DIFFERENT & EQUAL
TE NDRYSHEM & TE BARABARTE

safer young lives research centre

University of Bedfordshire

REPORT

The evidence speaks for itself:

Findings from the 'Small steps can make a big difference' youth-led action research project into young people's perspectives on seeking justice and support in relation to child trafficking in Albania

Study Report

“THE EVIDENCE SPEAKS FOR ITSELF…”

Findings from the ‘Small steps can make a big difference’ youth-led action research project into young people’s perspectives on seeking justice and support in relation to child trafficking in Albania

This research report was co-authored by six young researchers who were supported by Different & Equal in Albania and the Safer Young Lives Research Centre at University of Bedfordshire in the UK between 2020 and 2022 as part of the ‘Small steps can make a big difference’ youth participatory action research project. The evidence presented results from peer research that was conducted by young people who have first-hand experience of criminal justice and victim protection responses in relation to trafficking and sexual violence in Albania. Although the report was co-produced, it cumulates work that was led by the young researchers. The report has been translated from Albanian into English. Although it has been reviewed by the professional project team members, it has not been edited by an external proof-reader. This is purposeful to preserve the ‘voice authenticity’ of the young people who led and took part in the project. As such, this report is co-written by young people in words and format of their choice. It should be read with respect for this in mind.

Tirana, 2022

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1. PREFACE BY THE LEAD AUTHORS

Whoever is reading this report is probably wondering why we wrote it. We are a group of six young researchers from 'Different & Equal', an organisation in Albania that supports abused and trafficked young men and women on their journeys to justice and recovery. The perspectives and experiences of affected young people of going through the criminal justice and victim protection systems in Albania are rarely heard. We want to make these views and experiences known and bring about change in relation to how young victims and survivors are treated by the authorities that are supposed to help them.

Between January and July 2021, we completed an intensive research training programme. During this time, we acquired knowledge about participatory action research and learnt about research methods, rigor, and ethics. Over the following year, we continued to receive ongoing guidance from an academic researcher and support from the project coordinator and two facilitators from Different & Equal while we developed and implemented the study. After we collected data through a face-to-face peer survey, we analysed the evidence and wrote this research report to share the findings.

We participated in all phases of the study: all six of us decided on the research questions and designed the questionnaire; some of us interviewed peers as part of the survey; some analysed the information we collected; and three co-wrote the report.

After almost two years of hard work during which everyone gave their best, we hope that we have properly conveyed the perspectives of every young person who took part in the research and who trusted us with their experiences.

2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The research presented here was carried out by six young researchers aged between 17 and 26 in Albania as part of the 'Small steps can make a big difference' (*Small Steps*) project that was implemented between July 2020 and October 2022. Funded by Porticus foundation, *Small Steps* was a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project facilitated by 'Different & Equal' (https://differentandequal.org/en/rreth-nesh/), a non-profit organisation in Albania dedicated to providing high quality services for the protection and reintegration of victims of trafficking and abuse, in collaboration with the 'Safer Young Lives Research Centre' (SYLRC) (https://www.beds.ac.uk/sylrc/) at the University of Bedfordshire in the United Kingdom.

Small Steps engaged six young women (beneficiaries of Different & Equal) as lead investigators. The youth-led research design sought to challenge traditional power dynamics in research – moving from a model where research is done '*on young people'* towards one that is conducted *'with young people'.*

The report shares findings from a face-to-face peer survey that elicited the perspectives of 18 girls and young women between the ages of 15 and 26 on seeking support and justice in relation to trafficking and sexual violence in Albania. The findings show that:

- Processes relating to criminal investigations and trials can be **traumatising** for young people affected by trafficking for sexual exploitation;
- Young people affected by trafficking find it either **difficult or very difficult to contact the police**;
- **Victim statements pile up** in the police stations or commissariats and are not addressed because of insufficient evidence, mistrust or prejudices against victims;
- Young people surveyed had **low levels of trust in justice institutions, especially in the police**.
- However, trust in the police could be reinstated through:
    - **non-violent treatment** and **non-discrimination** of victims;
    - providing **encouragement, support, and care** to victims;
    - being mindful of and **minimising potential re-victimization**; and
    - clear demonstrations of **effective justice and law enforcement**.
- Young people surveyed had **low levels of trust in prosecutors.** These were linked to young people's perceptions of:
    - high prevalence of **corruption**;
    - high levels of **impunity and tolerance vis-à-vis law violations**;
    - **ineffective interagency working,** including **low cooperation of the police with other agencies**, such as the prosecutor's office.

  To enhance trust, young people surveyed suggest that the prosecutor's office should:
    - **support** and **encourage victims**;
    - take time and care to **understand cases** including **victim perspectives**; and
    - **communicate** with victims.
- Young people surveyed had **low levels of trust in courts**. There were related to young people's views about courts as:
    - making **unfair decisions**;
    - **not sufficiently cooperating** with other institutions;
    - **not performing** their **duties**;
    - **not adequately supporting** victims;
    - **not listening** to victims before making decisions;
    - **not understanding** the information provided by victims.
- **Prejudices** were reported as **commonplace amongst justice institutions**. Young people surveyed felt that actions by institutions and professionals can be informed by prejudices based on age, gender, and ethnic background and used to **discourage victims from seeking justice**.
- **Half of the young people** surveyed reported that young people **do not feel safe when dealing with justice institutions**. More than half of the young people surveyed reported that they did not feel safe in court.

- More than 60% noted that **victims do not feel safe after they have returned to their families**. Reasons for this included:
    - **impunity: failure to capture and punish traffickers**;
    - **failure to enforce protection orders**;
    - **harmful or prejudiced attitudes** amongst some police staff towards victims and their families.

  Young people surveyed felt that, in most cases, **relocating the family abroad was the best way to protect the family**.
- **76% of the young people** surveyed reported having had either a **'bad' or 'very bad' experience with the police**. These comprised:
    - difficult and **re-traumatising experiences** of undergoing **multiple interrogations**;
    - **lack of communication,** not keeping victims informed;
    - **insensitive communication**, using derogatory or offensive language;
    - a sense of **mutual mistrust**;
    - professionals **prying for irrelevant information** as part of the investigation and asking questions that are not related to the case; and
    - **gender discrimination**.

2.1 Key messages from this research for authorities include:

- professionals must **recognize the barriers** and difficulties young victims experience when seeking justice and support;
- all victims deserve **humane, sensitive, non-discriminatory treatment**;
- victims need **support** that is **child-friendly, trauma-sensitive** and **victim-centred**;
- victims who are minors should be **accompanied by a psychologist** during interactions with criminal justice institutions;
- criminal justice institutions must **respect children and young people's right to participation** and ensure that the voices of young victims are heard during criminal proceedings;
- cases must be considered **without undue delays** and within stipulated deadlines;
- young people expect criminal justice institutions to comply with and **effectively enforce the law**;
- more targeted efforts and training is needed to increase **institutional and professional sensitivity** to law violations and **address impunity and corruption**;
- **perpetrators** should receive the **punishments** they deserve and **not** be allowed to **re-offend**;
- public awareness-raising is crucial, especially in rural areas, so that victims, families and communities **understand children and young people's rights** and access to the criminal justice system

3. THE REPORT

3.1 The report structure

The report presents findings from the *Small Steps* youth participatory advocacy study and gives a comprehensive overview of the research process. It is structured as follows: after this short explanatory note about the report, we provide a brief description and background of the project. The methods section that ensues describes the study design and methods we used, both in terms of the co-production and the peer research. We begin by explaining what youth participatory action research means and why we used this approach. Illustrating the nature of our collaboration, we clarify different roles within the project team and acknowledge discrete contributions by individual project team members. We then outline some of the preparatory steps that we took at start of the project, including ethics approval, risk assessment and recruitment processes.

We recount our YPAR journey by providing information on the training we, the young researchers, received. We then explain the peer research process: how we defined the research questions, how we developed research tools, and how we collected and analysed our data before discussing the study's limitations.

Finally, we present the evidence that we collected through a face-to-face survey with eighteen peers. The survey gathered information on how criminal justice and victim protection services are perceived by young people who have been in direct contact with these institutions. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of our findings by giving recommendations on how to make these systems and responses more youth-friendly and victim-centred.

3.2 Terminology

3.2.1 'Trafficking'

According to the Albanian Penal Code, 'trafficking in persons' is a crime that involves '*the recruitment, transport, transfer, hiding or reception of persons through means of threat or the use of force or other forms of compulsion, kidnapping, fraud, abuse of office or taking advantage of social, physical or psychological condition or the giving or receipt of payments or benefits in order to get the consent of a person who controls another person, with the purpose of exploitation of prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or forms similar to slavery, putting in use or transplanting organs, as well as other forms of exploitation, both within and beyond the territory of the Republic of Albania'* (EURALIU, 1995: Art. 110a). In the report, we use 'trafficking' to specifically refer to the human trafficking of children and young people for the purpose of sexual exploitation to reflect the target group involved in the study.

3.2.2 'Victims' / 'survivors' / 'victim-survivors'

We employ the terms 'victim', 'survivor' and 'victim-survivor', fully conscious of their limitations, as a shorthand to describe young people who are or have in the past been affected by trafficking. The report is primarily aimed at criminal justice, law enforcement and victim protection institutions. We therefore use the terms used by these professions. The 'victim / survivor' terminology has been contested on a rage of grounds: for potentially labelling, stigmatising, and reducing individuals with experiences of trafficking to the abusive experience, thereby obfuscating many other aspects of their identity and glossing over their agency. While the term 'survivor' places more emphasis on strengths and agency, it can still be experienced as stigmatising and reductionist. As the study sought to demonstrate, 'victim-survivors' are not 'helpless' but can be highly competent and powerful agents for change. The decision for using the 'victim / survivor' terminology in this report was purely pragmatic to increase clarity and accessibility.

3.2.3 'Young people'

Although the category 'young people' generally refers to individuals between 15 and 24 years of age (UN, 2013), we use this term more flexibly in this report to primarily describe adolescents and young adults who had experiences of trafficking and / or sexual violence when they were minors and who have been receiving support from a reintegration service. The young people involved in our study were between the ages of 15 and 26 and, in many cases, had been supported by 'Different & Equal' for a number of years, reflecting the often long and complex recovery and reintegration process after experiences of international trafficking. Although the majority of the participants were under 24 at the start of the project and during data collection, one young researcher was 26 years old and had officially 'aged out' of the 'young people' category. Since she was very motivated to take part and we believed that she would be an asset to and benefit from the project, we did not want to deny her the opportunity. We recognise that this decision affected our sampling strategy and had definitional implications in terms of how the findings are framed.

3.2.4 'Peer(s)'

In the report, the term 'peer(s)' connotes a young person of a similar age who has had similar life experiences. In the context of the study, all participants (peer researchers and survey respondents) were beneficiaries of 'Different & Equal'. Even though their specific experiences of abuse, personal histories and circumstances varied, all had lived expertise in relation to the research topic and been in direct contact with criminal justice and victim protection institutions.

3.3 A note on the collaborative writing process

The report is the product of an experimental, collaborative writing process that took place between November 2021 and October 2022. It was co-produced by a project team encompassing different ages, skill sets and varying levels of prior writing experience. None of us had attempted to co-write a research report as an intergenerational team before.

The co-production method accounts for the 'multiple voice' narrative style of the report that alternates between the first and third person, representing the multiple identities and positionalities of different team members, as we switch between more formal, academic language and a slightly more colloquial and accessible but perhaps at times less nuanced style. Because the writing process was facilitated in two languages and required constant back and forth translations between Albanian and English, many of the terms used in the report had to be discussed at length as meanings were not always easily transferable between the two linguistic and cultural contexts. Although this was an imperfect, time-consuming and laborious process, co-writing offered some distinct benefits: it provided ample opportunities for sense-checking, which not only served to ensure that nothing got 'lost in translation' but also to verify that young people's perspectives were adequately understood and conveyed. The young researchers' expertise and leadership in making sense of young people's contributions, their role in overseeing how meanings were ascribed, and their editorial control over key messages added a unique layer of scrutiny and rigor.

The report was purposely not edited by a professional proof-reader to preserve the authenticity and provide a genuine representation of the young researchers' voices. We recognise that the report may not read as cohesively as a report that has gone through multiple rounds of peer review and professional proofing. Perfection and 'linguistic flow' were compromised in favour of authenticity. The report may challenge traditional notions of what a research report looks like. We present it, with pride, as a genuinely co-produced product that was led by young people. In many ways, the report mirrors and encapsulates the realities of youth participatory processes as inherently messy, highly time- and resource-intensive, unpredictable, deeply rewarding and utterly exciting ways of doing things differently, and more collaboratively.

4. PROJECT DESCRIPTION AND BACKGROUND

The 'Small Steps Can Make a Big Difference' (*Small Steps*) was a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project facilitated by 'Different & Equal' in Albania in collaboration with the Safer Young Lives Research Centre (SYLRC) at the University of Bedfordshire in the United Kingdom. The project was funded by Porticus Foundation and implemented between July 2020 and October 2022. During this time, *Small Steps* trained six young women (beneficiaries of Different & Equal) aged between 17-26 years old as young researchers and supported them to gather evidence on young people's perspectives about seeking justice and support from the criminal justice and victim protection systems in Albania in relation to trafficking and sexual violence.

Small Steps built on an existing partnership and a cumulative body of youth participatory work that we, as partner organisations, have jointly developed over the past decade as part of the University of Bedfordshire's *Our Voices* programme that promotes children and young people's participation in addressing sexual violence (for more information, visit https://www.our-

voices.org.uk/). As practitioners who have worked in the field for twenty years, we know that young people's contact with the criminal justice and victim protection systems can be problematic. We also know from the research evidence that the problem is not unique or limited to the Albanian context but prevalent in many other countries around the world (Surtees and Johnson 2021; Beckett and Warrington 2015). In Albania, the experiences of young people's institutional revictimisation has never been systematically documented or studied. This evidence gap constitutes a serious challenge, which we experienced first-hand in 2019 when a group of youth advocates met with professional and institutional key stakeholders in Albania to advocate for change as part of the *Our Voices Too* youth advocacy project (Bovarnick and Cody 2020). The young people involved in *Our Voices Too* quickly realised that, without evidence, young people's voices are not heard and taken seriously by those in power. Without evidence, criminal justice systems cannot be scrutinized and held accountable. The vision for Small Steps was born out of the tangible and dire need to collect youth-informed evidence on young people's experiences of institutional re-victimisation. Our idea for initiating a youth participatory action research project on this topic coincided with an increasing recognition at the regional and international level that young people's lived experiences of abuse and subsequent institutional re-traumatisation and re-victimisation must be acknowledged and that young victim-survivors' voices must be heard (Liefaard 2020) if systems are to adequately protect and ensure justice for the most vulnerable groups in our societies.

4.1 The project team

The *Small Steps* project team was intergenerational, interdisciplinary, and international. It consisted of six young researchers in Albania; a local project co-ordinator; two local facilitators; and a UK-based academic researcher.

4.1.1 The young researchers

All six young researchers were young indigenous Albanian women who were beneficiaries of Different & Equal. Although their individual abuse histories varied, all had experienced some form of sexual violence. Four had experienced human trafficking: two had been trafficked internally within Albania and two had been trafficked internationally. All young researchers had been in Different & Equal assistance for periods varying from six months to three years, receiving services tailored around their own needs and needs of their families and children.

