

ASSESSMENT OF THE SOS HELPLINES FOR VICTIMS OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA WITH RECOMMENDATIONS



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ANALYSIS OF THE SOS HELP-LINES FOR VICTIMS OF GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and do not necessarily represent the views of the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy North Macedonia.



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INTRODUCTION

The objective of the research was to perform an assessment of the current situation of SOS helplines for women victims of domestic violence (DV) and gender-based violence (GBV) across the Republic of North Macedonia. The research was conducted from October to November 2022 to make an assessment of the situation of the national helplines for women victims of GBV/DV and their functionality against the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) and its standards. The report was validated by the representatives of the three SOS helplines in March 2023.

GBV/DV is a pressing human rights issue in North Macedonia with 45% of women stating they have experienced it in some form. Provision of specialized services for the victims, including 24/7 SOS helpline, is one of the key components of a holistic response to prevention and protection from GBV/DV. There are currently 3 (three) SOS helplines for victims of GBV/DV in North Macedonia that were the subject of this research. The research was done drawing from literature review, on the basis of the interviews with the SOS line operators, interviews with victims, and an online survey with the stakeholders. This research assesses the current capacities, modes and standards of work and needed resources against the needs and commitments towards implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

Apart from the detailed analysis of the three SOS helplines, this report also presents a comparative analysis of the helplines in the region and Europe and provides conclusions and recommendations for aligning the national helplines service with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention.

The Istanbul Convention in North Macedonia

The Istanbul Convention, which entered into force in 2014, is the first legally binding international instrument aiming to prevent and combat violence against women and girls at the international level, and as such, it establishes a comprehensive framework of legal and policy measures to prevent such violence, support victims and punish perpetrators. By October 2022, the Convention has been signed by 46 of the 47 member states of the Council of Europe. The Istanbul Convention aims to protect women from all forms of violence; to prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence; to contribute to the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and to the promotion of substantive equality between women and men, including through the empowerment of women; to design a comprehensive framework, policies and measures for the protection and assistance of all victims of violence against women and domestic violence; to promote international cooperation in order to eliminate

violence against women and domestic violence; to provide support and assistance to law enforcement organizations and agencies to cooperate effectively in order to adopt an integrated approach to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence and to ensure effective implementation of the provisions of the Convention through a specific monitoring mechanism.¹

Article 24 of the Convention, which refers to "Telephone Helplines" - sets out that "Parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to establish free telephone helplines throughout the country, around the clock (24/7) to provide advice to callers, confidentially or with due respect for their anonymity, regarding all forms of violence covered by the scope of this Convention."² In the Convention's Explanatory Report³, it is further specified that "callers may remain anonymous, be counseled by persons trained in dealing with such situations, and that helplines provide information and support confidentially if callers so desire". The service should also be provided in all relevant languages.

On March 23, 2018, the Parliament of the Republic of North Macedonia ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence⁴, wherein the state undertakes to take legislative and other measures to provide a legal, institutional and organizational framework for the prevention of violence against women, protection of victims of violence, and punishment of the perpetrators of violence. The Istanbul Convention has thus become a part of the internal legal order, so the need to harmonize the existing legal and institutional framework with its provisions is imposed. In order to anticipate specific actions that will be implemented to harmonize the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, the state, through the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, prepared a National Action Plan for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.

The National Action Plan⁵ for the period between 2018 to 2023, define the activities, responsible institutions, indicators and the time frame for harmonizing the provisions of the Convention. It foresees the improvement of specialized services for victims of domestic violence, including the SOS helplines, and to that effect, the provision of financial resources from the state budget.

ABOUT THE PROJECT

This research was performed as part of the project "Prevention and protections from gender based violence in North Macedonia", funded by the British Embassy and implemented by UNFPA North Macedonia. The project purpose is to support the Government to embed and begin implementing state-wide integrated policies on gender-based violence (GBV) in line with the principles of the Istanbul Convention. The project has supported the implementation of the Istanbul Convention through a robust legal and policy framework that is multi-sectoral and with strengthened data which address perpetrator engagement

1 Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011

2 Ibidem

3 <https://rm.coe.int/ic-and-explanatory-report/16808d24c6>

4 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list?module=signatures-by-treaty&treatynum=210>

5 <https://www.mtsp.gov.mk/content/pdf/ap%202018/15.10-NAP%20AP%20za%20IK%202018.doc>

and leverage the media, so that women and girls are free from all forms of violence and the threat of such violence.

The project is structured around three pillars:

1. Coordination: the project develops coordination mechanisms between, and access to, critical multi-sectoral services for survivors. This includes the development of implementation policies and regulations across sectors – with Standard Operating Procedures (GBV SOPs) to ensure quality. The project supports the design of a model for integrated data collection and analysis on gender-based violence to ensure planning and monitoring of an effective multi-sectoral approach.

2. Response: the project improves service provision by strengthening capacities of service providers across sectors for victims and survivors. This includes expansion and provision of standardized services for victims of violence, through engagement of WROs/CSOs in partnership with other players in the referral process. Additionally, it will increase the uptake of services by enabling access to existing GBV reporting mechanisms. This includes raising the awareness about the national helplines for victims and survivors of violence to access services.

3. Prevention: the project promotes GBV survivor help and services through campaigns and events to raise awareness about the available services (with a focus on vulnerable groups), sensitization of journalists and editors on prevention of VAW/ DV, ethical GBV reporting, and gender stereotype reporting aimed at reducing the gender inequalities and prevention of VAW/DV.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of the research and analysis was to investigate and analyze the current situation of the helplines (SOS lines) for GBV/DV victims in North Macedonia, in terms of the services provided, number, quality and content of the telephone lines for help to victims of violence against women and domestic violence and to give recommendations for their improvement in accordance with the provisions of the Istanbul Convention.

The analysis focused specifically on provision of specialized services in the form of SOS helplines to victims of all forms of violence: intimate partner violence, sexual violence, and other forms of gender-based violence covered by the Istanbul Convention.

The research focused on the role and competences of the women civic organizations that administer the SOS helplines and provided an analysis of the performance and satisfaction with these services, followed by conclusions and recommendations. In

addition, regional and international good practices are presented, in order to provide better insight and comparison.

The specific components of the research were:

1. A review of existing literature and reports on SOS helplines in North Macedonia and good practices in the region and beyond;
2. An online survey with various stakeholders in order to map, assess and evaluate the work of SOS helplines and gather recommendations;
3. In-depth interviews with the SOS helplines operators; and
4. In-depth interviews with women survivors of violence, in order to assess and evaluate the performance of SOS helplines and gather recommendations.

Literature review

The literature review was conducted to analyze and gain insight into:

1. The situation of the helplines in North Macedonia; and
2. Comparative analysis of the helplines in the region and in Europe, with good practices.

The documents that were used in the literature review were the following:

- GREVIO reports and other reports to international bodies,
- Reports from Macedonian non-governmental organizations,
- Reports from SOS helplines describing their work and statistics,
- Reports from the relevant state institutions and agencies, and
- Reports on SOS helpline best practices from the region and beyond.

Interviews

For the purposes of the research, two sets of interviews were conducted: with SOS helplines' coordinators and operators, and with the women victims of violence who were beneficiaries of the SOS helplines.

1. Semi-structured interviews with SOS helplines
In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in November 2022, with the coordinator and an operator from each of the three service provider organizations. The female coordinators have extensive experience and knowledge of SOS helplines, with experience since 2001, 2003 and 1994 and the female operators interviewed have

professional experience since 1998, 1994 and 2021. They were interviewed with 18 open-ended questions, which enabled an overview and assessment of their work as service providers.

2. Semi-structured interviews with the victims

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to assess the experience and the satisfaction with the services provided by the operators of the helplines. The interviews were conducted separately, with a sample of 5 (five) randomly selected women-victims of domestic violence aged 29, 34, 42, 51 and 63 years. The purpose of the interviews was to provide insight into the satisfaction with the services; notwithstanding, we are aware that the sample is inconclusive and cannot be the basis for making definite conclusions. The contact with the victims and the conducting of the interviews were made possible through two out of the three SOS lines, which also manage shelter centers in Skopje and whose beneficiaries they were. The survivors were randomly selected and informed that their responses were anonymous and confidential and would be used solely for research purposes. The interviews consisted of 18 open-ended questions, designed to provide an overview of the victims' experience as users of the telephone SOS lines, their awareness, experience and satisfaction with them. The interviews with the victims were used to provide a more detailed insight into the work of the service providers and are not meant to represent the experience of all beneficiaries of SOS helplines or all victims of domestic violence in North Macedonia.

Online survey

An online survey was conducted with various stakeholders working with women victims of domestic and gender-based violence, on a national and local level, in the period between October 15 to November 15, 2022.

The survey was conducted with the aim to sample the opinions of the stakeholders on the current situation in terms of the number, quality, and content of helplines for victims of violence against women and domestic violence in North Macedonia and to provide recommendations for their improvement. It consisted of a total of 25 questions, of which 21 were multiple-choice questions and 4 open questions with narrative answers, and the results are based on 100 answers, which include input from local and national institutions, non-governmental organizations, shelters, the police and the centers for social work from all around the country.

THE MAIN FINDINGS IDENTIFIED BY THE RESEARCH

After the conducted interviews with the coordinators and operators of the SOS helplines and the women victims of domestic violence as users of the services of the helplines in

North Macedonia, as well as the conducted survey aimed at the centers for social work and other stakeholders working with the SOS helplines and in general with victims of domestic violence, the following findings can be highlighted:

- The three national SOS telephone helplines for victims of domestic violence are individually and entirely managed by specialized women non-governmental organizations.
- All lines have excellent cooperation with central and local authorities, institutions, and the police, which is key to the level and benefit of the services they offer.
- The helplines are financed from domestic and international sources and only one is financed from the state budget (MLSP).
- The vast majority are female callers, although there is a small number of male and child callers, reporting for the victim.
- The most common types of violence reported by victims are: physical, psychological and economic violence.
- Principles of work of the SOS helplines are anonymity, confidentiality, solidarity, and protection of integrity. The female professionals working on the helpline provide a space for callers to be heard, to be understood, to build trust and to be able to openly discuss the violence they suffer. The cases and workload are entered in a database that remains strictly confidential.
- The premises of the SOS helplines are not used exclusively as booths for receiving telephone calls, there is no constant work in shifts from the premises or offices themselves. There are no conditions to receive more than one call at a time, from different operators.
- All lines are staffed with female operators, coordinators, and additional staff: a social worker, a psychologist or other profile of staff who is trained and experienced in the field of provision of help, counseling work, psycho-social support, as well as experience with therapeutic work with people in crisis. These professionals are available on call.
- The operators who work on all three lines in the Republic of North Macedonia have received training on working with victims of domestic violence at the very beginning of their work at the SOS helplines.

- Currently, all three national SOS lines provide limited services in minority languages, depending on the nationality of the operator and whether the operator providing those services is on shift.
- The lines work 24/7 via call forwarding to the phones of operators who are on shift.
- The mobile helpline is free for the callers and the other two helplines strive to provide their services free of charge, however, this is not yet possible due to lack of sufficient funding.
- The SOS helplines' daily work is guided by their own practice and experiences, acquired through training and exchange of experiences with other organizations from the region and beyond. Each one of them has developed its own documents and procedures for work.
- The helplines conduct call logging in a specific manner, preserving the confidentiality and anonymity of the victims. From that data, the SOS helplines keep statistics on the number of calls, the forms and characteristics of violence, the total number and type of services provided, such as referrals to the police, to the centres for social work, to health institutions, to civil society organizations or free counseling.
- The protocols and documentation used for recording statistics on the number of calls and referrals are internal and differ for each helpline.
- Although the awareness and promotion efforts of the SOS hotlines by the organizations that manage them are at a satisfactory level, they are sporadic and largely dependent on external funding.
- The phone numbers of the helplines need to be promoted more to have wider reach to the public and the victims of violence.
- There is a need for improvement of technical hardware and software for modernizing the system of receiving calls, call registering and database management.
- The mobile application "Be safe" needs to be further promoted, if possible supplemented with additional functionalities.
- There is a need to invest in and introduce specialized services for callers and victims with disabilities.
- There is a need for continuous wide, multisectoral consultation and coordination between central and local authorities, institutions, the police, and the helplines, with

continuous training for work with the victims, avoiding secondary victimization and preventing the burnout effect of the service providers.

- There is a need for multisectoral cooperation providing additional services from the helplines to the victims, like in-person counseling or accompaniment to the victim to social, health and educational institutions, according to the needs of the beneficiaries.
- A significant investment in financial and human resources is required to standardize and improve the services of national SOS lines.
- The helplines expressed their willingness and desire to restructure their work, in order to provide 24-hour shifts with multiple operators in all relevant languages, if the conditions and finances would be provided for it.

NATIONAL SOS HELPLINES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

The following information is the result of a desk research on the national helplines in the Republic of North Macedonia, supplemented by the information from the interviews with the female directors and coordinators of the helplines. In the Republic of North Macedonia there are 3 (three) national telephone lines to help women victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Helplines are managed by women's civil society organizations. Below is a comparison table and a short description of the three, based on the publicly available information from their websites and reports, as well as first-hand information from the on-site visits conducted as part of this analysis.



Phone line	<i>National SOS line (02) 15-700</i>	<i>SOS Mobile National Line 141-700</i>	<i>National SOS line (02) 15-315</i>
Administered by	<i>Women's Organization of the City of Skopje (OZS)</i>	<i>National Council for Gender Equality (NSRR)</i>	<i>Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope)</i>
Type of telephone line	Landline	Mobile line	Landline
24/7	Yes	Yes	Yes
Free of charge	No	Yes	No
Languages	Macedonian Albanian (sporadic) English (sporadic)	Macedonian Albanian Romani (sporadic) English (sporadic) ⁶	Macedonian Albanian (sporadic) English (sporadic)
Number of operators	5 operators 1 coordinator	5 operators 1 coordinator ⁷	5 operators 1 coordinator
Number of calls per month	Approx. 90-110	Approx. 60-100	Approx. 40
Number of calls per year	Approx. 1200	Approx. 1000	Approx. 500
Target groups	Women survivors of domestic violence	Women survivors of domestic violence	Women survivors of domestic violence
Financed by	The City of Skopje MTSP (until 2016)Business community International organizations (various donors)	MTSP International organizations (various donors)	Municipality of Gazi Baba (covering phone bills only) International organizations (various donors)
Notes	Offers support to victims of domestic violence and manages a shelter for long-term accommodation (up to one year). Contact information is available on the mobile application Be safe.	It is the only mobile line and offers support for all forms of violence against women. Offers psycho-social counseling. It has a Facebook group for support. It is connected to the mobile application Be safe.	Offers online support to victims of domestic violence and manages shelter for intervention accommodation of victims (up to 48 hours). Contact information is available on the mobile application Be safe.
Website	www.ozs.org.mk/	www.sozm.org.mk/	krizcentar.org.mk/

⁶ The data is until December 2022. Since 2023 the helpline has included Turkish language (sporadic, if the operator is on shift)

⁷ The data is until December 2022. Since 2023 the helpline has 6 operators and one coordinator on shift work

NATIONAL SOS LINE (02)15700 – Women's Organization of the City of Skopje



About the organization

The Women's Organization of the City of Skopje (OZS) is a non-governmental organization that works in the field of promotion and protection of women's rights and manages a 24/7 national SOS line for victims of domestic violence and a shelter. Ever since 1991, OZS has been active in the promotion and development of gender equality, the fight against domestic violence, economic and political empowerment of women, as well as the fight for women's rights. It provides professional assistance to victims, offers psycho-social support and strengthening, provides safe and secure temporary residence (shelter) from 1 to 12 months, refers victims to the relevant institutions and provides continuous training of female volunteers for work on SOS helplines.

In 2010, OZS, together with 20 other related non-governmental organizations from all over the country, founded the National Network to End Violence against Women and Domestic Violence⁸

About the national SOS helpline of OZS

The helpline was established on August 2, 1994 as a project of OZS and the Dutch Interchurch Aid (DIA) and became the first SOS helpline for women and children victims of violence in independent Macedonia.

One of the main reasons for opening the SOS helpline was the overwhelming fact that violence against women and children at that time was not considered a social problem, but rather a private family affair. The increased demand of services of the SOS helpline led to the need to provide adequate education for the female operators, to strengthen capacities, expand cooperation at the state and international level, and gain greater trust among women and children victims of violence.

During the first year, 94 calls for help were registered. As this SOS helpline developed, collaboration has been forged with numerous institutions and related non-governmental organizations from the country and abroad. In 2004, in cooperation with the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, the SOS helpline for women and children victims of violence grew into the first National SOS helpline for victims of domestic violence (02) 15700.

