

ACADEMIC PAPER

DOING IT RIGHT

Making Women's Networks Accessible
with a Special Focus on Women from
Minority and Disadvantaged Groups



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AWEN	Albanian Women Empowerment Network
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEDAW	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CoE	Council of Europe
CRI	Centre for Roma Initiatives
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DV	Domestic Violence
GREVIO	Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
IC	Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)
KWN	Kosovo Women's Network
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
Sida	The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
VAW	Violence against Women
WAVE	Women against Violence Europe
WBT	Western Balkans and Turkey

INTRODUCTION

This research report was prepared on behalf of the EU–UN Women regional programme, ‘Ending Violence against Women: Implementing Norms, Changing Minds’, which aims to support the establishment and strengthening of regional platforms of civil society organizations (with a special focus on organizations representing women from minority and disadvantaged groups) to advocate for the development and implementation of laws and policies in line with CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention.

The aim of the project is to strengthen women’s voices and agency, including that of women’s organizations working with and representing women from disadvantaged groups at a regional level. The expected outcome is the strengthening of the capacities of platforms and/or networks of women’s organizations, as a vehicle to support women’s civic engagement in CEDAW and Istanbul Convention monitoring and reporting.

The research report focuses on **making networks accessible**, especially for women from minority and disadvantaged groups. It aims to offer an overview of the current situation regarding accessible networks in the following partner countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, and it includes two case studies that provide examples of good practice. It represents an initial attempt to examine different working approaches and analyse the inclusiveness of women’s networks in the region. The report focuses on the following five key topics: the openness of organizations/networks; the accessibility of their services; the inclusion of women from minority and/or disadvantaged groups; the rotation of power structures within networks; and the compliance of networks’ efforts with the Istanbul Convention.

1. All references to Kosovo in this report shall be understood to be in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

METHODOLOGY

The report was prepared in coordination with WAVE and project partner organizations. The Gender Alliance Development Centre and the Albanian Women Empowerment Network, both WAVE members, took the lead in preparing this report. A qualitative research methodology was used, as outlined below:

- Group discussion on the research report and possible best practice examples, during the project partners' meeting in Belgrade, Serbia, on 25 and 26 January 2018
- Information gathering on the five key topics in each country
- Discussion/semi-structured interviews with country representatives (WAVE member NGOs) on best practices in each country, in Ankara, Turkey on 30 March 2018
- Final data-collection through information sheets compiled by partner NGOs
- Desk review of existing reports on the same topics

Information gathered on the five key identified topics will inform a better understanding of the nature of women's networks, the role they play in successful collaboration between women's NGOs and activists, and their level of accessibility for minority and disadvantaged groups.

NETWORKING TO ACHIEVE MORE:

AN OVERVIEW OF PRACTICES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

Working alone can be challenging for women's organizations; the same is true for groups of activists. Networking has proved to be a very effective means of enhancing the power and influence of citizen's voices in advocating for better policies, improving governance and enhancing coordinated efforts among service providers. Additional benefits include the exchange of valuable information, new resources and best practice models.

Networking can maximize the reach, scale and impacts of interventions/programmes implemented by CSOs and activists.²

Networks may be one of the oldest forms of social organization; however, networks of civil society groups and organizations are characterized by some distinctive organizational principles and properties.

WHAT IS A CIVIL SOCIETY NETWORK?

“Civil society networks may be defined as civil society groups, organizations and sometimes individuals that come together voluntarily to pursue shared purposes of social development or democratic governance. These purposes may include exchanging resources, addressing common social goals or expressing their identities as a community or social group. In civil society networks, member groups and organizations retain their basic autonomy, with their own identity, mission and governance. **Networks can be composed of informal social relationships or formal bodies that are legally registered and institutionalized.** Civil society networks may be known by many different names, including coalition, alliance, apex body, association, movement, federation, etc. Networks often choose their names based on their own identity, context and language.”³

2. Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs, AED Centre for Civil Society and Governance, December 2005
3. Supporting Civil Society Networks in International Development Programs, AED Centre for Civil Society and Governance, December 2005.

Despite the significant challenges to active collaboration/networking among women NGOs and/or activists in the Western Balkans and Turkey (WBT) – such as the lack of secure funding, adverse political contexts⁴ and the absence of a ‘networking-culture’ – there are many examples of positive collaboration efforts in the region. Evidence shows that in WBT, cooperation among women’s CSOs has proved to be successful, be it in a formal or informal manner. Women’s NGOs have managed to create synergies in all countries in the region and to organize themselves in networks, uniting and strengthening women’s voices, enabling them to create effective lobbying tools and fulfill their agendas.⁵ These formal and informal collaborations have led to successful actions, such as:

- lobbying and advocating for improved legislation on Violence against Women (VAW) and Domestic Violence (DV)
- pushing for the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in various countries
- conducting successful awareness-raising events on VAW/DV
- undertaking national level initiatives to promote women’s human rights

In terms of the accessibility of networks, especially for women from minority and disadvantaged groups, all women’s NGOs, whether single organizations or networks, embrace a proactive approach in line with Article 4.3 of the Istanbul Convention. Both Article 4.3 of the Istanbul Convention and Article 14 of the European

Convention of Human Rights, stipulate that matters such as gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, and migrant or refugee status, should not represent grounds for discrimination. It is important to note that migrant and refugee women, women with disabilities, women from ethnic minorities, Roma, or women with HIV/AIDS, to name a few, may experience multiple forms of discrimination; this means that support services must be accessible to all these groups and tailored to their specific needs.

