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Tiina Wikström (ed.)

Journeys From Fear to Fair: Human Rights in Focus

Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
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Foreword

IN THE RAPIDLY evolving landscape of today's Europe, the principles of human rights remain both a cornerstone of our shared values and a pressing challenge. While Europe has long been celebrated for its commitment to fairness, equality, and justice, recent years have revealed also new complexities: shifting political climates, migration, digitalization, and social polarization all test the resilience of human rights frameworks. Additionally, human rights need to be studied within the broader view of planetary well-being, as humans are but part of the planetary whole.

Against this backdrop, the role of higher education is more vital than ever. Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences are not just places of learning but also forums for critical thinking, civic engagement, and the nurturing of responsible planetary citizens. Yet, awareness of human rights — what they mean, how they are protected, and why they matter — cannot be taken for granted, even within these institutions. Too often, human rights are discussed in abstract terms, disconnected from the lived realities of students and communities and not enough included in the European curricula of varied fields of studies.

Erasmus+ project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair) has sought to bridge this gap by examining the state of human rights in contemporary Europe and exploring innovative approaches especially within higher education but also in more non-formal and informal education, thus aiming to inspire teachers, educators, students, volunteers as well as migrants alike to engage in creative and empathic human rights dialogue in different fields of studies. The hope of our JeS project team is to foster a culture where human rights are not just studied but truly understood and championed—where every member of the academic community feels empowered to recognize, defend, and advance these fundamental rights on our shared planet.

We hope this small publication will serve as a call to action and a source of inspiration for teachers, educators, students, volunteers and all interested in human rights topics. The future of human rights in Europe depends on each one of us; what matters is our collective commitment to awareness, dialogue, and education. Together, we can ensure that the values at the heart of our societies remain vibrant and resilient for generations to come.

In Helsinki, 7.12.2025
Tiina Wikström
Senior Lecturer
JeS Project Manager
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JeS Project Events. Picture Credit: JeS Project Partners

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Introduction

JeS Project Team

THIS PUBLICATION CALLED Journeys from Fear to Fair: Human Rights in Focus is based on the Erasmus+ project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair) that took place in 2023-2025 and was led by Laurea University of Applied Sciences, Finland, and participated by University of Maribor (UM), Slovenia and University College of Leuven (UCLL), Belgium as well as CESIE from Italy, INCOMA from Spain and European Migrant Platform (EMP) from Belgium. Thus, the JeS partners include both Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences as well as NGOs and different training and research institutes.

Laurea UAS is a University of Applied Sciences that operates in Uusimaa region, Finland, and with its six campuses, there are about 11,000 students, 670 staff members and 39,000 alumni in the Laurea community. In its extensive national and international operations, Laurea focuses on people and interaction, with the strong value base of openness, impact, and responsibility. As an internationally active RDI UAS, Laurea's fields of expertise include sustainable and versatile social and health care, coherent security, service business and circular economy, entrepreneurship as well as pedagogical co-creation, such as the internationally recognized LbD, Learning by Developing pedagogical model.

The Faculty of Criminal Justice and Security at University of Maribor, Slovenia, is a university-level research and study institution in criminal justice and security studies, internationally acknowledged and taking part in developing knowledge, which constitutes a base for developing and offering internationally comparable undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Its mission is to develop the field of criminal justice studies (also known as police and security studies) based on the traditional academic disciplines of law, sociology, psychology, political science, criminology, criminal investigation, organizational science, information security, and computer forensics.

UCLL is a university of applied sciences, with eight campuses over the city of Leuven and the province of Limburg, Belgium, that offers a unique opportunity to question the current state of affairs and make room for innovation. UCLL aims to maximize the interaction between research and education, whilst taking the students' goals and well-being to heart by making their future the UCLL mission. UCLL Research & Expertise hosts eight centers of expertise: Art of Teaching, Education & Development, Health Innovation, Inclusive Society, Resilient People, Smart Organisations, Digital Solutions, and Sustainable Resources. These centers of expertise provide their expertise in advice and consultancy projects, in development and research projects. UCLL carries the Q*For quality label for consultancy assignments, contract research and customized training.

CESIE ETS is a European Centre of Studies and Initiatives, a non-profit organisation based in Palermo, Italy. Established in 2001, CESIE was founded in the spirit of the sociologist and educator Danilo Dolci, whose methods of nonviolent education and community empowerment continue to inspire its work today. The organisation's mission is to promote innovation in education, participation, and personal and social growth, fostering cultural transformation through creative and inclusive approaches. CESIE operates across several key fields of action, including youth education and mobility, adult training and lifelong learning, and quality in school education. It is also deeply engaged in promoting the inclusion of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, advancing research and innovation in higher education, and strengthening human rights, justice, and anti-discrimination efforts. Through these diverse initiatives, CESIE contributes to building a more inclusive, just, and dynamic society, both locally and internationally.

INCOMA is a training and research centre based in Seville (Spain) with extensive know-how and experience in the development and coordination of international cooperation projects mainly funded within the framework of EU programmes, especially in the field of education, training and research. INCOMA is especially devoted to the development of social innovation projects, with special focus on training targeting groups at risk or with special difficulties to enter to enter the labour market, namely young people, women and migrants.

European Migrant Platform (EMP) is a recently established NGO in Brussels advocating for the rights and dignity of migrants in Europe. With its passionate and established members from varied academic and other backgrounds and with their strong migrant network across Europe, EMP wishes to use their experience and expertise to add value to society we live in and to the world in general. EMP also cooperates with different stakeholders, both at national and international levels.

With the support of all the capable JeS partners, the JeS project aimed to address the social responsibility of especially higher education institutions, in co-operation with the NGOs and training and research institutes, to promote human rights and the awareness of such urgent European challenges as human trafficking, forced labour, undocumented migrants and the need for fair trade policies. This was done by focusing specifically on the voices of those individuals within the EU whose stories are often not included in the main social narrative and who often suffer silently and by also integrating their stories e.g. in HEI courses and curricula development. This includes for example migrants, women, refugees, minorities and youngsters in more vulnerable positions and at risk of being exploited.

Besides collecting and sharing different digital human rights eStories, all the JeS partners focused in their research activities on different human rights topics: Maribor focused on victimization and human trafficking, Laurea on undocumented migrants, fair-trade policies and fair working conditions, CESIE on migrant women and female victims of trafficking, INCOMA on digital literacy and social inequality, UCL on creative methods supporting migrant integration and EMP on successful integration process.

In addition to creating different online and onsite educational and stakeholder events, JeS focused on co-creating an innovative and open online learning environment for bringing together, from different parts of Europe, higher education institutions and NGOs, teachers, educators, researchers, students and migrants for shared learning, educational events, and workshops. These activities promote dialogue and intercultural encounters and make the above-mentioned human rights situations in Europe more visible and tangible as well as support their inclusion in higher education and other educational activities.

The target groups of the JeS project were and are varied. The immediate target groups consist of the project partners and their clients that include teachers, educators, students, refugees, migrants, volunteers, and people in vulnerable social and cultural positions. Throughout the project, different JeS activities have been integrated as part of the social services and correctional services programmes (BA and Master level) at Laurea, within the social services and teacher education programmes at UCL, within the criminology programme at Maribor as well as with volunteers, migrants and trainers from EMP, INCOMA and CESIE. Additionally, the project has provided possibilities for the students to complete their practice and work as junior researchers. For the future, we hope these JeS themes will be incorporated in different fields of higher education studies, as they are essential knowledge for all students; for example, it is important for business studies to include the human rights issues, such as undocumented workers and fairtrade viewpoint, as part of their activities.

For dissemination purposes, the JeS project has produced in addition to its educational events and web pages, an online Canvas environment, with a great variety of easy-to-access educational human rights materials (this publication included) from the JeS partner countries and Europe in general for teachers, educators, students, volunteers, migrants and all interested in these topics, both in English and in the local partner languages.

This summarizing project publication, ***Journeys from Fear to Fair: Human Rights in Focus***, wishes to make visible different partner voices and thus consists of varied types of articles yet providing but a small glimpse and a tiny tapestry of all the different topics related to the human rights questions of today as well as an insight to the Erasmus+ project impact especially within social services and also from the viewpoint of participating students.

And finally, the JeS project team wishes to warmly thank all the project experts, especially **Päivi Haapanen**, **Piia Tiilikallio**, **Mira Rajalakso**, **Alexander van Biezen** and **Paula Goltzsche**, as well as other stakeholders, students, migrants and volunteers for their valuable contributions in the project realization.

JeS, We Can — Together!

For more information, kindly visit our website: *https://jointstories.eu/*

Art Builds Belonging. Picture Credit: JeS Project Image Bank

Erasmus+ JeS Teacher Training and Capacity Building Webinar 15.5.2025. Picture credit: JeS Project Partners

In Focus:
Erasmus+ Project JeS
Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair

1 Human Rights and Planetary Well-Being in Higher Education

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In the 21st century, humanity faces a dual challenge – while promoting and safeguarding human rights, we must also ensure the health of our planet. These two imperatives that were once considered separate domains are now seen as deeply intertwined and interconnected. Climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution, and resource depletion have a direct impact on the rights to life, health, food, water, shelter, and education. Conversely, the pursuit of human rights can either support or hinder environmental sustainability, depending on how societies choose to act, and here education can play a key role. This short article explores the relationship between human rights, as promoted for example by the Erasmus+ project JeS (*Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair*), and planetary well-being, and it also examines the importance of addressing both topics together especially in higher education by applying, for example, the novel framework of Planetary Social Pedagogy.

THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS, ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH AND PLANETARY WELL-BEING

Human rights are universal entitlements that protect individuals' dignity, freedom, and well-being. Since the Paris meeting on 10.12.1948, the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) has been a milestone document on fundamental and universally protected human rights for all people and all nations (United Nations 2025b). In its 30 Articles, UDHR lays out the key freedoms of humankind, such as life, liberty and security as well as equality and freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and it also advises to promote respect to these rights and freedoms by the means of teaching and education.

When we talk about Earth-related environmental issues, we often talk about planetary health or one health and lately more frequently also about planetary well-being. As a multi-dimensional concept, planetary

health refers to a transdisciplinary field and a social movement that has since the 2015 report of the Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission focused on solutions when addressing the complexities of human impacts to Earth's natural systems, both in terms of human health and all life on Earth, while also encouraging all actors from scientists and economists to policymakers and all of us to drive solutions. Planetary health topics cover for example such environmental issues as climate change, air pollution, biodiversity loss and resource scarcity and the health impacts related for example to infectious diseases, mental health issues, nutritional diseases, and displacement and conflict. (Planetary Heath Alliance 2025.)

The notion of one health, in its turn, refers to a unifying approach that recognizes how the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants, and the wider environment (such as ecosystems) is closely linked and interdependent and how we need to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems within our communities and at subnational, national, regional and global levels. One health also calls for holistic collaboration across sectors and disciplines to promote the health and integrity of our ecosystems. (WHO 2025.)

Lately, amongst the ongoing debates of the well-being of present humans, future humans, and nonhuman nature, the concept of planetary well-being has emerged, addressing the moral considerability of both human and nonhuman well-being, and to promote transdisciplinary, cross-cultural discourse for both addressing the crisis and for promoting societal and cultural transformation by shifting the focus on well-being from individuals to processes, Earth system and ecosystem processes (JYU. Wisdom community 2021).

As these concepts of planetary health, one health and planetary well-being indicate, humans and Earth are increasingly seen as non-separate and co-dependent entities, so when our environment degrades, it naturally affects humans and human rights as well. Rising sea levels threaten the right to housing, air pollution affects our right to health, and droughts and floods jeopardize access to food and water or prohibit systematic access to education. Similarly, climate change affects people's income and at worst, can lead to human rights violations and even criminality.

At best, human rights frameworks can also protect the environment: Legal recognition of environmental rights empowers communities to challenge harmful practices, demand accountability, and promote sustainable development. *The UN Agenda2030* is an action plan for both people and planet, to promote the prosperity of both and to strengthen universal peace by tackling some of the greatest global challenges of sustainable development. With its five Ps of People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership, Agenda 2030 endeavours to end poverty and hunger and to ensure a healthy and equal environment to all human beings, both present and future generations. The planet needs to be protected from degradation, and consumption, production as well as the management of natural resources must be sustainable, so urgent action is needed on climate change. All human beings are to enjoy a prosperous and fulfilling life where economic, social and technological progress exists in harmony with nature. Peaceful, just, inclusive and sustainable societies are to be free from fear and violence, and there is a need for global solidarity, focusing especially on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. (UN 2025a.)

CLIMATE JUSTICE AND EQUITY

As such, climate change is also a human rights issue and interlinked with the notion of just transition (UNDP 2022). Climate emergency affects disproportionately vulnerable populations, and those least responsible for e.g. emissions often suffer the most, while those countries, industries, and businesses that have emitted large

amounts of greenhouse gases have often become very wealthy. This raises critical questions of climate justice. Climate justice reminds us of unequal historical responsibility and puts equity and human rights at the core of climate change decision-making and action, emphasizing also the importance of fair working conditions globally (UNDP 2025). We have the responsibility to help those affected by climate change, particularly the most vulnerable countries and communities least responsible to the crisis.

Climate justice looks at inequalities from many points of view, focusing for example on structural inequalities, socioeconomic inequalities, and intergenerational inequalities. Structural inequalities, based for example on ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status indicate that climate change impacts can be felt differently even within the same country – for example women, people with disabilities and indigenous people are often facing higher risks and have access to fewer resources. Due to socioeconomic inequalities, for example the resources needed to mitigate climate change impacts are not equally distributed around the world, and low-income countries and marginalized communities with their vulnerable populations are more often suffering from climate-induced damage and varied loss. Intergenerational inequity refers to the decisions of the previous generations affecting the future of children and young people of today who are to bear the impacts of climate change throughout their lives. The rights of these young people need to be addressed in all the present climate actions, to ensure that our future generations inherit a liveable planet, and especially developing nations need support in adapting to climate impacts and transitioning to greener economies while ensuring their fair access to resources. (UNDP 2025.)

A rights-based approach to climate action emphasizes participation, transparency, and accountability, ensuring that solutions are inclusive and equitable. After all, all people should have the agency to live life with dignity. And yet, the climate crisis is causing loss of lives, livelihoods, languages, and cultures, putting many at risk and having also impacts on many countries' education system via extreme weather events, damage to educational institutions, and parents (in)ability to send their children to school, impacting the futures of young generations. (UNDP 2025.)

PLANETARY SOCIAL PEDAGOGY AS A UNITING PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

As mentioned above, education holds one of the main keys to a fairer world, and hence Erasmus+ project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair) has also focused on promoting human rights awareness especially in higher education but within non-formal and more informal education as well, focusing especially on those stories and voices less heard in the pan-European narrative.

One of the more recent pedagogical innovations, combining both planetary well-being and education, is the novel theory of Planetary Social Pedagogy (PSP) that focuses on developing such pedagogical model that can support "a transformation of the human conception of reality into a form that both recognizes the connections and interactions between people, society, and the planet, and imparts an ethical orientation to action that strengthens the health and integrity of all entities" (Salonen, Laininen, Hämäläinen & Sterling 2023). As an umbrella concept and an academic discipline within formal, non-formal and informal education, social pedagogy offers within welfare and education a framework of social intentions, perspectives, and interventions for professional activities.

As indicated by Salonen et al. (2023), PSP, based on traditional social pedagogy, presents a novel theoretical framework that can also be applied in formal, non-formal, and informal education. Focusing on the social-ecological worldview and systems-thinking, PSP emphasizes the interconnectedness and interaction

between people, communities, economies, societies, and cultures that are all embedded in the biosphere and shape one another.

Similar cyclical thinking dominates the learning process of the PSP theory; PSP enhances learning between cognitive, metacognitive, and epistemic levels, and with its holistic understanding of individual, society and Earth and their deep interconnectedness, it manages to unite the three dimensions of a social-ecological worldview, namely spatial, temporal, and ethical. By questioning whether present educational models – despite sustainability thinking mainstreaming nowadays in education – only reproduce the dominant way of living and promote a neoliberal economy, PSP calls for a paradigm shift in our thinking, perception and imagination and challenges us to create such basis in education where fundamental transformation can shape human behaviour in ways needed for a shared sustainable future. Such a paradigm shift entails transformation of our ideals, values, culture and human behaviour – we are to learn to become with the world around us rather than learning about the world.

With its interdependent focus and a cyclic learning process, PSP recreates humans' place and agency in an interdependent world and contemplates humans' role in this context: how the relationship between individuals, society, and Earth should be seen and reorganized so we may advance from the dominant fragmented worldview to a social-ecological worldview where the individual, society, and the planet form an intertwined and systemic whole.

As a generic pedagogical framework, PSP can be applied to various learning processes in formal, nonformal, and informal context, and by calling for planetary citizenship, especially in higher education, it can take interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary themes with local, national, and global trends and concerns to the planetary level. (Salonen et al. 2023)

CONCLUSION

With the advancement of climate challenges, natural resources become scarcer, competition may intensify, threatening social peace and stability, and climate-induced displacement could affect millions, strain infrastructure and social systems, thus also challenging the basic human rights.

