



The Benefits and Challenges of Women's Networks in the Western Balkans and Turkey. A Comparative Report



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Abbreviations:

BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CSO	Civil Society Organisation
CSSP	Civil Society Strengthening Platform
DV	Domestic Violence
EU	European Union
GBV	Gender-based violence
GA	General Assembly
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
VAW	Violence against Women
WAVE	Women against Violence Europe

INTRODUCTION

This comparative report is prepared on behalf of the UN Women Project 'Support the establishment and strengthening of regional platforms of civil society organisations (with a special focus on organisations 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', under the programme "Ending Violence against Women: Implementing Norms, Changing Minds".

The comparative report focuses on identifying the gaps and patterns in the six Western Balkans countries and Turkey, regarding women's organisations practices towards networking, identifying the strengths and challenges of networks as well as the barriers in developing new ones. Furthermore, this report also provides an overview over existing barriers that prevent women from minority and disadvantaged groups to proactively participate within existing coalitions.

The report also provides information on the prevalence of women's organisations networks in the project countries, the benefits of working within a network and the needs of member organisations. Strengths, successes and challenges of working together are presented, as well as the nature of decision-making processes, representation of minority and disadvantaged groups in women's networks and strategic planning within network settings. Finally, this analysis emphasizes the possible barriers minority and disadvantaged groups of women might face concerning their full participation within existing networks.

METHODOLOGY

The comparative report is a joint effort between the WAVE office and project partner organisation Association Fenomena, Serbia - with Marija Petronijević being the data analyst and co-author. The methodology used for this report consists of three assessments in the form of three questionnaires prepared by the two partners, Association Fenomena Serbia and WAVE office.

The first two assessments analysing women's networks and women's organisations practices and attitudes towards networking look at determining the strengths and challenges of existing organisations, but also the barriers into developing new networks. The questionnaires also enquire about the decision-making process in networks, about the sufficient representation of all types of members and if current needs are being satisfied by networks. Furthermore, they assessed women's organisations (networks and single organisations) practices and attitudes towards networking in the project region and were sent to women's organisations/networks, currently CSSP partners.

The third assessment looks at the barriers preventing women from minorities and disadvantaged groups to proactively participate within existing networks or women's coalitions. The questionnaire respondents ranked from minority group organisations to single organisations and women's networks. The assessment looks at determining the interest of minority and disadvantaged groups to join a

network, and the network's inclusiveness when it comes to these groups in terms of strategy, decision-making process and access to information.

The following qualitative process was used for the preparation of the comparative report:

- Interviews with a total of 20 organisations, consisting of seven women's networks, 10 women's single organisations, two minority group organisations and one network focusing on marginalized groups in all seven partner countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Turkey,
- Data collection in the form of questionnaires, representing the assessment document, compiled by women's organisations,
- Analysing and comparing the received data.

WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS PRACTICES AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS NETWORKING

A) BENEFITS OF NETWORKING

According to women's CSOs in each targeted country, connecting with other women's organisations working in the violence against women field is a highly important element for their work. Women's organisations have identified key benefits of networking, among which: networks represent a form of empowerment of all groups of women, an effective mean of exercising collective power towards a common goal, they build capacity among they members, and they cover a significant part of the region or territory in which they activate.

Women's networks vary in size when it comes to their members, some count up to ten organisations, such as the networks from Albania and Montenegro, while others have many more members, as for example Serbia with 27 women's organisations. However, when taking the size of their territory into account, small networks have a proportionally equal coverage in their countries as the networks encompassing more member organisations cover a larger territory. The average number of network members in the analysed territory is 17.

Within the seven partner countries, the majority of the networks' members are women's CSOs. Some networks have only individual activists as members, such as women's network RAE 'First' in Montenegro. Other networks have mixed membership, such as the National Network to End Violence against Women and Domestic Violence 'Voice against Violence' in Macedonia, which encompasses 20-member organisations and three individual members. There have been three types of membership identified in the received answers: full membership¹, associated membership and networks consisting of individual members. Full membership has been identified amongst most networks, but exceptions have been encountered such as in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 'Safe Network' consists of eight full members and 13 associated member organisations.