⁸ <https://glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk/natsionalna-mrezha/za-nas/>

Work standards

The national helpline (02) 15-700 works 24/7. It provides services in Macedonian, Albanian and English (the latter two only sporadically, depending on the availability of the operator).⁹

The helpline work is divided into shifts, from the premises of the organization during working hours and by diverting calls to the landline phones of the operators outside of working hours. In the past, shift work took place with full duty in the premises of the organization, but after a break-in and theft in the premises, this practice was discontinued, until such time there are conditions and finances to reboot it.

In 2022 the helpline is staffed by a team of six trained and experienced part time female employees (one coordinator and five operators), whose goal is to recognize every type of violence and provide adequate support to victims. The team has undergone initial training for work with victims of domestic violence and it is regularly participating in educational and capacity building activities on the topic, organized by national and international organizations. Moreover, the staff of the helpline also provide training to female volunteers for work on helplines or with victims of DV or GBV.

The national SOS helpline encourages the victims to become independent, restore their self-confidence and independently make decisions about their life and how to end the violence. The program for working with callers is based on anonymity, discretion, trust, respect, without prejudice and non-discrimination on any basis. The helpline has professionals on call, among which there are sociologists, psychologists and legal advisors who are active on a needs basis and provide pro bono services as needed.

Statistics

Year	Number of calls
2022	962
2021	937
2020	942
2019	813

⁹ In the past, this helpline has provided services in English, Romani, Turkish, Vlach, Bosnian, Serbian, Croatian.

Funding

The national helpline (02) 15700 is financed with funds from various sources - state and international funding, as a project, but also has limited support from the business community. This diversified funding varies in amount and sources every year.

In the period from 2004-2008 and 2015-2016, the helpline was financed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy.

The City of Skopje finances the helpline only for 5 months a year, at a project level, with a sum of 300,000 denars in 2022, 250,000 denars in 2021 and 200,000 in 2020, which is far below the organization's needs. As a result, the operators, as well as the support staff of the organization work part time or on a voluntary basis.

Shelter

The Women's Organization of the City of Skopje – OZS also runs its own shelter for women and children victims of domestic violence.

The shelter provides services for victims of domestic violence from the entire territory of the Republic of North Macedonia. It provides accommodation for up to 6 people - victims and their children for a period of up to one year, and is accessible 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The services at the shelter center are free and they are offered in Macedonian and Albanian language. The shelter provides services to users regardless of age, sexual orientation, language, religion, national, ethnic, or social origin. The shelter provides the following services:

- Safe accommodation, food, personal hygiene products, medicines, clothes, shoes and toys for children;
- Assessment of the condition and of risk to health and life;
- Initial psychosocial help and support;
- Psychosocial treatment based on an individual plan for working with victims of domestic violence; and
- Person to accompany the victim to social, health and educational institutions according to the needs of the beneficiaries.

NATIONAL FREE SOS MOBILE LINE 141 700 National Council for Gender Equality



About the organization

The National Council for Gender Equality (NSRR) formerly known as the Union of Women's Organizations of Macedonia (SOZM) is a national, multi-ethnic, and multi-generational network of 116 local women's organizations. NSRR has a mission to promote women's rights, to work towards the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women and to build a society with equal opportunities for all. It was established in October 1994 and has so far grown into one of the largest women's networks in the Republic of North Macedonia. The goals of NSRR are the development, promotion and full implementation of international conventions and the Universal declarations of human rights with a special emphasis on the promotion of the prohibition of discrimination, especially on the basis of gender.

About the national SOS helpline of NSRR

The SOS helpline is mobile network based, dialed with or without prefix from all mobile operators, at the number 141700 (070/075/077 -141700). The goal of the helpline is to facilitate victims' access to services for their help and support and provide information and referral services for victims.

This is the only national mobile helpline. This phone line has been open and receiving calls since 2000.

Since 2020, the NSRR helpline has also been integrated in the mobile application "BE SAFE", initiated by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and supported by UNDP. The victims can send an SMS message to the helpline and the female operator will call back and provide a referral.

Work standards

Five operators and one coordinator, all female work on the line, but the line also has collaborators - social workers, psychologists, health workers and lawyers who are on call as needed.

The helpline operates 24/7, from the premises of the organization during work hours and in shifts after work hours. The service is available in Macedonian, Albanian, Romani and English languages¹⁰, but not at all times in all languages (except Macedonian).

¹⁰ The data is until December 2022. Since 2023 the helpline has included also Turkish language (sporadic, if the operator is on shift)

The service in the minority languages is available when the operator fluent in the specific language is on shift.

The activities of the service are free for the victims calling from all mobile operators across the country, which enables constant access to support and help, counseling, referral of victims to other direct services, connection to counseling centers, police, centers for social work, centers for accepting and accommodating victims in an emergency and in the long term.

Statistics

The victims who call the SOS helpline are mostly women, and the perpetrators are usually men, their husbands, partners, or ex-partners. Elderly people who are mistreated by their sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, due to inheritance, and victims of peer violence in schools, occasionally call the line as victims.

In most cases, the victims are unemployed and financially dependent on the abuser, who abuses and constantly harasses the victim, psychologically and economically, and often the children of the victims also suffer. Unemployment, the difficult economic situation of the victims, lack of opportunity for financial independence etc. are the main reasons for not reporting the violence. More than 80% of victims require personal contact with a counselor-psychologist and a lawyer, and often come directly to the premises of this SOS helpline.

Year	Number of calls
2022	407
2021	532
2020	448
2019	420

Physical violence (69%), psychological (31%), as well as economic and sexual violence are the most frequently reported of the total number of cases, although there is a high number of combined types. The time that the victim was enduring the violence was - 85% more than 5 years, 11% up to 2 years, 4% up to one year. Most of the callers were women between the ages of 22 and 50.

Funding

The helpline managed by the NSRR is financed by various donors, as part of project activities and in the frame of larger projects.

As of 2018, the helpline has been financed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy with a sum of 805,000 denars per year.

Other services

The organization also runs a psychological and legal counseling center, a self-help group and a Facebook group under the title "Come out of the shadows/Dil nga hijja" where women can debate, report violence and ask for the help they need. The page and the group work continuously and research and education of citizens about domestic violence is planned for each month, through surveys and questionnaires, publication of posts and articles by experts.



NATIONAL SOS HELPLINE 15 315 Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope)



About the organization

Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope) was founded on Dec 22, 2000 with a mission to fight violence against women and children and domestic violence in the Republic of North Macedonia, as phenomena that violate the rights of women and children and human rights in general.

The Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope) continuously works on advocacy, education and direct support to break the cycle of violence against women and domestic violence, through changes in individual and social beliefs, attitudes and behaviors that generate violence.

About the national SOS helpline of "Nadezh"

During the preparation for the operation of the SOS helpline, the founders first organized training for volunteers to work on this issue in Arzamas - Russia, where experiences from the functioning of several crisis centers from Russia were also shared. The Helpline (02)3173-424, named "a Telephone of confidence", was opened as a general helpline on October 28, 2001. In 2002, a second line of the "Telephone of confidence" was opened, with number (02)3175-516, which enabled receiving calls from 2 callers simultaneously.

The two lines of "Telephone of confidence" helpline started working from 9 am to 5 pm, increased its hours of operation from 9 am to 9 pm in 2004, and in 2010, a special telephone line (02) 15 315 was opened, which became a National SOS helpline for victims of domestic violence, available 24/7. In 2010 and 2011, the Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope) started organizing training for the work of local SOS lines for victims of domestic violence.

In 2020, the Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope) started receiving enquiries, providing counseling and referrals using online tools, i.e. via Facebook, Instagram and email. Online sessions and counseling are arranged through these messages.

Work standards

The National SOS helpline operates 24/7 via call forwarding. The information shared is confidential and care is taken to preserve privacy.

Five operators and one coordinator, all female, work in shifts on the line, and the languages in which the service is provided are Macedonian and English. (The operators can speak both Serbian and Croatian and can provide the service in these languages as well, while Albanian is offered occasionally, i.e. when there is a need).

The line is staffed by the staff of Crisis Center "Nadezh", i.e. trained female volunteers and supervisors who, depending on the nature of the call, direct the victims towards further steps and protection measures depending on their needs and in accordance with their interest. The staff have received training in crisis work, listening and communication skills, community resources, gender, religious and cultural issues.

Among other types of training, the Crisis Center "Nadezh" organizes group and individual mentoring sessions for professionals who work with victims of gender-based violence. For the prevention of the burnout syndrome caused by work with gender-based violence, for self-care, well-being and endurance, the staff of the helpline also offered mentoring sessions for professionals who work in civic organizations, social work centers, police stations and educational institutions. This service is not a permanent service of the organization, but a project activity, which did not continue.

In order to ensure the most satisfactory results, Crisis Center "Nadezh" conducts a questionnaire on satisfaction, with which it monitors the satisfaction with the services it provides.

Statistics

Year	Number of calls
2022	514
2021 ¹¹	532
2020	514
2019	510

¹¹ During the entire year of 2022, 448 emails were received, in 2021, 484 email messages were received and in 2020 (July-September) - 164, and the team of Crisis Center "Nadezh" answered all of them.

Funding

Reports indicate that over the years the Crisis Center "Nadezh" has received support from the British Embassy, the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and EVN - the national electro-distribution company.

The national line is financed with funds from various donors, through project activities. For the year 2022, Crisis Center "Nadezh" has received funds for its SOS helpline from the municipality of Gazi Baba, in the amount of 280,000 denars¹², which are not at the required level for the satisfactory functioning of the helpline, thus the operators operate the line voluntarily.

The Shelter managed by this organization is supported by the MLSP, on a yearly basis.

Shelter and other services

In addition to the helpline, Crisis Center "Nadezh" also provides care and safe and secure temporary accommodation for a period of 24-48 hours with the capacity to accommodate a maximum of 5-7 victims of domestic violence at a time. Apart from providing care to the victims and their children, they also provide protection, psychosocial support, counseling, and meeting their basic needs (food, clothing, bedding, hygiene products and medicines). At the same time, the victim is supported by a person to accompany her to other relevant institutions that the victim needs to see in order to find a permanent solution to overcome her problem, or victims are accompanied to an institution competent for the provision of an extended temporary residence.

The organization also provides emotional empowerment and initial legal aid through education for victims of domestic violence. The victim is provided adequate psychosocial support and encouragement in the process of finding a solution for her problem. The support sessions with victims of domestic violence led by a professional team (psychologist, social worker and lawyer trained for working with victims), are aimed at psychosocial support and at building the victim's resilience while she is making important decisions about her future, as well as informing her about opportunities, especially in terms of legal procedures that can be initiated. The sessions take place in a separate room within the premises of the Crisis Center "Nadezh", for as many times as is required.

¹² These funds covered the costs of the telephone lines and activities, but not the staff.

RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH ON THE OPERATION OF THE SOS TELEPHONE HELPLINES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA BASED ON IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

As part of our research, we aimed to determine how the national helplines in the Republic of North Macedonia work and what standards they meet. The following information is based on the in-depth interviews with the coordinators and operators of the three national helplines.

Principles of operation of the telephone SOS lines

According to the information provided in the interviews, on all three SOS helplines in the Republic of North Macedonia, the female operators are familiar with and are guided by the principles they are obliged to respect:

1. Respect for the gender perspective and non-discrimination on any of the following grounds: race, color, origin, national or ethnic origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, belonging to a marginalized group, language, citizenship, social origin, education, religion and religious affiliation, political belief, other beliefs, disability, age, marital status, property status, health status, personal characteristics and social status or on any other basis;
2. Availability 24/7;
3. Urgency and due diligence;
4. Active listening;
5. Timely and appropriate reaction;
6. Responsibility and professionalism in handling the calls;
7. Attention to the rights, interests and needs of the victim;
8. Secrecy and confidentiality when exchanging data;
9. Avoiding secondary victimization.

Space and equipment

In order to enable the service of the SOS telephone lines, the space in which the service is provided should ensure the privacy of the users and conditions for the smooth functioning of the operators, as well as keeping records and confidentiality of the calls. Through the interviews we could confirm that these conditions haven't been sufficiently implemented.

The premises of all three helplines are not used exclusively as booths for receiving calls and conducting telephone conversations. They are part of the offices of the organization which administers them. Only one operator per shift receives calls; there is no constant shift work of multiple operators providing services in different languages simultaneously. Currently, there are no conditions to receive more than one call at a time from different operators, so it may happen that when the victim calls, she cannot reach the operator and get help (if the line is busy). Outside the working hours of the organization - provider of the service, the calls to the SOS helplines are diverted to the fixed lines in the operator's homes, or the mobile phones of the operators, who can be at any location.

All the interviewed telephone lines' operators expressed their willingness and desire to restructure their work, shifts and duties, provided there are conditions and finances available.

Recommendation:

We recommend investing in a specially equipped space for shift work and rest for operators, with a modernized switchboard and VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol), so that multiple operators can conduct multiple conversations at the same time, with due respect for confidentiality and other work principles. The SOS telephone service for information and referral can also be provided via mobile phone, if the privacy of the users and smooth operation, active listening and secrecy of the conversations are ensured.

Competence of operators and other staff

The daily work of the SOS telephone helplines in the Republic of North Macedonia is administered by female coordinators and operators.

All organizations – providers of the SOS helpline service have hired female coordinators (currently all of them have one per line) who are directly responsible for managing the service and coordinating the activities of the operators.

Also, the organizations have hired female operators, who have completed an appropriate, usually in-house training for working with victims of all forms of violence (explained below in more details). According to the interviews, all three organizations answered that a total of 6¹³ people work on the SOS telephone lines, one coordinator and 5 operators each, employed part time, or working as volunteers, dependent on funding.

In order for a helpline to function successfully and provide assistance to victim callers, operators working on the helpline must be informed and trained to handle any situation that victim callers may present to them. During the visits and interviews, we established that the operators who work on all three lines in the Republic of North Macedonia have received training on domestic violence at the very beginning of work at the SOS helpline. In addition, during their work, depending on the type of work, they received training in regard to the work at the shelters, work as operators, communication training, as well as additional recurring training, seminars at regional and international level. Some of the topics were crisis communication, protection measures for victims of domestic violence, active listening, gender equality, religious and cultural relations, victim support, trust building and many more.

However, the training that female operators receive at the workplace is not standardized and consists of handing over work duties from a more senior colleague when transitioning to an operator position, or general training, subject to support for non-governmental and women's organizations from different donors. Our research shows that there is a need for regular, comprehensive training of professional helpline staff, for profiling victims and for preparedness for various scenarios and simulations of different situations.

The telephone helplines should provide professional support for all staff who provide the services, operators, coordinators, social workers, psychologists and other professional staff. All of the providers of these services across the three lines stated that they have a practice of weekly meetings with the team and occasionally have team building activities through informal gatherings such as visits to exhibitions, poetry readings, etc. The Crisis Center “Nadezh” has developed a training program for acquisition of self-care, well-being and resilience skills for professionals who work with victims of gender-based violence. The National Council for Gender Equality and the Women’s Organization of the City of Skopje have so far produced manuals, as well as professional training for support and trust building skills in people from different professional backgrounds working with victims of domestic violence. The tools that they have developed represent a sound basis for supporting organizations, institutions and staff working with victims of domestic violence.

¹³ The mobile SOS line of the NSRR had 5 operators and one coordinator until the end of 2022. Since 2023 it has 6 operators and one coordinator.

Recommendation:

To capitalize on the existing resources, it is important to organize trainings and coordination meetings between SOS line operators and other institutions and organizations such as the police, centers for social work staff, as well as professional support to personnel (social workers, psychologists, lawyers), for the sake of better coordination, familiarity with the work and mutual support.

All three organizations have also hired at least one professional: social worker, psychologist or other profile of staff who is trained and experienced in the field of providing help, counseling work, psychosocial support, as well as experienced with therapeutic work with people in crisis. From the interviews, we noticed that the organizations also have pools of professionals whom they turn to on a need basis. These do pro bono work for the organizations or are engaged occasionally to provide consultations for the helpline.

Recommendation:

- Provide conditions, as well as financial means, to hire at least 3 permanent professional staff, on shift work, which would greatly improve the service provided by the helplines.
- Organize regular, comprehensive training of professional helpline staff, for profiling, with simulations of different situations and preparedness for different scenarios through standardized certified trainings for operators of SOS lines.

Languages in which the service is provided

The helplines should provide services in the languages of the minority communities at all times.

