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POLICY BRIEF

SOCIAL SERVICES FOR WOMEN WHO SUFFERED GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief summarises the findings of ongoing monitoring conducted by the informal Network against Gender-based Violence against Women and Girls in the Western Balkans (WB) of the quality of social services available to women and children who have suffered gender-based violence as per required international and national standards. Findings are based on the results of 2021 comparative survey implemented in 6 WB countries with participation of 476 women survivors of GBV who received support from WCSOs and obtained services in the Social Welfare Centres¹ as well as 2020 mapping of rehabilitation and reintegration services for women survivors of violence in the WB region².

LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

All Western Balkan (WB) countries, including Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia have ratified or committed to implementing the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention, IC).³ The IC sets forth clear guidelines regarding prevention, protection, support, legal measures, and monitoring mechanisms for combating gender-based violence. Chapter IV on Protection and Support, requires establishing proper mechanisms to provide effective cooperation between all relevant state agencies, including civil society organisations (CSOs), to protect and support survivors and witnesses of all forms of violence.⁴ Most countries have established commitments to providing social services through additional laws and policies.⁵

¹ Full report Serbia available via [link](#), full report Albania [link](#), full report N. Macedonia [link](#), full report Montenegro [link](#), full report Kosovo [link](#), full report Bosnia and Herzegovina [link](#).

² Kosovo mapping services [link](#), BiH mapping [link](#), N. Macedonia mapping [link](#), Montenegro mapping [link](#), Albania mapping [link](#), Serbia mapping [link](#)

³ Council of Europe, [Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence](#), 2011. All have signed except Kosovo, which cannot due to its political status. However, Kosovo's authorities have committed to implementing it as part of its Constitution.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ For example, in 2019 Kosovo amended its Criminal Code to specify an act of domestic violence as a criminal offense and is presently amending its legal and policy framework to be aligned with the IC. Prior laws and



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REGIONAL FINDINGS

Overall, monitoring of social services undertaken in 2020-2021 suggests that comprehensive case management remains weak in all WB countries. Each woman needs to receive an individual case management plan⁶ and receive support for rehabilitation and reintegration. However, these are rarely created and when they are, women are seldom adequately consulted in the process. Legal and psychological counselling is under-funded and inaccessible to many persons who have suffered violence. Financial assistance and social housing are largely non-existent across the region; where they do exist, they are difficult to access. The COVID-19 pandemic has reduced dramatically victims' access to social housing and made services even more inaccessible. Access for women with disabilities to services is extremely limited to non-existent, given architectural barriers. Roma women and other national minorities face difficulties accessing services due to language, prejudices, inadequate services, and poor capacities of the Safe houses regarding number, age, and sex of their children.

Additionally, most CSWs do not have regulated obligatory vocational training for social workers, and the services provided vary shelter by shelter. Training on a victim-centred approach with attention to trauma has not been institutionalised for current or future professional social workers. In this context, experienced women's rights CSOs (WCSOs) continue to provide essential services, which also enable them to monitor the implementation of laws and policies and the performance of social service providers. WCSOs designed and established first specialised support services for women who survived violence in WB countries (same as in the whole world) and provided such services for decades without state funding and full recognition of their expertise in the field of GBV. WCSOs also struggle to secure sufficient financing, particularly for comprehensive rehabilitation and reintegration programmes as foreseen by the IC.

The tables below summarize social service availability in the Western Balkans. The first table, Summary of Findings on Availability of Social Services summarizes the prevalence of services in the Western Balkans. All Western Balkan countries are failing to provide adequate case management to victims of domestic violence⁷. Protections for domestic violence victims exist in all the Western Balkans country's legal systems [except Montenegro]. But these laws lack implementation and coordination mechanisms and are not all fully aligned with IC Standards. Roughly half of Western Balkan countries have multidisciplinary systems that coordinate social services but most of these systems are not functional and inconsistent (except Albania and Serbia⁸). Across the region, there is not enough funding for social services and the governments do not adequately fund CSWs and their staff⁹. All Western Balkans countries lack

policies also foresaw such services, such as the [National Strategy of the Republic of Kosovo on Protection from Domestic Violence and Action Plan](#), 2016-2020.

⁶ In Serbia this is obligatory practice according to the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence (article 31) but monitoring results are indicating at least one third of the survivors lacks individual plans for protection and support, monitoring report available via link: <https://www.womenngo.org.rs/en/policy-activities/advocacy/1804-2021-awc-report-on-the-implementation-of-the-law-on-prevention-of-domestic-violence-2020>

⁷ For example, in Serbia, Special report prepared by the Protector of the Citizens in cooperation with Autonomous Women's Centre confirmed that the content of the Individual plan for survivors is inadequate, lacks all necessary protection measures as well as support services. Please see: <https://www.womenngo.org.rs/en/news/1623-uneven-implementation-of-the-law-on-prevention-of-domestic-violence-in-the-area-of-the-city-of-belgrade>

⁸ In Serbia, multidisciplinary system is coordinated by the basic prosecution office, not SCW.