The networks are mostly characterized by an even geographical distribution, as for example the 10 organisations part of AWEN Network in Albania are located in seven counties out of 12, from the north

¹ Full membership signifies that member organisations enjoy the full extent of their rights as well as obligations incorporated in the statutes of the networks.

to the south of the country. Another example is depicted in Illustration 1, which shows the geographical distribution of the network in Serbia whereby women's CSOs coverage reaches almost all parts of the country. The geographical distribution of women's networks highlights the importance of women's NGOs working together and being under the same umbrella, as jointly they can cover a significant part of territory. This idea is also highlighted in Article 22 of the Istanbul Convention, where parties of the Convention are 'to provide or arrange for, in an adequate geographical distribution, immediate, short and long-term specialist support services to any victim subjected to any of the acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention'. A 'well-resourced specialist support sector'² is best ensured by women's organisations and by support services provided, and it should be 'sufficiently spread throughout the country and accessible for all victims'³. Women's organisations/networks are an existing crucial resource for combating violence against women, contributing to the fulfilment of states' obligations under the Convention.



Illustration 1. – Geographical distribution of women CSOs part of the “Women Against Violence” Network in Serbia

All answers, including the ones from networks' representatives and representatives of women's organisations, indicate a clear willingness of women's CSOs to work together, to share knowledge and lobby under an 'umbrella' that shares the same values and aims. All women's CSOs have highlighted the importance of being open to integrate new organisations and continuously develop/grow

² Explanatory Report of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), pg. 80

³ Ibidem.

networks. Regardless of how many members networks have, similar patterns have been identified to the approach of networking, decision-making process and inclusiveness of networks.

There are no significant territorial variations across the different countries in the received answers between the seven partner organisations.

The main benefits identified by network coordinators (Table 1) and members of the networks (Table 2) in the questionnaires, are divided into four categories, and presented in the following tables.

CAPACITY BUILDING	• Exchange of different or similar experiences and new information • Mutual advice between women's NGOs • Burnout prevention • Building solidarity amongst women's NGOs
FUNDING AND SUSTAINABILITY	• Partnering in different projects, joint actions and projects • Joint fundraising • Continuation of feminist knowledge and practice in the field of violence against women
INCREASED VISIBILITY AND ADVOCACY	• Partnering in joint activities at a local and/or national level • Stronger representation in the public sphere, and advocating for better policies at a local and/or national level • Improved cooperation with local and/or national governments • Connecting and cooperating with public authorities on different issues
TECHNICAL AND LOGISTICAL SUPPORT	• Direct support to all members by the network staff • Coordinated activities amongst all members • Creating solutions to practical problems

Table 1. – Perspectives of networks' coordinators on the benefits of networks

CAPACITY BUILDING	• Improving strategies and coordination of women's CSOs response to violations of women's human rights • Sharing expertise and best practice examples in conducting different activities • Sharing skills for projects • Increased confidence among members of the networks • Personal empowerment
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	- Enhanced solidarity in the network, especially between majority and minority groups – majority groups learn from/about the experiences of minority groups - Training, seminars, conferences on a much bigger scale than one organisation alone could organize - Learning about different parts of the country, the problems and solutions enacted
ACCESS TO RESOURCES	- The possibility to have more support and access to resources - The possibility to make connections and improve contact with donors and other stakeholders - The possibility to access the human resources the network has to offer - The achievement of common goals is easier when different organisations are involved in the networks - Mutual collaboration
INCREASED VISIBILITY AND ADVOCACY	- The opportunity to raise and amplify the voice of each member organisation - Stronger and common positions towards authorities - Joint lobbying and advocacy activities to adopt/change or implement different laws - Greater visibility of joint activities in the media - Enhanced strength in communicating with institutions - Sense of unity in the public - Conducting joint initiatives, such as 'A Femicide Remembrance Day' was initiated by the network and accepted by the state, which would not be the case if one organisation alone would have started the same initiative⁴
ORGANISATIONAL SUPPORT	- Establishment of clear lines of communication within the network and between its members - Improved information flow between members - Increased support for members in solving specific cases

Table 2. – Members' perspectives on the benefits of women's networks

⁴ Organised by women's NGOs in Serbia.

B) DECISION-MAKING PROCESS, REPRESENTATION AND STRATEGIC PLANNING WITHIN NETWORKS

The interview results indicate that the following procedures are common practise within the networks in all seven partner countries: a solid decision-making structure, a process to decide the representation of different network-members and strategic planning. Without these key processes, a network cannot properly function and lacks accountability.

