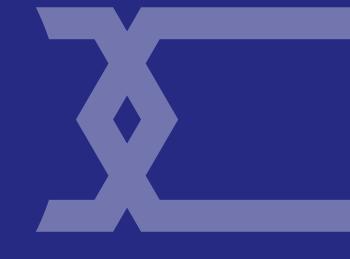


Chapter 5. VoT sensitive approach in identifying and interviewing victims

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5. VoT Sensitive Approach in identifying and interviewing victims

5.1 **Introduction to Chapter**

The chapter 'VoT Sensitive Approach in Identifying and Interviewing Victims' provides essential knowledge and practical tools for professionals engaged in combating trafficking in human beings for labour exploitation. Designed to address the specific challenges of working with victims of trafficking (VoT), this module equips participants with skills to identify victims and conduct interviews in a manner that is trauma-informed, culturally sensitive and respectful of human dignity. The target groups for this training include law enforcement authorities, prosecutors, labour inspectors and frontline practitioners such as social workers, health workers, child protection officers and migration authorities. These professionals share a common objective to enhance the identification of victims and strengthen the prevention, investigation and prosecution of trafficking crimes across the European Union, in line with the broader goals of the **ERADICATING II project.**

Chapter Learning Objectives 5.2

Understand the concept of a VoT-sensitive approach: Understand trauma and define the principles of a victim-cantered, trauma-informed and culturally sensitive approach in the context of human trafficking for labour exploitation.

Recognise indicators of trafficking: Identify key signs and behaviours that may suggest an individual is a victim of labour trafficking.

























- Develop effective communication skills: Apply techniques for building trust and rapport with victims, ensuring interviews are conducted with empathy, confidentiality and respect for the victim's rights and well-being.
- Conduct safe and ethical interviews: Utilise knowledge for obtaining accurate and reliable information from victims while minimising re-traumatisation and ensuring their physical and emotional safety.
- **Promote victim protection and support**: Recognise the importance of referring victims to appropriate support services.

Definitions 5.3

Human Trafficking

Human trafficking is the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of people through force, fraud or deception, with the aim of exploiting them for profit. Men, women and children of all ages and from all backgrounds can become victims of this crime, which occurs in every region of the world.

Labour Trafficking

Human trafficking with the purpose of labour exploitation, in which individuals are compelled to work through the use of force, fraud or coercion. Common indicators include unpaid wages, excessive working hours, confiscation of documents, unsafe living or working conditions and physical abuse.

























Victim of Trafficking (VoT)

A person who has been subjected to exploitation through means such as coercion, deception, abuse of power, or vulnerability for purposes including forced labour, sexual exploitation or other forms of abuse.

VoT Sensitive Approach

A method of interacting with and supporting individuals who are identified or suspected to be victims of trafficking. It emphasizes empathy, dignity and respect while addressing the unique needs and vulnerabilities of victims. This approach integrates principles from trauma-informed care, victim-centred strategies and culturally sensitive practices to create a supportive and empowering environment for victims.

Trauma

Trauma is a psychological and emotional response to a distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It may result from either witnessing or experiencing an event that poses a fundamental threat to one's physical and mental integrity or survival.

Trauma-informed Approach

This approach enhances understanding, recognising, and responding to the effects of trauma on individuals. It emphasises creating safe and supportive environment that avoids re-traumatisation and empowers individuals to heal.

























Victim-centred Approach

A victim-centred approach is a method of supporting individuals that prioritises their rights, needs and well-being. It ensures that victims are treated with dignity, respect, and empathy and emphasises their autonomy in decision-making.

Cultural Sensitivity

The ability to understand, respect and appropriately respond to cultural differences and practices when working with victims from diverse backgrounds.

Re-traumatisation

Additional harm experienced by a victim due to insensitive or inappropriate responses from authorities or support systems.

Confidentiality

The principle of keeping information shared by victims private and only disclosing it with their informed consent or when legally required to protect their safety or the safety of others.

Theoretical / informative part 5.4

Identifying victims of human trafficking, particularly labour trafficking, is a challenging yet critical process that requires a nuanced, trauma-informed approach. Many victims do not self-identify as such, often due to fear, coercion, psychological manipulation or a lack of awareness about their exploitation. Consequently, frontline responders, including law enforcement, prosecutors, labour inspectors and frontline

























practitioners such as social workers, health workers, child protection officers and migration authorities, play a crucial role in detecting trafficking indicators and initiating interventions to protect the victims.