In **Albania**,⁶ there are currently three women’s networks, one formal and two informal (project-based) networks.⁷ The **Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN)**, founded in 2011, is a formal network of 10 organizations, offering services to women victims of DV and human trafficking, empowerment programmes and shelters for victims, as well as services for perpetrators of violence. The AWEN Network has been selected as a model of good practice in the region (for a detailed description please refer to Case Study 1). There are also two other informal networks, ‘The Network against Domestic Violence and Trafficking in Human Beings’ and the ‘Monitoring Network against Gender-Based Violence’. These project-based networks work together during project implementation, to fulfil specific project activities and objectives. The cooperation between women’s NGOs is considered very successful, with women’s organizations working together to meet the needs of DV victims, organizing joint awareness-raising events, and lobbying and advocating for women’s rights, as well as raise funds for network members (in the case of AWEN).

4. The political context in Turkey has become increasingly precarious since the Government declared a State of Emergency in 2016. Since then, many women’s NGOs and LGBTI organizations have been shut down or banned from organizing any public activities. In other countries, such as Montenegro, there is a lack of understanding of gender-based violence among government agencies.

5. Mapping Report: Depicting the situation of women’s NGOs in partner countries of the project. WAVE, 2018

6. Albania signed the Istanbul Convention on 19 December 2011 and was the second Council of Europe Member State to ratify the Convention on 4 February 2013. The Convention entered into force in Albania on 1 August 2014.

7. One of the informal (project-based) platforms/networks was created by the Centre for Legal Civic Initiatives (CLCI) at the beginning of 2018, under the EU-UN Women Programme, ‘Ending Violence against Women: Implementing Norms, Changing Minds’.

The ‘National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters’, established in 2007, which works with victims of trafficking, (mostly women and children), is another example of successful collaboration among NGOs. The aim of the Coalition is to coordinate activities and services for the protection, assistance, rehabilitation and reintegration of women, girls and child victims of trafficking. It is composed of five shelters (one public and four non-public) working on anti-trafficking in Albania.⁸

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH)**, there is currently one informal network, ‘**The Safe Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina**’, founded in 2001, working specifically on VAW and DV. The Network consists of 32 NGOs and government institutions engaged in combating violence, from across the whole of the territory (the Federation of BiH and the Republika Srpska). In terms of the ‘inclusion’ of women from minority and disadvantaged groups, all women’s organizations, humanitarian associations and NGOs that are part of the Network work with women refugees, although none of the organizations have dedicated programmes that specifically support these groups. In terms of ‘openness’, membership in the Network is on a voluntary basis, and is open to all civil society organizations in Bosnia and Herzegovina that work in the area of prevention, protection and rehabilitation of victims of all forms of violence.

To ensure quick and effective action, an Advisory Committee for the Safe Network was established in February 2002, consisting of 11 organizations, representing 11 different regions. Furthermore, seven members of the Safe Network BiH are representatives in the Network Secretariat. The Secretariat manages the operational processes of the Safe Network BiH. The Chair is elected by the members of the Network for a period of

12 months and is responsible for informing the members about planned and implemented activities.

One of the strategic objectives of the Network is to contribute to the creation of an effective legislative and policy environment, in line with international standards on eliminating VAW and all forms of discrimination, and in compliance with the Istanbul Convention.⁹

Two other networks in BiH work with disadvantaged groups. One specifically involves organizations working with **Roma women – the Roma Women’s Network (Uspjeh BiH)** – and the other with organizations working with women with disabilities – the **Network of Women with Disabilities BiH**. The latter is a platform that aims to improve communication among women with disabilities and raise public awareness of disability issues.

Another joint initiative is ‘**Peace with Woman’s Face**’, created in 2013. It specifically focuses on cultural memory, transitional justice, advocacy activities and policy change. It was initially founded by 12 organizations, but now an additional 10 grassroots organizations and numerous peace organizations and activists support the work of the initiative. Two organizations coordinate the work of the Network: ‘Foundation Lara’ from Bijeljina and ‘HO Horizonti’ from Tuzla. The Network started with capacity-building interventions that included dialogues among activists, local workshops and the ‘Women’s Peace Caravan’ – a joint initiative in 2013 in 12 cities in BiH, which ended with a peace meeting in Sarajevo. A key achievement of the initiative was the agreement to establish a Memorial Day to commemorate the suffering of women during the war in BiH.¹⁰

“Do not sit and wait for better times. Your time is now, and therefore you need to stand up and make it better. Peace cannot be achieved without us!”

Danka Zelić, a member of the ‘Peace with Woman’s Face’ initiative

8. https://www.albania.iom.int/publications/leaflets/11%20%20Leaflet_NCAT_KKSAT_ALB%20&%20ENG.pdf

9. More information can be found at: <http://www.sigurnamreza.ba/en>

10. The Memorial Day is a non-institutional initiative that attracted a growing number of supporters (organizations and individuals) during the ‘16 days of activism against gender-based violence’ campaign in BiH (advocacy efforts to institutionalize the date are still ongoing).

In **Kosovo**, two active networks working on VAW and DV were reported by a local WAVE member. The **Kosovo Women's Network** (KWN), established in 1996, was originally an informal network of women's groups and organizations from various regions in Kosovo. Since its inception, KWN has developed into a network that advocates on behalf of Kosovan women at the local, regional and international level. Representing the interests of 125 organizations¹¹ covering all ethnic groups throughout Kosovo, KWN is a leader among civil society organizations. KWN cooperates regularly with other women's groups in the region, both informally and formally, and is open to new members, organizations or individuals.

In terms of the the 'rotation of power' within the Network, the KWN Board of Directors is elected by the KWN Assembly of Members during the Annual Membership Meeting in December each year. As the elected representative of KWN members, the Board of Directors is the second highest decision-making body in the Network. It oversees KWN's work through quarterly meetings and advises on key decisions taken by the Network staff. The KWN Advisory Board involves people who have contributed greatly to KWN's work over the years. They are nominated and approved by the KWN Board of Directors for an unlimited term. They regularly provide advice and assistance to KWN, drawing from their vast knowledge, experience and connections.

