

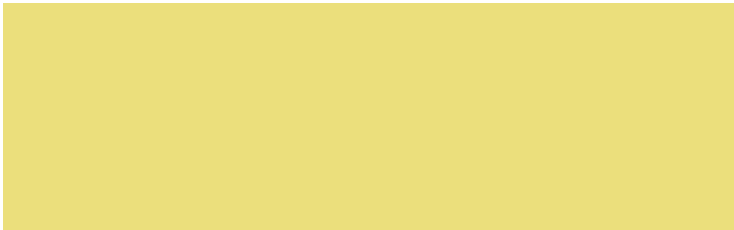
THE GENDERED MATTER OF VIOLENCE

GOOD PRACTICE AND LESSONS LEARNED FROM BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA, KOSOVO AND SERBIA



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1. PREFACE

Counteracting violence against women and supporting women who have survived violence has always been at the core of women's movements and organisations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia. If women are not free in their own homes, at their workplaces or in the streets, if they are not given the fundamental right to integrity of their own bodies – how can they start considering entering into politics, engaging in peace negotiations, or in other ways influencing their communities and society at large.

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Kvinna till Kvinna) was founded while supporting and working together with women's groups in Bosnia-Herzegovi

na in 1993 and in Kosovo and Serbia in 1994. Since 2009, Kvinna till Kvinna and partner organisations have been working specifically with advocacy towards EU institutions, consistently bringing up gender based violence and violence against women as issues of fundamental rights as well as litmus tests for the rule of law. Issues that should be at the core of EU support to the Western Balkans. In this publication we have documented our joint

lessons learned from twenty-five years of collaboration with the women's movement in the Western Balkans. ■



Lena Ag | Secretary General





2. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Many women in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia are living with painful memories of the Yugoslav wars that took place in the 1990s and the abuse they were subjected to. Women's experiences of the wars have largely been ignored, and very few women from the region were present at the peace negotiations that decided how the conflicts were to be solved. The peace agreement for Bosnia-Herzegovina, the Dayton Peace Accords¹ (1995), was drafted in a way that reinforces the fragmentation of different ethnic groups, something

¹The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina

that has hindered Bosnia-Herzegovina's reconstruction process. The agreement also failed to include a gender perspective. Similarly, in 2005, Kosovo Albanians and Serbs negotiated Kosovo's future political status. And once again, despite demands made by the women's movement, there were no women present.

Even after the wars, women have largely been excluded from the official reconstruction processes. As women are already underrepresented in political positions it becomes particularly problematic when international mediators only address political and military representatives without actively seeking input from women; also after key resolutions such as UNSCR 1325² on women, peace and security have been adopted. However, many women have found their platform for engagement and influence in civil society organisations. When it comes to peacebuilding and reconciliation, the women's movements in the three countries have played an important role, not least in making contact with women from different ethnic groups early on, and fighting together for human rights and against recurrent nationalist tendencies.

During the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina, more than 2.2 million³ people, i.e half of the population, were forced to flee their homes and approximately 100,000 people were killed. It is estimated that at least 20,000 women were subjected to sexual violence, according to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. Twenty years later, the large majority of these women have still not received any form of redress, and they are often stigmatized, whereas only a small number of perpetrators have been convicted. Similarly, during the 1998-1999 war in Kosovo, thousands

of women were subjected to violence, sexual violence and/or were killed. Even more were forced to flee from their homes. The majority of the refugees were Kosovo Albanians, but other minorities – such as the Roma – were also displaced.

Working for political as well as moral accountability for the wars is difficult and often dangerous in the whole region. In Serbia, for example, a few peace and human rights organisations – mainly headed by women – and a couple of small political parties advocate for Serbia to come to terms with its involvement in the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s. These human rights defenders are constantly accused of anti-Serbian propaganda by leading politicians, and are subjected to harassment, threats, violence and vilification in the media. The security situation for women human rights' defenders throughout the region is generally problematic. ■

² UN Security Council 1325 on Women, Peace and Security stresses the importance of women's equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security. <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/wps/>

³ The number varies depending on the source. This number is on the lower end of the scale.



3. WHAT IS GENDER BASED VIOLENCE AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN?

Gender based violence consists of acts that hurt, threaten, violate, force or restrict a person, and which are based in a gendered power structure. This structure contains perceptions of masculinity and femininity which include a rank order of genders and thus a power imbalance.

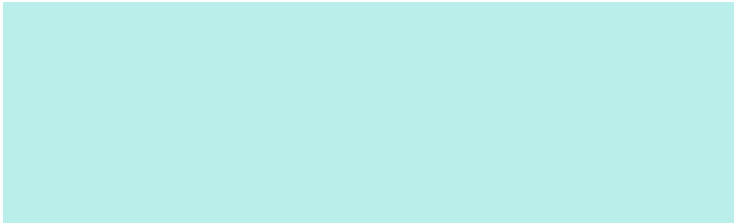
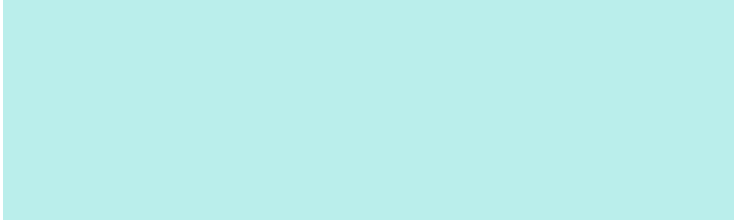
The concept of gender based violence includes different types of violence

targeting individuals or groups, perpetrated by different types of actors in a variety of settings. Kvinna till Kvinna recognises that the gendered power structure interacts with other power structures derived from, for example, class, age and ethnicity. A majority of the work with gender based violence that Kvinna till Kvinna and partner organisations are involved in addresses men's violence against women, which is gender based violence that targets women and girls.

