



LITHUANIA

Country-specific contextual report

Findings from the assessment and recommendations
for establishing a Women and Girls Safe Space in Lithuania

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The Safe Hut project

The Safe Hut “Holding safe spaces for women and girls’ empowerment” project is co-funded by the European Commission under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) Programme (EU AMIF-2022-AG-CALL-THB).

The project, number 101100732, will run for 24 months (01/04/2023 – 31/03/2025) and involves seven experienced partners from six EU countries (Italy, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria). The main project objective is to support social and labor integration of migrant women and girls (potential) victims/survivors of trafficking and other forms of violence by establishing Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) where women and girls feel physically and emotionally safe and are supported through processes of empowerment.

Project partners

[CESIE](#) - Centro Studi e Iniziative Europeo – Coordinator (Italy)

[CENTRO PENC](#) – Antropologia e psicologia geoclinica (Italy)

[IRC](#) – International Rescue Committee ([Germany](#) and [Italy](#))

[KMOP](#) – Social Action and Innovation Center (Greece)

[KOPZI](#) – Center Against Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Lithuania)

[AidRom](#) – Asociatia Ecumenica a Bisericii Din Romania (Romania)

[Animus](#) - Centre for rehabilitation, counseling and psychotherapy (Bulgaria)

1. Introduction

This report includes the key findings of the assessment conducted by KOPZI in Lithuania, as launching partner of a Women and Girls Safe Space (WGSS) in the scope of the Safe Hut project. The assessment was conducted at a stage prior to the establishment of the WGSS, in order to gather important information to tailor and adapt the WGSS to the local context, under the guidance of the IRC as partner of the project. In this phase key stakeholders such as community leaders, local and international NGOs, and local authorities working in the migration and anti-trafficking field were engaged to give their feedback on the major needs of women and girls survivors or potential victims of human trafficking. In the assessment, a key role is played by women and girls who are actively involved in this phase not only as informants or potential beneficiaries of the WGSS, but as decision-makers.



This analysis is key to define critical strategies to develop and plan the programming design of the WGSS that will be launched in Kaunas (Lithuania).

2. Summary of assessment

KOPZI as a launching partner of the WGSS in Lithuania has conducted a context and community dynamics assessment following the guidance of the IRC, which provided the relevant tools according to the WGSS Toolkit¹ that was adapted to the local contexts, with the collaboration of the launching partners of the Safe Hut project. The assessment includes the following activities: 1) Key Informant Interviews with key stakeholders in the geographic area where the WGSS will be opened – Kaunas in this case; 2) Service Mapping with entities who provide services to women and girls – including but not limited to GBV, sexual and reproductive health and anti-trafficking services; 3) Stakeholder analysis to collect information on key players who are important for the effective launch and running of WGSS; 4) Focus Group discussions with women and girls survivors or potential victims of trafficking and safety mapping to collect needs to ensure a tailored women and girls – led design of WGSS; 5) Focus group discussions with members of the communities and community leaders to gather information from stakeholder who can influence women and girls access to the WGSS; and 6) Community mapping to better know the accessibility and safety of services who are addressed to women and girls.

The partner listed the most important stakeholders to be involved in this process, taking into consideration who can support or block an organization from securing a WGSS. The assessment was a first opportunity for the organization to establish trust and credibility for the WGSS, ensuring that women and girls are involved in the very first step to promote the empowerment and leadership process, fundamental objectives in the WGSS programming. Safety considerations were examined before engaging women and girls, to ensure they are not put at risk.

¹ Melanie Megevand (IRC) and Laura Marchesini (IMC), *Women and Girls Safe Spaces: A Toolkit for Advancing Women's and Girls' Empowerment in Humanitarian Settings*, February 2020.





2.1 Key Informant Interviews

The Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted between June and November 2023, involving 7 Key Stakeholders. It was an important process to collect relevant information on the context and community dynamics, to identify which are the most vulnerable groups, and in what relationships different groups and community leaders are. It was also a key starting point to consider which can be a safe and accessible place to establish the WGSS.



CONTEXT AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS

According to the collected data by KOPZI, different groups of migrant and refugee women are divided by nationality, segregated from each other, and tend to undertake limited exchange and communication outside of their own communities. In addition, Lithuanian communities may contribute to the marginalization of migrant women. In some cases, migrant women reach out to the host communities and get disappointed about the inability to connect with them; in other cases they even do not try to reach out, and instead they stay within their communities.

The collected information shows that among different groups of migrant women, there is miscommunication and lack of trust. It seems that the relationship between different community members is also highly influenced by situational circumstances.

The interviewees mentioned that a hierarchy among members of certain groups- specifically from D. R. Congo and Nigeria- has been noticed, which seems to be caused by different economic status of the family or by belonging to a specific ethnic group. Additionally, there can be a lack of trust between members of the same communities, especially when the members knew each other from their home countries.