Complexities in victim identification

Traffickers often employ sophisticated methods to control and exploit their victims, making detection difficult. Victims may appear to live or work in seemingly normal environments while actually being subjects of abuse and coercion behind closed doors. Common barriers to victim identification include:

- Fear of retaliation victims may fear threats or violence against themselves or their families if they disclose their situation.
- Lack of trust in authorities negative experiences or fears of arrest, deportation or punishment can prevent victims from seeking help.
- Psychological manipulation many victims are subjected to tactics that distort their perception of reality, such as dependency on their traffickers or Stockholm Syndrome.
- Cultural and linguistic barriers victims may face challenges in communicating their experiences or understanding their rights due to language differences or cultural norms.

Key indicators of labour trafficking

Identifying trafficking victims requires careful observation of behavioural, physical and situational indicators:

























- Behavioural signs victims may show fear, anxiety, depression, memory gaps or deliver inconsistent accounts. They might appear too submissive or display unwillingness to engage with authorities.
- Physical signs evidence of physical abuse, malnutrition, exhaustion or untreated medical issues are common among victims.
- Situational signs victims often lack access to personal identification documents, may live in overcrowded or unsafe housing and work excessive hours under harsh conditions for little or no pay.

Stages of trafficking to consider during the identification process

1. Recruitment

Identify the form of recruitment – through deception, coercion, debts.

2. Transportation

Determine the conditions under which they were moved, including the methods and individuals involved.

3. Exploitation

Identify the nature of the abuse, such as forced labour, debt bondage or threats.

4. Reintegration or return

Recognise the challenges victims face in escaping or re-establishing their lives.

The role of screening tools

Structured screening tools, such as the <u>IOM Screening Tools</u> or <u>the Trafficking Victim</u> <u>Identification Tool (TVIT)</u> by the Vera Institute of Justice, are important for assessing

























potential cases. These tools guide interviewers in asking the right guestions to distinguish trafficking victims from individuals in other vulnerable situations. Screenings should prioritise:

- Privacy and safety, ensuring the victim feels secure during the process.
- Open-ended questions that allow victims to share their experiences freely without feeling judged or coerced.
- Informed consent, explaining the purpose of the interview and how the information will be used.

VoT sensitive approach in identification

Trauma often elicits intense feelings of fear, helplessness, or horror, and it can manifest with both psychological and physical impacts. A key characteristic of trauma is the possibility of re-living the experience through intrusive memories, flashbacks, or emotional triggers, which can affect the individual's well-being and behaviour.

Trauma can have the following effects on the **brain**:

1) Alterations in Brain Function:

- Trauma triggers chemical responses in the brain, significantly affecting perception, reactions, behaviour and memory.
- These responses can disrupt emotional regulation and lead to survival mechanisms such as fight, flight or freeze, pushing individuals out of their 'window of tolerance' (the optimal state where stress and emotions are manageable).

























2) Impact on Memory:

- Memory is stored differently in the brain following trauma, often fragmented or disorganised.
- Victims may experience delayed reporting or difficulty recalling details and the sequence of events. This is a natural response, not a sign of dishonesty.

3) Involuntary Responses:

- Trauma responses are automatic and beyond the individual's conscious control.
- Misinterpretation of these responses (by law enforcement or others) can lead to judgments that victims are withholding information or being untruthful.

Understanding the effects of trauma and using VoT sensitive and trauma-informed approach is therefore essential to ensure that victims are treated with dignity and care throughout the identification process. This includes:

- Prioritising safety create an environment where victims feel secure and supported.
- Building trust recognise that trust-building takes time, especially with individuals who may have faced betrayal or abuse.
- Empowering victims ensure victims have control over their choices and are not pressured into actions they are uncomfortable with.

VoT sensitive interviewing

When interviewing victims of labour trafficking, adopting the VoT sensitive approach is again crucial. It begins with creating a safe, empathetic environment where victims feel

























supported and respected. Trafficking victims may have been controlled through fear, threats or psychological manipulation, making it critical to establish trust early on. This includes ensuring immediate needs, such as food, clothing, and shelter, are met before initiating discussions. The setting should be neutral and non-threatening, avoiding locations that could be perceived as intimidating, such as police stations, unless necessary. Professional outfit that conveys approachability rather than authority is encouraged, and interpreters or support staff (if needed) must be carefully chosen to ensure neutrality and cultural competence.