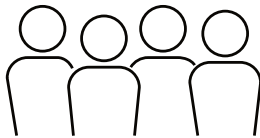
A significant part of gender based violence in general, and violence against women and girls in particular, is sexual violence. Sexual violence is violence that takes a sexual expression, such as rape, sexual abuse and sexual harassment. The offence is not an expression of sex-

uality, but of power and control; it is a sexual expression of aggression, which should not be confused with sexuality.

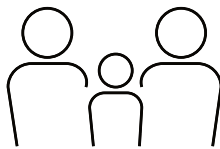
By using the term gender based violence we acknowledge that both women and men can be survivors/victims, as well as perpetrators of gender based violence. At the same time the vast majority of all gender based violence is perpetrated by men and targets women and girls. By using the term gender based violence we also emphasise that one can be targeted because of one's gender identity, sexuality or for not accepting the expectations, norms and roles that society attributes to women and men. We recognise that it is up to the person subjected to violence to choose whether they identify as a survivor or victim and therefore we use both terms. ■



■ **STATE AND
INSTITUTIONAL
LEVEL**



■ **COMMUNITY
LEVEL**



■ **INDIVIDUAL
LEVEL**

4. TOWARDS A PARADIGM SHIFT

The women's movement is well aware that the general level of gender based violence is raised in conflict affected areas. The militarisation itself is connected to a stereotyping of genders, and an increased access to small arms exposes women to increased danger in both public and private spheres. It is in this context that Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations operate, both providing support to survivors/victims⁴ of violence, as well as working towards the elimination of gender based violence

⁴ A person subjected to violence has the right to define their experience, for example whether they identify as a survivor or a victim.



There are numerous difficulties we stumble upon in our work. Some of the key ones are the culture of blaming the victim, stigmas, and other social norms; lack of knowledge of the law by officials; an unclear definition of sexual harassment in the criminal code, which makes it difficult for officials to understand what it is; the lack of good data collection systems and case management electronic systems by institutions, which makes it difficult to monitor cases and their progress; lack of sustainable funding for shelters, though it has improved; and poor rehabilitation and reintegration programmes for persons who have suffered violence, which makes it difficult for them to deal with trauma and move forward with their lives after violence has occurred.

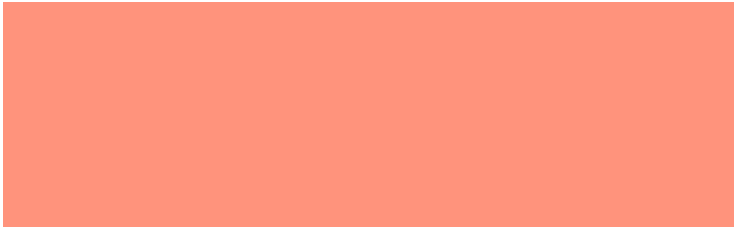
Nicole Farnsworth, Kosovo Women's Network

perpetrated in close relationships, in the community and by the state. To a large degree, this consists of men's violence against their female partners, but it also includes violence against LGBTQI persons, violence directed against women human rights defenders, as well as harmful traditional practices such as honour crimes.

The aim of this booklet is to share experiences and practices regarding work on gender based violence between women's organisations in different regions. It presents real and recent cases of how women's organisations in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia work to prevent, respond to and counteract gender based violence. Their work is carried out on different levels and addresses institutions, states and communities, as well as individuals. Through inter-sectoral partnerships, training of professionals and advocacy towards governments and judiciary, they are pushing for long-lasting structural change. By raising awareness about gender based violence and challenging norms of masculinity and femininity, they are constantly changing the public perception of gender based violence from a private matter into that of a criminal offence, and reducing the stigma often placed on survivors/victims. By providing gender sensitive support services to survivors/victims, they make an immediate change in people's lives. They also provide safe meeting spaces and tools for empowerment for survivors/victims of violence, as well as for themselves as women human rights defenders.

Creating areas where women feel safe, in which they can empower themselves and each other, in solidarity, is the common ground in the work of the women's organisations that Kvinna till Kvinna cooperates with, and a starting point in their work to improve local communities, as well as policies and legislation in relation to gender based violence and women's rights.

The women's organisations featured in this booklet are working towards a paradigm shift, where security means security for all and where women have increased power. ■



5. FEATURED ORGANISATIONS

BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

United Women, Banja Luka, works to strengthen women's rights and gender equality. The organisation provides legal assistance to women who have experienced violence. United Women advocates for authorities to work more efficiently with the prevention of violence against women and to increase public awareness of the issue. The organisation also seeks to increase women's participation in politics and works with court monitoring.

Center of Legal Assistance for Women (CLA), Zenica, is a centre for women's rights that directly assists women in exercising their rights and access to justice, including free legal advice, both face-to-face and online, as well as court monitoring. They have set up educational, online learning platforms targeting the main stakeholders and authorities dealing with human rights and gender based violence, to sensitise professionals on these issues. CLA also works to improve gender equality policy and works for peacebuilding with a focus on women's rights.

Budućnost, Modriča, supports women who have been subjected to violence. Budućnost runs a hotline and a shelter offering various forms of therapy and legal advice. The organisation works to prevent violence against women, and supports women in politics and in society at large. In 2010, Budućnost opened Bosnia-Herzegovina's first men's centre as part of its work to change attitudes of men as perpetrators of violence. Budućnost also organises projects on peacebuilding and seeks to increase women's awareness of their rights.