With the broader view provided by PSP, such human rights issues and urgent European challenges as the ones studied and analysed in the Erasmus+ project JeS (including trafficking in humans, forced labour, undocumented migrants and the need for fair trade policies) can be placed in a larger context with a social-ecological worldview, emphasizing our human moral judgment, empathy and responsibility based on reason. With a transformative paradigm shift in our thinking, perception and imagination, we can start seeing more clearly how the future of humanity and the planet is inseparable. Protecting human rights without safeguarding the environment is futile; likewise, environmental action that ignores social justice risks deepening inequality. A sustainable and resilient future demands a holistic, ethical vision—one that recognizes the dignity of all people and the integrity of the Earth. By embracing such interconnectedness as promoted by PSP, we can build a world where both people and the planet may thrive. Hence, this also needs to be the focus in all our education, whether formal, non-formal or informal, as education is an essential key in transforming our mindset for co-creating a sustainable future for us all.

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Picture Credit: Freepik AI image.

2 Impact in a Social Services Project JeS: From Erasmus Impact Toolkit analysis to Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM) with Inner Development Goals

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THIS SHORT ARTICLE covers the topics of Erasmus Impact Toolkit, the SDG Impact Assessment Tool and the Laurea-developed Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM), using Erasmus+ project JeS (*Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair*) as an example. With the notion of SDG, this article refers to the *17 Sustainable Development Goals of Agenda 2030* by the United Nations (UN 2025).

As described in the *Erasmus Impact Toolkit* (European Union 2025), during these past 30 years, Erasmus+ programme, with its thousands of yearly projects, has become one of the main forms of European cooperation and collaboration in the sphere of education and training, with many long-lasting and positive impacts. However, analysing and monitoring systematically such impact can be challenging. For that purpose, the recently co-created Erasmus Impact Toolkit includes a set of practical, easy-to-use tools for enhanced project impact.

Additionally, as the notion of impact is also closely related to sustainability, this article analyses the counterpart of the *SDG Impact Assessment Tool* (2025) for Sustainable Development Goals, called here the Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM). The SDG Impact Assessment tool, developed by Gothenburg Centre for Sustainable Development, is used in RDI projects to visualize how an activity, organization, or an innovation promotes SDGs achievement. However, as it is more challenging to evaluate the sustainability impact of for example social services related project, where often the so-called soft skills are at centre, the Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM), based on the Inner Development Goals, responds to this gap in knowledge and offers an alternative way to make the project impact visible, especially in terms of inner sustainability.

ERASMUS IMPACT TOOLKIT

What do we mean by impact or desired impact? Impact is closely linked with a desired, fundamental change we want to contribute to (Erasmus+ Impact Tool). We might want to support active citizenship, or research and economy or we may want to promote equality and employability in society. As impact refers to a wider socio-economic change, it is obvious that this is something we cannot accomplish alone with one project. For the desired change, we also need to engage our target group early on as co-creators to meet their true needs and accomplish the change we want to see.

The purpose of the *Erasmus Impact Toolkit* (EIT) is to provide nine impact tools that support the evaluation of the whole project cycle consisting of four, partially overlapping phases, as visualized below. Each tool is described in detail, and simple instructions for using the tool in practice are also provided, with examples. Additionally, the toolkit document provides all the templates for the tools for printing or to be filled by hand, yet the users are recommended to create their own digital versions of them, as the tool is seen more as a compass than a map. (European Union 2025.)

Image 1. *Erasmus+ Toolkit Phases.*

At **Phase 1,** Applying for Funding, EIT applies e.g. Problem Tree Analysis (PTA), where the "tree" represents the core problem, the "roots" stand for its causes, and the "branches" describe its effects. PTA helps clarifying the meta level impact goal by identifying root causes and effects of the central project problem. It also supports the project logic visually by addressing and focusing on the right problems and priorities.

At **Phase 2**, Project Implementation, the recommended tool is Impact Mind Mapping where milestones, mid-term effects, long-term effects, hidden effects and indicators are made visible and tangible. At this stage, the impact can be also monitored by using Micro Follow-Up Surveys or Impact Diary. (European Union 2025.)

At **Phase 3**, Midterm Review, EIT suggests the usage of Most Significant Change (MSC) Tool, where participants share narratives about the most significant change they have experienced due to the project. MSC can be used during midterm review or after reporting. At this stage, also After Action Review (AAR) meeting can be applied – AAR is a short, focused and structured team-based discussion where the team reflects on what worked and what didn't, and how they can improve moving forward.

At **Phase 4**, Impact Reporting, the interest lies in such tools as Focus Group Interviews where, during a facilitated discussion, a small group of participants explore e.g. project's achievements, challenges, and impact. Another tool for Phase 4 is called Living Learnings Document that can be used online at the end of an Erasmus+ project to compile key insights and lessons learned and it also provides a strong basis for new projects.

As our Erasmus+ project JeS is at this point between Phases 3 and 4, the focus of this article is not to describe the usage of the tools of AAR, Focus Group Interviews and Living Learnings Document as such but to apply their key ideas, in a modified format, as the Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM) where the *Inner Development Goals* are at focus.

TRANSFORMATIVE SKILLS IMPACT ASSESSMENT MODEL (TSIAM) AND ITS BACKGROUND

Based on the needs of *United Nations' Agenda 2030* (UN 2023), with its 17 sustainable development goals, and the evaluation of sustainability-related impact in Erasmus+ projects, Gothenburg Centre for Sustainable Development has developed the *SDG Impact Assessment Tool* that visualizes with self-assessment results how an innovation, organization or a project promotes SDGs achievement (SDG 2024). This tool is also used at Laurea project evaluations to find out how the different aspects of SDGs and their attainment are realized in project activities.

Image 2. *UN's Agenda 2030 with 17 Sustainable Development Goals*

As mentioned in my earlier article on Laurea Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM) for RDI Projects: the Erasmus+ Project JeS (Social Services) as an Example (Wikström 2024), the TSIAM model was to be developed towards the end of the JeS project, and thus this short article will especially focus on the transformative IDG skills (the TSIAM model) and how their impact has been visible in Erasmus+ project JeS activities so far. Therefore, the SDG analysis with the JeS SDG impact is presented only shortly below in Image 3, as an example.

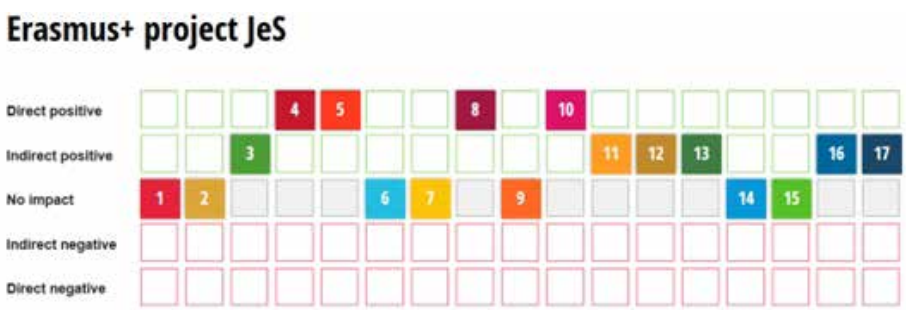

Image 3. *The SDG Impact Analysis of the Erasmus+ Project JeS*

As an SDG and Agenda2030 counterpart, the Transformative Skills Impact Assessment Model (TSIAM) focuses on inner transformative competences and is based on Inner Development Goals, where the focus lies in such competences that are essential for individual sustainability development, supporting the community-level attainment of the SDGs as well. The IDGs focus on our capacities for being, thinking, relating, collaborating and acting (Image 4), with the 23 skills of human inner growth and development (Image 5). Similarly, the TSIAM follows the structure of these five capacities with 23 transformative skills.

Image 4. *The Five Dimensions of Inner Development Goals. Picture Credit: IDG Resource Library*

Image 5. *The 23 IDG (1.0) Skills of Human Inner Growth and Development. Picture Credit: IDG Resource Library*

IDG Logo. Picture Credit: IDG Resource Library

By benchmarking and modifying the Gothenburg model as well as the above-mentioned Phases 3 and 4 Tools of EIT, it was possible to collect from the JeS project partners their key insights about the project impact especially in terms of those transformative IDG skills that are essential in social services projects both within HEIs and NGOs and form the basis of TSIAM.

The TSIAM prototype was tested with the JeS project partners (N=7) in autumn 2025, few months before the project ended. The partners received an email with the TSIAM in eform and, based on the country- and partner institution-focused answers, the TSIAM model looked as visualized below. Also, the participants were instructed as follows:

> ***Dear JeS partners,***
>
> ***For our final publication purposes, I kindly ask you to evaluate these IDG-based statements about our JeS project. The scale used here is 1-5, 5 meaning well realized/of key importance, 3 moderately realized/of moderate importance and 1 not realized/not important in JeS activities, materials etc.***
>
> ***THANK YOU!***

On next pages are presented the JeS TSIAM partner answers (N=7) to all the five capacities with 23 transformative skills, with the mean for each skill.

Table 1. *The importance of skills related to Being in Jes project according to JeS TSIAM partner answers (N=7)*

SKILLS	MOTIVATION	MARK THESE USING NUMBERS 1-5*
Inner Compass	JeS activities and materials encourage participants to analyse their values and commitment to human rights and DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) promotion in their daily lives.	4.9
Integrity and Authenticity	JeS activities and materials encourage participants to become aware of essential human rights and act with sincerity and commitment for the benefit of others.	4.3
Openness and Learning Mindset	By increasing the easy access to free human rights materials, educational events and eStories, the participants can learn and grow and if needed, also modify and change their views.	4.6
Self-Awareness	By encountering and reflecting upon e.g. peer migrant stories, the participants can become aware of their thoughts and feelings, and this can affect positively their self-image and self-awareness as well.	4.6
Presence	JeS events and materials, such as eStories, provide the participants with a chance to practice non-judgemental, open-ended presence.	4.4

* 5 meaning well realized/of key importance, 3 moderately realized/of moderate importance and 1 not realized/not important in JeS activities, materials. You can use the same number several times.

Table 2. *The importance of skills related to Thinking in Jes project according to JeS TSIAM partner answers (N=7)*

SKILLS	MOTIVATION	MARK THESE USING NUMBERS 1-5*
Critical Thinking	JeS activities and materials encourage participants to critically analyse e.g. their own views of human rights and DEIB -related issues as well as their organizations' commitment to promote human rights and inclusion.	4.1
Complexity Awareness	JeS activities and materials encourage participants to become aware of the societal and political aspects of the complexities involving human rights and DEIB realization in Europe.	4.3
Perspective Skills	JeS activities and materials encourage participants to engage in a peace-promoting and constructive dialogue with different life stories and world views and how human rights issues can be included e.g. in HEI curricula development.	4.6
Sense-Making	By encountering and reflecting upon e.g. migrant, refugee and other eStories of people in vulnerable positions, the JeS participants can make sense of different societal realities in Europe and how to promote peace-related competences e.g. in HEIs and NGOs.	4.4
Long-term Orientation and Visioning	JeS materials, such as eStories and webinars, provide the participants with a chance to plan long-term personal and societal engagement in human rights promotion activities in HEIs and NGOs.	4.1

* 5 meaning well realized/of key importance, 3 moderately realized/of moderate importance and 1 not realized/not important in JeS activities, materials. You can use the same number several times.

Table 1. *The importance of skills related to Relating in Jes project according to JeS TSIAM partner answers (N=7)*

SKILLS	MOTIVATION	MARK THESE USING NUMBERS 1-5*
Appreciation	JeS activities and materials encourage participants to relate to others and to the world with a basic sense of appreciation of human rights as well as gratitude, encouragement and positivity.	4.6
Connectedness	JeS activities and materials promote a sense of being connected with and/or being a part of a larger whole, such as a community, humanity or global ecosystem.	4.7
Humility	JeS activities and materials allow the participants to see situations less self-centred manner, without concern for one's own importance and more seeing the overall human rights point of view.	4.4
Empathy and Compassion	JeS activities and materials promote one's abilty to relate to others and oneself with kindness, empathy and compassion and address related suffering.	4.7

* 5 meaning well realized/of key importance, 3 moderately realized/of moderate importance and 1 not realized/not important in JeS activities, materials. You can use the same number several times.

Table 4. *The importance of skills related to Collaborating in Jes project according to JeS TSIAM partner answers (N=7)*

SKILLS	MOTIVATION	MARK THESE USING NUMBERS 1-5*
Communication skills	JeS events and activities increase the ability to really listen to others, to foster genuine dialogue, to advocate own views skillfully, to manage conflicts constructively & to adapt communication to diverse groups.	4.6
Co-creation skills	JeS events and activities support one's skills and motivation to build, develop and facilitate collaborative relationships with diverse stakeholders, characterized by psychological safety and genuine co-creation to support human rights cause.	4.4
Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence	JeS events and activities encourage willingness and support competence to embrace diversity and include people and collectives with different views and backgrounds.	4.6
Trust	JeS events and activities increase one's ability to show trust and to create and maintain trusting relationships.	4.4
Mobilisation skills	JeS events and activities increase skills in inspiring and mobilizing others to engage in shared purposes.	4.3

* 5 meaning well realized/of key importance, 3 moderately realized/of moderate importance and 1 not realized/not important in JeS activities, materials. You can use the same number several times.

Table 5. *The importance of skills related to Acting in Jes project according to JeS TSIAM partner answers (N=7)*

SKILLS	MOTIVATION	MARK THESE USING NUMBERS 1-5*
Courage	JeS events and activities increase one's ability to stand up for important values, make decisions, take decisive action and, if need be, challenge and disrupt existing structures and views of racism, inequity etc.	4.1
Creativity	JeS events and activities increase one's ability to generate and develop new ideas, innovate and being willing to disrupt conventional patterns to support human rights.	4.3
Optimism	JeS events and activities support one's ability to sustain and communicate a sense of hope, positive attitude and confidence in the possibility of meaningful change.	4.4
Perseverance	JeS events and activities support one's ability to sustain engagement and remain determined and patient even when human rights supporting efforts may take a long time to bear fruit.	4.1

* 5 meaning well realized/of key importance, 3 moderately realized/of moderate importance and 1 not realized/not important in JeS activities, materials. You can use the same number several times.

Based on these results, one can create the following Erasmus+ project JeS TSIAM summary.

Table 6. *JeS TSIAM Partner Answers (N=7) to All the Five Capacities with 23 Transformative Skills, with the Mean for Each Skill*

TSIAM FOR ERASMUS+ PROJECT JES (SCALE 1-5; N=7 WITH JES PARTNERS)				
BEING	**THINKING**	**RELATING**	**COLLABORATING**	**ACTING**
Inner Compass 4.9	Critical Thinking 4.1	Appreciation 4.6	Communication skills 4.6	Courage 4.1
Integrity and Authenticity 4.3	Complexity Awareness 4.3	Connectedness 4.7	Co-creation skills 4.4	Creativity 4.3
Openness and Learning Mindset 4.6	Perspective Skills 4.6	Humility 4.4	Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence 4.6	Optimism 4.4
Self-Awareness 4.6	Sense-Making 4.4	Empathy and Compassion 4.7	Trust 4.4	Perseverance 4.1
Presence 4.4	Long-term Orientation and Visioning 4.1		Mobilisation skills 4.3	
Mean = 4.6	Mean = 4.3	Mean = 4.6	Mean = 4.5	Mean = 4.2

Thus, in terms of the IDG capacities and according to the JeS partners' views, the Eramus+ project JeS supported and focused on the five IDG capacities in this order:

Table 7. *The focus and support for IDG capacities in the Eramus+ project JeS*

IDG CAPACITY	MEAN
Relating	4.6
Being	4.6
Collaborating	4.5
Thinking	4.3
Acting	4.2

When analysed in more detail, the most important nine of the 23 transformative IDG skills promoted by JeS project activities were the following:

Table 8. *The most important IDG skills promoted by JeS project activities*

IDG SKILL	MEAN
Inner Compass	4.9
Connectedness	4.7
Empathy and Compassion	4.7
Openness and Learning Mindset	4.6
Self-Awareness	4.6
Appreciation	4.6
Perspective skills	4.6
Communication skills	4.6
Inclusive mindset and intercultural competence	4.6

All in all, the JeS activities were least focused on or had been least successful in supporting the following transformative IDG skills, though these too were not graded very low (4.1/5):

Table 9. *The least focused on / supported IDG skills in JeS project activities*

IDG SKILL	MEAN
Perseverance	4.1
Courage	4.1
Critical Thinking	4.1
Long-term Orientation and Visioning	4.1

CONCLUSION

By applying and modifying the Gothenburg model as well as the above-mentioned Phases 3 and 4 Tools of EIT and using the IDG framework with its five capacities and 23 transformative skills, it was possible to test a prototype version of TSIAM online to see how well it works in evaluating the impact of a social services -focused project, such as the Erasmus+ project JeS.

Based on the results, one can state that in addition to supporting the SDGs directly (4, 5, 8 and 10) and indirectly (3, 11, 12, 13, 16 and 17), the JeS project has been most impactful in terms of supporting and focusing on the IDG-based transformative skills and competences of inner compass, connectedness, empathy and compassion as well as openness and learning mindset, self-awareness, appreciation, perspective and communication skills development, with inclusive mindset and intercultural competence.

