

NEWSLETTER

November 2024

**Gender Alliance for
Development Center**

National Conference

"Empowerment,
Recovery,
Reintegration:
Strengthening Services
for Survivors of
Gender-Based
Violence"

Tirana, November 27, 2024

The National Conference on "Empowerment, Recovery, Reintegration: Strengthening Services for Survivors of Gender-Based Violence," an initiative aimed at advancing the quality and sustainability of rehabilitation and reintegration services for survivors of gender-based violence in Albania.

Organized by the Gender Alliance for Development Center in collaboration with the Albanian Women Empowerment Network, the Ministry of Health and Social Protection, and supported by the Austrian Development Agency (ADA)



New Partnership



Gender-based violence remains a significant issue in Albania, where survivors face substantial obstacles in their recovery and reintegration into society. The need for comprehensive and specialized services for survivors is more urgent than ever.

This event aimed to address this need by bringing together key stakeholders from various sectors to discuss, share experiences, and develop strategies for improving services for survivors of violence. Together, participants explored policies, shared best practices, and promoted innovative solutions to ensure that survivors receive comprehensive, compassionate, and effective support to help them rebuild their lives.

Objectives

- Deepening the understanding of international standards and national policies shaping services for survivors of violence, with a focus on aligning Albania's practices with international norms and standards.
- Promoting collaboration among key sectors—healthcare, economic, social, justice, and others—to create integrated, survivor-centered systems for rehabilitation and reintegration of gender-based violence survivors.
- Developing a collective vision for the future of rehabilitation and reintegration services for survivors of gender-based violence in Albania, ensuring sustainability and long-term impact.
- Facilitating networking opportunities to encourage collaboration among civil society organizations, stakeholders, and survivors in advancing collective efforts to improve services.



Presentation of Context and Policy Discussions



Mrs. Mirela Arqimandriti
Executive Director
Gender Alliance for Development Center

Mrs. Mirela Arqimandriti, Executive Director of the Gender Alliance for Development Center, opened the conference by emphasizing the importance of addressing gender-based violence and the need for specialized and integrated services for victims. She highlighted that it is essential for all actors, including the public sector, civil society, and international institutions, to work together to create a sustainable system that provides comprehensive and effective support for victims of violence.

At this conference, discussions focused on improving services for victims of violence, with a particular emphasis on rehabilitation services, including psychological support, legal assistance, and economic support. Ms. Arqimandriti highlighted that many victims face social and economic barriers that force them to remain in abusive relationships or struggle to rebuild their lives after experiencing violence. She also emphasized the need for an integrated approach that comprehensively addresses victims' needs by providing support through social, rehabilitation, and economic services.

Another key issue discussed was the lack of legal support and essential services needed to ensure that all victims have the opportunity to report violence and receive legal protection. Ms. Arqimandriti also emphasized the importance of continuous support, noting that while there have been significant improvements in legislation, the implementation and enforcement of the law remain a challenge. Many victims feel unsafe reporting violence due to fear of retaliation and the lack of effective protection.

The conference also highlighted the importance of education and public awareness on gender-based violence, especially in rural areas where access to information is more limited and violence is often normalized. Ms. Arqimandriti emphasized the need for all levels of society, including state institutions, civil society organizations, and international institutions, to collaborate in building a stronger and more sustainable system that can provide continuous support for victims of gender-based violence.

This event brought together professionals, human rights advocates, representatives from institutions, and civil society organizations who shared experiences and best practices for addressing gender-based violence and supporting survivors. In conclusion, Ms. Arqimandriti urged all participants to continue working towards strengthening existing services and developing new sustainable models that can enhance support and integration for victims of violence into society.

Presentation of Context and Policy Discussions



Mrs. Etilda Gjonaj

Member of the Albanian Parliament,
General Rapporteur on Violence Against
Women at the Council of Europe

As part of the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence, Etilda Gjonaj, Member of the Albanian Parliament, emphasized the importance of maintaining a year-round commitment to combating violence, using this period to raise awareness and engage society. She highlighted that while activities addressing violence against women are concentrated during this time, efforts to support victims and prevent violence must be a continuous commitment.

In her speech, Ms. Gjonaj highlighted alarming statistics reflecting the situation of violence against women in Albania and Europe. She stated that one in three women has experienced violence in various forms, while 18% of women who have suffered physical and sexual violence have also experienced domestic violence. Additionally, one in eight women has been a victim of sexual violence, including rape, underscoring the severity of the situation and the urgent need for intervention.

Focusing on the growing issue of online violence, Ms. Gjonaj emphasized that 41.1% of girls and women have reported experiencing harassment and cyberstalking, a phenomenon that is becoming increasingly concerning. For MP Gjonaj, these statistics reflect the reality of violence against women and should prompt urgent action to build a safer society for women and girls. She also shared insights from her visits to shelters in Tirana and Kamëz, where she observed firsthand the support provided to women victims of violence. While essential services are available, she highlighted that the biggest challenge remains the reintegration of these women into society, particularly for those from smaller cities who have faced multiple barriers, such as estrangement from their families and the loss of other rights.

