

# SOCIAL POSITION, EXPERIENCES AND STRENGTHS OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTIVE IN THE FIELD OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Maja Mamula, PhD  
Dušica Popadić

**12 women**  
from 8 countries  
have invested  
**295 years** in  
preventing and  
combating sexual  
violence!

**5 women**  
have received  
**28 awards** and  
nominations  
**7 organizations**  
have received  
**20 awards** and  
nominations!



REKONSTRUKCIJA  
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## **Impressum**

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The Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade and the European Women’s Network against Sexual Violence present you The Survey on Social Position, Experiences and Strengths of Women Human Rights Defenders Active in the Field of Sexual Violence.

### **Authors:**

Maja Mamula, PhD  
Dušica Popadić

### **Translation:**

Nataša Šofranac  
Radmila Vujović

### **Design and desktop publishing:**

Svetlana Pavlović

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*In September 2007, the Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade in Serbia launched the first National Campaign against Child Sexual Abuse. The room in which we booked the press conference was crowded, there was a lot of commotion among the female and male journalists and there were two rows of cameras to cover the event.*

*Joined by our guest-speakers, we announced the Campaign course, showed first two TV videos ever about the prevalence of violence and who the most common offenders of child abuse were and...*

*Then a series of questions posed by malicious tabloids ensued, directed to me. "...And your cooperation with the 'agency' for lesbian rights?" I had always known such a question might be raised.*

*I took out the book entitled Written Out: How Sexuality Is Used to Attack Women's Organizing by Cynthia Rothschild, which had recently been translated from English by the Reconstruction Women's Fund.*

*I had the opportunity to be sent a copy to view it in its still unfinished translation form, as well as the original. It is most likely that, by that time, I had already known the book by heart.*

*Why? Because I discovered and learned from that book that there were women like us from the Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade, who were exposed to discrimination and violence on various counts, including sexuality.*

*I used to carry the book with me frequently, wherever I went. Of course, this book was my ally that was constantly with me when I met with journalists.*

*When asked that question, I raised the book so that it came between the journalists and me like a safety blanket, and I said:*

*“You see, what you’re doing right now has been explained in this book. We already know that women who are human rights defenders and who publicly speak out against sexual violence are exposed to violence based on their sexuality. Yes, I do cooperate with the Organization for Lesbian Human Rights. ... Please, ask the next question.”*

*This book has been by my side ever since.*

***I wish that all of you who are holding our study in your hands find it instrumental in helping you recognise and understand your own experience better, the one you pursued or were lacking. To boost your courage while you are changing the world for the better, free from sexual violence.***

***Dušica Popadić***  
*Directress of the Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade*  
*President of the European Women's Network against Sexual Violence*

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## 1. ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE STUDY

**Defenders** - Women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence

**SV** - Sexual violence

**CSA** - Child sexual abuse

**ITC** - Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade

## 2. SURVEY

The Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade (ITC) and the European Women’s Network against Sexual Violence are conducting a survey under the name “Social Position, Experiences and Strengths of Women Human Rights Defenders Active in the Field of Sexual Violence” in the period 2020 – 2022. The survey is being financed by the Reconstruction Women’s Fund, Serbia.

With the focus on a very specific subgroup of women human rights defenders, this survey is paving a pioneering way forward. It is the result of many years of consideration of the Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade, as well as the understanding knowledge based on experience that this subgroup is potentially specific with regard to a series of characteristics. Therefore, these specific characteristics will be the subject of the analysis in the final report by the end of the aforementioned period.

Sexual violence is a topic which has not received enough attention in patriarchal societies, regardless of whether the key target population are women and/or children.

We live in a world in which sexual violence is still not recognised as a social problem and is not considered relevant, surrounded by an enormous amount of prejudice, astounding and inadmissible mistrust towards children and women, i.e. adult survivors of sexual violence.

Women, as survivors, as well as supportive persons to their child who is a survivor of sexual abuse, are constant targets for misogynists.

It has never been easier for sexual predators to access children than it is nowadays. Child sexual abuse within the family is still a well-kept bad secret.

Sexual violence is very rarely reported. Everywhere in the world, its prevalence is undermined since there is always a lack of services that victims of sexual violence can draw support from, as well as a lack of policies ensuring the best interests of women and children victims of sexual violence. Depending on the country, there are either no public campaigns for raising public awareness, or there are never enough of them.