A summary of the evidence-based JeS IDG impact (based on the TSIAM prototype and the JeS partners' views) could then be described as follows:

> *JeS activities and materials have focused on encouraging participants to analyse their values and commitment to human rights and DEIB (diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging) promotion in their daily lives, and they have promoted the participants sense of being connected with or being part of a larger whole, such as a community, humanity or global ecosystem. With its activities and materials, JeS has promoted the project participants' ability to relate to others and oneself with kindness, empathy and compassion and address related suffering. Also, by increasing the easy access to free human rights materials, educational events and eStories, the participants have been given opportunities to learn and grow and if needed, also modify and change their views.*
>
> *By encountering and reflecting upon e.g. peer migrant stories, the participants have been able to become more aware of their thoughts and feelings, which can then positively affect their self-image and self-awareness as well. JeS activities and materials have encouraged participants to engage in a peace-promoting and constructive dialogue with different life stories and world views, and the project has also provided opportunities to analyse how human rights issues can be included e.g. in HEI curricula development. JeS events and activities have increased the participants' ability to really listen to others, to foster genuine dialogue, to advocate one's own views skillfully and to manage conflicts constructively as well as adapt communication to diverse groups. Finally, JeS project events and activities have encouraged willingness and supported competence to embrace diversity and include people and collectives with different views and backgrounds.*

Thus, one can conclude that in addition to using different models for SDGs and impact evaluation, such as the Gothenburg model and EIT, it is also possible to further develop such impact models that make visible and better resonate with, for example, social services -based projects where the impact is often more related to the development of inner sustainability with transformative skills and competences and thus, at times, harder to make tangible or present it with evidence-based materials. As the IDG 2.0 was published in late October 2025 and will be applied towards the end of 2025 also in HE context, with few additions to the original IDG framework, such as forgiveness and systems thinking, also the TSIAM prototype can be further developed in the future to resonate with the latest advancement of transformative inner development goals and their impact for example in social services related Erasmus+ projects.

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3 Erasmus+ JeS Project as a Student Project

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IN ITS PEDAGOGY, Laurea UAS focuses on Learning by Developing (LbD) model. This means that at Laurea, all pedagogical choices are based on student and learning-centredness, competence-based approach, working life relevance, guidance and flexibility. Similarly, in Laurea's international RDI activities within higher education (HE), such as Erasmus+ projects, student integration and participation in different project activities are central. In this short article, the Laurea LbD model is presented in dialogue with *Erasmus+ JeS* (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair, 2023-2025) project activities where both Bachelor and Master students from Laurea Social and Correctional Services programmes were active participants and co-creators of the European-wide JeS activities.

LBD PEDAGOGY AND INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS AT LAUREA

Laurea is an LbD-based learning community, and *Laurea's competence-based pedagogical programme* (Laurea Pedagogical Programme 2023-2025) defines Laurea's approach to learning, teaching, guidance, skills development, the role of knowledge and collaboration with partners. As an accessible higher education institution (HEI), Laurea emphasizes equality and diversity while acknowledging individual differences. Laurea's aim is to equip students with necessary skills and knowledge and to support their own competences for the future working life needs. Hence, learning at Laurea is closely integrated into working life and RDI projects, and competences are developed through the Learning by Developing (LbD) pedagogical model. With its national and international partners, Laurea offers a natural bridge to working life to all the students and provides possibilities to acquire useful working life competences in various ways.

With its pedagogical activities, Laurea wishes to support both internationalisation and multiculturalism as natural parts of the student's professional identity during their studies. By participating in international HE projects, the notion of internationalisation at Laurea can be naturally realized – relevant language skills

and the ability to interact with diverse people and work in diverse communities is spontaneously enhanced. International HE projects with multicultural collaboration support one's ability to think beyond one's own worldview and promote one's teamwork skills as well as enhance one's ability to act effectively in different global networks.

At Laurea, the necessary working life competences are developed in diverse working life -relevant learning environments, following the Learning by Developing (LbD) model. In international HE projects, such as Erasmus+ project JeS, students can have simultaneously several active roles as learners, experiencers, developers, and researchers, while collaborating with the international higher education community. In this way, Laurea's RDI projects provide intercultural learning environments where students can learn critical thinking and apply research-based knowledge to the evolving needs of the working life and society today and tomorrow.

By integrating international projects as part of core competence and elective or complementary competence courses, Laurea teachers can promote an intercultural, learning-friendly culture where the students' multicultural and international competences can be naturally strengthened. In this way, also the individual learning processes, instead of teaching processes, can be designed by taking into consideration students' diverse backgrounds, competencies, and their learning objectives, as there is always some flexibility in international projects and their realization. Also, in international projects, participatory methods strengthen the student's active role as a learner, thus supporting also student's overall well-being during the studies. When the inclusive pedagogical solutions are in dialogue with the international collaboration of, for example, Erasmus+ projects, the development of students' diversity and multicultural competence is made possible. At best, participation in HE international projects can support the achievement of both personal competence and career goals.

LAUREA STUDENTS AS ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN THE ERASMUS+ JES PROJECT

They key purpose of the Erasmus+ human rights project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair, 2023-2025) was to address the issues of common values, civic engagement and participation as well as building inclusive higher education systems and stimulating innovative learning and teaching practice. JeS project activities focused on human rights and rule of law as well as social responsibility of educational institutions in preventing racism and discrimination.

Even that this short article solely focuses on Laurea's LbD pedagogy and Laurea students' role in the Erasmus+ project JeS activities, the other HEI partner students from UCLL, Belgium, and University of Maribor, Slovenia, were also actively involved in the JeS research and eStories collection activities as well as webinars, including altogether hundreds of students, and also the other JeS partners offered different educational activities, participated by a significant number of migrants, educators, migration experts and future HEI students.

During 2023-2025, Laurea students from Social and Correctional Services Bachelor and Master programmes were actively involved in different JeS project activities as younger JeS researchers during several core competence and elective or complementary competence courses (Wikström 2024). They were also granted a special statement in their Transcript of Records, indicating that they had completed their specific course or practice period as a younger or junior researcher in co-operation with the Erasmus+ project JeS.

Students collected eStories and produced articles, blogs, portfolios and posters related to the JeS project themes especially under the project WPs (work packages) 2 (Joint Research About the JeS Project Themes) and 3 (eStories Collection and Student and NGO Workshops) as well as created educational materials for WP4 (Teacher Training and Capacity Building). Students also participated in webinars and JeS panel discussions as well as the Multisensory Story Sharing Week at Laurea in November 2024 and the final seminar in early December 2025.

These research and other materials created by students were published both in Finnish and in English and were included on the JeS web page as well as in the JeS Canvas platform with the JeS Toolkit – a comprehensive toolbox on human rights related topics and educational materials for teachers, students, educators, migrants and volunteers and for anyone interested in human rights, both in English and in local partner languages.

LAUREA STUDENTS' FEEDBACK: "LIFE IS ALL ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS I THINK!"

During the elective or complementary competence Laurea course for Social Services (Sustainable Global Future 2025), with exchange students from different parts of the world, the students were asked to reflect how they see the importance of promoting human rights in HE and in our world today. Below, some of the student feedback after participating in the JeS project activities are expressed.

The students stated that human rights promotion is crucial for creating a world where everyone is equally accepted as who they are. Open discussion about human rights issues is needed and should be talked about more. One of the students stated: "This course executed this perfectly. Unity and equality are keys to sustainable future."

Students saw the importance of human rights in HE and in our shared world as profound, as these rights are interlinked with such important values as dignity, equality, freedom, justice, and peace that form the core principles for any inclusive and sustainable society. They emphasized that when executed in HE, human rights that affect our overall wellbeing can promote equal opportunities, defend freedoms, and foster safe, inclusive learning environments. Integrating human rights in HE contributes to the development of responsible global citizens who value variety and work for justice and peace and can actively promote social and environmental change in our interlinked and diverse world.

As such, for students, universities are not just places for academic learning but also crucial places for shaping values such as equity and inclusion. With their human rights education, universities can "shape our

JeS Multisensory Story Sharing Week Event at Laurea in November 2024. Picture Credit: JeS Project Partners

minds and actions regarding how we treat other people, and this also helps us make the world a much better place for each other". Also, when migrants' voices are heard and their real needs are understood, "then targeted help will be given to them instead of giving them what the system thinks they need". Human rights are also about our efforts "to try to understand others and to incorporate small actions into daily life for the sake of the environment".

Also, one of Laurea students completed her final Social Services practice in the JeS project, just before her graduation as a Bachelor of Social Services. For her, the experience with JeS was "truly transformative, both professionally and personally". Through her project work, she developed a much deeper understanding of human rights, sustainability, and social justice, and gained confidence in expressing these values through writing and research. By writing weekly LinkedIn news updates, she could stay informed about global issues while learning to communicate different complex topics clearly and effectively. She also attended different human rights and sociocultural sustainability related seminars that "gave her space to reflect on current human rights challenges and connect them to real-world practice". JeS team meetings allowed her to observe how EU-funded projects function in practice and how international collaboration and organized human rights work operate.

Additionally, the student wrote own blog posts on human trafficking and other human rights themes that strengthened her research skills and allowed her "to share knowledge that I care deeply about". Also, "one of my favourite experiences was creating and presenting my own material on the importance of human rights in professional social work". By teaching others, the student "understood the subject even more deeply and appreciated how essential these principles are in everyday professional life". Volunteering opportunity at the World Village Festival in Helsinki gave her a broader view of global human rights issues and the importance of cultural diversity and cooperation. For the student, the JeS participation experience "has been incredibly enriching, it has shaped how I see the world, strengthened my passion for human rights, and inspired me to continue promoting dignity, equality, and justice in my future career."

CONCLUSION

As mentioned in the beginning of this article, *Laurea's competence-based LbD pedagogical programme 2023-2035* aims is to equip students with necessary skills and knowledge and thus support their competence development for their future working life needs. With its international projects, such as Erasmus+ JeS, Laurea provides students also with different opportunities for varied intercultural working life competence development, as seen in the student quotes.

At best, international HE projects can support students' professional development by enhancing their language, collaboration and teamwork skills and by advancing their abilities to work in diverse communities where networking and cultural competences are required. By participating in Laurea's international RDI activities and by engaging in different multicultural dialogues on important and current societal and human rights themes, students can get valuable experience for their professional paths in the future.

As I have mentioned in my earlier article on student co-operation in RDI projects (2024), when the RDI activities can successfully meet the teaching topics and schedules, students' participation in the project activities can be a win-win situation to all the participants and benefit not just the students but also all the project partners. Students are a great asset to Laurea RDI activities with their fresh and innovative ideas and up-to-date views and insights on many relevant societal topics, such as human rights and their realization in young people's lives in Europe and beyond.

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Erasmus+ Project Final Seminar at Merkki Museum, Helsinki. 2.12.2025. Picture Credit: JeS Project Partners

Erasmus+ Project JeS:
Human Rights Challenges

4 Undocumented Migrants in Finland: Vulnerability, Employment, and the Risk of Falling Victim to Human Trafficking

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UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS ARE a highly vulnerable group, both globally and in Finland. They often remain "invisible" to the public, and their existence — as well as the challenges they face in securing a livelihood — are not sufficiently recognized. At the Erasmus+ JeS project, undocumented migrants are one of the key themes, with the aim of raising awareness about this group: who they are, how they ended up in their current situation, how it affects their lives in terms of coping in society, especially regarding employment, and unfortunately, their increased risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. I hope that through the research material produced by the project, the sharing of good practices and initiatives, and the stories collected, the voices of undocumented migrants will be heard. In this article, I present selected findings from the project, describe who undocumented migrants are, and highlight their vulnerable position, particularly from the perspective of employment in Finland. This article primarily relies on the case study, "Undocumented Migrants and Their Everyday Lives", conducted by Jauhiainen and Tedeschi (2021), which is the first and only comprehensive research studying undocumented migrants on a large scale in Finland.

DEFINITIONS OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

Various terms and expressions are used to describe people who enter a country illegally, overstay their permitted period of residence, live in a country without a residence permit or violate immigration rules in a manner that renders them liable for expulsion. In academic, media and public discussions, terms such as "irregular", "undocumented" or "unauthorized" immigrants have been used. The terms "clandestine" or "illegal immigrants" have also been used, but these are not recommended nowadays as they have very negative connotations. Internationally, for example, the UN, the European Parliament and the European

Commission recommend the use of the terms 'undocumented immigrant' or 'irregular migrant'. (Spencer & Triandafyllidou 2020, 15; PICUM 2017.)

To better understand the different forms of irregular migration status, the following list outlines the various situations that undocumented migrants may face. These examples also highlight the complexity of how entry, residence, and employment statuses can overlap and interact:

- Individuals using forged documents, or those with genuine documents but assuming false identities.
- People with seemingly legal temporary residence, such as so-called "working tourists" who enter on a tourist visa but work irregularly. In some countries, they represent majority of undocumented migrants. Similarly, seasonal and contract workers with conditional permits may face deportation if they violate the terms of their contracts (e.g., by working longer than permitted).
- Migrants, who lose their residence status because they no longer meet the conditions under which their permit was originally granted—such as becoming unemployed, losing a valid employment relationship, completing their studies, or aging out of a family-based permit.
- Individuals who never had legal status, having entered the country illegally and failed to find a pathway to regularization.
- Migrants who entered illegally but are registered with public authorities, and whose asylum applications have been rejected.
- Tolerated individuals without official status, with or without documentation proving the suspension of their deportation. This situation arises when returning to the country of origin or transit is not possible due to lack of diplomatic agreements or inability to verify the migrant's nationality.
- Children born to parents residing unlawfully, who therefore lack fully documented legal status themselves.

These examples illustrate the diverse and overlapping realities of undocumented migrants and the legal uncertainties they face. (Spencer & Triandafyllidou 2020, 15–16.)

Picture Credit: JeS Project Image Bank

EMPLOYMENT STATISTICS AND PATTERNS

The number of undocumented migrants is difficult to estimate. In Europe, it was estimated that there were between 1.9 and 3.8 million undocumented individuals, which corresponds to approximately 7% to 12% of the total migrant population in the EU in 2008. Since then, some updated estimates are available for a few countries: irregular migrant residents were estimated at between 180,000 and 520,000 in Germany in 2014; at around 300,000 in Italy in 2013; at around one million in the UK in 2010; and at around 33,000 in Sweden in 2017. In Finland, about 4,000 - 5,000 undocumented migrants in 2019 (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 203). In general, most official and independent sources speak of an irregular migrant presence ranging from 6% to 10% of the total foreign resident population in Europe before the eruption of the so-called "migration crisis" in 2014–2015. (Spencer & Triandafyllidou 2020, 19-20.)

Citizens of EU member states are generally not subject to standard entry or immigration controls. However, they are required to prove that they can support themselves financially, follow public security regulations, and register their residence if they plan to stay in Finland for more than 90 days. In theory, EU nationals enjoy unrestricted movement within the Schengen zone, meaning they are not obligated to report their arrival in Finland, and authorities cannot conduct random checks on their documents or residency status. Police can check the identity of a person and his/her right to remain in Finland only in specific cases mentioned in the Aliens Act. As a result, it is relatively easy for an EU citizen to continue living in Finland even after their legal right to stay has expired. This situation applies to various groups, including former students, EU nationals who were previously employed, tourists, and other types of visitors. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 64.)

An increasing number of individuals are moving across borders within the Schengen area without having the legal right to do so. Some have gone through the asylum process in one EU country and, after being rejected, relocate to another member state. Aware that a new asylum application would likely be denied, they choose not to apply again and instead live as undocumented migrants. Others—often former asylum seekers or refugees—may have secured permanent residency in one EU country but decide not to stay there. They move to another country, such as Finland, possibly because they have stronger social connections, prefer the living conditions, or face negative circumstances in their country of residence. If they do not meet the requirements for legal residency in Finland, they often avoid contact with authorities and remain hidden. There are also people who never initiate the asylum process at all. They enter Finland without authorization and continue living there without legal status. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 65–66.)

THE VULNERABILITY OF UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS

In 2022, the Ministry of the Interior conducted a survey entitled "Report on Possible National Solutions to the Situation of People Without a Right of Stay in Finland". This report examines, from the perspective of the legislation on aliens, possible national solutions to the situation of people who arrived in Finland as asylum seekers in 2015–2016 or earlier and who have resided in the country for a long time without a right of stay. The report stated that there is a heterogeneous group of people living in Finland without the right of residence. There are various reasons why people may stay without the right to reside. This may include individuals who entered the country illegally, or individuals whose legal residence conditions have expired, for example due to a negative asylum or other decision. The situations of individuals in Finland were also very different. These could have been people of working age and functional capacity, as well as people with mental health problems and minors. (Sisäministeriön maahanmuutto-osasto 2022, 12.)

According to the survey (Sisäministeriön maahanmuutto-osasto 2022, 15) the vulnerability of people without the right of residence to exploitation and even human trafficking emerged. Some of those without a right of residence in the country work on completely normal working conditions. However, the employment relationships offered to some people may be vague and include indications of extortion-like work discrimination or even work-related human trafficking. In addition, concerns about sexual abuse and related human trafficking were raised, especially for women with an asylum seeker background. Homelessness and dependency to providers of help or housing can create a framework for sexual abuse. So far, there have been few victims of human trafficking without the right of residence in the assistance system for victims of human trafficking in Finland. However, not all victims, for various reasons, seek the services of the assistance system. One reason may be that potential repatriation is seen as a greater threat to further exploitation.