The ages of the young researchers ranged between 17 and 26 years. Three of the young researchers had children. When the project started, four of the young researchers resided in independent living arrangements and two lived in Different & Equal's safe shelter accommodation, attending high school. At the time of report writing, four young researchers had finished high school and worked in paid employment while one young researcher had started university in 2021. By the end of the project, all six young researchers had transitioned into independent living arrangements.

Two of young women who agreed to join the 'Small Steps' project had been previously involved in participatory initiatives, including in the *Our Voices Too* youth advocacy project (Bovarnick and Cody 2020) that gave rise to *Small Steps* and had prior experience of group work.

4.4.2 The local project co-ordinator and facilitators

The project co-ordination was managed by the Executive Director of 'Different & Equal', a highly experienced Human Trafficking Trainer in Albania and a prominent leader in the field with twenty years of experience in working on trafficking and exploitation issues. The project was supported by two highly skilled and experienced local facilitators. The first facilitator had significant expertise in trauma-informed social work, including youth participatory and group work. The second facilitator had in-depth knowledge of working on trafficking and abuse issues and had a research background.

4.4.3 The UK-based academic partner

The academic researcher was based at the Safer Young Lives Research Centre (SYLRC) at the University of Bedfordshire in the UK. With a strong interest in research ethics, trauma-informed approaches, and youth participatory methods, the academic researcher brought twenty years of international, postdoctoral experience in children's rights and sexual violence research to the project.

5. METHODS

Methodologically, *Small Steps* represents a highly ambitious and innovative research initiative that sought to address the evidence gap outlined above by capturing young people's lived realities through youth-led peer research. Youth-led peer research on sexual violence, particularly if it engages young people with lived experience, is extremely rare (Bovarnick et al. 2018), partly due to the associated ethical and practical challenges and the considerable time and resource requirements. *Small Steps* involved young people with lived experience centrally in all aspects and stages of the research process: from conceptualisation and research design to implementation and dissemination. The rationale for choosing a highly participatory approach was two-fold: first, we hoped that a youth-led study would generate evidence that adequately reflects the unadulterated and often unheard or misconstrued perspectives of young victim-survivors who, although they deserve support and justice, often feel let down by the system. Second, we were keen to gather learning on the process and to advance our understanding of how to safely and meaningfully co-produce research with young researchers who have lived experience of trafficking and sexual violence.

5.1 What does youth participatory action research mean

…in theory?

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is based on a recognition that we the need to involve young people in investigating problems affecting them and in finding appropriate

solutions. Representing a shift from researching 'on' to researching 'with' young people, YPAR addresses traditional power imbalances in research. According to Jonathan London, it 'offers the opportunity for young people to speak the world as they see it, to envision the world as they desire it, and then to take action to make these visions a reality' (2006: 408).

5.2 …in practice?

YPAR is collaborative, applied, and action-oriented: young people typically work in collaboration with professional researchers to co-produce knowledge with the aim to promote change. Youth participatory engagement in research can range alongside a continuum. Different YPAR projects may involve young people to varying degrees, in different stages and diverse ways in the research design and process, depending on what is appropriate and feasible in the context of a particular project. Because highly participatory initiatives are very time- and resource-intensive, require significant capacity-building and skilled facilitation, research initiatives that are led by young people are rare.

5.3 Why use a YPAR approach?

The evidence base on sexual violence, including young people's experiences of seeking support and justice, is largely generated by adult professionals and scholars (Bovarnick et al, 2018). By implication, young people's perspectives are either filtered through adult lenses or missing altogether from our knowledge base. This is problematic because without an accurate understanding of how young people experience and view existing problems, we are unlikely to find relevant solutions.

5.4 A note on co-production

Youth participatory research typically entails a collaboration between novice researchers and more experienced professional or academic researchers. In such collaborations, young people share power with adults, assume different roles and have varying levels of influence over the research design and process. We recognise the importance of clarifying the roles project partners assumed and explicitly acknowledge the different ways in which individual members of the project team contributed to this study. Although the report was co-produced, it cumulates work that was led by the young researchers. In the spirit of transparency, we note that the first half of the report, specifically the project description and methods sections, required more technical input and knowledge of the relevant literature. These sections were therefore led by the professional team members. The first version of these sections was drafted by the SYLRC researcher and subsequently reviewed and discussed in a series of workshops with the young researchers, facilitators, and the project coordinator. The young researchers made substantial changes to simplify the language as they felt that the terminology and sentence structure was too complex. Subsequent versions were revised and edited in collaborative writing sessions that took place both in English and in Albanian. The project co-ordinator and local facilitators had a good command of English and were able to simultaneously translate back and forth for the benefit of the academic researcher who did not speak Albanian. While all the of the young researchers spoke Albanian, some also spoke English, to varying levels of proficiency. The findings section, discussion, and conclusion, which represent the

mainstay of the report, were led by the young researchers. Guidance was provided by professional team members on distinct aspects, such as the report structure and clustering of key themes and messages. The young researchers assumed editorial control and had the final say on how the overall report was curated. Providing an in-depth description of this process is outside of the remit of this report. However, future publications are planned to present more detailed learning regarding different aspects of the co-production process.

5.5 Ethics

We gained ethical approval from the University of Bedfordshire's School of Applied Social Sciences Ethics Panel in October 2020 for stage one, and then in April 2021, for stage two of the research. The participatory research design necessitated a two-stage ethics application process, primarily, because we did not know at the beginning of project, which research design and methods the young researchers would choose. The first application comprehensively articulated the aims, parameters, and process of young people's participatory involvement in the study, including recruitment and risk assessment processes, and discussed related ethical considerations. Once the young researchers had completed the research training and decided on the research design, the second application then outlined the young researchers' chosen data collection method (a face-to-face survey) and considered in detail the associated risks and support needs of both peer researchers and survey respondents. All of young people involved in the study were risk assessed and gave free and informed consent with the understanding that they could opt out at any time.

The ethical and practical risks of involving trauma-affected young people as peer researchers and survey respondents were addressed by providing flexible and ongoing, trauma-informed wraparound support. Ethics was a central and 'living' agenda item during the conceptualisation, development, and delivery of the project, extending far beyond facilitating meaningful consent, compliance with data protection, confidentiality, anonymisation and safe storage of data. A key aim of *Small Steps* was to promote ethical and meaningful youth leadership in sexual violence research. We attempted to achieve this by maximising young people's capacity and scope to influence key decisions through providing tailored training and ongoing support; acting as critical friends and supportive professional companions; working together, discussing and reflecting on the ethical dimensions of each step to ensure that the research was robust and ethical. In line with the guiding principle of minimising harm and maximising benefits (ERIC 2013), the study created opportunities for young people to build their research, communication and advocacy capacities, to build social connections, and to express their perspectives.

5.6 Recruitment of peer researchers and sampling

For practical reasons, all young people involved in the study were recruited through 'Different & Equal'. Internal recruitment enabled us to conduct personalised risk, needs, and strengths assessments that drew on an in-depth understanding of, and already established relationships with, the young people concerned. It also enabled us to identify individual support needs and to provide 'in-house' support for each young person.

While the sample is described in more detail under 4.1.1, our criteria for recruitment were as follows:

- Aged 16-26 years old;
- Open to all genders;
- Open to all ethnicities;
- Beneficiaries of "Different & Equal" for a minimum of 6 months;
- Experience of trafficking and / or sexual violence;
- Able to take part in terms of capacity, literacy skills, time, commitment and stage of recovery.

Both young male and female beneficiaries that were supported through the Different & Equal assistance programme were invited to join the project. Only one young male showed interest in participating whereas all other interested candidates were female. Unfortunately, the young man was eventually unable to join the project because his family left Albania to migrate to another country.

5.7 Risk assessments

A risk assessment process was conducted by 'Different & Equal' whereby potential risks and benefits of participating in the YPAR were assessed for each potential candidate. Only candidates whose risk assessment was deemed manageable were invited to join the project. Whenever possible, risk assessments were participatory to ensure that the possible implications, both positive and negative, of taking part in the project were explored and evaluated jointly with the young person concerned.

Information sessions were held to describe the goals of the project and to outline the involvement parameters, roles, responsibilities, expected time of engagement, and the provisions for support and payment for young people's contributions. Although we contacted young people of different genders, ethnic backgrounds, and mixed abilities, we were not successful in recruiting as diverse a sample as we had hoped and, most notably, did not reach any male candidates. Six young women aged 17-26 years who met the recruitment criteria agreed to participate in the project. They were all Albanian nationals and none of them had a physical or mental disability. Some had been trafficked outside of the country and returned to Albania. While their histories of abuse and personal circumstances varied, they were all beneficiaries of 'Different & Equal' and had lived expertise in relation to the research topic.

5.8 Working together

Roles and responsibilities within the project were clearly defined from the onset and agreed within the team. During the first session, we set up a joint working agreement and discussed how we wanted to collaborate. Central to developing a group working agreement was acknowledging and valuing what each member of the team was able to bring to the project at any given time. This included a recognition of existing limitations, personal circumstances, and an understanding that levels of engagement might vary between young researchers depending

on what else was happening in their lives. We clearly articulated expectations in terms of the level of time and commitment required for the project. In efforts to mitigate risks of re-traumatisation and vicarious trauma, we also defined clear ground rules regarding confidentiality and anonymity within and outside the group setting. Trauma-informed, wraparound support was put in place, which included de-briefs, counselling, weekly check-ins, regular reflective sessions, and clinical supervisions. These were offered at regular intervals and were also available on an *ad hoc* basis as and when needed.

5.9 The YPAR training programme

From January until April 2021, the young researchers completed a rigorous and comprehensive research training programme comprising the following core units:

1. Introduction to social research;
2. Youth participatory action research (YPAR) approach and theoretical principles;
3. Sexual violence: understanding different forms, key concepts and dynamics;
4. Definition of study priorities and questions;
5. Research methods: quantitative and qualitative methods, creative approaches;
7. Research ethics;
8. Scientific rigor;
9. Research design: identification of appropriate methods and target groups;
10. Project management: defining tasks and deadlines

The aim of the training programme was to provide the young researchers with a sound understanding and the necessary skills to design and implement an ethical and rigorous research project. The curriculum was developed by the academic researcher drawing on existing, tried and tested training materials (see for example Warrington 2022; D'Arcy et al n.d.; Peace 2020; Save the Children 2018; UNICEF 2019; YOUTHPRISE 2018). These materials were then revised in collaboration with the local project partners and adapted specifically for this project to design a comprehensive and systematic YPAR training program that was fit for purpose.

5.10 Developing the YPAR project

The YPAR training programme was designed as a 'learning by doing' module that combined teaching and practice elements. The participatory, iterative, and reflexive process, during which the young people designed their own research study, was supported by the academic researcher, the project co-ordinator, and the two local facilitators. During weekly workshops that lasted between one and three hours, the young researchers received 'on the job' training and guidance while they were developing the different study components.

A few preliminary steps proceeded data collection, which we describe below. As a first step, the young researchers familiarised themselves with the research topic. The broad theme, criminal justice responses to young survivors of trafficking and sexual violence, had previously been identified as an issue of high priority by a group of youth advocates in Albania (Bovarnick and

Cody 2020). The young researchers attended a sexual violence workshop to gain an in-depth understanding of underlying dynamics and core concepts of sexual abuse and exploitation. A scoping review was compiled by a local research consultant to outline relevant information about current practice and policies pertaining to child protection, domestic violence, trafficking, sexual violence. A summary of the scoping review was presented as part of the training to familiarise young researchers with the current practice and policy landscape. During stage one of data collection, the young researchers then refined the research topic through completing a series of participatory and creative activities including a brainstorm to identify key themes and a mapping exercise to extrapolate relevant structures and relationships around these themes. The young researchers created two collages to visually map salient issues affecting young victim-survivors as well as identifying protective strategies for support and recovery.

Fig. 1: Collage 'How it is'

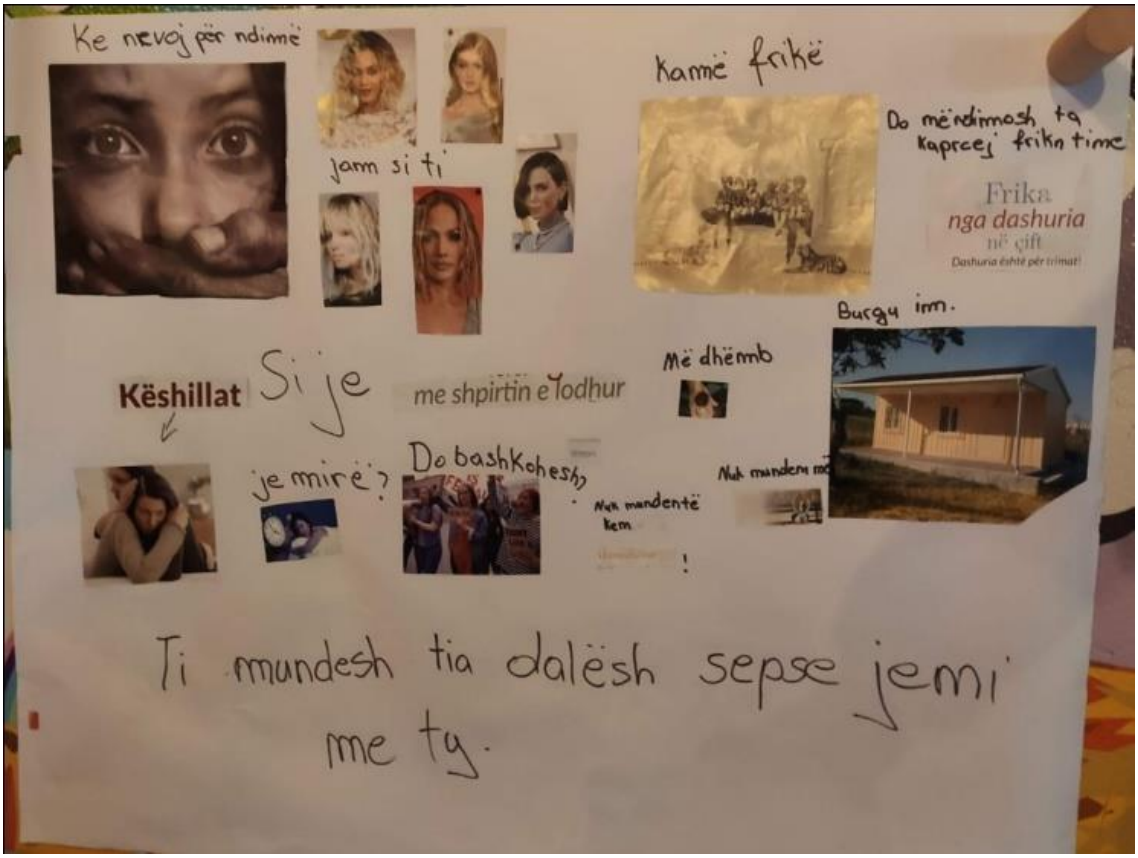


Fig 2: Collage 2 'How it should be'

Following a mindful, iterative, and trauma-informed approach, the young researchers gathered preliminary data in in the safe confines of the group by creating two collages (Fig. 1 & 2) to identify free associations with the research topic. Based on this groundwork, we articulated a series of research questions and ranked these according to priority. These were then turned into hypotheses and used to inform survey questions. The young researchers wanted to test their hypotheses in a peer survey and elicit a wider range of perspectives on the research topic. The rationale for using this method was to increase representativeness of the findings by including a wider constituency of young victim-survivors in the research and to enable data triangulation. The survey method also allowed young researchers to compare their own perceptions against others', thereby adding a layer of scrutiny and rigor.