Zenski Centar, Trebinje, focuses mainly on violence against women and empowerment of rural women. Since 2002, Ženski Centar runs a women's centre and provides legal aid, psycho-social support and healthcare for women, as well as training for economic empowerment. The organisation also works with advocacy and has opened a meeting space, where women from vulnerable groups meet, exhibit and sell handicrafts.

Foundation Lara, Bijeljina, works against human trafficking and gender based

violence and with assisting survivors/ victims. Lara runs a women's centre and a safe house in Bijeljina and supports women with legal aid. It has also advocated for improved legal protection for women. The organisation also works with issues concerning local reconciliation, peacebuilding and dealing with the past.

KOSOVO

Medica Kosova, in Gjakova, supports women who suffer from traumas after being subjected to rape and other types of sexual violence during the conflict. Medica Kosovo offers rehabilitation programs that include legal support, psycho-social workshops and individual consultations. The organisation has contributed to getting people to talk about the sexual violence committed during the war, something that has been a taboo subject. Medica Kosovo has been instrumental in the process of improving the legal framework for survivors of war rape and has been working to make EULEX, the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, investigate these cases as possible war crimes.

Kosovo Women's Network (KWN), Pristina, is a network with more than 115 women's organisations, including organisations of all ethnic groups from throughout Kosovo. KWN runs campaigns, conducts research and supports, protects and promotes the rights and interests of women and girls throughout Kosovo. KWN supports cooperation between women's organisations. KWN works to increase women's political participation, improve people's access to health care, prevent gender based violence, and empower women economically.

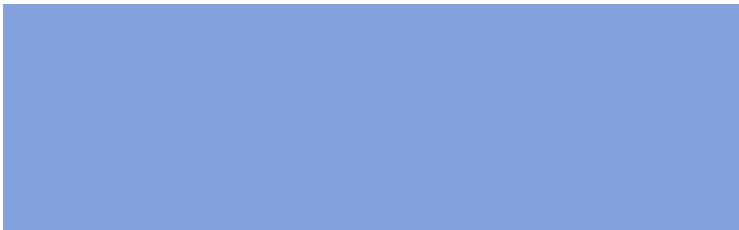
SERBIA

Autonomous Women's Center (AWC), Belgrade, offers various types of support to women who are victims of violence, and educates public officers and institution employees about how to prevent and handle violence against women. AWC coordinates the Women against Violence Network (see also below). AWC conducts comprehensive advocacy work to improve legislation on violence against women, and women's rights in

Serbia. In 2011, AWC founded "the Observatory" an independent expert body for monitoring of gender based violence, as part of the implementation of the Istanbul convention, together with the European Women's Lobby.

Women Against Violence Network, coordinated by AWC, is a coalition of 25 specialised women's civil society organisations from 19 towns in Serbia that provide individual support to women and work on changing the social context to decrease violence against women in Serbia. ■





6. DRIVING CHANGE AT ALL LEVELS

6.1 Advocacy and institutional transformation – working on the state and institutional level

Persistent advocacy and awareness-raising are key in the process of improving laws, holding the state accountable and creating long lasting change within state authorities, law-enforcement bodies, educational institutions and health institutions. Women’s organisations do this by, for example, forming inter-sectoral

partnerships and providing training and offering advice for leaders and professionals, and by forming monitoring teams and holding institutions accountable.

Pushing for increased participation of women in politics and in peace processes is also an important step on the way to a society where security means security for all, and where gender based violence and violence against women is high on the agenda. In a sense, reduced violence and women's increased participation in society are mutually reinforcing, since when women are free from violence, and threats of violence, and have their rights acknowledged and respected, they can participate on equal terms to influence societal change.

Modrica model – local multi-sectoral teams, Budućnost, Bosnia-Herzegovina

In the small town of Modriča, two girls had been sexually abused by their stepfather for months. In 2010, one of the girls confided in her teacher, who luckily had attended one of Budućnost's workshops on the prevention of gender based violence, and so the teacher contacted the organisation for advice. After the case was reported, the stepfather gained the support of the local community and politicians through a petition. Despite this, Budućnost's activists managed to work closely together with the local prosecutor's office, the social welfare centre and the police to ensure the prosecution of the stepfather, and the protection of the girls. The stepfather was soon sentenced to serve 11 years in prison.

After having been tested in a few other municipalities, and thanks to the advocacy efforts of Budućnost, this good practice led to the adoption of what became known as the Modrica model for how to address cases of violence step-by-step. The model

” The network continually monitors the institutions that have jurisdiction in cases of domestic and intimate partner violence and writes appeals in the event of any inadequate or unprofessional conduct, mostly directed at the Ombudsman in order to control the conduct of institutions in cases of femicide. The Network has also organised protests demanding punishment for those held accountable in the institutions for neglect or inadequate conduct. In most of these cases, the perpetrator was reported to the authorities.

Svjetlana Timotić,
Women Against Violence Network



involves joint interventions and cooperation of various institutions and professions in solving the problem of gender based violence. It defines the responsibility of each stakeholder, i.e. multi-sectoral teams (an advisory group, monitoring and mobile teams) whose aim is to provide help and support to survivors/victims. This model is also used by United Women among other organisations in other parts of the country.

Budućnost activists are proud to say that their greatest achievement was incorporating the multi-sectoral cooperation in the entity level Law of Protection from Domestic Violence, adopted in 2012. As a result, institutions have adopted by-laws, and an agreement between the Ministry of Police, Ministry of Justice and Ministry of Health and

Social Welfare centres was signed. Based on that, each stakeholder and responsible ministry has developed a plan of support for survivors/victims. For example, if a survivor/victim reports the violence or goes to the health centre to seek help, staff there are obliged to take care of her, instruct her and inform the competent bodies such as the police and centres for social work. Also, there is an advisory body comprising directors of the institutions responsible, and a mobile team consisting of professionals from all institutions to whom the case is assigned. The main responsibility lies with the president of the assembly or the mayor of each municipality, as the highest authority in the local community.