At present, all three national SOS lines provide services in Macedonian and limited services in the Albanian language, depending on whether the operator providing those services is on shift. The mobile helpline of NSRR provides occasional services in Romani language, depending on the availability of the operator. Other languages in which services have been provided by the helplines since their establishment until now are English, Romani, Turkish, Vlach (Aromanian) and Serbo-Croatian, however this was also temporary and

dependent on funding and/or the engagement of the operator. At the time the research was conducted in December 2022, there were no permanent shifts of operators in other languages of minority communities to operate 24/7.¹⁴

All helplines agree that continuous support should also be provided in the minority languages, however this is conditioned by the appropriate funding, staffing of the SOS lines, the change and/or turnover of staff, as well as shift work as a condition for receiving the service in the appropriate language.

Access to the helpline services is an essential component of the system of protection of victims' right to be free from gender-based violence. Due to communication, information, physical, and other barriers, women with disabilities may have difficulties in reaching out to these essential services.

The accessibility of the services should be adapted to the type of disability, although this still depends on the specific individual needs of the person. In that direction, the services of the telephone helplines should be adjusted, especially for people with intellectual disabilities and sensorial impairments (deaf people and blind people), both as callers to the helplines, but also as victims.

For women victims with intellectual disabilities, the language should be adjusted in a way that the caller can understand what to expect from the service, how to get the service, etc.. The operators of the telephone helplines stated that they have had such experiences and they treat each such case with due attention and according to the specifics of each victim individually.

For callers and victims with deafness and hearing loss, the first step is to provide a texting option (chat option) on a wider range of communication platforms, which have been established in advance. In addition, lines with video-conference calls (where a sign language interpreter will be included) should be provided. These can be provided through the modernization of telephone lines and the inclusion of VoIP protocols (voice over the Internet). In principle, if a call is received, and no one speaks on the other side, the operators should immediately try to get in touch with the same person through a communication platform (video or written communication).

For callers and victims with visual impairments, a special attention should be given during the promotion of the phone numbers of the helplines - advertisements, billboards, banners, posters, but also on web pages and social networks, so they can be accessible for reading (Braille on printed materials or the numbers should be written in a clearly legible font and contrasting colors so that they can be easily photographed/scanned, and

then with the help of assistive technology they can be read for the person).

The helpline operators stated that they had cases when victims with disabilities contacted them by e-mail or through messages on the organization's Facebook page. The "Be Safe" mobile application, if upgraded, can offer the aforementioned options for victims with various types of disabilities – a chat option, video calls, contrasting texts and codes, or pre-recorded messages, texts and protocols for action.

Recommendation:

Introduce conditions and resources for provision of SOS helpline services in all relevant minority languages available 24/7.

Further develop hotlines' technical abilities and capacities that allow for alternative forms of communication for victims with disabilities.

Organization and working hours

The SOS helpline for victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence should be anonymous and free, with 24-hour support, 7 days a week.

Our research indicates that the lines do not work 24/7 from the offices of the service provider organizations but use call forwarding to mobile phones of operators who are on shift.

Out of the three national SOS helplines, only the NSRR Mobile line is free for callers. The other two lines charge a minimum amount of 0.75 denars per minute. Even though they approached the telecom services providers, they failed to secure sponsorship for converting their lines into free ones. When they attempted to convert their lines to be free of charge, they found that this required changing the number, which is already widely known to the public, so they decided against the change.

All three lines pay a sum for forwarding calls from the landline or mobile number of the SOS phone to the landline or mobile phone of the operator who is on shift. The same is free for callers, and the regular price of the call remains fixed.

We may note that the helplines are striving to provide 24/7 free service, however, they lack sufficient institutional support and funding to fully achieve this. Therefore, this can be overcome if sufficient funding is provided.

¹⁴ The mobile line of NSRR has since 2023 introduced Turkish language, depending on which operator is on shift.

Recommendations:

- Establish cooperation and understanding from the providers of telephone services, whereby the same would be free for the callers and would not appear on the bill of the callers to ensure greater protection and safety of the victims.
- Provide services through other telecommunication or information technologies (VoIP, Skype, Viber, e-mail, Internet consultations, etc.), while ensuring data protection, anonymity and confidentiality.

Confidentiality

In general, all SOS helpline operators have a working principle to actively listen to the victims who call the lines, to approach the situation with a timely and appropriate reaction, and to be responsible and professional. They also stated that they always pay attention to the rights, interests and needs of victims who come forward and all information about the victim remains confidential.

When asked how they ensure that the services are confidential, all the operators of the telephone lines answered that the information remains anonymous. In cases when undertaking an activity for which the victim should share an address, according to the protocol, the information remains secret, according to the established way of working. In addition, the operators' work contracts have a confidentiality clause. The data is protected in secure files and folders to ensure that the right to anonymity of the victims is not threatened.

The operators inform all callers that they operate under the principle of confidentiality within certain limitations. Confidentiality of data can be limited in exceptional cases - if it is necessary to protect the victim, when it is likely that her life, health or freedom is threatened or when it is necessary to protect other persons (children, elderly parents), because there is a probability for them to be exposed to risk.

The operators use indicators and key words when identifying danger for the victim. They are trained and experienced to recognize a low, medium and high-risk situation for the victim and respond accordingly (with the victim's permission to call the authorities) or instruct the victim on what to do. There are also cases such as situations of immediate danger and limited confidentiality when the operators are obliged to report the case to the competent authorities without the consent of the caller and they inform the callers about it in advance.

The operators are obliged to inform the victims who call, their circumstances permitting, about the rights and services they are entitled to. They actively participate in finding a

solution to the victim's problem, and they patiently wait until she makes her own decision. They advise the victims, listen to them carefully and then give them appropriate referrals if necessary. The victim can call all SOS helplines an unlimited number of times, as well as leave a phone contact number, so that she can be contacted at a time convenient for her, at no additional cost.

Call logging and data records

As a working principle in all organizations that provide referral services through telephone helplines, the caller is informed about rights and services, actively participates in finding solutions, and is given sufficient time to consider information and options and make her own decision. The operators of the SOS helplines allow the victim sufficient time to understand the information in accordance with her needs in terms of language, identity, literacy, disability, etc.

In order to maintain anonymity and operational confidentiality, the helplines conduct call logging in a specific manner. The operator who receives the call collects the necessary information, such as general demographic data, data regarding the violence is taken, then the risk is assessed and a referral is made to the appropriate institutions. From that data, the SOS helplines keep statistics on:

- the number of calls,
- the type and characteristics of violence,
- the total number and type of services provided, such as referrals to the police, to the center for social work, to health institutions, to other civil society organizations or free legal counseling.

In order to work professionally, promptly and smoothly, the helplines work according to internal work procedures when receiving a call. Also, in the internal organization of the work of each line separately, there are principles of work for the operators, protocols that they are guided by, such as a working protocol, they have a call log form, as well as a protocol for cooperation with other organizations and receiving victims.

Through the interviews, it was determined that the helplines would have the following records and documentation: anonymous database, call log with a brief description of the situation of the victim who called, as well as track of how many times the victim called. Daily and monthly reports are kept and they contain the data by:

- municipality of residence,
- age,
- nationality,
- type of violence,
- circumstance in which the violence occurred,
- a report on where the victim was referred to.

The records are kept on paper and electronically. Each of the helplines has developed its own rules and forms, according to which reports are made on a daily, monthly and annual level.

Recommendations:

- Regularly evaluate and update the documentation related to the general forms, protocols, reports and risk assessment forms.
- Utilize or develop a program for electronic database management, to facilitate the call logging, the encryption of users, as well as the preparation of reports.

Data protection

The SOS helplines have their own systems in place to protect as much as possible the information they receive, to protect it from misuse, destruction, loss, unauthorized modification and unauthorized access. They keep it in paper form, locked, as per the Personal Data Protection Act, and only the authorized persons working for the helplines have the access to them. Data statistics are kept in an electronic database, usually in the form of a report in Word or Excel format. There is no joint standardized protocol for conducting conversations or logging conversations and keeping statistics, and each organization (SOS helpline) is guided by its own model. All of them have an anonymous database of users and a call log, with a brief description of the case and the operator's intervention.

The organizations have some form of written scenarios for conducting the conversations, written instructions for risk assessment, or instructions for preparing reports. The organizations that manage the SOS helplines are guided by their own practice and experiences, acquired through training and exchange of experiences with other organizations from the region and beyond. While effective response to DV and GBV depends largely on the competence and experience of the service provider, and these service providers have a great deal of expertise and experience, having a

standardized risk assessment tool and counseling guidelines would help improve overall service provision across different agencies and easier transfer of know-how in dealing with cases of DV and GBV.

Recommendations:

- Introduce protocols and standardize questionnaires and documentation for call logging, as well as data processing and statistics.
- Use the processed data from the records to raise public awareness, ensuring anonymity of the victims.

Additional Services provided by the SOS helplines

When asked what services the helpline provides, the answers from all operators of SOS lines are that they provide the following information:

- available services for GBV victims,
- legal information,
- counseling and assistance,
- psychological support and assistance.

These services are mainly provided on telephone, but all organizations stated that there are often cases when victims come, even unannounced to their offices requesting advice or protection. The SOS helplines also include a referral service, such as to state institutions or social welfare institutions approved by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, according to the Law.

The fact that the telephone lines are located in the premises of women's civil society organizations, which are known to the public, as well as the familiarity of the victims with the SOS telephones give a freedom or comfort to the victims to ask for counseling or a referral to free legal or psychological help or other services. The conversations are conducted by operators or other professional staff if the victim so requests.

Per the request of the victims, there have been cases when the victim is accompanied to the institutions competent for the case. In those instances, as reported by the organizations, the victims have stated that they feel more connected, confident and safe with the operator who has received the call(s) or the counselor who accompanied her. However, these are isolated cases and although the organizations themselves have the desire, it is not an established

practice, nor do they have the financial resources to make it sustainable. There is an additional segment which is important for the work of the SOS helplines and the organizations that manage them. Namely, due to the publicly available information of the location and services offered by the SOS helplines or the organizations that manage them, they are exposed to various security risks. In the past, all three organizations reported that their offices had been violently broken into (outside of the regular working hours) by unknown perpetrators. Currently, the organizations have no physical or electronic security systems in place for their (or their beneficiaries') safety.

Recommendations:

- Given the practice and the desire of the organizations administering the helplines, additional resources should be secured to ensure that these organizations can provide regular in-person or online counseling and/or accompaniment of the victim to the competent institutions.
- Provide conditions, as well as financial means, to set up electronic or physical security systems in place, for greater protection of persons and data.

Monitoring and evaluation of the work of SOS helplines

In order for the SOS helplines to always function at the highest level and standards, the organizations should carry out internal monitoring to determine whether the victims who call do receive the appropriate services and support, whether the services correspond to the needs of those who call, whether there are problems in the implementation of the structured plan that the operators are guided by and whether those who call the lines are satisfied with the services. For the evaluation of their work, the employees of the SOS telephone helplines stated that they use internal evaluation meetings, briefings and/or group meetings, taking into account the opinion of the users of the telephone lines through feedback (if possible).

At the same time, two of the organizations (OZS and Crisis Center "Nadezh") can use feedback from some of the victims through the work of the shelters they administer. Until now, none of the organizations providing referral services through the SOS telephone lines has established a mechanism or arranged a feedback system for evaluating the satisfaction of the services provided to the callers. Feedback is conducted only if the victim calls the SOS helpline again.

Also, all service provision organizations lack a system for receiving complaints from beneficiaries. The user of the service has the right to complain about the operation of the SOS helpline, the way the call was received or the treatment of the operator. This would further reinforce the trust of the callers, increase their expectations regarding the quality of the services and increase the efficiency of the delivered services.

Recommendations:

- Introduce a service quality management system to provide feedback and a high level of satisfaction to service users to be used as a benchmark, norm or model for comparison of the provided services, including the services of the different SOS telephone helplines.
- Develop mechanisms or procedures for receiving and responding to complaints and appeals in accordance with the internal regulations of the service provider organization.

Statistics

When asked to assess how many calls the SOS helpline receives in a month and a year, the Crisis Center "Nadezh" stated that they receive about 40 calls per month (usually more than 40), the NSRR answered that it is about 60 to 100 calls per month, and the OZS said that they received the most calls during the corona pandemic (130-140), while for a month there are about 90 to 112 calls. The assessment of the calls per year, the Crisis Center "Nadezh" reported about 500, NSRR about 1000, and OZS 1100.

Regarding the structure of the callers and the percentage, the crisis center "Nadezh" stated that women mainly call the SOS line, although there is a very small percentage of men, about 2-3%. NSRR reported that the structure of callers is women aged 30-40, and they are about 90%, but there are also children who call, as well as neighbors and relatives who report violence. The OZS replied that the calls are mainly from women, from the entire territory of the country, but they also have 1% of calls made by men, as well as 2% of calls from children, who are directed to the numbers of Megjashi (the Children's SOS line).

According to the coordinators of all three helplines, the reported perpetrators are in most cases the husbands, partners, parents, children, sons/daughters of older persons. From the interviews with the operators, we received information that about 60% of the victims called for the first time, while 20% called twice. About 20% of victims call three or more times. As reporters of violence in a huge number of cases, 80% are the victims themselves,

and in only 20% of the cases reporters on behalf of the victim are other persons. Most commonly reported cases of violence to all helplines are cases of physical, psychological and economic violence. Majority of cases have multiple types of violence involved, but generally, all of the cases that lasted for a long-time end with physical violence, and the victims usually need advice, referral or help for evacuation.

When asked if and how they keep statistics for the SOS telephone helplines, all operators pointed out that they keep monthly and annual statistics, broken down mostly by municipality, age, gender, nationality, type of violence and reasons for violence, type of service that was offered. During the on-site visits we concluded that each helpline has its own forms that differ from one organization to another.

Recommendation:

Introduce modernized and electronic systems for statistical data gathering, to help unify data and stratification and speed up reporting.

Promotion of the helplines

In order to determine how much is invested in making the citizens familiar with the helplines in the country, the research examined how the helpline is promoted. It was established that the promotional activities are carried out by the organizations themselves through social networks, through flyers or as part of the projects that they are implementing, then through visits and media interviews, occasional campaigns, their websites, occasional grants and cooperation with other civic organizations and state institutions.

Although the awareness and promotion efforts of the SOS helplines by the organizations that manage them have been in place for years since their establishment, they are sporadic and largely dependent on external funding.

Recommendation:

Provide financial means for continuous and intensified promotion of the SOS helplines' numbers, and for wide promotion and familiarization of the users of the various services they offer.

Funding

The research shows that the organizations don't have adequate funding for their operation. The funding is minimal and insufficient for the regular and successful functioning of the SOS helplines.

Dealing with financial difficulties and irregular funding puts professionals at a disadvantage. Although they maintain the line professionally, most of the operators have been working for years voluntarily and without compensation, as part of a personal mission and dedication to higher goals. The persons who do internships or volunteer occasionally and from whom suitable candidates are selected for work on the SOS helplines, are employed part time and trained, but cannot be retained due to insufficient funding.

The Ministry of Labor and Social Policy finances only one of the SOS lines, that of NSRR (Mobile National SOS Line 141-700) in the period from 2018 until present, with an annual total amount of about 805,000 denars. This funding is used to cover the costs for fees of the coordinator and operators as well as the rental of the space and utilities.

The City of Skopje partially finances the line of the Organization of Women of the City of Skopje (National SOS line 15-700), from 2019-2022, with a sum of 200,000 to 300,000 denars. This amount covers only 40% of the costs of operating the line on an annual basis. In the past, this line was partially financed by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy (in 2006-2009, as well as in 2015) with amounts of about MKD 51,000 per year.

The line of the Crisis Center "Hope" (the National SOS line -15-315) in 2022 is financed with a yearly amount of 280,000 denars by the Municipality of Gazi Baba¹⁵

All three lines additionally apply for and are occasionally funded by international funding and/or donations, inter alia, from the business sector. Although they are financed by grants from international multilateral and bilateral donors, such as the EU, the UN agencies, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, etc. these finances are not regular and depend on project financing, which also includes a promotion section or helpline

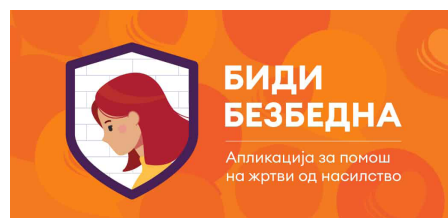
support. Project based financing by international donors and the EU could continue for a while but will eventually end because funding services is the obligation of the state and/or the municipalities. Therefore, the helplines also need adequate funding from the state and local municipalities.

¹⁵ The funds were intended to cover telephone bills.