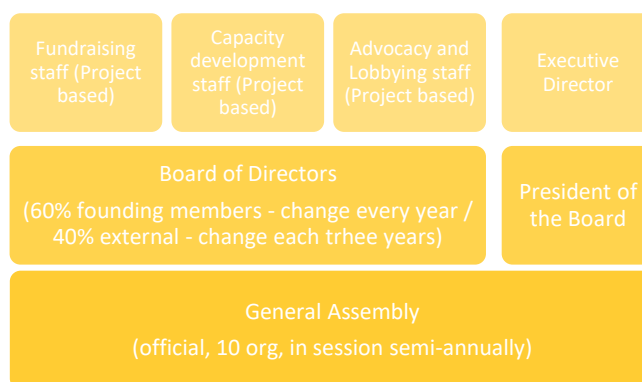
The decision-making process

Regarding the decision-making process within networks, the two most common key elements of the network's governance structure seem to be the General Assembly (GA), and the elected Board by the GA, responsible for key strategic decisions. The General Assembly appoints the Board of the network, usually comprised of seven or eight members, one of which being the president. This is the case for networks in Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia and Serbia. Different structures have been identified in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Turkey, where either all members vote (Montenegro), decisions are taken by the Secretariat of the Network (composed out of representatives of all members) in BiH, or decisions are taken by the Interim Assembly (responds to the requirements of the assembly components) and Main Assembly in Turkey.

In all the analysed networks, there are two main levels of authority and administration. The first level is the Assembly, consisting of all the member organisations' representatives. The Assembly chooses the advisory and managing bodies. The second level is represented by the Board (of directors) and Executive Director/Manager usually coming together as a second decision forum.

Furthermore, the structure of networks differs from one to another: some networks are formal while others are informal. Networks are often hierarchical, but smaller networks prefer a more horizontal structure; some prefer closed membership while others include outside parties/organisations/activists as part of their executive bodies; some networks have centralized and long-term coordination while others tend to rotate management more often. However, differences are not substantial.

The following illustrations represent examples of various network structures with a division of tasks and decision-making process in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Macedonia:



Graph 1. The decision-making structure of AWEN Network Albania

Chairing organisation

- Elected each 12 months by the Secretariat
- Informing members about activities plans and implementation

Secretariat of the Network

- Consisting of all network members
- Managing the functioning of the network

Graph 2. The decision-making structure of Safe Network in Bosnia and Herzegovina



Graph 3. The decision-making structure of the National Network to end Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ‘Voice against Violence’, Macedonia

Some networks have strict decision-making procedures, where each member organisation has one vote in the Assembly, and at least 51% of the votes are needed to take a decision. Other decisions are taken either by consensus or by the management staff. For example, in the Turkish network, the Assembly on Women’s Shelters and Solidarity Centers, when they need to decide on specific and urgent issues, everything is discussed through email (as it is quicker than waiting for the Annual Assembly), but these decisions always require unanimity. When it comes to the Albanian network, smaller scale decisions related to everyday activities are usually taken by the network’s management, this being the network’s Executive director.

Organisations pointed out that in some networks, an intensive process of mutual communication and discussions needs to take place, when it comes to decisions reached through consensus. This is the case,

for example, for the organisation National Council for Gender Equality in Macedonia, where consensus is always sought to reach common decisions and positions on questions related to women's rights and discrimination against women.

Moreover, it was also highlighted that the decision-making process in networks usually evolves and changes over time, in order to better fit the current needs of the networks, this being the case for example for the women's network in Turkey.

Strategic planning of networks

In terms of networks' strategic planning and establishing the overall aims and goals for the upcoming years, all networks have a specific process in place. The process requires inclusivity, i.e. involving all network actors, as well as board members, directors, staff and/or external experts. It was reported that the main aims and goals of a network are usually decided upon, during the creation of the network by its founding members. These aims are based on the needs of the group but can also be adjusted and updated at a later stage, if members decide and agree so. Furthermore, the strategic plan of networks is commonly discussed and adopted by their Assembly and included as one of the network's formal documents, together with the statutes of networks. This is the case, e.g. in the Serbian Women Against Violence Network, where, new member organisations have to accept and sign the "Rulebook of the Network and its Feminist principles of work" in order to join. Additionally, the Serbian network creates its strategic plan every three years, which is always discussed and adopted within the Assembly of the Network, composed of all member organisations, each member having one vote per organisation.