"Thanks to our persistence, knowledge and abilities we were able to persuade

the local authorities to take responsibility for gender based violence through the signing of protocols with all relevant institutions. It would be logical if these policies remained, and we did not have to remind institutions on their roles and responsibilities. However, lessons learned over the years and our experience have shown that the adopted laws, regulations or procedures mean nothing if they are not properly implemented. That is why we are constantly on alert, following the situation, monitoring the work of institutions responsible, and in some cases, building capacities of civil servants.” says the Director of Budućnost, Gordana Vidovic.

Economic empowerment of survivors/victims, Zenski Centar, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Zenski Centar (Women’s centre) works in one of the most underdeveloped regions in Bosnia-Herzegovina where programmes of support for rural women living in poverty are practically non-existent. To support survivors/ victims in their efforts to reach economic independence from their perpetrators, Zenski Centar have advocated for social support packages targeting women survivors/victims of violence to be allocated in local municipal budgets. The organisation has been strategically effective in integrating and linking social enterprising models and women’s economic empowerment with counteracting and preventing violence against women.

According to Zenski Centar, the economic independence of women, as well as coordinated community responses, are key to an improvement in living conditions and the reduction of poverty of rural women and women survivors/ victims of gender based violence.

A multidisciplinary support network, Zenski Centar, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Zenski Centar applies a multi-disciplinary approach, involving the municipality, local prosecutor’s office, the social welfare centre, the police, health centers, as well as the local nursery school, elementary and high schools, the Red Cross and the media. They initiated the Protocol on Cooperation for the municipality of Trebinje in 2005 and the practice was soon established in neighbouring municipalities. A multi-disciplinary support network consists of a number of professionals from local institutions. Their meetings are held once every two months, or more often in urgent cases. In practice, this cooperation means that as soon as a case of violence against women is reported, the police patrol informs other team members. Hospitals must provide free health checks and consequently issue a note about any injuries.

Zenski Centar was able to help the Trebinje hospital to acquire an ultrasound with a vaginal probe. Consequently, ultrasounds and gynaecological examinations for survivors/victims of gender based violence and in the maternity hospital are free. Zenski Centar urged the police to introduce the use of drawings to make the listing of injuries easier. Free nurseries, even private ones, are available for children from families where violence occurs, while the Red Cross contributes with free clothes and medication. However, Zenski Centar states that the main challenge they face in their work is the implementation of the multi-disciplinary approach in practice and the fact that the staff within the institutions are constantly changing. They point out that it is important to maintain the continuity

of good cooperation with the institutions. For this reason, Zenski Centar has published a brochure that promotes this model, intended for local institutions, which includes the positive aspects of cooperation and the results achieved to date along with recommendations for improvement.

Anti-trafficking monitoring group, Lara, Bosnia-Herzegovina

Between 2005 and 2015, Foundation Lara organised an anti-trafficking monitoring group, which brought together representatives of key institutions such as the police, the State Investigation and Protection Agency, prosecutors' offices, social work centres and Lara staff. The initiative to start a monitoring group came from a meeting between Lara and representatives of institutions from northeast Bosnia-Herzegovina. At the time, Lara had already established a good cooperation with all institutions involved in the prevention of human trafficking for the purpose of forced prostitution. For example, the police officers already visited Lara's shelter regularly, due to the previously agreed practice that statements of survivors/victims could be recorded at the premises of organisations providing shelters; in other words, in a friendly environment. In cooperation with the police, Lara had also at that time organised workshops on the prevention of trafficking in schools.

"Thanks to this previously established cooperation, it wasn't very difficult for us to bring together representatives of institutions to a joint meeting once a month, or every two months. The most difficult part was to ensure the participation of representatives of social welfare centres and prosecutor's offices.

Social welfare centres have been slow in embracing the obligations towards survivors/victims of human trafficking, but eventually we succeeded in convincing them of the important role they play," explains Radmila Zigic from Lara.

According to Radmila Zigic, these meetings were successful because they were held with the intention to initiate the exchange of experiences and information among the key stakeholders. The aim was to develop a good interconnection between institutions from different administrative regions. Over time, the working group meetings became very important for the representatives of institutions, who understood the benefits of the meetings and readily responded to Lara's invitations.

Monitoring courts, United Women Banja Luka and Center of Legal Assistance for Women, Bosnia-Herzegovina

When women human rights defenders stepped in to courts for the first time a few years ago for the purpose of monitoring cases of gender based violence, neither the prosecutors nor judges were very pleased. It was not common for citizens and civil society to act as watchdogs of the judiciary and court practices, and there was little understanding of the importance of monitoring court proceedings in cases of gender based violence and intimate partner violence, echoing the widespread view that violence that is perpetrated by an intimate partner or within the family is a "private problem".

Women's civil society organisations did not lack arguments. Since the war ended in 1995, they have been the main, often sole, actors providing legal aid,



psychological support and safe houses for the survivors/victims; they were, therefore, well aware of the numerous challenges women were facing while seeking protection from violence. Not only is there a serious lack of comprehensive, sensitised and specialised social support to women survivors/victims of violence, but the low number of investigations and prosecutions in cases of gender based violence discourages women from reporting acts of violence. These are just some of the reasons why gender based violence, despite the comprehensive institutional framework, remains widespread. The first monitoring results showed many gaps in the application of legal standards, including the lack of a gender sensitive approach, such as placing a minor survivor/victim of sexual abuse on the same bench in court as the perpetrator.