5.11 Preparation of the survey

A comprehensive training programme, outlined below, was developed and delivered between May and July 2021 to equip young researchers with the theoretical knowledge, technical skills, and practice opportunities to design and administer a survey:

1: Creating a survey
2: Formulating survey questions: learning about different types of questions
3: Creating an introduction and explaining consent

4: Piloting the survey
5: Administering the survey
6: Data analysis

The manual draws on materials developed by the YPAR Hub at the University of Berkeley in the United States of America (http://yparhub.berkeley.edu/investigate-method/surveys/). The lesson plans were significantly adapted and expanded to meet the elevated ethical requirements arising from the research topic and target group involved as peer researchers and survey respondents. For example, additional sessions were added to the programme on 'consent', data protection, confidentiality and researcher/participant wellbeing.

The training programme combined teaching and practice components to guide young researchers through the process of designing, testing and implementing the survey. The survey was piloted extensively in the group and underwent eight rounds of internal review until it satisfied ethical and quality criteria. Our internal review process considered the following criteria:

A. Ethics: Are the questions potentially upsetting or triggering? Are they framed generally and elicit perceptions, rather than personal stories?
B. Clarity: Are the questions easy to understand, accessible and unambiguous?
C. Answerability: Is it possible to answer the research questions?
D. Rigor: Are the questions neutral and unbiased?
E. Relevance: Do the questions reflect young people's realities and priorities?
F. Comprehensiveness: Does the survey cover the most important questions? What is missing?

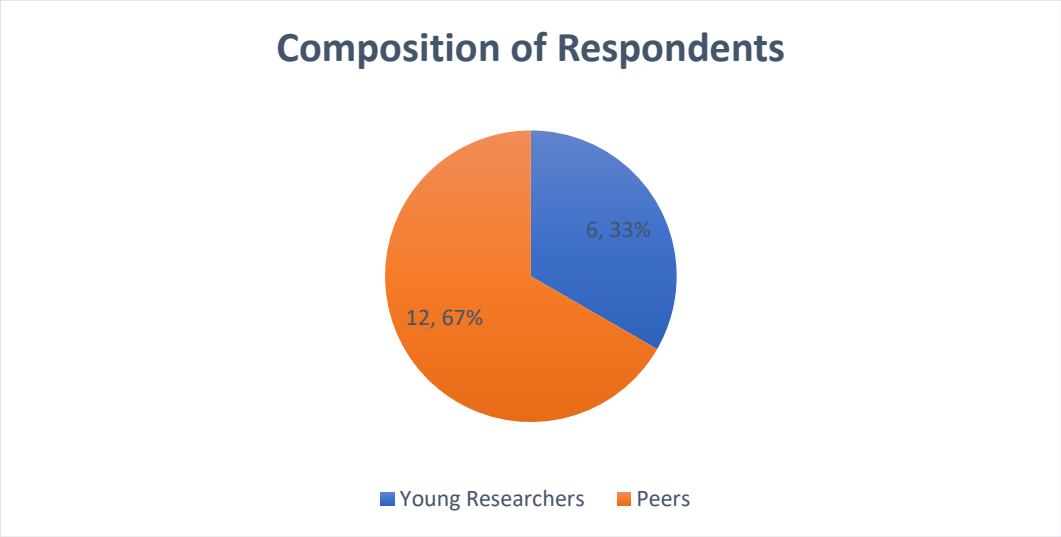
The final survey captured demographic data and comprised a range of closed and open-ended questions to elicit quantitative and qualitative data corresponding to the key themes outlined below:

i. Barriers to accessing justice and support
ii. Level of young people's satisfaction with services
iii. Good practice and areas for improvement
iv. Perceptions of where cases get stuck in the system
v. Safety
vi. Trust
vii. Interviewing practices ('achieving best evidence')?
viii. Risks of re-traumatisation
ix. Impunity
x. Ideas for more youth- and victim-centred practice

The full survey can be found in the Annex 1.

5.12 Data collection

Data was collected in two, iterative stages: during the first stage, data were collected in the group setting by the young researchers who administered the survey on one another. During the second stage, data were collected with 'peers'. These were beneficiaries of Different & Equal who were not part of the young researchers' group. Therefore, six of the final number (n=18) of survey responses result from the young researchers. Subsequently, an additional 12 peers were involved as respondents in the survey, generating a total of 18 survey responses.



5.12.1 Stage 1: Preliminary data collection and analysis

After several rounds of piloting and refining the survey questions, the final version of the survey was first administered within the group of young researchers before it was used to elicit the perspectives of a wider peer group (see 5.12.2 and 5.12.3). We decided to include the survey responses provided by the young researchers during the last pilot round in the final data set because: a) the young researchers were part of target group, and b) the survey responses from the pilot provided highly relevant information on the research topic.

5.12.2 Recruitment of peer survey respondents

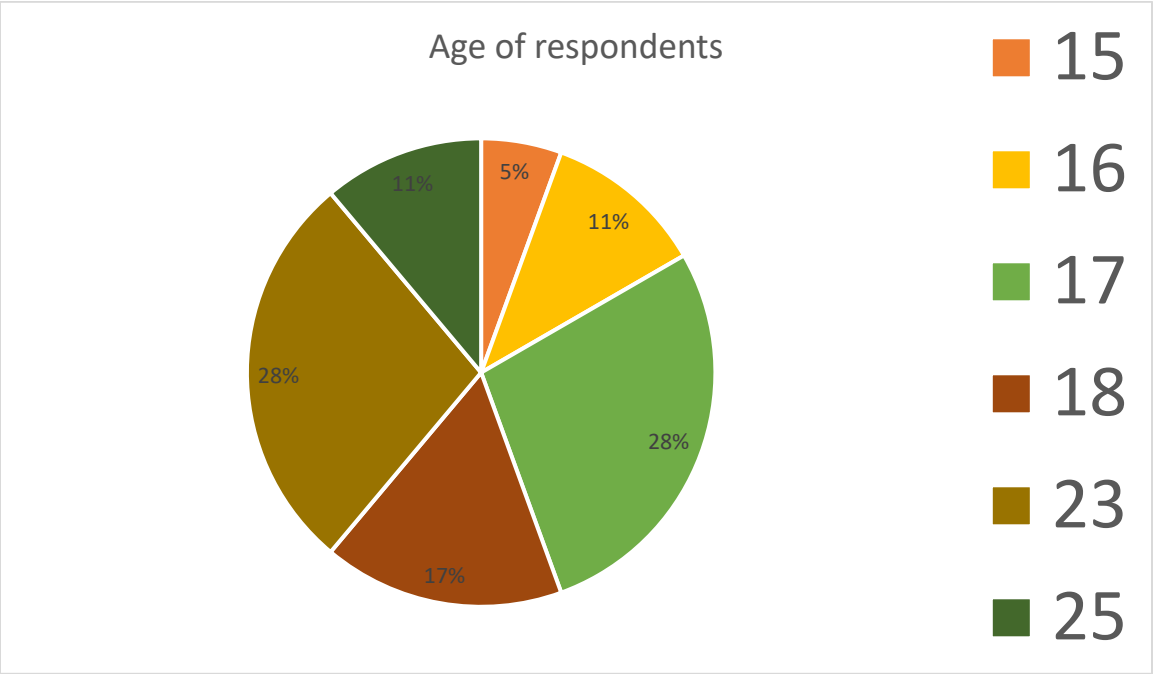
Twenty additional candidates ('peers') were invited to take part as respondents in the peer survey. They were introduced to *Small Steps* and the project team. It was explained that the project sought to shed light on the experiences of children and young people who have experiences of the criminal justice and victim protection systems in Albania. Candidates were informed that a group of young women had been trained as peer researchers by 'Different & Equal'. It was explained that the young researchers wanted to conduct a face-to-face survey with peers to elicit young people's perspectives and to use the information to advocate for improved criminal justice responses for young victim-survivors of trafficking in Albania. Candidates were asked if they were happy to be interviewed by a young researcher as part of a

face-to-face peer survey that had been developed by the young researchers. To facilitate informed consent, candidates were told that any information provided as part of the survey would be kept confidential and that the data would be anonymised and only used for action research purposes.

Similar sampling strategies and selection criteria that were used for recruiting the young researchers (see p. 5.6-5.7) were applied to the candidates that were approached as potential peer survey respondents. Only young people who were beneficiaries of 'Different & Equal' were approached to enable personalised risk assessments. Care was taken, wherever possible, to recruit survey respondents who were not known to the young researchers, or, as a minimum, not to match a young researcher with a peer respondent who lived in the shelter together. The rationale was to provide a sense of anonymity and confidentiality and to counter potential feelings shame, embarrassment, and further stigmatisation.

Out of the 20 candidates that were approached, 13 agreed to be interviewed by one of the young researchers as part of the face-to-face survey. One respondent dropped out once she met the young researcher and withdrew consent. The remaining 12 peer survey respondents were aged between 15 and 25, all were female and supported by 'Different & Equal'. The table below reflects the group age composition:

Fig. 3: Age of peer survey respondents



The majority (n=10) lived in Tirana at the time of data collection. 11 had attended school: they had either completed 9 years of school, were attending secondary school (n=6) or had completed secondary school (n=2). One was attending university. Half of the survey

respondents were still in the first year of support while the other half were in the third year of support.

5.12.3 Stage 3: Peer survey data collection

The young researchers administered the face-to-face peer survey between July and September 2021. Given that the high level of stigma attached to the research topic, care was taken not to match young researchers with respondents that might know each other to provide anonymity and reduce potential feelings of shame or concerns over confidentiality. The survey questions were used as a guide to conduct structured face-to-face interviews. Respondents were asked if they were happy for the 'survey-interviews' to be recorded. In one case, manual notes were taken instead because the survey respondent did not feel comfortable to be recorded.

We provided 'in-house' wrap-around support to each young person involved in the survey. A worker was available to talk before and after survey administrations; extensive de-briefs were conducted with each young researcher and each respondent to check in with the young person, discuss any potential issues that had been surfaced during the survey; and to identify and address any emotional support needs. During the time when the survey was administered, a member of staff was close by to assist and intervene as and when needed.

5.14 Survey data analysis

The recordings of the 18 survey-interviews were transcribed by the young researchers with assistance from a local facilitator who had extensive research experience. All names and identifying features were removed from the transcripts to protect the identity of respondents and comply with data protection. We used a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke 2006) as an analytical framework to make sense of the data and to interpret young people's perceptions of the criminal justice and victim protection systems in Albania in relation to trafficking. Each transcript was independently analysed and manually coded by two young researchers and the academic researcher. Over the course of ten data analysis workshops, codes from the first round of analysis were compared, discussed, and re-examined in the group. As part of a thorough peer review process, we visually mapped codes on flip chart paper to organise, verify, and re-organise codes into broader meaning clusters and to identify connection between them. Demographic and quantitative data resulting from closed questions and raking exercises were translated into graphs and visual charts. In line with the principles of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1998), qualitative data generated through free text boxes and open-ended survey questions were analysed by selecting quotes and text passages to illustrate key themes. Finally, a 'problem and solution tree' method (Snowdon et al 2008) was used to identify the most important findings from the study and to articulate key advocacy messages. These are outlined in the executive summary on pages 2-4.

5.15 Limitations, ethical issues, and methodological strengths and challenges

Our study has some limitations that we acknowledge up front. We grappled with a range of ethical and methodological challenges inherent in the YPAR design that feel important to address. The study's sample size was relatively small and we recognise that this may raise

questions about the representativeness of our findings. *Small Steps* recruited a sample of young people who were beneficiaries of 'Different & Equal' and, as such, had lived experience of trafficking and / or sexual violence in Albania. The study aimed to shed light on young people's experiences of seeking support and justice in relation to these crimes. Although our sample was not as diverse as we had hoped – particularly in terms of gender - it encompassed a wide age range (between 15 and 26 years old), different ethnicities, and a diversity of abuse histories and personal circumstances, including varying levels of formal and informal support systems.

Supporting trauma-affected, novice researcher to conduct peer research on a highly sensitive issue is an ambitious endeavour. Given the significant associated training requirements and support needs, it felt appropriate to limit the group size in order to ensure that: a) every young researcher was adequately trained, taking into consideration individual learning needs, paces, and styles; and b) all young people taking part in the study (young researcher and survey respondents) received flexible, tailored and trauma-informed wraparound support throughout the entire research process.

The main purpose of the study was to generate in-depth and youth-informed evidence through a process that centrally and ethically involved young people with lived experience as lead investigators. Due to the associated ethical and practical risks[1], youth- and survivor-led studies remain scarce and the perspectives of young victim-survivors remain largely marginalised from debates. Although participatory methods offer a tool for harnessing lived expertise, common critiques of PAR include methodological concerns that sometimes discredit the validity of findings resulting from participatory research processes. Frequently, these are linked to questions about participant researchers' research competencies, their relative inexperience, lack of formal training and / or academic qualifications. In the context of YPAR, these issues tend to be amplified and compounded by ageist biases.

Some of the critiques are well founded. For example, a common challenge in PAR is that participant researchers, much like other early career researchers, may feel less confident and accustomed to asking probing questions. We experienced similar challenges in our study. In the interest of transparency, we highlight throughout the findings and discussion section where it would have been useful to further probe, ask for more information or clarification, and where our survey failed to include questions that, in hindsight, would have been important to ask. A compounding challenge specific to sexual violence research, which tends to be even more pronounced when engaging affected young people, are valid concerns over potential re-traumatisation and vicarious trauma. We sought to counter these risks by keeping the survey questions intentionally broad and general, in efforts to avoid causing potential upset to respondents by asking personal questions or delving too deep into past traumatic experiences

[1] Engaging young survivors in sexual violence research is very rare due to the associated risks including those related to re-traumatisation, 'triggering' and vicarious trauma. There are also practical challenges as the topic is highly stigmatized. There may be valid safety concerns and sensitivities in relation to confidentiality. Many victim-survivors may have a real need to stay anonymous.

and to prevent re-traumatisation for those administering and completing the survey. We recognise that this entailed a trade-off and that prioritising the welfare of the young people involved in the study might have resulted in a slightly less nuanced and in-depth data set. However, particularly in the initial stages of an exploratory research project, it is very common that some questions remain (partially) unanswered and new questions are raised. The *Small Steps* study should be seen in this light: as a first, exploratory step into gaining a better understanding of how young people view and experience existing challenges in relation to victim protection and criminal justice in Albania.