Furthermore, Ms. Gjonaj emphasized that education is key to preventing violence and fostering a society that is more sensitive to these issues. She stressed the importance of ensuring that girls and women understand what constitutes violence and feel empowered to report any cases of abuse. Another crucial point in her speech was the support for civil society organizations that work to combat violence against women. Ms. Gjonaj highlighted that these organizations face challenges without sustainable financial support and called on donors and international agencies to continue funding initiatives that strengthen and sustain efforts in this field.

In conclusion, Etilda Gjonaj emphasized the necessity of a dedicated legal framework for the reintegration of violence survivors and supported the creation of a specific legal code to aid victims and prevent violence. This code would encompass social, legal, and financial aspects, ensuring a more comprehensive approach. She also expressed confidence that by integrating these elements into national policies and strategies, Albania can achieve sustainable progress in the fight against violence against women.

Presentation of Context and Policy Discussions

In her speech, Ms. Denada Seferi emphasized the importance of high-quality integrated services for victims and survivors of violence, expressing gratitude to civil society for their 20-year contribution in this field. She highlighted that this event brings together a diverse range of stakeholders—from policymakers and activists to international partners—to elevate key issues to a higher level of public consultation and to discuss the weak links in the system.



Mrs. Denada Seferi
Deputy Minister, Ministry of Health and
Social Protection

Ms. Seferi emphasized that the current victim protection policy is implemented through referral mechanisms in all 61 municipalities and by local structures that support victims of violence, providing them with access to social protection programs. She also highlighted the importance of social inclusion programs, which integrate other sectors such as employment, education, rehabilitation, and reintegration services.

In Albania, there are currently 39 local services providing initial assistance to victims of violence, including shelters, community services, and multifunctional centers. The rehabilitation and reintegration of victims is approached within a holistic framework, starting from the identification of violence, the establishment of specialized structures within the police, and the continuation of specialized services for women and girls affected by violence.

Ms. Seferi also emphasized that every link in the system has its own responsibility, and professional ethics must be upheld at the highest level to ensure that victims receive dignified treatment. In this regard, she highlighted the training of over 500 professionals, supported by international agencies such as UNDP and UN Women, aimed at improving professional conduct and ethics in service delivery.

Regarding service mechanisms, the Liliun Center for victims of sexual violence and two specialized centers for child victims of sexual violence in Fier and Shkodër serve as key examples of specialized services. The Social Fund has established over 73 integrated socio-health services, providing support to 33,000 beneficiaries, most of whom are victims of domestic violence. Additionally, nine dedicated services focus on the treatment of violence victims, operating as shelters in various municipalities.

Ms. Seferi emphasized that the service system must function harmoniously and is currently being improved to align with European standards. This can only be achieved by enhancing referral mechanisms and strengthening case monitoring. She called on civil society and referral mechanisms to follow each case through to completion, ensuring that victims do not return to situations of violence.

In conclusion, Ms. Seferi emphasized that the focus should not only be on services but on saving lives, strengthening families, and protecting children who have experienced violence.

Presentation of Context and Policy Discussions

Ms. Monika Zach, the Austrian Ambassador to Albania, highlighted Austria's commitment to combating violence against women, emphasizing that this remains one of Austria's top international policy priorities. She underscored Austria's ongoing support for both global and local projects aimed at fighting violence against women and girls, stressing the critical role of the Istanbul Convention. Through the Austrian Development Agency, Austria has supported numerous projects and has been a reliable partner in efforts to prevent violence.



Mrs. Monika Zach
Ambassador of Austria
to Albania

The Ambassador noted that Austria has supported the "Orange the World" campaign, a global initiative aimed at raising awareness about violence against women and girls. She also highlighted Austria's contribution to implementing projects that support Albanian society in the fight against violence. Additionally, she emphasized that Albania has been a priority country for Austria since the 1990s, with this commitment continuing through support for protective services and projects focused on improving legislation and victim protection.

On a global level, the Ambassador emphasized that violence against women is a widespread issue affecting many countries and requires strong international cooperation to be effectively addressed. She highlighted that both international efforts and Austria's initiatives are crucial in developing policies aimed at ending violence against women and girls and ensuring that victims have access to support, rehabilitation, and reintegration into society. She also noted that Austria actively supports initiatives to combat gender-based violence through 41 projects worldwide.

One of the key themes in Ms. Zach's speech was the importance of institutionalizing services for victims of violence. She noted that Albania has made significant progress since ratifying the Istanbul Convention, strengthening its legal framework and supporting the development of essential services for victims. However, she acknowledged that both Austria and Albania continue to face challenges in eliminating systemic barriers and ensuring adequate funding for victim services at the local level.

Ms. Zach also emphasized that there is still much work to be done to improve support for victims of violence. She stressed the need for close cooperation between institutions, civil society organizations, and international partners to ensure that services are accessible and tailored to the needs of victims. She called for ongoing efforts to support victims of violence and to guarantee their rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

In conclusion, the Ambassador reaffirmed Austria's commitment to supporting Albania and contributing to the goal of a violence-free society. She expressed gratitude for the ongoing efforts of civil society and the dedication of international organizations, emphasizing that only through cooperation and collective commitment can the objectives of a safer society for women and girls be achieved.

