



### LEGAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORK

Croatia has ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in September 1992 and its Optional Protocol in March 2001. In January 2013 Croatia signed the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) and ratified it in June 2018. However, both the Istanbul Convention and the CEDAW Convention are almost never used in the legal processes against violence against women, despite being above the national law<sup>1</sup>.

Family violence was defined by the Criminal Code, through the adoption of the first Act on Protection against Domestic Violence in 2003. This led to improvements in the field of combating domestic violence, including strategies for prevention, sanctioning, and suppression. At the same time, the first Gender Equality Act and the Anti-Discrimination Act were passed to create equal opportunities for women and men and the Office of the Gender Equality Ombudsperson was set up as an independent body to combat gender-based discrimination and to advance gender equality. In 2004 the Government of Croatia established the Office for Gender Equality and coordinators were appointed in local and regional self-government units.

Despite significant progress in legislation, provisions are either not sufficiently implemented or implemented to the detriment of the survivors of violence<sup>2</sup>. There have been provisions tackling violence against women but within the framework of trafficking in persons, sexual violence, domestic violence without naming violence against women as such. It took six years to draw up a new National Plan for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights and Combating Discrimination for the period from 2022 to 2027. However, this has yet to be enacted and implemented.

Deficiencies in the application of the provisions of the Istanbul Convention and international and European legal regulations have inhibited further progress. Croatia has not fully recognized the structural nature of violence against women and girls as gender-based violence. Due to a lack of understanding of GBV by

institutions, gender-neutral approaches are adopted which fail to create a necessary connection between gender inequality and GBV. Research by AWHZ<sup>3</sup> shows that 46% of women were not satisfied with the conduct of the police after reporting violence, 14,2% have personally experienced double arrests and 17,3% have been processed as second accused in cases of domestic violence. The Croatian legislator does not distinguish GBV from other forms of domestic violence.

The justice system in Croatia does not provide victims with adequate redress or access to compensation for damages from perpetrators which is a serious shortcoming. In addition, the growing trend in religious fundamentalism is impacting women's reproductive rights and violates women's rights to equality.

### FACTS

In 2017 the Gender Equality Ombudsperson under the General Police Directorate of the Ministry of the Interior initiated Femicide Watch, an observatory for comprehensive monitoring, data collection, analysis and reporting of femicide cases. Femicide in Croatia accounts for 25-30% of all murders of which a significant number are women killed by their intimate partner<sup>4</sup>.

According to EIGE<sup>5</sup> the COVID-19 pandemic in Croatia gave rise to a higher risk of violence against women committed by an intimate partner. During the pandemic, women's organizations reported a sharp increase in the demand for support services for female victims of violence which further exacerbated pre-existing gaps in funding provisions for victim support services.

According to the 2019 FRA's Survey II<sup>6</sup>, 55 % of women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence, experienced it in their own home. 16 % of lesbian women, 8 % of bisexual women and 18% of trans people were physically or sexually attacked in the previous five years. 28 % of women experienced harassment in the previous five years, and 19 % in the previous 12 months. 33 % of women with disabilities experienced harassment in the previous ►

five years, and 25 % in the previous 12 months. The increase in cyber harassment is troubling with 10 % of women being subjected to cyber harassment in the previous five years, and 6 % in the previous 12 months and young women aged 16-29, 24 % experienced cyber harassment in the previous five years, and 16 % in the previous 12 months.

## WOMEN'S CSOs LANDSCAPE - Challenges and Needs

The condition of human rights in Croatia continued to worsen in 2021, as demonstrated in the illegal and violent pushback of refugees and migrants from Croatia into neighbouring countries and the further deterioration of the institutional framework for the development of civil society<sup>7</sup>. The National Strategy for Creating an Enabling Environment for Civil Society has still not been brought through and the criminalisation of civil society organisations working on issues of asylum and migration continues to be a serious threat.

The consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to emerge. During the pandemic the problem was that victims were isolated from access to support services but now the challenge is that there are insufficient numbers of women activists to provide support services and still very limited funding.

### Direct Victim Support Activities

Croatian women's CSOs are key providers of **access to shelters/refugee centers** for women victims/survivors of GBV. In 1988 the first SOS helpline for abused women and their children was founded in Zagreb and in 1990 the first shelter was opened by AWHZ<sup>8</sup>. Through the persistent work of women activists, shelters, helplines, and counselling centres for women victims of violence were opened in various parts of Croatia and today each of the 21 counties has a shelter. However, with one centre for every 50.000 women there is still a need for much more.