Recommendation:

Introduce a permanent solution based on cooperation with all stakeholders to support and fund national SOS helplines, especially in providing financial resources that are necessary for the sustainability of the SOS helplines and the establishment of an infrastructure that will meet the standards prescribed by the Istanbul Convention.

When asked whether it is still possible to maintain autonomy and receive funds from the state and the local communities, all interviewed representatives of the SOS helplines answered in the affirmative, while when asked whether the administrative requirements for funding are something that can be easily fulfilled, all answered that every time they work on a project they give a report to the competent authority and they can and have experience in providing licenses, reports, regulations and standards, but many times these bear costs. It points us to the fact that there are no obstacles, for the organizations that administer the national SOS helplines, to receive adequate and regular support.



Mobile app - Be safe

The "Be Safe" application is a software application for all mobile phones and tablets, which enables potential victims of violence to ask for help and to be located if they find themselves in danger.

It was launched on October 19, 2020 by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy supported by UNDP. The mobile application enables users to send SMS with "one click" (by briefly holding the red button) requesting help. The message can include GPS data and telephone number of the person using the app. It is designed in a way that operators on the SOS helpline, after receiving the SMS, can follow up with prompt response according to Protocol.

The geographical location is obtained from the mobile phone and this tracking data is sent by SMS to the National Free Mobile SOS-line 114 700, administered by the NSRR, or mobile contacts of choice defined beforehand. The aim is to enable swift signaling of threat to which the victim is exposed to, and locate her in a timely and accurate

manner. All of this is done in the service of providing the victim with the best possible support and help in the moment of need and in accordance with the Protocol.

The "Be Safe" application enables the users to insert additional numbers, based on personal preference, that they would like to alert in urgent situations. The application also offers safety instructions and advice, review of legal rights as well as other information, such as contact information of key CSOs and other organizations working as specialized service providers in the country as well as contact information from the Centers for social work in the whole country. The application is a simple digital solution that can be of great help, especially in times of crisis.

The app's key features include:

- ▶ geolocation (locating the user of the application in the moment),
- ▶ SMS messages that are sent to the National SOS line or mobile contacts chosen by the user of the application in case of danger,
- ▶ other useful information and resources, available in Macedonian, Albanian and Romani language.

The application contains instructions on how to use the app in its entirety, the basic rights that all potential victims of violence should be aware of, tips that can help the victims protect themselves and increase their security and the multi-sector protocol for protection and prevention from domestic violence.

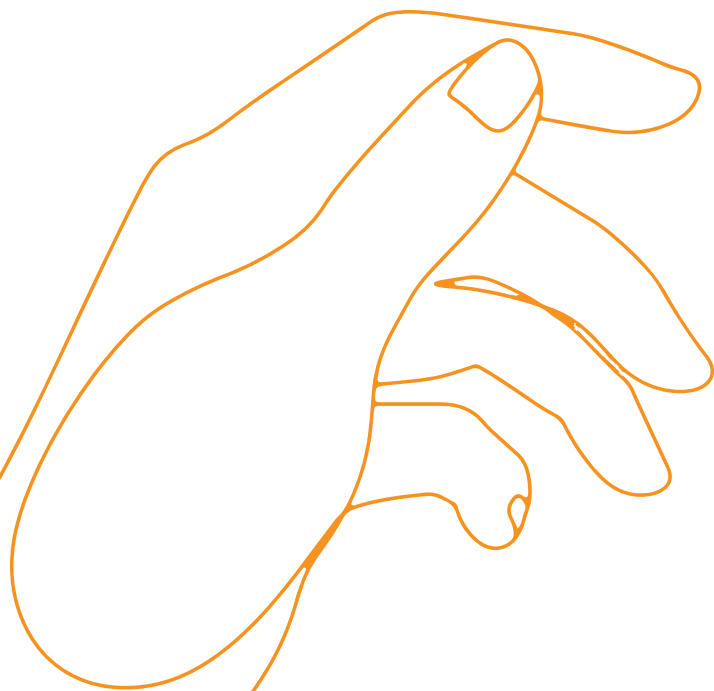
Under the function of important contacts, available services for GBV/DV victims are listed with a webpage and phone numbers of each of the help services such as the police, each of the Social Work Centers by city, the centers for victims of sexual violence, the numbers of the helplines of NSRR, OZS, Crisis Center "Nadezh" and others.

The application includes information about the types of violence, where the user of the application can learn about the types of violence (including intimate partner violence, physical and psychological violence, stalking, etc.).

The application is available to download for free from the Google Play Store and the Apple Store, but the costs incurred when sending an SMS, making a phone call or using data or Internet traffic associated with the use of the application, are borne by the user. When activating the "PRESS FOR HELP" button the victim agrees that her respective location, after it has been tracked, is being forwarded to the National Free Mobile SOS-line via SMS message. The SMS is received by the operator on duty at the NSRR helpline and processed accordingly using the data received. Upon receiving the geolocation of the victim in distress, the operator acts in accordance with the Protocol for support to women victims of violence, undertake measures as agreed and alert the

designated staff and police upon contact and permission from the victim. The existence of an application like the "Be Safe" mobile application is a significant step forward in the prevention of domestic violence and efforts to protect victims. It is worth noting that the advantages are obvious and during our assessment we noticed that there are a few additions and improvements that could be implemented.

- ▶ The logo and name of the app are easy to recognize, and the purpose of the app is visible, putting the victim in additional danger.
- ▶ The application is not sufficiently promoted and known to the public.
- ▶ Regarding the number of SMS messages that arrive on SOS phones from the "Be Safe" application, it is still very small. For 2022 there were 23 messages received (sometimes 1 per month, sometimes 3), some of which were randomly selected from children, testing the app or just for checking.



Recommendations for further improving the application:

- Supplementing the information provided in the application with practical advice, like for example-

how to leave an abusive relationship - what steps to take before leaving the abuser, what to take with you, what are the risks they face and how you can protect yourself from potential danger during the process and after he leaves (as well as details for a situation involving children)

how to help a loved one - support, approach to the situation, who can be contacted (help services) to help the victim

- Including in the app documents adapted for persons with sight impairment, such as contrast text or codes or having previously recorded messages text and protocol.

- Provision of protected mode

Adding a special security mode feature which, with one click on the logo the screen changes to show posts with female themes, or that takes the victim to a different page with other data (or evokes a dummy page with news/weather report/female products or themes) in case she is in danger.

- Change of logo

In order to protect the victim using the app from further danger from the abuser we recommend creating a new design that matches the security mode of the app, like a flower, plant, star, cloud etc.

- Privacy protection

We suggest enabling an option on the application itself to delete all data that the user provides in the application.

- Diary

We propose the diary option as an additional option where victims can safely collect data (text, audio, video and image) as evidence of the violence they experience at the hands of the abuser, stored on icloud, idrive, google drive or similar, in order not to keep data on their phone that would put them at risk, and the abuser can't delete the evidence.

- Chat option

As an additional option, we suggest adding a possibility of 'chat' or leading a conversation via messages with the operators of the SOS helplines, if the victim is not able to speak over the phone. The chat function should also be available 24/7. This function would enable the service to be available for a wider reach to the victims, especially victims with disabilities or the ones that are in doubt whether or how to contact the SOS lines due to lack of information or fear.

As an option to consider, design and add, we suggest implementing a feature where the app can run in the background, and in a situation where the victim would be in danger of being able to press or hold the volume key (or voice) which would activate a sensor that would cause the phone to start recording evidence as well as send a location via SMS to nearby contacts listed in the app by the user.

RESULTS OF SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE AND THEIR EXPERIENCE WITH THE HELPLINES

As part of the report, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to assess the satisfaction of victims of domestic violence, with the services provided by the operators of the helplines. The interviews were conducted separately, with five women - victims of violence that were referred from 2 out of 3 helplines. This does not provide a sample of the beneficiaries of the service, nor can it provide the basis for drawing conclusions of the overall satisfaction. However, the research team felt that it was important to include feedback about the direct experience and satisfaction from a number of beneficiaries, however small that is.

The contact with the victims and the conducting of the interviews were made possible through the two shelter centers in Skopje, whose beneficiaries they were. The victims were informed that their responses were anonymous and confidential and would be used solely for research purposes.

The first question to the victims was about familiarity with the lines and the number of calls they had to SOS helplines. All respondents answered affirmatively that they are familiar with the SOS helpline numbers, three of them knew the numbers of all three lines. None of the interviewees had knowledge of the numbers before needing them, but all knew that there was a helpline for women victims of violence and found the number easily when needed. They came to the numbers in different ways - via the Internet or by calling

the information from where they were given the number on the line, through a neighbor, from a friend, service and one of them from an employee at the Center for Social Affairs.

"I knew there were some numbers for help, I have seen on TV ads, but it took me a lot of thinking about if I should call and what will happen. I was scared and embarrassed." (Interview respondent)

When asked about the number of calls, the victims had different answers - most of them called three or more times, including on different lines and with different operators. Among the reasons for repeated calls are the personal relationship they developed with the operator, the feeling of security and assurance of safety, as well as the psychological support they received from the operators.

"I called often because I needed to hear the operator's voice, to get reassurance that everything would be alright and I would get out of the situation" (Interview respondent)

All the victims stated that the operators responded from the first time on the dialed numbers, and some of them were informed that the calls were not free, after which they were contacted by the operators, with their permission. Four of the victims called the SOS phones several times before the event that led to their placement in a shelter, and three of them also called after minor incidents to share what happened or to ask what to do and how to do it, or what is the path to the institutions and what awaits them further.

When asked why they decided to contact the SOS telephone lines, the victims answered that they wanted to "find out who, how and where can help them", "wanted to be heard", "ask for an opinion" or "share an opinion and advice on how to deal with situations of domestic violence". They also shared that they had considered calling the SOS helpline for a long time, with responses ranging from two months to two years, and the reasons for doing so were because they "thought they could handle it on their own," "because they didn't have the courage to call", "because they didn't want it to be known", "because they were afraid of the abuser" or because they didn't know what would happen to them next, whether they would be reported to the institutions.

"I was lost, I didn't know what to do. I don't understand any of those things myself, I just needed help. Only there (on the phone line) could I get an explanation, even advice and understanding." (interview respondent)

Victims who participated in the research confirmed that they experienced common forms of domestic violence, including psychological violence, threats and coercion, and physical violence. On two occasions, the respondents in the interviews mentioned incidents of

sexual violence, but did not want to explain them further. During the interviews that were conducted as part of the research, reluctance was felt to share information about sexual violence. This is common in traditional and conservative communities with strong patriarchal attitudes. Fear of stigmatization, shame or secondary victimization often means that victims remain silent about the violence and choose not to seek support or report incidents.

"(The situation) affected my health, my family, my work, because of that my children were also exposed to violence. I was afraid for my own life and the life of my children. I didn't know how far it could go; but the SOS helpline operators supported me and showed me the way, and I knew I had no choice but to keep fighting." (interview respondent)

None of the women we talked to had any complaints about the operators they talked to on different helplines. They characterized the female operators as compassionate, patient, self-sacrificing, attentive, trustworthy and pleasant persons, who showed attention and understanding for their problems and patiently listened to them tell their whole story.

"When I had a crisis after an incident, the SOS phone operator helped me stay calm and take care of the children." (interview respondent)

There are statements about the operators having a soothing voice that helped them a lot to pull themselves together during an incident, that the operators guided them on how to act and helped them restore their self-confidence, that they patiently listened to them every time they called and offered help:

"I felt pain, I felt hurt, the operator helped me calm down and think about what to do" (interview respondent)

The victims were also asked to remember the duration of the conversations with the SOS line operators, as well as their feelings when they talked to the operators. The conversations lasted from half an hour to two hours, generally until all the problems were shared and they were never interrupted.

"The operators are very patient, I used to call and talk for an hour, and they would listen to me and offer me advice." (interview respondent)

They talked to an operator, who encouraged them to share their problems, provided advice and referred them to the institutions that can help them. The victims developed feelings of trust, closeness and friendship with the operators, as well as satisfaction with the services provided to them through the helplines.

"I'm satisfied, I think they saved my life" (interview respondent)

"I have no words to express how grateful I am to all the operators I have talked to!" They were my only support, my only consolation and hope that (the situation) will end." (interview respondent)

To assess whether the helplines used the principle of confidentiality, we asked the victims if they heard the operator confirm confidentiality when they called, and they all answered that they were told at the beginning that the conversation was confidential and that this was the principle of operation of the helpline. The victims who asked the operators to call them back, because the line was not free, did so after being informed and agreed to give their phone number.

In the continuation of the interviews, we were interested in the procedure or protocol followed by the operators of the SOS telephone helplines. When asked if they received information about their rights and what rights were explained by the operator, all victims answered that they received the necessary information about their rights, as well as about the competent institutions that can help them. Their rights were explained during the conversation and the decision could be made without pressure; all the information was received and the right to protection was discussed. While they were asked about what advice they received, for example: to leave, to stay, to go to the police or CSW, all responses were that they were advised to report the case of violence to the CSW and the police.

"The last time (the violence) happened, I immediately called SOS and the operator called the police and I think someone from social services." (interview respondent)

When asked if the operators called or suggested calling someone on their behalf, such as the police or the CSW, the answers were that the operator always first asked and then suggested calling the police or the CSW. The victims shared that the operator called the police station and asked them to come to the spot; or that they were advised that the police should warn the perpetrator to refrain from committing violence; the operator called the CSW to explain the case to them and made an appointment for a meeting with the official who would lead the case, and this was recorded in the CSW; and in some cases the victims themselves asked the operator to call the police.

We asked the victims what happened afterwards, whether the victims received protection, shelter, whether the violence stopped, etc. All the answers were that they reported the violence to the CSW and the police station and were taken care of in the shelter, and some of them even came with the children.

"Me and my children were taken out of the [abusers'] house. We were on the phone [with the operator] the whole time, she called some institutions, and they came quickly. I just remember that we were saved and taken to the shelter."

(interview respondent)

The majority of them were taken care of in the shelters temporarily, until the problem was solved, but some of them answered that since they are not employed, they were offered to go to training so that they can get a job.

"The operators visited me every day while I was in the shelter, took me to medical examinations and helped me with the documents." *(interview respondent)*

To evaluate the satisfaction with the experience with the SOS telephone lines, we asked the victims when looking back, what they would like to hear or receive from the operators of the SOS helpline. All victims expressed satisfaction and stated that they would not change a thing. They expressed gratitude that they were "pointed in the right direction to solve the problem", received "everything a victim should receive", that "the operators were engaged and helpful" and that they received "support that means a lot" to them.

"When I look back in my memories, the conversations with the operator of the SOS line were the only bright things in my life at that moment." *(interview respondent)*

"If my operator hadn't been so persistent and self-sacrificing, I would have gone back to the abuser again, and maybe I wouldn't be alive now." *(interview respondent)*

From the answers we can conclude that there is still a lot of stigma in the society that family problems should remain in the family. Raising awareness is necessary so that victims can call the helplines and not feel that they will be judged and that the telephone lines are operated by operators who work according to the principle of confidentiality and do not judge the users of the helplines.

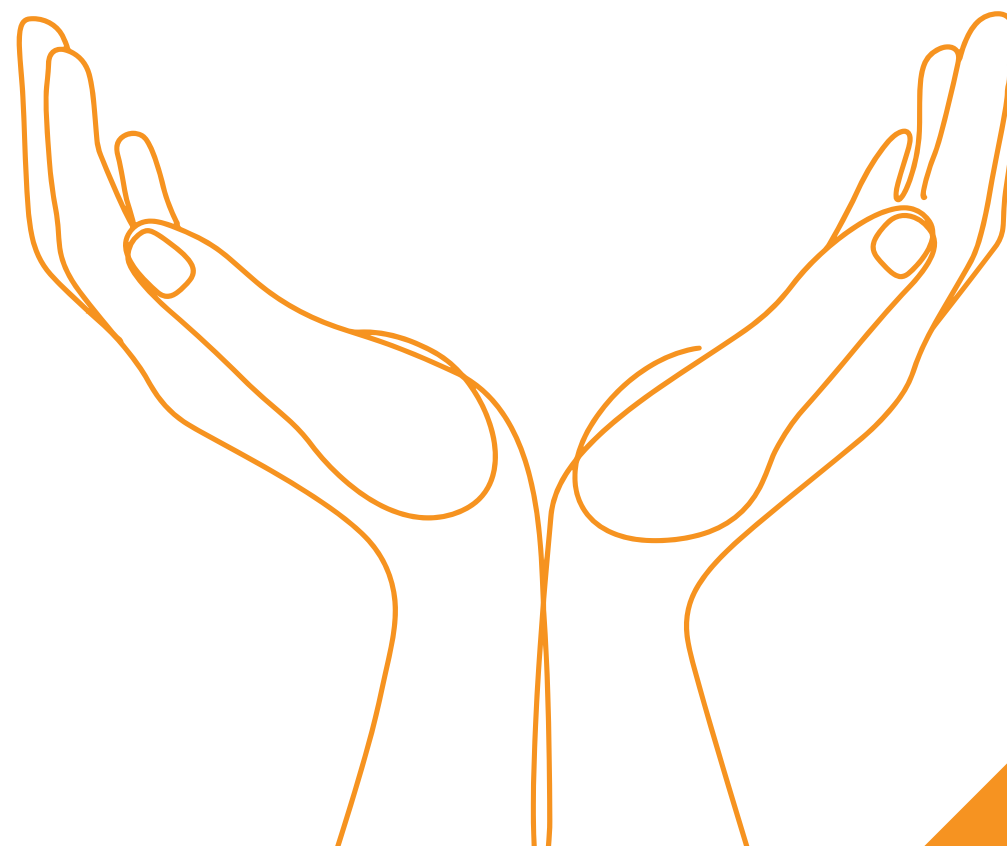
Although we were only able to interview a small number of beneficiaries, due to the limitations of the research project and confidentiality that is guaranteed to the victims, the interviews gave us an insight that for the victims who were interviewed, the helpline was of the utmost importance. Without it, the victim could have easily become discouraged and given up seeking help or fallen under the influence of the abuser. Instead, she received reassurance, help and the necessary guidance and confidence to walk the path towards finding salvation or solution.