In 2012, the KWN established the **Kosovo Women's Fund**, which provides small grants to women's organizations that lack access to other sources of funding and are seeking to work on women's rights, particularly among rural and/or marginalized groups such as Serbian, Bosnian, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian women, and women with disabilities. The Fund has enabled many organizations to continue their work. To apply, organizations must meet certain criteria;

they must: be members of KWN and compliant with the organizational strategy; contribute to at least one strategic objective in KWN's Strategic Plan; work with grassroots and/or marginalized individuals and groups; and lack other opportunities to secure funds from donors. This approach constitutes a very effective means of including and empowering women from minority or disadvantaged groups.

In compliance with the Istanbul Convention, KWN focuses its efforts on enhancing the performance and the quality of services of shelters, particularly in terms of rehabilitation and reintegration. KWN has also been advocating for improvements to the mechanisms for reporting and investigating cases of sexual harassment,¹² in line with Article 40 of the Istanbul Convention.¹³

The second network, the **Kosovo Shelter Coalition**, was established in 2010 as a formal coalition of eight local organizations but is currently comprised of only five local shelter organizations working with victims of DV.

In terms of the inclusion of disadvantaged groups, both networks work with women with disabilities.

In **Macedonia**, there are currently two active networks: the 'National Network to end Violence against Women and Domestic Violence – Voice against Violence' and the 'National Council for Gender Equality'. **The National Network to end Violence against Women and Domestic Violence – Voice against Violence** is a formal network of 20 organizations working on VAW, some of whom provide support services for victims of violence. Formed in December 2010 by CSOs working on preventing and combating VAW and DV, it was formally registered a year later. The mission of the Network is to coordinate the actions of CSOs towards advancing policies and practices in combating VAW and DV. The Network aims to promote the recognition of women's rights in the Republic of Macedonia.

11. <http://www.womensnetwork.org/?FaqlD=34>

12. KWN, Annual Report 2017: <http://www.womensnetwork.org/documents/20171219123350317.pdf>

13. Article 40 – Sexual harassment: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment, is subject to criminal or other legal sanction.

The Network's member organizations are of different size, ranging from small grassroots organizations to larger organizations working at a national level. Network members represent various ethnicities and provide support to women belonging to all ethnic groups, regardless of their socioeconomic status. The Network is open to all organizations and individuals who want to join or who need assistance and support, and recognizes the need to address the issues facing women with disabilities, migrant women, Roma women, etc. The Network is increasing the scope of its work to include women from these groups and specifically address their needs. This is an indicator of the openness of the Network, as well as the accessibility of its services for minority or disadvantaged girls and women.

In terms of power structure, the Network has an executive office and staff, but the main decision-making bodies are the Assembly, consisting of representatives of all the organizations in the Network, and a Management Board, made up of five representatives from member organizations. The President of the Management Board is also the President of the Network.

The Network's engagement in VAW and DV is based on: the recognition and protection of women's rights, in line with relevant international conventions (including the Istanbul Convention) and declarations; a gender-sensitive approach; a condemnation of all types of gender-based violence; advocating for victims' interests; viable working practices; solidarity and cooperation among member organizations; and transparency. The Network is involved in all activities concerning the implementation of the Istanbul Convention in Macedonia.¹⁴ Representatives from the Network are part of the Working Group developing the Action Plan for the national implementation of the Convention.

The National Council for Gender Equality is a network of 116 formal and informal organizations working at the local level to provide services for victims of violence such as counselling, free legal aid and the national helpline.

These two networks do not work specifically with women refugees/migrants. Only one member organization, 'Open Gate – La Strada Macedonia', works directly with this target group; while some member organizations of the 'National Network – Voice against Violence' work with women with disabilities or women from the LGBTI community.

In **Montenegro**, there are three active women's networks working on women's rights: the 'Informal National Network against VAW', the 'Women's Roma Network (FIRST)' and the 'Network of SOS helplines'.

The **Informal National Network against VAW** consists of seven women's NGOs that provide specialist support services, but also advocate for better prevention, protection and prosecution mechanisms for gender-based violence. All organizations work with women refugees if they are victims of gender-based violence and in need of specialized support. There is currently no organization that specializes in working with disadvantaged groups, but all the organizations work with women from diverse backgrounds (such as Roma women, women with disabilities, single mothers).

The **'Women's Roma Network (FIRST)'**, was selected as an example of good practice for networks working with women from minority and disadvantaged groups; it was the first formal network accessible to women from these groups in Montenegro. The current Network has two activists in Berane, two in Podgorica and four in Niksic (central and northern regions of Montenegro), and is currently expanding both in terms of membership and geographical coverage (for a detailed description please refer to Case Study 2).

The **'Network of SOS helplines'** is an informal network consisting of five local SOS helplines, spread across five cities (Podgorica, Bijelo Polje, Berane, Plav and Ulcinj). All organizations work directly with women survivors of gender-based violence, including women from minority and disadvantaged groups. This informal network does not currently meet the needs of women's organizations, due to limited resources and an absence of clear binding mechanisms for its members.

14. Ratified on 22 December 2017 and came into force on 1 July 2018.

In **Serbia**, there is one active network, the **Women against Violence Network** (*Mreža Žene protiv nasilja*), established in 2005.¹⁵ The Network is a coalition of specialized women's NGOs that provide individual support services to women (SOS lines, counselling, shelters, safe houses, crisis centres, etc.) and that work towards changing social norms and attitudes, with the aim of reducing VAW in Serbia.

The Women against Violence Network is open to all organizations and individuals that work, directly or indirectly, on reducing VAW – through research, advocacy, education and lobbying for laws that provide protection from violence – and that accept and implement the Network's basic principles.

