

Webinar Report: “State Funding for SOS Helplines in the Western Balkans and Republic of Moldova”

The webinar “*State Funding for SOS Helplines in the Western Balkans and Republic of Moldova*” took place online on 12th of December (Tuesday) from 3pm to 5pmCET.

All Western Balkan governments have ratified and/or adopted into their legal frameworks the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (known as the “Istanbul Convention”). As per the Istanbul Convention, governments should fund non-governmental women’s rights civil society organizations (WCOSs) and recognizing they are key actors and partners in advancing women’s human rights and gender equality. Moreover, ensuring funding for commitments under the Istanbul Convention should be an objective and result of gender responsive budgeting.

The WCOSs representatives from the region spoke about their everyday challenges and how do they deal with lack of funding as key agents and partners in addressing gender-based violence and furthering gender equality. The webinar was moderated by **Visnja Bacanovic from Gender Knowledge Hub**.

The aims of the webinar were:

1. Present the findings from the GBWN policy brief related to funding of SOS helplines, one of specialized services for combating gender-based violence in the Western Balkans and Republic of Moldova which emphasized that funding and adequate resources for that, as well as the recognition of Women’s Civil Society Organizations (WCOSs), are or should be at the core of Gender-Responsive Budgeting (GRB). 2022 assessment did the mapping the SOS helpline and the structure of the service per country, collected the data about the number of calls, service providers and annual budget, including the sources of funding and explored further development of methodology – general and specialized services.
2. Explore together the priorities for the funding of SOS helplines and address some of the questions such as:
 - *How can we calculate the funds needed for the development and increased accessibility of services?*
 - *How can we measure service effectiveness and quality?*
 - *What needs to be considered regarding the lack of data and performance indicators for better advocacy of the funding of SOS helplines?*

After the introduction of key findings from the pilot assessment, we heard from the following representatives of the WCOSs from the Western Balkans and Republic of Moldova:

- **Daniela Dabija**, Manager of the Trust Phone for Women and Girls, La Strada Moldova

La Strada Moldova as part of La Strada International, a European NGO Platform against human trafficking, that works from a human rights perspective in support of trafficked persons. The platform aims to prevent human trafficking and to protect and realize trafficked persons' rights. This is done by providing access to adequate assistance and support to victims, and via information and knowledge exchange, capacity building of NGOs and other stakeholders and cross-sectoral cooperation. Focus is on monitoring and advocacy for change to ensure accountability for the effective implementation of European Anti-Trafficking policies and regulations.

Key facts:

- The service was firstly created by La Strada but now it's funded by the state.
- There is a support team managed and funded just by La Strada.
- 4 psychologists and 1 manager
- At most 26 calls for one day, 1600 calls in a year
- The number of calls varies depending on the season - they have the most calls in the autumn (wine season), for summer the least.

- **Nataša Mujkanović**, Safe House Coordinator, Fondacija lokalne demokratije, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The Foundation of Local Democracy is a local non-governmental organization that has 20 years of experience in designing, coordinating, managing and providing technical and personnel support for various projects and programs. The primary focus of our work is in the protection, promotion and advancement of human rights, especially rights of victims of violence based on gender, community building, creating institutional capacity for networking and development, and leading partner. This kind of focus of our organization has resulted in the fact that we have become an unavoidable partner of government institutions and the initiator and coordinator of system solutions in the field of human rights.

Key facts:

- The SOS hotline started in 2004. The phone is active 24/7. Primarily it was for urgent calls, when someone called we sent the police.
- 100 calls a month in average/ yearly 16 000 calls.
- 4 coordinators that are working in shifts.
- Gender Center is financing technical support.

- **Jovana Spremo**, Safe House Coordinator and **Mirzeta Tomljanović**, Safe House Technical Coordinator, Fondacija Lara, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Women's organizations Lara from Bijeljina is a non-governmental organization that has been operating since 1998. Since its foundation, "Lara" has been working on developing programs for the protection of women from all forms of gender-based violence and empowering women for political and other forms of public action. It is the first women's NGO in BiH to establish a shelter for victims of human trafficking (in 2000), where it provided assistance to nearly 200 women. By advocating for the adoption of better laws, by educating officials and preventing sexual exploitation of women and girls, especially among school youth, Lara significantly contributed and contributes to the reduction of this form of violence against women in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Key facts:

- 24/7 Available and covers the whole territory of Serbia
- Trained consultants for working on the SOS helpline
- Completely voluntary work - no budget allocations for the purpose of financing the SOS helpline
- 16 500 calls for this year (2023)

- **Savka Todorovska** and **Ruzica Pinzovska**, NSRR - National Council for Gender Equality, North Macedonia

NSRR - National Council for Gender Equality is a national, multi-ethnic and multi-generational network, creatively oriented towards the future. The organization strives to achieve gender equality, development, protection of women's rights and peace. The National Council for Gender Equality is a network of around 116 local formal and informal women's organizations and groups from urban and rural areas in the country. The National Council for Gender Equality (NSRR) was established in October 1994 and grew into one of the largest women's networks in the Republic of Macedonia. Members of the network are women of different ages, social and educational levels, ethnicity and religion.

Key facts:

- Within the NSRR, the 24/7 free mobile SOS line operates in 4 languages: Macedonian, Albanian, Roma, and Turkish, with a dedicated team of 6 operators.
- NSRR methodology when creating the budget for the SOS line is according to the number of human resources and overhead costs of the SOS line in order to ensure a functional and accessible line 24/7.
- 1994 - establishment of the first helpline for women victims of domestic violence in Skopje supported by the Dutch Inter-Church Organization, contributing 10,000

marks for its creation and an additional 10,000 marks were distributed for the purchase and establishment of the first shelter, still operational today.

- **Biljana Stepanov** – Director of Women's Support Center and Board President of SOS Vojvodina Network, Serbia

The Women's Support Center is a non-governmental and non-profit organization whose goal is to improve the position of women through the organization of various educational, promotional, advisory, research and other activities and contribute to the establishment of gender equality and the policy of equal opportunities, especially in the local community and in the region.

Key facts:

- The center exists for 11 years, funded by 5 women CSOs;
- Licensed from the ministry;
- They are all employed and have no volunteers;
- Annually more than 15000 services, for 10 months this year they have had 1307 calls;
- Funded only by donors. Funding of WCSOs in Serbia is very sporadic and very small.

- **Ejnxh Pepa** - Programme Coordinator, Counselling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG)

The Counselling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG) was established in 1996 as a civic response to the omnipresent violence against women, deeply rooted in the country's patriarchal traditions. The CLWG's primary activity is to offer psychological, social, and legal counseling to victims and survivors of violence. For more than two decades 148,000 women and girls have benefitted from this direct assistance offered through our SOS helpline service and our in-house face-to face counseling. After signing an agreement with the Albanian Ministry of Health and Social Protection in 2016, the helpline telephone service now serves as the singular National Hotline for Victims of Abuse, through the free of charge number 116117.

Key facts:

- In 2019 after lobbying and intense advocacy – 10% of funding was giving from the state for the social fund (shelters for victims and helplines);
- In 2023 the government covers up to 30% of the helplines, but only the limited number of staff; rest of the funds need to be raised from donors (project based is very challenging for sustainability, donors retract from funding services as helplines);