The victims were informed about their rights, advised and referred. The principle of confidentiality was observed and the beneficiaries were informed about it in advance.

The operators of the helplines referred the users of these services to the Social Work Centers or the police, and they also helped them to call, report the violence and supported them during the whole procedure. In addition to information and referral, the interviewed women received instructions that helped them to deal with the situation even after reporting the problem.

The operators that the women talked to performed professionally, met the needs of the victims who called, whether it was just to be heard, informed or to gather courage to take action towards solving their situation.

In these cases, the victims were looked after from start to finish which is vital to the functioning of these lines which are one's last straw for hope and rescue from an unbearable situation and adds to the response of how important these lines are to callers.



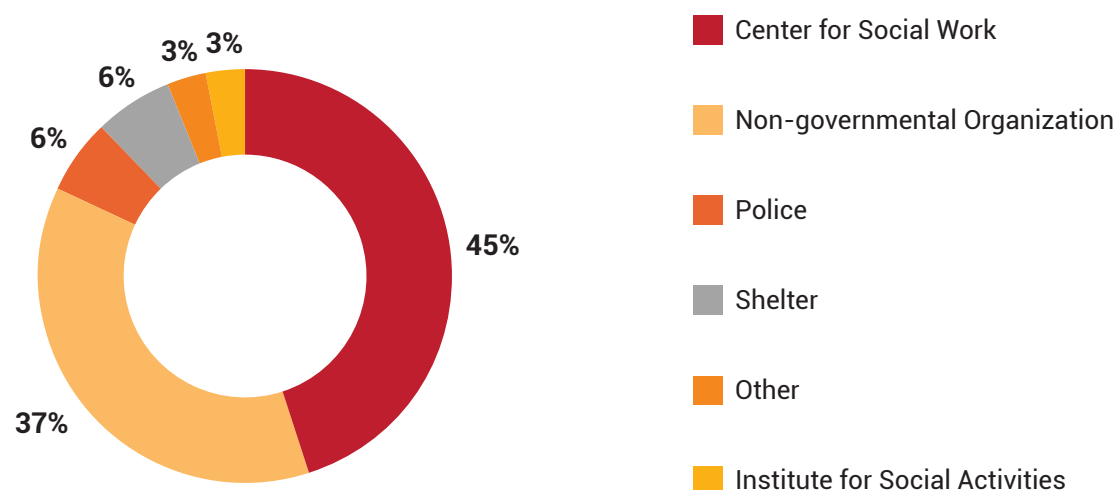
RESULTS OF THE SURVEY CONDUCTED FOR THE SOS TELEPHONE HELPLINES IN THE REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

In order to get an evaluation of the functioning of the SOS telephone lines to help women victims of domestic violence, as well as to make an assessment of the victim support system in the Republic of North Macedonia, an online survey was conducted in the period from October to November, 2022. It was sent to relevant representatives of stakeholders working with women victims of violence, at the local and national level.

Structure of respondents

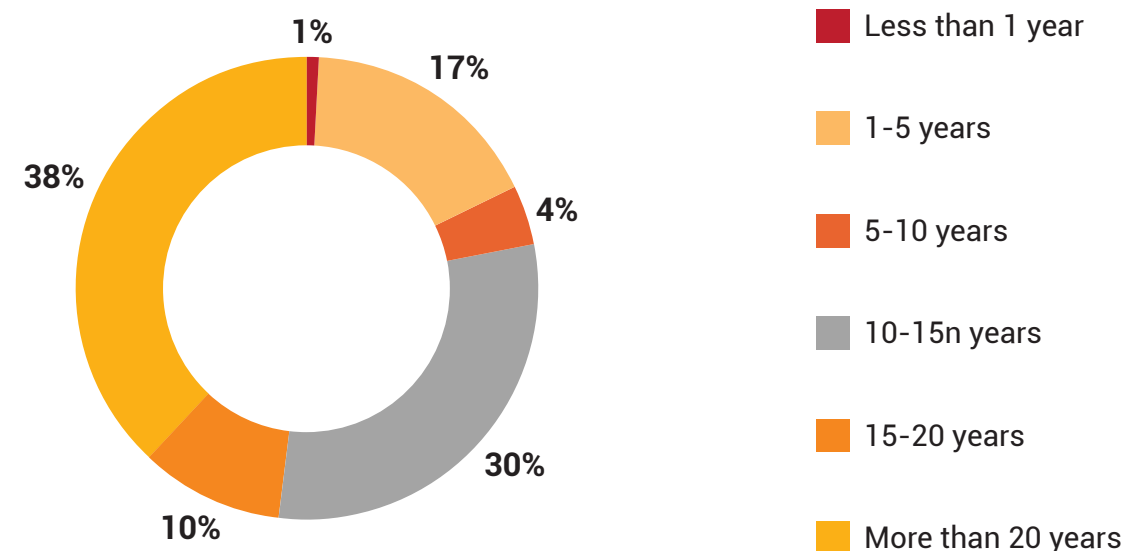
The results of the research are based on the responses received from 100 respondents who effectively filled out the survey. Nearly half (45%) of the respondents came from the Centers for social work (CSW), more than a third (37%) from non-governmental organizations, with the rest from the police, women's shelters, institutions for social activities and other organizations.

1. Where do you work?



While the majority of the respondents (78%) have over 10 years of experience working in their sectors, various answers were collected-

2. How long have you been working there?

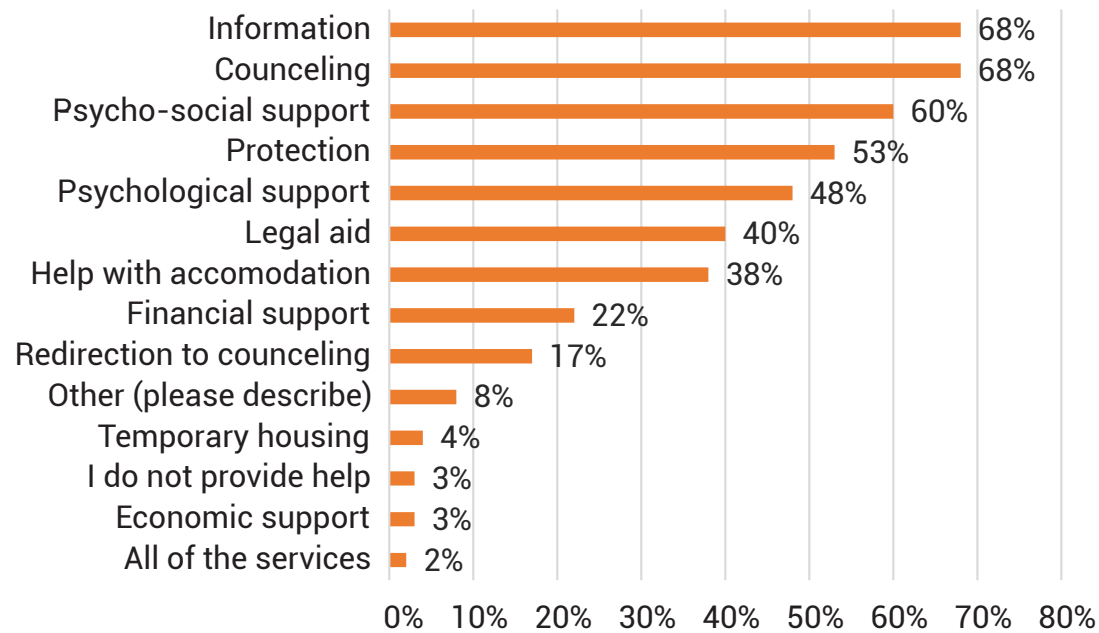


The majority of the respondents work with victims of violence and therefore had the competence to give an assessment of the existing situation. The percentages are as follows - 35% answered that they work with 5-10 victims per month, 25% with less than 5, 15% with more than 20 per month, 12% with 10-20 victims of violence per month, 8% do not work directly with victims of violence, and 5% work only on gender-based violence policies, but not with victims.

Types of victim services

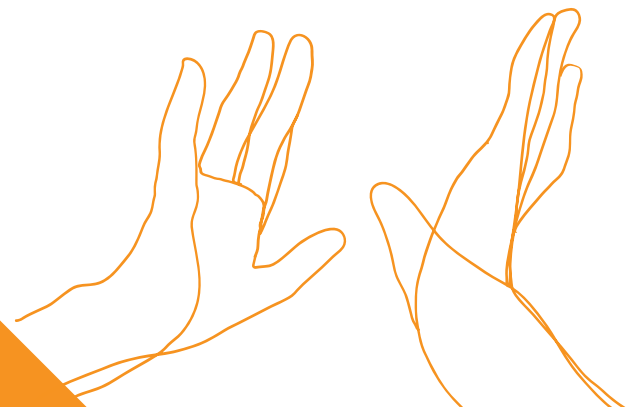
Regarding the type of assistance provided to the victims, the majority of respondents have direct experience working with victims of violence and know the modalities and services offered. The largest number or 68% of the respondents offer counseling and information, 60% provide psycho-social support, 53% offer some form of protection, 40% provide legal assistance, 38% help with accommodation, and 22% help with financial assistance.

4. What kind of help do you provide to the victims? (tick all that apply)

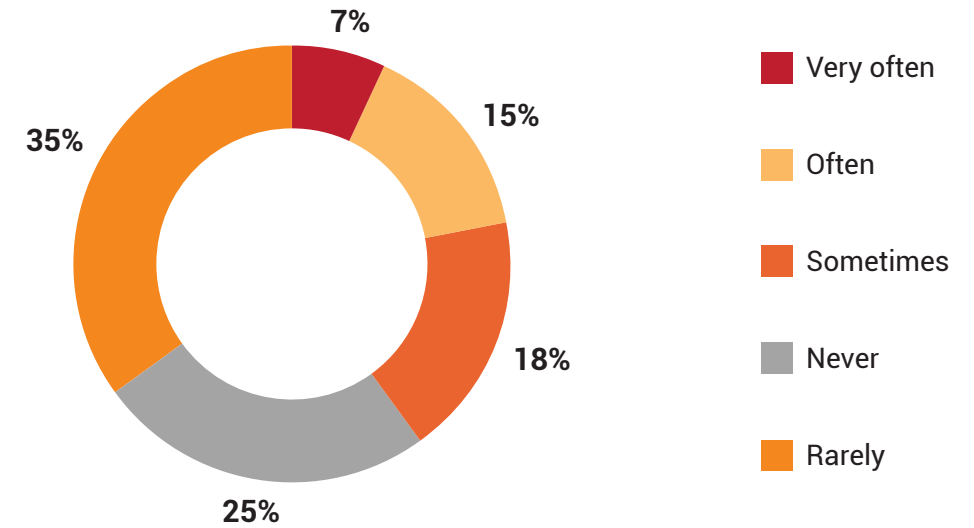


Familiarity with the work of SOS helplines

With the intention of examining the extent to which the helplines are used when referring victims to institutions, we received answers that the majority of institutions (75%) that work with victims of violence receive referrals through SOS telephone helplines, either often (40%) or less often (35%). We also found that the majority of respondents are familiar with helplines, know the three national helplines or at least one of them, and 14 % of them answered that they know more than three helplines.

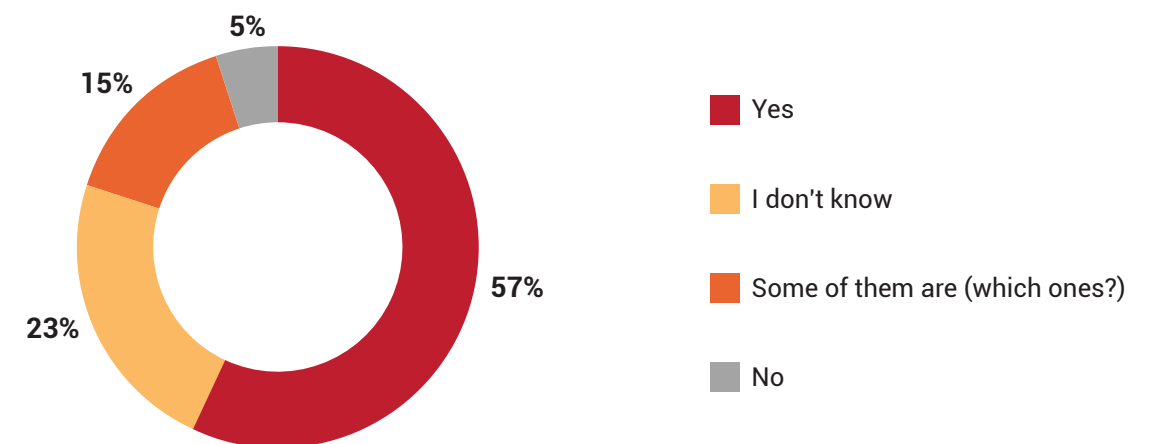


5. How often are victims of violence referred to you by the SOS helplines?



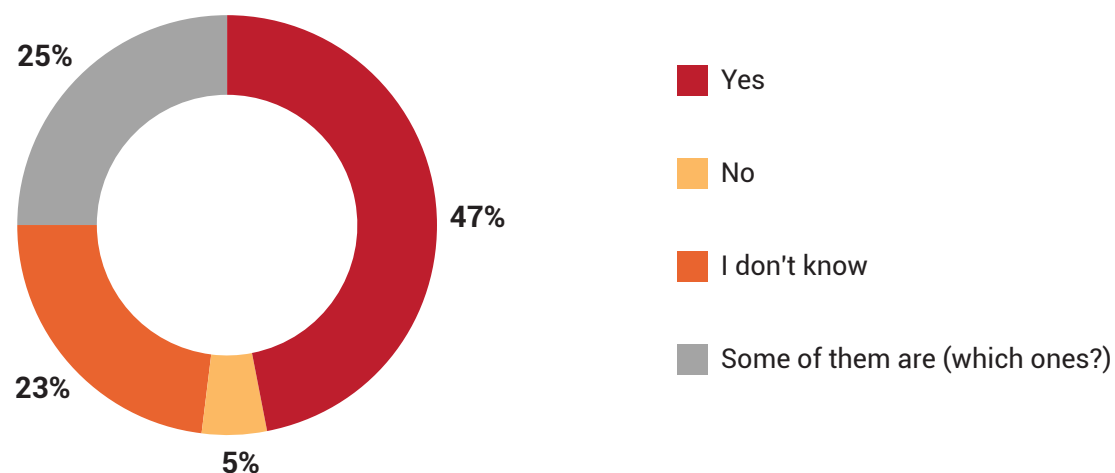
Regarding the awareness of the organizations about whether the SOS helplines are free, 57% of the respondents said that they are free, 23% that they do not know, and 15% consider that some of them are free. From the answers received, it can be ascertained that it is not sufficiently clear and known which lines are free, and above 20% of the people surveyed are not at all familiar with that information.

7. Are these SOS Helplines free of charge?



When asked whether SOS helplines are available 24/7, 47% of respondents answered that all are available, 25% answered that only some are available, 23% answered that they do not know, 5% that they are not available 24/7.