The Network is informal and currently has 27 member organizations. The Network is active in all five regions of Serbia; each region is coordinated by one organization. 'Association Fenomena' (a WAVE member), for example, coordinates the south-west region of the Network, which consists of five organizations. The Autonomous Women's Centre has been the main coordinating body of the Network since its inception. The Network is currently in the process of decentralizing: it will be divided into five regional centres and will have five organizations that will coordinate each centre. These organizations will make up the Management Board of the Network.

None of the organizations in the Network work specifically with refugee/migrant women, but some organizations, such as IMPULS (Tutin, south-west Serbia), dedicate some of their activities to women refugees. Several organizations work specifically with disadvantaged groups such as Roma women, women with disabilities or women victims of human trafficking: Anti-trafficking action (ASTRA); Atina; Roma Children's Centre; Out of Circle, Belgrade and Vojvodina (supporting women with disabilities); Roma Centre for Women and Children, Daje; Roma Association of Novi Becej; and SOS Line, Osvit (offers multilingual support in Roma and Serbian languages). The Women against

Violence Network is open to all organizations and individuals working to reduce VAW, directly or indirectly – through research, advocacy for women's right to life without violence, education and lobbying for laws that provide protection from violence – and that accept and implement the Network's basic principles.¹⁶

Members of the Network are part of some of the Istanbul Convention projects and initiatives – for example, the regional 'I sign campaign',¹⁷ which resulted in legal changes and greater advocacy for the implementation of the Convention in Serbia.

In **Turkey**, there is currently one informal network,¹⁸ '**The Assembly of Women's Shelters and Solidarity Centres**', formed in 1998. The Network currently has 18 member organizations, working in the area of gender equality and VAW. Among the member organizations, there are some working with women refugees; although they do not focus specifically on this type of work. Two examples of organizations working directly with women refugees are KADAV (*Kadinlarla Dayanisma Vakfi*) and AKDAM (*Adana Kadin Daynisma Merkezi ve Siginma Evi Dernegi*). Engelli Kadin Dernegi works specifically with women with disabilities.

In terms of cooperation, there is an active collaboration between women's NGOs, enabling them to effectively communicate or react to issues whenever necessary. These organizations have practical experience of organizing events together or implementing different projects. The Assembly has two annual meetings: the Interim Assembly and the Main Assembly. The Interim Assembly is only for the representatives of the Assembly. This three-day meeting is organized by one of the organizations each year, in their respective city. The Main Assembly is open to both Assembly organizations and the Assembly participants, bringing together more than 250 women every year. Mor Çatı Women's Shelter Foundation is the permanent Secretariat and works together with the host organization to organize both the Interim and the Main Assembly meetings.

15. Information according to WAVE member, Association Fenomena, Serbia.

16. <https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/en/about-us/wav-network>

17. <http://www.potpisujem.org/eng/>

18. Information according to WAVE Member, the Foundation for Women's Solidarity, Turkey.

Members of the Assembly do not discriminate against women survivors of violence who contact them for their services. Although none of the organizations work specifically with migrants or refugees, there are a number of organizations that support them. Other women's organizations are expanding their scope of work due to the increase in demand for services from migrant and refugee women. For instance, The Foundation for Women's Solidarity, AKDAM and another organization (which is not a member organization of the Assembly), run a project to foster dialogue between women's organizations and local actors, to help prevent gender-based discrimination and violence against refugee women. The project aims to meet the needs of women's organizations working on VAW and to increase their knowledge and experience of combating VAW among women refugees, including Syrian women. Additionally, it aims to share the experiences of women's organizations and increase cooperation with other actors in the field. The Association for Women with Disabilities (Engelli Kadın Derneği) joined the Assembly, offering the opportunity to understand and raise awareness of violence and discrimination experienced by women with disabilities.

Despite the challenging political context,¹⁹ there have been other concrete efforts to enhance compliance with the Istanbul Convention, also through collaboration in joint platforms/initiatives. During 2017, a group of eight women's organizations prepared a shadow report for the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), which was shared with women's NGOs in Turkey.

19. Since the State of Emergency was declared in Turkey, in July 2016, six women's NGOs have been shut down. Many grassroots organizations and LGBTI organizations face a similar fate. Furthermore, there seems to be significant repression of LGBTI organizations, as the Government in Ankara has, for example, banned any outdoor or indoor activities of these organizations. Even before the ban, many LGBTI activists were taken into custody during the Pride March in Istanbul in 2016. Women activists faced the same problems when organizing the Women's March on 25 November 2016. These kind of government decisions are increasingly limiting the freedom and working-remit of specialist women's and LGBTI NGOs.

EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY:

CASE STUDY 1: ALBANIAN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT NETWORK (AWEN), ALBANIA

Following a long phase of inspiring capacity-building interventions supported by the Swedish *Kvinna till Kvinna* Foundation in July 2009, eight women's organizations came together to finalize a long and fruitful collaboration by creating the 'Albanian Women Empowerment Network' (AWEN). The establishment of the Network was critical in strengthening the cooperation among these organizations, increasing the impact of joint interventions and initiatives, and empowering the feminist movement in Albania. The creation of the Network was supported from the beginning by the *Kvinna till Kvinna* Foundation. AWEN was legally registered as a non-profit organization on 27 December 2011. Now, AWEN is a formally registered network, consisting of 10 organizations in seven districts (in which two thirds of the Albanian population lives).

AWEN's mission is to support, protect and promote the rights and interests of women and girls in the Republic of Albania, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity,

language, origin, education, political beliefs, religious and philosophical beliefs or socioeconomic status. As a network, the aim is to exchange experiences and information, organize joint actions, collaborate and network among member organizations, raise funds on behalf of its members and, most importantly, to lobby and advocate at local and central levels. Key thematic focus areas are VAW, the economic empowerment of women and the participation of women in politics.

During the period 2011-2018, AWEN has realized multiple projects supported by several donors, including the *Kvinna till Kvinna* Foundation, the Mediterranean Women's Fund, Sida (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency), the US Embassy in Tirana and UN Women Albania. Since 2016, AWEN has received direct support from Sida,²⁰ following a thorough evaluation that deemed AWEN institutionally robust enough to act as a support channel for its member organizations.