In general, in Finland in 2023, the assistance system for victims of human trafficking received 510 new applications, of which 326 victims of human trafficking were accepted into the system. Slightly more than half of them were women and girls. Of them, 73% had a visa or residence permit, and 12% lacked legal residence status. The majority, i.e. 64%, of all exploitation cases in 2023 occurred in Finland. Forced labour was the most common form of human trafficking. The individuals involved represented 35 different nationalities. The sectors most associated with forced labour were natural product picking (32%), berry farming (24%), the restaurant industry (13%), cleaning services (11%), wellness sector (4%) and horticulture (4%). (Ihmiskaupan uhrien auttamisjärjestelmä 2024.)

UNDOCUMENTED MIGRANTS AND EMPLOYMENT IN FINLAND

Jauhiainen & Tedeschi (2021) conducted a study concerning undocumented migrants in Finland between 2018 and 2019. The study explores the complex and often precarious employment situations of undocumented migrants in Finland. Study was based on fieldwork including surveys from 100 undocumented migrants and ethnographic observations and provides a nuanced picture of how individuals without legal residency navigate work, survival, and dignity in Finnish society.

Undocumented migrants in Finland are legally prohibited from working. Despite this, many engage in employment out of necessity, as they are excluded from most welfare benefits. Although some social support is technically available, bureaucratic hurdles make access extremely difficult. As a result, work becomes a vital means of survival when informal networks fail. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 101.)

Among Jauhiainen & Tedeschi (2021) survey respondents (n=100), 26% had worked in Finland, and 24% were employed at the time of the study. Employment types varied: 38% had relatively permanent jobs, 24% worked part-time, 38% were employed irregularly or randomly. Only 5% had been employed for over a year. These figures reflect broader trends in Finland, where labor market participation among foreign-born populations is generally lower. For example, in Helsinki in 2017, unemployment among Iraqis (with residence permits) aged 20–64 was 53%, compared to less than 10% among native Finns.

Employment was significantly more common among men (31%) than women (0%). However, the data on women was too limited to draw firm conclusions. Language proficiency played a key role: those fluent in Finnish were nearly twice as likely to be employed (40%) compared to those with limited language skills (24%). Previous work experience in the country of origin also increased the likelihood of employment in Finland. Of those who had worked in their home countries (71%), 38% were employed in Finland. Many valued mobility within Finland over living among people of the same ethnic background when seeking work. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021.)

TYPES OF JOBS AND EMPLOYERS

In the international context, undocumented migrants are employed in many sectors—cleaning, food service, car cleaning, barbering, mechanical work, and construction. At this case study (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021) employed respondents had a variety of jobs, usually in positions that did not require special training or skills. Of the respondents who were employed, 33% were employed in a company, 3% were self-employed, 3% had mixed employment, and 60% had other types of employment. These different jobs included restaurant workers, volunteers, and teachers, for example. There were some differences regarding people's backgrounds: those who had not completed secondary education, who had gained work experience in their countries of origin, and who had family in Finland were more often self-employed than other respondents. Some found work in businesses run by people from their own ethnic group, now regular migrants in Finland. This reflects a broader international trend where undocumented workers often rely on co-ethnic networks to access low-paid, informal jobs. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 102-103.)

WORKING CONDITIONS AND LEGALITY

A significant number of undocumented migrants were engaged in ordinary jobs that are also held by Finnish citizens and documented immigrants. In their current roles, 62% reported working alongside Finnish colleagues, and 64% had co-workers from their own national or ethnic backgrounds. However, the ways in which the enterprises operated (regarding wages, insurance, taxation, and similar) were to some extent illegal or on the border between legality and illegality. The media has revealed that, in Finland (as elsewhere), some private employers exploit the legal systems so that they can hire asylum seekers as trainees, whom they do not have to pay a salary. Such exploitation can become more serious when people lose the status of asylum seeker and become undocumented migrants. Regardless of the informality of their jobs, over two out of three (70%) of this study (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 103) responding employed undocumented migrants had written work contracts, and half (52%) received their salaries via a bank account. One out of four employed people (24%) received their salary in cash, and another one out of four (24%) claimed that they were not paid for their work. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 103.)

Despite the risks, many undocumented migrants actively avoided illegal activities, driven by personal values and moral convictions. The study includes powerful testimonies from individuals who resisted criminal paths despite extreme hardship, emphasizing their desire to work, contribute, and maintain dignity. Work provided psychological relief, social connections, and a sense of purpose. Many expressed distress over being idle, which worsened mental health and triggered traumatic memories. Employment, even informal, helped restore a sense of normalcy and self-worth. (Jauhiainen & Tedeschi 2021, 106.)

MOTIVATIONS AND CHALLENGES

According to the Jauhianen & Tedeschi (2021) survey, the motivations for working were multifaceted. The first one was the financial survival – Many had no other means to support themselves or their families. The salaries undocumented migrants received varied greatly, depending on the working hours and types of jobs. The median salary the respondents mentioned was 10 EUR per hour for a full-time job and 7 EUR per hour for part-time or random work. The second motivation for working was social and psychological well-being

– work offered structure, dignity, and social interaction. Working and being able to support themselves or their families could give undocumented migrants temporary relief from stress, help them to build social relationships and to provide them with a measure of dignity. In general, doing nothing all day long, had a negative impact on their wellbeing and health. The third one was hope for legal status – some hoped that employment might lead to a residence permit.

However, Finnish immigration law requires that work be legal, sufficiently paid, and stable to qualify for a residence permit. Since undocumented migrants often work underpaid and informal jobs, they rarely meet these criteria. (Työ- ja elinkeinoministeriö 2024). Moreover, working illegally can harm future immigration applications, as it may be seen as system abuse.

CONCLUSION

This article reveals the resilience and agency of undocumented migrants in Finland. Despite legal restrictions, many seek employment not only to survive but to maintain dignity, integrate into society, and pursue a better future. Their experiences challenge common stereotypes and highlight the need for more humane and inclusive policies.

As the JeS project uses storytelling to give people a voice, I would like to conclude my writing by sharing the words of an undocumented immigrant who participated in the Jauhiainen and Tedeschi (2021,106) survey:

> *"I don't like to be like a beggar. I miss my country, even if I would like to learn the language and settle down here: with study, work, or marriage. As for the work, I am ready to do anything. I feel that I am wasting my time here, just waiting for something to happen, but I feel safe here; you don't see people assaulted here. However, I am a little bit afraid of the police and of deportation. I feel sad. Nothing can make me happy, and I miss my country, even if I cannot go back there. I feel bad because I don't want to be a beggar, but the situation is such that I am [a beggar]. I don't know what to do. I would feel much better if I could get asylum. I could do things. Now I cannot do anything, because I don't have the residence [permit]. I studied before, but when I received the negative decision, I couldn't study anymore. I was kicked out of the reception centre two months ago. I am attending a Finnish course. I come here [to the day centre] every day, and I go to sleep at the emergency shelter. I only sleep four hours per night. I have nightmares and keep overthinking. I am a religious person, so I believe that He will decide when the time is right for me to get the things that I need."*

Copilot and the DeepL program for language checking and sentence structure were used when editing this JeS article.

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5 Victims of Human Trafficking in Nail Salons

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Across Europe, the nail salon industry often seems like harmless place for beauty and selfcare. But beneath the nice colours and sparkles, another dark reality exists, for some, these salons serve as facades for exploitation and human trafficking. In recent years, investigative reporting and survivor testimonies have lifted the curtain on this dark revealing story of debt bondage, coercive work conditions, and illegal practices hidden behind perfect manicures.

In Finland, where the beauty industry is often seen as harmless, voices within the Vietnamese migrant community tell a different story. A recent investigation by Finnish Yle (Finland's national public service media company) found that some salons function less as a legitimate business and more as fronts for trafficking-related activities, raising urgent questions about regulation, oversight, and human rights in the country's fast growing beauty sector. (Pehkonen, Stolzmann & Vu 2025.)

Human trafficking in nail salons is not just a hidden labour issue, it is a human rights crisis that cuts borders, economies, and communities. The beauty industry thrives on accessibility and affordability, but the true cost of a cheap manicure may be the exploitation of vulnerable migrant workers trapped in cycles of debt and coercion. By reporting how this plays out in Finland, a country often praised for its transparency and welfare model, we confront a larger European problem: the ease with which exploitation can slip under the radar of regulators and consumers. This matters because every client, policy maker, and business owner should be aware of the systems that allow trafficking to happen under the guise of these services.

HOW NAIL SALON TRAFFICKING HAPPENS

Human trafficking in nails salons often begins with deceptive work recruitment practices. Workers, frequently migrants, from Southeast Asia or Eastern Europe, are promised legitimate employment opportunities with

fair wages and legal work bound by inflated recruitment fees or forces to pay for accommodation, training, and equipment, creating a cycle of debt that effectively traps them in the salon. (Myria 2022.) Traffickers commonly control victims by isolating them from the real world, limiting their communication with family or authorities, and sometimes confiscating passports or identification documents, making it difficult or even impossible for workers to escape or seek help (EMN Belgium 2023).

Within the workplace, victims often endure extremely long hours for little or no pay, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and harsh physical and mental conditions. Many salons are small and deal mostly with cash, and combined with unclear legal responsibilities for subcontracted workers, this reduces accountability and makes detection of abusive practices challenging. (Europol 2021). Language barriers and unfamiliarity with local labour laws further increase worker's vulnerability, as they may be unaware of their rights or fearful of reporting abuse for fear of losing employment or residency status (Myria 2022).

Overall, these factors of deceptive recruitment, debt bondage, isolation, confiscation of documents, and exploitative working conditions create a framework in which human trafficking can succeed in the nail salons industry. Official reports highlight that nail salons are among the sectors most at risk for labour exploitation, showing how a service that seems ordinary can mask serious violations of human rights (Myria 2022; EMN Belgium 2023).

NAIL SALON HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN EUROPE

In Europe, the nail salon industry has grown rapidly during the past two decades, influenced by rising consumer demand for affordable beauty services and the popularity of specialized gel, and nail art (ASD Reports 2023). Yet, behind this booming sector, reports of labour exploitation and trafficking have surfaced in several countries.

In Sweden, a 2019 investigation revealed that employees at a major nail salon chain were subjected to severe labour exploitation, working six days a week for long hours while being forced to return substantial portions of their wages, despite the existence of a collective agreement. When the employees contacted the union, they faced threats and suspensions from work, prompting both civil and criminal legal proceedings. By the end of 2019, the civil case resulted in financial compensation, and in 2022, the salon owner was convicted of fraud for charging workers for employment thought cleared of human trafficking. This case highlights the significant barriers migrant workers face accessing justice and social rights, including language limitations, precarious immigrant status, and dependency on employers, and highlights the critical role of unions, NGOs, and government agencies in facilitating legal protection and readiness for vulnerable workers. (Schoultz and Muhire 2023.)

In 2025, the German government officially moved to strengthen enforcement against illegal work in beauty sectors, explicitly including nail studios among the targeted businesses. Under the new law approved by the cabinet, employees in nail salons, cosmetic studios and barbershops will be required to carry valid identification during work, enabling authorities to conduct more effective inspections. The legislation also aims to bring employers into agreeing by improving reporting obligations and increasing penalties. These measures come amid concerns over unchecked exploitative practices in these industries, such as underpaying workers or employing people without proper documentation. (OsnaFM 2025.)

Other organizations active in the fight against human trafficking have also flagged this sector as particularly at risk. For example, in October 2023, the Samilia Foundation, actively fighting against modern

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slavery in Belgium, marked EU Anti-Trafficking Day with a campaign focused on human trafficking in nail salons. The campaign featured testimonies from survivors, insights from social inspection services and the judiciary, and information displays in the 17 busiest metro stations in Brussels. (European Migrstion Network EMN Belgium 2023.)

Despite the diversity of the cases in Europe, a common thread emerges: the combination of low regulatory oversight, high demand for inexpensive services, and the precarious status of migrant workers.

A FINNISH CASE

In Finland, the nail salon industry, while appearing innocuous, has revealed troubling signs of labour exploitation and potential human trafficking. Investigations by Yle's MOT program uncovered that some salons, particularly those employing migrant workers from Vietnam, operate under conditions that blur the line between legitimate employment and coercion. Workers often pay significant sums, sometimes tens of thousands of euros, to secure jobs, leaving them trapped in debt bondage. Once employed, they face long working hours, low or delayed pay, and cramped living arrangements, sometimes sharing apartments with several colleagues. Language barriers, unfamiliarity with Finnish labour laws, and fear of losing their jobs or residency status further prevent these workers from seeking help, effectively isolating them within the system. The salons cater to the public's demand for affordable services, but behind the scenes, employees endure exploitative conditions that would be illegal under standard labour regulations. (Pehkonen, Stolzmann & Vu 2025.)

Authorities and experts acknowledge that while Finnish law prohibits forced labour and exploitation, gaps in enforcement and oversight allow such abuses to persist. Labor inspections are infrequent, and the legal classification of workers as independent contractors in some cases limits access to protections such as minimum wage and occupational safety measures. NGOs and social services have noted that victims often hesitate to report abuses due to fear of deportation or retaliation, making it difficult to detect and prosecute cases. The Yle investigation highlights the urgent need for stricter regulations, more proactive labour inspections, and public awareness to prevent exploitation in the beauty industry. It also underscores a broader European challenge: even countries with strong welfare systems are not immune to modern forms of labour trafficking, showing that vigilance and targeted policy responses are essential to protect vulnerable migrant workers. (Pehkonen, Stolzmann & Vu 2025.)

REGULATORY GAPS AND POLICY ENFORCEMENT

In Europe, human trafficking in nail salons is often facilitated by a combination of legal loopholes and regulatory gaps. Many workers are classified as independent contractors rather than employees, which excludes them from basic labour protections such as minimum wage, overtime pay, and workplace safety regulations. This classification, coupled with minimal inspection and oversight of salons, creates conditions where exploitative practices can thrive largely undetected. Workers are frequently subjected to long hours, low pay, and unsafe working environments, while employers face limited accountability due to unclear regulations and weak enforcement. The lack of specialized training for law enforcement to identify trafficking in this sector further compounds the problem, as does the absence of targeted legislation addressing labour exploitation specifically in beauty services. Consequently, traffickers can exploit vulnerable migrant workers systematically, taking advantage of both the structural gaps in the labour system and the workers' precarious legal and economic status. (FIZ 2022.)

One of the most striking exploitative practices identified in Finland's nail salon industry is the selling of work contracts to migrant workers. Investigations have shown that some salon owners, particularly within Vietnamese-run businesses, demand payments of up to €25,000 from workers in exchange for the promise of employment. (Pehkonen, Stolzmann & Vu 2025.) This practice creates a form of debt bondage, as workers must borrow large sums to secure the contract and are then forced to accept exploitative working conditions to repay the debt. In many cases, the promised wages are not delivered in full, with some workers coerced into returning part of their salary in cash or working for little to no pay at all. The financial burden of these contract fees, combined with the risk of losing both employment and residence rights if they resist, leaves workers in a position of extreme dependency on their employers. As a result, the selling of contracts functions as a mechanism of control that traps migrant workers in exploitative situations while allowing salon owners to profit from both their labour and their vulnerability. (Pehkonen, Stolzmann & Vu 2025.)

To address these systemic abuses, in February 2024, the Finnish Government adopted a comprehensive Action Plan for the Prevention of Labour Exploitation, reflecting growing concern about the record number of cases of suspected abuse uncovered in recent years. The plan outlines 33 measures across multiple ministries, focusing on legislative reform, stricter monitoring of work-based residence permits, and improved inter-agency cooperation to identify and prevent exploitation. It seeks not only to enhance detection of abuses such as wage discrepancies and misclassification of workers but also to strengthen the position of victims through clearer distinctions between employment and entrepreneurship. Employers are also expected to

play a more active role, with new criteria introduced to promote ethical recruitment and corporate social responsibility. To ensure effective implementation, the plan invests in advisory services for migrant workers, makes punishments for exploiters more severe, and commits to multilingual information campaigns to raise awareness of rights and responsibilities. A government steering group, supported by social partners, will oversee the programme's rollout until 2027, making it a central instrument in Finland's strategy to promote fair conditions while expanding work-based immigration. (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment 2024.)

Additionally, Finland participates in the EU-funded ELECT THB project (2021-2023), which aims to improve law enforcement cooperation and training on trafficking for labour and sexual exploitation in Finland, Estonia, and Latvia. This project has facilitated cross-border collaboration and information sharing among law enforcement agencies, labour inspectors, and NGOs, leading to more effective identification and support for victims. (HEUNI n.d.) Furthermore, organizations like Victim Support Finland and the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare (THL) provide crucial support services, including legal assistance, psychological counselling, and safe housing for victims of trafficking. These efforts are complemented by public awareness campaigns and training programs for professionals to recognize and respond to signs of exploitation. While challenges remain, these initiatives represent significant steps toward combating human trafficking and protecting vulnerable workers in Finland and across Europe. (THL n.d.)

CONSUMER AWARENESS AND ETHICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Consumers play a crucial role in addressing exploitation in the nail salon industry. By making informed choices, clients can help reduce demand for services provided under abusive conditions. This includes selecting salons that comply with labour regulations, visibly display certifications or licenses, and treat workers fairly. Awareness campaigns in Europe, such as those run by the Samilia Foundation in Brussels, aim to educate the public about the hidden risks behind cheap nail services and provide avenues for reporting suspected exploitation (European Migration Network (EMN) Belgium 2023). Even simple actions, like asking about working conditions or supporting salons known for ethical practices, can create pressure on businesses to adopt fair labour standards. When consumers exercise ethical responsibility, they become part of a broader solution, helping to dismantle the systems that allow trafficking to persist in seemingly ordinary beauty services.