Presentation of Context and Policy Discussions



Mrs. Fiona McCluney
UN Resident Coordinator
in Albania

Ms. Fiona McCluney, UN Resident Coordinator in Albania, highlighted the importance of the "Orange the World" campaign, symbolically wearing orange every day to raise awareness and combat violence against women and girls. She emphasized that this commitment is one of the UN's global priorities, stressing that violence against women and girls is not just an issue that can be addressed through isolated interventions but requires a coordinated and long-term effort.

Ms. McCluney also underscored the importance of remaining engaged and supporting actions that drive meaningful change.

Ms. McCluney expressed her gratitude to the Gender Alliance for Development Center, and the Albanian Women Empowerment Network for their dedication to combating gender-based violence. She emphasized that this regional initiative provides an important opportunity to discuss and improve service delivery mechanisms for victims of violence in Albania. She noted that, as in many other countries, efforts to support victims require a collective commitment from all stakeholders, including the UN, international agencies, civil society, and both local and central governments.

Ms. McCluney also shared a personal experience related to a tragic femicide case that occurred at a school in the United Kingdom, where a female teacher was murdered by her husband. She emphasized that this incident serves as a stark reminder that violence against women is a universal issue, affecting all layers of society, regardless of the environment in which it occurs. This extreme act of violence, she noted, underscores the urgent need for action.

Ms. McCluney further emphasized the UN's efforts to ensure that laws and policies addressing gender-based violence align with international standards. As part of this commitment, she highlighted the ongoing program implemented by UN Women, UNDP, and UNFPA to combat violence against women, funded by the Governments of Sweden and the United Kingdom.

This program includes two key aspects:

1. The creation of a legal framework to improve legislation and,
2. The development of a coordinated response mechanism at the local level, where communities and social services can interact and address victims more effectively.

In conclusion, Ms. McCluney emphasized the need to continue working together to ensure a fairer and safer society for women and girls and to remain committed to our efforts to eliminate gender-based violence at all levels.

Grant Signing Ceremony: Grant Agreement for the regional project "Institutionalizing Quality Rehabilitation and Reintegration Services for Violence Survivors II."



The Grant Agreement for the second phase of the project "**Institutionalizing Quality Rehabilitation and Reintegration Services for Violence Survivors**" was signed during the conference by Ms. Mirela Arqimandriti (GADC) and Mr. David Muckenhuber, Head of the Regional Coordination Office for Albania, Montenegro, and North Macedonia at the Austrian Development Agency.

The Gender Alliance for Development Center (GADC) is the organization leading this regional project.

Project Overview

This project enhances access to quality services for GBV survivors in the Western Balkans by strengthening professional capacities, advocating for systemic changes, and empowering civil society. Through training programs, coaching, and the provision of SOS helplines, legal aid, and psychological support, it ensures survivors receive comprehensive assistance. Advocacy initiatives promote survivors' autonomy, push for institutionalized rehabilitation services, and campaign for better state budget allocations and policy implementation. Additionally, networking, monitoring, and knowledge-sharing activities empower civil society organizations to collaborate effectively and drive sustainable change. These efforts align with the Istanbul Convention, fostering improved support systems, survivor empowerment, and long-term impact in the region.

Expected Impact and Results

Impact: Achieving comprehensive access to quality services for gender-based violence (GBV) survivors in the Western Balkans (WB), in alignment with the Istanbul Convention (IC).

Outcome: Survivors of GBV will benefit from better-funded and improved-quality services.

Target Audience/ Beneficiaries:

- Women Survivors of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)
- Children Witnessing or Experiencing Violence
- Local and National Decision-Makers
- Institutions Responsible for GBV Support and Local government structures (municipalities)
- Women's Civil Society Organizations (CSOs)
- Media

Country / Region: Western Balkan (WB) countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia

Partners

- **Albania:** Gender Alliance for Development Centre (GADC)
- **Albania:** Albanian Women's Empowerment Network (AWEN)
- **Kosovo:** Kosovo Women's Network (KWN)
- **Serbia:** Autonomous Women's Centre (AWC)
- **Bosnia and Herzegovina:** Foundation United Women (FUW)
- **North Macedonia:** National Network to End Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (NNVWDV)
- **Montenegro:** Women's Rights Centre (WRC)

Session 1: International Framework and National Policies for Supporting Victims of Violence



Mrs. Elona Fana
Program Manager,
ADA Albania

Ms. Elona Fana moderated the first panel of the conference, which addressed "The International Framework and National Policies for Supporting Victims of Violence." This panel focused on examining the interaction between international frameworks, such as the Istanbul Convention, and national policies designed to protect and empower victims of violence.

During the discussion, progress achieved so far was highlighted, including improvements in legislation and the implementation of new measures. However, the gaps and challenges that still exist in service delivery were also emphasized.

One of the key topics was specialized services and the integration of victims' needs into a comprehensive approach, including psychological, legal, and economic support. The discussion also emphasized the importance of stronger support for the most marginalized groups, such as women with mental health issues and those living in rural areas.

Ms. Fana emphasized that, despite positive advancements, there is still an urgent need for increased and dedicated funding to ensure sustainable services and to train professionals so they can effectively address the challenges faced by victims.