20. The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency is a government agency of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Sida is responsible for the organization of the bulk of Sweden's official development assistance to developing countries.

FEEDBACK FROM MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS

“The collaboration with AWEN has brought very important changes. It has literally revitalized our NGO. The continuous, timely (technical/procedural/managerial) support from the programme staff whenever we met major challenges, the ongoing encouragement to improve our service and enlarge our area of intervention in other municipalities of our region, the assistance in working more closely with other AWEN member NGOs, have been very significant for us. AWEN has played a crucial role in our work, especially during recent years, not just because of the financial support, but also as a mentor, mediator and also booster of our organization’s visibility at the national level, advocating for the issues that concern us (and all member organizations) at the local level.” **Entela Gjoni, Jona Association, Saranda**

“Thanks to AWEN’s intense advocacy work during 2016, ‘Me, the Woman’ (Pogradec) has become a powerful local actor and a national voice. AWEN’s role in our organization is obvious in the expansion of our intervention areas during 2017, as a result of AWEN’s ongoing evaluation and supporting work.” **Eleni Jajcari, Me the Woman, Pogradec.**

Openness of the network

AWEN’s member NGOs are some of the most active and long-standing women’s NGOs in the country: the ‘Gender Alliance for Development Centre’, Tirana; the ‘Association of Women and Girls with Social Problems’, Durres; ‘Me, the Woman’, Pogradec; ‘Agritra Vision’, Peshkopi; ‘Woman to Woman’, Shkodra; the ‘Women’s Forum’, Elbasan; the psychosocial centre ‘Vatra’, Vlora; the ‘Jona Association’, Saranda; ‘Counselling Line for Girls and Women’, Tirana; and the ‘Centre for Civic and Legal Initiatives’, Tirana. With an initial membership of eight organizations (2011), the Network now (2018) comprises of 10 member organizations.

NGOs interested in becoming a member of this ‘semi-closed’ network must officially apply for membership and the application must be unanimously voted upon by all AWEN member organizations. The acceptance of new members is based on some key criteria: the organization should be compliant with AWEN’s organizational strategy; it should bring added value to the Network as a whole (expertise, experience, etc.); their work should cover a geographic area not covered/covered sufficiently by existing members and/or the organization offers specialized services that are not offered by existing members; the organization has expertise in a new topic/area of women’s rights; and the organization is able to reach vulnerable women and girls from marginalized groups, such as women with disabilities, women from minority groups, etc.

The most recent new member organizations are considered an asset to the Network due to their

long-standing experience and the unique service they offer to DV victims. One of them is a key referral agency for DV cases at national level, through the National Hotline for DV cases, and the other has high-level expertise in legal issues relating to DV and women’s rights. Both these services are considered to add value to the Network.

Making the services accessible to other organizations

While AWEN itself does not offer direct services, its member organizations offer support to girls and women in need (with a special focus on women victims of DV and trafficking in Albania). Collaboration between member organizations is very close, especially for referrals and assistance in cases of DV. The level of cooperation has intensified over the years, influenced largely by the regular interventions (capacity-building, exchange of experience, joint advocacy initiatives, and common interests for joint programmes) of the AWEN Network. One of the key changes over recent years has been in the working culture, towards a much stronger collaborative mindset. There is now greater commitment to cooperate, and more proactive engagement among CSOs.

There is also effective collaboration with other organizations that are not members of the Network but work in the same focus area. This collaboration is strong at a local level, but also at the national level, especially for DV case referrals and advocacy initiatives. Joint brainstorming activities and joint efforts to promote women’s rights have become more and more frequent.

A good example of the latest collaboration among women's NGOs all around the country is the project-based platform, the 'Monitoring Network against Gender-Based Violence'; AWEN acts as the Secretariat, while around 45 organizations have joined efforts for this initiative.

Inclusion of women from minority or disadvantaged groups

As stated in Article 4 of the Istanbul Convention: "The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular, measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, color, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status." Services – psychosocial advice and support, legal support, sheltering, re/integration services (education, professional formation, mediation for employment, housing), etc. – are offered for all categories of vulnerable women, with a special focus on women survivors of VAW and DV.

The services are also offered to women victims of DV from minorities (Roma and Egyptians are the predominant minorities in Albania), as well as women with special needs.²¹ However, whenever there is a lack of expertise for a specific support service, AWEN member organizations ask for the support of other specialized organizations which offer that specific service (for example, in cases of severe mental health problems or other disabilities). This approach guarantees support for all women survivors of DV from minorities or disadvantaged groups. One of the objectives of the Network is to enrol more organizations that have specific expertise in addressing issues facing women from minorities and women with disabilities,

thus becoming a network that has expertise on, and is representative of, all groups of women in Albanian society. This need has been identified by the Network's member organizations themselves, especially over the last two years, and will be followed up during the upcoming (October 2018) strategic planning process for 2019-2022.

Rotation of power structures

AWEN has five staff (project-based) in charge of the day-to-day management of the Network, fundraising, capacity development, and joint lobbying and advocacy efforts. The highest decision-making structure of AWEN is the 'General Assembly of Member Organizations', which comes together twice a year. The General Assembly is called by the Executive Director and the Board of Directors, or at least half of the member organizations. The General Assembly, as the highest decision-making structure, elects the Board of Directors. The Board consists of seven members, four of whom are elected from among the founding members of the Network or their representatives (also part of the General Assembly), while the other three Board members are elected from among outstanding social activists in the country (not part of the General Assembly). These three Board members are elected by the General Assembly and keep their position for three years, with the possibility of re-election. The four internal Board members change in rotation every year. The Board of Directors elects a Chief Director of the Board. The Board of Directors comes together twice a year (or more often if requested by one third of its members) and is the second highest decision-making structure in the Network, followed by the Executive Director.