Aleksandra Petric from United Women Banja Luka says that since 2011, when

women's civil society organisations set foot in the courts for the first time, greater attention is being paid to the survivor/victim. "We have an educational role in the courtroom towards judges and prosecutors. They're starting to realise that domestic violence can no longer be neglected, nor perceived as socially acceptable behaviour. That is what is important to us," she explains.

Women's organisations involved in the monitoring meet regularly at the so-called monitoring team meetings in order to assess legal processes. They carefully evaluate each case and propose recommendations for further improvement of the court practice and overall institutional response. Although there have been signs and confirmation that the judiciary acknowledges the important role of women's organisations in the courts, there are still concerns, not least about the lenient sentencing policy. The monitoring team points out that

85 per cent of the court cases lead only to a probationary sentence, and avoid issuing criminal sanctions and various protection measures for the survivor/victim that presuppose removing abusers from the family.

Court Monitor Zvezdana Marković underlines that the entire system is, unfortunately, benevolent to the perpetrators. "There is a rhetoric of forgiveness, of reconciliation with the victims, even justification in some cases, followed by the low penalty practice," she says.

"The reasoning of the court is often as follows: he's a family man, he behaved properly in the courtroom, or he's from a prominent family," explains Meliha Sendić, the director of the Center of Legal Assistance for Women

Involving survivors/victims in awareness raising, Medica Kosova, Kosovo

Medica Kosova runs a centre for female survivors/victims of rape and other types of sexual violence during the conflict, where they may speak openly about their traumas without fear of public stigma. The organisation aims to transform society by deconstructing the patriarchal norms deeply rooted in the lives of female and male individuals as well as in the community, by challenging the dominant stereotypical image of women raped during the war, as well as empowering women who have experienced various kinds of gender based violence, primarily wartime rape.

In 2011, one of the women who came regularly to Medica Kosova's centre decided to speak out in a TV show about her experience of rape during the war. For the first time, the silence on this

topic was publicly broken by a survivor/victim herself. Medica Kosova had tried to address sexual violence as a war crime and the legal status of women as war veterans, war invalids and civilian victims of war since 2003. They had worked methodically to influence politicians and the international community to really listen to the stories of survivors/victims and start advocating for their rights in public discourse and legal system, as well as to give them public recognition. They had not yet included survivors/victims directly in their advocacy.

"Advocacy starts by sharing with other organisations, then gradually involving institutions and then gradually involving the survivors. Once you involve survivors in advocacy activities, things change, you cannot jump to advocacy without really preparing the women for the advocacy process. The concern for the status of the survivors becomes real once the survivors start meeting with the public authorities. There is always a risk that the woman is yet again instrumentalised and manipulated for the wrong reasons, and becomes further traumatised by speaking publicly about what had happened to her. It is therefore important to make sure she is ready and empowered enough. Having celebrities and public authorities talking publicly about this issue helps a lot in your advocacy work and in your support with the women directly, because the women then feel that they are really receiving the highest public attention and realise that there is nothing they should be ashamed of," says Veprora Shehu, Executive Director of Medica Kosova. ■

6.2 Challenging perceptions of gender and gender based violence – working on the community level

Women's organisations work preventively to end gender based violence by raising awareness and challenging public perceptions of gender and gender based violence. They challenge their communities' views and treatment of perpetrators and survivors/victims of violence. Through their training and awareness-raising campaigns, targeting women and girls as well as men and boys, gender based violence is being viewed more and more as a criminal offence and less as a private matter.

Making men's violence against women a public matter, Autonomous Women's Center, Serbia

Autonomous Women's Center has managed to transform the dominant image of men's violence against women, especially in comparison to how it was previously perceived, namely as an internal family affair. In 2016, the Act on Preventing and Combating Domestic Violence was passed, and this fact, along with the more serious handling of the issue of violence against women, is the result of many years of hard work on the part of the women's movement. The most important change this Act introduced is the possibility of imposing an emergency restraining order, for the purpose of immediately removing the perpetrator from the victim's vicinity. If it is clear that violence can be perpetrated or already has been, or it can be repeated, the police are legally obliged to issue the order to remove the perpetrator. This contributes to removing the issue of gender based violence from the field of private

“ We believe the Network contributes to the prevention of violence against women, reduction of stereotypes and prejudice in society and an atmosphere in which violence against women is not just a personal matter but deserves public condemnation.

Snežana Jakovljević, Women Against Violence Network

and family affairs, where it is placed by the traditional patriarchal system.

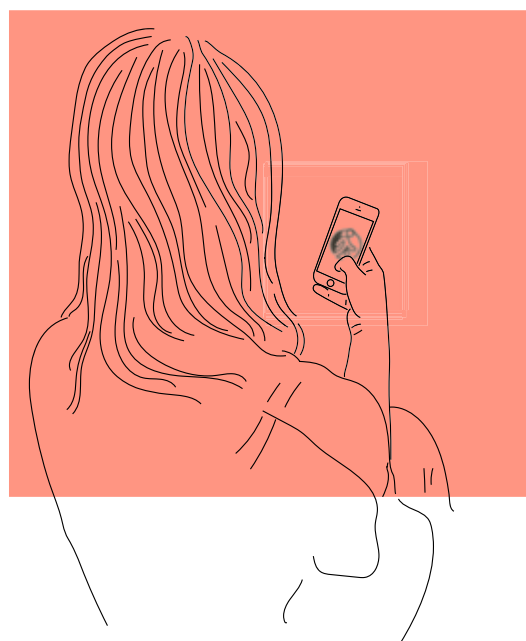
Removing stigma surrounding survivors/victims of sexual violence during war, Medica Kosova, Kosovo

Medica Kosova works to remove stigmas and taboos surrounding women who were raped during the war, helping them break out of the position of victim, a position that is deeply patriarchal and contributes to their subordination, isolation and dependency. According to Medica Kosova, the visibility of these women in the public discourse should be for the purpose of the recognition of their suffering and support of their reintegration into the society, and should not be exploited for political purposes.

