



MMS Bulletin #155

Gender equality: Where do we stand 25 years after the historic UN World Conference on Women in Beijing?

Covid-19 and access to justice for women and girls-in Albania **The invisible threat**

By Elira Jorgoni

The Covid-19 pandemic challenged the mental health of the most vulnerable, including the victims and survivors of domestic violence. It increased the burden of unpaid care and domestic work, income loss, and the effects of the lockdown contributed to higher rates of stress and anxiety among women. In Albania, with a considerable share of informal employment, vulnerability is exacerbated by a weak social protection system and uneven spread and availability of services for those in need. CSOs demonstrated flexibility in adjusting their services to the new context, yet they are faced with considerable challenges.

 The invisible threat


Survivor of gender based violence. Photo: © Imrana Kapetanovic

Trends and issues – violence against women and girls and Covid-19 in Albania

The Government of Albania in the last five years has taken a number of important steps on gender equality and empowerment of women, including improvements in the national legal framework in accordance with the ratified international documents and expanding specialized support services to the treatment of victims and survivors of domestic violence.

Yet, the latest National Population Survey “Violence Against Women and Girls in Albania”, 2018 reveals alarming findings such as 1 in 2 women believe violence between a husband and wife is a private matter. Overall, 1 out of 2 women surveyed experienced one or more of the five different types of violence during their lifetime (52.9% experiences intimate partner violence, dating violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment and/or stalking). Episodes of violence are reported more in cities than in villages while women who reside in rural areas face more barriers - subjective or objective institutional barriers, when it comes to filing complaints. Barriers in rural areas have also to do with the existing mentality, lack of information regarding rights and existing services, as well as lack of access to free legal aid. There are insufficient

numbers of emergency/crisis shelters and beds in the country, thus not meeting the minimum standards of the Istanbul Convention for accommodation (which requires shelters to operate 24/7, providing shelter women and their children in emergency situations). Shelters are located only in the capital and main cities, and the geographical limitations mean that women in rural areas would need to move to access this form of assistance.

 “The power of the voice”: Against the threat of sexual and gender based violence in COVID-19. Raise awareness intervention from WtW, ZDB, SAWG, CLWG and CLMB. Photo: © CLWG and CLMB

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COVID-19 impact on domestic violence and access to justice

In Albania, with a considerable share of informal employment, vulnerability is exacerbated by a weak social protection system and uneven spread and availability of services for those in need. Informal workers are more likely to be the first ones affected by the economic shocks.

The Government of Albania (GoA) has been intensively working on relief measures. Yet, in the context of limited resources and already depleted by following the earthquake of November 26, 2019, recovery needs are just getting deeper for most of the population. During the lockdown period (March-May) there was a lot of pressure on the delivery of services related to prevention and addressing domestic violence. With children home-schooling and lost income of parents, vulnerabilities of many households living in poor housing conditions were exacerbated showing in insufficient resources to pay the bills and cover existential needs. As schools, kindergartens and nurseries were closed, mothers who had a job could not partake as they did not have care support for their children. Women engaged in the hospitality industry, informal jobs as housekeeping, child or elderly care services were affected the most financially as they were not paid for the days that they did not work.

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) report that the biggest issue remains the negative impact COVID-19 has had on people's income and access to health care. Problems have arisen for women who have lost their jobs at this difficult time and have no means to buy food for themselves and their families. They could not pay their rent and landlords are threatening to evict them and their families – and this has also happened in a few cases addressed by the CSOs. The situation was precarious for the women and children victims of domestic violence living in the same roof with their perpetrators. Women, isolated at home with their abusive husbands, did not have any possibility to ask for help. The situation in the rural areas is worse considering the absence of services and the mentality that is rooted also in the police services, they feel they do not have other options but to cohabitate with violence.

According to data from non-public service providers, the number of women and girls reporting domestic violence has increased nearly four times (the National Helpline received about 2194 calls in the period of March 13– May 31, 2020 compared to 708 calls in 2019 or about 4 times more calls over the same period). They mainly seek help for psychological support, referrals to

the police and local administrative units for economic support. Following the gradual uplift of measures, the National Helpline and counselling services have been receiving increasing requests for legal counselling, due to the restrictions and new regulations for the public services, especially courts. Another striking evidence from the counselling line reports is also the fact that women who have decided to report to the police the violence from their husbands during this period, are more disposed to start the divorce proceedings immediately, contrary to before, when it took a long time for the survivors to decide on divorce proceedings.

The threat of gender based violence and domestic violence in COVID-19. Psychologist Bledar Zeneli on @historiaimeklantv for the CLMB. Raise awareness intervention. Photo: © tvklan, tv channel

Impact and response - adopting new ways of planning and delivering services

As many public and private services targeting domestic violence victims and survivors have not been working at their full capacity at this situation, this has placed a higher burden on the service provision. Some of the measures adopted to keep delivering services are: establishing working hours and arranging shifts; contacting existing clients (women and men) receiving psychological counselling to explain them with the newly adopted online approach; identifying with each client the best way and channel of communication (phone calls, Viber, WhatsApp, Skype, etc.) and deciding the schedule of counselling.