According to the interviewed professionals, the biggest reason for tensions between different migrant groups within camp structures in Lithuania, is that the freedom of movement has been taken away from the people residing in the structures, and hundreds of different people have to stay together.

Different attempts for mitigation measures such as dialogue, special separation of conflict parties, and increased communication have been mentioned as mitigation measures. This usually happens with the help of community leaders, centre administration, church leaders or NGOs involved.

According to the director of the local refugee camp in Kaunas, in the case of tensions within the community the local staff is constantly open for communication. The camp structure does not allow for much privacy for the refugees residing there, since everybody is staying together. The mitigation measures taken within the camp include training for awareness on how to deal with conflicts that may arise based on different countries of origin and the level of vulnerability of the clients.

In addition, every woman has an assigned case worker. The staff is available at any time during the working hours.

Inside of the camps, a lot of different activities are available, for example a club where women come to drink tea and chat with each other. Preparing food together has been proven another good way to mitigate conflict that arose. Social workers invite women to come to a special studio where they can bake and have conversations. This kind of communication has been a helpful way to deal with tensions.

In addition, dance and meditation sessions are organized for women, while different religious events are celebrated, to make sure the connection to the migrant's religion and traditions is supported.

Based on the information gathered, KOPZI proposes to appoint a focal point for social cohesion who will work in close cooperation with community leaders and the administration of the Centre against Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings



COMMUNITY DYNAMICS

The data collected by KOPZI points out that a division among the migrant groups exists along the lines of perceived cultural and religious principles. According to one of the interviewed professionals, the dynamics in the local refugee camp are much more difficult to handle compared to 2022. There have been recent changes in the origin countries; also the number of unaccompanied minors arriving in Lithuania has drastically increased, as well as the number of women and girls arriving from African countries. There are organised meetings for migrants who are camp residents. According to the collected information, women avoid those meetings, but if meetings only for women were organized, they would actively participate and share their inputs.

Migrant women in Lithuania come from different countries and may belong to different religions. According to the data collected during the key informant interviews, women inside the camp behave in a restrained manner in order to avoid gossips or conflicts, but when they leave the camps, they feel more empowered to act freely. Also, according to the collected information, women are mostly with their husbands and children. Single women also reside in the camp, as well as a group of women who became pregnant during their journey to Europe, and/or who found partners during the journey.

Vulnerable groups

The collected data shows that among the interviewed professionals all migrant women are perceived as belonging to a vulnerable group, with differing levels of vulnerability. Women who have experienced violence, such as gender-based violence or human trafficking, and who are not aware of their rights and may not feel safe reporting these incidents, are particularly vulnerable.

According to the collected information, there are constant conflicts between the migrant women and the governmental employees because of missing trust. The governmental employees lack the understanding for the needs of the migrant women and may even bully them in certain situations. In the case of repeated mistreatment by the authorities, the migrant women do not want to approach these services anymore.

All the migrants in the camp belong to vulnerable groups. Usually the indications for women's vulnerability are illness, mental health challenges, post-traumatic stress disorder, pregnant women or women with children. One interviewee shared that many unaccompanied girls from the African continent reside in the refugee camp, out of which many had temporary partners. In these cases, the interviewee explained about the possible risk of rape from the side of these men.





COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS

The data provided by KOPZI suggests decision-making for migrant women and girls to be difficult, as the interviewed professionals enclosed that in the majority of girls and women communities underly very patriarchal structures, with the men of the family taking decisions for them.

According to the collected information, when migrant families receive asylum in Lithuania, work is most often available to men and not to women. The unemployment rate among the migrant women is quite high, so even if the family situation is not good, the women cannot easily leave their husbands because of financial insecurity, which has an impact on their self-determination. In addition, women tend not to speak the local languages which makes it more difficult to find work.



SERVICE PROVIDERS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The Data provided by KOPZI states that the important stakeholders interacting with the migrant and refugee women are local Caritas branches, the Red Cross, Save the Children, Vartai (youth organization), Frida (women's organization), and Siena group (migrants' organization).

In Lithuania Caritas has strong relations with different Ukrainian groups, and they provide a wide range of services and occupational activities for them. Save the Children are active with young Ukrainian or Belorussian refugees, the same goes for Frida but the interviewees were unaware if specified services provided for migrants from other communities are available.

Data collected also suggests that the local NGOs are not able to sufficiently support or protect the migrant and refugee women from further harm, which leads to a loss of trust by the clients.



EXISTING REFERRALS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

In the case of violence within the families, which occurs often within the camp structures, women report the incident to the staff which tries to support – in these cases police officers are involved and usually the abuser is separated from the family. For now, the best practice is to place the abuser in another camp, and to allow the woman and her children to recover from the violent attacks. Some camps have developed several procedures on how women could report such issues, and a complaint box was placed in an area without surveillance to ensure the person's anonymity when reporting or delivering feedback.

