

SDC Gendernet: Partner Learning Day 2021

Gender and COVID19: Case Study

Project/ intervention title:	CLWG		
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Overall goal

Main aim of your project/ intervention

Location

Country/ national and/ or sub-national

<p>The Counseling Line for Women and Girls (CLWG) is one of the most active non-public professional service providers operating in Albania supporting survivors of domestic violence (DV) with a wide range of professional counselling and referral services for women and girl survivors of DV/GBV. Alongside the hotline services CLWG provides face-to-face psycho-social and legal counselling at their premises. The short-term and long-term assistance (referral, psycho-social support, legal assistance, outreach, prevention) is combined with advocacy and lobbying efforts for state funding of the CLWG. Since 2016, the CLWG has as an exclusive agreement with the Ministry of Health and Social Protection for running the National-Help-Line (24/7). Currently 30% of helpline is state-funded. CLWG also works in close collaboration with the Counseling Line for Men and Boys (CLMB).</p> <p>Primary beneficiaries of the current project phase are women and girl survivors (above 10 years old) and those at risk of GBV, specifically those from Roma and Egyptian communities, elderly women (60+) and women and girls with disabilities in the following five municipalities:</p> <p>Tirana, the capital of the country, has been selected based on the high inequalities with many migrant households located in peri-urban Tirana and living in poverty; Shijak, Devoll, Bulqiza and Rrogozhina are smaller and generally less affluent municipalities with high rates of unemployment and low opportunities for women's involvement in decision-making and community engagement.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Albania: Tirana, Shijak, Devoll, Bulqiza, Rrogozhina
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Core problem

- Main issue(s) addressed

<p>Over half of Albanian Women and Girls have experienced VAWG (UN Women 2019), with women and girls in rural and otherwise marginalized communities facing particular barriers to access help. Through the COVID-19 pandemic and following the earth quake of 26. November 2019, the risk for VAWG in Albania is complexly aggravated while referral mechanisms, public and non-public service providers and the health system struggle to meet beneficiaries' increased needs under extraordinary economic strain and changing regulations (UN Women 2020).</p> <p>While reported DV cases and accordingly the police protection orders drastically dropped during the lockdown (shelter were either closed or half empty) the number of calls to the CLWG tripled: The National Helpline received about 2194 calls between March 13 – May 31, 2020 compared to 708 calls during the same period in 2019. Today it is still much higher than before the lockdown and there is an increased need for counselling (not least due to the raise of mental health problems) the raising level and incidence of violence inside and outside the home, together with levels of unemployment.</p>

Intervention

- Main strategies undertaken

1. During the lockdown (March to May 2020) the number of calls to the CLWG tripled. Today it is still higher than before the lockdown and due to the raise in and intensification of mental health problems there is an increased need for counselling. CLWG reacted by adding to **additional phone lines** (with the same and thus increasing their lines from one to three lines) and increasing
2. They started offering **online counseling**, for clients who could not come to face-to-face session anymore, due to the COVID mobility restrictions and they acquired a mobile phone to provide counseling via applications such as Whatsapp and Viber, and also to allow victims to contact them via messaging applications, at a time when they were living under the same roof with their perpetrators and discretion was more difficult.
3. Alongside the increasing the working hours of the psychosocial counsellors, an additional legal counsellor was engaged, in order to assist women in accessing and obtaining the benefits that the government provided in the framework of the COVID-19 crisis. The lawyer has developed an easy **guide** for this purpose and assisted vulnerable individuals throughout the whole process. Vulnerable callers have been assisted in how to receive exemption from taxation and rent, how to apply for a postponement of loan payments etc. (March – September 2020, app. 600 women and girls received such assistance).
4. Already in the wake of the earth quake that hit 11 municipalities, incl. the two largest cities Tirana and Dures, CLWG diversified. Due to extreme levels of poverty generated by the overlapping crises, the socio-economically most affected DV survivors were provided with emergency food and sanitation packages. 50 such packages with survival supplies were created and distributed to survivors of violence and their families.
5. Becoming more active on social media (and people spending more time online) and producing an awareness-arising radio and video spot they managed to initiate and mobilized a large gender-mixed crowd for an awareness-raising protest in Tirana, following the multiple rape of a 15-years girl by a school guard in June 2021.

The additional services (1-4) were secured by an emergency fund by IAMANEH Switzerland.

- Systemic issues: main structural barriers tackled/ to overcome?