21. This refers to women with disabilities and with mental health issues.

Compliance of efforts with the Istanbul Convention

AWEN's contributions to advocacy for women's rights have been numerous throughout the years. Its position as a leading advocate has strengthened, becoming one of the main voices for women's rights in the country. The Network has held continuous meetings with relevant public institutions, participated in national consultations relating to the implementation of gender equality, and provided input and recommendations for effective implementation of gender equality laws and the necessary improvements in gender policy and legislation. Input and recommendations of Network members has been developed, consolidated and presented by AWEN to relevant institutions. During 2018, AWEN's Executive Director was elected as one of the three CSO representatives in the National Council for Gender Equality in Albania.

AWEN was one of the few organizations that prepared a shadow report for GREVIO (2017).²² All the work of AWEN and its members is in line with the standards of the CoE Convention;²³ the key efforts include:

- Capacity-building of local actors working with DV cases, as per Article 15 – Training of professionals
- Working towards extension of services for DV survivors, such as the National Hotline for DV Victims and rehabilitation services for perpetrators, as per Article 24 – Telephone helplines and Article 16 – Preventive intervention and treatment programmes
- Advocacy efforts at national and local level for the opening of emergency shelters in municipalities and in collaboration with women CSOs, as per Article 23 – Shelters
- Offering free legal aid/representation for DV survivors, as per Article 57 – Legal aid
- Specialist support services, as well as protection and support of DV survivors, independent of the willingness to denounce violence, as per Chapter 4 – Protection and support, Article 18/4; Article 20 – General support services; and Article 22 – Specialist support services
- Advocacy and capacity-building initiatives related to sexual violence, to enhance efforts in addressing sexual violence in Albania, as per Article 25 – Support for victims of sexual violence;
- National and local-level awareness-raising campaigns, as per Article 13 – Awareness raising
- Conducting national research on intimate partner violence among adolescents, as per Article 11 – Data collection and research

22. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/report-awen-final-draft-jan-17/1680717e19>

23. The full text of the CoE Convention can be found in the annex to this report.

CASE STUDY 2: WOMEN'S ROMA NETWORK ('FIRST'), MONTENEGRO

During 2000, the SOS Hotline for Women and Child Victims of Violence in Niksic, developed and implemented the 'Centre for Roma Women', with the aim of empowering Roma women and enhancing their integration into the local community. In 2004, after years of work with Roma women, the programme established the first Roma women's NGO in Montenegro, the **Centre for Roma Initiatives (CRI)**. Over a 12-year period, the organization implemented projects that involved activities such as workshops, legal and psychological counselling, medical counselling, and services and programmes for children. These interventions created substantial social changes among women from minority and disadvantaged groups.

To identify and encourage Roma and Egyptian women in other parts of Montenegro (particularly in the northern and southern regions of Montenegro, where many of the Roma and Egyptian minorities live), 'SOS Hotline Niksic' started working in different towns across the country.

With the aim of increasing the influence of Roma and Egyptian women throughout Montenegro, these two organizations decided to unite their efforts and formalize their collaboration through the creation, in 2009, of the **Women's Roma Network – 'FIRST'** (PRVA in Montenegrin). It is the first network accessible to women from minority and disadvantaged groups in Montenegro. Since 2013, the CRI and the FIRST Network have taken over all the programme activities from the SOS Hotline Niksic, as per the exit strategy.

Openness of the network

The FIRST Network is formed of activists from all parts of Montenegro. Currently, the Network has two activists in Berane, two in Podgorica and four in Niksic (central and northern regions of Montenegro), and is expanding both in terms of membership and geographical coverage. The FIRST Network stipulates that NGOs and individuals can be part of the Network if they adhere to the goals and activities defined by its statutes. Decisions on admitting

new members into the Network are made by a majority vote in the Assembly. All members are registered in the members' register.

Making the services accessible to other organizations/activists

In terms of collaboration with other organizations, the Network cooperates with organizations whose goals and activities coincide with its own. The Network has a Facebook profile and a website through which beneficiaries and other stakeholders can receive information about the work of the FIRST Network and the services it provides. Network members working in the field are in daily communication with beneficiaries, facilitating their access to the services that the Network provides, such as support or access to information. Currently, the Network cooperates with CRI; the NGO, 'Ruza', from Berane; the Montenegrin Women's Lobby; SOS Hotline Niksic; and the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights.

Inclusion of women from minority or disadvantaged groups

The Network was created with the aim of assisting, protecting and empowering women from minorities, in this case Roma women and their children/families, by:

- Creating a safe place for women and girls (in rented houses outside of Roma settlements to avoid isolation and social exclusion; and safe spaces for women and children to learn, socialize, and freely share and acquire new skills);
- Intensive fieldwork in settlements to establish relationships with members of the Roma/Egyptian community, to reduce resistance towards the programme and build mutual trust;
- Challenging negative traditions and practices by establishing close links with the Roma/Egyptian community;

- Playing a ‘mediator’ role between the Roma/Egyptian community and state institutions, particularly in terms of improving access to education and primary health care centres for Roma women and girls, and increasing their knowledge of reproductive health issues; helping Roma women to navigate complex bureaucratic processes – such as for citizenship, migration status and birth certificates –thus enabling them to achieve other rights; and assisting women victims of domestic violence to realize their right to be protected by state institutions;
- Creating a database of direct and indirect beneficiaries/clients (women, men, boys and girls) to gather data for advocacy/lobbying purposes.

Rotation of power structures

The governance structures of the FIRST Network include the Assembly, the President of the Network and the President of the Assembly. All decisions are made through public voting, with a majority vote of 50 per cent plus one member.