While our research process was far from perfect, we feel that there were many accomplishments: we successfully addressed key ethical and methodological concerns by adopting a rigorous, iterative, trauma-informed and highly reflexive approach, which we have carefully documented. We met the significant training and support needs of all young people involved in the study as fully and flexibly as possible within the existing time and resource constraints. We equipped a group of six young victim-survivors with sufficient knowledge and skills to produce credible evidence that can withstand professional scrutiny. We facilitated the safe participation of a further 12 young victim-survivors in a peer survey so they could contribute their perspectives. While we do not claim our findings to be exhaustive or universally valid, we assert that they have emerged from an ethical, rigorous, systematic, and transparent research process and represent a diversity of youth perspectives with first-hand experience of the victim protection and criminal justice systems in Albania.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The following section presents and discusses the findings from the peer survey. We organised the findings thematically under six main headings while recognising that there may be overlaps as findings may relate to more than one key theme. We include visual graphs and use quotes (*in italics)* to illustrate key research findings and messages under the following main headings:

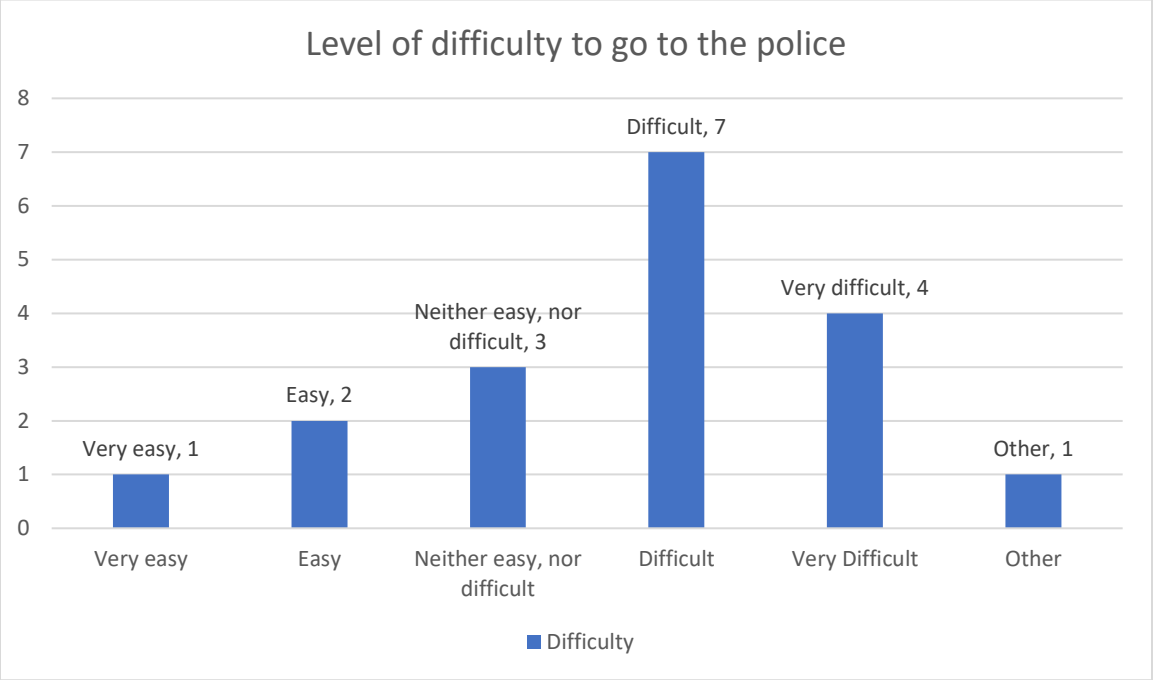
1. The path of justice
2. Trust and disbelief
3. Prejudice
4. Security
5. The role of traffickers in justice
6. Communication and behaviour

6.1 The path to justice

6.1.1 Seeking help from the police

Respondents were asked to determine how easy it was for young people affected by trafficking to go to the police from a scale from '1' (very easy) to '5' (very difficult). 11 out of 18 (61%) survey respondents found it difficult or very difficult to go to the police.

Fig. 4: How difficult is it for young people to approach the police?



Survey respondents were then asked to express their views about the reasons for why it might be difficult for young trafficking victim-survivors to approach the police. Although only 11 people answered that young people found it difficult or very difficult, the vast majority (n=15), had an opinion on this matter. Young people gave the following reasons:

- **Victims' fear of being judged**: *"They [young victims] have a hard time because they are afraid of prejudices, what will people say about me, what they will say about the event. I also talk about my experience. This was the first thing I thought, and [I felt] fear."* (Respondent No. 11)
- **Victims' fear of receiving threats and intimidation from traffickers**:
    - "*It is very difficult for them [young victims] because she or he may be threatened from someone or some may be afraid of their family because if he goes to prison, he will take revenge outside."* (Respondent No. 11);
    - *"Given that the traffickers have not been caught - they put pressure on the victims"* (Respondent No. 14)
    - *"Fear that the trafficker will find out that he has been reported - and will harm her*" (Respondent No. 17);
- **Victims' fear of attracting media attention and losing anonymity**: "*when you go to the police, everything is treated by the media and affects the family and many other things*" (Respondent No. 7).
- **Victims' lack of family support**: *"It depends if they have family support: I, for example, did not have family support"* (Respondent No. 8);

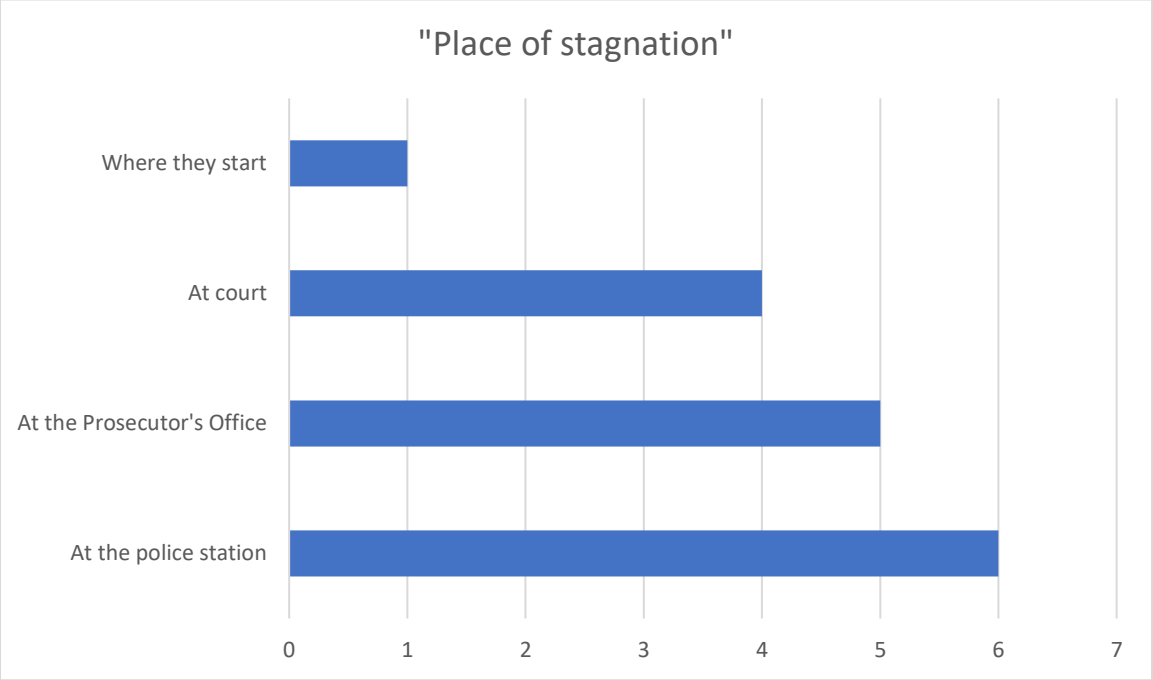
- **Victim's difficulty of expressing oneself in front of the police**: *"It is normal for them to find it very difficult because victims, however, cannot express what they feel*.'(Respondent No. 9);
- **Victim's lack of information about what will happen after going to the police**: *"It's difficult because they don't know what will happen next" (Respondent No. 18).*
- **Criminal justice professionals' lack of trust in the statements of young victims**: *"from what I heard they did not take it as a basis as they did not want to and they passed it off as a case"* (Respondent No. 3);
- **Intimidating behaviours by police**: "*There are cases when they were interrogated, the officers raised their voices and the young people were frightened, were afraid*" (Respondent No. 5);

The findings show that young victim-survivors of trafficking face a range of significant barriers in contacting the police for help. We - the young researchers - are concerned about the large number of respondents reporting barriers in approaching the police and the wide range of reported barriers. Another significant worry is that going to the police can lead to various negative consequences for young victims. For example, it can jeopardise a victim's relationship with their family or invite harmful attention from media and society, whereas it appears to have no effect on capturing traffickers and abusers.

6.1.2 Case standstill and reasons

Survey respondents were asked where they think cases "get stuck" in the criminal justice system as this was a central them emerging from the mapping exercise we conducted in the group. Out of 18 survey respondents, two answered "*I don't know*"; six said "*in the region/commissariat/police*"; four said "*at court"*; five said "*at the prosecutor's office*"; and one noted *"where cases start".*

Fig.5: Case stagnation



Three of the respondents also suggested reasons for the stagnation, which included:

- **Lack of evidence**: *"I believe that the information is stuck where it is provided because there are no facts to go further.'* (Respondent No. 6)
- **Mistrust and prejudice**: *"They constantly doubt you, they don't believe any of your words, they say "you're a child", someone else may have encouraged you to speak. They think you're lying even though they don't have facts"* (Respondent No. 6)

Respondents gave more relevant information on this topic when we asked them about the most important messages to give to criminal justice institutions. One respondents pointed to problems of not having enough information, lack of awareness, limited understanding, and lack of relevant training by suggesting: "*they (criminal justice institutions) should go to more villages to inform them, as there is a lack of information, they do not know their rights, as they do not have the proper education, their parents did not support or trust them*" (Respondent No. 6).

The evidence gathered illustrates that the police as an institution is instrumental for progressing cases. The answers show us that the survey should have collected data about the role of victims in criminal cases, more specifically what the victims know about what is expected of them for the progress of the cases.

6.1.3 Procrastination of cases by professionals

In addition to delays, the information gathered shows that cases are not always given due diligence or adequate and timely consideration. Two of the respondents pointed to the problem of procrastination. They suggested that cases can get delayed because they are not prioritized and pushed forward by relevant professionals, which impedes the progression of cases. One research participant recounted:

> "*After a year, I was called to the court and they asked me whether or not I would continue the denunciation against that person and I told them no, I will not continue because I have moved on with my life and don't call me again because I don't have time to appear at the courts. They told me. That was all with you, we will not call you again*" (Respondent No. 7).

Another research participant stated:

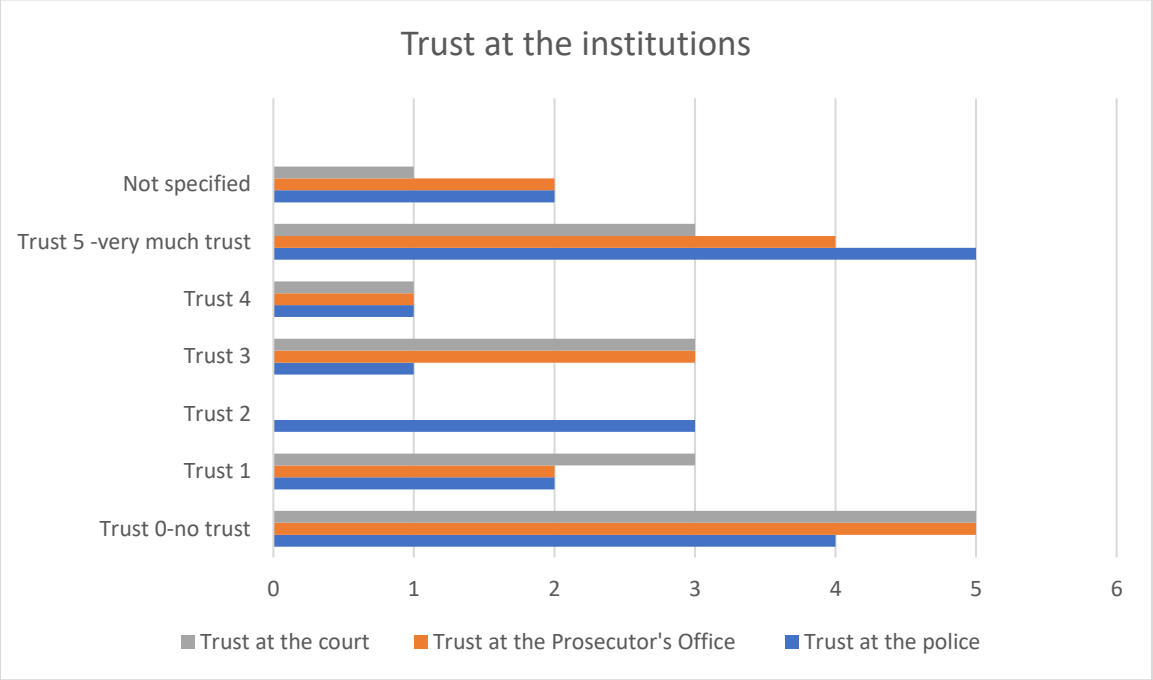
> *"maybe those (cases) are treated by all the units at all their stages and therefore the process is prolonged."* (Respondent No. 17)

6.2 Trust and disbelief

6.2.1 Strong variations in trust in institutions

Respondents were asked about the level of trust they have in three distinct criminal justice institutions: the police; the prosecutor's office; and the court. They were asked to use a scale from '0' (no trust) to '5' (complete trust). The findings, visualised in the chart below, show an interesting divide and an almost even split between respondent who had zero trust and those who had complete trust in institutions.

Fig. 6: Trust in institutions



Three respondents did not provide answers regarding the prosecutor's office or court. The evidence indicates that young people's experiences with professional groups can vary greatly. Although the survey collected data on trust in all three criminal justice institutions, respondents talked about their levels of trust in the police than the prosecutor's office and courts. Overall, the answers provided were short and telegraphic. The study did not collect data about specific encounters that respondents may have had with each of these institutions. However, the fact that respondents expressed more opinions about the police reflects the way the justice system works: the police is typically the first point of contact. Lack of trust in the police, combined with the other factors that deter young people from approaching the police, can seriously undermine a young victim's ability to seek help and justice.

The evidence highlights that trust is an important concern for young people in their dealings with the police. There were references to trust in respondents' answers to other questions that were not directly related, including questions about young people's views on what constitutes offensive behaviour.

A shortcoming of the study was that it only investigated young people's trust in the police but not vice versa. In the future, it would be interesting to gather information about how much the police trust young victims and to compare the results.