“One of the key changes we achieved is empowering women to ignore social context and take care of themselves. Before, women were forced to stay at home because the family thought the victim would be pointed at and they would be disgraced, and the women obeyed. This has changed. Now, they don’t care. Women were concerned about what others were saying, especially in their families. Now they ignore that, now they try to protect their dignity. They try to protect their rights,” says Veproje Shehu, Executive Director of Medica Kosova.

Initiating a public discussion on sexual harassment, Kosovo Women’s Network, Kosovo

The Kosovo Women’s Network and its members have initiated a public discussion about sexual harassment, using online campaigns and research. This has led to the topic becoming much more present in the public sphere, and opened a space for women and girls to talk more freely about sexual harassment and even report it to the authorities, which did not happen



before. The aim of initiating public discussion is to prevent sexual harassment from occurring in the first place, even though this is difficult to measure.

The Kosovo Women’s Network recognises the needs and skills of a new generation of women, including how to use the internet safely, moving feminist discussions to online spaces, and making use of technologies in their work. An example of this is their collaboration with Girls Coding Kosovo, a KWN member, and Open Data Kosovo in creating a new application for smartphones, “Ec Shlire” (Walk Freely), which has enabled more people to report sexual harassment. They plan to use this in the future for advocating the improvement of public policies for preventing sexual harassment.

Campaigning door to door, Kosovo Women’s Network, Kosovo

Due to cultural and social expectations and pressure, women have not traditionally registered themselves as property owners or claimed their inheritance. As part of their strategy to contribute to the fulfilment of women’s rights to inheritance

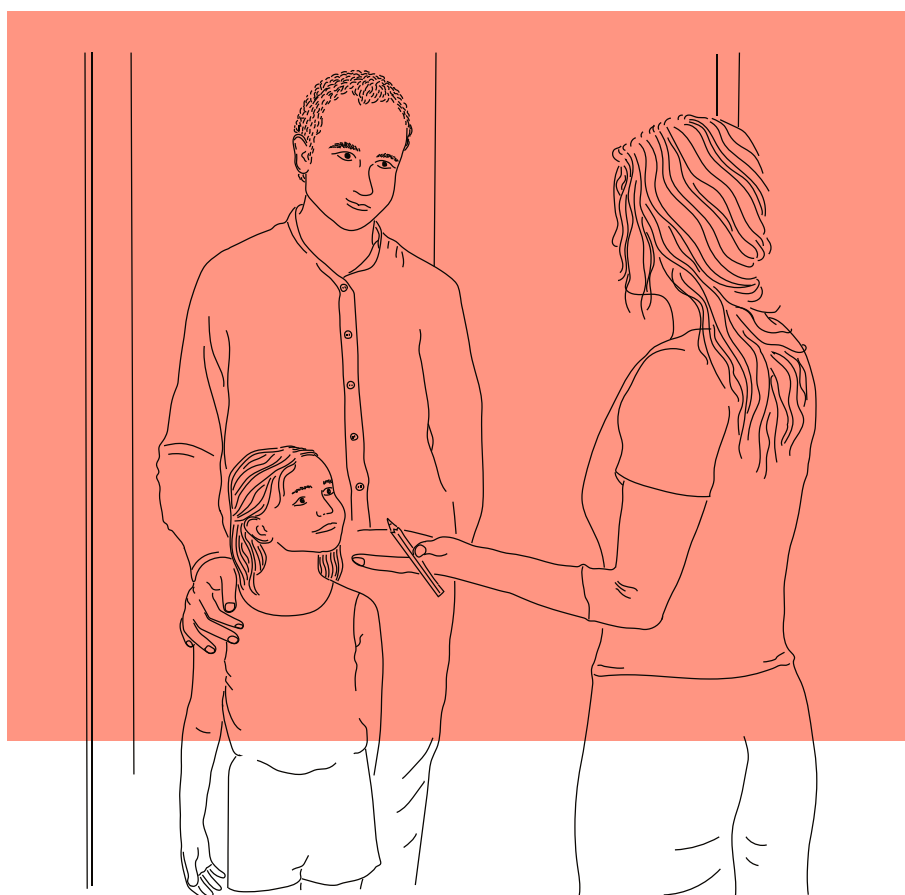
ce and property, the Kosovo Women's Network and its member organisations are conducting an extensive door-to-door campaign, informing thousands of women and men about the importance of women registering their property.

Not claiming these rights becomes an obstacle for women who want to leave their abusive husbands or families, since they are less likely to be able to support themselves financially in general, and more specifically, cannot claim their share of their home.

"We believe speaking with families is one of the best ways to contribute to social change. We then provide legal assistance and even assisting with paying the court fees (in some cases) that will enable women to register their property immediately. This has led to dozens of women registering their property in recent months, and we are aiming for more in

the near future," says Nicole Farnsworth, Program Manager and Lead Researcher at the Kosovo Women's Network.