The interview process should prioritise the victim's autonomy, dignity and emotional well-being. Interviewers must explain the purpose and structure of the interview, clarify the victim's rights and set expectations about the duration and content. Allowing victims to dictate the pace of the conversation and to pause or discontinue at any time fosters a sense of control and safety. Open-ended, non-leading questions are essential to encourage free narratives, and the language used should be sensitive to cultural and individual contexts. Terminology should align with the victim's experiences and avoid potentially stigmatising or confusing phrases.

Victims may exhibit signs of trauma, such as minimisation, denial or inconsistent accounts, due to their psychological state. Trauma can disrupt memory and emotional processing, making it challenging for victims to provide a coherent narrative. Interviewers must approach these inconsistencies with understanding, reframing their questions if necessary and allowing victims multiple opportunities to clarify. Avoiding blame or judgment is vital, victims should be reassured that their experiences are valid and that they are not responsible for the harm they endured.

























Building trust requires genuine expressions of care and empathy. Acknowledging the victim's courage in sharing their story and affirming their right to safety and dignity are key elements. Statements such as 'Your safety is our priority' and 'You are not to blame for what happened to you' can help establish rapport and alleviate fears of judgment or retaliation.

The integration of confidentiality protocols is essential to protect victims from further harm. Discussing how their information will be used, obtaining consent for its use, and limiting access to their details are critical steps. Interpreters and staff involved in the interview process should sign confidentiality agreements, ensuring that sensitive information is not shared beyond authorised personnel.

Recording interviews should be approached with care, ensuring victims are comfortable with the method used, whether audio, video or written documentation. Any recording must be transparent, with informed consent obtained beforehand. If victims express discomfort, alternative methods should be offered.

Interviews must adhere to ethical and legal standards. Jurisdictional laws, particularly those governing the rights of minors and the use of interpreters, must be followed. Victims' rights, such as access to legal representation and temporary residency, should be safeguarded throughout the process. Ethical practices demand that victims are never pressured into testifying. Transparency about the potential legal implications of their testimony is critical for ensuring informed cooperation.

Adopting the **PEACE model** provides a structured framework for interviews in several stages:

























- 1) Planning and preparation involve understanding the victim's context and arranging support resources, such as trauma-informed counselling, if needed.
- 2) **Engaging and explaining** help build rapport and set a collaborative tone.
- 3) The **account** stage focuses on gathering information through the victim's free narrative, with minimal interruptions.
- 4) Closure and evaluation ensure that the victim's immediate concerns are addressed and that the process is reviewed for completeness and sensitivity.

Examples for VoT sensitive questions*:

Table 9. Examples for VoT sensitive questions

NO	YES
'Why did you?' 'Why didn't you?'	When (specific event happened), what were your feelings and thoughts?' 'Are you able to tell more about what happened when?'
'Start at the beginning and tell me what happened.' 'How long did the assault last?'	Where would you like to start?' 'Would you tell me what you are able to remember about your experience?' 'What are you able to tell me about what was happening before/during/after the assault?'

























'Why did you go with the suspect?' 'Do you think you led them on?'	Can you describe what you were thinking and feeling when you went with the suspect?' 'Did the suspect's behaviour change after you went
	with them? How did this make you feel?'
'Why were you out at this time and at this location?'	'What are you able to tell me about what brought you to the location at this time/day?'
'Why didn't you leave?'	'Are you able to describe what was happening while you were in (the room, the car, the house, etc.)?'
	'What were your thoughts and/or feelings while you were in (the room, the car, the house, etc.)?'
'Did you say no?'	'What are you able to recall doing or saying during the incident?'
	'How did the suspect respond to your words or actions? Do you remember how that made you feel?'
'Did you fight back?'	'What did you feel like you were physically capable of doing during the incident?'
	'What was going on in your mind when you realized you were in danger?'

























'Why didn't you report right away?'	'Did anything in particular cause you to come tell us about this incident today?' 'Was there someone you trusted to tell about the incident after it occurred? When you told them, what were you thinking and feeling?'
'Did anyone see this happen?'	'Can you tell me about any people or witnesses who might have seen you and the suspect together or who might have seen the incident?' 'Can you tell me about any people or witnesses who might have seen you after the event?'