Equal representation of members in networks

Regarding equal participation of members within the network, the great majority of interviewed organisations believe that their voice is sufficiently represented in the network and that their organisation is involved in key strategic activities, as all strategic decisions are taken during annual assembly meetings. Stronger (in the sense of 'bigger and more experienced') organizations tend to have at times a more explicitly active role. This was stated for example by a women's organisation in Macedonia: "The voice of our organisation, as one of the oldest female NGOs in the country, has influenced all formal and informal networks we are part of⁵".

Nevertheless, despite a solid structure with clear decision-making processes, strategic planning and representation, networks can face at times difficulties and challenges as highlighted by some of the interviewees. When it comes to the inclusion of all members in the decision-making process, member organisations reported that, in some cases, this process was not yet democratic enough, and that members were not sufficiently involved. Certain respondents indicated an imbalance of power within their network, pointing out a higher level of responsiveness from networks towards the feedback received from larger and more powerful organisations, as opposed to the input received from smaller organisations. As mentioned, stronger organisations often tend to have a more active role and to be more fully represented at a national level. This was acknowledged for instance by the Serbian Women against Violence Network, who reported that the difference between their member organisations' capacity in terms of staff, funding, office, knowledge and experience, often led to an unequal distribution of responsibility and power. They further

⁵ National Council for Gender Equality, Macedonia

reported that they were actively working on this issue, and taking measures to decentralise the decision-making process, but that there was still need for further progress.

Some organisations emphasized the transparency and openness of their networks but stressed that members' involvement within the network often remains quite passive. CSSP partner in Kosovo highlighted the fact that they do receive all relevant information from the network they are part of, but it is up to member organisations to be actively involved in all or some parts of the strategic planning. This can often be quite difficult as each member has its own set of activities and agenda to carry out within their organisation, and most of them are frontline organisations working directly with victims of violence. Other organisations, as for example the Serbian partners, expressed their satisfaction in terms of the effective communication within the network, e.g. members are encouraged to freely express their opinions, but they stated that there was not always a follow-up on their feedback, feeling that their opinion was not always taken into consideration when deciding upon different pending issues.

Furthermore, other members criticised the way networks sometimes carry out their activities. They suggested that there is a tendency of networks to enter a 'routine' when carrying out their activities. For example, joint media statements or joint campaign initiatives have become regular practice, while less and less new and creative initiatives are being put into practice.

Based on these findings and comments, it can be concluded that the responsibility and involvement of each member organisation towards networks sometimes needs to be reconsidered. Likewise, the way the decision-making process is handled and presented by network coordinators must at times be updated and improved. It is therefore clear that a solid network structure requires the network to be transparent in its decisions and strategic planning, and at the same time to include as many opinions/feedbacks of members' as possible in the decision-making process.

C) THE NEED FOR ESTABLISHING NEW NETWORKS

Women's networks do not address the needs of their member organisations in the same manner and to the same extent in all analysed countries. However, all networks support their member organisations to some extent, for example, in advocacy activities at a central or local level, in fundraising activities or in providing capacity building activities, such as trainings, mentoring, study visits. Among the most common and important needs of women's organisations, the following can be highlighted based on the received responses:

- sharing experiences between women's organisations,
- the creation of common policies,
- the role of networks to create a permanent link of communication between civil society organisations and public authorities.

"These being among the most fundamental needs of women's organisations, we believe that the network satisfies its aims" stated the activist in Turkey.

About one third of interviewed organisations suggested there is a need for better mechanisms to be implemented by women's networks to encourage a more proactive participation of smaller organisations but also of new organisations joining the networks. Moreover, partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina, identified the need for women's networks to have a stronger and more regular presence

on the public scene, to ensure transparency and increased awareness about their work, by for example improving communication with the media. There is furthermore a constant need of all member organisations, to have a more active role in the development of their networks.

Less than one third of targeted organisations explicitly expressed the fact that their needs are not completely satisfied within their respective networks. These opinions can be justified by emphasizing the multiple, various and specific needs that each women's organisation part of a network has, which is strongly related to the lack of networks' capacity to actually gather all these inputs and properly implement them. Furthermore, sometimes the needs of women's organisations are not being met due to a lack of communication that sometimes exists among members of the same network or the due to unclear rules and procedures of networks.