Another key issue discussed was the effort to ensure sustainable support for victims after leaving shelters and how their reintegration into society can be facilitated. The discussion also emphasized the importance of collaboration and coordination between institutions and civil society organizations to ensure that services are delivered effectively and tailored to the specific needs of victims.

Ultimately, the panel emphasized that it is essential for the Albanian government, at both central and local levels, to continue providing support for victims of violence, particularly by ensuring access to justice and free legal assistance.

The discussion highlighted that there is still room for improvement and that continued commitment is needed to enhance existing services and develop new and sustainable models for support and integration.

Session 1: International Framework and National Policies for Supporting Victims of Violence



Mrs. Etleva Sheshi
Director of Social Inclusion and Gender Equality Policies, MHMS

Ms. Etleva Sheshi, during her participation in the conference panel on the prevention of gender-based violence and domestic violence, thanked the organizers and emphasized the importance of the 16 Days of Activism, which provides an opportunity to raise awareness to Albanian society about this issue.

She emphasized that the commitment to providing support and protection for victims continues year-round, including collaboration with civil society organizations and local coordinators, who are on the frontline of victim protection and support.

Ms. Sheshi emphasized that Albania has made significant progress in recent years, establishing standards and new institutions for the prevention of gender-based and domestic violence. This progress includes strengthening local government capacities to provide direct services to victims and improving legislation, including the adoption of a specific law on measures against domestic violence and amendments to the Penal Code and the Code of Criminal Procedure.

Albania has ratified key international conventions, including the Istanbul Convention, and has strengthened measures to combat violence while expanding the definition of the family circle. Albania's decision to be part of the Beijing Conference and to develop national action plans has contributed to violence prevention and support for women, integrating violence prevention and response into updated legislation.

Despite the progress, challenges remain, particularly at the local level, where most cases of violence occur and where victims seek support. Ms. Sheshi emphasized the need for greater accountability and efficiency in delivering victim services, ensuring that they are professional and well-coordinated. However, further improvements are needed to ensure that all actors fully assume their responsibilities within the violence referral mechanism.

Another highlighted challenge was the capacity building of service providers and ensuring opportunities for those engaged in supporting victims of violence. Coordinated efforts among various actors, including central institutions, local coordinators, and civil society, are essential to ensuring a rapid and effective response.

Ms. Sheshi also highlighted ongoing efforts for a new gender equality law, which will fully integrate protection against gender-based violence. This law will include strengthening coordination mechanisms, such as the National Council for Gender Equality, to oversee measures against violence and the protection of women and girls. This represents a significant step in establishing a strong legal and institutional framework to combat violence in society.

In conclusion, she emphasized the importance of continuous monitoring of services and the exchange of best practices, highlighting successful examples of cooperation between municipalities and institutions. She pointed out the collaboration between the municipalities of Tirana and Kamëz, which facilitates the sharing of experiences in managing the cases of violence.

Session 1: International Framework and National Policies for Supporting Victims of Violence



Mrs. Rosa Logar (online)
Former President of GREVIO, Expert and Activist for the Protection Against Violence Against Women

Ms. Rosa Logar, former President of GREVIO, expert, and activist for the protection of women against violence, participated online in the conference. In her presentation, she emphasized the importance of standards and support services for survivors of violence, based on the Istanbul Convention.

Ms. Logar addressed the ongoing issue of violence against women, emphasizing that despite efforts, it remains deeply rooted in many countries. She referred to recent GREVIO evaluations for Austria and Albania, which indicate that violence continues to affect a significant number of women worldwide.

According to recent reports, one in three to one in five women are still affected by violence, highlighting that violence against women and girls remains a deeply rooted issue. Ms. Logar explained that a key element of the Istanbul Convention is ensuring reliable support for women victims of violence and their families.

She emphasized the importance of integrated services that work together to provide comprehensive support. Albania has made significant progress in this area, particularly in developing an integrated approach that includes local coordinators.

The Istanbul Convention also emphasizes the need for specialized services, such as women's shelters, counseling centers, and 24-hour helplines for victims. Ms. Logar highlighted the importance of safety and opportunities for women with disabilities and for children who witness violence, stressing that they too must receive support.

However, she acknowledged that much work remains to be done, as no country has fully met the recommendations regarding the establishment of centers for sexual violence and shelters for every 10,000 residents.

Another key element that Ms. Logar emphasized was the gendered understanding of violence. She stressed that victims are not to blame for the violence they experience and that their rights must always be at the center of every action. She also highlighted the importance of the non-discrimination principle in service provision, ensuring that no victim is excluded from support services based on nationality, ethnicity, or other factors.

Ms. Logar also spoke about the importance of a human rights-based approach, emphasizing the need to prevent secondary victimization, which can further exacerbate survivors' trauma. She highlighted Austria's service network, developed over the past 45 years, which includes national helplines, shelters, and intervention centers. Additionally, she mentioned community-based violence prevention programs implemented in Austria, where awareness on domestic violence is raised at the local level, and individuals are connected to specialized services. She praised Albania's progress in this field and encouraged further advancements.

In conclusion, she emphasized that violence can affect anyone, and supporting victims is a collective responsibility.