The most critical problems for CSOs in running shelters and counselling centres is sporadic and uncertain funding from the state and other national donors. Access to shelters is fundamentally linked to **accessing adequate counseling and psychological support, including group support for survivors as well as legal and medical advice**, according to the specific situation women face. There are insufficient funds available for counseling, staff training and overall victim support. Victims require support on a wide range of issues for

which **staff may require some specialized knowledge** (i.e. women knowing their rights before, during and after criminal proceedings, personal data protection, social mentoring and economic empowerment to break perpetrator dependence, etc.).

Women's organizations are **limited in their outreach to women in refugee and asylum centers** (mostly Ukrainian women and asylum seeking women from Syria), due to the lack of collaboration with the police and women survivors of low/moderate levels of violence in remote places on the islands and in the hinterland of the coastal counties.



<sup>1</sup> Government of Republic of Croatia - Office for cooperation with NGO's: Care4Trauma Improving GBV victims support services and the access to justice through Trauma-informed Care. Country report Croatia, 2022. Retrieved March 22, 2023 from [https://azkz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Care4Trauma\\_draft\\_country\\_report\\_Croatia-EN.pdf](https://azkz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Care4Trauma_draft_country_report_Croatia-EN.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Idem

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved March 23, 2023 from Autonomous Women's House Zagreb (AWHZ) (<https://azkz.hr/en/>)

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved March 22, 2023 from <https://equineteurope.org/social-media-campaign-highlighting-good-practices-on-combating-violence-against/>

<sup>5</sup> Retrieved March 23, 2023 from <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/2021/domain/violence/HR>.

<sup>6</sup> FRA's Fundamental Rights Survey and LGBTI Survey II, 2019. Retrieved March 23, 2023 from <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/eu-lgbti-survey-results>

<sup>7</sup> LIBERTIES RULE OF LAW REPORT (2022) Country & Trend Reports on Democratic Records by Civil Society Organisations Across the European Union. Retrieved March 23, 2023 from <https://www.liberties.eu/en/stories/liberties-rule-of-law-report-2022/43972>

<sup>8</sup> Retrieved March 23, 2023 from Autonomous Women's House Zagreb (AWHZ) <https://azkz.hr/en/>

<sup>9</sup> Retrieved March 23, 2023 from <https://medfeminiswiya.net/2021/04/09/feminism-in-croatia-a-brief-overview/?lang=en>

Existing shelters also need support to establish the capacities to admit women asylum seekers and refugees from other countries as well as women with the status of foreign workers whose numbers have quadrupled in the last year. Statistical data shows that **40% of migrants and asylum seekers are women at increased risk of GBV and human trafficking.** 85% of refugees from Ukraine in Croatia are women and children.

The need for **basic services, such as translation services, cultural mediation skills** and informational material in multiple languages are urgent needs that also require addressing.

### Indirect Victim Support Activities

Together with the provision of shelter and support for women victims/survivors of GBV, the key work areas for women's CSOs are **monitoring activities on EU and international policies, their practical application in national and regional laws and following up on the Istanbul Convention and CEDAW. Gaining knowledge on how to advocate at international and domestic levels as well as intergenerational knowledge transfer** to strengthen young women activists are pressing issues for grassroots organizations. Key topics of women's activism in Croatia are to claim the State's responsibility for:

- **Research on victim-perpetrator relationships** to raise awareness about the structural character of GBV and differentiate between different forms of GBV.
- **Data collection on GBV** as well as the need for case studies on court processes; the need for protocols on the harmonization of data provided by the different state authorities (police data is different to ministry data, etc.).
- **Awareness raising and sensitization programs** for the overall population by introducing gender responsive and GBV aware materials into the mandatory curriculum of the state education system, working particularly with boys on male entitlement and violence as well as into the vocational training of the police, health system providers, judges, workplaces, teachers, etc.
- **Creating more strict laws and punishments** to send a clear message of zero tolerance to GBV, including structures to avoid insanity pleas and State initiatives to work with perpetrators in detention centers for effective rehabilitation.

- **Legal approval of the right to obtain the status of 'victim of sexual violence during war'** or 'status of civilian victims of war' and improved legal efficiency in prosecution processes. Legal approval of the right to obtain the status of 'victim of sexual violence during war' or 'status of civilian victims of war' and improved legal efficiency in prosecution processes.