There is a direct link between the establishment of new networks and members' organisations needs being met by current women's networks. Therefore, when women's organisations have been enquired about the need for the establishment of a new network, opinions were diverse. Some organisations, including the ones whose needs are not entirely satisfied in the existing network, do not see the necessity for a new network to be established. This is either because there are already several different existing networks (women, minorities, youth, etc.) or because they would rather either enlarge and strengthen the capacities of existing networks or reorganize and decentralize networks' activities and the decision-making process. Other organisations identified main barriers for forming new networks such as the number of members the current national network has, making it difficult for others to form their own network, but also the lack of financial resources ensuring the sustainability of networks. These barriers have also been identified when it comes to current networks, as two of the main causes of networks 'decline in power.

When specific issues of concern to women's organisations arise, ad hoc or informal networks are seen as possible solutions to address specific problems, if there is no network already working on the topic. In this scenario, organisations have not identified any particular barriers in forming either formal or informal new networks.

Other organisations do not consider it relevant for new networks to be created to address specific issues, due to the high-risk context in which women's rights organisations are currently working. This is the case of Turkey, where the existence of a state of emergency⁶ has directly hindered the work of activists and civil society organisations. In countries where repressive governments exist, and the exercise of human rights is limited, many rights-based civil society organisations are forced to shut down, the formation of a new informal or formal network is not seen as a possibility in such contexts. This however does not contradict the importance of having platforms where civil society organisations can come together to organise actions of solidarity and to discuss how to continue their work under repressive (hostile) conditions.

Overall, it can be concluded that apart from special political situations, women's networks are seen as a crucial element in the defence of women's human rights. Networks are an effective mean in exercising collective power and working together for a common goal, as well as a form of empowering

⁶ The state of emergency was lifted by the Turkish government in July 2018, two years after the coup attempt.

all groups of women. This idea is also proven by the number of women's networks, either formal or informal, existing in the seven analysed countries.

The following table presents data collected regarding the prevalence of various networks in each targeted territory:

ALBANIA	1. Albanian Woman Empowerment Network 2. The Network against Domestic Violence and Trafficking in Human Beings 3. Monitoring Network against Gender-Based Violence 4. The National Coalition of Anti-Trafficking Shelters
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	1. Women's Network of Bosnia and Herzegovina 2. Network of Women Police Officers 3. NGO Network "Ring" Against Trafficking of People 4. Network of Women in Business
KOSOVO	1. Women NGO network "Qeliza" - Gjakovë 2. Women's Network of Kosovo 3. Network of Youth NGOs
MACEDONIA	1. National Network to End Violence against Women and Domestic Violence "Voice against Violence" 2. National Network for Gender Equality
SERBIA	1. Roma Women's Network (Serbia), 2. Women in Black Network (international), 3. Women's Network of Zlatibor district (Serbia), 4. Women's Network of Rasina district (Serbia), 5. Informal Network of feminist organisations against femicide (Albania, Kosovo, Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia)
TURKEY	1. The Assembly of Women's Shelters and Solidarity Centers

Table 3. Women's CSOs regional networks in the Western Balkans and Turkey

D) STRENGTHS, SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES OF WOMEN'S NETWORKS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS AND TURKEY

Women activists from the Western Balkans and Turkey understand the significance and importance of networking, which is emphasised several times throughout this analysis. The “unification of NGOs and individual activists in order to improve the status of women and children,” as one activist states, produced several **key strengths** in this regard. Recognition of networks’ work allowed women’s CSOs to become key actors in promoting women’s human rights and a point of reference for key institutions in their country, including public administration, EU institutions and other private donors. Furthermore, the ability to influence key policy makers, and to lobby for better laws and law enforcement mechanisms at a local and/or national level is another valuable strength of women’s network.

Apart from the qualitative work women’s NGOs are undertaking, their strength is also recognized in the capacities and resources of networks, compared to smaller organisations. They offer a space for communication, joint activities or projects, as well as specialized expertise when it comes to particular social problems. Other strengths highlighted by partners are the historical continuity of their work in the GBV field, the varied platforms for sharing different experiences and the human resources to tackle the complex issues of GBV that networks offer.