6.2.2 Suggestions related to increasing trust in the police

The vast majority (n=16) of respondents gave suggestions on how to increase young people's

trust in the police:

- Five respondents suggested that the police should understand and trust the victim: "*They should understand us when we speak and believe us*" (Respondent No. 13);
- Three respondents expected that the police do their duty and enforce the law: "*normally when you don't experience yourself something at first, it's hard to believe it and be accurate or sure that it happened but even otherwise, you should perform your duty as a police officer or PMF[2], as a court, as a prosecutor, as a lawyer or as a psychologist. Normally you have to approve the case and it is up to someone else to find out whether it is true or not. You do not have to judge the other whether it is true or not*" (Respondent No. 8);
- Three respondents suggested that the police should support, help, take care of the victims: "*keep them close, trust them, come together with other people who provide help, to support the victim*" (Respondent No. 10);
- Two respondents advised that the police should be attentive to every victim and not discriminate: "*To pay attention in these types of cases so that there are no more victims, no more trafficking... to have everyone's attention, not only to one person*" (Respondent No. 11);
- Two respondents suggested that the police should have personal qualities and display behaviors that facilitate trust:
    - *"...to show respect, pay more attention to people and cases*" (Respondent No. 18);
    - *"They should investigate more, trust the victim, be kind, not judge her*." (Respondent No. 15);
- Two respondents recommended that the police should encourage victims: "*They should support the victims and give them courage*" (Respondent No. 4);
- Two respondents talked about impunity and suggested that the police should not let traffickers and abusers go: "*They should bring justice, every trafficker should face justice. They should not keep him one night at the police station and then let him out, as he will traffic other girls*" (Respondent No. 17);
- One respondent suggested that the police: "*…. should be fair*" (Respondent No. 18);
- One respondent noted that the Police should investigate more/better (1): "*They should investigate more, trust the victim, be kind, not judge*" (Respondent No. 15);
- One respondent suggested that the police should re-victimise young people: "*They should have a better communication, care better, they should not victimize her as she is already a victim. It is absurd, it is not normal*" (Respondent No. 5);
- One respondent highlighted that the police: "*… should not be corrupt*" (Respondent No. 12);

[2] Child protection social worker

Some respondents did not elaborate on what would increase young people's trust in the police, perhaps because they did not have sufficient information or understanding of the police's role and obligations regarding supporting young victim-survivors of trafficking. Another reason why more detailed information was not provided may be linked to the time lapse between the survey and respondents' last contact with the police. As mentioned previously, more than half of the respondents have been supported by 'Different & Equal' for more than a year. The phase of being in direct contact with the police may therefore be already behind them.

Although the survey did not use specific terms to refer to institutional revictimisation in any of the questions, some of the respondents referred to 'violence' 're-traumatisation' and 're-victimisation' to describe acts of aggression within their interactions with criminal justice professionals and institutions. Some noted the use of physical violence by police towards young people who were seeking support and justice. One respondent recounted: *"I remembered something. When my brother was 12 years old, he was arrested by the police during the night. They beat him hard and broke his fingers. I just want to curse the police officers'* (Respondent No. 12). The young researcher who conducted the face-to-face survey later described that during a de-briefing session she had observed that the respondent started playing with her phone case when asked what the police could do to make victims feel supported. The respondent was visibly touched by the question and appeared emotional.

Although our study did not explicitly focus on institutional violence, the survey findings suggest that this topic merits further investigation. Specifically, it would be beneficial to gain a clearer understanding of the scope of institutional violence, whereby the use of violence appears to be embedded in practice by those working in criminal justice institutions, and to learn about the different types of violence that young people encounter, for instance, at police stations.

Although more research is needed to investigate to what extent other populations have similar experiences within the criminal justice system, it is possible that our survey findings mirror perceptions that are held more widely in Albanian society. Mapping public opinions about the trustworthiness of institutions and the effectiveness of law enforcement would be very insightful because low public trust in the criminal justice system will invertedly inform victims' confidence and motivation to seek help. For young victims who may not have a strong support network it may feel too risky to approach institutions if they feel that it is unlikely that they will receive a helpful response. In the future, it would be useful to explore the relationship between public opinions and young victims' perceptions of the criminal justice system to better understand whether these are interconnected and to what extend public perceptions inform help-seeking behaviours.

6.2.3 Suggestions related to increasing trust in the prosecutor's office

More than half (n=11) of the survey respondents provided suggestions for increasing trust in the prosecutor's office. Many of these recommendations mirror those made in relation to the police. Young people want the prosecutor's office:

- Not to be corrupt (n=1);
- To support and encourage victims (n=1);
- Not to tolerate law violation (n=2);
- To cooperate with the police (n=1);
- To understand the issue (n=1);
- To communicate with the victims (n=1);
- To do their work diligently (n=1);
- To be fair with cases (n=1);
- To give due importance to the issue (n=1).

Trust in the prosecutor's office is connected to how competently prosecutors to handle cases, how much importance and urgency they accord to cases, how transparently they communicate with victims and how much they keep young victims informed. One respondent noted: *"I'll link it back to my case. I don't trust them as they haven't done anything. They have not changed at all, they don't even answer the phone... They just postpone things for weeks. They say they will deal with that this week, then the next week and so on."* (Respondent No. 16)

Although this did not feature in young people's recommendations to police, respondents referred specifically to 'criminal justice cases' when formulating their suggestions for building trust in the prosecutor's office. The reason may be that 'cases' are not initiated by the police, or perhaps, it indicates that young victims are not aware of how 'cases' are compiled. While respondents did not specifically highlight the need for the police to enhance cooperation with the prosecutor's office, their recommendations for the prosecutor's office pointed explicitly to the need for improving interagency working with the police.

6.2.4 Suggestions for courts

More than half (n=11) of the respondents provided recommendations for increasing trust in the courts. Approximately a third of the responses noted that trust in the court system would require effective measure against corruption. Other suggestions included:

- to take fair decisions and give traffickers deserved punishments (n=2);
- to cooperate with other institutions (n=2);
- to do the work they are responsible for (n=1);
- to support the victims (n=1);
- to ask victims before making the decision (n=1);
- to understand the information provided by victims (n=1).

Answers in relation to how to increase young people's trust in the courts were short and telegraphic. This was perhaps because respondents thought to have already responded to this question in the previous sections that elicited their views on enhancing trust in police and the prosecutor's office.

A recent amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure in Albania has now enshrined the right of a person who has been the victim of a criminal offense to be provided with information

regarding their case. Our survey did not yet include specific questions about whether respondents had already benefited from these amendments. It is, however, encouraging and very positive that our findings, which clearly highlight a need for timely and transparent communication, coincides with these recent changes. Future research should include questions about victim's experiences of these new legal provisions. This would not only enable a comparative analysis with our data that precedes this amendment, but the information could also be translated into education efforts and actions to promote awareness and confidence about victims' rights.

6.3 Prejudice

6.3.1 Prejudices encountered by victims

The survey did not directly ask whether respondents felt judged by professionals, nor were respondents asked whether issues around judgment may have had any impact on their ability to seek justice. Prejudice, however, emerged as a key theme and featured repeatedly in responses to survey questions about why young people might be reluctant to go to the police and what they felt was the most important message to give to criminal justice institutions.

3 out of 16 people noted prejudice as a significant barrier that deters young victims from contacting the police. Young people explained that:

- *"It is difficult for them because they are afraid of prejudices, what will the people say about me, what will they say about the event. I speak from my experience, and this was the first thing that I thought"* (Respondent No. 6);
- *"The moment you go to the police, everything is covered by the media. This affects the family and many other things. People are prejudiced by the society and work. It's just a matter of mentality and fear*" (Respondent No. 7);
- *"... (Victims) feel judged*" (Respondent No. 15)

Respondents noted that prejudices can be informed by racist and ageist biases. One respondent explained: *"...don't look down on the victims, what race they belong to, what is their colour...black people are looked down in Albania. The racism mentality exists...When you are asked what you are and after telling them who you really are, people start looking at you differently, particularly the police officers. They immediately start harassing you" (Respondent 12).*

The survey responses illustrate that young victims often grapple with a wide range of complex considerations, including how to navigate the potential implications of losing anonymity and confidentiality, before making up their mind about when, how, and whether to seek justice. Before making such a far-reaching decision, many victims may stop and think about what other people will say about them and how they will judge the event. Many young people who have suffered injustice and have been hurt, hang back on reporting because prejudices are widespread, and they are scared. Due to these prejudices, many young victims forgo the chance to seek justice, they miss out on the chance to change things in their lives. This begs the

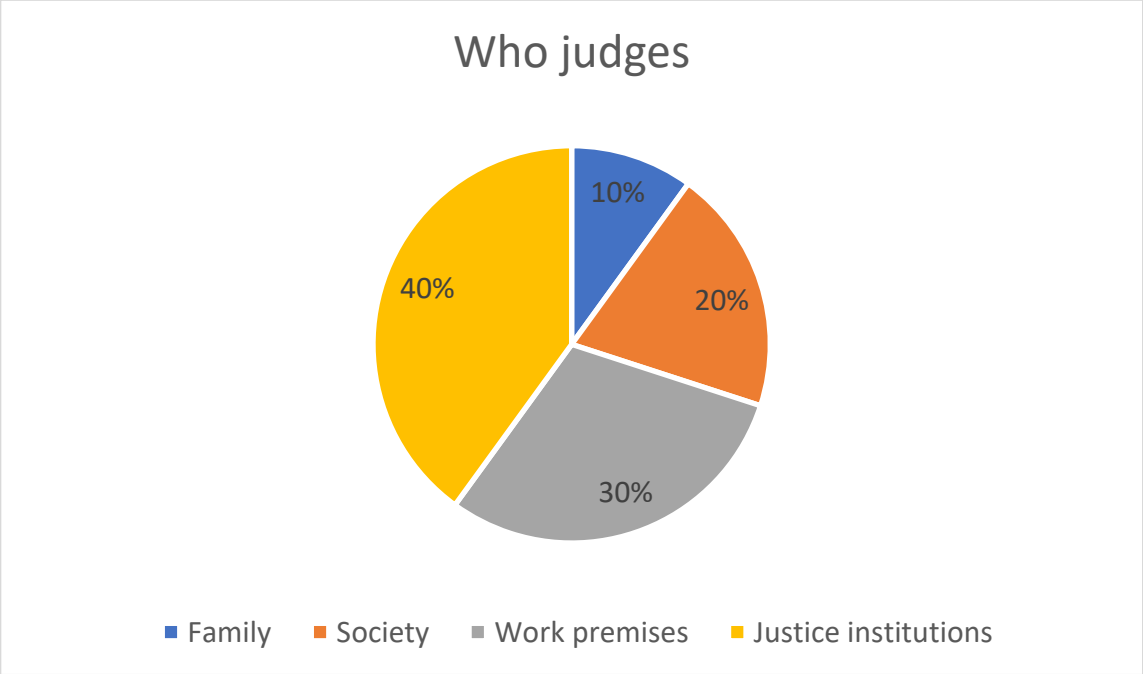
question of whether it is fair for young victims to lose their right to justice because others judge them?

Prejudice undermines young victims' confidence and is as a major barrier to approaching the police for help. Although only 3 out of 18 respondents explicitly recounted relevant experiences within their interactions with institutions, it is likely that there are more young people who experience institutional discrimination and who did not take part in the survey. Somewhere out there, there are many more who do not have the courage to report to the police due to the fear of being judged.

6.3.2 Institutional prejudice

The ten respondents who reported experiences of prejudice in the survey noted that these existed across different environments. For example, one respondent recounted being judged by her family whereas two others stated that social norms and attitudes in society often promote prejudices. Three other respondents reported feeling judged at their workplace whereas four others stated that justice institutions can hold prejudices. We identified four categories and organised the data from the survey according to the different settings where respondents reported experiencing prejudicial treatment. As illustrated below (Fig. 6), respondents primarily located prejudices in the contexts of family, society, work, and justice institutions.

Fig.7 Where do young victims feel judged?



The large number of young people who reported to have suffered from prejudices and the wide range of settings where judgement takes place indicate that prejudice is wide-spread and far-reaching. It is a major concern that families were listed as a setting where young victims face

judgement. In light of the significant role that family support can play in helping young victims in their recovery and reintegration process, it raises important questions in terms of how prejudices within the family setting affects young victim's well-being in the long term.

Given that the survey did not ask questions about whether or the types of prejudices they may have encountered in their interactions with criminal justice institutions, it is difficult to reach any conclusions about what the exact prejudices are and how they manifest in professional practice. More research is needed to investigate the prevalence, nature and consequences of prejudices against young victims. For example, it would be helpful to find out if there are specific prejudices about trafficking, abuse and sexual exploitation. If so, future research could explore how such prejudices not only impact on how young victims are viewed and responded to but also how prejudices potentially inform self-blame or shape victims' narratives about what happened to them.

6.3.3 Effects of prejudice

The survey responses suggest that, for young victims, prejudices can breed fear, jeopardise family support, and increase victims' reluctance to go to the police.

The survey responses suggest that it can be very difficult for young people to know how to continue their life after experiencing something that they never wanted and never expected would happen to them. Young people who contemplate seeking support and justice in relation to trafficking may be experiencing many difficulties. Although no prejudice is justifiable, many young victims will at one time or another face prejudices, and due to these prejudices, they may lose a sense of themselves, they may lose support from their family, but also the opportunity for justice. Prejudices instil great fear of coming forward and seeking support.

A more in-depth exploration of how prejudices impact all areas of young people's lives after experiences of trafficking and abuse would be beneficial. Further research could enhance our understanding of how young victims are perceived and treated by society and give us a better understanding of why families or communities might reject them after experiences of trafficking and sexual violence. It could shed light on whether young people feel blamed, rejected or ignored by their families or communities and whether prejudices and victim-blaming attitudes lead to social isolation and loss of friendships. Other questions that would be interesting to investigate are whether young people in Albania might face difficulties finding employment and housing after experiences of trafficking and to examine whether there are greater risks of re-victimisation in intimate relationships amongst this population.

6.4 Security

6. 4.1 Feeling secure in institutions

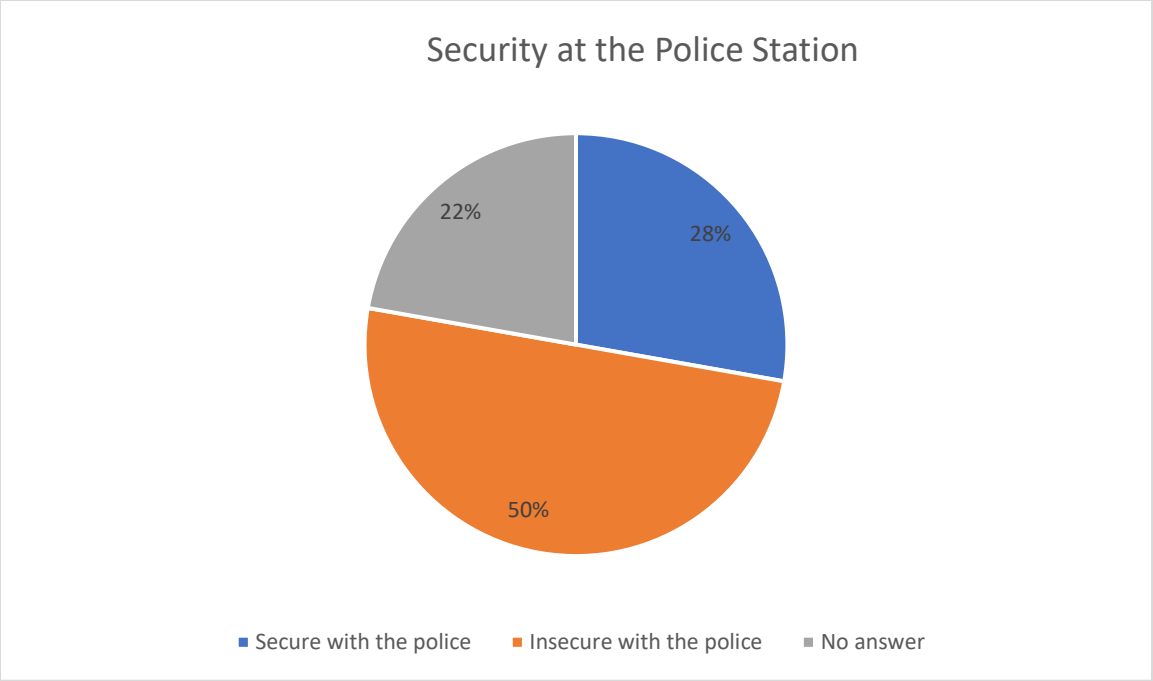
According to the survey responses, many young people do not currently feel safe when they are in contact with justice institutions. Only a small number (n=5) reported that young victims feel safe when they are dealing with the police, prosecutor's office and the courts. The following section provides more detailed information about young people's views on safety in relation to

the different criminal justice institutions and suggests some actions that would make young people feel safer in these settings.