The organisation has been advocating for several years that women's right to inheritance and property is a crucial issue, and finally the government of Kosovo and several donors are now focusing on this issue, including improving the legal and policy environment to make registering property and claiming an inheritance easier. The Kosovo Women's Network has worked closely with other actors, including the Agency for Gender Equality in the Prime Minister's Office, which put in place the current Administrative Instruction for the Joint Registration of Property. For a limited time, this Instruction has removed all fees on registering property jointly for spouses. This is an affirmative action to encourage more couples to register their property in the names of both spouses. ■





The main principle of the SOS telephone helpline is to respect the integrity of a woman and provide her with support. This is the key in the feminist principle, not to pressure the woman and force solutions on her, but to provide her with support, to empower her and help her to recognise her own resources. Also, the fact that she will not be judged, stigmatised or marginalised is very significant to them.

Vedrana Lacmanović, Autonomous Women's Center

6.3 Support services and empowerment – working on the individual level

Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations shelter, support and empower women and children that have been subjected to, or at risk of, gender based violence. Every survivor/victim is met with the assumption that she is resourceful and strong enough to find motivation and restore her life and is supported in these efforts. This approach gives the survivors/victims of gender based violence a proactive role by helping them empower themselves, take the initiative and become independent.

In addition, the leaders, staff and activists of the organisations providing support services need support themselves. They and other women's human rights defenders often live under, and are in opposition to, oppressive regimes and patriarchal traditions, which means that they are often subjected to threats and violence by people who feel threatened by their work. Also, as is often the case for those who listen to and empathise with people's experiences of being subjected to violence, they run the risk of experiencing secondary traumatisation. Taken together, these internal and external factors can create stress and lead to burnout. Networks and safe spaces where women human rights defenders can share experiences and develop strategies on how they can work with their own safety and well-being are crucial for them to be able to continue their important work. Creating alliances between activists



of different backgrounds, expertise and identities, as an expression of solidarity, can be a powerful tool for mutual support and empowerment.

Establishing trust in support services, Autonomous Women’s Center, Serbia

The Autonomous Women’s Center provides support to around 1,500 women annually, securing over 3,000 services of psychological support and over 2,000 legal services with the support of Kvinna till Kvinna and the OAK Foundation. One of the basic feminist principles underlying the psychological and legal support that Autonomous Women’s Center offers survivors/victims is believing in, and

not judging, the women they meet. This is significant for the quality of the support, since it helps establish a relation of trust that will let the woman articulate her own experience. It also creates an empowering solidarity among women.

“Many of our clients have turned to the police and centres for social welfare for protection from violence, but have only come across distrust and judgement. Often, these institutions do not believe in women’s statements, even in the cases when there is a court decision stating that a woman has suffered violence. The trust and support they receive from consultants and lawyers of the Autono



Autonomous Women's Center empowers them to represent themselves, to seek support and legal aid, but also to endure court procedures which are often long-lasting and wearisome," says Bobana Macanović from Autonomous Women's Center.

Through trust built with the trained staff and lawyers of the Autonomous Women's Center, survivors/victims start to take control over their own lives,

represent themselves, demand support and legal protection, but also to stay and endure the legal processes that are usually very painful and wearying. This methodology is an example of a feminist paradigm where no woman is objectified or instrumentalised. It is a process in which women become and remain agents: capable, strong and skilful enough to articulate their needs and the means for realisation of their needs.



Reaching out to survivors/victims of sexual violence, Medica Kosova, Kosovo

Through many years of work, the members of Medica Kosova have supported over 6,500 women whose personal histories have been marked by various war and post-war traumas. They use well-defined strategies for approaching women who survived sexual violence.

Until 2011, Medica Kosova suppor-

ted gynaecological care, travelling to villages with a mobile ambulance providing education on family planning, contraceptives, hygiene and preventive healthcare. A specific approach was provided for women survivors/victims of sexual violence. These women were still suffering from the violence they experienced during the conflict and were afraid of the vaginal examinations, so the doctors were carefully trained to use a psychosomatic approach. They did not push the women but used the monthly visits to talk to them and explain how important preventive examinations and ultrasounds are.

One of the lessons learned is that addressing these women merely as survivors/victims of sexual violence was not an option, since it would have the women running away because of the stigma, the fear of being labelled and the shame and the blame they were made to feel. Instead, Medica Kosova started working strategically on this topic in smaller groups of women, approaching sexual violence in a general manner, as a war crime that could happen to anyone.

"In this way we were earning their trust. In our culture, sexual violence is perceived more as a shame to the family than violence against the sexual integrity of a woman. This is why we needed to gain their trust first, so they would know that we were not judging them and that we were there to support them. Then they started individually to open up," explains the organisation's Executive Director, Vepror Shehu.

Medica Kosova have also integrated art therapy into their programmes, an idea that came from a woman who visited

their centre on a regular basis. "Some women aren't verbally equipped or are not very good at expressing themselves verbally so I use a lot of non-verbal techniques, such as art therapy. Drawing and painting can be a non-threatening form of communication that can help them come into contact with their feelings," says Emirjeta Kumnova, Medica Kosova.

Feminist care ethics, Women against Violence Network, Serbia

Since the very beginning, the Women Against Violence Network follows its own principles of "feminist care ethics" in its work. These are reflected in the member organisations' support services towards survivors/victims of men's violence.

"All of us who enter the network agree not to insist on data, that women may approach us anonymously and to respect diversity. We trust the woman. That is our common ground," says Aleksandra Nestorov, Women against Violence Network.

This principle is also reflected in the network's work with its own members, for example its programmes for the prevention of burnout, which defenders of women human rights, especially in the field of gender based violence, often experience.

"We provide a dignified support environment and appreciation for those who work with women who have survived violence, acknowledging how wearisome and hard their work is and organising different programmes for avoiding burnout," says Snežana Jakovljević.