Compliance of efforts with the Istanbul Convention

The work of the FIRST Network complies with many of the articles of the Istanbul Convention; more specifically:

- Article 4 – Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination
- Article 37 – Forced marriage
- Article 39 – Forced abortion and forced sterilization
- Article 6 – Gender-sensitive policies
- Article 19 – Information
- Article 20 – General support services
- Article 27 – Reporting
- Article 32 – Civil consequences of forced marriages
- Article 33 – Psychological violence
- Article 34 – Stalking
- Article 35 – Physical violence
- Article 36 – Sexual violence, including rape
- Article 40 – Sexual harassment
- Article 41 – Aiding or abetting and attempt
- Article 42 – Unacceptable justifications for crimes, including crimes committed in the name of so-called ‘honour crimes’

MAIN FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS: FEATURES OF SUCCESSFUL NETWORKING IDENTIFIED IN THE REGION

This report shows that networks can be accessible to women from minorities and/or disadvantaged groups by either tailoring their access to services according to the needs of these groups or by working with organizations that specifically work with them. All of the identified networks are proactive in their efforts towards including women from minority and/or disadvantaged groups in their work. In terms of access to services, women survivors of violence are generally assisted, protected and empowered if they are part of the networks'/organizations' target group. Furthermore, there are also examples of networks that specifically work with particular groups of women, such as the 'Network of Women with Disabilities' from Bosnia and Herzegovina, a platform created with the aim of facilitating communication among women with disabilities and raising public awareness of disability issues.

To ensure not only **effective support of women from minority/disadvantaged women's groups**, but also their **active participation in strategic decision-making**, they should also be represented in strategic decision-making bodies (such as network Boards and strategic planning processes). Their voices are a crucial component in the fight against VAW and enable the provision of improved services that are tailored to specific groups' needs. Whereas some networks/organizations include the support of vulnerable groups in their strategic objectives, others are still working towards this aim and towards making a tangible difference for all women. To make progress in this area, networks should either incorporate

in their statutes the needs of disadvantaged/minority women or the need to collaborate with specialist organizations run 'by and for' minority groups. A good example of this is the AWEN Network Albania: one of their objectives in their upcoming strategic plan (2019-2022) is to address the needs of women from minority and disadvantaged groups by aiming to incorporate organizations that work with these groups in their network.

Empowering disadvantaged groups of women through local or regional women's organizations can lead to the establishment of **autonomous specialized women's organizations**. The 'SOS Hotline' for Women and Child Victims of Violence in Niksic, developed and implemented a 'Centre for Roma Women in Niksic', which resulted, in 2004, in the establishment of the first Roma women's NGO in Montenegro: the 'Centre for Roma Initiatives'. Their main aim is to empower Roma women and facilitate their integration within wider society. Such programmes emphasize the importance of involving specific groups of women in the work of women's organizations, due to their knowledge and understanding of the realities minority groups face. Supporting women's voices from minority groups in becoming more visible within the VAW sector; involving them as active partners of change enables NGOs to offer more tailored support services.

Women's networks/organizations that include women from minority backgrounds, can also be **hubs of specialist knowledge** about specific disadvantaged groups of women and the experiences/practices of organizations supporting them. They can, therefore, more effectively represent the voice of organizations/women from minority backgrounds, which otherwise remain unheard in the public arena, and contribute towards influencing government policy and legislation through lobbying efforts (depending on the local/regional political context). Advocacy and lobbying efforts are most successful when they are undertaken by a group of organizations/activists or a network – as, for example, in the case of collaborative efforts to ensure the effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

Most networks are generally open in their **membership structure** to women's organizations or women's activists. Usually, membership approval is based on pre-set criteria. Some networks have a semi-closed approach to new membership, based on the aim and purpose of the network – for example, when it is project-based. The networks in WBT usually have member organizations/activists that are spread throughout the country for greater representation and outreach purposes. This approach is very useful when it comes to addressing the interests of women from different groups. All networks are characterized by a pluralistic decision-making approach when it comes to accepting new members. These are usually joint decisions taken by the Board of Directors and General Assembly.

The work of a network is more efficient when it has **dedicated and funded staff** carrying out its activities. Usually networks make use of membership fees to raise funds; they provide a reliable source of income and can complement and reduce dependency on donor funding. Very few networks receive financial support from their respective governments and rely almost entirely on international donors. In some cases, women's networks implement their own funding initiatives, such as the Kosovo Women's Network, which in 2012 established the 'Kosovo Women's Fund'. It provides small grants for women's organizations lacking access to other resources. The Fund is particularly important for rural

and/or minority groups such as Serbian, Bosnian, Roma Ashkali and Egyptian women, and women with disabilities.

Financial support is a crucial aspect of an organization's sustainability; there is, therefore, a **need for governments to allocate appropriate funding for women's NGOs**, so their initiatives can reach more marginalized people. Appropriate funding should also be allocated to women's organizations working specifically with minority and disadvantaged groups. As Article 8 of the Istanbul Convention stipulates: *"...appropriate financial and human resources shall be allocated by states for adequate implementation of integrated policies, measures and programmes to prevent and combat all forms of violence, including to those carried out by non-governmental organizations and civil society."*

To conclude, **two main observations** can be made from this research:

Firstly, most of the women's organizations/networks present in the Western Balkans and Turkey seek to be accessible to women from minorities and/or disadvantaged groups. They either tailor their access to services according to the needs of these groups, or they collaborate with organizations that specifically work with them.

Secondly, there has been a notable increase in cooperation between women's organizations/networks and organizations specifically supporting women from minority and/or disadvantaged groups. Women's networks either actively support the establishment of organizations working with these groups or include these organizations in their own networks.

While there is room for improvement, these two observations are clear signs that women's networks are generally accessible and inclusive in the WBT region.

ANNEX 1.