Successful joint initiatives implemented within networks directly influence the impact women’s networks have in their countries. For example, in Macedonia, the network invests a lot to advocate for improved policies and conditions in terms of the services provided to women victims of gender-based violence. As a result, in 2016, a large number of Macedonian parliamentary political parties signed a joint declaration for the prevention and protection from different forms of violence against women and domestic violence, while in 2018, services for women are being established in three different regions in Macedonia.

Another advantage of women’s networks lies in the crucial role they can play for women’s organisations, in offering financial support or acting as mediators between small organisations and public authorities. Furthermore, networks represent a platform ensuring visibility at a national level, for all NGOs working in the area, and a unique voice to advocate and lobby for common issues encountered by women’s organisations at a local or national level. For example, when a draft law in November 2016 envisaged the suspension of sexual harassment offenses in Turkey if the crime occurred during marriage, 83 women organisations organised protests, which eventually led to the withdrawal of the law proposal.

When it comes to the **challenges** identified by network coordinators, they can be divided into internal and external challenges, the latter implying more serious consequences for the existence and survival of networks.

Some internal challenges identified by partners have to do with the complex work of coordinating a large number of organisations and/or individuals, in attracting or maintaining donors’ support as well as the need for more human resources to be able to effectively fulfil the aims of the network. As a result of the afore-mentioned challenges, there is an unequal distribution of power but also of responsibilities between member organisations. Another particular challenge encountered by our project partners, is the need to expand networks’ membership to include organisations specifically

working with women from minority and/or disadvantaged groups. Indeed, partnering with new CSOs that work on specific issues can increase the impact of their work/interventions and achieve faster results, as highlighted by the Albanian partners.

Some external challenges identified by the interviewed coordinators were related to the current political situation many women's networks/organisations find themselves in. The political situation in many of the Western Balkan countries and Turkey, as well as the economic conditions, are unfavourable and unstable, delaying specific policies regarding the prevention and tackling of VAW or withdrawing vital funds. The instable political climate and erratic government approaches in tackling VAW, makes it also very challenging to influence VAW policy making in an effective manner. Furthermore, there is a current tendency for right-wing governments to grow in power and receive populations' support. These kind of developments represent increasing threats to the women's movement and other human rights defenders, as it promotes traditional and conservative attitudes towards gender-specific policies. For example, in Serbia initiatives such as the abortion ban, and pro-birth policies are currently more often present in the general discourse of right-wing politicians.

Besides the rise of right-wing movements, unemployment and corruption are also issues that can negatively affect women's movements and feminist actions. In terms of corruption, for instance, as one of the interviewees testified, the "ruling party is distributing funds to loyal new founded or old (loyal) CSOs" while directors of some anti-violence centres become ruling party sympathisers and collaborators to get the benefits and funds of the party. In these conditions, in some countries a number of women's organisations were closed down and their work was banned by the government.

This only further proves that there is a crucial need for women's groups to join forces nowadays. It is now "much more important for these NGOs to come together and protest in these extraordinary circumstances," concludes the activist from Turkey.

ASSESSING THE BARRIERS PREVENTING WOMEN FROM MINORITY AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS TO PROACTIVELY PARTICIPATE WITHIN EXISTING COALITIONS, NETWORKS AND PLATFORMS AT A REGIONAL LEVEL

The final part of the research considers the role of minority and disadvantaged groups, organisations and activists in the women's movement, in particular when it comes to their role in networks and coalitions. For this part of the analysis, representatives of minority group organisations, networks which mainly have minority groups as members and other women's organisations were interviewed.

PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATION WITHIN EXISTING NETWORKS

Usually, women from minority and disadvantaged groups are involved in the work of women's networks, either as beneficiaries and/or involved in the decision-making process. These two forms of involvement do not mutually exclude each other, but rather happen simultaneously. Generally, women's organisations act as service providers ensuring effective support for all victims of violence,

including women from minority and/or disadvantaged groups⁷, and/or try to work with women's organisations representing these groups for a more effective and fast support of all women. Their form of involvement, though, varies from country to country.

In some networks all member organisations work with minority and/or disadvantaged groups of women and girls without distinguishing particularly between their beneficiaries, such as in Albania, Kosovo and Macedonia. In other networks, specialized organisations working with minority and/or disadvantaged women are founding members of the networks, such as in Serbia and Turkey. Some networks reach out to minority groups and their needs by mainly cooperating with minority organisations, external to the network, as it is the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro.

