



Successful Campaigns in Albania for issues related to Violence against Women and Girls, Domestic Violence and Gender Equality

Identified during the implementation of Regional Program “Ending violence against Women and Girls – Implementing norms, changing minds”

“My ex-husband physically abused me from the very first day of our marriage, when I gave birth to our two sons, until the day he got rid of me. But I survived, and I want to continue living despite injuries I have in my head, body, and soul. I want to live for myself and my children, who he considers them enemies too. He beat me to an inch of my life and abandoned me, assuming I was dead. Strangers found me unconscious and took me to the hospital. I can feel the scars of violence under my dyed hair. Thirty years ago, I was violated to the core not only by my husband but also his family. Despite everything, he has never apologized. He always considered me his property, and he decided whether I lived or died”.

“Since three years ago, the person who used to be my husband, the father of my two wonderful daughters, turned into the person who persecutes and violates me regularly. Everything started when he accused me of adultery with my employer. His jealousy and possessiveness towards me turned into a nightmare for our family. He abused me consistently. My 17- and 9-years old daughters were always afraid of their father. But one day, the scars in my body, mind, and soul gave me the strength to say: “STOP-No more!” My husband can’t live in peace, while he sends me to hell every day, every week, every month. I picked up the phone and called 112. I asked the Police to help me. Recently I have received my third Protection Order, while my violator is in prison for the third time.”

These are only two testimonies out of hundreds of women who get regularly abused by their former husbands. For many years now, several responsible institutions and non-governmental organizations work tirelessly to support women, victims of domestic or gender-based violence.

During the last three years (2017, 2018, and 2019), a series of successful and challenging campaigns are held to encourage victims and witnesses of violence to report all types of abuse and support the victims.

Campaign: “CALL 112/129”

During these last three years, responsible institutions and non-governmental organizations, despite many challenges, have conducted a series of successful educational campaigns. Alma Katragjini, Local Coordinator for Domestic Violence Issues, Child Protection and Gender Diversity in the Police Directorate, shares some of the most used slogans in these campaigns. “Hear me too”, “Together we can do more”, “Come Forward to Report”, “Come Forward to Denounce”, “Report the Violence”, “Call 112/129”.

In response to legislative amendments done in 2018, the State Police established specific structures to intensify the fight against gender-based violence. Katragjini states: *“The State Police and the Ministry of Interior have endorsed a strategy which aims to enforce the laws against domestic violence and child protection in Albanian communities. To comply with the law’s amendments, made in January and March 2019, the State Police is collaborating with Tirana Municipality, State Social Service, and some international organizations to implement four different programs to guarantee children’s protection against neglect, violence, and any other form of abuse against their rights”*. The groups assisted by these programs are the victims of domestic violence, marginalized groups of the population, Roma/ Egyptian communities, especially the ones located in rural areas. They benefit in different ways, especially with information on the reporting process and procedures.

There are countless challenges faced during daily work. The lack of coordination between responsible institutions for managing domestic violence or child abuse cases is an ongoing challenge for Police Authorities. “It negatively impacts the performance of the referral program. The victims miss adequate and timely services. Gender Diversity Legislation amendments but also the focus put by the Albanian Government and Ministry of Interior on issues of violence have helped establish concrete structures with dedicated staff to work on gender diversity and prevention of domestic violence. However, there is still a lot to be done in this direction”.

CAMPAIGN: “I am a super woman”

Albanian Women Empowering Network (AWEN) for many years now advocates and lobbies for violated and trafficked women and girls' rights, who are the target groups of this organization. The slogan used by AWEN on March 8th for the past three years has been, “I am a superwoman and super girl”. This slogan hopes to manifest women’s strength, attracting public and media attention.

“Our main target is women experiencing domestic or gender-based violence, women and girls, victims of trafficking, women, and girls from marginalized and rural areas who we aim to empower through our economic empowerment programs. We also work with men/boys who are

perpetrators of violence. We offer them rehabilitating psychological counseling through two organizations in Shkoder and Tirane. Another target group during the last two years have been the young girls and boys. We have conducted a research/study on “Violence in intimate relations among teenagers.” in the past two years. This study was particularly important as it informed that domestic and gender-based violence sometimes starts already by this age” – as stated Ines Leskaj, director of AWEN.

One of the biggest challenges for AWEN is the weak/ lack of support from the government, making AWEN entirely donor-dependent. Due to a shortage of funding, the network’s organizations are incapable of providing services to victims of violence and often have to let their staff go. Another challenge is the reduction of donor’s funding or donors’ phasing out as a result of positive indicators reported by the Albanian government. “Another challenge that we have encountered is the communities’ closed mindset regarding gender stereotypes on violence, regarding reporting the violence, but also the programs we offer and our services’ benefits”.

CAMPAIGN: “Don’t be silent”

“Counseling Line for Women and Girls” has mostly used the slogan “Don’t be silent” encouraging reporting in hotlines 116117 but also directly at the police authorities or other responsible structures. Another slogan has been “Be a man”, which aimed to challenge the traditional gender norms in Albania, stating that a real man can cry, help with domestic chores, get scared, and experience emotions.

“Counseling Line for Women and Girls” in these three years has assisted victims of violence and their perpetrators. It has also provided training for the state institutions employees responsible for delivering social services for domestic violence victims, among others. Iris Luarasi, a director of this organization, says *“The main program is the national hotline 116117, which is available 24 hours, seven days’ week to provide help, psychological and legal assistance as well as to refer cases of violence. There is also the organization’s spin-off “Counseling Line for Men and Boys”, founded in 2012 to provide rehabilitation programs for men and boys perpetrator of violence. This program is implemented in close collaboration with the Prisons’ Directorate and Probation Service and intends to offer counseling services to this category of perpetrators.*

The biggest challenge for “The Counseling Line for Women and Girls” has been financing the National Line 116/117. “For almost one year, the counselors have worked pro-bono to keep the line effective for 24 hours. After all of the work done and a lot of lobbying, we were able to gain the state's support. The coordination with the courts for the referral of male perpetrators to receive services remains of crucial importance. In this regard, the judges of Tirana and Durres’ courts are trained and made aware; however, many other judges remain untrained and uninformed. Also, the male perpetrators’ referral system is still weak”.

National level conferences, television broadcasts, awareness-raising campaigns featuring visuals of violence against women, awareness-raising messages in audio-visual media, clear messaging for all target groups in social media, collaboration among the network of organizations, and state institutions have resulted in being best practices in the joint fight against violence.

According to the state police, the awareness-raising work done directly at the community level, especially in rural communities and close to vulnerable groups, has been very useful. The fieldwork has impacted the number of reporting to the police structures considerably.

“The Counseling Line for Women and Girls” highlights as a successful practice the work done with men and boys – perpetrators of violence. They are not only rehabilitated through counseling but do also bear their share of responsibility.

Albanian Women Empowering Network (AWEN) states that the lobbying and advocating initiatives to amend the legislation on domestic violence, and the law on free legal assistance are best practices. Also, the awareness-raising initiatives to encourage domestic and gender-based violence reporting, monitoring the implementation of the domestic violence mechanism in 6 municipalities within the framework of UN Women and Gender Alliance Joint Program are essential activities. The monitoring process has made Municipalities more accountable and, as a result, more proactive and effective in managing violence cases.