

Preventing sexual and gender-based violence in migrant communities and strengthening support to survivors in EU cities

Update May 2020: Unaccompanied Migrant Children (UMC)



[#EqualCity](#) [#GenderEquality](#)

[#SGBV](#) [#MigrantChildren](#)

Five months have passed since the start of the regional Equal(c)ity project, coordinated by the Country Office of Belgium and Luxembourg of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and funded by the European Commission. The project aims to improve urban services in 4 different EU cities to tackle sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against migrants, by each developing a specific toolbox:

- Brussels: SGBV against LGBTQI+ migrants and the creation of safe spaces
- Luxembourg: SGBV against female migrants
- **Rome: SGBV against unaccompanied migrant children (UMC)**
- Gothenburg: SGBV in a family context, focusing on honor-related crimes

Now, more than ever, urban services are under pressure and first line workers are at the forefront of a relentless, strenuous battle whilst socio-economic inequalities are exacerbated. COVID-19 has the world in its grip and continues to put a strain on local, national and global resources.

Despite these challenging circumstances, the project Equal(c)ity project partners are continuing their activities. With this thematic project update, the project team would like to brief you on the activities already conducted, the future steps, and the impact of COVID-19 on migrant communities.

You can access the other three project updates here: [LGBTQI+ / Female Migrants / Migrant parents](#)

Objectives of the project in Rome

In the city of Rome, IOM Belgium and Luxembourg are partnering with ETNA, Sapienza University, the city of Rome, and IOM Italy to address SGBV against UMC.



The partners will develop a training toolbox which aims at building the capacity of first line workers working with UMC - legal guardians, social workers, cultural mediators, and community workers - to better identify, refer and protect UMC who survived or are at risk of SGBV. The tools will also contain training for UMCs themselves. Both training curriculums will include a mindfulness-component. The tools will be specifically adapted to the context of the city of Rome but will be adjustable for other EU cities. They will build on good practices and input from an independent expert panel. The panel includes academics, field and IOM experts, expert cities and representatives from migrant communities.



Activities – State of Play

As a consequence of the [security decrees issued by the Italian Ministry of Interior in 2018 and 2019](#), which directly affected the migratory flows to Italy, the project partners decided to invest first of all in the verification of the presence and nationalities of the UMC accommodated in reception structures as of January 2020. This information allows the partners to tailor the training tools to the target group and to be culture sensitive.

On February 28th, a stakeholder event took place to present the Equal(c)ity project, with the support of the city of Rome. The event welcomed participants such as the President of the Juvenile Court of Rome, the Regional Ombudsperson for Children and Adolescents, the Director of the Division of Social Integration Policies for Migrants and Safeguard of Migrant Children of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, together with social workers, reception center operators and volunteer guardians.

Future activities

The project partners had already planned everything for the trainings to start at the end of March 2020. The team drafted the interview questionnaires for adults and UMC, a guide to harmonize every detail of the interviews with children, as well as a data sheet to be filled in for each interviewed child, in order to assess his/her suitability to participate in the trainings. The testing of these tools was foreseen during the pilot training in April 2020. Unfortunately, as of March 9th, due to the escalation of the COVID-19 pandemic, the team had to put all training activities on hold.

While under confinement and without clarity on when activities will resume, project partners are working on further developing the training tools and reaching out to potential beneficiaries. The partners are also contacting possible members to be included in the expert panel and liaising with both identified and potential trainee beneficiary cities.

Mindfulness-Based Training

The activities planned in Rome aim to implement [Mindfulness Based Interventions \(MBI\)](#) for both UMC and frontline workers involved in their care. The MBI will also be part of the finalized toolbox. Mindfulness can be defined as a particular way of paying attention: intentionally, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 2005), which can be trained from an early stage of life. Stress-reduction MBIs aim to improve psycho-physical wellbeing and self-awareness of participants through the practice of awareness meditation techniques based on directing one's own attention to breathing, bodily sensations, the senses, emotions, and thoughts. In addition, MBIs include a strong psycho-educational component on stress and emotions, and age-appropriate homework and exercises to be practiced in everyday life.

[Stress-reduction](#) involves all areas of psychological distress: relational stress, work-related stress, physical-health-related stress, and emotional stress. In fact, strong empirical evidence supports the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions for stress reduction, psychological wellbeing, attention, cognitive flexibility, emotion regulation, management of depression, anxiety, chronic pain, trauma, as well as in terms of functional and structural neuroplasticity (Creswell, 2016; Khoury et al., 2015; Sharma & Rush 2015).

MBIs can have both a [preventive and a curative impact](#) and can play an important role in the well-being of survivors of SGBV. In Rome, the training will target the following aspects:

- Enhanced emotion regulation
- Decreased automatic responses and dysfunctional behavioral patterns
- Enhanced ability to cope with stress
- Enhanced interpersonal relationships
- Promoted self-care
- Ability to do self-relaxation
- Strengthened ability to focus and concentrate
- Enhanced mental health and wellbeing (including depression and PTSD symptoms)

MBI for first line workers

Professionals working with young people who are struggling with traumas are subjected to intense stress and burnout in the form of secondary traumatic stress. The [exposure to trauma](#) can indeed produce indirect trauma, damaging mental health and impacting the ability to work and take care of the persons they assist.