Interviewers should avoid using questions or prompts that may feel confrontational or directive, such as those starting with 'why', instructions like 'explain to me' or requests for a step-by-step account, such as 'and then what happened?'. Instead, using openended questions allows the interviewee to share information at their own pace and based

on what they are able to recall. For victims, this approach can aid in retrieving memories from a traumatic event and provides a sense of control during the process, counteracting the feelings of powerlessness they experienced during their exploitation.

Immediate support and multi-agency collaboration

Once identified, victims require immediate support, including medical care, safe housing and access to psychosocial services. Referral mechanisms should be in place to connect them with specialised resources tailored to their needs. Collaboration among

























law enforcement, healthcare providers, NGOs and community organisations is critical for providing holistic support.

5.5 **Suggested activity for the chapter**

Table 10. Identifying and interviewing a victim of labour trafficking

Activity Name	'Identifying and interviewing a victim of labour trafficking'
Type of Activity	Role Play with a Case Study Scenario: Yulia is a 28-year-old woman from Ukraine who fled the war and sought refuge in Bulgaria. A man offered her a job as a cleaner at a hotel, promising fair wages and safe accommodation. Upon arrival, her passport was confiscated, and she was forced to work long hours without pay. Yulia lives in cramped, shared housing with limited freedom to leave. She feels trapped and fears that the authorities will always support the Bulgarian hotel owner rather that the Ukrainian refugee. Yulia appears withdrawn and hesitant to speak during conversations.
Duration	30 min.























	Participants will:		
	 Learn the ability to recognise labour trafficking indicators through verbal and non-verbal cues. 		
Loorning	 Apply VoT sensitive approaches to interviewing victims, ensuring safety and respect. 		
Learning Objectives	 Analyse victims' behaviour to identify signs of fear, coercion and trauma while distinguishing barriers to disclosure. 		
	 Evaluate their own techniques to refine their communication and build trust with victims effectively. 		
	 Create individualised strategies to support victims' unique cultural, emotional and logistical needs. 		
	Printed or digital case study.		
Materials Needed	Printed observation forms with evaluation criteria.		
Moducu	A private space for each group to conduct the role-plays.		
	Introduction (5 minutes):		
Guidelines	 Present the case study and brief participants on the purpose 		
for the	of the activity.		
facilitator	Preparation:		
	Divide participants into groups of 4–6 people.		

























- Assign roles within each group: Victim, Interviewer, Observer(s).
- Provide each group with the case study that outlines a realistic trafficking scenario.

Role-play setup:

- Victim portray Yulia using details from the case study. Adjust responses to reflect nervousness, mistrust and reluctance to disclose full details.
- Interviewer conduct a mock interview to identify signs of trafficking, using VoT sensitive approach (meeting the immediate needs, building trust, asking open-ended questions, ensuring safety).
- Observer(s) take notes on the interaction using the provided evaluation form and evaluate the interviewer's approach.

Role-Play execution (15 minutes):

- The interviews focus on building a connection and gathering information from the victim.
- Observers monitor how the interviewer applies the principles of VoT sensitive approach (avoiding judgment, respecting autonomy etc.).

Debriefing

After the role-play, each group reflects on the following (10 minutes):

























•	Interviewer -	What	was	challenging	about	building	trust	or
	identifying tra	affickir	ng ind	icators?				

- Victim How did the interviewer's behaviour affect your comfort level during the interview?
- Observers What strengths and areas for improvement did you notice in the interviewer's approach?

Facilitate a group discussion to share insights and connect the exercise to real-world practices.

Before the role-play

Prepare participants:

- o Brief them on the activity's purpose and ground rules (respect, empathy, confidentiality).
- o Ensure they understand their roles (victim, interviewer, observer) and the case study.

Set the scene:

- Arrange in advance the group spaces.
- Provide materials like the case study and evaluation forms.

During the role-play

Facilitate realistic execution:



Tips

facilitator

for





















- Encourage the 'victim' to portray emotions like nervousness or reluctance authentically.
- o Guide the interviewer to use open-ended questions, empathy and cultural sensitivity.
- Monitor and support:
 - Observe group's dynamics and step in if necessary to maintain focus and comfort.
 - o Keep the exercise within the respective time.
 - Keep the atmosphere positive and supportive.