CONCLUSION

The evidence from across Europe makes clear that nail salons, often seen like harmless spaces of beauty, can conceal systems of labour exploitation and trafficking that thrive on legal loopholes, weak enforcement, and vulnerability of migrant workers. The Finnish case, with practices such as the selling of contracts and debt bondage, show how well-regulated welfare states are not immune. While initiatives like Finland's 2024 Action Plan and EU-wide efforts signal progress, combating exploitation in this sector requires more than policy, it demands vigilant enforcement, cross border cooperation, and informed consumers who recognize the hidden cost behind cheap beauty services. Only by addressing these structural and social drivers can Europe begin to dismantle the cycle of coercion and protect the rights of workers in the beauty industry.

AI was used for translating some sources and correcting some grammar for this artcile.

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6 Human trafficking in Slovenia: Detection, Investigation and Victim Protection

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THE AIM OF this article is to explore the phenomenon of human trafficking in Slovenia. The article presents the legal definitions of the trafficking-related exploitation along with its forms, such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, servitude, forced criminality, forced begging, trafficking human organs, tissue and blood, illegal adoptions, and forced child marriages.

Additionally, this article describes Slovenia as a transit hub and less so as a country of origin for human trafficking issues, with sexual exploitation being the most common form of offence. Analysis of Slovenian national statistics for the period 2010–2024 reveals low reporting rates and challenges that affect detection and prosecution of crimes related to human trafficking. The role of law enforcement, non-governmental organisations, and social services in addressing these trafficking-related challenges in Slovenia is stressed, while good practices like multi-agency victim support programmes and public awareness campaigns are described. In the conclusion, ongoing obstacles are identified and recommendations made concerning prevention, legal protection and systemic responses to human trafficking in Slovenia.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is a global form of organised crime based on the exploitation and abuse of individuals for financial gain. Perpetrators often take advantage of vulnerable victims, coercing them by way of deception, force or violence to engage in various forms of exploitation, such as sexual exploitation, forced labour, or other kinds of slavery (Klun and Frangež 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2022). International conventions define human trafficking as the recruitment, transporting, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons for the purpose of exploitation. The trafficking process entails for example coercion, abduction, fraud, abuse of power and victim's vulnerability, and the giving or receiving of payments to gain

control over the victim. Also, when analysing the possible cases of human trafficking, the victim's consent is not considered valid if it is obtained in prohibited ways.

In Slovenia, human trafficking is defined as a criminal offence in Article 113 of the Criminal Code (2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2023). Paragraph 1 of the article states that it is prohibited to purchase, take over, accommodate, transport, sell, hand over, or in any way handle another person; to recruit, exchange, or transfer control over them; or to act as an intermediary in such actions. The second and fifth paragraphs refer to special forms of the qualified criminal offence of human trafficking whereby the perpetrators use force, threats, kidnapping, deception, abuse their position, engage in other forms of coercion, are members of a criminal organisation that commits offences of trafficking, obtain large financial gains from committing the offence, or carry out the offence against a minor (2012, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2023; Klun and Frangež 2024).

Human trafficking encompasses numerous forms of exploitation (Caplan et al. 2009; Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–d; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC] 2022). These include:

1. Sexual exploitation – involving coercion into prostitution or other sexual services by way of force, threats, or exploitation of vulnerability
2. Forced labour and labour exploitation – individuals are compelled to work under threat of punishment for little or no pay, often in construction, hospitality, agriculture or industry
3. Servitude – victims are trapped in private households in exploitative situations where they perform labour and domestic work for little or no payment – and refers to disguised forms of servitude that appear voluntary but are, in reality, controlled and exploitative
4. Forced criminality – victims are coerced to commit theft, traffic illicit drugs, or perform other criminal activities
5. Forced begging – exploiting individuals to solicit money by begging under coercion or threats
6. Trafficking human organs, tissue and blood – this relates to both trafficking human organs, tissue and cells, and trafficking human beings for the purpose of organ removal
7. Child trafficking – referring to forced labour, forced begging, children being used in armed conflict, sexual exploitation, trafficking for human organs, tissue and blood, forced marriages, and illegal adoptions including cases of surrogacy.

Human trafficking often results from a complex interaction of factors such as poverty, unemployment, social exclusion, poor economic conditions, nearby armed conflict, and limited access to education in victims' countries of origin. Corruption, discrimination, marginalisation coupled with gender inequality add to the prevalence of this phenomenon (Klun and Frangež 2024). Victims typically have socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The most vulnerable groups include children, adolescents, women, migrants, refugees, and the unemployed (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–d).

HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN SLOVENIA

Slovenia is a transit hub and, to a smaller extent, a country of origin when it comes to human trafficking (Društvo Ključ - center za boj proti trgovanju z ljudmi 2022; Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025). As shown in Graph 1, the police recorded 409 criminal offences related to human trafficking between 2010 and 2024. While most offences were recorded in 2018 (71), the lowest figures were for 2010 and 2014, with just 3 cases each.

Figure 1. *Number of Offences of Human Trafficking in Slovenia in the Period 2010–2024 (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve n. d.–e; Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025)*

Between 2010 and 2023, 455 victims of human trafficking were identified in Slovenia. Among them, 90% were women, 9% were men, and 1% were children. Most victims originated from Ukraine, Serbia, Romania, the Dominican Republic, China, and Hungary. Slovenian-born individuals accounted for 6% of the victims. In the same period (2010–2023), 246 individuals were identified as suspects, and while 45% of them were indicted, just 26% were convicted. Sexual exploitation was involved in 90% of detected human trafficking cases between 2010 and 2022, 7% involved forced criminal activity, and 3% comprised other forms of exploitation, including forced labour, servitude, begging, and forced marriages (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–e; Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–f).

In Slovenia, the forms of human trafficking most detected are sexual exploitation and prostitution, followed by forced labour, servitude, forced criminality, forced begging, and forced child marriages. In the past 5 years, 10% of professional workers have held concerns that children could also be at risk of sexual exploitation (Kovač & Kos 2023). However, trafficking in human organs, tissue and blood has not yet been detected by the Slovenian police (Frangež & Bučar Ručman 2017; Kovač & Kos 2023).

DETECTION AND INVESTIGATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING

Human trafficking is most frequently detected as part of proactive police work given that victims rarely report the crime themselves (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2023). Several factors cause this underreporting, including a fear of the perpetrators, shame, trauma, distrust in institutions, and simply being unaware of their own victimisation (Farrell et al. 2019). The use of modern technology provides an extra barrier against detection. It allows traffickers greater anonymity, encrypted communication, broader operational reach, and the ability to control victims remotely. Technology as a tool is used for recruiting, advertising, extorting, surveillance, and the financial management of trafficking operations. In response, the police actively cooperate with the private sector and online platforms to identify cases, raise public awareness, and encourage reporting (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025).

Nongovernmental organisations (NGOs), social services, and other stakeholders also have a crucial role in investigations because they can provide essential information to law enforcement (Farrell et al. 2019). A major obstacle to prosecution remains the lack of sufficient evidence of such offences. Victims are vital for criminal proceedings, yet often refuse to cooperate, while witnesses are rare or may have an interest in concealing the victimisation (Pajón and Walsh 2018). When reports are made, they are generally submitted by neighbours or relatives, and only rarely by the victims themselves, who often wish to remain anonymous out of fear of retaliation (Frelih, 2017). Other reasons for not seeking help include threats, fear of being deported, and low trust in institutions (Markelj et al. 2022; Šalamon 2006).

It often proves challenging to identify victims of human trafficking due to the hidden nature of the crime and victims' limited awareness of their rights, foreign legal systems, and local languages (Clawson et al. 2009). To aid with recognition, the Slovenian Ministry of the Interior (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2016) developed four main indicators: general indicators (e.g., lack of knowledge of travel details or possession of forged documents); behavioural indicators (e.g., avoidance of eye contact, visible injuries, rehearsed responses); indicators specific to certain forms of trafficking (e.g., forced prostitution, labour exploitation, forced begging); and indicators for children (e.g., inappropriate behaviour for their age, lack of schooling,

Picture Credit: Freepik AI Image

absence of parental contact). Yet, identification and protection efforts are further complicated since victims often do not recognise themselves as such (Bučar Ručman and Frangež 2014).

Investigations into human trafficking rely on a mix of conventional and covert investigative measures, such as surveillance, tracking, wiretapping, house searches, and undercover operations (Frelih 2017; Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025). Investigators may pose as clients and visit locations suspected of exploitation. Sometimes, undercover roles as sex workers, hostesses, or massage therapists are taken on by female investigators (Pajnik and Kavčič 2007).

Victim and witness testimonies are essential for successful prosecution, yet generally rare. In some cases, witnesses may even seek to defend the accused during questioning, possibly out of intimidation or fear of consequences. Defendants many times deny the offences, shift the blame to the victims, or claim they are the target of revenge, a personal vendetta or were set up by the police. Co-defendants frequently deny involvement as well and in certain instances female co-defendants may be willing to present themselves as sex workers to avoid conviction (Pajnik and Kavčič 2007).

VICTIM PROTECTION IN SLOVENIA

In Slovenia, two ministries are responsible for providing care and assistance to victims of human trafficking: the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities, in cooperation with the NGOs Society Ključ – Centre for the fight against human trafficking, Slovenian Caritas, and Slovenian Philanthropy (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–b). Operating since 2003, there has also been the National Working Group for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. This group is responsible for preparing and implementing action plans, reporting to the national government, and supporting the national coordinator in formulating proposals to improve prevention and victim support measures (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–a).

A key starting point in providing support is that the individual identifies themselves as a victim, albeit this often does not happen without the intervention of the police or an NGO (Tiegl 2024). Initially, victims are placed in crisis accommodation, which may then transition into safe housing programmes and other programmes as required (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–b).

The main support programmes for victims of human trafficking include (Društvo Ključ - center za boj proti trgovanju z ljudmi, n. d.; Karitas, n. d.; Kovač 2019; Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–b; Tiegl 2024):

- **Crisis Accommodation** (*Slovenian Caritas*): which provides up to a 30-day stay in a safe environment for urgent protection. The comprehensive care for human trafficking victims includes accommodation, material aid, basic healthcare, psychosocial assistance, interpretation services, and help with returning to the country of origin.
- **Safe Accommodation** (*Society Ključ*): which provides a secure space for victims cooperating with the police. The comprehensive care for victims of human trafficking includes counselling, accompaniment to court or medical appointments, and weekly financial assistance. The programme also includes training for professionals who deal with such individuals.
- **(Re)integration of Victims** (*Society Ključ*): which supports victims' social reintegration through Slovenian language courses, education, job-seeking, and volunteering. Assistance also encompasses documentation support, housing assistance, and psychosocial care.

- **PATS Project** (*Society Ključ*): aimed at asylum seekers who are victims of human trafficking or sexual violence. It includes information provision, awareness-raising, and referral to appropriate support programmes.
- **Support for Persons in Prostitution** (*Society Ključ*): the programme targets individuals involved in prostitution, who might also be victims of trafficking. Support is offered in person or anonymously, and includes psychological support, health promotion, and assistance with exiting prostitution if desired.
- **Comprehensive Care – Municipality of Ljubljana (MOL)** *(Society Ključ*): short-term, 5-day crisis accommodation for individuals not yet officially recognised as victims but in urgent need of protection. The programme is funded by the City Municipality of Ljubljana.

Right Relationship Project (Society Ključ and partners): A partnership programme that connects several organisations (Legebitra, SOS Telephone Association for Women and Children – Victims of Violence, Public Institute Young Dragons, DrogArt, Iz principa organisation, Association for Power, Association for Nonviolent Communication). It is intended to educate young people about violence, recognise human trafficking, and strengthen their ability to act. It also includes mutual support between organisations in more complex cases.

Preventive activities also form a crucial part of Slovenia's comprehensive approach to tackling human trafficking. These efforts aim to raise awareness among both the public and at-risk groups who could become victims. Focus is placed on informing consumers and service users, especially when services may be performed by individuals subjected to forced labour or labour exploitation. The goal is to reduce demand for such services and thereby disrupt the exploitation chains involved. Professional training is another vital preventive measure, notably for public sector employees who might encounter cases of trafficking in the course of their work (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve, n. d.–c).

CONCLUSION

Human trafficking remains a complex and persistent form of organised crime that provides considerable challenges for national and international systems for prevention, detection, prosecution, and victim support. In Slovenia, the phenomenon appears in several forms, most prominently sexual exploitation (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025). Despite targeted efforts, Slovenia continues to grapple with low reporting rates, difficulties with identifying victims, and barriers to successful prosecution. Significant challenges remain, such as the identification of victims (that still relies heavily on institutional actors given that self-identification is rare), access to justice for victims, which is hindered by insufficient witness protection, complex procedures, and a general lack of awareness of victims' rights. Moreover, the overlap of gender, migration status, and poverty can often create multiple layers of marginalisation, making it harder for victims to access support and become reintegrated into society.

Slovenia has nevertheless adopted several good practices, particularly in victim support. Between 2015 and 2023, several public awareness campaigns were implemented in the country to inform the public and vulnerable groups about the dangers of human trafficking. Other aims of doing this were to lower the demand for exploitative services and encourage the reporting of suspected cases. The campaigns were carried out by the Ministry of the Interior, the Police, Society Ključ, Slovenian Philanthropy, the International Organisation

for Migration, and other organisations. Activities included posters, brochures, short films, social media content, public events, and educational workshops (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025). One such campaign was the 2015 traveling exhibition entitled "My dreams" prepared by Society Ključ, which displayed portraits of Roma children and youth, toured several Slovenian cities and academic institutions, and was intended to raise awareness about human rights violations in certain Roma communities, including forced marriages, sexual abuse, labour exploitation, and human trafficking (Frangež 2024).

Alongside awareness-raising efforts, training sessions were provided for police officers, prosecutors, judges, social workers, labour inspectors, healthcare professionals, consular staff, and NGOs. These trainings concentrated on identifying victims, understanding the legal framework, and recognising indicators of human trafficking, all with the aim of improving early detection and strengthening support mechanisms (Ministrstvo za notranje zadeve 2025). In the future, Slovenia's response would benefit from stronger cross-border cooperation, further digital capacity-building for investigators, increased investment in victim-centred legal reforms, and the bolstering of local-level prevention networks. Providing NGOs and support programmes with sustainable funding is also critical for ensuring continuity and effectiveness. Finally, it is imperative to shift public perception and promote a broader understanding of human trafficking as a systemic issue rather than mere isolated criminal events.

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7 Bridging the Digital Divide: Challenges and Opportunities for Migrants in Europe

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THIS ARTICLE WAS developed within the framework of the European project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair), which promotes diversity, inclusion, and active participation through digital storytelling. One of the central themes addressed by JeS is the digital divide affecting migrants and other vulnerable groups, and how this inequality impacts access to rights, services, and education. Through research, training, and community engagement, JeS encourages the creation of inclusive narratives and the sharing of experiences that reflect Europe's social and cultural pluralism. In this context, the present article contributes to the project's objectives by exploring the barriers and opportunities related to digital inclusion in migrant populations, and by highlighting the importance of equitable digital access as a prerequisite for full participation in society.

THE DIGITAL GAP

The digital gap, also known as the digital divide, refers to unequal access to digital technologies and skills among different groups. This gap is not just about technology, but also about opportunity and inclusion: those without digital access or literacy face growing barriers to education, employment, and public services, leaving them at risk of social exclusion (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) n.d.).

Migrants are among the populations most affected, often encountering digital exclusion due to factors such as limited skills, language barriers or inadequate connectivity. For migrant communities, the implications of this digital gap are profound. Digital services can greatly facilitate migrants' social and economic integration, but only if these technologies are accessible to all, otherwise digitalisation may deepen existing inequalities (Yilmaz 2023).

Indeed, humanitarian organisations now frame digital inclusion as a fundamental human right and an essential step for migrants to exercise their rights and participate fully in modern society (Alencar 2023).

Bridging the divide is therefore crucial to uphold principles of equity, foster social inclusion by enabling active participation, and ensure diverse communities are not left behind in the digital age.

Evidence from Spain illustrates both the potential benefits and the risks of the digital divide in a migrant context. According to Accem (Spain), digital tools can foster the inclusion of migrants by helping to reduce social inequalities. At the same time, it warned that migrants lacking digital access or skills may become further marginalised, facing greater exposure to online misinformation, discrimination, and social isolation (Domínguez & Tejeda 2018). Addressing the digital gap in migrant populations is thus not only a matter of technological advancement, but a pressing social imperative to ensure all members of society can exercise their rights and integrate fully into an increasingly digital world.

DIGITAL DIVIDE AND DIGITAL LITERACY

The digital divide refers to the gap between those who have access to digital technologies and the internet and those who do not, as well as disparities in the skills needed to use these technologies effectively (UNESCO n.d. -b).

It encompasses differences in access (availability of devices and connectivity) and in usage or skills, often described as first- and second-level digital divides, which lead to unequal outcomes (a third-level divide in opportunities and benefits) (Van Deursen & Van Dijk 2019). Socio-economic factors such as income, education, gender, age, and migratory status often stratify the digital divide (UNESCO n.d. -b).