6.4.2 Security at the police station

Only five out of the 18 people surveyed answered that young people affected by trafficking feel safe when they are in contact with the police. Nine respondents stated that they did not feel safe in their interactions with the police.

Fig 8: Security at the police station



Respondents were asked about suggestions of how the police could make young people feel safer. Almost half of the respondents (n=7) recommended to increase support for young victims, as illustrated by some of the quotes below:

- *"More support, in order to help the victims"* (Respondent No. 4);
- *"You keep them close, to trust them, to encourage them, to help them with whatever they need. The victim needs to be trusted so that they can speak out loud"* (Respondent No. 10).

4 of the respondents stated that good communication was a prerequisite for safety:

- *"It would be better, if police officers should be more communicative" (Respondent No. 8);*
- *"To have proper communication" (Respondent No. 14);*
- *"As long as the problem is communication, the interrogation in front of many people should also change" (Respondent No. 17);*

- *"To be able to communicate properly, to understand the victims, to behave well" (Respondent No. 18)*

Other respondents pointed out the importance of understanding and fulfilling their institutional role and obligations:

- *"They should do their job properly and not say it is a shame to report" (Respondent No. 1);*
- *"They should deal more with the cases, not ignore them. They should not say that they are already included on their list and have searched for them." (Respondent No. 9).*

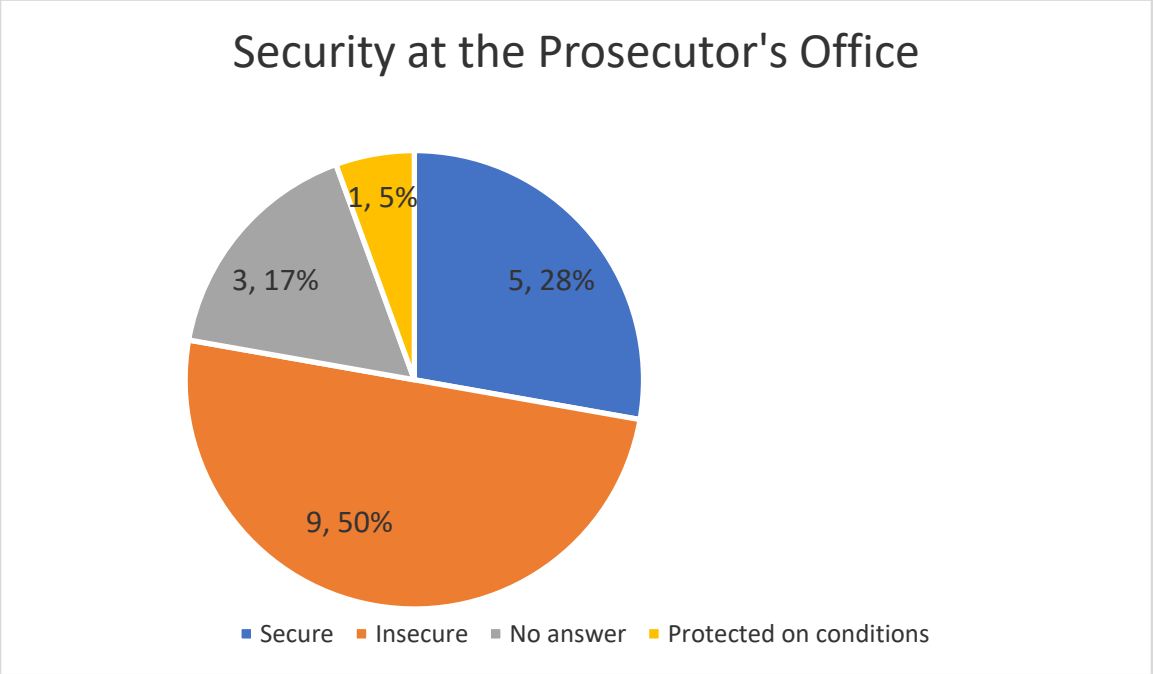
One respondent expressed a sense of disillusionment and hopelessness with the system as she felt that change was unlikely: *"Nothing can be done in this country with our police."* (Respondent No. 11)

The survey data did not generate any recommendations about changing the physical premises of police stations. This suggests that security may be largely dependent on 'soft' skills, such as understanding and non-intimidating communication, that police officers need to make young victims feel safe. The survey highlighted a strong need for increasing support for young victims by the police. Respondents clearly noted that feeling safe comes from feeling supported.

6.4.3 Security with the Prosecutor's Office

5 respondents responded that they felt safe when they were in contact with the prosecutor's office and 9 stated that they did not safe. 3 respondents chose not to answer the question and one commented that she only felt safe to go to the prosecutor's office with a support person.

Fig.9: Security at the prosecutor's office



8 respondents gave no recommendations in terms of how to improve young people's sense of security at the prosecutor's office. 2 respondents suggested that the prosecutor's office should do its job:

- *"They must do their job properly."* (Respondent No. 1);
- *"They must do their work, not let things behind over time, don't push them."* (Respondent No. 14).

Other respondents suggested to improve support for and attention to young victims:

- *"They should give more support and help the victims." (Respondent No. 4);*
- *"They should provide endless support to the victims, who must have maximum support." (Respondent No. 12);*
- *"Prosecutors should pay more attention to young people." (Respondent No. 9).*

One respondent noted that the prosecutor's office understood trafficking cases including the need for security better than the police: "*Prosecutors are aware of the case and it is easier for them to understand the victims*" (Respondent No. 8).

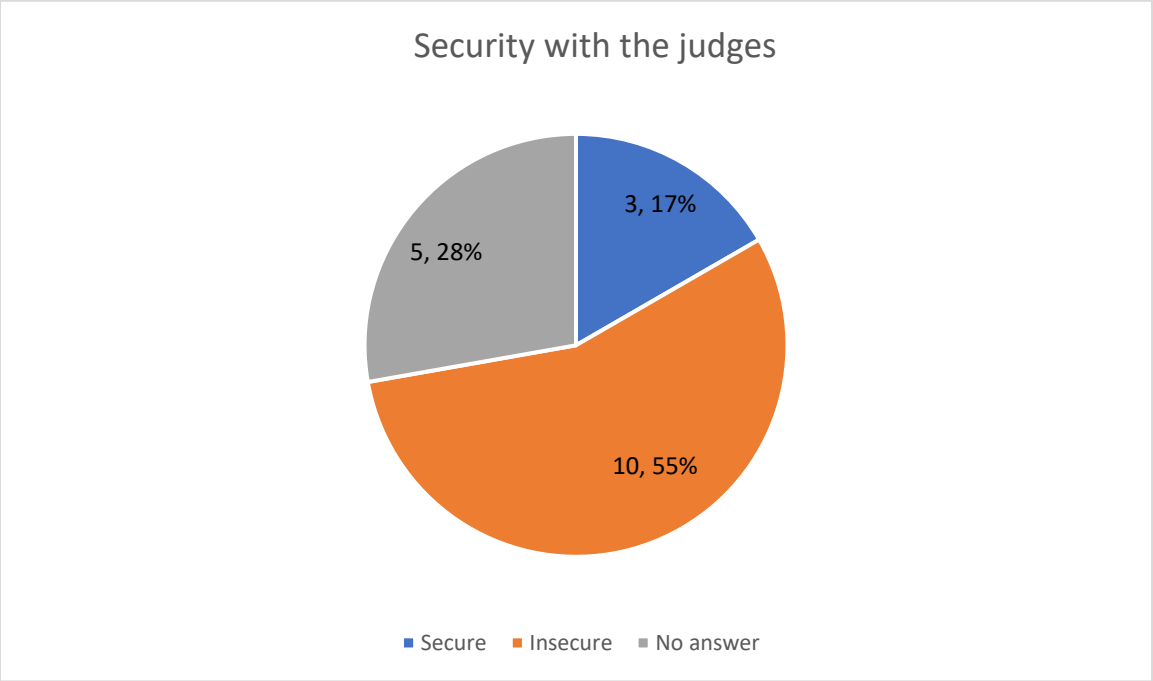
Overall, there were fewer recommendations in the survey responses about enhancing young people's sense of security with regard to the prosecutor's office than for the police. Our interpretation of the data is inconclusive. It may indicate that respondents felt that nothing needed to drastically change to enhance young people's sense of security at the prosecutor's

office or it could mean that fewer respondents had been in contact with the prosecutor's office and therefore had no views on the topic or relevant experience to share.

6.4.4 Security at the court

3 respondents reported that they felt safe with judges whereas 10 respondents stated that they did not feel safe when they were in contact with judges.

Fig.10: Security at the court



8 respondents had no suggestions for improvements to be made to the court whereas 10 respondents provided some recommendations and wanted judges to:

- Fulfil their institutional obligations: "*They must do their work properly*." (Respondent No. 1);
- Support victims:
  - "*They should provide more support and help the victims*." (Respondent No. 5)
  - *"They should protect them."* (Respondent no. 2);
- Respect victims' privacy: "*The judge should not ask improper questions, as those [he] asked to me. During my trial, he didn't need to know the part of my story, where I was going to stay with mom or here [the reintegration centre]. He asked questions about my story. In fact, his duty is not to ask questions about what happened to me.*" (Respondent No. 8);
- Cooperate with other institutions: "*Judges should cooperate with each other*." (Respondent No. 11)
- Provide justice:

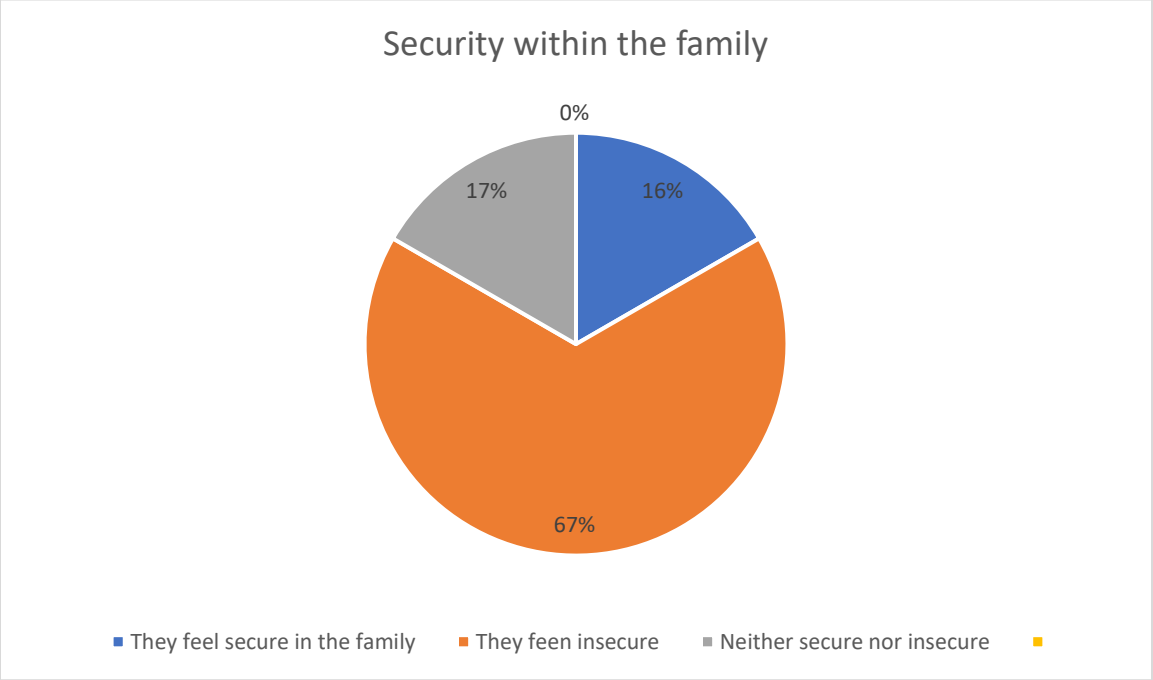
  - "*They should judge the case fairly regarding what happened to the victim*." (Respondent No. 14);
  - "*They should be fair*." (Respondent No. 18);
- Be sensitive: "*They should be more correct, more sensitive, to think that they are helping someone and the law at the same time. They should think that they have their children of their own*." (Respondent No. 15)

The survey data clearly showed that respondents often did not feel safe during their interactions with the police, the prosecutor's office and in courts. Criminal justice and victim protection institutions should take note of this as there may be a considerable unreported number of young victims who may feel equally unsafe when seeking support and justice. Institutions should question why so many of the young people involved in our survey highlighted this problem. The fact that respondents reported not feeling secure when they were in contact with institutions whose duty was to listen and protect them is of great concern. It raises the question of what is wrong with the Albanian criminal justice system if young people say they fear institutions instead of trusting them to adequately protect them and make them feel safe.

6.4.5 Security after returning home

The majority (n=12) of respondents stated that they did not feel safe when they returned to their families as continued threats from traffickers often remained, either against the victim or / and their families, with the possibility of further (re)-victimisation and other negative repercussions hanging over them. Three respondents answered that they felt neither safe nor unsafe whereas three others noted that returning to their family made them feel safe.

Fig.11: Security within the family



Two respondents suggested that young victims would feel safer when they returned to her family if there was a protection order, support, and if the criminals had been arrested. In order to feel secure, victims would need to feel confident that their situation would not get worse.

Respondents were asked about their ideas of how to enhance security after young people had returned to their families. Two respondents explained the situation with regard to family protection as follows:

- *"Police support is primary, but in some cases it does not work. This is always the case in Albania."* (Respondent No. 8); "
- *"The police just say go, you are safe with your family. They don't do anything else. They just say a word, and they do not care what happens to you later, if you are alive or not."* (Respondent No. 9).

In contrast, one respondent highlighted the protective factors of returning to the family. She noted that staying with the family would be safe "because no one can help you as much as the family, not even the police." (Respondent No. 9).

According to the survey data, key measures that would make young victims' feel safer after returning to their families include:

- **Conviction of traffickers** (n=5):
    - "*The person who has committed a crime, must not be released after 10 days, but instead, a good lesson should be given to the person who threatens people, so that he does not do this again.*" (Respondent No. 7);

- *"[If] the perpetrators have been caught, she is sure that it will not get worse. When she is confident, she can face any kind of challenge. This should give her courage, so that she can later help other victims, as well*." (Respondent No. 10);
- "*The main thing it that traffickers should be arrested. I think that they should be rehabilitated, change and therefore, they will not seek revenge when they are released from prison*." (Respondent No. 14).
- "*As long as the trafficker is not convicted, it is scary to return home.*" (Respondent No. 16);
- "I heard that many girls do not feel safe at home, particularly if the traffickers have not been convicted." (Respondent No. 17).

