerability factors (e.g., poverty, family breakdown, prior abuse, migration status).</i>	Girl, 16 years old at the time of trafficking, Nigerian national. Came from a low-income family, with limited education and exposure to gender-based violence in the country of origin.
Type of exploitation <i>Sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, forced begging, forced criminality, domestic servitude, illegal adoption / sale of babies, removal of organs, other.</i>	Sexual exploitation in street-based prostitution.
Recruitment and control methods <i>Means of recruitment (e.g., deception, coercion, abduction, online grooming), recruiter relationship to victim (if known) (e.g., family, acquaintance, organised group), control methods used (e.g., threats, debt bondage, confiscation of documents, violence, isolation).</i>	Recruited in Benin City by a family acquaintance offering work as a domestic helper in Europe. Upon arrival in Libya, subjected to abuse and forced to pay a “travel debt” of €35,000. Coercion reinforced by <i>juju</i> rituals and threats to her family.
Trafficking route <i>Country of origin, transit countries, country of destination, internal trafficking</i>	Nigeria → Niger → Libya (detention camp) → Italy (arrival by sea in Sicily) → transferred to reception centre in Piedmont → escaped and trafficked to Turin.
Identification and assistance <i>How was the victim identified? (e.g., law enforcement operation, referral by NGO, self-report), was the victim formally recognised as a trafficking victim, type of support provided (e.g., shelter, legal aid, psychosocial support, family reunification), was the child referred through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).</i>	Identified through NGO outreach after a police raid in Turin. Recognised as a victim under Art. 18 of the Italian Immigration Law. Received accommodation in a protected shelter, legal assistance, and psychological support under the national anti-trafficking programme.
Investigation and outcome <i>Was the case investigated, number of suspects identified (if any), prosecution and outcome (if known) (e.g., conviction, pending, dismissed), barriers to justice or protection (e.g., fear of retaliation, lack of evidence, delays).</i>	Five traffickers (four Nigerian women, one Italian intermediary) were arrested and convicted for trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation (sentences from 8 to 14 years). The victim was repatriated voluntarily to Nigeria under an IOM reintegration programme.

Country <i>Name of the country where the case occurred or was identified.</i>	Italy
Source of information <i>Court decision, official report, NGO case file, media article, interview respondent (generalised to preserve confidentiality).</i>	GRETA 2024 Report
Date of case (or period) <i>Month/Year or date range if exact date is unknown.</i>	2018-2020
Victim profile <i>Age at time of trafficking, gender, nationality, vulnerability factors (e.g., poverty, family breakdown, prior abuse, migration status).</i>	Three Romanian boys aged 15–17, from rural areas of Bacău. Economic deprivation and school dropout. Travelled to Italy with adult relatives.
Type of exploitation <i>Sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, forced begging, forced criminality, domestic servitude, illegal adoption / sale of babies, removal of organs, other.</i>	Labour exploitation in agriculture under conditions amounting to forced labour.
Recruitment and control methods <i>Means of recruitment (e.g., deception, coercion, abduction, online grooming), recruiter relationship to victim (if known) (e.g., family, acquaintance, organised group), control methods used (e.g., threats, debt bondage, confiscation of documents, violence, isolation).</i>	Recruited by Romanian intermediaries (“caporali”) promising legitimate seasonal work. Upon arrival, passports were confiscated; minors worked up to 12 hours daily for €2/hour, lived in abandoned buildings without sanitation. Controlled through debt bondage and intimidation.
Trafficking route <i>Country of origin, transit countries, country of destination, internal trafficking</i>	Romania → Italy (Apulia region, Foggia province). Internal movement between rural sites.
Identification and assistance <i>How was the victim identified? (e.g., law enforcement operation, referral by NGO, self-report), was the victim formally recognised as a trafficking victim, type of support provided (e.g., shelter, legal aid, psychosocial support, family reunification), was the child referred through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).</i>	Identified by Carabinieri during a coordinated inspection with the Labour Inspectorate and NGO <i>Casa dei Diritti Sociali</i> . Referred through the National Referral Mechanism and relocated to a child protection centre.e.

Investigation and outcome <i>Was the case investigated, number of suspects identified (if any), prosecution and outcome (if known) (e.g., conviction, pending, dismissed), barriers to justice or protection (e.g., fear of retaliation, lack of evidence, delays).</i>	Ten suspects charged with trafficking and labour exploitation; six convicted (sentences between 6 and 10 years). Victims granted residence permits for social protection.
General observations <i>Summary of key insights, challenges, or promising practices from this case that could inform policy or capacity building</i>	The case illustrates the intersection between child trafficking and the Italian system of <i>caporalato</i> . Despite successful prosecution, systemic monitoring of child labour in agriculture remains weak and seasonal.

Country <i>Name of the country where the case occurred or was identified.</i>	Italy
Source of information <i>Court decision, official report, NGO case file, media article, interview respondent (generalised to preserve confidentiality).</i>	Save the Children Italy reports (2022–2023)
Date of case (or period) <i>Month/Year or date range if exact date is unknown.</i>	2020-2022
Victim profile <i>Age at time of trafficking, gender, nationality, vulnerability factors (e.g., poverty, family breakdown, prior abuse, migration status).</i>	Male, 15 years old, Egyptian national. Arrived as an unaccompanied minor in Sicily. No family in Europe, low education, indebted to traffickers for journey cost (€3,000).
Type of exploitation <i>Sexual exploitation, labour exploitation, forced begging, forced criminality, domestic servitude, illegal adoption / sale of babies, removal of organs, other.</i>	Forced criminality (drug distribution in Palermo).
Recruitment and control methods <i>Means of recruitment (e.g., deception, coercion, abduction, online grooming), recruiter relationship to victim (if known) (e.g., family, acquaintance, organised group), control methods used (e.g., threats, debt</i>	Recruited by compatriots within the migrant community in Palermo, offering “work” opportunities after leaving reception centre. Controlled through debt bondage, threats of violence, and surveillance by adult exploiters.

<i>bondage, confiscation of documents, violence, isolation).</i>	
Trafficking route <i>Country of origin, transit countries, country of destination, internal trafficking</i>	Egypt → Libya → Italy (Lampedusa → Palermo).
Identification and assistance <i>How was the victim identified? (e.g., law enforcement operation, referral by NGO, self-report), was the victim formally recognised as a trafficking victim, type of support provided (e.g., shelter, legal aid, psychosocial support, family reunification), was the child referred through the National Referral Mechanism (NRM).</i>	Initially treated as a juvenile offender after arrest for small-scale drug sale. Later identified as a trafficking victim after social services and the Juvenile Court's guardian intervention. Transferred to a protected community, provided legal aid and psychological counselling.
Investigation and outcome <i>Was the case investigated, number of suspects identified (if any), prosecution and outcome (if known) (e.g., conviction, pending, dismissed), barriers to justice or protection (e.g., fear of retaliation, lack of evidence, delays).</i>	Two adult Egyptians arrested for trafficking and forced criminal exploitation; case ongoing. Victim received a temporary residence permit and education support.
General observations <i>Summary of key insights, challenges, or promising practices from this case that could inform policy or capacity building</i>	The case demonstrates the challenge of distinguishing victims from offenders among foreign minors involved in criminal activities. Early coordination between law enforcement and social services was key to reclassifying the case and ensuring protection rather than punishment.