Digital literacy is a key concept closely tied to the divide. UNESCO defines digital literacy as the confident and critical use of a full range of digital technologies for information, communication and basic problem-solving, underpinned by basic ICT skills like using computers to retrieve, evaluate, and communicate information (UNESCO n.d. -a). In practice, digital literacy denotes the ability not just to access technology, but to use it meaningfully, from navigating online services to creating and sharing content safely. Low digital literacy exacerbates the digital divide by limiting individuals' capacity to benefit from online resources. For example, as of the early 2020s only about 56% of Europeans possessed at least basic digital skills, prompting EU targets to raise this to 80% by (2030 European Parliament 2022). This shortfall highlights the importance of strengthening digital literacy to foster inclusion.

DIGITAL INCLUSION AND DIGITAL RIGHTS

Digital inclusion denotes the policies and efforts aimed at closing these gaps so that everyone can participate in the digital society. It involves ensuring equitable access to affordable internet, devices, digital skills training, and accessible online services for all individuals, especially marginalized groups.

The EU's Digital Economy and Society Index (DESI) monitor such factors (connectivity, skills, online services) to guide inclusion efforts. Digital rights are the human rights that apply in the digital context, encompassing rights such as privacy, freedom of expression, access to information, and non-discrimination online (Muller 2025.; Gobierno de España 2021). These rights frame the normative commitment to an inclusive digital society.

At the European level, the European Declaration on Digital Rights and Principles (European Union 2023) underlines that everyone should benefit from the digital transformation and that fundamental rights must be upheld online. Likewise, Spain's Digital Rights Charter (2021) affirms principles like the right of access to the

Picture Credit: Freepik

Internet and universal accessibility in digital environments and calls for public policies to eliminate digital gaps across all social groups (Gobierno de España 2021).

Such legal and institutional frameworks (e.g. EU data protection laws, universal service obligations, digital education strategies) provide a structural approach to digital inclusion and protect individuals' rights in the information society. Importantly, they recognise that bridging the divide is not only about infrastructure or economics, but also about upholding rights and agency in the digital age.

MIGRANT POPULATIONS AND STRUCTURAL DIGITAL EXCLUSION IN EUROPE

Applying these concepts to migrant populations in Europe reveals a distinctly structural and intersectional nature of digital exclusion. Migrants, including refugees and other people on the move, often face compounding barriers to digital access.

Structural factors such as language barriers, recognition of qualifications, legal status, and socio-economic precarity can limit migrants' access to devices, connectivity, and formal digital training. Studies indicate that many migrants experience a persistent digital divide: for instance, lacking affordable internet (due to expensive SIM cards or limited infrastructure) and missing out on online services that could aid their integration (Fung, Hung et al. 2025).

These challenges are frequently intersectional. Migrant women, for example, may confront a double digital gap, impeded by both gender inequalities and their migratory status. Research has found that patriarchal norms and ICT cultures can especially hamper migrant women's digital access and skills, undermining their ability to use e-services and hindering integration outcomes (Fung, Hung et al. 2025).

Similarly, older migrants or those with lower education levels might struggle disproportionately with digital tools, compounding their social exclusion. Crucially, digital exclusion of migrants is not due to a lack of interest or effort on their part, but arises from structural inequalities in education, language support, and access to resources. Recognizing this, international organisations stress the need for targeted inclusion measures, the International Organization for Migration, for instance, emphasizes that access to technology is essential for migrants' safety, empowerment and full participation in society. In practice, bridging the gap for migrants involves culturally and linguistically tailored initiatives: digital literacy workshops, community internet access points, and inclusive e-government services can all help mitigate the migrant digital divide (European Commission 2022).

Within Europe, migrant communities often have lower digital inclusion indicators than native-born populations, reflecting the wider socio-economic divides. Spain provides a pertinent case study (European Commission 2022).

While Spain performs above the EU average on some digital inclusion metrics (with 64% of people having at least basic digital skills, versus 54% EU-wide) it still means over one-third of the population lacks basic skills (European Commission 2022), a segment that disproportionately includes migrants and other vulnerable groups. In response, Spanish authorities have explicitly prioritized digital inclusion in national strategies. The Spanish Digital Rights Charter's recognition of a right to internet access and commitment to closing accessibility gaps is one example (Gobierno de España 2021). Additionally, Spain's Recovery and Resilience Plan invest heavily in digital skills training and infrastructure, which can benefit migrant integration by improving access to online education, e-health, and e-government services (European Commission 2022).

In sum, ensuring digital inclusion for migrants in Spain and across Europe requires a structural approach: addressing affordability and infrastructure, providing education in digital skills (with attention to language and cultural barriers), and safeguarding digital rights. By embedding the principles of digital divide, literacy, inclusion, and rights into migrant integration policies, European countries can work towards narrowing the digital gap and enabling migrants to fully participate in the digital society on an equal footing (European Parliament 2022).

PARTICIPATORY INSIGHTS: MIGRANT AND PRACTITIONER VOICES FROM THE JES PROJECT IN SPAIN

As part of the JeS project, INCOMA carried out a participatory activity in Spain to explore the real-life implications of the digital divide through qualitative methods. This initiative formed part of Work Package 3 (WP3) and was designed to collect lived experiences and professional insights by engaging directly with migrants and the professionals who support them.

Between May and September 2024, INCOMA organised six workshops and four in-depth interviews, reaching a total of 67 participants, including migrants, refugees, social workers, volunteers, educators, and NGO professionals. The primary methodology employed was the story circle Deardorff (2020), a collaborative format that fosters trust and reflection through shared narrative construction. The sessions took place in various formats (face-to-face, online, and hybrid) to maximise accessibility and adapt to participant needs.

Participants discussed their personal or professional encounters with digital inequality, highlighting common barriers such as lack of access to equipment, insufficient digital skills, and linguistic or bureaucratic challenges when interacting with public e-services. Migrants frequently described feelings of exclusion and

dependency, particularly when required to navigate administrative platforms or online education without adequate support. Professionals, in turn, acknowledged that although digital needs are often overlooked, they are increasingly central to successful integration.

The feedback gathered from each workshop underlined the value of this collective exercise. Migrants reported feeling seen, validated, and less alone in their struggles, while practitioners found it eye-opening to consider digital inclusion as a core need, not a secondary one. Several expressed interest in applying story-based participatory methods in their own work moving forward.

The 22 anonymised stories collected have since contributed to both the analytical basis of the JeS project and the broader reflection on how policy, education, and social services can better respond to digital exclusion. They illustrate the diversity of migrant experiences, while also exposing structural patterns, especially the compounding effects of digital exclusion when combined with other vulnerabilities like age, gender or residence status.

This field-based activity not only enriched the research dimensions of the project but also reinforced its core commitment: to centre the voices of those most affected by the digital divide and ensure their perspectives shape inclusive, informed solutions.

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Erasmus+ JeS Final Seminar at Merkki Museum, Helsinki. 2.-3.12.2025.
Picture Credit: Tiina Wikström

Erasmus+ Project JeS:
Human Rights Solutions

8 Experiencing Inclusive and Diverse Approaches at UCLL

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THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES the underrepresentation of students with a migration background and the inclusive policy in the teacher training program at UCLL (University Colleges Leuven-Limburg). It highlights the inclusive and diverse approaches implemented by the institution, identifies existing challenges, and presents recommendations for improvement. The findings are based on interviews, surveys, and institutional data collected during a practice-based explorative research project.

DIVERSITY OF EDUCATIONAL LANDSCAPE IN BELGIUM

There is a noticeable underrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds in teacher education program in Belgium, which is in marked contrast to society in general and to classes in primary and secondary education. The education system in Belgium is characterized by ethnic disproportionality of the ethnic background of the teaching staff and the profile of the pupils. This lack of representation creates a distorted image of the educational landscape and raises important questions about inclusion, representation, and preparedness for diverse teaching environments.

Teachers serve as role models and having educators from various cultural and religious backgrounds can enrich students' perspectives, foster intercultural understanding, and enhance motivation and self-confidence—especially when students see themselves reflected in their teachers. Recent research shows that teachers from underrepresented groups can enrich learning environments through their diverse identities and experiences. However, the dominant homogeneity and majority-oriented school cultures hinder genuine inclusion, highlighting the need to improve diversity within the teaching workforce. (Heinz, Daid, & Keane 2025). This article presents findings from an explorative practice-based research project conducted at UCLL. Diversity in education is essential for equitable learning opportunities. However, the underrepresentation

of students with migration backgrounds in teacher training program raises concerns about inclusivity and representation. UCLL aims to address these issues through targeted support and inclusive policies (Myria 2023; UC Leuven-Limburg 2025).

EXPLORING THE PRESENCE OF STUDENTS WITH A MIGRATION BACKGROUND

To gain insight into the representation and academic progression of students with a migration background in the teacher training program at UCLL, data were obtained from the institution's internal data service. This data spans several academic years and includes self-reported information from students regarding their migration background, collected via pre-enrolment questionnaires. It is important to note that these figures are indicative rather than definitive, as they rely on voluntary self-identification and are not based on verified demographic records.

A notable trend is the steady increase in the number of students with a migration background. In 2018, only 38 such students attended at the Heverlee campus, compared to 754 Belgian students. By the 2023–2024 academic year, this number had risen to 146 students with a migration background, alongside 1,537 Belgian students. The Diepenbeek campus shows even higher numbers, with 234 students with a migration background versus 2,813 Belgian students. According to the former head of the BASO teacher training program and current member of the data team, this discrepancy is partly due to Diepenbeek offering program such as Islamic education, mechanics, and electrical engineering, which tend to attract more diverse student populations.*

Tracking graduation rates presents additional complexity. Many students with a migration background do not complete their studies within the standard three-year timeframe. In most academic years, the average time to graduation exceeds three years. The COVID-19 pandemic further disrupted academic progression, with a significant number of students discontinuing their studies. In the 2022–2023 academic year, the average time to graduation dropped to 2.2 years, likely reflecting increased dropout rates rather than accelerated completion.

For example, of the 38 students with a migration background who enrolled in 2018–2019, only 17 had graduated three years later. While some may have completed their studies in subsequent years, the available data do not provide conclusive follow-up. It is confirmed, however, that 40 students from that cohort eventually obtained their diploma, indicating a relatively high attrition rate.

In comparison, Belgian students generally complete their studies within the expected timeframe, although they too experienced setbacks during the pandemic years. Since 2018, a total of 743 students with a migration background have entered the teacher training program. Of these, only 82 have graduated to date. Excluding those who are still enrolled and not yet eligible to graduate, 335 students remain in the pool of potential graduates. This means that only 24.5% of these students have completed the program. The low graduation rate suggests that a significant number of students have discontinued their studies, while a smaller portion continues to work toward completion.

These findings underscore the need for targeted support strategies and structural adjustments to improve retention and success rates among students with a migration background. Enhanced language support, flexible study pathways, and culturally responsive teaching practices may contribute to more equitable outcomes.

* The teacher training program at UCLL (University College Leuven-Limburg) are offered on several campuses, including Heverlee (Leuven), Diepenbeek, and Diest.

INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT AND CHALLENGES

All prospective students must meet specific language requirements. For teacher education program in early childhood, primary, and secondary education, UCLL accepts the ITNA (Inter-university Test of Dutch for Non-Native Speakers) and the CNaVT (Certificate of Dutch as a Foreign Language). These tests assess language proficiency in domains relevant to academic and professional contexts. To further support linguistic integration, UCLL offers a preparatory year in collaboration with Hasselt University and VDAB. This program includes intensive Dutch language instruction, study skills training, and orientation to the Belgian education system. However, access is conditional on holding a secondary school diploma from the country of origin and passing selection procedures.

In terms of financial support, UCLL provides general assistance such as flexible payment plans and Stuvo financial aid, which is granted after a thorough assessment of the student's socio-economic situation. Students who combine studies with family responsibilities benefit from the Bologna system, which allows retention of study credits during interruptions. Nonetheless, the recognition of foreign diplomas remains a significant barrier, and balancing academic life with family obligations continues to be a challenge for many.

Academic support is available to all students and includes trajectory coaching, study coaching, and advisory services. These services help students plan their academic paths, develop study skills, and make informed choices about their education. While language support is offered through workshops and the *language bureau* , it is not specifically tailored to the needs of students with a migration background—despite language being one of the most significant challenges for this group.

Moreover, program-specific adaptations are more visible in the early childhood education program, which has a higher proportion of students with a migration background. This program has adjusted its didactic approach to better support multilingual learners and employs a buddy system during internships, fostering peer support and inclusion.

From a pedagogical perspective, students emphasize the importance of empathetic educators and teaching methods that promote connection and cultural responsiveness. Inclusive didactics and relational approaches are seen as essential for creating a supportive learning environment.

In terms of social support, initiatives include efforts to foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds. UCLL organizes intercultural dialogues to enhance connection. Weekend trips and collaborations with student associations provide informal spaces for (intercultural) exchange, helping students integrate into the broader student community. Additionally, certain courses focus on cultural awareness, social participation, and integration, aiming to prepare future teachers for diverse classroom environments.

Psychological support is also available to all students through general services, including counselling and psychosocial assistance. However, these services are not specifically adapted to the unique challenges faced by students with a migration background. Many of these students encounter discrimination during internships or housing searches, which can negatively impact their mental health and sense of safety. Despite the availability of support, the lack of targeted psychological services means that some students' needs remain unmet.

In terms of institutional diversity, UCLL's staff and student population remain predominantly of Flemish origin. The high language requirements for admission pose a significant barrier to entry for many qualified individuals with a migration background. While the institution is generally perceived as open and welcoming, the absence of a comprehensive diversity policy limits the effectiveness of current efforts. Diversity-related

initiatives are often driven by individual staff members rather than embedded in a structural, campus-wide strategy.

Despite these efforts, several challenges remain. Language requirements continue to act as a barrier to entry, especially for students who are still acquiring Dutch. Financial constraints and the lack of tailored support for students with family responsibilities hinder academic success. Moreover, the limited diversity among faculty and the absence of structural, targeted language support contribute to feelings of exclusion. Students also report a lack of representation and recognition within peer groups and teaching staff, which affects their sense of belonging and motivation.

STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND SURVEY INSIGHTS

To better understand the needs and experiences of students with a migration background, a survey was conducted among 84 students enrolled in various teacher education tracks at UCLL.

The survey revealed a group of future educators, with most respondents aged between 21 and 24. Gender distribution showed that 58.3% of participants identified as female and 41.7% as male, offering insight into the demographic composition of the student population—an important factor when designing targeted support measures.

While 85.7% of respondents were born in Belgium, the remaining participants represented a wide range of migration backgrounds. Specifically, 4.8% had origins in Western Europe, 3.6% in Eastern Europe, 4.8% in

JeS Multisensory Story Sharing Week Event at Laurea in November 2024.
Picture Credit: JeS Project Image Bank

North Africa, 3.6% in Latin America, and 1.2% each in Asia and Southern Europe. This diversity highlights the importance of a teacher training program that not only acknowledges the unique experiences of students with a migration background but also responds to their varied needs through inclusive practices.

When asked about their sense of belonging within the program, 80.3% reported feeling at home, while 19.7% expressed a need for greater inclusion and connection. This underscores the importance of cultivating a learning environment where all students feel welcomed, supported, and valued.

Despite these positive indicators, several challenges persist. Financial constraints and the lack of tailored support for students with family responsibilities hinder academic success. Moreover, the limited diversity among faculty and the absence of structural, targeted language support contribute to feelings of exclusion. Students also report a lack of representation and recognition within peer groups and teaching staff, which affects their sense of belonging and motivation.

To foster a more inclusive learning environment, UCLL must address these systemic issues through sustained policy efforts, improved communication, and culturally responsive practices. This includes developing a comprehensive diversity strategy, recruiting a more diverse faculty, adapting language support to meet specific needs, and ensuring that all students—regardless of background—feel seen, supported, and empowered throughout their academic journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance inclusivity within its teacher training program, UCLL should adopt a comprehensive and structural diversity policy that actively promotes cultural representation in both teaching materials and faculty composition. Strengthening language support and lowering entry barriers would make the program more accessible to students still acquiring Dutch. Additionally, fostering intercultural dialogue and peer support initiatives can help build a stronger sense of community among students. Transparent communication about available support services is essential to ensure that all students are aware of the resources at their disposal. Finally, implementing a clear and accessible reporting system for discrimination would contribute to a safer and more equitable learning environment for everyone.

Inclusive education at UCLL is a shared responsibility. While current initiatives show promise, structural changes and active engagement from all stakeholders are necessary to create a truly inclusive learning environment. Recognizing and valuing the diverse backgrounds of students enriches the educational experience and prepares future educators for a multicultural society.

AI has been used in this article to enhance the quality of translation and textual fluency.

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JeS Multisensory Story Sharing Week Event at Laurea in November 2024.
Picture Credit: JeS Project Image Bank

9 Stories of Belonging in the Multisensory Space

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JeS PROJECT AIMS to pilot different ways of promoting human rights at various forums, as well as at online and on-site educational events. This article addresses the sense of belonging and how it can be strengthened using the multisensory space method. The multisensory method, at Laurea so called "Aistien" method, aims to encourage people from different backgrounds to engage with one another, fostering an understanding and appreciation of each other's backgrounds, values, and ideas. The article describes a JeS project workshop that took place at Laurea in November 2024. A total of 18 participants from the project partner organisation attended the three-day workshop using Aistien method, including teachers, project workers, volunteers, and students. They came from five European countries and represented six partner organisations. Laurea's students participate in part of this workshop online.