Session 1: International Framework and National Policies for Supporting Victims of Violence



Mr. Ergys Qirici
Director General of the Directorate
of Free Legal Aid,
Ministry of Justice

Mr. Qirici emphasized the importance of access to justice and free legal aid, a key element for those in need, particularly for marginalized individuals and groups. He highlighted progress in establishing institutions that provide legal support to vulnerable groups and stressed the significance of justice reform, which has brought substantial changes in this field. The Ministry of Justice, in collaboration with local and international actors, has developed a structured and organized system for delivering free legal aid, supported by the adoption of a new legal framework for this service. In 2017, the Law on State-Guaranteed Legal Aid (Law No. 111) was approved and came into force in June 2018, introducing significant improvements compared to the previous 2008 law.

The new law introduced a more structured system, where free legal aid is provided not only by the Ministry of Justice but also by the Directorate of Free Legal Aid, the National Chambers of Advocacy, and the courts, which offer legal representation for those unable to afford a lawyer. One of the key innovations of the new law was the inclusion of domestic violence victims, survivors of sexual abuse, and victims of human trafficking in every stage of criminal proceedings. This law ensures that these groups receive free legal aid at every step of the legal process, from counseling and guidance to court representation and legal document preparation.

Currently, there are 46 providers of primary legal aid, including organizations authorized by the Ministry of Justice. These centers offer legal assistance to victims of domestic violence, trafficking victims, and individuals without income or assets. An important aspect is that legal aid is provided directly through 20 centers established since 2020, covering all regions of Albania, including the largest cities. In 2023, the Ministry of Justice enhanced legal aid support for victims of violence and trafficking by increasing the budget to cover expenses for lawyers and legal experts providing these services. Legal aid includes counseling, guidance, assistance in preparing legal requests, and court representation for individuals unable to afford legal fees. Throughout 2023, over 100 million ALL from the state budget was allocated for legal aid services.

Another key element is the integration of online legal aid services, allowing citizens to access free legal assistance through a 24-hour helpline. This service aims to reduce costs and ensure that citizens can access justice without the need to travel or incur additional expenses related to legal services. To further improve the delivery of legal aid services, the Ministry of Justice has incorporated training programs and awareness campaigns into its strategies. These initiatives target legal aid providers, including staff from legal aid centers, non-profit organizations, and universities. Additionally, promotional and educational activities have been organized to inform and engage citizens.

A recent development is the 14% increase in funding for free legal aid centers in 2024, enabling the expansion of services and the inclusion of additional centers to provide better support for citizens. Legal aid for victims of violence has also become more accessible with the exemption from court fees, further improving access to justice for those in need.

Mr. Qirici emphasized the importance of collaboration between state institutions, international agencies, and local authorities to protect victims and improve access to justice. He also highlighted the need to reduce the burden on courts and ensure the efficient delivery of legal aid services for those seeking assistance.

Session 1: International Framework and National Policies for Supporting Victims of Violence



Mrs. Vilma Shurdha
Commissioner, People's Advocate
Institution

Mrs. Vilma Shurdha, Commissioner at the People's Advocate, emphasized the importance of joint efforts in protecting the rights of women and girls, highlighting that violence against women remains a deep-rooted and ongoing issue in Albanian society. She stressed that forums like this provide an opportunity to assess achievements and challenges, as well as to reaffirm the commitment of institutions and civil society to protecting these rights.

According to Ms. Shurdha, despite the progress made, the implementation of strategies for the protection of violence victims remains insufficient, leading to limited and low-quality services.

In this context, Ms. Shurdha emphasized the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration services for victims of gender-based and domestic violence, noting that efforts to provide these services remain insufficient. She referenced reports from the People's Advocate and the recommendations directed at institutions to improve services and create opportunities for the reintegration of victims into daily life.

According to Ms. Shurdha, legal improvements and existing strategies for gender equality and victim protection still suffer from significant implementation gaps, leading to a lack of services and poor service quality, particularly in rural and remote areas. She also highlighted the absence of dedicated services for women with mental health issues, a vulnerable group facing multiple challenges.

Ms. Shurdha also discussed the challenges in identifying victims and noted an increase in requests for economic support and housing for women victims of violence. She stated that the Social Housing Law recognizes abused women as a priority category, but there remains a discrepancy between demand and available resources, particularly regarding rent subsidies and social housing provisions.

Another issue raised was the need for a coordinated and integrated response from all institutions to ensure the protection of violence victims and enable them to reach their full potential. Ms. Shurdha emphasized that support for victims must be more coordinated and sustainable, and that the current legislation requires further improvements.

In conclusion, Ms. Shurdha emphasized the need for a more structured and coordinated response to violence against women and girls, ensuring that efforts contribute to both prevention and the empowerment of victims' rights. She also highlighted the importance of establishing a monitoring mechanism for femicide and the protection of women from violence, which would aid in identifying and preventing this phenomenon.

Session 2: Multi-Sectoral Approaches for Quality Rehabilitation and Reintegration



Mrs. Ines Leskaj
Executive Director
AWEN

The second session was moderated by Ms. Ines Leskaj, Executive Director of AWEN, who emphasized the importance of collaboration among all structures and actors involved in providing services for victims of gender-based violence.

Ms. Leskaj noted that while progress has been made in providing direct services such as psychological and legal support, the long-term rehabilitation and reintegration phase remains a significant challenge.