The national helpline and other counselling services have promptly responded to the changed context by adjusting their service delivery to the new circumstances. The helpline services continued working 24/7, while all staff has been working from home, providing psychosocial, legal counselling and referral to victims and survivors. During the last week of April, the National Hotline received about 70 calls per day, compared to an average of 44 calls per week over the same period in 2019. This marked the highest number of calls ever received at the national hotline in a day. While clients have received psychosocial counselling in relation to domestic violence, a considerable number of calls were registered by previous or existing clients due to increased anxiety and panic attacks. As the lockdown measures became stricter, the service provision within the shelter premises became very difficult. Shelters also adjusted the service delivery to the new situation, following up the existing clients which had been hosted by their relatives, or living in rented apartments – with rent and food costs being provided mainly through the shelters. Women sheltered at their relatives place also needed support as many of the host families were poor and could hardly provide for themselves.

Government Measures: The domestic violence shelters were deemed as essential services and were re-opened during the lockdown, in mid-April. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection, with the support of UN, adopted a dedicated protocol^[1] to ensure uninterrupted functioning of shelters during the COVID-19 emergency in Albania. According to the new

protocol, domestic violence shelters are declared as essential services and must remain open and accept new survivors of gender-based violence. The protocol approved by the government provides guidance on accepting new women survivors into shelters during the pandemic, managing new cases and the obligatory hygienic standards to be applied by state, NGO-based and emergency shelters during the current situation. However, service providers report that full implementation of the protocol is a challenge, given that there is no financial support from the government to support the procurement of needed materials, which are an extra cost to already tight budgets for the existing services. Courts remained operational addressing however only urgent matters, such as bail applications, maintenance, domestic violence, and children-related cases. The Ministry of Health and Social Protection also launched a major campaign across different media channels, aimed at reaching out to victims of domestic abuse and reassuring them that services for them are still available and informing them on the toll-free number for the domestic violence helpline. However, CSOs sustain that the campaign was delayed by the government and municipalities should have played a more proactive role during the pandemic.

Video spot produced by the Ministry of Health and Social Protection as a response to the growing rate of domestic violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, promoting the National Helpline number 116117.

Can gender-transformative alone be an effective approach to tackle GBV in times of unprecedented crises like the one we are facing? Challenges and needs to improve access to justice and crisis response for survivors of domestic violence

Non-public service providers have worked around the clock and demonstrated high flexibility to adjust to new working environment, putting the clients' needs at the centre with all the various limitations linked to the lockdown. Yet, working under the pandemic situation did highlight a number of challenges. Some of them were addressed by the government, but others pointed out important direction of work for the policy makers to further intervene in the system and increase its flexibility for preventing and addressing the domestic violence cases. Other challenges are linked to the limited resources and needs to upgrade technical skills of the service providers to mobilise adequately in the unusual working environment. Initially, service providers were faced with a challenging work context following the earthquake that hit Albania in November 26, 2019 and just few months later marked the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. In both situations, the absence of preparedness and appropriate crisis management and response became evident. Other challenges mentioned by the CSOs related to service provision, included: lack of preparedness at municipal level in managing the cases of severe risk; phone case referrals to public institutions not very effective; dragging court cases as the legal staff feared for their safety due to the risk of infection; lack of protocol and procedures to address online counselling approach. Online support was another challenge as it requires adequate internet connection and suitable equipment for online counselling.

Youth engagement and empowerment. The impact of COVID-19 in family relationships. Gender transformative interventions.

Photo: © SAWG Tirana and WtW – ZDB Shkodra

The need for a better preparedness and appropriate crisis management and response is clear. It is important to resource and guarantee accessibility to essential services for survivors and victims of domestic violence during similar situations and support safe response and service provisions for survivors of violence by public and non-public providers. Maintaining essential services – as shelters and hotlines accessible and operational at all times, while supporting the adoption of these services to crises situations is crucial. CSOs can capitalise on best working practices used during the pandemic and tailor a crisis response approach of services ready to be mobilized as needed. Further operational plans for online support services and protocols need to be developed. Furthermore, CSOs can play an important role in building solidarity with communities to prevent cases of domestic violence through applying gender transformative approaches that tackle the root causes of gender-based violence, as well as in addressing the needs of those affected ensuring that information on relevant support services is available and accessible through different channels of communication. Yet, can gender-transformative alone be an effective approach to tackle gender-based violence in these times of unprecedented crises? In a constantly challenging environment, the underlying message is that preparedness guided by agile strategic planning is key together with keeping the focus on emerging needs and rights of vulnerable women and girls.

This article has been authored by Elira Jorgoni, based on a review of literature and, most importantly, on information provided by local organisations supported by IAMANEH in Albania, such as Shelter for abused Women and Girls (SAWG), Counseling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG), Counseling Line for Men and Boys (CLMB), Women-to-Women (WtW) and Zyra per Djem dhe Burra (Office for Men and Boys, ZDB).

References

- [1] Order of the Minister of Health and Social Protection no. 254 dated 10.04.2020 "Protocol on the operation of public and non-public residential centers that provide housing service (shelters) for victims of domestic violence and trafficking in the situation of the COVID-19 pandemic"; and cover letter of MSHMS No. 2027 dated 28/04/2020 to the Municipalities "Protocols for Management of Domestic Violence Cases at the local level through NRM" and on "Management of domestic violence cases at the local level through NRM during the situation of Covid-19.

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