⁹ GREVIO 2018 baseline report for Montenegro, section Financial resources: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-montenegro/16808e5614>; GREVIO 2017 baseline report for Albania, section Financial resources: <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-first-baseline-report-on-albania/16807688a7>; GREVIO 2020 baseline report for Serbia, section Financial resources: https://www.womenngo.org.rs/images/GREVIO/GREVIO_Report_on_Serbia.pdf;

a consistent system for tracking domestic violence cases; Albania is the only country in the Western Balkans that has a data tracking system for case management.

Most Western Balkan countries have very low rates of social service availability per IC Standards. Despite the efforts made by Coordination Referral Mechanisms and Interdisciplinary Technical Team members to address the needs of specific GBV cases in Albania, survivors of violence have not always benefited from support services¹⁰. Free legal aid is centralized in those big municipalities where UNDP and the Ministry of Justice have invested financial support and human resources. Whereas in those municipalities where such investment is not made, free legal aid is not offered according to the legal obligations of the respective Law No. 111/2017¹¹. Bosnia and Herzegovina have very weak social service availability, with only 43% of victims receiving a case management plans, and only 9.5% of victims provided with safe housing options. In Kosovo, 50% of victims are provided with a case management plan but its numbers go down when it comes to specific services such as financial aid (40.6%) and resources for children (35%). Montenegro's strongest social service availability is informing the victim of their rights (50%) and providing housing options (50%) but Montenegro only provided 19.4% of victims with adequate case management. North Macedonia informs 53% of victims of their rights, and makes case management plans for 47% of victims but only provides financial and employment services for 15% and 13% of victims. Lastly, Serbia, survivors indicated poor social service availability, with only 25.4% of victims being given a case management plan and only 18.5% of victims are informed about services for children¹². The detailed findings for each country are found in the tables below.

Table 1. Summary of Comparative Survey Findings on Availability of Social Services

Country	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Does the country provide adequate case management to victims?	No	No	No	No	No	No
Are protections for victims of domestic violence	Yes	Yes, lacks implementation and coordination	Yes, but improvements needed as per IC and lacks implementation	No	Yes, new law adopted in 2021	Yes, lacks implementation and coordination ¹³

¹⁰ [HRDC Stakeholder REPORT](#) on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence and Domestic Violence.

¹¹ [Shadow Report](#) on The Implementation of Recommendations Addressed To Albania By The Committee Of The Parties To The Council Of Europe Convention On Preventing And Combatting Violence Against Women And Domestic Violence 2018-2020

¹² It should be noted that the findings are based on the responses of 59 AWC service users who survived long term violence and experiencing complex life circumstances. Monitoring of 2020 official data indicates that in 70% of newly reported cases the individual plan for protection and support was developed. But even official data confirmed extremely low participation of (0,5%) women survivors in individual plan development. More information available in the monitoring report: https://www.womenngo.org.rs/images/resurs-centar/AWC_Ninth_Report_on_Independent_Monitoring_2020.pdf

¹³ Lack of rehabilitation and integration services, especially in poor municipalities, which is 70% of municipalities in Serbia (services are funded from the local budgets and certain services from public transfers aimed at social protection from national to local level).

institutionalized by law?			on and coordination			
Do appropriate multidisciplinary services exist?	Yes	No	Yes, but inconsistent or not functional	No, not fully aligned with IC standards	No	Yes, lacks implementation ¹⁴
Has an adequate budget been allocated for domestic violence services?	No	No	No	No	No	No
Are there adequate data tracking systems for case management?	Yes, difficulties with consistency	No	No	No	No	No

Table 2. Social Service Availability according to the comparative survey findings as per IC Standards¹⁵

Country	Albania	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Kosovo	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
Did the case manager make a plan for each person who has suffered violence?	57%	43%	50%	19.4%	47%	25.4%
Did the case manager inform the person of all of their rights according to IC guidelines?	100%	31%	57.2%	50%	53%	33.9%
Did the social services centre inform the person who suffered violence about psychosocial support options?	100%	25%	45.8%	28.95%	34%	40.7%
Did social services provide the person who suffered violence with emergency housing options?	46%	45%	57%	46.67% ¹⁶	36%	25%

¹⁴ Obligation according to the Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence but not fully and properly implemented, please see: <https://www.womenngo.org.rs/en/policy-activities/advocacy/1804-2021-awc-report-on-the-implementation-of-the-law-on-prevention-of-domestic-violence-2020>

¹⁵ Percentages refer to the percentage of monitored cases in which the IC standards were met. Albania n=91, BiH = 84, Kosovo n =90, Montenegro n= 66, North Macedonia n= 86, Serbia n=59.