- **Issuing and implementing protection orders** (3 respondents): "*I think they should be protected by the police. They should be provided with a protection order, and it must not be just a letter, but it should be put in effect.*" (Respondent No. 7)
- **Behaviours, attitudes, and measures taken by the police** (5 respondents):
  - "*Advising the victim to stay away from people who hurt her, to provide her with a quiet family environment, with safe people who help her not to think about what happened*." (Respondent No. 6);
  - "*I think that they should put guards as is the case abroad.*" (Respondent no. 11);
  - "*As long as the police does its work well, contacts must be maintained. They should inform the victims when the traffickers are released."* (Respondent No. 15);
  - "*They should have maximum support from the family and the state police.*" (Respondent no. 2);
  - "*They should talk more, to listen to us and to be closer to us.*" (Respondent No. 13).
- **Protection should be provided even after the investigation has ended** (2 respondents):
  - "*They can protect the victim for the moment, until the investigations are over, but there is still the risk that she can be again a victim."* (Respondent No. 3)
  - "*The police must monitor the victims and protect them.*" (Respondent No. 18)

While effective family protection may require mobilisation and collaboration across different institutions, the police is the key institution responsible for family protection. It would also appear necessary to carefully consider the conditions under which young victims return to their families and to closely examine any assessments and arrangements that have been made. This should include information on the trafficker's whereabouts and putting physical protection measures in place to ensure the safety of victims.

More research into the specific risks that families face after victims come home alongside an exploration of the short- and long-term benefits of returning to, or close to, the family would be beneficial. The survey data provided no information about family protection or young people's perceptions regarding the logistical capacities of the police in this area. An institutional capacity assessment could shed light on how well equipped the police is to guarantee victim protection.

6.4.6 Protection of the family

The survey highlighted young people's expectation that the police should protect trafficking victims and that this was not primarily the responsibility of the family. Only five out of 14 respondents referred to the family as their key protective factor.

In the survey, respondents were asked what the police should do to protect the families of trafficking victims from threats and attacks by their traffickers. Three respondents suggest that the family should be helped to move abroad:

- "*If the threat is so great that even the police could not stop it, then it would be very good to help the victims move abroad for a period of time.*" (Respondent No. 7);
- "*The best thing is to be in a place where they don't have much contact with people, abroad, in a safer place or somewhere outside the city.*" (Respondent No. 8);
- "*If the situation is serious, they should leave the country*." (Respondent No. 14)

2 respondents noted that the police should be physically close to the family:

- "*In order for the Police to protect the family of that girl or boy, they should assign guards, and must be in contact with that family.*" (Respondent No. 11);
- "*The police must protect, monitor them*." (Respondent No. 18)

Respondents provided few suggestions in relation to family protection. This may be because: a) they do not live with their family; b) they believe that if the victim is protected, the whole family is protected; or c) they think that it is difficult to take effective actions to protect the family.

6.5 The Role of Traffickers in Justice

6.5.1 Influence of traffickers on victims

The study did not include direct questions about the influence that traffickers have on justice institutions. However, we found relevant information on coercive mechanisms that traffickers use to control or intimidate victims in answers to why young people might feel reluctant to go to the police. There were references in our data that suggests that traffickers may use threats, revenge, and pressure to exert influence over victims:

- "S*ome may be afraid of their family because if the perpetrator is convicted and sentenced to prison, he shall surely take revenge upon being released.*" (Respondent No. 11);
- *"[Victims] may be threatened.*" (Respondent No. 10);
- "*Given that the traffickers have not been arrested - they put pressure on the victims.*" (Respondent No. 16);
- "*It is difficult for them [victims] as they may be threatened. They do not know what will happen next."* (Respondent No. 18)

6. 5.2 Conviction of traffickers and the role of impunity

The survey did not ask direct questions about the conviction of traffickers. The punishment of traffickers, however, emerged as a key theme in respondents answers to questions about trust in institutions:

- "*The rules that the Prime Minister and the President announce on television should not remain just words but should be turned into actions so that the person who is to be punished, is punished as he deserves. ...Nowadays, the innocent is judged more than the guilty*." (Respondent 7).
- "*To bring justice, every trafficker must be faced with justice. He should not be kept for one night at the police station and then released, because he will traffic other girls, as well*." (Respondent 17)

There was also relevant data in respondents' answers to what police should do to protect victims and their families. This information highlights that it is of utmost important to young people that traffickers are caught and imprisoned and that victims are duly informed:

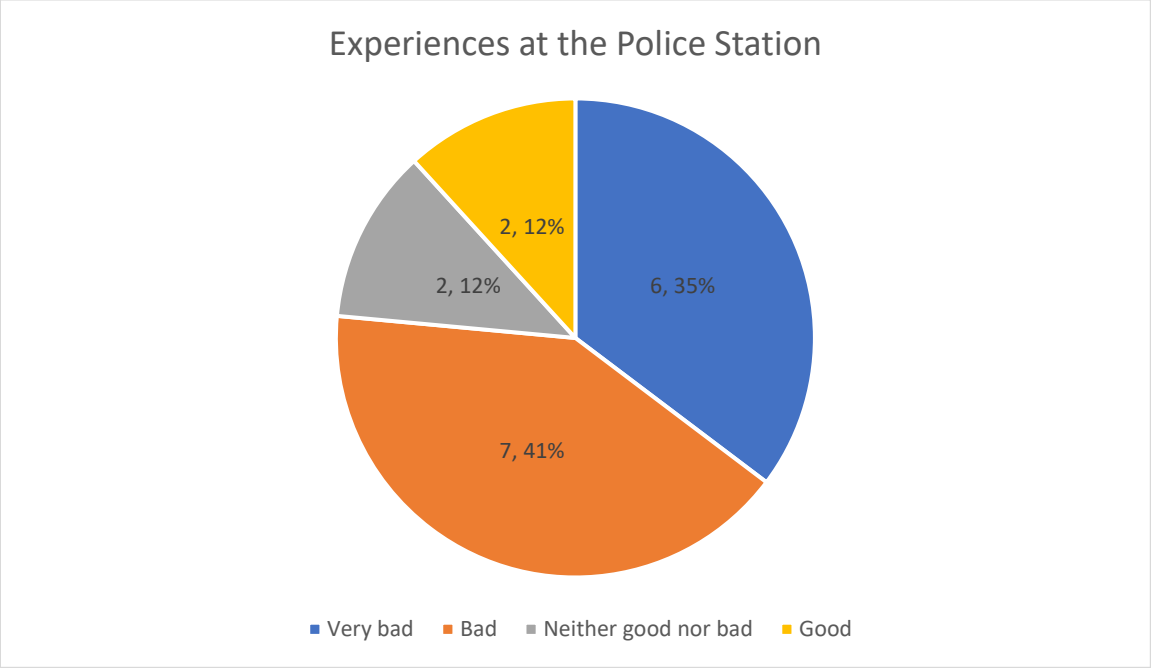
- "*The traffickers must be arrested and put in prison.*" (Respondent No. 12)
- "*Victims must be informed about the trafficker's movements. They can't be satisfied with "we'll protect you. Don't worry!*" (Respondent no. 17)
- "*Catch the traffickers and don't let them out because he can do the same thing to someone else!*" (Respondent no. 5)

The evidence gathered suggests that the justice system should notify any actions that will be taken against the trafficker and that the victim must be informed of any information relevant to the case. Additionally, should the trafficker on any ground be released from prison, the victim must be informed with immediate effect. If the victim feels concerned for their safety or endangered, prompt and effective support must be provided.

6.6 Communication and Behaviour

17 out of 18 respondents provided information to the question about how they felt on police premises. The majority rated their experience negatively: six respondents described their experience as 'very bad'; seven as 'bad'; two as "neither good nor bad" whereas two respondents rated recounted having a 'good' experience. 12 respondents further noted that victims felt pressured by the police to report trafficking crimes and to give statements.

Fig. 12: Young people's experiences at the police station



When the project started, four of the young researchers resided in independent living arrangements, two lived on their own, and two lived with their families.
The fact that 13 out of 18 respondents described their experience at the police station as 'bad' or 'very bad' raises a serious concern about how young people are responded to when seeking support in relation to trafficking and sexual violence. The survey did not ask about the reasons for how respondents rated their experience. Although it would have been interesting to glean those explanations, we had ethical concerns about delving further into respondents' personal stories and potentially re-traumatising material. Instead, the survey asked a more general question about what young people understood as offensive behaviour (see 6.1). We recognise that this decision has contributed to missing insightful information about why respondents rated their experiences at the police station poorly.

6.6.1 Offensive behaviours

Because we knew from our own experiences that young victims' interactions with the police can be difficult and because we wanted to learn more about the range of experiences that young people have on police premises, we invited respondents to give their opinions on what they viewed as offensive behaviour. Out of 18 survey respondents, six chose not to comment on this question and two of the six answered that they 'could not speak'. One respondent stated that she felt good at the police premises. The remaining 11 respondents reported that they felt offended during their first contact with the police: they were not trusted by the police and felt re-victimized. Their denunciation was not taken seriously, and police officers used mocking and offensive language while addressing them. They were blamed for what had happened to them. The following quotes illustrate the range of responses that respondents recalled from their interactions with the police:

- "*Are you sure that this event happened for real or are you making it up?*" (Respondent No. 8);
- "*Go, girl, go home. This is the first word they would say.*" (Respondent No. 12);
- "*You sought it yourself... Why did you do this?*" (Respondent No. 11).

The survey data highlight that victim-blaming and discrediting or undermining young victim's statement are common practice on police premises. If young people are not believed and not supported but instead blamed, mocked or discriminated against when they approach the police for help, it is not surprising that many young victims think twice about approaching institutions for support.

During the survey, respondents commented on a range of practices they that cause young people offense and distress, as illustrated below:

- **Inappropriate / insensitive interviewing**: "*The smallest details, making her feel bad. Asking a lot of questions at a very bad emotional time for the victim*." (Respondent No. 5);
- **Delving into the past**: "*When they are asked about the past.*" (Respondent No. 18)

The high proportion of survey respondents (n=11) who provided information on experiencing offensive and distressing behaviours and the wide range offensive behaviours that were recorded in the data set causes us great concern. The evidence presented here calls for immediate actions to stop and prevent any future institutional revictimisation of young people who have already been traumatised through trafficking and sexual violence. There is a clear training need to promote awareness of trauma-informed practices, sensitive interviewing skills, and to gain a better understanding of young victims' needs and how these should be responded to across police forces.

6.6.2 Repeat interrogations

The survey asked respondents whether they thought that young victims were often interrogated multiple times as part of their criminal investigations. None of the respondents answered this question. However, almost all respondents (n=16) provided information about repeat interviewing practices and commented on how this effects young victims. 6 out of 16 respondents who answered the question stated that repeat interviewing practices, whereby victims are asked questions multiple times over, often by several different professionals, can lead to re-experiencing traumatic events.

Respondents felt that, in addition to being retraumatising for the young person, this practice could be counterproductive. Although the purpose of repeat interrogations is presumably to build up a complete picture of the incident and to verify the evidence, respondents felt that the practice achieved the opposite - instead of giving a clear picture of the events, it spoils it:

- "*I was interrogated 10 times or more. In my opinion this is not a good practice, because if you ask a person who is in a very bad emotional state and who has experienced a*

trauma 10 times, he will say something different every time. This is because he himself does not remember the event exactly as it has happened." (Respondent No. 7)

- "*It is normally a bit difficult to say the same thing at various stages and all the time, because the same story, the same experience comes back. However, it is their duty to find out if they (the victims) stick to the same word or not, so as to find out if is it true or not.*" (Respondent No. 8);

On respondent seemed have normalised and accepted the negative feelings associated with repeat interviewing as part of the justice process, commenting "*they feel bad, it is normal*" (Respondent No. 16).

However, the majority of respondents explained why being interrogated many times over was harmful. They reported that the repeat interrogation practices:

- Made them feel terrified and ashamed: "*Touched, they are afraid, threatened, as if the end has come. They have no strength as they feel ashamed*." (Respondents No. 10).
- Made them feel vulnerable and insecure: "*They feel vulnerable, insecure of course, because it is assumed that you are going there to be provided with protection and find another reality*." (Respondent No. 1);
- Frightened them and increased their anxieties: "*There are emotions and the psychological pressure increases. There is also the fear of telling or not everything.*" (Respondent No. 7)
- Made them feel like the police was waiting for them to make a mistake and trying to get them into trouble, be caught out, to prove their guilt: "*I have been interrogated many times by different people just to see if the things I said were true. They wanted me to make any mistake and catch me red handed. This makes them feel very bad as they are re-victimized by repeating an event many times.*" (Respondent No. 6);
- Caused fatigue and annoyance: "*Victims are not believed, they are constantly interrogated by different people. The police question the words of the victim by saying to them that you did not say this the last time. The victim is tired of this procedure.*" (Respondent No. 17);
- Compounded their stress: "*I think they feel stressed under the police pressure and under the pressure of the person who trafficked them.*" (Respondent No. 11)

During the survey, respondents also talked about other aspects of the interrogation process that cause distress. One respondent noted that young people feel uncomfortable about being asked sensitive and private questions and having to answer them in front of professionals they don't necessarily trust: "*I think they feel bad when they are asked about sensitive things and in front of many people.*" (Respondent No. 14)

We noted at the beginning of this section that none of the respondents commented on whether or not they believed repeat interrogations were a common practice experienced by young victims of trafficking. There are different ways to interpret this silence. Given how much detail respondents provided about the effects of this practice and how it makes young people

feel, it is possible that respondents simply ignored the opening question because they took it as a given that repeat interrogation is an integral part of criminal investigations. Their statement clearly demonstrate that many respondents had experienced this practice and had strong views about it.

Respondents' descriptions closely mirror what we know from research and practice about post-traumatic stress syndrome (PTSD) and its effects, which often includes memory loss. This can impact victims' ability to reconstruct past traumatic events. As the young people in the survey explained, due to the significant psychological stress, it can be very difficult for a victim to recall details of what happened to them. The slightly 'defensive' tone in some of the respondents' statements expresses frustration and hurt that young people understandably feel if this is not understood and adequately taken into consideration by institutions and professionals. A sound understanding of trauma and trauma-informed practice should guide how young victims are responded to at all times. This raises the critical question of why many authorities in Albania still continue to exert pressure on young victims to repeatedly gather more facts and details. This is despite the research evidence that exists on PTSD and despite many professionals knowing from their own practice experience that a victim's memory might be impacted by trauma. It needs to be understood that this practice can cause re-traumatisation and deep distress.

The survey generated limited information about whether the practice of repeat interrogation is born out of mistrust. We wonder if this might be different in cases where victims initiate contact with the authorities out of their own volition. Unfortunately, we did not collect data on this topic but it would be interesting to explore the relationship between self-referrals and how this affects professionals level of trust / mistrust in victims' statements.