When disadvantaged/minority groups are not part of a network, it is common practice among organisations to cooperate with these organisations. Conferences, seminars, commemoration of important dates and joint projects are among the typical joint activities carried out with external organisations. When minority groups are network founders, the same sort of cooperation is usually happening. In times where the work of women's NGOs is at risk due to the political push-backs and where human rights activists face increased risks, solidarity and cooperation among all women's organisations becomes vital.

THE INTEREST AND INVOLVEMENT OF MINORITY AND DISADVANTAGED GROUPS IN NETWORKS

The third assessment looked also at evaluating the interest and actual involvement of minority and/or disadvantaged groups in participating within existing coalitions, networks and platforms at a regional level. The received answers highlight different ways of inclusion and different levels of interest of vulnerable groups to engage with women's networks/organisations.

As emphasized throughout the report, one of the advantages of women's networks is the significant territory they cover. The territorial coverage represents a factor that influences firstly the formation of networks, and secondly, in a certain manner, also the work between vulnerable group organisations and women's organisations/networks. Based on the received answers, it can be noted that in smaller countries, collaboration, as a form of networking, between minority/disadvantaged groups and women's networks/organisations is more frequent than in larger countries. For example, Roma Women's Network RAE in Montenegro, composed out of individual activists, collaborates with different women's NGOs such as Center for Roma Initiatives, Montenegrin Women's Lobby, or other Roma and Egyptian women experts. In Kosovo, minority group organisation Briga, operating in the Peja Region, is collaborating with the ERAC⁸ (Equal rights for all coalition) Coalition, that has 19 NGOs representing all NGOs at a local and regional level in Kosovo, and are little involved in networking with other NGOs. The organisation also collaborates with women's NGOs/women's activists from neighbouring countries such as Albania, Montenegro, Serbia. Furthermore, it can also be remarked the presence of informal women's networks/coalitions in the two countries rather than formal networks, impacting in the end the way NGOs work with each other.

⁷ WAVE – Doing it right: Making women's networks accessible. With a special focus on women from minority and disadvantaged groups, pg. 19

⁸ <http://equalrightsforallcoalition.com/en/publications/>

In larger countries, such as Albania, Serbia and Turkey, the tendency is to include minority/disadvantaged group organisations as members of the formal networks, if an interest exists. In this scenario, it can be distinguished between the interests of minority/disadvantaged groups to join different networks and the networks assessing the needs of these vulnerable groups, by co-opting these organisations to join the network or indirectly, by assessing these needs through its members who are directly involved in this type of work. When it comes to the Albanian context, AWEN Network identified that there have been informal interests from vulnerable women's groups to join the network but have not yet been formalised with an official request. Furthermore, AWEN Network has also highlighted that on a strategic level, the network gets inputs from different groups and stakeholders, including minority and disadvantaged groups. The needs of the above-mentioned groups are also assessed through member organisations, directly involved in this type of work, being reflected in the decision-making process. Similar process has also been identified in Turkey, where the Assembly on Women's Shelters and Solidarity Centers, have in their network organisations working with minority, disadvantaged groups of women but also refugee women. According to the needs and interest of a specific group, the Assembly determines the topics to be discussed in the meetings so that further actions to be taken in this perspective. This was, for example, the case of trans women that cannot be admitted in shelters due to legislative regulations, issue that was many times on the agenda of the Assembly.

Other organisations, such as the ones in Macedonia⁹, have identified that there is an interest of these groups to join the network, but in the last decade minority and disadvantaged group organisations are willingly acting as separate organisations. This is the result of a more responsive legislation to their needs, a more open society as well as available funds for the projects they are undertaking.

Furthermore, when asked to detail activities minority and disadvantaged groups take part in, some networks highlighted the little involvement of such groups but have nonetheless offered a set of examples of their joint efforts. In Albania, Roma women or LGBTQI women regularly engage in awareness raising campaigns, petitions, activism, or bring their expertise into reports for different national or international bodies. Women's organisations in Montenegro are working together on topics such as women and poverty, protection of labour rights and violence against women in general. In Serbia, organisations take part together in the 8th of March public walk. For Bosnia and Herzegovina, minority and disadvantaged group organisations are involved in writing joint project proposals with other women's NGOs, organizing different events or commemorating important international dates.