¹⁶ Shelter services are provided by NGOs, but they are licensed to be part of the social protection system.

Did social services provide the person who suffered violence with long term housing options?	11%	9.5%	7%	0%	8%	1.7%
Did social services provide the person who suffered violence with financial aid (Fin) and employment (Emp) options?	Fin: 71% Emp: 57%	Fin: 55% Emp: 9.5%	Fin: 40.6% Emp: 20%	Fin: 52,17% Emp: 26%	Fin: 15% Emp: 13%	Fin: 27% Emp: 10%
Did the social services provide support and resources for children of persons who suffered violence?	60%	29.5%	35%	75%	22%	18.5%

Table 3. Overall assessment of CSW responses in relation to the needs of women beneficiaries.¹⁷

WB Region	Number of women survivors who evaluated received CSW services	Level of satisfaction of service users with CSW services
TOTAL	476	1. very unsatisfactory – 75 (17,48%) 2. unsatisfactory – 60 (13,99%) 3. somewhat satisfactory - 100 (23,31%) 4. satisfactory - 126 (29,37%) 5. highly satisfactory - 53 (12,35%) 6. no answer – 15 (3,50%)

SOCIAL SERVICES IN WB COUNTRIES

Monitoring by WCSOs has revealed the following regarding the quality of social services in each country. The general findings were presented in the previous section and this section focuses on areas where the countries are different.

Albania

Case management for persons who have suffered violence in Albania is institutionalised in laws and policies. The Prime Minister and Council of Ministers recently reviewed and expanded the duties of local coordinators for domestic violence.¹⁸ Legal requirements for local coordination mechanisms and CSWs have helped improve address of domestic violence.¹⁹ All 61 municipalities have appointed Gender Equality Employees, several of whom also serve as Local Coordinators for Domestic Violence issues (LCDV). Also, the amended Law 9669/2016 “On measures against violence in family relations” has established Coordinated Referral

¹⁷ Full report Serbia available via [link](#), full report Albania [link](#), full report N. Macedonia [link](#), full report Montenegro [link](#), full report Kosovo [link](#), full report Bosnia and Hercegovina [link](#).

¹⁸ Albania Implementation Recommendations Istanbul Convention, [Report on the Implementation of Recommendations Addressed to Albania by the Committee of the Parties of Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combatting Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence \(Istanbul Convention\)](#), 2021.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Mechanisms of Domestic Violence' Cases (CRM) at the local level.²⁰ CRMs are obliged to identify, report, and treat cases of violence against women as specified in the IC.²¹ Yet, case management remains weak and inconsistent, largely due to inadequate budget allocations. Rehabilitation and reintegration services remain particularly insufficient. Most social services are provided by local WCSOs, which depend on international donor funds. Albanian law mandates LCDVs to manage data entry into a coordinated REVALB data system, managed by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection for case management.²² However, some municipalities report delays in data entry and the systems usage remains inconsistent across the country.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Gender Action Plan aims to harmonise domestic violence laws at all levels with international standards.²³ It includes training of professionals, as well as rehabilitation and reintegration of survivors. Budget allocations are inadequate to support services mandated by law. CSWs in Bosnia and Herzegovina lack coordination with other government institutions and struggle with implementing the domestic violence law. They do not have the knowledge and capacities to assist persons who have suffered violence needing shelter. Social workers are not provided with consistent education on how to treat persons who have suffered violence. The feminist WCSOs that can provide training to CSWs do not receive enough state funding for this. Another significant problem is the complex structure of reporting and coordination that leads to gaps in services. Monitoring suggests that only one-third of the victims approaching CSWs receive information regarding their legal rights. CSWs are underfunded and do not have the critical knowledge or infrastructure to support victims of domestic violence.

Kosovo

Kosovo's legislation only focuses on domestic violence and ignores all other forms of gender-based violence. Kosovo's law also lacks a gender-sensitive framework. Currently, Kosovo is amending its law on domestic violence. WCSOs have called for it to be expanded to address all forms of gender-based violence as per the IC, as well as for the draft law on social services to be amended to include to gender-based violence. Kosovo has had strategies on Protection from Domestic Violence, which have aimed to create rehabilitation services, increase services at the municipal level, allocate funds for long-term rehabilitation, and integrate policies for rehabilitation among various centres. Unfortunately, these have not been implemented.²⁴ Coordinated referral mechanisms exist in some municipalities, but most are weak, and the quality of practice differs as they do not have a clear legal mandate. Inadequate budget exists for services. Training for social workers is inconsistent and inadequate at best. No set criteria define the education obligations for social workers. This leads to inadequate services and poor to non-existent case management. Data systems for case management are weak and hardly used.