- Lack of preparedness to respond to the multiple crises (earth quake, COVID-19): limited resources available and needs to upgrade technical skills of the service providers to mobilise adequately in the unusual working environment
 - Shortage of CLWG staff – also due to being affected by pandemic and lockdowns themselves.
 - Gov. social services underfinanced and insufficient capacity, some still closed even beyond the lockdown.

COVID-19, overlapping with the impact of the November 2019 earthquake, highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing inequities and system weaknesses. Given the lack of resources, skills and preparedness in the social protection system, traditional challenges of quality, adequacy and coverage were accentuated, and basic needs were met by improvised humanitarian crisis response. Women and girls with disabilities were further excluded as a result of the disruption of specialized services, whereas the ad hoc support was neither sufficient, continuous, nor adequate. Some centers decided to close, despite contrary instructions from the government, while online services could not address all the needs. Information and news media were dominated by COVID-19 infection reports, while there was not sufficient information on the available services for survivors of domestic violence and how to access them. The COVID-19 pandemic is a wake-up call to address structural challenges. In response to these challenges and needs, the proposed intervention will contribute to disaster preparedness and response systems, addressing both prevention and response to Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). It is an opportunity to support building adequate, shock responsive and resilient systems for VAWG, reflecting the needs of targeted vulnerable groups.

COVID19 Effect	
Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Forced to stay in isolation, existing clients felt more at ease to participate more frequently in online counselling, illustrated by the higher number of calls received by them. More frequent communication and the availability of counsellors helped build trust and thus supporting better their psychological well-being - Online counselling schedules were made more flexible and fitting best to needs of beneficiaries. - Services / counselling centres for perpetrators: Men find it easier to speak from their comfort zone by eliminating the stress of frequent office attendance for counselling sessions (without fear of embarrassment that anyone could notice them entering the centre). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulty in reaching women and girls through online channels if they had no or poor internet access or lack digital literacy • Adverse effects of social distancing (incl. wearing masks): Difficulty to establish a trust relationship in distance with new clients, as they feel susceptible by the fact that they are not sure about the confidentiality of the conversation, especially in clients that had an ongoing court procedure. • Often counselling techniques require face to face communication in order to observe also the nonverbal elements of the communication – which was not always possible online and impossible via phone counselling sessions. • The need for additional resources to mobilize during crises situation – such as additional phones for each shift; funds to mobilize for food and sanitation packages for the clients in need, contingency costs to cover rent costs and provide some financial support. The workload for the counsellors was high, risk or burn out.
What are key conclusions	
Key good practices	Key lessons learnt
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquiring mobile phones for the Helpline and building up online counseling services • Emergency diversification (food packages) brings visibility • Public awareness raising of political education and lobbying through intensified online public presence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need to improve digital literacy and access for clients. • Develop further operational plans for online support services and protocols. • Importance of diversification

Key recommendations

For civil society:

- Capitalise on best work practices used during the pandemic period and tailor a crises response approach of services ready to be mobilized as needed.
- Undertake safety planning with survivors to minimize their safety risk when living with an abusive partner, including emergency options for safe shelter.
- Develop and share tools and resources that have proved to be effectively used during the pandemic and engage in knowledge sharing with other service providers.
- Advocate for equal online use of services available as alternative support.
- Monitor domestic violence trends and prepare adequate support in cooperation with all key stakeholders.
- Build solidarity with communities to prevent and address cases of DV, as well as ensure that information on relevant support services is available and accessible through different channels of communication.

For the Government:

- Resource and guarantee accessibility to essential services for survivors and survivors of DV during the pandemic and support safe response and service provisions for survivors by public and non-public providers. Maintain essential services – as shelters and hotlines accessible and operational at all times, while supporting the adoption of these services to crises situations.
- Extend the support services to survivors of domestic violence in other areas of the country ensuring availability and accessibility of services closer to the population.
- Issue public service announcements with the message that violence against women and girls will not be tolerated during the pandemic and perpetrators will face severe consequences.
- Prepare in cooperation with key stakeholders and service providers a national preparedness and response plan for survivors and survivors of DV during crises. Detail steps for adequate financing to mobilize for emergency situations, providing support to CSO service providers and rights-based organizations as well as financial support for the survivors and survivors of domestic violence.
- Ensure and extend the support responses in remote and rural areas.
- Capacitate and empower local governments to report and address GBV and actively refer these cases to the Coordinated Referral Mechanism (CRM).



*Protest/Raise awareness intervention from WtW, ZDB, SAWG, CLWG and CLMB.
Photography from CLWG and CLMB*



*On the premises of CLWG in Tirana
Photography from CLWG*



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