8. Are these SOS Helplines available 24/7?

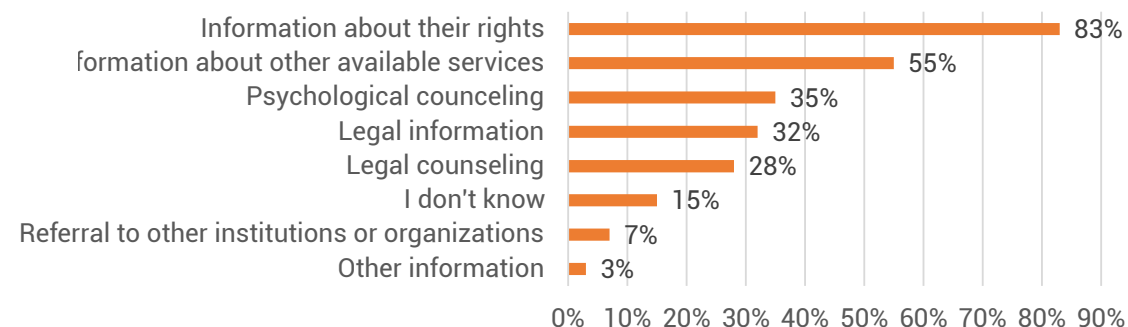


We can see that knowledge and experience related to working hours of the SOS helplines on the part of other stakeholders vary, indicating that there is a need to provide regular information to the stakeholders of the current working hours and capacities of each helpline.

Services provided by SOS helplines

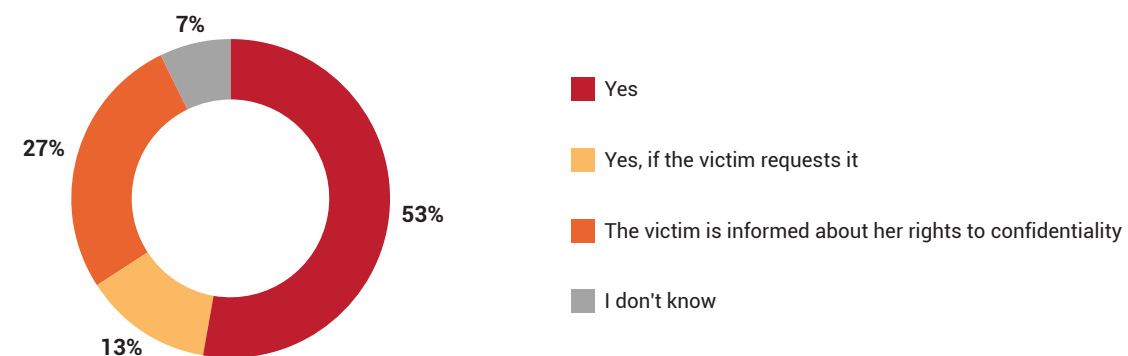
According to the respondents, the most common services that victims of violence receive from the SOS helplines are information about their rights (83%), information about other available services (55%), psychological counseling (35%), legal information (32%), legal counseling (28%), referral to institutions or other civic organizations (7%), while 15% do not know.

9. To your knowledge, what services do victims usually receive by the SOS helplines (tick all the apply)?



Regarding the question of whether the services provided by the SOS helplines are anonymous and confidential for victims, the answers of the respondents were variable, with 52% answering that they are anonymous and confidential, 27% do not know, 13% answering that they are anonymous and confidential if the victim so requests, 7% answered that the victim was informed of her right to confidentiality, whereby we conclude that the general answer is that there is awareness about the SOS lines as anonymous and confidential for victims of violence.

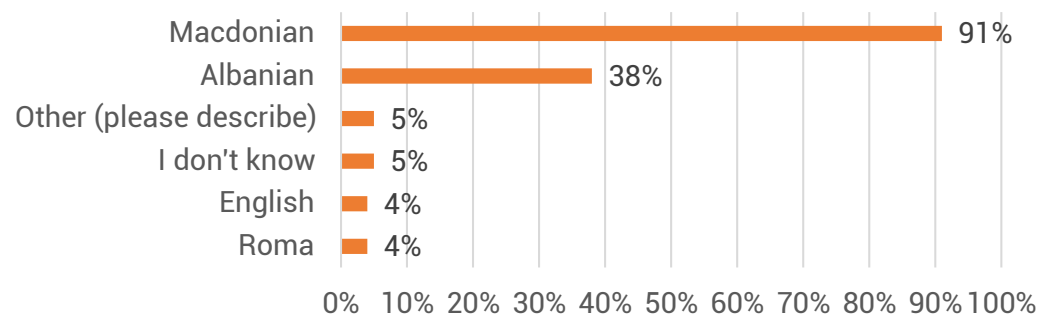
10. Are the services provided by SOS Helplines anonymous and confidential for the victims?



When asked about the languages in which the telephone SOS helplines are available, the highest percentage of respondents identified the Macedonian language - 91%, 38% of the respondents also identified support in the Albanian language, 4% for Romani and English

and 5% opted for other languages as well. From here, the need for standardization, but also greater awareness and promotion of the telephone helplines, especially the language support they offer, can be seen.

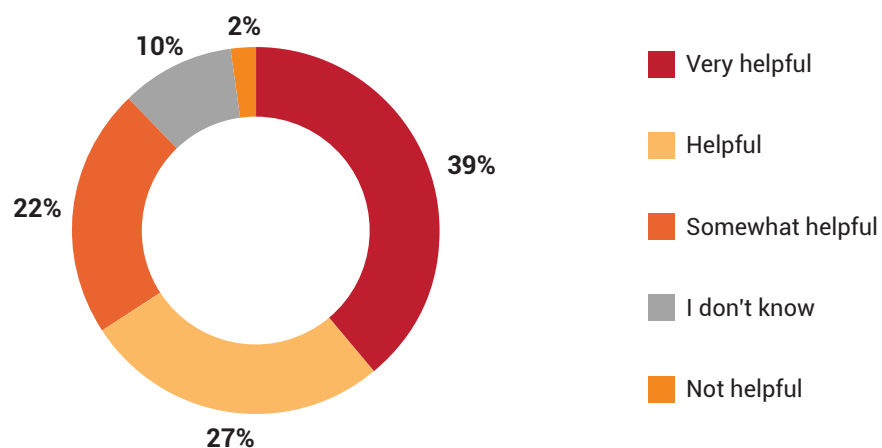
11. In what languages are the SOS Helplines available (tick all that apply)?



Usefulness of the SOS telephone lines

Most respondents assessed favorably the perceived usefulness of the assistance from SOS helplines for the victims. Of the respondents, 88% answered that they found in their work the SOS telephones to be very helpful, helpful or somewhat helpful for the victims, while 10% that they do not know or cannot identify whether SOS telephones are useful, and 2% answered that they are not helpful.

12. How would you rate the usefulness of the help recieved from the SOS Helplines to the victims?



When asked about their recommendations as to improvement of the existing services or additional services that could be provided, they provided the following suggestions:

- cover regions with more operators,
- have more cooperation with centers for social work that are outside of Skopje,
- improve the 24/7 service,
- provide regular assistance in more languages, including in the Romani language,
- carry out a stronger and continuous promotion of the lines and numbers,
- give more practical help and protection to the victims of violence,
- implement an appropriate expert or specialized approach, which will not put the victim through secondary and tertiary victimization while being referred to one institution to another,
- specialize in referral to local women's civil society organizations as service providers.

Some of the respondents answered that the SOS telephone helplines should also accompany the victim to the institutions, as a starting point and trusted persons of the victim who called them first.

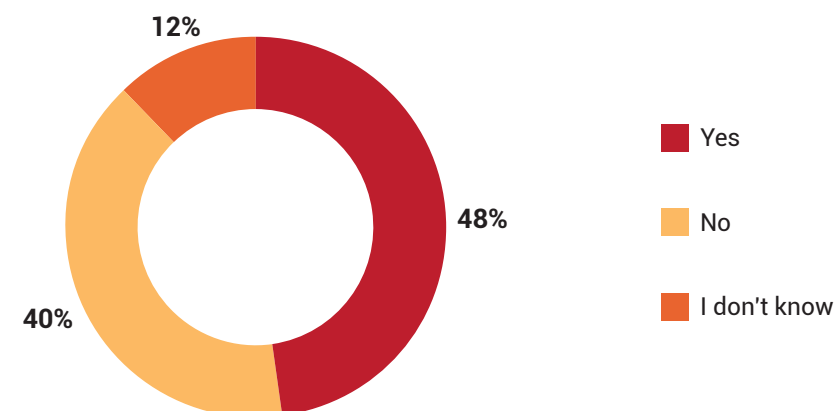
All these suggestions and assessments provide a broader picture of the services of the helplines that are needed.

It is recommended to further expand the consultation process and enable testing of specific proposals and scenarios for their feasibility and functionality.

Multisectoral cooperation

Although 48% of the respondents answered that there is multisectoral cooperation between their institution/organization and SOS helplines, there is still a large number of those who do not have or do not know if there is such cooperation at all.

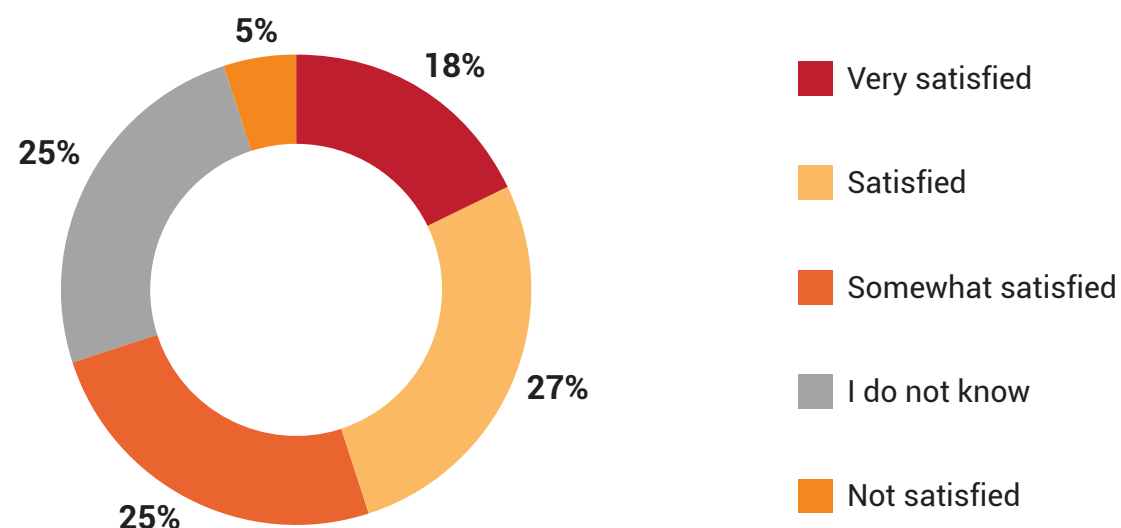
15. Is there multisectoral cooperation between your organization/ institution and the SOS helplines?



Satisfaction with the work of SOS lines

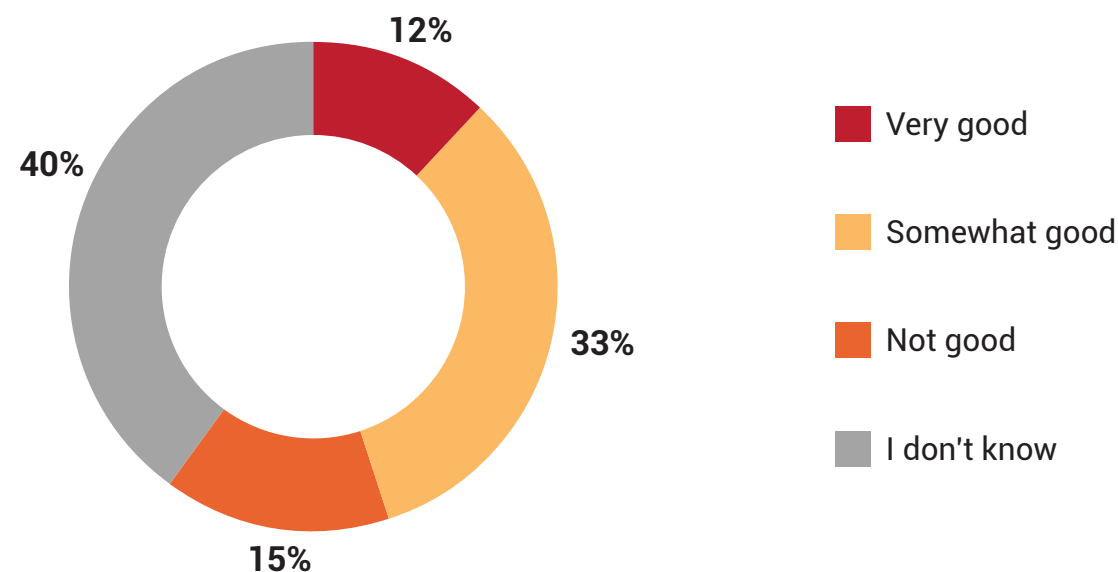
Regarding satisfaction with the work of the SOS telephone helplines, it can be concluded that there is mostly satisfaction among the respondents - 45% are satisfied, 25% are somewhat satisfied. It is interesting that there is a large number, 25% of the respondents who do not know or cannot determine their satisfaction with the work of the helplines, which is probably due to the lack of direct contact with the telephone lines. Dissatisfaction with the telephone help lines was expressed by 5% of respondents.

17. What is your level of satisfaction with the work of SOS Helplines?



The answers to the question of assessment of human resources of the SOS helplines are similar; 45% answered that the resources are very or somewhat good, 40% answered that they do not know, or have no information. The percentage of dissatisfaction with the human resources of SOS lines is 15, and not a single respondent answered that they are excellent. With that in mind, there is a need to both inform the stakeholders of the work and available resources of the SOS helplines, as well as ensure strengthening of human resources, which would enable the provision of better services.

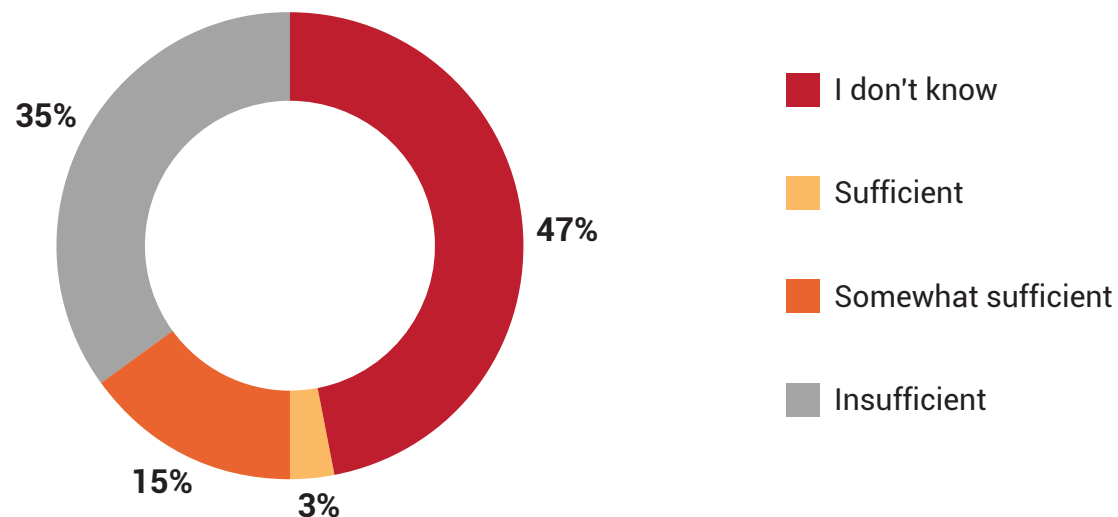
18. How would you rate the available resources in staff of the SOS Helplines?