Ms. Leskaj emphasized the lack of a strong chain for the social integration of victims, highlighting the need for better cooperation between the Ministry of Health and Social Protection (MSHMS), local institutions, and shelter services.

She also pointed out that many municipalities have supported services for victims of violence, but these remain limited, particularly in areas such as long-term housing and sustainable support. Furthermore, she stressed that despite the commitment of the state and institutions, financial support for these services has been insufficient, with a lack of sustainable budgetary funding to ensure the continuous provision of these services.

One of the key challenges Ms. Leskaj highlighted was the lack of sustainable financial support for services for victims. She noted that many donors have withdrawn, making it increasingly difficult to secure funding for such services. Ms. Leskaj also stressed the importance of the Albanian government taking greater responsibility for funding these services, ensuring their sustainability and long-term support.

The successful model of Tirana Municipality, along with other municipalities that provide direct services for victims of violence, serves as a valuable example that can be shared and replicated across other municipalities in Albania. Ms. Leskaj emphasized that conferences like this provide an excellent opportunity to exchange best practices and take concrete steps toward ensuring better and more sustainable services for victims of violence.

Collaboration and commitment from all civil society actors and institutions are key to ensuring support, rehabilitation, and high-quality services for victims of gender-based violence.

Session 2: Multi-Sectoral Approaches for Quality Rehabilitation and Reintegration



Sister Alma Zogu

“Rozalba,” the shelter for child victims of abuse in Gjadër, Lezhë

Sister Alma emphasized the importance of the integration phase for girls who are victims of domestic violence and abuse, highlighting the challenges they face during this period.

The shelter provides support for girls up to the age of 18, while the integration phase requires careful attention, as there is a risk that girls may return to abusive environments or become vulnerable to the same patterns they previously experienced. Sister Alma explained that some of the girls leaving the shelter benefit from vocational training courses, while others pursue university studies and can be employed with the support of the center.

Sister Alma emphasized that the integration phase is particularly challenging, despite the importance of rehabilitation and reintegration efforts. This stage requires continuous support for the girls, especially after they leave the shelters and face a society that is often not fully ready to accept them. Despite the center’s efforts to facilitate employment and educational opportunities, integration remains a difficult process, and many girls struggle to find sufficient support after leaving the shelter.

Another point discussed was the lack of policies supporting the reintegration of these girls into society. Sister Alma emphasized that, although various services are provided during the girls' stay in shelters, what is missing is a concrete plan and strategy to offer support for girls after they turn 18. In many cases, they face significant challenges and feel unprotected with services that may be available at the national level.

She also stressed the need to create a strong network that includes free social, legal, and psychological services, as well as assistance from state institutions, to ensure successful reintegration for victims of violence. Centers and NGOs must work together to provide sustainable support, while state institutions need to take greater responsibility and ensure that these girls are not left abandoned after leaving the shelters.

Sister Alma emphasized that, although the centers have provided support and opportunities for the girls, there is still much work to be done to ensure that they are protected and successfully integrated into society. She stressed that integration requires more than just support for rent. Projects and plans must be developed that help the girls develop their skills and reach their full potential. This is a process that requires continuous collaboration and commitment from all societal actors to ensure a better future for these girls.

In conclusion, Sister Alma emphasized the need for greater investment in this area, creating a support chain between ministries and municipalities to ensure the full protection and integration of victims of gender-based and domestic violence. She called for the establishment of a more coordinated and powerful system that would allow these girls to break free from the cycle of violence and develop an independent and successful life.

Session 2: Multi-Sectoral Approaches for Quality Rehabilitation and Reintegration



Mrs. Anisa Subashi
General Director of Social Services,
Municipality of Tirana

In 2024, Tirana Municipality managed an alarming number of domestic violence cases, reporting 639 police denunciations and 720 other cases related to domestic violence are managed in previous years. Services for victims of domestic violence and their integration are a priority of the municipality's policies and programs, including the social plans currently under development. Part of this commitment includes gender equality plans, with Tirana Municipality working on the third round of the local action plan for gender equality, which will be extended until 2027. Additionally, the integration plan for the Roma and Egyptian communities and people with disabilities is also part of this broader process.

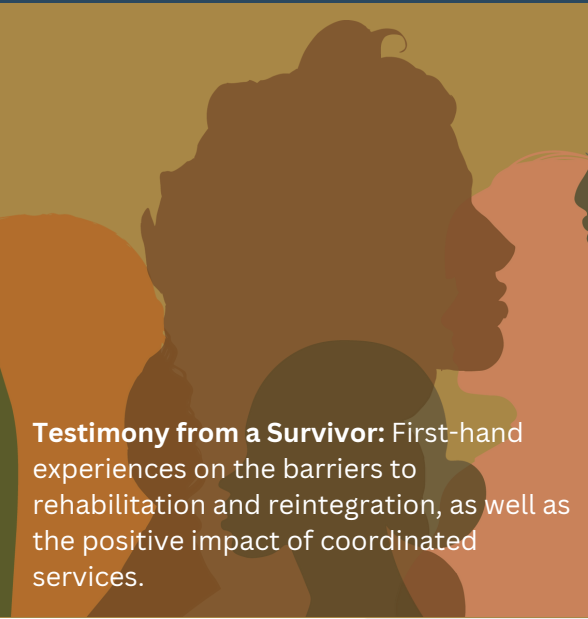
The referral mechanism for domestic violence, which includes 16 institutions and NGOs, is in the process of expanding to include additional actors such as media and healthcare. This mechanism has been consolidated in recent years, and the Municipality of Tirana has established the child protection unit, ensuring specialists in every administrative unit of Tirana. Child protection units are present in 27 units of Tirana, and in each unit, there are social workers and psychologists working with a special focus on domestic violence and child protection.