Although guidelines are provided by the National Association of Social workers in Italy, these mainly focus on how to prevent, detect and scale-down violence eventually perpetrated against a social worker rather than providing coping mechanisms for his/her well-being.

MBI for UMC

Trauma is very present amongst UMC, including [sexual and gender-based traumatic exposure](#). Moreover, UMC are often more at risk of subsequent exposure to SGBV. The MBI for UMC will be both a preventative and curative intervention, based on the needs of the target group. In addition to working on restoring and enhancing

their healthy emotion regulation, the training will aim to strengthen available resources and cognitive flexibility to empower participants and help them take an active and positive role in their integration pathway.

All activities will be in full respect of the [code of ethics](#) of the professional orders of the trainers. This will be closely monitored and assessed by the City of Rome's department for social policies and the ethical committee of Sapienza University. The Department of Psychology of Sapienza will also measure and evaluate the effectiveness of the trainings. Participants will be invited to voluntarily participate in a study which will assess well-being, stress and emotion regulation before and after the participation to the MBI.

COVID-19 and the impact on migrants



Photo: © IOM

The COVID-19 pandemic affects everyone, everywhere, and at the same time [amplifies and deepens existing inequalities](#). Migrants, especially when undocumented, are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. They may face obstacles in accessing health care and other support services, are subject to increased stigmatization and discrimination, and risk income loss due to less favorable employment conditions. [Migrant workers are at the frontline of the response to COVID-19](#), whilst at the same time enjoying less favorable working conditions which may also have a direct impact on their health. For migrants in reception or detention, conditions are also particularly challenging, as they are faced with the suspension of group activities for residents and face-to-face counselling, limited visits from external visitors, whilst at the same time knowing that their procedure might be halted due to the lockdown. They might not be able to follow social distancing rules or to self-isolate, which could be harmful for their/others' health, and at the same time have no ability to request medical or psychological assistance due to i.e. overburdening of social and medical services. For newly arrived persons in need of international protection, the situation is also very insecure as they might not be able to file their application and have no access to an official reception structure.

While school closures affect all children and youth, [distance learning during](#) the pandemic is exacerbating existing inequalities. Children and youth from marginalized or poorer households, including migrant families, may not have access to the necessary digital technologies. Migrant children and youth being out of school during the pandemic also risks of dropping school or lagging behind in terms of language learning. They may

also not benefit from the support of their parents who may themselves still be adapting to the receiving country or may be working during the pandemic



Click on the picture to access IOM's Analytical snapshot on migrant children and youth.
Photo: © IOM

For UMC, the lockdown situation might even be more challenging and stressful. Migrant children who are unaccompanied and/or separated from their parents or relatives are indeed particularly vulnerable, all the more when living in migrant camps. The pandemic exacerbates such vulnerabilities and UMC may find themselves without sufficient **protection**.

In EU cities, UMC outside of reception structures - because they already turned 18 or because they chose to remain “on the move” to their final destination-, may be **more at risk** of SGBV. They may be forced to live on the streets or find themselves “confined” with people who might put them in exploitative situations or who perpetrate violent behavior against them. For UMC on the move, trying to get accommodated into a new reception structure might be difficult if not impossible due to confinement measures.

A good example is the experience of Italy, whereby the municipalities have the possibility to grant longer periods of care and accommodation, allowing for assistance of UMC until 21 years of age.

On the other hand, UMC who are accommodated in reception structures may see their activities for personal **inclusion or growth slowed down** or blocked due to the heavy burden of the lockdown on social services. Moreover, reception centers do not always have the means to install separate quarantine units, which leads to increased risk for COVID-19 in the common areas (sanitation, living area, etc.).

For more information on how COVID-19 impact migrants, and links to interesting initiatives undertaken to protect migrants, please click on the image.



ETNA has launched a **free service** called *Coronahelp* to provide **psychological support** to migrants, including UMC, and staff working in the reception structures until the end of the emergency period.

The tools created by the three partners in Rome will be discussed and shared with the following interested cities:

- Leeuwarden (NL)
- Palermo (ITA)
- Oulu (FIN)

Interested in receiving the finalized tools? Find our contact details below!

General info on the Equal(c)ity project

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Implemented by: IOM Belgium and Luxembourg, in collaboration with IOM Italy

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Implementing Partners



SAPIENZA
UNIVERSITÀ DI ROMA

ROMA



ETN OPSICOLOGIA
ANALITICA



City of
Gothenburg

Contacts

For more information on the project, please contact Elisabeth Palmero at epalmero@iom.int or +32 (0)2 287 74 39

Interested in receiving the finalized tools of this project, please contact Anke Van de Velde at avandevelde@iom.int

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IOM Country Office for Belgium and Luxembourg

Rue Montoyer 40, 1000 Brussels, Belgium

+32 (0)2 287 74 39 – epalmero@iom.int

belgium.iom.int/equalcity



@IOMBeLux



IOM Belgium and Luxembourg



belgium.iom.int