6.6.3 Focusing on information that is relevant to the investigation

The survey investigated respondents' views on whether they thought young people were being asked irrelevant questions as part of the investigation. 11 of the 18 respondents thought that the police only collected information that was necessary for the investigation whereas 6 respondents stated that the police also posed invalid questions about things that were not relevant for, or related to, the investigation. Eight respondents did not answer the question about the nature of questions or give an example of irrelevant questions. Four respondents thought that the police were likely to ask victims about personal things. Two respondents noted that such practices made young victims feel guilty and were at times intentionally used to trigger feelings of self-doubt and self-blame:

- "*They ask about personal things, not related to the case, they use ways and means not to trust the child*." (Respondent No. 15);
- "*I can't say for sure, I know that when a victim goes to the police, she is not believed. They continue to ask her "are you sure?" go and think once more. You are too young to ask about these things. They ask questions not related to the case and make comments by blaming you."* (Respondent No. 17)

One respondent further felt that questions about how the victim was introduced to the trafficker were not relevant to the investigation and could make young people feel uncomfortable or like they were being judged or blamed: "*They ask first about the case, then they move on to personal issues. They ask about the family, the trafficker, where he is from, how you knew him, etc."* (Respondent No. 3).

Another respondent recalled a worrying episode about being questioned by a police officer in a way that felt frightening and abusive: "*It could also be some maniac police officer, but normally he asks at the beginning about trafficking, but God help me, he can also be as I already mentioned before.*[3]" (Respondent No. 1).

We surmise that the large number of survey respondents refused to comment on the question about inappropriate questioning because: a) police rarely ask young victims inappropriate or personal questions that are unrelated to the investigation; or b) it is not always clear to young victims whether a particular question is relevant for a criminal investigation. In hindsight, it might have been helpful if we had clearly defined what we meant by 'personal question that is not relevant to the criminal investigation' or given an example before asking respondents to comment on this topic. At the same time, we also did not want to ask a leading question that might have influenced respondents' answers.

6.6.4 Support that would make a difference

The survey data offered a range of suggestions about how the police could make young victims feel better and how they could better support them. Respondents gave the following key recommendations:

- **Catch the traffickers** (2 respondents);
- **Be humane and not use violence** (2 respondents): "*Being closer to the victim, more understanding and doing things properly but in a slightly more human way*." (Respondent No. 7);
- **Provide support and help** (4 respondents): "*They should help as much as possible, so they don't sit around eating sunflower seeds and pizza on the street. I see the traffic police officers that stay there not doing anything, just eating seeds and pizza, drinking Pepsi, red bull. They only want to earn money. I cannot describe what these police officers are doing.*" (Respondent No. 11)
- **Practice sensitive, trauma-informed communication** (3 respondents):
    - "*To speak calmly, not to say anything that might hurt her, to take the testimony in a way so that she does not get hurt again, not to make her feel guilty, as if they were psychologists*." (Respondent No. 5)
    - "*To communicate well, calmly.*" (Respondent No. 18)
- **Encourage victims to report** (1 respondent): "*You [the victim] should be motivated to report. They should deal with the victim as much as possible. I have also seen journalists*

[3] Off the record, the respondent recounted an encounter with a police officer that was sexually abusive and frightening.

who do not focus on the victims and how to help them. They talk only nonsense. It's not something that can pass quickly, it will be there, all your life." (Respondent No. 6)

- **Foster a sense of safety** (1 respondent): "*They should support them to feel safe*." (Respondent No. 2)
- **Keep victims informed** (1 respondent): "*The police should keep the victim informed about the case.*" (Respondent No. 3)
- **Provide a psychologist who can support the victim** (2 respondents):
    - "In my case, instead of telling my story to an officer, I told it to a psychologist and I felt better. The police station offers this help as they also have their own psychologist." (Respondent No. 8)
    - "They should help them to talk to a psychologist and a person they trust. They must talk as much as possible. The victim should feel good." (Respondent No. 10);
- **Provide a choice to have a female member of staff** (1 respondent);
- **Do not ask victims personal questions** (1 respondent);
- **Consider the special needs of children and young people** (1 respondent).

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The evidence presented in this report demonstrates that young victims of trafficking face significant barriers and a wide range of uncertainties during their journeys through the Albanian criminal justice and victim protection systems.

7.1 Trust

A lack of trust was identified as a major barrier to seeking justice and support. The report highlighted that young people's levels of trust in the authorities is directly influenced by the behaviours and attitudes that professionals in criminal justice institutions display towards them. Poor communication, victim-blaming attitudes, prejudice, and insensitive behaviours by professionals can seriously harm and re-traumatise victims and deter young people from seeking support and justice. How police forces communicate and behave towards victims is of utmost importance because they are typically the first point of contact. When professionals believe and take victims' declarations seriously, it instils in young people a sense of trust in the criminal justice and victim protection systems. Conversely, when victims' statements are routinely discredited, it has the opposite effect: it breeds mistrust in the authorities; it sends the message that it is not safe for young victims to disclose; and it deters young victims from seeking support and justice. The survey results clearly show that young people's trust in institutions, particularly in the police, rides primarily on staff behaviours and attitudes and less on the physical environment of the premises. It could be useful to further examine whether there are resource constraints, staff shortages, or logistical and process challenges that compound the problems identified in the survey and, if so, how these could be addressed to enhance young people's trust in institutions.

7.2 Communication

Young people's experiences of criminal justice responses to child trafficking point to a strong need to closely examine and set clear standards in terms of how staff communicate with and behave towards young victims. High professional standards should apply to all institutions and across all stages of the criminal justice process. As a first step, it would be helpful to conduct comprehensive institutional assessments to scrutinise current practices and processes around law enforcement and victim protection. Those in charge of safeguarding children and young people should lead reforms, take on board young people's perspectives, and ensure that staff receive specialist, trauma-informed training on child-friendly and victim-centred practices and communication methods. It is critical that staff performance is regularly monitored and harmful attitudes towards young victims of trafficking identified and actively challenged. The relevant institutional leaders should assume responsibility for, and take effective measures to prevent, the institutional re-victimisation of young victims of trafficking.

7.3 Safety

According to the survey, many young victims do not currently feel safe in justice institutions. Young people's interactions with criminal justice institutions are in many cases characterised by fear. Whether young people feel secure during their contact with the authorities largely depends on individual staff members and their ability to build trust and make young victims feel safe and supported. The required presence of young victims on institutional premises - at police stations, the prosecution's office, and in court- should, wherever possible, be kept to a minimum to reduce young victims' stress and anxiety. Forensic interviews, testimonies, and related interrogations forming part of the criminal investigation should take place in child / youth friendly surroundings. They should be conducted by experienced, specialist staff with relevant, trauma-informed expertise and sensitive communication skills. Young victims should be asked if they prefer a female professional to take their statement. A psychologist should be appointed to support minors during criminal investigations.

7.4 Knowledge and Information

Generally, young victims require more education about their rights and support to actively claim them. Specifically, young victims often lack clear information about their cases and wish for more transparent communication and timely progress updates. Respondents reported that delays in case progression were common and noted that the inertia and uncertainty can cause significant anxiety. Delays were linked to high levels of mistrust and prejudice towards victims and attributed to lack of awareness among professionals about victims' rights. Respondents felt that the pace of case progression largely depended on how well institutions and professionals communicated and worked together. Effective interagency working between the police and the prosecutor's office was highlighted as especially critical. While the study generated some insights into young people's perceptions on current multiagency working, further investigations could shed light on young people's experiences regarding case transfers from the police to the prosecutor's office.

7.5 Impunity

Impunity, high levels of corruption, and tolerance of law violations amongst criminal justice professionals and institutions were as significant problems in Albania, undermining effective law enforcement and fundamentally affecting young people's sense of safety. Many of the young people surveyed reported having serious security concerns after being reunited with their families if their traffickers had not been captured and protection orders had not been put in place or effectively enforced to ensure their own and their family's safety. Impunity denies victims the chance to obtain justice, which is an integral part for recovery, and seriously hampers prevention efforts.

7.6 Future research

The *Small Steps* study identified some knowledge gaps that would be useful to explore in future research:

7.6.1 The survey explored young people's trust in criminal justice professionals and institutions but not vice versa. Future research could shed light on whether the lack of trust is mutual and further examine the implications for young victims. For example, an attitude survey could be administered across criminal justice institutions to gauge levels of trust in young victims and explore how often their statements are not believed. This could facilitate a cross analysis with the data presented here and build a more comprehensive picture of the situation. Mapping public opinions about the trustworthiness of institutions and the effectiveness of law enforcement could add another dimension to understanding how public perceptions of the criminal justice system might inform victims' level of trust, confidence and motivation to seek help.

7.6.2 The evidence presented in this report suggests that young victims of trafficking can face prejudices from criminal justice professionals. More research is needed to investigate the prevalence and nature of existing prejudices across relevant institutions and to clarify whether prejudices are specific to trafficking and sexual violence. The *Small Steps* peer survey did not investigate to what extent the identified challenges are specific or limited to child trafficking or whether they represent, and are the product of, broader malfunctions in law enforcement and victim protection in Albania. Comparing the challenges identified here with research evidence regarding other crimes would shed light on this question. It would furthermore be interesting to contrast young people's experiences of seeking justice and support with the experiences of older trafficking victims to discern potential ageist biases.

7.6.3 In a similar vein, it would be beneficial to gain a more in-depth understanding of how prejudices impact all areas of young people's lives after experiences of trafficking. Such research could illuminate to what extent prejudices and potential victim-blaming attitudes form an integral part of existing social norms and whether these can lead to victims' social isolation, difficulties in finding employment and housing, and increase risks of re-victimisation and exposure to other forms of abuse, for example intimate partner violence. Popular discourses that normalise sexual violence and that silence, stigmatise or blame victims, not only influence professional attitudes and behaviours - they can also often shape victims' own narratives about their experiences of abuse and inform their understanding of what role they play in abusive events. This, in turn, can fundamentally curtail young people's access to support and justice. In the future, it would be useful to explore the relationship between social norms and young victims' helpseeking behaviours to better understand how these are interconnected.

7.6.4 Although the *Small Steps* study did not explicitly focus on institutional violence (where the use of violence is embedded in professional and institutional practice), the survey findings indicate that some respondents had experienced re-victimisation through criminal justice professionals, specifically the police. This is of utmost concern and urgently warrants further investigation. Specifically, it would be beneficial to gain a clearer understanding of the scope of the problem by examining manifestations of harmful practices across different institutions and to identify different types of violence that young people encounter across the criminal justice system.

7.6.5 The *Small Steps* research surfaced the roles which criminal justice institutions, and specifically the police, play in facilitating and hindering case progression. Future research could investigate the role of victims in these processes. For example, there is currently little knowledge about young victims' levels of understanding regarding their own involvement and contribution in facilitating case progression.

7.6.6 A recent amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure in Albania has now enshrined the right of a person who has been the victim of a criminal offense to be provided with information regarding their case. Future research exploring whether young victims have already directly benefitted from these legal provisions would enable a comparative analysis with our data that precedes this amendment.

7.6.7 More research into the specific risks that families face from traffickers after victims return home alongside an exploration of the short- and long-term benefits of returning to, or close to, the family would be beneficial. The survey data provided no information about current levels of family protection or young people's perceptions regarding the logistical capacities of the police in this area. An institutional capacity assessment could shed light on how well equipped the police is to guarantee victim protection.

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9. ANNEX: SURVEY PROTOCOL

"Small steps can make a big difference" Project Survey Protocol

Step 1: Presentation and being provided with the permit

Step 2: Warm-up questions

Thank you for agreeing to participate in the survey. How are you?

Step 3. Demographic data

1. How old are you? _____
2. In which city do you live? _____
3. Gender? Please, make a tick to: male/female / not so male/female
4. What education do you have?
   Make a tick, please: 9-year education/ general secondary school/ vocational secondary school/ university
5. How long have you been helped/ have been provided with services?

Step 4: Survey Questions

1. As you already know, this survey is about the experiences of young people in seeking support and justice after experiencing trafficking for sexual exploitation and sexual violence. Who do you think is most often affected by these crimes?

Men/women/both sexes??

2. How easy is it for young people affected by trafficking to go to the police?
Use the scale below

1: Very easy☐
2: Easy☐
3: Neither easy nor difficult ☐
4: Difficult☐
5: Very difficult ☐

3. *If you marked 4 or 5,* why do you think young people find it difficult or are reluctant to go to the police??

Write your answers here:

4. What do you think, what would young people say, how would they describe their experience when they went to the police for support and justice?

Use the scale below :

1: Very good☐
2: Good☐
3: Neither good nor bad ☐
4: Bad ☐
5: Very bad☐

5. What issues or behaviors young victims can be experience as offensive?

Write your answers here :

6. Which is the level of criminal justice that cases of young people who, after being victimized and passing through the criminal justice system, get stuck?

Write your answers here :

7. Do you think that young people affected by trafficking feel safe when they are in contact with:

a) Police/ Police officers: Yes/No

Could you please explain your answer here?

7/b Do you think that young people affected by trafficking feel safe when they are in contact with:

b) Prosecutor's Office/Prosecutors: Yes/No

Could you please explain your answer here?

7.c Do you think that young people affected by trafficking feel safe when they are in contact with:

c) Judges: Yes/No

Could you please explain your answer here?

8. In your opinion, what can law enforcement institutions do to make young people feel safer?

Write your answer here:

a) Suggestions for the police officers:

b) Suggestions for prosecutors:

c) Suggestions for judges:

9. How much do you think young people affected by trafficking trust the following institutions:

9.a Police officers

From 0 to 5, how much do they trust the Police officers (0 means they have no trust at all, 5 means they trust them at the maximum)

0. ☐ 1. ☐ 2. ☐ 3. ☐ 4. ☐ 5. ☐

Can you explain me why you made this choice?

9.b Prosecutors

From 0 to 5, how much do they trust the Prosecutors (0 means they have no trust at all, 5 means they trust them at the maximum

0. ☐ 1. ☐ 2. ☐ 3. ☐ 4. ☐ 5. ☐

Can you explain me why you made this choice?

9.c Judges

From 0 to 5, how much do they trust the Judges (0 means they have no trust at all, 5 means they trust them at the maximum

0. ☐ 1. ☐ 2. ☐ 3. ☐ 4. ☐ 5. ☐

Can you explain me why you made this choice?

10. Do you have any suggestions on how to increase trust between young victims and these institutions?

a) Suggestion for the police/police officers :

b) Suggestion for prosecutors:

c) Suggestion for judges

11. Do you think that during the investigation and criminal trial the victims of trafficking are interrogated more than once by the police, prosecutors and judges? Yes No

12. How do you think young people feel about this practice?

Write your answer here:

13. Do you think that the police interrogate the victim only for the information that is important for the investigation? Yes No

14. *If you ticked 'No',* what other information that is not important for the investigation, can the police ask the victims?

Write your answer here:

15. Do you think that some victims may feel pressured by the police to report trafficking crimes and to give statements? Yes No

16. What can the police do to make victims of trafficking feel better and supported in such situations?

Write your answer here:

17. Do you think that the process of investigation and criminal trial procedures can be traumatizing for young people affected by trafficking? Yes No

Do you want to say something about the most difficult elements or the biggest concerns regarding this process?

18. Do you think that young people who have been trafficked are safe when they return to their families? Yes No

19. Do you think that the police protect young people who have returned to their families from threats and attacks by their traffickers? Yes No

20. How can the safety of young people be enhanced after their return to their families?

Write your suggestions here:

21. What do you think the police should do to protect the families of trafficking victims from threats and attacks by their traffickers?

Write your suggestions here :

22. What is the most important message that you want to give to criminal justice institutions?