Montenegro

The Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare oversees the implementation of the Strategy on Protection from Domestic Violence. The national policies established in the legislation are not

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² REVALB is a specifically designed system for maintaining data related to case management of domestic violence cases, using a multi-sectoral approach by Coordinated Referral Mechanisms at the local level.

²³ Preventing and combating gender-based violence, including domestic violence and trafficking in human beings [Gender Action Plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2018-2022](#).

²⁴ Investigation, Prosecution, Procedural Law and Protective Measures, [From Laws to Action](#), 2021.

fully aligned with IC standards and do not recognise all forms of violence against women. The Ministry does not have the financial resources to implement the Strategy and mostly relies on WCSOs to provide resources and services for victims. As a result of poor funding and no institutionalised model for training CSW case managers, CSWs do not provide adequate services to victims. CSWs are very passive and do not inform victims of their legal rights or provide them with adequate case management as per the IC. As a reason for this, they often state that case managers are overloaded with a large number of cases. Tellingly, WCSOs that are trained to assist women receive more cases than CSWs. When comparing the figures on the number of cases handled by one case manager in the CSW²⁵ compared to cases handled by a case manager in the WCSO, the number of cases handled by the CSW is lower than the WCSO.

North Macedonia

North Macedonia ratified the IC in 2017 and created a National Action Plan for implementation adopted by the government in 2018. Recently, the government has adopted a new law titled "Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence". The Law includes all forms of violence against women. It also introduces "consent" in defining rape. It introduces the reintegration of women victims in Article 99. However, the government adopted the Law with no financial obligations. The Ministry of Labour and Social Policy opened 11 new specialised services in 2019, managed by CSWs locally, but most of these services are not operational as CSWs do not have human or financial resources for providing these specialized services. Thus, the government still largely relies on WCSOs to finance social services with donor support. Insufficient funding remains one of the most significant challenges in addressing gender-based violence. CSWs lack a coordinated process to treat all victims. Right now, CSWs are only treating physical violence and are not addressing psychological issues, rehabilitation and reintegration, financial assistance, employment, and housing. CSWs are not providing persons who have suffered violence with proper case management and an individual action plan. The case managers are overwhelmed and underfunded, especially in rural areas. There is insufficient monitoring of cases across the country and no database or case management tracking exists.

Serbia

Written in gender neutral manner, the Law for Prevention of Domestic Violence (2017), avoided to ensure full recognition of the gendered nature of abusive relationships and linkages with the inequality between women and men. AWC's monitoring results demonstrated that the law is not properly implemented across various municipalities and fails to ensure protection of all women and children across the country who have experienced violence²⁶. The Law prescribes that the police, public prosecutors, courts, and centers for social work are in charge of the prevention of domestic violence and for providing support for survivors. The law mandates judges, prosecutors and police officers who proceed in the GBV cases to attend specialised GBV training programs but not CSW professionals. Since the adoption of the new law number of reported GBV cases increased. Due to the lack of funding and employment ban in public administration there is insufficient number of professionals in CSWs to deal with the GBV and cases in general. Lack of resources and trained professionals lead to more focused CSWs emergency interventions leaving women survivors without long-term support and proper assistance in accessing rehabilitation and reintegration services (which are also poorly geographically distributed or non-existent). Additionally, the system lacks social services that provide resources to child witness of domestic violence.

²⁵ Data provided by representatives of the Ministry of Finance and Social Welfare.

²⁶ Monitoring reports available via AWC web page: <https://www.womenngo.org.rs/en/independent-reports-on-law-on-prevention-of-dv>

Conclusion

This brief summarizes findings from the monitoring of social services across the Western Balkans. Overall, monitoring suggests that case management and service availability remains very weak to non-existent throughout the WB. Laws and policies, including secondary legislation obliging training and adequate capacities among social workers, remain inadequate in most countries, as per the IC. Budget allocations are far from sufficient. Governments rely on WCSOs, but do not adequately fund them (except in Kosovo) or utilise their expertise. When governments have involved WCSOs in legal drafting processes and implementation (Albania, Kosovo) there was greater success in funding CSWs and greater satisfaction with their services.

Recommendations

- Based on gender analysis, (national and/or local) governments need to allocate adequate resources for providing comprehensive emergency, rehabilitation, and reintegration services in line with IC requirements for persons who have suffered all forms gender-based violence.
- Governments need to require minimum educational qualifications and training for social service case managers, based on the IC and a victim-centred approach.
- Governments need to ensure consultation with WCSOs that have expertise in these issues in drafting and implementing laws related to addressing gender-based violence; this includes allocating resources to support them and their expertise.
- The EU can pressure WB governments to address shortcoming in social protection services for persons who have suffered gender-based violence through forthcoming annual country reports, political dialogues with each country, and its external financing related to enhancing social protection.