The workshop aimed to facilitate discussion on human rights and belonging using the Multisensory Space Method. This article describes how the workshop was organised and evaluates how the method promotes human rights, belonging and mutual understanding. For Laurea, developing the method and organising part of the workshop as a hybrid event by including online students was a new experience, and the article discusses this.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELONG?

Belonging is a multidimensional concept involving social, imagined and material aspects. It is shaped by everyday practices, rituals and institutional structures. On the one hand, belonging includes a person's intimate feelings of being 'at home'; on the other hand, it encompasses the political struggles over who is allowed to belong. (Barglowski & Bonfert 2021). Belonging can be described as a feeling of ease in social

situations. It means being part of a larger group that values, respects and cares for you, and to which you feel you can contribute. You are welcomed, accepted and heard. (Cohen 2022).

The concept of belonging acknowledges the possibility of hybrid identities and multiple forms of solidarity, as people can feel a sense of belonging in several 'fields' or groups simultaneously (May 2013). However, the rapid changes in society and the environment may cause a sense of not belonging (May 2011). This can happen either when a person moves from one country to another, or when the local community changes rapidly, for example because of migration.

The feeling of belonging is not only a result of personal decision but also involves societal perspectives: political struggles over who is allowed to belong (Barglowski & Bonfert 2023). Rapid societal change affects both migrants and the locals. It affects migrants' integration into their new host society, but it also creates a new context for belonging for the local people. For this reason, encounters and discussions involving individuals both within minorities and between locals and minorities, about the sense of community are important.

Social recognition is crucial for a sense of belonging. This recognition is needed both as individuals and as groups. This involves recognising and valuing the various subcultures and groups within society. As members of these groups, we need to experience appreciation for the group as a whole, rather than just for ourselves as individuals. (Mönkkönen et al. 2023).

LOCAL COMMUNITIES AND A SENSE OF BELONGING

Local environments, such as schools, neighbourhoods and community organisations, play a crucial role in shaping the sense of belonging experienced by young migrants. Depending on how inclusive and responsive they are, these spaces can either support belonging or reinforce exclusion.

The study found that immigrants' strong attachment to their own ethnic group often supports their integration into the local culture (Kemppainen et al. 2020). This is why migrant communities and NGOs play a significant role: they help migrants feel "at home" by offering them community, cultural continuity, and supportive relationships. For those facing exclusion or discrimination, migrant communities become alternative spaces of belonging. Migrant organisations enable migrants to maintain transnational ties while integrating into the host society, helping them to negotiate complex identities and build self-confidence. For second-generation migrants in particular, migrant communities support cultural expression and social participation. (Barglowski & Bonfert 2021).

LAUREA'S MULTISENSORY ROOM

The JeS workshop took place in Laurea's 'Aistien' multisensory room. Built in one of Laurea's classrooms, the space has been in use since 2009. Its original purpose was to bring together people from different backgrounds. The idea behind the 'Aistien' multisensory space is to provide a place where individuals from different cultures and backgrounds can meet, discuss, and learn about their own cultures, as well as those of others. The multisensory elements are intended to create a homely atmosphere. Users can customise the space to their liking using the different elements.

The space can be used in two different ways. First the "ready-made space", where all the senses are engaged, is a familiar, safe space that inspires encounters. The space helps people forget the outside world

and focus on a theme or conversation. It can also be a way to visit another time or place. Such a ready-made space can be used for intercultural encounters. Using different senses is connected to emotions, which play an important role in intercultural learning (Jokikokko & Uitto 2017). The cozy and positive atmosphere supports learning (Marangell et al. 2018).

However, in most cases, the most important thing is the process in which a small group builds a space to talk about something important to them, such as their own background and culture. Creating the space together as a group is a positive way to talk about cultural backgrounds and identity. (The multisensory Space). In this process groups can collectively explore how they perceive themselves within the majority culture and as representatives of their own culture. This process can empower immigrant groups to fulfil their role in supporting their group members and maintaining the cultural continuum.

JES MULTISENSORY SPACE WORKSHOP AT LAUREA

The JeS project workshop took place at Laurea in November 2024. The workshop focused on human rights, particularly the right to a home and a sense of belonging. The aim was to give workshop participants an experience of how the 'Aistien' multisensory method promotes a sense of community and belonging. A total of 18 participants from the project partner organisations were present. Each partner organisation sent a group of three to four participants, including teachers, project workers, volunteers and students. The group usually consists of one actual project member and then students or volunteers. The participants represented different nationalities, including volunteers with an immigrant background. Hearing their stories was particularly meaningful in terms of the workshop's objectives.

Two advanced tasks were set for the workshop. One involved bringing a picture of a place that represented one's sense of belonging. The other was a group task related to human rights and belonging. Each participating group prepared a multisensory space from the perspective of human rights and belonging. This could relate to a specific group, theme, or viewpoint. What does home mean to a refugee, an immigrant child or a migrant worker? Where do they feel they belong? What provides them with safety?

On the first day, we shared personal stories about belonging. The personal stories were told and enlivened only with one picture projected onto the walls. Through these stories, we took a brief tour of beautiful landscapes, from Finnish forests to mountains and even the sky. These different places and small moments, such as a happy dog welcoming you home, symbolised what belonging or being at home means to different people.

A variety of activities and experiences were on offer on the second day. The participating groups presented their prepared environments. We were delighted to visit these spaces. The topic of belonging and feeling at home was approached in a variety of ways. We heard the stories of young immigrants collected in Belgium using the photovoice method. Photovoice is a participatory action research method which enables participants to capture their lived experiences and express their viewpoints through photographs. One group gave us a multisensory yet fact-based presentation on human trafficking. Another presentation compared the situations of migrants and tourists. They asked: why are tourists welcomed so warmly, but migrants aren't? We also heard someone's story about their long experience of living in Europe as a migrant, as well as their experiences of homesickness and the evolving sense of belonging. We also had the opportunity to drink tea together and hear stories from young women about settling into life in a new country.

JeS Multisensory Story Sharing Week Event at Laurea Multisensory Space in November 2024. Picture Credit: Minttu Räty

There were many stories in a short space of time… It was a wonderful, emotional day. However, the schedule was tight. Although the Multisensory Space could easily be adapted to support the different stories, it would have been great to stay longer and discuss each topic in more depth. After such a long day, we needed some fresh air and a walk. All the workshop participants went to Helsinki together. The evening walk included a task where the participants had to take pictures on the theme of 'belonging to Finnish society'.

On the third day, we worked together as one large group to quickly build the 'Helsinki' space. The photos from the previous day were compiled into a single presentation and projected on-to all the walls, allowing us to enjoy a wonderful virtual tour of Helsinki. Although the theme of belonging was not particularly evident, the main idea was to create the space together as a group in a very short time. Then we had the opportunity to relax in the space we had created. The space was open to Laurea students, but unfortunately, we had no additional visitors. However, we were happy as a group to share our experiences of the week.

LAUREA STUDENT PARTICIPATION

In addition to the on-site participants, a group of students from Laurea joined the workshop for part of the time. These students were studying the Intercultural and Multiprofessional Competencies course, which was being taught online by project manager and senior lecturer Tiina Wikström. In total, there were about 40 students, including many exchange students and students with an immigrant background.

Initially, students shared their stories of belonging on the Padlet online platform. They participated in the first day of the JeS workshop via Zoom. In the multisensory space, we could also see the pictures they shared through a Zoom meeting on one wall. As well as the pictures, the Zoom meeting participants could be seen on one wall. The stories were similar to the previous ones. A sense of belonging was represented by pictures of family and friends. This also meant enjoying the beautiful landscape around their homes. However, in some stories, the focus was on other senses. This included touch when walking in the sand. Or taste when eating together.

Students familiarised themselves with the online materials about the multisensory method and wrote some reflections on Padlet. They perceived the Multisensory Space Method as a versatile and impactful tool for their studies and future professional work. Many students noted that engaging all the senses — sight, sound, touch, smell and taste — aids understanding and retention of complex concepts. An immersive environment helps supporting long-term memory and concentration.

The students suggested that the space could be used to reduce stress by providing calming sensory stimuli, such as music, lighting and tactile materials. In workplaces, the space could promote well-being. Students also suggested ways in which the space could be used for client work, such as building trust and emotional safety, particularly with vulnerable groups. It could be used to create engaging, inclusive group settings that foster openness and creativity. You could also use multisensory tools to explain health conditions and treatments to patients. Students value the potential of these tools to improve communication, understanding and inclusion.

LESSONS LEARNED

Feedback from both workshop participants and online students about the workshop was positive. The multisensory approach was noted as a powerful tool for promoting intercultural understanding and human rights education. Many participants highlighted that the workshop had enhanced their ability to relate to diverse perspectives. Next, we summarise the main findings presented to the funder in an unpublished report on the Multisensory Space Workshop.

Most participants found the Multisensory Space content and methodology very useful or significantly impactful. The workshop was praised for being culturally enriching and emotionally impactful, and participants expressed gratitude for others sharing personal stories. Participants reported gaining new insights, such as a deeper understanding of cultural differences and shared human experiences, as well as a deeper appreciation of personal stories and experiences. This fostered meaningful connections and empathy. (Naranjo 2024.)

The workshop also received critical feedback and suggestions for improvement. First, there was too much content for the time available. More time should be allowed for discussions, emotional processing and creating a multisensory space. (Naranjo 2024.)

Although piloting the hybrid workshop was enriching, it also raised some critical viewpoints. The workshop felt less intimate and cozy; the online voices of teachers and students were somewhat like 'sounds from outer space'. If we want confidential, homely, and considerate sharing of stories, this cannot be achieved with such a large group. Based on this experience, it was also found not to work in the best possible way in a hybrid format. However, students participating in the online teaching were very satisfied. Sharing stories via Padlet and virtual meetings, as the students did, seems successful. (Naranjo 2024.)

CONCLUSION

The Multisensory Space workshop provided an emotionally evocative environment in which to explore the theme of belonging. Participants were encouraged to engage with personal storytelling and intercultural dialogue. The method was found to be particularly efficacious in engendering empathy and mutual recognition.

The workshop and the stories of immigrants about where they belong and what their home is sparked a lot of thoughts. It was touching to hear how young immigrants had built their own community in their new homeland. How could we support them in building this sense of belonging? On the one hand, belonging to the local community, on the other hand, belonging to their own ethnic community. It also raised the question of how we together can create a new sense of community and belonging in educational institutions, local communities, and work-places. This is a process that requires community members to meet and listen to each other.

Beyond the immediate context of the workshop, the approach of the Multisensory Space method shows promise for broader applications in education, community development, and integration work. It has been demonstrated to offer an effective means of establishing emotionally safe environments in which individuals are empowered to disclose aspects of their identity, engage in the process of establishing a sense of belonging, and initiate the construction of connections that transcend geographical and cultural boundaries.

Whilst the hybrid format facilitated greater participation, it also presented challenges to intimacy and emotional depth. The utilization of this hybrid method could prove advantageous in the promotion of the method and the providing of pre-information regarding the onsite workshop. However, based on this experience, the hybrid model cannot be recommended as an environment for confidential discussions that promote community spirit.

The workshop served as a reminder that belonging is not a static state, but an ongoing process that can be fostered by sharing narratives and being willing to listen and be heard.

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10 Bridging the Gap Between Reality and Narrative

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The Erasmus project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair) has focused on making different human rights stories and narratives of less heard voices visible and included in the European shared narrative. Many of such stories, often narrated by refugees and migrants, also frequently involve various forms of trauma and thus serve as a reminder for the need of a robust support system for individuals in need. Individuals with a migratory background may require different forms of assistance, such as health care and social support, legal aid, and psychological counselling. Equally important is the necessity for active, attentive, and empathetic listening of their personal stories. This reflection also involves asking pivotal questions: What lessons can be drawn from these experiences? How can they be utilized effectively? Who benefits from this sharing, and for what ultimate purpose?

This blog discusses the themes of story dynamics, narrating trauma, affective knowledge as well as non-formal education as a site of narrative reconfiguration.

DYNAMICS OF STORIES

Stories can be conveyed through a multitude of mediums, including spoken words, written accounts, photographs, and visual art. This multifaceted approach to storytelling is particularly prevalent in the realm of humanitarian communication, especially when reflecting on significant historical events that have shaped our collective consciousness. However, a critical consideration arises: can those who have historically governed the narratives of the past, those who effectively "colonize history", also exert control over the lens through which these stories are viewed today? This question challenges us to consider the implications of perspective and power in storytelling, urging a more thoughtful and inclusive dialogue around the experiences being shared.

On the international stage, as we analyse the complex dynamics that connect one nation to another, it has become increasingly evident that our perception often implies that some lives hold greater value than others. This stark realization stems not only from an examination of the starkly differing living conditions that contribute to diverse levels of well-being across the globe but also, and perhaps more significantly, from the disparate ways in which traumatic experiences (e.g. migratory path, violence, war, famine, etc.) of individuals are acknowledged and reported in the media. When the viewer encounters evidence of suffering predominantly through mainstream information channels, the access is predicated on the assumption that prior to the viewer's encounter, someone has made a conscious, culture-aware decision about which images and narratives to disseminate to the public.

Studies across decades show that the selection process reflects a calculated prudence rooted in prevailing societal norms and audience expectations. In a thought-provoking, albeit concise, comparison of public reactions to the Korean War vis-à-vis the Vietnam War, Sontag (2023) highlighted the role ideologies play in media representation by stating how, if there was ideologically no room for the photographs, the public did not see them. She pointed out that the media refrained from presenting images that could humanize the adversary during the Korean conflict, unlike the efforts by such photographers as Felix Greene and Man Ribaud, who sought to portray the human experience in Hanoi. This selective representation was further compounded by the media's alignment with the prevailing narrative that characterized the Korean War for many as a fierce colonial struggle, showcasing how societal ideologies significantly shape the portrayal and reception of conflict narratives.

The portrayal of these tragic narratives, often presented as detached journalistic testimonies, has therefore two critical implications. Firstly, the depiction of suffering frequently seems to belong to an 'other' zone, locations remote and unfamiliar, almost insurmountable for those in the West to grasp. Secondly, the emotional distance constructed between the realities of suffering in these zones and the comforting sphere of Western security is stark. This relationship is manifested in a manner that often strips the narrative of any deep emotional resonance.

NARRATING TRAUMA: VOICE AND MEDIATION

Trauma inherently defies complete articulation, as it encompasses complex experiences that are often laden with emotional and psychological weight. Events such as forced migration, systemic violence, or profound personal loss frequently enter public discourse not through unfiltered direct testimony from those who have experienced them but rather through various mediating structures, including non-governmental organizations (NGOs), journalists, academic institutions, and advocacy campaigns. These mediations play a critical role in selecting what narratives are deemed intelligible for dominant audiences and transform multifaceted lived experiences into recognizable narrative forms that fit within culturally accepted frameworks.

The scholar Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) famously cautioned that when subaltern voices are "given voice" within hegemonic structures, those voices are often distanced from their authenticity; they are ventriloquized or manipulated to conform to Western epistemological standards. In contrast, bell hooks (1989, 1994) emphasized the empowering and transformative potential of individuals articulating their own narratives as a political act of resistance. She urged educators and advocates to create inclusive spaces where silenced individuals can communicate their realities on their own terms, thus reclaiming agency over their stories. These critical perspectives converge on an essential realization: narrating trauma is intricately tied to

Women Intertwining Their Life Stories with the Help of a Thread and Cards.
Picture Credit: Chiara Francavilla

relations of power. Narratives can never be considered neutral; they are shaped by the positionalities of both the narrator and the mediator, as well as by the expectations and perceptions of the imagined audience. The power dynamics embedded within these relationships influence what stories are told and how they resonate in the larger socio-political context.

SEEING AND FEELING: SPECTATORSHIP AND AFFECTIVE KNOWLEDGE

While trauma is narrated through various forms of media, it is also interpreted through acts of spectatorship, which demands active engagement from the audience. Susan Sontag's (2003) insightful reflections on images of suffering elucidate that spectators are not mere passive recipients; they actively interpret and construct meaning based on their cultural and political contexts. Certain images achieve iconic status, demanding moral attention and empathy, while others fade into obscurity. This hierarchy of visibility is shaped less by the actual severity of suffering and more by the frames that render that suffering visible and meaningful to the public. Rolling in another layer of complexity, Roland Barthes (1980) distinguished between two critical elements of image analysis: the studium and the punctum. The studium refers to the culturally mediated ways we interpret images, as for the shared codes, recognizable humanitarian frameworks, and social cues.

On the other hand, the punctum is the deeply personal, affective component that "pierces" the spectator's consciousness, creating an intimate connection that transcends standardized interpretations. This distinction elucidates why certain narratives resonate deeply on a personal level, while others do not, even within the same overarching discursive framework: one's affective knowledge is informed by personal experience while also being influenced by the existing mediations that set the stage for emotional engagement.

Further connecting these insights to the present-day humanitarian context, Lilie Chouliaraki (2006, 2013) posits that the ways in which narratives and images of suffering are framed actively shape different types of spectators. Traditional models of humanitarianism might have invited spectators to adopt stances of pity and moral accountability; however, contemporary post-humanitarian campaigns often address audiences that are more sceptical of moral appeals, engaging them through nuanced personal affective responses rather than shared political commitments.

Thus, the prominence of a narrative hinges not only on the storyteller's method but also on the spectator's positionality, which is itself informed by the prevailing discursive environment. By synthesizing these perspectives, we can see that narrative prominence emerges from the interplay of cognitive, affective, and political processes. Within the cognitive framework, we observe that narratives can be understood within dominant discourses.