ARTICLES FROM THE ISTANBUL CONVENTION MENTIONED IN THIS PUBLICATION

Article 4 on Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination: The implementation of the provisions of this Convention by the Parties, in particular measures to protect the rights of victims, shall be secured without discrimination on any ground such as sex, gender, race, color, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, association with a national minority, property, birth, sexual orientation, gender identity, age, state of health, disability, marital status, migrant or refugee status, or other status.

Article 6 on Gender-sensitive policies: Parties shall undertake to include a gender perspective in the implementation and evaluation of the impact of the provisions of this Convention and to promote and effectively implement policies of equality between women and men and the empowerment of women.

Article 11 on Data collection and research: For the purpose of the implementation of this Convention, Parties shall undertake to: (a) collect disaggregated relevant statistical data at regular intervals on cases of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention; (b) support research in the field of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention in order to study its root causes and effects, incidences and conviction rates, as well as the efficacy of measures taken to implement this Convention.

Article 13 on Awareness-raising: (1) Parties shall promote or conduct, on a regular basis and at all levels, awareness-raising campaigns or programmes, including in cooperation with national human rights institutions and equality bodies, civil society and non-governmental organizations, especially women's organizations, where appropriate, to increase awareness and understanding among the general public of the different manifestations of all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention, their consequences on children and the need to prevent such violence. (2) Parties shall ensure the wide dissemination among the general public of information on measures available to prevent acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.

Article 15 on Training of professionals: (1) Parties shall provide or strengthen appropriate training for the relevant professionals dealing with victims or perpetrators of all acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention, on the prevention and detection of such violence, equality between women and men, the needs and rights of victims, as well as on how to prevent secondary victimization. (2) Parties shall encourage that the training referred to in paragraph 1 includes training on coordinated multi-agency cooperation to allow for a comprehensive and appropriate handling of referrals in cases of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.

Article 16 on Preventive intervention and treatment programmes: (1) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to set up or support programmes aimed at teaching perpetrators of domestic violence to adopt non-violent behaviour in interpersonal relationships with a view to preventing further violence and changing violent behavioural patterns.

Article 18 on Protection and support: The provision of services shall not depend on the victim's willingness to press charges or testify against any perpetrator.

Article 19 on Information: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that victims receive adequate and timely information on available support services and legal measures in a language they understand.

Article 20 on General support services: (1) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that victims have access to services facilitating their recovery from violence. These measures should include, when necessary, services such as legal and psychological counselling, financial assistance, housing, education, training and assistance in finding employment.

Article 22 on Specialist support services (2) Parties shall provide or arrange for specialist women's support services to all women victims of violence and their children;

Article 23 on Shelters: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting-up of appropriate, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers to provide safe accommodation for and to reach out pro-actively to victims, especially women and their children.

Article 24 on Telephone helplines: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to set up state-wide round-the-clock (24/7) telephone helplines free of charge to provide advice to callers, confidentially or with due regard for their anonymity, in relation to all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.

Article 25 on Support for victims of sexual violence: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide for the setting up of appropriate, easily accessible rape crisis or sexual violence referral centres for victims in sufficient numbers to provide for medical and forensic examination, trauma support and counselling for victims

Article 27 on Reporting: Parties shall take the necessary measures to encourage any person witness to the commission of acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention or who has reasonable grounds to believe that such an act may be committed, or that further acts of violence are to be expected, to report this to the competent organizations or authorities.

Article 32 on Civil consequences of forced marriages: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that marriages concluded under force may be voidable, annulled or dissolved without undue financial or administrative burden placed on the victim.

Article 33 on Psychological violence: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of seriously impairing a person's psychological integrity through coercion or threats is criminalized.

Article 34 on Stalking: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of repeatedly engaging in threatening conduct directed at another person, causing her or him to fear for her or his safety, is criminalized.

Article 35 on Physical violence: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of committing acts of physical violence against another person is criminalized.

Article 36 on Sexual violence, including rape: (1) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the following intentional conducts are criminalized: (a) engaging in non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a sexual nature of the body of another person with any bodily part or object; (b) engaging in other non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a person; (c) causing another person to engage in non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a third person. (2) Consent must be given voluntarily as the result of the person's free will assessed in the context of the surrounding circumstances. (3) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the provisions of paragraph 1 also apply to acts committed against former or current spouses or partners as recognized by internal law.

Article 37 on Forced marriage: (1) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of forcing an adult or a child to enter into a marriage is criminalized. (2) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the intentional conduct of luring an adult or a child to the territory of a Party or State, other than the one she or he resides in, with the purpose of forcing this adult or child to enter into a marriage is criminalized.

Article 39 on Forced abortion and forced sterilization: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that the following intentional conducts are criminalized: a) performing an abortion on a woman without her prior and informed consent; b) performing surgery which has the purpose or effect of terminating a woman's capacity to naturally reproduce without her prior and informed consent or understanding of the procedure.

Article 40 on Sexual harassment: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment, is subject to criminal or other legal sanction.

Article 41 on Aiding or abetting and attempt: Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish as an offence, when committed intentionally, aiding or abetting the commission of the offences established in accordance with Articles 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38.a and 39 of this Convention. (2) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish as offences, when committed intentionally, attempts to commit the offences established in accordance with Articles 35, 36, 37, 38.a and 39 of this Convention.

Article 42 on Unacceptable justifications for crimes, including crimes committed in the name of so-called “honour crimes”: (1) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that, in criminal proceedings initiated following the commission of any of the acts of violence covered by the scope of this

Convention, culture, custom, religion, tradition or so-called “honour” shall not be regarded as justification for such acts. This cover, in particular, claims that the victim has transgressed cultural, religious, social or traditional norms or customs of appropriate behaviour. (2) Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that incitement by any person of a child to commit any of the acts referred to in paragraph 1 shall not diminish the criminal liability of that person for the acts committed.

Article 57 on Legal aid: Parties shall provide for the right to legal assistance and to free legal aid for victims under the conditions provided by their internal law.

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