Children and women, i.e. adult survivors of sexual violence are exceptionally rarely asked what they need to recover from sexual trauma and what was missing that could have prevented sexual violence from happening. The most efficient prevention is to learn about the topic of sexual violence from kindergarten through university, within the framework of national curricula at all educational levels, in order to recognise it and protect against it. It will still take a lot of time for this to become reality.

Since the 1960s women have been most frequently the ones working diligently on the sexual violence issue in the world. They have always met with resistance, misunderstanding, opposition. They were and are even now alone doing the important work that they are very committed to, and which is not their primary job in the ordinary meaning of the word, but which turned out to be above all their life mission to change the world so that it becomes a better place for everyone, especially future generations.

Women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence give a huge contribution to a better world. They recognise the significance of mutual networking and thus multiply their knowledge and valuable experience, becoming even stronger to face sexual violence predators, as well as their respective states and parts of the international public still insensitive to the fact that sexual violence is a major crime and hate crime.

For decades feminist organizations have been making appeals for gender equality stressing that it will not be achieved until the issue of sexual violence becomes an authentic strategic priority for states and their main focus. Among them are also the Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade and the European Women’s Network against Sexual Violence.

This issue has been clamouring for public attention and gaining traction in the past several years owing to the “MeToo” movement and national movements in European countries including a very recent “#MeTooIncest” started in France. In Europe, in the Balkans, there are also significant movements such as “#Jaztudi” (“MeToo” in Slovenia, 2018) “Justice for Girls” (Croatia, 2019) and “You are not alone” (Serbia 2021), “I didn’t ask for it” (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, 2021), “Medusa” (North Macedonia, 2021) and many more do arise.

Apart from undermining the impact of sexual violence on survivors in society, it is not believed that a recovery after a sexual trauma is possible, and it is often discouraged by structural violence while women human rights defenders active in this field are being particularly neglected.

There are rare surveys conducted on women human rights defenders. They are most commonly included in surveys on human rights defenders and it is just in rare surveys that more attention is paid to the specific role of women in this field, to the problems they encounter and to what specific forms of violence they are subjected to.

When this sphere is narrowed down, when we turn exclusively to women human rights defenders working on the issue of sexual violence, there are almost no data, or surveys.

The basic goals of our survey were to draw attention to the basic characteristics of women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence, their spheres of work and their successes, as well the sources of their vulnerability and the violence they suffer just because of who they are and what they do. Also, the aim was to demonstrate whether, and in what way, long-standing work on the issue of sexual violence impacts women human rights defenders and what support sources they have.

### 3. WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

To define women human rights defenders, and in particular women's human rights defenders is far more complex than it seems at first. While the term "human rights defenders" is most commonly used, the term "women's human rights defenders" is more complex.

First of all, it came into use much later, not just as a notion being mentioned at all, but also generally in terms of understanding differences, work scope, from the time it was first clearly used in declarations and charters up to its use in texts and surveys.

Second, it raises the question of whether we refer to women human rights defenders or men/women human rights defenders of women's human rights.

For the purposes of this survey, the definition resulting from careful consideration of different definitions will be used, also employed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Amnesty International, Frontline Defenders, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, the organization JASS, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the organization Global Fund for Women and Kvinna till Kvinna.

**Women working on the promotion and protection of human rights and all the persons defending women's human rights and contributing to gender equality with dedication are commonly referred to as "women's human rights defenders". They are targets of numerous attacks, both for being women, persons of different sexual orientations and gender identities, but also for what they are doing for the promotion and protection of women's human rights and gender equality.**

Women defenders come from various fields of work. Even though it is most commonly assumed that they are activists, representatives of civil society, civic initiatives and/or service providers (e.g. direct work with women survivors of violence), they may also come from the judiciary, including lawyers, as well as journalists, politicians and other professions, but all sharing a common denominator – active work on ensuring that girls and women realise all their rights. They are openly speaking out against inequality, inequity, violence, discrimination, frequently because they have experienced it first-hand. Their work has not received enough recognition yet, but is still the key to social changes and progress pertaining to women's rights against patriarchy, fascism and racism.

Also, they come from all countries in the world, pointing out inequality and oppression of women.

It may be perceived that some women human rights defenders do not identify themselves with the term and do not see themselves as women human rights defenders, that they are not familiar with the documents protecting their rights, have no knowledge of the possibilities or mechanisms for protection. A certain number of women human rights defenders think that if they compare themselves with their counterparts from e.g. DR Congo, Latin America, Africa or Iraq, they have no reason to complain, ask for additional elements of protection, denying the effect of their own work and experiences on their personal lives, health, as well as the effect on persons close to them and their family.