Mediators intentionally filter and reshape trauma narratives into forms that resonate with cultural familiarity, often leading to simplification or decontextualization of complex realities. While personal and subjective, the level of affective responses and reactions are moulded by the cognitive frames established by mediators. Spectators engage with narratives through structured emotional possibilities, responding to elements that resonate with their unique experiences while partially being shaped by mediators who may insist on feelings such as pity, compassion, solidarity.

NON-FORMAL EDUCATION AS A SITE OF NARRATIVE RECONFIGURATION – ERASMUS+ JES PROJECT (JOINT ESTORIES: JOURNEYS FROM FEAR TO FAIR)

As we have observed, a significant issue emerges when access to voice—whether personal or collective—is unevenly distributed, creating fixed narrative hierarchies across various societal frameworks. These hierarchies often lead to the marginalization of specific voices while amplifying others, consequently obscuring nuanced or politically charged narratives. This complex dynamic elucidates why migration stories that are visually striking, emotionally engaging, or easily translatable tend to gain greater prominence over those narratives that are fragmented, imbued with political intricacies, or fall outside the prevailing discourses. Moreover, it demonstrates that understanding trauma is a collective process—constructed within a community rather than merely passed from storyteller to listener.

Recognizing that narrative prominence arises from structural factors compels us to investigate and challenge these very structures. Non-formal education contexts, comprising workshops, participatory storytelling sessions, artistic laboratories, and civic engagement initiatives present unique, flexible environments that encourage the exploration of narration, mediation, and audience engagement in reflective and transformative manners. Initiatives that facilitate collaborative storytelling between migrants and non-migrants serve to disrupt established power dynamics regarding who is entitled to speak and who is allowed to listen. This disruption cultivates dialogic narratives that embrace a diversity of experiences and truths while simultaneously linking to the deconstruction of contemporary societal narratives.

By merging these educational approaches, we can create a foundation to contest dominant frameworks and carve out space for marginalized voices, fostering an enriched understanding of the complex layers surrounding trauma and its representation within both historical and modern contexts. Within the JeS eStories co-creation process, the material collected—specifically, individuals' life stories—becomes a robust foundation for designing interactive and engaging activities that stimulate critical thinking among all participants. These personal narratives not only showcase a wide array of experiences but also inspire participants to reflect deeply upon their own perspectives.

In a multisensory environment, such as the one promoted by the Joint eStories of JeS activities, can be strategically crafted to challenge the prevalent lens through which this space is constructed and experienced. By incorporating elements such as soundscapes, visual media, and tactile interactions, we can immerse participants fully, encouraging them to question and reassess their perceptions and assumptions. The technique of visual storytelling, when enhanced by analytical and critical frameworks, transforms the narrative experience into a potent instrument for those seeking to engage in profound reflection on alternate realities—an exploration encapsulated by Susan Sontag's (2003) concept of the "other zone." This "zone" embodies a space that feels both distant in its unfamiliarity and intimately close through shared human experiences, inviting participants to navigate the intricate interplay between familiarity and estrangement in their lives and the lives of others.

CONCLUSION

The epistemology surrounding trauma and migration fundamentally revolves around critical questions of who gets to narrate these stories, how the narratives are mediated, how they are received, and which stories ascend to significance. The insights of thinkers like Sontag (2003)—whose focus lies on spectatorship—Barthes

(1980) with his emphasis on affective detail, Spivak's (1988) critique of ventriloquized voices, hooks's (1989, 1994) advocacy for self-authored narratives, and Chouliaraki's (2013) analysis of humanitarian mediation collectively provide a multidimensional lens through which this inquiry can be understood.

These theoretical contributions are interrelated and serve to enrich one another. Non-formal education, with its inherent flexibility, participatory nature, and capacity for reflexive engagement, can play a transformative role in illuminating these dynamics. By cultivating spaces where individuals critically engage with the construction and circulation of migration narratives, non-formal education can also enrich, in dialogue and co-operation, the formal higher education, as in the JeS project.

AI was used in this article for language check and review.

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11 Gender Equality Plan Supporting Integration: Building Inclusive Futures

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IN OUR INCREASINGLY diverse and interconnected world, gender equality is not only a matter of fairness but a strategic imperative for successful integration and one of the key elements in different EU projects as well. A well-designed Gender Equality Plan (GEP) can serve as a powerful tool to support the integration of individuals from varied backgrounds, especially migrants, refugees, and other underrepresented groups, into education, employment, and society at large, and it also supports fair and inclusive project work. In this short article, the key aspects of GEP are presented in dialogue with Handan Hosgoren Sayer, a representative and migrant expert of *European Migrant Platform (EMP)*, a recently established NGO in Brussels, focusing on the rights and dignity of migrants in Europe, to analyse how GEP can support successful integration.

EUROPEAN MIGRANT PLATFORM IN SHORT

Before looking closer at the GEP and its key purpose, the work and goals of European Migrant Platform (EMP) are presented shortly below. As a relatively newly established NGO, operating in the centre of Europe, in Brussels, EMP has a great opportunity to review the present European migrant situation and its developments. Consisting of established and enthusiastic migrants with a strong pan-European network, EMP members wish to employ their personal experiences to add value to their communities and societies and the world in general. As such, EMP cooperates with different stakeholders, both at national and international levels, and as a migrant association, the EMP members and volunteers come from varied backgrounds, including for examples academics, teachers, doctors, entrepreneurs, journalists and experts in various professional fields.

With its strong member base, EMP focuses on active citizenship promotion by creating different opportunities for migrants to participate in society via meaningful exchanges between migrants, public authorities and civic society. EMP also actively encourages migrant and refugee participation in local

economies, arts, sports, public institutions, and volunteering. With the active involvement of migrants in shaping their local community, the positive migrant contribution can be demonstrated, and this can, in its turn, help overcome any possible trust barriers as building trust is of key importance in strengthening peace and cohesion in societies. By empowering both migrants and their host communities and by supporting migrant integration into the economic, social, cultural and political atmospheres of the host society, it is possible to build a bridge of success between the migrants and the society of the host country. Including the voices of refugees and migrants in the European narrative is also essential for planetary wellbeing. As a member of Erasmus+ JeS project, EMP brings forth in its research and innovation activities the important and too often unheard voices of migrants and their stories.

WHAT IS A GENDER EQUALITY PLAN (GEP) BASED ON?

Integration is a multidimensional process involving access to education, employment, healthcare, and social participation, with gender playing a critical role in shaping these experiences. Women and gender minorities often face several barriers related to systemic discrimination, cultural expectations or caregiving responsibilities that challenge their active participation in society. As a relevant part of research and innovation activities in Europe, GEP that supports gender equality recognizes these intersecting challenges and actively works to dismantle them.

The European Commission is committed to promoting gender equality and overcoming gaps and inequalities in research and innovation activities and in all its EU policies, as part of its *Gender Equality Strategy (GES)*

According to this strategy, gender equality is a core value of the EU, a fundamental right and key principle of the *European Pillar of Social Rights*. In the last decades, the EU has strongly invested in the promotion of gender equality, as it is seen as an essential condition for an innovative and thriving European economy. For a prosperous Europe, we need to use all our talent and diversity to meet the requirements of, for example, the demographic challenges and green and digital transitions.

Even that Europe has significantly advanced in the progress related to the gender gap in education, gender gaps in employment, power, care, pay and pensions still need to be solved. Sexist hate speech, gender-based violence and gender stereotypes are not yet history; rather, gender-based violence and harassment continue at an alarming rate. The purpose of the GES is to create a gender equal Europe where all in their diversity are equal and gender-based violence, sex discrimination and structural inequality between women and men no longer exist.

As far as the implementation of this strategy goes, the Commission wants to systematically include a gender perspective in all stages of EU policy design in all EU policy areas, applying intersectionality – "the combination of gender with other personal characteristics or identities, and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of discrimination" (European Comission 2020) – as a crosscutting principle. Similarly, we need to combat such gender stereotypes that are a root cause of gender inequality and limit people's aspirations, choices, income, pension and freedom.

In today's Europe, artificial Intelligence (AI) has also become an important factor and a key driver of economic progress that the *Gender Equality Strategy (GES) 2020-2025* addresses. While AI can support solving many societal challenges, there lies a risk for intensified gender inequalities and such data that risk repeating earlier gender biases. As gender inequality questions form a global problem, women's empowerment is a core objective of EU external action also outside Europe.

What about the future then? In the years to come, gender equality remains as a fundamental right and a fundamental value of the EU. Based on the March 2025 roadmap for women's rights, with a long-term vision for fully achieving women's rights in Europe, the new 2026-2030 Gender Equality Strategy (2025) will outline the concrete measures of such actions that help turn that vision into reality.

One way to put the GES into practice in the RDI actions is the GEP, the goal of which is to improve the European research and innovation system. This is done by creating gender-equal working environments for all talents and "better integrate the gender dimension in projects to improve research quality as well as the relevance to society of the knowledge, technologies and innovations produced" (European Comission) . The GEP is actively used for example in EU Horizon programme where the emphasis lies in increasing the number of women participating in research and innovation programmes and better integrating the gender dimension in the content of research and innovation projects. Additionally, as mentioned in Horizon Europe) the idea is to increase the number of participating EU widening countries in such actions that emphasize gender equality in research and innovation organisations. (European Commission: Directorate-General for Research and Innovation 2021.)

Also, as stated in the EU GES, it is important to broaden "gender equality policies in research and innovation to intersections with other potential grounds for discrimination such as ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation" (European Comission n.d. -b) .

To meet the eligibility criterion, a GEP needs to fulfil four obligatory process-related requirements (Horizon Europe 2021) , as visualized in image 1

Image 1. Process related requirements for GEP.

Here *publication* refers to a formal signed document published on the institution's website and *dedicated resources* indicate there are both resources and expertise in gender equality to implement the plan in practice. *Data collection and monitoring* refers to sex and/or gender disaggregated data on personnel (and when relevant, students) and annual reporting on indicators. *Training*, on the other hand, refers to awareness raising on gender equality and unconscious gender biases for staff and decision-makers.

Additionally, when creating a GEP, the organization should consider and pay attention to the following points: "1. Work-life balance and organisational culture. 2. Gender balance in leadership and decision-making. 3. Gender equality in recruitment and career progression. 4. Integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content. 5. Measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment" (Horizon Europe 2021).

GENDER EQUALITY PLAN AND EUROPEAN MIGRANT PLATFORM

As a civil society organisation and RDI actor, the European Migrant Platform (EMP) is committed to advancing gender equality and inclusion for migrant women. To explore how Erasmus+ JeS project partner EMP

integrates these goals into its activities and the wider migrant community, the author invited Senior Gender Equality and Integration Practitioner-Researcher **Handan Hoşgoren Sayer** to share her expert reflections.

In this discussion, particular attention was given to five key areas identified within the EU's Gender Equality Plan framework: work-life balance and organisational culture; gender balance in leadership and decision-making; gender equality in recruitment and career progression; the integration of the gender dimension into research and teaching content; and measures against gender-based violence, including sexual harassment.

A review of these major themes demonstrates how Handan exemplifies the practical application of gender equality principles within the context of integration. Drawing on international and European policy frameworks, such as *CEDAW* and the *Beijing Platform for Action of the UN*, the *Sustainable Development Goals* (SDGs), the *EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025*, and the *Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe*, she shows how these commitments are manifested in hard reality for migrant women, as well as influencing structures such as European Migrant Platform (EMP). Bridging policy literacy with practical experience, her reflections represent a convergence of study, administration and lived knowledge.

To Handan, work-life balance and organizational culture are not just optional benefits, but foundational pillars for achieving equality. She emphasizes that work-life balance is a structural condition for inclusion and wellness – and as such, a direct matter of concern for the Sustainable Development Goals and United Nations Goal 5, in particular (UN 2015). As she sees it, inclusive organizational culture does mean flexible hours but also calls for a root-and-branch rethinking of systemic gender bias that underlies how productivity and commitment are evaluated.

The European Commission's Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 specifically incorporates the principle of intersectionality. Intersectionality is recognized in it as a cross-cutting principle, which means that migrant women frequently face multiple forms of discrimination. Gender Equality Index 2024 of European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) finds that persistent gaps still exist in time and work across the EU. Drawing on her work with EMP, Handan emphasizes how crucial it is to normalize care-friendly organisational structures – schedules that take account of family time, leave for parents including fathers, and leadership that sets an example of empathy. Such measures, she argues, help not just individual well-being but institutional performance as well and they are in line with the European Union's long-term aim for inclusive innovation ecosystems.

Handan insists this notion of representation as people's participation and democratic governance. In her view, however, the issue relates to legitimacy and quality of government. She also believes that the implementation of "gender-balanced" policies is directly associated with democratic accountability and provides effective policy outcomes for women. According to EIGE (2024), the EU's average rate in terms of female empowerment remains at 57.5 points out of a possible 100. This confirms once again that there persist deep-seated asymmetries in government and business leadership alike. Handan also notes that minority and migrant women add multidimensional perspectives to decision-making processes.

The European Commission's 2023 Action Plan on Gender Balance (European Commission 2023) and the subsequent Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)17 of the Council of Europe all stress, for instance, that equal representations in governments is a democratic must. For Handan, customised mentoring and transparent processes of selection still offer crucial openings for promoting equality. Within the framework of EMP, she suggests an exchange of leadership structures and capacity-building models which make it possible for emerging women leaders – particularly migrant women – to play a full part in the running and strategic development of institutions.

Art Builds Belonging. Picture Credit: JeS Project Image Bank

Handan believes that more systemic surveillance and accountability mechanisms are necessary for gender equality in hiring and promotion. Recognition of these responsibilities is not only a question of pluralism, but also one requiring international engagement. The Horizon Europe framework incorporates specific elements such as Gender Equality Plans (GEPs) as a standard eligibility condition, thereby institutionalising gender equality at the company level (European Research Council 2021). Still, EIGE's 2024 figures show that women continue to be nearly absent from upper-level positions in academia and business. At the Sr. Vice President level and higher for example new appointments filled by women constituted just 34%.

Handan stresses the contribution of anonymous recruitment, gender-neutral advertising for positions and career return programmes in reducing biases. She moots that if an organization is to move away from mere compliance towards deep cultural varietals, then gender equality can become a standard criterion for performing well as opposed being performed badly. This mirrors her call for systemic inclusion in both research and innovation clusters, in line with the objectives of the European Commission (2020) and United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 10 to 'reduce inequalities'.

One central part of the way to show respect for knowledge is to adopt gender-sensitive research perspectives when carrying out research and incorporating gender-dimension into content. As Handan emphasizes, gender-sensitive research enhances both scientific validity and its social significance. The European Commission for example points out clearly in its 2022 report that gender must be included all along research processes. In Handan's opinion, research and education that ignores gender is destined to perpetuate bias and exclusion. So, this explains her advocacy for systematic education of teachers, inclusion gender-divided indicators into assessment systems and financial incentives that consider gender-sensitive research methods. Handan believes that integrating gender into research and teaching content directly contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals 4 on Education and 16 on Peaceful and Your Premises (United Nations 2015).

As for gender violence and sexual harassment, Handan says that combating gender violence, including sexual harassment sets the ethical bar for any equality strategy. However, the Istanbul Convention (2011)

of the Council Europe grounds gender-based violence in both human rights violations and an indication that society is out of kilter structurally. In this climate, EIGE's report expects as many as one in every three European women may have suffered physical or sexual violence - data that have changed little over a decade. She emphasizes prevention and protective measures must be hard-wired into institutions instead of ad hoc initiatives. At EMP she supports no-tolerance policies, clear reporting channels, and introductions of culturally sensitive training modules for both staff members and beneficiaries. She connects these techniques with the EU's 2020-25 Strategy's guiding principle of "freedom from violence" (European Commission 2020), and as well as SDG 5.2 global target to end all violence against women and girls. In her opinion, not every person can draw safety and self-respect from a company calling itself "inclusive" unless that requirement is met.

CONCLUSION

Supporting integration through gender equality is not the responsibility of one sector alone —it requires collaboration across EU policy makers, educational institutions, governments, civil society, and the private sector and it needs to be addressed in different EU projects as well. By embedding gender equality into integration strategies, we not only empower individuals but also strengthen the social fabric of our communities and promote peace in our societies.

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The principles of human rights remain both a cornerstone of our European shared values and a pressing challenge in the changing landscape of today's Europe. Despite our commitment to equality, fairness and justice, we also face recent new complexities of shifting political climates, migration, digitalization, and social polarization. In addition, human rights need to be studied within the broader context of planetary well-being, as humans are but part of the planetary whole.

Hence, the role of higher education is more vital than ever. Universities and Universities of Applied Sciences are not just European places of learning but also forums for critical thinking and civic engagement. The responsibility of higher education is to include human rights awareness in the European curricula of varied fields of studies.

Erasmus+ project JeS (Joint eStories: Journeys from Fear to Fair) has sought to bridge this gap by engaging in creative and empathic human rights dialogue and awareness and education promotion in the different fields of higher education studies in Finland, Belgium, and Slovenia, while collaborating with European NGOs and training and research institutes in Italy, Spain and Belgium. We hope this small publication will serve as a call to action and a source of inspiration for teachers, educators, students, volunteers, migrants and all interested in human rights topics. JeS, Together We Can!