Generally, networks do not include minority and disadvantaged groups as a specific strategy, priority or goal. The overall impression is that minority organisations are welcome and involved in the work of women's networks, but networks do not state in their statutes as one of their goals to reach these types of organisations. When the assembly of networks or other specific bodies work on the annual priorities, minority related issues may be seen as priorities for specific activities amongst network members.

When minority and disadvantaged group organisations are formally part of networks, they participate in the decision-making process, influencing the strategies of networks or actively contributing to meetings, such as those aimed at project implementation. Women's networks take into consideration inputs received from experts representing different women's groups, and advice on how to develop

⁹ National Council for Gender Equality, Macedonia

them most effectively. Therefore, inclusion in the strategy of a network is an important element in gathering all perspectives at the table. This is of course an initiative that has to come both from women's networks as well as minority/disadvantaged group organisations.

Even though efforts are being made to include minority and disadvantaged group organisations in network's strategies, according to a minority group organisation in Serbia, these are usually insufficient, due to a lack of limited resources of the network. Moreover, a lack of transparency of the network's decision-making process and the network's way of working and engaging with women's NGOs can influence the interest of vulnerable groups to join the network.

When it comes to access to information (e.g. about the network, services provided by members) for minority/disadvantaged groups, none of the targeted networks reported a distinct or special way of ensuring this information is made available to all women's groups. Standard information about functioning of networks, services offered, or updates on their activities is distributed among all members of the network in equal form e.g. through social media platforms newsletters or hard copy reports. Annual reports are being produced, official websites are updated periodically with the information regarding new actions, activities, news on national and/or local events, or work of member organisation. Networks also make active use of social media platforms to promote their services or activities of member organisations. However, no particular distinction seems to be made between reporting the activities of minority group members and other members. Some network members emphasized the good internal communication regarding one sort of information, such as call for proposals, but a rather poor information flow regarding other important aspects, such as organisation's activities or decisions directly affecting minority groups.

CONCLUSIONS

Women's networks are perceived by women's organisations as an important element in the fight against VAW and defending women's human rights. Some of the key strengths of women's networks lie in their capacity to empower all groups of women, to be an effective tool in exercising collective power towards a common goal, to build the capacity of their own members and eventually to cover a significant part of a country's territory.

To have sufficient external impact, women's networks require a solid internal structure. A solid internal structure implies a clear decision-making process, strategic planning as well as ensuring an equal representation of all members.

In terms of the decision-making process, the two key elements of networks' governance structure seem to be the General Assembly and the elected Board, decisions being taken either by consensus or by their members' majority vote. When it comes to the inclusion of all members in the decision-making process, the great majority of interviewed organisations highlighted that their voice is sufficiently represented in the network and that their organisations are actively involved in key strategic activities. Gaps have been identified though when it comes to the inclusion of all members, some organisations considering that their voice is not sufficiently represented, certain respondents indicating an imbalance of power through a higher level of responsiveness of networks towards feedback received from larger organisations.

The report also explored a potential need for establishing new networks. The participants agreed widely there is no need to create other networks, except for when specific issues arise such as cases of political instability threatening the women's movement. However, CSSP partners highlighted that there is a need to strengthen or enlarge already existing networks, rather than creating new ones. One of the main barriers identified in forming new networks are the scarce financial resources to create a network and ensuring its sustainability.

Even though networks represent a great source of power, the report has identified several internal and external challenges for the existence of networks. Some of the internal challenges identified were the complex task of coordinating a large number of organisations, attracting and keeping the interest of different donors and the need for more human resources involved in maintaining networks and their activities. Most of the external challenges identified were related to the current political situation in which many women's organisations find themselves in, such as instable political climates, hostile government attitudes towards women's rights and erratic governments' approaches in tackling VAW make it very challenging to influence VAW policy making in an effective manner.

When it comes to minority and/or disadvantaged groups the report shows that generally women's networks do include these groups in their work, by either directly cooperating with these organisations or referring beneficiaries to services working specifically with these groups. The overall impression is that minority and disadvantaged groups are welcome and involved in the work of women's networks, but their specific needs are not usually incorporated in the statutes of general women's networks. There are also other ways in which minority and/or disadvantaged groups are involved either as members of a network, or as non-members collaborating with these networks.