One of the biggest challenges has been providing social services in rural areas. To address this, Tirana Municipality has planned the opening of two new centers in Zall Herr and Vaqarr, aiming to meet the needs of these remote areas. The expansion of services has also included the improvement of service quality, through training and capacity building for the staff of social and psycho-social services. Currently, in the seven community centers of Tirana Municipality, around 900 women and girls benefit from services, and through partnerships with non-profit organizations, the services have been diversified.

For 2025, Tirana Municipality has planned an increased budget to support victims of violence and local coordinators, as well as a new program aimed at employing 10 women victims of violence. Another supportive initiative is the empowerment project for girls and women, which has included approximately 90 women with new and existing businesses. This program has seen growth, and the number of beneficiary women is expected to reach 30 women per year, supporting heads of households, survivors of domestic violence, and human trafficking victims.

In this context, Tirana Municipality is also undertaking initiatives to support girls and women from families receiving economic aid, offering personal care assistance during menstrual cycles and support for enrolling children in kindergartens and nurseries in Tirana, where enrollment is free for this category. These initiatives are reflected in the 2025-2027 budget and will contribute to improving the integration and protection of women and girls in society. Tirana Municipality is strongly committed to providing full support and integration for victims of domestic violence, ensuring quality services and ongoing support for them.

Session 2: Multi-Sectoral Approaches for Quality Rehabilitation and Reintegration



Testimony from a Survivor: First-hand experiences on the barriers to rehabilitation and reintegration, as well as the positive impact of coordinated services.

***Elda's story:** Elda is a strong woman living in Durrës with her two daughters. She has faced many challenges in her life, and now, as she is in the process of divorce, she shares her difficult but resilient and determined journey. *"It's not easy to talk about the past because suddenly painful memories resurface,"* says Elda, recalling the period of separation and the difficulties she has endured.

**Name has been changed to preserve anonymity*

She has been separated for more than three years and has had to survive on her own, working hard to make ends meet and pay the rent. *"I worked more than 13 hours a day,"* explains Elda, *"and there were times when I was forced to leave my job due to the sexual harassment I experienced in the workplace."* This is a part of her reality that is difficult to express, but it needs to be shared to better understand her experiences.

Elda has been determined not to stop her journey because she knows there are many women and girls who don't have the same opportunity. *"I've managed to live alone, provide food for my children, and do everything I can for them to have a better life,"* she says. One of the greatest challenges for her has been financial security and ensuring that her daughters have food. She has received free legal and psychological support, which has enabled her to face life's challenges, and continue fighting for her and her daughters' future.

However, Elda has always had a dream: to study and to provide her daughters with a good education. Despite not having had the opportunity to go to school herself, she has done everything she can to ensure that her daughters receive a complete education and grow up to be successful individuals. *"Educating children is everything. I've done the impossible for my daughters to have a better opportunity than I had,"* says Elda, sharing deep emotions about her challenges and her desire to give her daughters everything she possibly can.

Even though her life has been filled with difficulties, she knows that every step she has taken so far has been a step forward toward a better life for herself and her daughters. *"I am a strong woman,"* says Elda proudly. *"And although I've gone through many hardships, I will continue fighting to achieve my dreams and secure a bright future for my daughters."*

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Mrs. Brikena Puka
Executive Director
Vatra Center, Vloora

Ms. Puka, from Vatra, began her speech by thanking the organizers for the opportunity to be part of the panel and for the close collaboration that Vatra has with many other organizations working dedicatedly to protect women's rights, especially those who are victims of gender-based violence.

She emphasized the importance of Vatra's work, which focuses on the accommodation, rehabilitation, and reintegration of victims of trafficking, gender-based violence, and sexual abuse. Additionally, the organization provides legal and psychological support, as well as assistance with justice matters, including court representation and support for the victims.

Ms. Puka also emphasized the economic empowerment of victims through vocational training and the opportunity for them to create microenterprises with financial support from the organization. She spoke about the challenges faced by the organization and violence victims every day, including financial difficulties and the need for greater resources to support these services. According to her, to provide quality and long-term services, the organization requires a large budget, which for Vatra amounts to 60 million lek (approximately 600,000 euros) per year. She pointed out that only 30% of this budget is covered by the state, while the remaining portion is funded by donors.

Among other points, it was also highlighted that one of the biggest challenges for the organization remains the long-term housing of violence victims. Ms. Puka mentioned that in Vloora, for example, they have faced difficulties in paying rent for apartments and providing services for the children of victims. Other challenges are numerous, especially for those who seek help with rent payments, medications, and other basic needs.