GBV Reporting: According to the information collected by KOPZI, theoretically the same reporting mechanism exists for migrant women as for the local women. However, information about this mechanism is not communicated to the migrant and refugee women, understanding it would require local language skills, while many of them do not trust the local services.



DETAILS RELATING TO THE SUPPORT OF THE WGSS

Stakeholders interviewed highlighted that the opening of safe spaces for women and girls should be accessible via public transportation, while avoiding dangerous areas and zones. They reported that they would be supportive of the establishment of a WGSS, stressing the issue of collaboration among organizations for higher effectiveness. KOPZI will work closely with the local reception centre, Caritas, the Red Cross, the local university, the youth centre, municipality representatives and Siena organisation for the operation of the space.

Kaunas city centre, the location chosen by KOPZI was classified as safe for the participants by both the organization and the interviewed individuals. In addition, it was stressed by interviewees that activities should take place during daylight hours.

Regarding the **role of men** in such spaces, the interviewed community members mentioned that they would prefer not to have men in the safe space. Some mentioned that they would accept the presence of male staff.

The cultural mediator employed for the space is Kenyan and speaks Swahili, Bantu and English. In addition, there will be a social worker working with children, social worker and project manager who speaks Russian.





DIVERSITY

The first focus group discussion took place with 4 women from Kenya, between the age of 25-40. The participants were survivors of human trafficking.

The second focus group discussion took place with 3 women from Ukraine and 2 women from Kyrgyzstan, between the ages of 28-32. The group consisted of survivors of gender-based violence.



SAFETY

Both groups were asked questions around their safety and participated in a safety mapping, an exercise consisting of identifying the places they go to in the city-centre (Kaunas), and the places that feel the most and the least safe. This mapping is essential to identify the best suitable location for the future WGSS.

The first group mentioned feeling safe at the workplace, the church and the supermarket. The second group mentioned they feel safe at home and everywhere in the city as long as they are together.



TAILORED WGSS

Groups were asked to describe their daily habits and also to share their ideas about the types of activities or skills that they would like to learn or share with each other.

The general daily habits of women and girls were discussed and disclosed as follows:

- 7 pm – 9 am: Sleep and rest
- 5 am to 9 am: Sleep and rest, personal care, domestic duties outside
- 10 am to 1 pm: work
- 1 pm to 4 pm: work
- 4 pm to 7 pm: work, domestic duties

Skills women and girls can teach one another:

- cooking
- making clothes
- make-up

Types of activities and services that support strength, assets, and control of change around women and girls:

- social club
- language courses
- sports club
- praying together

2.2 Focus Group discussions

KOPZI conducted three focus group discussions (FGD) for the assessment activities, two with women from Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, and Kenya and an additional FGD with the Nigerian community represented by a group of 4 Nigerian women.

2.3 FGD with women

The composition of the two groups intended to focus on vulnerabilities that were identified based on KOPZI experience and key informant interviews.

2.3.1 Second Focus group discussion with women from the Nigerian Community

The FGD with communities took place on the 29th of August 2023 with a **group of 4 Nigerian women** of an age range between 29 and 38 years old. The participants had different roles in the community.

As regards places where women meet other women and they feel safe, the participants referred to places like school, language courses, each other's homes, and churches/places of worship.

As places considered unsafe, bars and dark places were mentioned as dangerous for women, while for adolescent girls any place was classified as unsafe, unless they are accompanied.

According to what emerged during the focus groups with community members, what makes a place **safe and accessible for women** and girls is the possibility to bring their children to the space, and the fact that men do not have access to the space.

Participants pointed out that a space needs to be friendly, welcoming and free of gossip for women and girls to feel safe. The group also mentioned that the activities should happen during daytime.

Participants also showed their concerns regarding men's participation to the WGSS or regarding the involvement of male staff.

As for the most suitable **location** for the WGSS, participants agreed that the location should be around the city centre, that it should be easily accessible and that it should be used during the day.

The most suitable **time** to provide services in WGSS seemed to be the morning and early noon hours.



3. Recommendations for establishing the WGSS

The implementation of the WGSS should follow the general guidelines and tips given in the [WGSS Toolkit](#) and the main lessons learnt from the experience of IRC and Centro Penc in implementing WGSS in different settings. However, it cannot be done so without a strong contextualization and adaptation from the design phase to the implementation. The assessment phase allowed KOPZI to gather the necessary information to adapt the guiding principles of the WGSS to the context, while maintaining minimum standards. This process was carried out with the support of IRC, and some initial recommendations for the launch of a WGSS in Kaunas emerged, outlined in this section of the report.