Financial resources

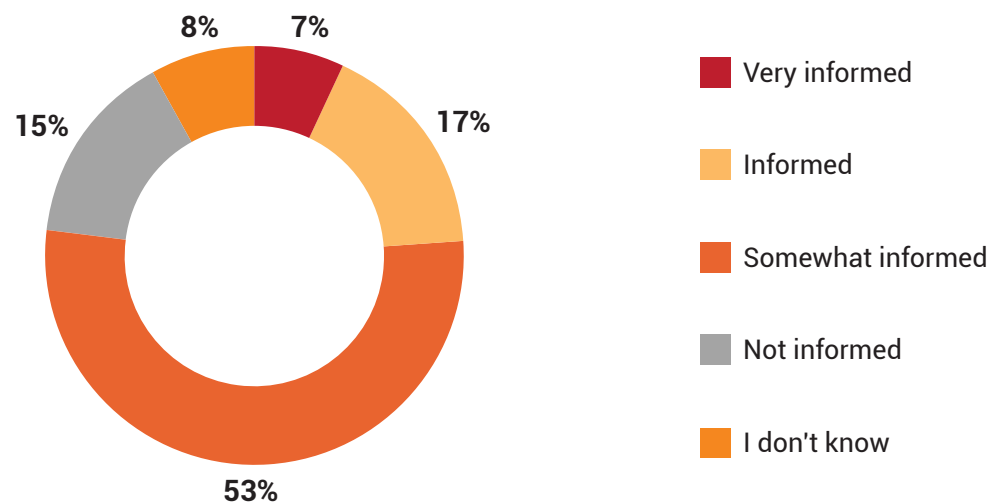
Regarding the available financial resources, the answers were as follows: 47% of the respondents do not know or have no information about the financial resources available to the SOS lines, 15% assessed that the SOS lines are somewhat good with financial resources and a very small percentage, 2% answered that they are excellent. However, 35% of the respondents answered that the situation with the available financial resources for SOS help lines is not good. We conclude that there is a need for more communication among the institutions and with the public about the work and needs of the SOS telephone helplines, and also a need to increase the available financial resources for them. This would increase the capacity in human resources, expertise, way of working, number and type of services provided to victims, their promotion as well as the satisfaction of users and stakeholders.

19. How would you rate the available financial resources for the SOS Helplines?



Awareness of the victims about the existence of helplines

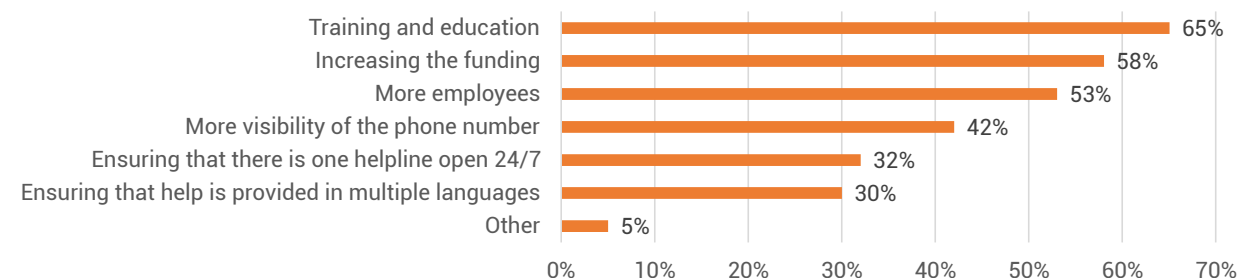
20. In your opinion, how informed are the victims in North Macedonia about the existence of SOS Helplines?



Regarding the awareness of the victims about the existence of SOS telephone helplines in the country, one can see the need for greater promotion and a wider scope of the same. When asked to rate the awareness of the victims of the existence of the helplines, only 24% of the respondents replied that the victims are informed, while the majority or 53% consider that the victims are somewhat informed. However, 15% of respondents believe that victims are not informed about the existence of SOS helplines, and there are those who do not know or cannot assess - 8%.

Improving the services of the SOS helplines

24. What are your recommendations for improving the work of SOS Helplines (tick all that apply):



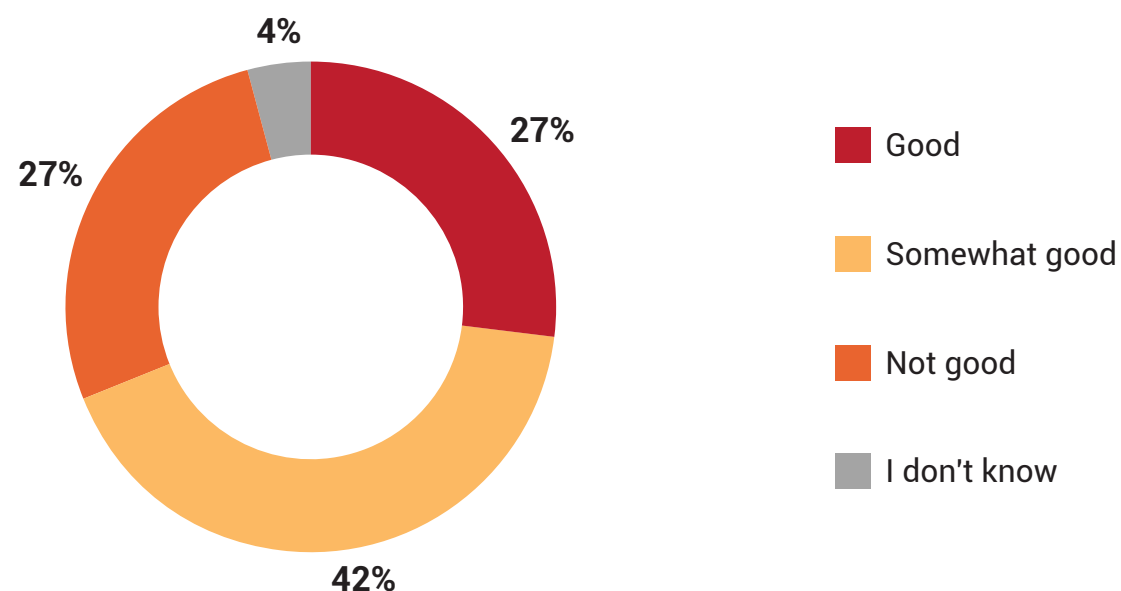
Regarding the recommendations the respondents have for improving the work of the SOS helpline, the majority of answers are that training and education are needed - 65%; as well as an increase in financing - 58%. A large percentage of respondents, 42% recommend greater visibility and promotion of the telephone number, 53% of respondents recommend increasing the number of employees of the SOS lines; 30% recommend provision of language support and 32% provision of a line that will work 24/7. It can be concluded that the respondents see ameliorating the shortcomings of SOS helplines in increasing the institutional and financial capacity of the lines, as well as promoting them to the public.

Feedback on the overall system of support

While the main objective of this research was to map the work of the existing SOS helplines, their work does not exist in isolation, but is part of and depends on the larger system of protection from violence and support for the victims. Therefore, to get a clearer picture

of the context in which the SOS helplines work, we asked the respondents' opinion about the overall system of support for victims of violence in the Republic of North Macedonia. The general feedback from the respondents is that it is somewhat good (42%), excellent or very good for 27% of the respondents, but about a quarter of the respondents (27%) answered that the system is not good.

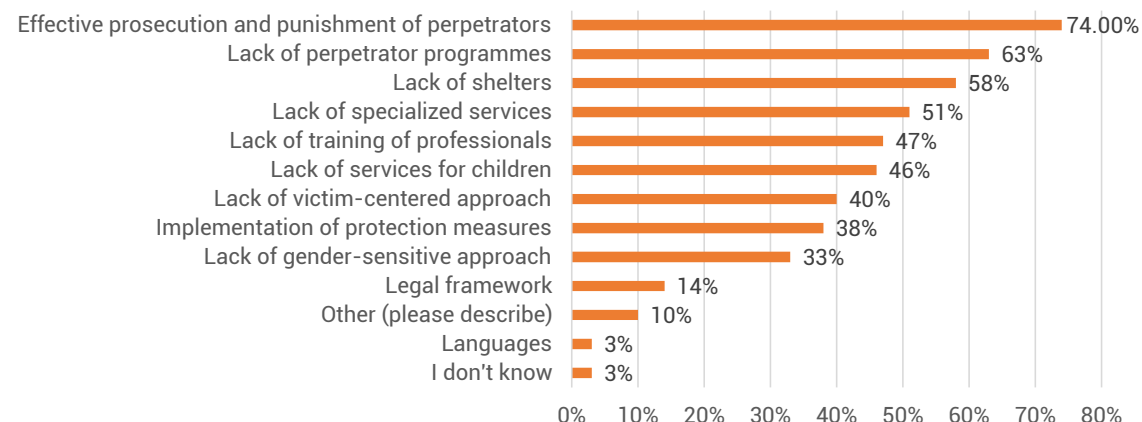
21. How would you rate the overall system of support to victims of violence in North Macedonia?



In order to get a more detailed insight into the biggest shortcomings in the system of support for victims of violence in the country, according to the respondents, we gave space to choose one answer to see what the biggest drawback is, and then the survey participants were asked to give their opinions regarding the shortcomings in the system.

Majority of respondents, 74%, believe that there is a lack of effective prosecution and punishment of perpetrators, followed by 63% who believe that there is a lack of programs for perpetrators, 58% believe that there is a lack of shelters, 51% believe that there is a lack of specialized services, 47% believe that there is a lack of training for professionals, 46% that there is a lack of services for children, 40% believe that there is a lack of a victim-oriented approach, 38% believe that better implementation of protection measures is needed, 33% believe that there is a lack of a gender-sensitive approach.

22. What do you think is lacking in the support system for victims in North Macedonia (tick all that apply)?



According to this sample of stakeholders from different institutions and NGOs, the main shortcomings in the system for supporting the victims of violence in North Macedonia are institutional and can be solved with the help or will on the part of the institutions and organizations. An effective legal framework, its effective implementation, implementation of effective comprehensive programs aimed at victims, their children, but also at the perpetrators can give desired results in the long term.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF TELEPHONE HELPLINES IN THE REGION OF REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA AND EU

As part of the research, we looked into the current situation of SOS helplines in the region and in Europe. According to the 2021 annual report of WAVE - Women Against Violence Europe¹⁶, the feminist network that promotes the human rights of women and children for all countries involved in the Convention, states that 30 of the 46 countries bound by the Convention have at least one national women's helpline that meets the standards of the Istanbul Convention:

¹⁶ WAVE Country Report 2021 - Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

TABLE 1: National women’s helplines in EU member states¹⁷

STATES	Existence of a national helpline	Is it free	Is it available 24/7	Does it meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention?
AUSTRIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
BELGIUM	No	-	-	No
BULGARIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CROATIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CYPRUS	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
CZECH REPUBLIC	No	-	-	No
DENMARK	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ESTONIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FINLAND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
FRANCE	Yes	Yes	No	No
GERMANY	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GREECE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
HUNGARY	Yes	Yes	No	No
IRELAND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ITALY	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LATVIA	Yes	Yes	No	No
LITHUANIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LUXEMBOURG	Yes	Yes	No	No
MALTA	No	-	-	No
NETHERLANDS	No	-	-	No
POLAND	Yes	No	Yes	No
PORTUGAL	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ROMANIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SLOVAKIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SLOVENIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SPAIN	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SWEDEN	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
TOTAL(27)	23 (yes) 4(no)	22 (yes) 1(no)	19 (yes) 4(no)	18(yes) 9(no)

¹⁷ WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

TABLE 2: National women’s helplines in non-EU countries¹⁸

STATES	Existence of a national helpline	Is it free	Is it available 24/7	Does it meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention?
ALBANIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ARMENIA	No	-	-	No
AZERBAIJAN	No	-	-	No
BELARUS	Yes	Yes	No	No
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GEORGIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
ICELAND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
KOSOVO	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
LIECHTENSTEIN	Yes	No	Yes	No
NORTH MACEDONIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
MOLDOVA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
MONTENEGRO	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NORWAY	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
RUSSIA/ RUSSIAN FEDERATION	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SERBIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
SWITZERLAND	No	-	-	No
TURKEY	Yes	No	Yes	No
UKRAINE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GREAT BRITAIN	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• ENGLAND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• NORTHERN IRELAND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• SCOTLAND	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
• WALES	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
TOTAL (19)	16 (yes) 3(no)	14 (yes) 2(no)	14 (yes) 2(no)	12 (yes) 7(no)

¹⁸ WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021, https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_Country-Report.pdf

According to the overview of the National Helplines for Women in EU Member States, out of a total of 27 EU Member States, 18 meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention, and 9 countries do not, while according to the table for National Helplines for Women in countries outside the EU, out of a total of 19 countries, 12 countries meet the standards of the Istanbul Convention, and 7 countries do not.

The helplines in all countries offer the same services - they offer information and support to victims and survivors to keep themselves and their children safe, and to empower them to understand their own situation and needs. They inform victims and survivors about women's shelters and local support services, depending on the state. The helplines also provide callers with a range of information on protective measures such as emergency restraining orders, restraining or removal orders against the abuser, financial assistance, shelter or child support, legal and psychological assistance and more. Operators of women's helplines have specialized training in all forms of gender-based violence and as part of their work they encourage victims to exercise their rights and take steps in accordance with the situation and what is right at the given moment.

So far, there is no single source of information on helplines, which would compare all active helplines in the signatory states of the Istanbul Convention. In addition to the existing research, we made a comparative analysis of the telephone lines for help in selected countries from the region of the Republic of North Macedonia taking into account differences in standards and operability of the telephone lines.

In the following, data is given on examples of the operation of telephone helplines in EU member countries, as well as non-EU countries.

COUNTRIES THAT ARE NOT EU MEMBERS

ALBANIA

According to a 2020 report by the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation¹⁹ Albania has a national hotline called the Women and Girls Advice Line (Linja Kombetare e Keshillimit per gra e bikka), which is open 24/7 and is free. Although the line itself existed before, it became the National Helpline for Women and Girls and was launched during the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign in November 2016 and became operational on 2 February 2017.

¹⁹ KVINNA, KVINNA Report 2020, Women's rights in the Western Balkans, Women in politics, gender-based violence and safety of women human rights defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation " (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation , 2020

The helpline provides services in Albanian, English and Italian for all types of violence against women,²⁰ but not in the languages of minority communities. According to the²¹ 2021 GREVIO report, Albania has no specialized hotlines and while it is run as a violence against women hotline, in practice it is run as a domestic violence hotline. The line is financed by the state, as well as by donations and international funding.

In 2020, the helpline received 6567 phone calls. The three main forms of violence that were reported were psychological violence, physical abuse and sexual abuse.²²

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Recognizing the need to protect women victims of domestic violence, in 2004 a SOS line was opened in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which was valid for the entire territory of the country.

Later, two helplines for women victims of violence were established, one of which covers the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the other covers the Republika Srpska.

In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the SOS telephone is called SOS telephone for help to victims of violence.²³ The line was established on the initiative of the Gender Center in 2008, during which a memorandum of cooperation was signed between non-governmental organizations and a number of local authorities for the establishment and way of functioning of the SOS helpline. Non-governmental organizations such as the NGO "Žena BiH" - Mostar, which coordinated the entire activity on behalf of the non-governmental organizations, made a great contribution to the procedure of introducing this unique line.

The helpline is free and operates 24/7. It does not offer multilingual support. The total number of callers in 2020 was 2347.

The helpline in the Republika Srpska that functions as a hotline for victims of domestic violence is called the SOS line for victims of violence. The line was established in 2005 with the support of the Gender Center of Republika Srpska, and administered together with four women's NGOs.²⁴ Calls to the SOS line are technically diverted to the fixed numbers of the mentioned non-governmental organizations, which are divided depending on the geographical area from which the call is made. Since the start of functioning in 2019, the helpline received 10917 calls.

²⁰ WAVE, WAVE Country Report 2021 - Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision , 2021

²¹ GREVIO, Mid-term Horizontal Review of GREVIO baseline evaluation reports, 2021

²² WAVE, WAVE Country Report 2021 - Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

²³ Ibidem

²⁴ WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021,

The SOS lines in both entities are managed by safe houses, while the maintenance of the lines is provided by the gender centers.²⁵

Helplines in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although they received government funding in the past, are funded by international donors. Funding and operations still largely depend on funds from donors through the non-governmental sector.

The telephone helplines are staffed with female operators who have completed a special educational program for working with victims of domestic violence, and the lines are specialized in working with victims of sexual violence of various categories. The three most common forms of violence reported by callers were family violence, consequences of sexual violence and re-traumatization due to the pandemic.²⁶

KOSOVO

In Kosovo, there is a national women's helpline, called the "helpline number". The Office for Victim Assistance and Advocacy (VAO) provides a 24/7 toll-free helpline for victims of domestic violence, but according to a²⁷ 2020 Kvinna til Kvinna Foundation report, this line is not specialized for victims of domestic violence and in practice officers with less appropriate training, knowledge and qualifications may respond to calls, whereby reporting procedures may remain unresolved, or delayed.

This line provides services in Albanian, Serbian and English. Funding for the helpline comes through government funding, international funding and donations. In 2020, the total number of callers was 1091. The three most common types of violence reported by callers were domestic violence, sexual violence and human trafficking.²⁸

MONTENEGRO

In Montenegro, there is a national helpline called the National SOS line for domestic violence which started its work as a national helpline in 2015 in Nikšić. The original helpline was founded in 1998 by a group of female activists²⁹ whose efforts were recognized by the state and the line became the national SOS line.