"We wouldn't be able to survive in what we do if we didn't meet a few times a year

to talk about our experiences and our activities and offer each other support. Support is vital when you are opposing tradition, patriarchy and nationalism. Without it you feel alone and isolated, as in the case of violence, until you are extinguished," says Aleksandra Nestorov.

The Women Against Violence Network runs several different programmes that are continuously updated in accordance with the individual and collective needs expressed by activists. Activities include Integrated Security workshops for activists (introduced by Kvinna till Kvinna), supervision workshops for service providers, led by a psychotherapist, summer meetings for activists with self-care programmes and workshops on different issues.

Feminist care ethics also means respecting diversity and practising solidarity and empowerment within the network, for example concerning its distribution of power within the process of decentralisation of the network.

"We have made sure that some of the organisations for women with disabilities or for Romani women and other marginalised groups have entered the core of the organisation. It is not easy, it will take time but will be successful if we invest enough," says Vedrana Lacmanović.

Supporting survivors/victims of human trafficking, Lara, Bosnia-Herzegovina

A gender perspective is crucial for building trust and establishing good communication with the survivors/victims of trafficking that Lara meets. As women human rights defenders, the Lara staff and activists empathise with the survivors/victims and never approach them

bureaucratically or with prejudice. "Based on our experience, it is easier for a female victim of violence to establish communication with a woman than with a man. This does not mean in general that all women are gender sensitive and all men misogynistic, but only that gender roles in which we have been raised contain part of the prejudices that influence the work and actions of women and men and that is important to keep in mind when providing assistance to women survivors of violence to reduce or completely exclude any secondary victimisation," says an activist from Lara.

Lara first started supporting survivors/victims of trafficking in 2000, five years after the Dayton Peace Accords. The demand for trafficked women for the purpose of prostitution increased soon after the ending of the war, as peacekeepers, UN personnel, and civilian and military contractors came to Bosnia-Herzegovina.⁵ Corruption within the Bosnian police force allowed the trafficking of women and girls to flourish.⁶ At the time, human trafficking channels from Eastern Europe to Bosnia-Herzegovina passed through Bijeljina, the North-eastern city where Lara is based. In early 1999, around ten night clubs literally sprang up overnight in Bijeljina area, where over 150 women were forced to engage in prostitution.

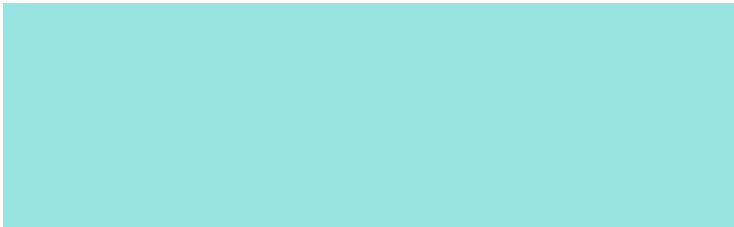
After one year of direct assistance and providing shelter for more than 40 victims of trafficking (2000-2001), Lara conducted its first successful awareness raising campaign. In 2003, they managed to raise enough funds to organise the work of the shelter and assistance provision in accordance with requirements and standards that were in force at that time. Until then, the entire team

of Lara had worked on a voluntary basis. "We wanted to make them feel at home. We treated them as equals, and provided them with the things they needed most, clothes, food, medical care, contact with their families. We accompanied them to the police station to give statements, and to the court, if they decided to testify," says an activist from Lara.

"The process of getting them to open up wasn't easy. In some cases, it took over 20 days for a girl to open up and voice her real story," says Zorica Stepanović, who worked at the shelter at the time. She says the recruitment scenario was always the same. Most survivors/victims were girls from poor families. Recruiters would find them easily and promise them a job abroad and a better future. Activists from Lara were aware that the first difficulty in communicating with a female survivor/victim of violence would be self-perceived guilt. On first contact, almost every woman would say: "I'm not a prostitute". Representatives of Lara would empathise with her and would eventually convince her that what happened was not her fault. They would also engage in conversation about her family, her life, her dreams and ambitions, anything that would connect them to each other and help her understand that she is not to be blamed for what happened to her. ■

⁵ Hopes betrayed: trafficking of women and girls to post-conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina for forced prostitution" New York, New York, Human Rights Watch, 2002 Nov. (Bosnia-Herzegovina Vol. 14, No. 9 (D)). <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/bosnia/Bosnia1102.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.hrw.org/reports/2002/bosnia/index.htm#TopOfPage>



” Kvinna till Kvinna’s support rests on feminist principles. They didn’t presume to know what we needed, but they asked what we needed. This was their approach to us and thus they became the key component for the growth and development of the women’s groups and movements in Serbia. Had it not been for that level of support, understanding and partnership which we received from this foundation, the women’s movement in Serbia would not be as it is today.

Aleksandra Nestorov,
Women Against Violence Network

7. CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the time of writing, almost 25 years have passed since Kvinna till Kvinna started collaborating with the vivid and resourceful women’s movement in the Western Balkans. These organisations, some of which are featured in this booklet, bring together women with an astonishing ability to take action for what they know is right.

As this booklet shows, they work simultaneously on both strategic and operational levels to change legislation as well as practices, and with personal meetings and comprehensive support to survivors/victims. They address gender based violence on individual,

community and state levels, with both reactive and preventive measures. Again, it is confirmed that a strong women's movement is essential for the work to end gender based violence.⁷

During this journey, we have all learned something, developed, and increased

our expertise in different fields. Kvinna till Kvinna has developed as an organisation, together with the partner organisations, and would not be what it is today without such fruitful and stimulating cooperations. ■

⁷ <http://www.genderanddevelopment.org/page/feminist-solidarity-and-collective-action-issue>