3.1 Naming, location, and physical layout

Regarding the location of the WGSS in Kaunas, the different suggestions that came up during the assessment must be taken into consideration. First, it is recommended that it is easily accessible and reachable, as stated several times by key informants and stated in the WGSS Toolkit guidelines. It is important that the location is a neighborhood perceived as safe and to ensure that activities offered are taking place during daytime, ensuring that women will not have to travel throughout nighttime in the city, as mentioned by the interview participants. If an organization decides to establish it in the city centre, it is recommended the space has a main, visible entrance but also a hidden one, to ensure the privacy of women and girls accessing it. Regarding the name of the WGSS, it is recommended that it should not address precise categories of women and girls (e.g. victims/survival of trafficking), it should imply safety without making it explicit, to avoid stigma as indicated by the WGSS Toolkit guidelines. The location chosen by KOPZI is that of a youth centre in the centre of the city, which is easily accessible by public transport. The space will be available two days a week and the concrete opening hours will be further discussed with the women.

3.2 Target population

During the assessment, it emerged that there can be tensions between different migrant groups based on their countries of origin, religious beliefs, and language spoken. People tend to build more cohesion with other people with similar characteristics, and this should be taken into consideration while establishing a WGSS. This space is not meant to create or encourage divisions, and the WGSS staff should be aware of the fact that tensions may occur, in order to be prepared to handle them. Based on the information gathered, KOPZI proposes to appoint a focal point for social cohesion who will work in close cooperation with community leaders and the administration of the Centre against Trafficking and Exploitation of Human Beings.

Different attempts for mitigation measures such as dialogue, special separation of conflict parties, and increased communication have been mentioned as mitigation measures. This usually happens with the help of community leaders, centre administration, church leaders or NGOs involved.

In addition, KOPZI will offer different activities in the safe space to encourage all women from different communities to get to know each other and interact on the basis of shared interest. These activities will be developed and discussed in close collaboration with the women who will attend the space to ensure the active participation of the clients.

The WGSS staff cultural mediators play a key role in understanding group dynamics, acting in the direction of settling differences, and supporting the rest of the staff in managing diversity. Staff training in cultural mediation techniques, interculturality, conflict management and diversity is highly recommended. It is mandatory for all staff to receive training on GBV and anti-trafficking, as they work in this framework.

KOPZI has so far employed one Kenyan cultural mediator to ensure that the Kenyan community is encouraged and able to participate in all activities and healthy group dynamics are supported through the use of Swahili, Bantu and English which will give different communities a better opportunity to interact with each other.

3.3 Securing by-in from the community and stakeholders

As discussed during the assessment KOPZI will work closely with local Caritas branches, the Red Cross, Save the Children, Vartai (youth organization), Frida (women's organization), and Siena group (migrants' organization) to disseminate information about what activities and services are available within the safe space, especially in the first phase of programming of the WGSS, but also throughout its time of operation. This will help to further understand the needs of the target population and keep updated on available services and activities for the women and girls in Kaunas outside of the safe space to be better able to coordinate with other local organisations and support the clients.

It became clear throughout the interview process that all interviewees believe men's direct participation in the WGSS is not recommended and hinders the opportunity of providing a safe space or the target population.

3.4 Selection and design of feedback channels

The feedback channels within the safe space will be established together with the women and girls, e.g. by initially using a box tool to collect their ideas and feedback, and discussing which ways of feedback will be most comfortable for the women and girls to use.

3.5 Provision of services and women-led empowerment activities

With respect to the scheduling of activities within the WGSS, it is highly recommended to consider the information gathered during FGDs with women and community leaders to schedule them at times that would be most suitable for participation. It emerged the need to propose the activities within the WGSS during daytime, since some of the women mentioned feeling unsafe moving around in the city.

Among the activities that could be proposed, in addition to recreational ones such as sports, making clothes, cooking together and language classes it is recommended to propose informative sessions on specific topics such as GBV and anti-trafficking, or Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH), not only giving women and girls accurate information around protection risks, but also on services available and how to access them. When proposing these activities, it is recommended to present them using generic concepts related to women's well-being and safety, without mentioning words such as violence or trafficking, which could discourage women from participating in group activities. It is recommended that WGSS facilitators assess the level of interest as well as protection risks within the groups of women and girls attending the space, to design information sessions with a more specific outlook.

Finally, it is highly recommended that, organizations define the first activities they wish to develop (together with the women and girls who will attend the space) during the start-up phase of the WGSS. They should ensure clear referral pathways are defined and that their staff is well trained to handle disclosure of violence or trauma and refer incidents in a safely and timely manner to the relevant services. For that matter, it is highly recommended that interested organizations define strong partnerships with other local organizations and public services to provide a survivor-centered comprehensive response to GBV and anti-trafficking.



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