This SOS line provides free 24-hour services in Montenegrin, Albanian and English.³⁰

The helpline is managed by women's civil society organizations with partial funding from the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy and international donors.

The helpline is run by well-trained, competent staff with specialist knowledge in the field of gender-based violence and women's and human rights, with more than 17 years of experience working with victims of violence and working on the helpline. The helpline provides support to victims of violence through information, guidance and psychological counseling.³¹

According to WAVE³², in 2020 the hotline received 3533 calls from 354 people and the most common forms of violence reported by callers were physical and psychological violence.

SERBIA

Serbia has a national women's helpline called the SOS helpline for women who have experienced violence, which became a national SOS line in 2018. It is free, operates 24/7 and serves all victims of gender-based violence in Serbia. It is managed by the Public Center for Social Protection for Infants, Children and Young People.³³

There are no helpline services in other languages of the minority communities and the helpline does not have trained staff who is specialized in working with women who have experienced violence.

In addition to the national helpline, there are several regional and local helplines, many of them with many years of experience. In Vojvodina, a free helpline is available for victims of all forms of violence, whose services are provided in the languages spoken by minority communities. The same works on weekdays from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m. It is run by representatives of six women's organizations connected to the SOS Vojvodina network, but it is financed by the provincial government. In other parts of the country, local women's organizations continue to run local helplines, mainly focused on victims of domestic violence, however, only three of the NGO-run helplines have received the necessary license from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Regarding the helpline situation in Serbia, GREVIO notes that the services provided by most local helplines run by specialized women's organizations are in-depth telephone counseling, while the newly

25 OSCE, Survey on Well-Being and Safety of Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina, OSCE, 2019

26 WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021,

27 KVINNA, KVINNA Report 2020, Women's rights in the Western Balkans, Women in politics, gender-based violence and safety of women human rights defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation , 2020

28 WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021,

29 History of the organization – SOS Telephone (sosnk.org)

30 KVINNA, KVINNA Report 2020, Women's rights in the Western Balkans, Women in politics, gender-based violence and safety of women human rights defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia, Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation " (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2020

31 NGO Report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence in Montenegro, 2017

32 WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

33 Zvecanska, Center for the Protection of Infants, Children and Youth - <http://zvecanska.org.rs/>

established national helpline focuses only on referrals. Second, most referrals appear to be limited to the local Social Protection Center and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and women are not or are rarely referred to specialized support services run by NGOs, such as the Autonomous Women's Center in Belgrade.³⁴

In its report, GREVIO³⁵ expresses concern about the confidentiality and anonymity of callers after women's civil society organizations in Serbia expressed concern about the violation of victims' rights because the victims' calls were recorded without prior notification or obtaining their consent. Serbia has since introduced a message on the phone line informing callers that their call will be recorded.

In 2020, the women's helpline received 2922 calls and the most common form of reported violence is psychological violence.³⁶

TABLE 3: National women's helplines and shortcomings faced by countries in the region

Do countries have: COUNTRIES:	Free national line	24/7 hotline available	Trained staff	Specialized line for victims of domestic violence	Availability of the language of minority communities 24/7
ALBANIA	Yes	Yes	-	No	No
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
KOSOVO	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
MONTENEGRO	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
SERBIA	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

34 GREVIO, GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) Serbia, 2020

35 GREVIO, GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) Serbia, 2020

36 WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

EU MEMBER STATES

GREECE

In Greece, there are two national helplines for women. The main line is called SOS Helpline 15900. It is state-owned and managed by the General Secretariat for Family Policy and gender equality.³⁷

The line is free, provides advice, support and counseling on gender-based violence and operates 24/7. The annual number of calls is about 7000. The line offers services in Greek and English, and additionally provides services in Farsi and Arabic, which are not available 24/7, but callers are notified on the line itself via a pre-recorded message, about the specific hours and days when that support is available.³⁸ The staff are counselors trained in gender issues. According to WAVE's³⁹ 2021 report, the hotline provides support to survivors of domestic violence, sexual violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking.

The second national helpline is called Hopeline and is run by an NGO called the Union of Women's Associations of Heraklion Prefecture (UWAH).⁴⁰ The helpline is free, available 24/7 and offers support on violence against women in Greek and English. It receives funds from private donors.

From November 2019 to December 2020, helplines received 9,872 calls. The most common forms of violence reported by callers were domestic violence, sexual harassment and rape.⁴¹

CROATIA

In Croatia, there are two women's helplines throughout the country, which are available 24/7 and are free. The main national women's helpline is the National Call Center for Crimes and Misdemeanors. The line provides services in Croatian and English and provides adequate support to women who have survived violence. 1408 calls were recorded in 2020.⁴²

The second helpline is Women's Help Now which is run by a women's organization called Women's Help Now. The line is free, available 24 hours a day, and victims of violence are provided with free legal and psychosocial assistance. Another national helpline

37 WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

38 Greece's report on the implementation of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention), 2022

39 WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

40 Ibidem

41 Ibidem

42 WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

is run by Autonomous Women's House Zagreb, it is free of charge, but doesn't provide services 24/7. The national call center line offers services in Croatian and English. The Association handles up to 1800 telephone calls per year coming from all over the Republic of Croatia.⁴³

In addition to these two lines, there are several regional women's helplines in Croatia run by various women's shelters. There are a total of 8 SOS telephone lines available 24/7. Some telephone lines are run by women's NGOs, civil society organizations and other service providers who also run shelters for victims of violence, which are financially supported by the Ministry of Labour, Pension System, Family and Social Policy."

Some of them are available 24/7, and mainly provide information to women who need accommodation.

The three most common forms of violence reported by callers were cases of domestic violence, sexual violence and violation of children's rights.

BULGARIA

There are two national women's helplines in Bulgaria. One is run by the Gender-Based Violence Prevention Alliance and is free and available 24/7. The helpline provides special support for victims of domestic violence. The line is financed through private donations, as well as through the Ministry of Justice. During 2020, it received 484 calls.

The second helpline is run by the Animus Foundation and is called the National Helpline for Survivors of Violence. This helpline is also free, offers 24/7 support, is funded through support from the Ministry of Justice and is run by volunteers.

The number of callers in 2020 is not available for the Animus Foundation Helpline, but in 2019 it received a total of 37,915 calls. Both helplines are run by non-governmental organizations and do not offer multilingual support. The three most common forms of violence reported by callers to all three helplines were domestic violence, sexual violence and child marriage.⁴⁴

SWEDEN

Sweden stands out with its national helpline for violence against women – the Women's Peace Line. It is a national line and is administered by the National Center

for Women's Peace at Uppsala University and Uppsala University Hospital. It works 24/7, it is free, the bill does not show that the call was made and the callers remain anonymous. It deals with all forms of violence against women, with well-trained and experienced social workers and nurses who refer callers to locally available support services.⁴⁵

The helpline is specifically aimed at women over 18 who are victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence. The national telephone helpline is also fully funded by the state. Although the line does not have a function for SMS or chat, it still offers, through its website, opportunities for people with disabilities. This line offers help in many languages spoken in Sweden, with the help of interpreters, whose involvement requires permission and waits up to 10 min to join the call. The helpline is widespread and more than 50% of women in Sweden know of its existence. According to the official website of Kvinnofridslinjen, the hotline received an average of 42,498 calls per year and about 116 calls per day in 2021.⁴⁶

GERMANY

Another country that stands out in the European Union is Germany. In 2013, even before the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, they established a legally mandatory National Helpline for violence against women. The line is free, operates 24/7 and operates in German, Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Chinese, Croatian, English, Farsi, French, Italian, Kurdish, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Spanish, Turkish and Vietnamese language. It is financed by the state. In 2020, the helpline received 80,396 calls, of which the most common forms of violence reported by callers were family violence, sexual violence and psychological violence.⁴⁷

The line is managed by more than 80 specially trained female counselors who offer advice on all forms of violence covered by the Istanbul Convention. The helpline is available to a wide range of callers, including women with intellectual disabilities, who can receive counseling in easy-to-understand language; deaf and/or mute women using sign language online chat or video counseling; and those who may need intercultural counseling.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ GREVIO, GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) Sweden, 2019

⁴⁶ Kvinnofridslinjen, a national helpline for victims of threats or physical, psychological or sexual violence -<https://kvinnofridslinjen.se/en/about-us/>

⁴⁷ WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

⁴⁸ GREVIO, GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) Germany, 2022

⁴³ Women's help now, SOS phone for women and children victims of violence -<http://zenskapomocsada.hr/o-nama/>

⁴⁴ WAVE, WAVE COUNTRY REPORT -2021 Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the impact of COVID-19 on their provision, 2021

TABLE 4: National women’s helplines and the shortcomings faced by EU member states

Do countries have: COUNTRIES:	Free national line	24/7 hotline available	Trained staff	Specialized line for victims of domestic violence	Availability of the language of minority communities 24/7
GREECE	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
CROATIA	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
BULGARIA	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No
SWEDEN	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
GERMANY	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

EUROPEAN SOS HELPLINE

As an initiative of the German Presidency in 2020, the European Commission established a single, harmonized helpline for victims of violence against women, number 116 016. The line is active from November 2022. Women victims of violence can call this number from any of the EU countries and get advice and help wherever they are at the moment. So far, 15 EU member states have linked their national helplines to this number. The rest of the EU member states have until the end of April 2023 to connect their national lines to this number.

The single number for assistance to women victims of violence will enable a greater range of services and facilitation of access to help. In this way, women who are mobile across EU countries can remember and use one number and be connected to services that are geographically closest to the place where the violence took place, so that victims would receive timely help, referral and counseling from local SOS helpline administrators.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis shows that in different countries of the region and Europe there are different models of operation of telephone helplines.

In terms of management, the lines that are managed by specialized non-governmental organizations, individually or shared by several women’s organizations, prevail, but there are cases of state managed helplines through public institutions (centers).

All helplines are recognized and supported by national governments, through licensing or memoranda of cooperation.

Also, all lines have excellent cooperation with central and local authorities, ministries and the police, which is key to the level and benefit of the services they offer.

It can also be pointed out that, although most are centralized, in some countries there is regionalization or geographical division of SOS helplines’ responsibilities. This is in addition to direct contact with local services for protection and accommodation, as well as facilitating the administration of lines from various organizations.

In terms of financing, although most of them are financed by the state itself (and/or the municipalities), most are with combined financing from domestic and international sources.



RECOMMENDATIONS

The assessment of the SOS helplines for victims of violence indicate that there are three well-developed and experienced SOS helplines for victims of domestic violence and violence against women in North Macedonia: National SOS line OZS (02) 15-700, managed by Women's Organization of the City of Skopje (OZS), National SOS Mobile Line NSRR 141-700, managed by National Council for Gender Equality (NSRR), National SOS line Nadezh (02) 15-315 managed by Crisis Center "Nadezh" (Hope).

They have been operating for many years in difficult conditions and with very limited institutional and financial support.

The standards that were developed in these organizations are mostly in line with the standards of the Istanbul Convention, as far as this is possible with limited resources. The service provided is highly helpful, empathetic, the operators are trained and motivated to provide service to the beneficiaries, regardless of insufficient resources. The service provision is well developed and there is a multisectoral cooperation and referral system, as well as cooperation with the shelters. For the most part, the SOS helplines strive to provide free of charge, 24/7 services.

However, the premises for work are not adequate, there is no work in shifts at the premises, and 24/7 provision of SOS helplines' services is not fully secured. More resources are needed to ensure the efficient operation of SOS helplines.

The importance of the three helplines that provide support to victims of domestic violence is beyond doubt. The helplines have been established for a long time, with 29, 23 and 22 years of experience and recognition among the population.

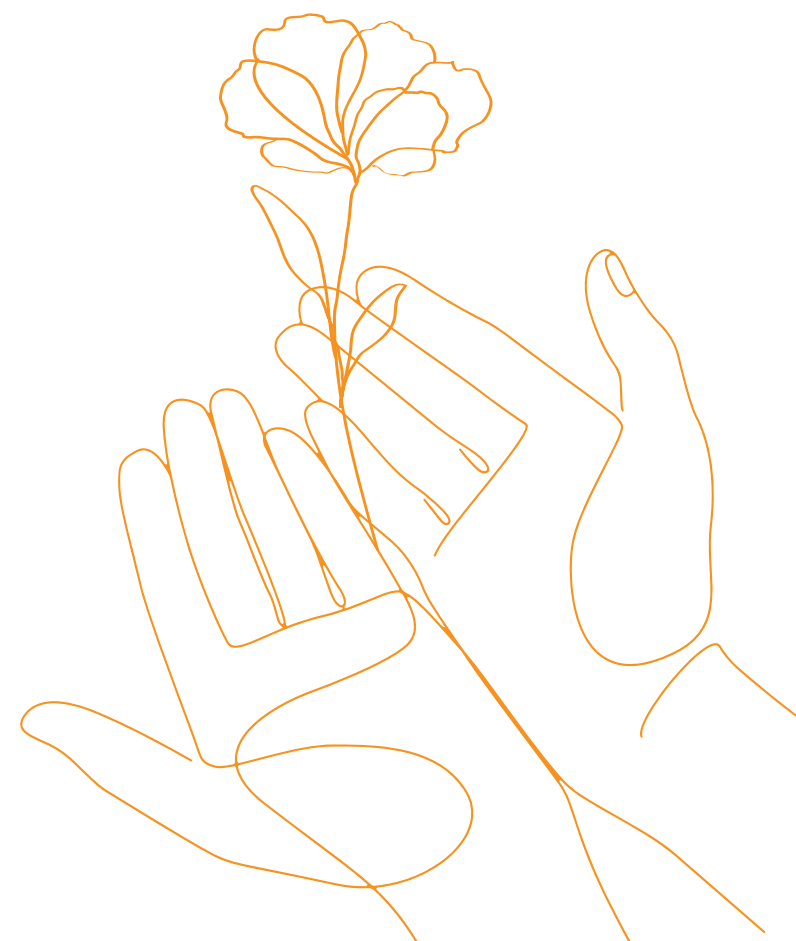
Recommendations

In order to strengthen the provision of services of the national helplines for victims of domestic violence and violence against women, we would like to propose the following recommendations:

- Support the improvement of the services of the national helplines available 24 hours, 7 days a week and free of charge to ensure easy and confidential access to information and counseling by trained professionals on all forms of violence against women in all relevant, including minority languages (Macedonian, Albanian, Romani, Turkish, Serbian, English).

- Provide financial and institutional support for the sustainability and continuity of work of all three SOS national helplines in North Macedonia, both by the central government and the municipalities.
- Develop technical abilities and capacities and provide services for callers with disabilities of all types.
- Invest in a specially equipped space for shift work and rest for operators, with a switchboard, for conducting multiple conversations from multiple operators at the same time, with due respect for confidentiality and other work principles.
- Ensure regular, comprehensive training of professional helpline staff, for profiling, for simulations of different situations and preparedness for different scenarios through standardized certified training for operators of SOS helplines.
- Organize training, meetings and coordination meetings between SOS helpline operators, the police, CSW employees, as well as professional support staff (social workers, psychologists, lawyers), for the sake of better coordination, familiarity with the work, as well as mutual support.
- Support cooperation with the telecom providers in order for the helplines to be free of charge for the callers and not appear on the bill of the callers, in order to ensure greater protection and safety of the victims.
- Provide possibilities for provision of services through other telecommunication or information technologies (Skype, Viber, e-mail, Internet consultations, etc.), while ensuring data protection, anonymity and confidentiality.
- Given the practice and the desire of the organizations administering the helplines, additional resources should be secured to ensure that these organizations can provide in-person or online counseling and/or accompaniment of the victim to the competent institutions.
- Support the process of aligning the existing protocols, questionnaires and documentation for call logging, as well as data processing and statistics of calls.
- Regularly evaluate and update the documentation related to the general forms, protocols, reports and risk assessment forms.
- Support the implementation of data management software for electronic database management, to facilitate the call logging, the encryption of users, as well as the preparation of reports.

- Provide conditions, as well as financial means, for the helplines, to set up electronic or physical security systems in place, for greater protection of persons and data.
- Support the SOS helpline(s) to introduce a service quality management system to provide feedback and monitor the level of satisfaction of callers to be used as a benchmark, norm or model for comparison with the provided services.
- Develop mechanisms or procedures for receiving and responding to complaints and appeals in accordance with the internal regulations of the service provider organization.
- Provide financial means for continuous and intensified promotion of the SOS helplines' numbers, and for wide promotion and familiarization of the users of the various services they offer.
- Introduce a permanent solution to support and fund the national SOS helplines, especially in providing resources that are necessary for the sustainability of the SOS helplines and the establishment of an infrastructure that will meet the standards prescribed by the Istanbul Convention.



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