Meanwhile advocating for the State's responsibilities women's CSOs are often the only ones responding, with very limited funds, to the **growing need for gender-sensitive education and training of professionals on the dynamics of GBV** in the work of judges, prosecutors, police, social welfare centres, health workers and other experts working in related institutions.



### Community Building and Outreach Activities

To build a community free of GBV, Croatian women's CSOs have identified **the need for national TV campaigns.** Grassroots organizations are active with smaller campaigns through social media and/or radio but do not have the funds and capacities for the needed wider community outreach.

Through public speaking and activism, the women's movement increases its visibility. Therefore, **activists need to develop expertise in public speaking and public relations.** Overall, women's CSOs advocate for developing close cooperation with governmental authorities in systematically building GBV aware communities through raising awareness about harmful social and sexual norms, cultural belief systems and traditions. The women's movement also raises awareness about good practices in other European countries, such as models applied in Germany, Spain, and Sweden.

The need to build collaborations between women's CSOs and State institutions (social welfare, police, ►

judges) has also been identified as well as making awareness raising seminars and training on GBV mandatory.

### **CSO Competency Building**

The main priority for women's CSO's in Croatia is **knowledge building** so activists have the expertise to address the direct needs of victims and are knowledgeable for their lobbying and advocacy work. Specifically, knowledge building on European legal frameworks to learn how to frame the Conventions for the domestic implementation, (training on how frameworks apply to the national, regional, and local contexts), with a clear focus on how to prevent and combat GBV. Professional skill building as well as supervision and support for the ones working with survivors of GBV is also urgently needed to guarantee staff health and wellbeing.

Networking is also considered a key activity and part of women's CSOs daily activities. In this ad hoc networking has been identified as the most efficient way, as they focus on specific topics without interruption from diverse interests. There is a consensus that through **increased financial support for structural costs to provide some level of remuneration** since many work on a voluntary basis and with precarious income, networking will take care of itself.

The lack of structural funds is a pressing issue which forces CSOs to rely on project-based funding which keeps them in a precarious state due to uncertainty of project approvals and the short-term character of project funding. Moreover, work capacities shift from the provision of direct victim/survivor support and advocacy work to dealing with increased administrative tasks, such as writing of project proposals, collecting documentation, narrative, and financial reporting<sup>9</sup>.

Nevertheless, for many women's CSOs **project-based fundraising and knowledge about existing European funds and skill building on project writing** is a key priority meanwhile others do not prioritize these aspects as the reality of their highly voluntary or low-level paid work necessitates a focus on the direct victim support activities. However, there is a need for **support through helpdesks in monitoring, assessment, evaluation, and reporting**. Specifically, their annual reporting and reporting on advocacy topics.

Overall communication skills are needed as well as analytical skills of the work done and the presentation of data and facts.

*“55 % of women who experienced physical and/or sexual violence, experienced it in their own home.”*

#### **ABOUT THE STUDY**

This study analyses the women's CSO landscape in Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, France, Greece, Italy, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Spain. It identifies the challenges women's CSOs face and their needs to prevent and combat GBV. The study was carried out by INDERA SL at the request of **Calala Women's Fund** jointly with the **Mediterranean Women's Fund (MedWF)** and **Ecumenical Women's Initiative (EWI)**.

#### **Methodology:**

Based on a review of the current initiatives at grass-roots level in the 11 countries and the project portfolio of EU supported initiatives, a model of activities was created comprising the following four areas: 1) Direct Victim Support Activities: services and activities which are provided directly to the victims of GBV; 2) Indirect Victim Support Activities: monitoring, advocacy, and watch dog activities regarding the adoption and implementation of laws and policies to combat and prevent GBV as well as research, awareness raising and preventative activities. 3) Community and Outreach: activities to strengthen stakeholders' collaboration, networking and community building; 4) CSO Competency Building: activities to strengthen women's CSOs structural, technical, financial and operational capacities.

Stakeholder interviews with women's CSOs and experts from the 11 countries, together with desk research provided information and data about legal and policy frameworks, actors, tools and methods in the area of GBV and VAWG to identify needs to support actions with potential in prevention, protection, prosecution, service provisions, partnership building and prevalence.

The data provided in this study was collected in March 2023. More information at: [www.calala.org](http://www.calala.org)