After the Role-play

- Debriefing:
 - o Facilitate reflections: What worked well? What was challenging?
 - o Highlight positive behaviours (empathy, listening) and suggest improvements.
- Refer to the module's key concepts:
 - Reinforce VoT-sensitive approaches.
 - o Link lessons to practical applications, such as identifying trafficking indicators and asking the right questions.

























Printed case studies Printed evaluation forms Present the case study to all participants during the main session using slides or a shared document and give instructions. Divide participants into breakout groups (4–6 people each) using the online platform's breakout room feature. Assign roles: Victim, Interviewer, Observer(s). Share the virtual case study (via a shared document or a slide) with each group. The role-play takes place in breakout rooms for 10–15 minutes. The interviewer interacts with the victim as though in a virtual interview (via video call). Observers for adherence to VoT sensitive principles and note areas for improvement.		 Address emotions: acknowledge the emotional intensity of the activity. 					
variations Variations for online implementa tion Variations Observers for adherence to VoT sensitive principles and note areas for improvement.	Handouts						
focused and productive. Use the chat or 'drop-in' feature to provide guidance if needed.	for online implementa	 Present the case study to all participants during the main session using slides or a shared document and give instructions. Divide participants into breakout groups (4–6 people each) using the online platform's breakout room feature. Assign roles: Victim, Interviewer, Observer(s). Share the virtual case study (via a shared document or a slide) with each group. The role-play takes place in breakout rooms for 10–15 minutes. The interviewer interacts with the victim as though in a virtual interview (via video call). Observers for adherence to VoT sensitive principles and note areas for improvement. Monitor the breakout rooms to ensure discussions stay focused and productive. Use the chat or 'drop-in' feature to 					

























	Bring all participants back to the main session.		
	 Discuss what went well and what was challenging in the virtual context. 		
	 Share observations on building trust and identifying trafficking indicators remotely. 		
	Debrief & Wrap-up		
References	UNODC, IOM, ILO, OSCE, Vera Institute of Justice, CTI, IACP		

CASE STUDY & ROLE-PLAY

Yulia is a 28-year-old woman from Ukraine who fled the war and sought refuge in Bulgaria. A man offered her a job as a cleaner at a hotel, promising fair wages and safe accommodation. Upon arrival, her passport was confiscated, and she was forced to work long hours without pay. Yulia lives in cramped, shared housing with limited freedom to leave. She feels trapped and fears that the authorities will always support the Bulgarian hotel owner rather than the Ukrainian refugee. Yulia appears withdrawn and hesitant to speak during conversations.

- Form groups of 4–6 people.
- Roles in each group: Victim, Interviewer, Observers.

























- o Victim: portray Yulia using details from the case study. Adjust responses to reflect nervousness, mistrust and reluctance to disclose full details.
- o **Interviewer**: conduct a mock interview to identify signs of trafficking, using VoT sensitive approach (meeting the immediate needs, building trust, asking open-ended questions, ensuring safety).
- o **Observers** take notes on the interaction using the provided evaluation form and evaluate the interviewer's approach

Role-play Observation Form

- 1. Observe the role-play and evaluate the interviewer on each criterion.
- 2. Circle the rating that best reflects the interviewer's performance.
- 3. Use the 'Observer Notes' section to provide specific feedback or examples for each criterion.

Criteria	Evaluation Scale	Observer Notes
Building Trust	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Using Open-ended Questions	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	

























Criteria	Evaluation Scale	Observer Notes
Demonstrating Empathy	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Addressing Victim's Emotional Cues	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Ensuring Cultural Sensitivity	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Respecting Victim's Autonomy	Excellent / Good /Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Maintaining Confidentiality	Excellent / Good /Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Handling Reluctance or Fear	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Observing Non-Verbal Cues	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	
Providing a Safe and Supportive Environment	Excellent / Good / Needs Improvement / Not Observed	























Reflections 5.6

- 'How did this training deepen your understanding of the challenges faced by victims of labour trafficking?'
- 'What skills or approaches from today's session will you apply in your work to better support and identify victims?'
- 'Reflect on the importance of empathy and cultural sensitivity during interactions with potential victims. How can these shape your professional practice?'
- 'What barriers to trust-building did you observe during the role-play and how might these be addressed in real-world scenarios?'
- 'How can a VoT-sensitive approach contribute to more effective identification and protection of trafficking victims?



















