



## **Civil Society Strengthening Platform<sup>1</sup> Guidelines to better support women and girls victims of violence throughout the COVID-19 pandemic**

The current COVID-19 pandemic represents a great social and economic disruption to all human beings, affecting disproportionately women and girls due to widespread pre-existing discrimination and inequalities<sup>2</sup>. Every crisis creates inequalities and aggravates older ones, such as the inequalities existing against women and girls. It is necessary for states to step up their efforts and increase the measures to protect women and girls victims of violence.

Home is not always a safe place for women and their children, and they are especially at-risk during lockdown, as they cannot escape their abusers. A grave concern is that social distancing and confinement rules imposed by national governments have triggered additional risks of domestic violence.

The present guidelines are to support the national government and service providers in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey to better respond to the needs of women and their children, girls' victims of violence to the effects of the lockdown measures in light of the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus. These guidelines are to be applicable also after the lockdown measures are lifted.

The guidelines are prepared by CSSP partners and WAVE Network, in frame of the Civil Society Strengthening Platform project, a project ongoing in 7 countries in the Western Balkans and Turkey, supported in frame of the European Union and UN Women programme 'Implementing norms, changing minds'<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The Civil Society Strengthening Platform is a platform gathering 9 women's organisations in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia and Turkey with the goal to strengthen women's voices and agency at a regional level.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2020/04/voices%20of%20womens%20organizations%20on%20covid19final.pdf?la=en&vs=2118>

<sup>3</sup> <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/regional-programme-in-the-western-balkans-and-turkey>



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**In order to better cater to the needs of women and girls' victims of violence, national governments in the Western Balkans and Turkey should consider the following:**

- Prevention and support services provided by women's NGOs and other state services should be declared essential services to allow them to function at full capacity
- Provide financial support to women's NGOs running vital support services such as: national helpline, women's helplines, women's shelters, women's counselling services
- Constantly engage with women's NGOs to plan the response to the COVID-19 crisis, in planning the lockdown measures and the lift of the lockdown measures
- In consultation with women's NGOs, prepare and implement emergency protocols for shelters for victims of violence, to address the challenges of the pandemic
- Cooperate with women's NGOs and other civil society organisations to respond to the needs of vulnerable groups that are most at risk, such as: women with disabilities, Roma women, women living in rural areas
- Continue to adhere to the standards of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence – the Istanbul Convention – especially in times of crisis
- Gather gender responsive data and statistics for sound policy-making. There is need for a rapid national gender-responsive assessment of the needs and priorities of women victims of violence and disadvantaged groups
- Provide clear instructions and standard operating procedures to all state institutions (health, education, social work, police) so that they can provide a gender-sensitive response to victims of violence
- Provide strict orders for health care professionals, social workers, police and other institutions involved in these actions to maintain the confidentiality of the location of women's shelters
- Launch awareness raising campaigns (online or using other platforms) to inform citizens on services available for women and girls victims of violence, APPs that can be used by victims of violence to contact support services



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**Guidelines to better support women and girls victims of violence:**

- Women and their children that need to reach a shelter, or other services, should be tested of COVID-19 with priority
- Distribute enough, free of charge, protective equipment (such as masks, gloves) to women's support services (women's shelters, women's counselling services)
- In cooperation with regions/cities, ensure sufficient bed capacity for victims of domestic violence and their children who cannot be admitted to women's shelters (for example the use of hotels with reception, free apartments over AirBnB)
- Women's easy access to abortion and affordable measures of birth control should be ensured
- Coordinate delivery of medicine and food to vulnerable and excluded groups of women

**Guidelines the Ministry of Justice and State Police should consider when supporting victims of violence:**

- Violence against women and domestic violence should be prioritized by courts, and should be considered 'cases of emergency' by the courts
- Consistently record and keep records of all calls and visits to police stations to report cases of violence
- In cases of reported violence, domestic violence, strictly apply the Protocol on Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
- Increased penalties for domestic and sexual violence, as well as violence against children, for the duration of the lockdown measures to counter the spread of COVID-19
- Public campaign to inform the population about the legal services that continue to be provided to better support victims of violence
- Emergency protection orders and protection orders (criminal or civil) should be immediately available to protect women and girls victims of violence
- Children of victims of violence should always be included in these protection orders
- Short-term protection orders should be replaced by longer term protection orders
- Risk assessment procedures should be conducted on a case-by-case basis



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