Regarding support policies for victims, Ms. Puka raised the concern that many women are dependent on the assistance provided by organizations, while they desire to work and earn their own income. She also emphasized that in order to provide necessary services and ensure financial sustainability, organizations like Vatra need to secure funding from various donors. She pointed out that for this reason, it is crucial to have close coordination among different actors, including the state and municipalities, to support these victims and ensure long-term services for them.

In the end, Ms. Puka spoke about the process of developing the social plan of Vlorë Municipality, which was recently approved, and expressed hope that this plan will be successfully implemented, prioritizing victims of violence and trafficking. She stated that this is an opportunity to help victims and provide support, and she called for this model to be replicated in other municipalities as a positive example.

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Mrs. Sonila Reçi
National Center for the Treatment of
Domestic Violence Victim

In her speech, Ms. Sonila Reçi, Director of the National Center for the Treatment of Domestic Violence Victims, emphasized the importance of the conference as an opportunity to present the services offered by the center she leads. She mentioned that, due to the confidential nature of the services, she could not share specific figures, but it was important to give an overview of the services provided by the center. The National Center, located in Kamëz, offers 24/7 residential services for victims of domestic violence from the moment they complete procedures at the police station and are referred through the referral mechanism.

The center offers a comprehensive package of services, including psychosocial support, financial assistance, shelter, clothing, and free legal aid. Ms. Reçi emphasized the agreement signed with the Ministry of Justice, which is an exceptional support, enabling victims of violence to access free legal services, a possibility that did not exist for them before. She also mentioned the importance of the center's collaboration with the Employment Offices in Kamëz and Tirana, which have provided employment opportunities for victims of violence, helping them integrate and overcome life's challenges. The offered work has focused on simple positions that match the victims' skills and professional preparation, providing them with the opportunity to prepare for an independent life.

Ms. Reçi also emphasized that a major challenge remains the reintegration of victims after leaving the center. While in the Municipality of Tirana, women have the opportunity to be supported with a rental bonus and other benefits, this opportunity is not available in many other municipalities. She emphasized the need for increased cooperation and capacity building for the treatment of domestic violence cases, to ensure that victims do not return to their abusers after completing treatment. According to her, there have been cases where, after a year of treatment and integration, victims have returned to the environments of violence due to the lack of long-term support and monitoring.

Ms. Reçi also spoke about the need to improve internal policies and strategies, as well as to increase collaboration with other actors to ensure that services are delivered more efficiently. She emphasized that in many cases, after leaving the center, victims are unable to continue the necessary treatment and integration, leaving them unprotected and exposed to further violence.

This is a challenge that requires a coordinated response and ongoing efforts from all civil society actors and state institutions. In conclusion, Ms. Reçi called for the review of strategies and policies for the protection and reintegration of victims of domestic violence, to ensure that they do not return to the cycle of violence and are given the opportunity to start a new, independent life.

Main conclusions of the National Conference

- **The Need for Quality and Integrated Services:** Gender-based violence remains a serious issue in Albania, exposing victims to social, economic, and legal barriers that hinder their recovery and reintegration. To address these challenges, it is essential to provide specialized services, including psychological, legal, and economic support, within an integrated approach that guarantees comprehensive and sustainable care.
- **Improvement of the Legal Framework and National Policies:** Albania has made significant progress with the ratification of the Istanbul Convention and the strengthening of the legal framework, laying the foundation for the protection and support of victims. However, significant challenges remain in the full implementation of measures and the monitoring of their effectiveness. Integrating gender budgeting into public policies can help ensure a fair and effective allocation of resources.
- **Coordination and Cooperation Among Different Actors:** Collaboration between state institutions, civil society, and international actors is essential for providing sustainable support to victims. An integrated approach requires commitment to harmonizing actions and ensuring that services are focused on the specific needs of victims and supported by sustainable financial resources.
- **Sufficient and Sustainable Support for Victims:** Support for victims must be continuous and sustainably funded by the state. Currently, there are significant and unclear gaps in budgetary support, and for this reason, the integration of gender budgeting is essential to ensure sufficient and sustainable funding for the provision of long-term services. To ensure effective support, victim centers should be strategically planned, aiming to open one center for every 100,000 inhabitants. These centers should offer specialized rehabilitation and reintegration services in collaboration with various public and private institutions.
- **The Challenge of Reintegration:** Despite improvements in the provision of rehabilitation services, reintegration remains a major challenge, especially for victims from rural areas and those facing unfavorable social and economic conditions. Support programs need to be accompanied by mechanisms that also improve the economic and social opportunities for victims.
- **Attention to Specific Groups:** Victims with disabilities, those living in isolated areas, and children witnessing violence require specialized support. Programs should focus on creating mechanisms and services that address the specific needs of these groups.
- **Vision for the Future:** All participating actors have committed to deepening collaboration to create a well-functioning network of integrated services. This includes increasing the capacities of institutions and allocating funds in alignment with gender budgeting, aiming for effective services tailored to the diverse needs of victims.

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Contact

Gender Alliance for Development Center

Address: Str. Abdyl Frashëri, Pall 10/1
Tirana, Albania

Phone: +355 4 22 555 14

Mob: +355 68 20 59 301

Web: <https://gadc.org.al/>

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