On account of doing their work and re-examining traditional values, they are to a large extent exposed to gender-specific risks and threats due to their human rights engagement, and/or as a direct consequence of their gender identity and/or sexual orientation. However, when the field of work of human rights defenders is narrowed down even more, to women's human rights defenders pertaining to sexual and reproductive health and rights, the risk is drastically increased in many countries, in particular in those under authoritarian regimes. By doing their work, re-examining social inequalities, women's position, gender roles and pointing out the weaknesses in political regimes and governments, they become sitting targets.

Generally speaking, we may say that women human rights defenders defend the rights recognised by *the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights*<sup>1</sup> and other instruments of the universal system of human rights.

Additionally, we can say that women human rights defenders act in accordance with the Declaration on *the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*<sup>2</sup> (1999), better known as the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders.

1 [http://www.mvep.hr/custompages/static/hrv/files/081210\\_deklaracija\\_ljudska\\_prava.pdf](http://www.mvep.hr/custompages/static/hrv/files/081210_deklaracija_ljudska_prava.pdf)

2 <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declarationCroatian.pdf>



Besides the abovementioned document, the responsibility of a state to protect women human rights defenders is laid down within the framework of the UN Human Rights Council Resolution on Human Rights Defenders<sup>3</sup> (2013) , with supporting mechanisms such as the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Commissioner of Human Rights of the Council of Europe, whose mandate also pertains to human rights defenders, EU Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders (adopted in 2004, updated in 2008).

Nonetheless, there remains the key question and that is **to what extent women human rights defenders are protected in practice.**

“In the current political climate, in which there is a backlash against human rights, women who defend and promote rights are often the first to come under attack” said UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Michel Forst<sup>4</sup>. He also added that in many countries women human rights defenders are stigmatised and called bad mothers, terrorists or witches, silenced or marginalised, and can even be killed.

Besides the same forms of violence that men human rights defenders face, women human rights defenders face additional and different threats that are shaped by entrenched gender stereotypes and ingrained perceptions of what women may and may not do. Women human rights defenders are subjected to numerous forms of violence just because of who they are and what they do. The aim of the violence and the attacks is to delegitimise their image in society, to disparage their professional work, to demonise and intimidate them.

Women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence face additional threats and attacks based on gender and sexual stereotypes, as well as threats of sexual violence. Because of the work they do in protecting women’s rights they have been additionally targeted and subjected to additional forms of gender-based violence. Their families and people close to them may also be subjected to threats and violence, with the aim of intimidating women human rights defenders and discouraging them from further engagement.

To understand the impact of violence, it is not enough just to list and describe different forms of violence. It is necessary to understand how economic, social, cultural, geographic, class and religious factors may lead to a deepening of the consequences of violence and even exacerbate them. It is necessary to take into account how age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, native language, the context in which they are working and the experienced trauma (e.g. war) could make the woman human rights defender feel even more exposed and hurt or could leave even more serious consequences. Misogyny, sexist and homophobic statements made by politicians, state authorities, religious leaders in a community, religious associations, other groups, the media, sent through social media, their community, by their own family, stigmatisation, public shaming, doxing and publishing their personal details on social media (SMEAR campaigns), attacks at public events (panel discussions etc.), threats, persecution, harassment (calls, messages, emails, social media, in person), verbal violence, physical violence, online and offline, gender-based violence, threats and sexual violence, are just some of the forms of violence reported by women human rights defenders which they suffered because of their engagement.

The situation is further compounded by different forms of violence towards organisations where they work, such as a negative attitude towards the organisation, prohibition on data dissemination, restrictions concerning advocating, phone tapping, raids, inspections, confiscation of IT equipment, allegations of being foreign mercenaries and spies, working against the interests of their own countries and people, that they are against tradition, culture, religion... It is not until all these forms of violence are taken into consideration, both on the personal level and at the level of the organisation, that we gain closer insight into the frequency and seriousness of them and how they affect the survival of women human rights defenders.

“Governments are failing to protect women human rights defenders who routinely face a wide range of gender specific attacks, including rape, because of their work promoting rights relating to women, gender equality and sexuality”, Amnesty International said (2019).

It is vital to understand that women human rights defenders are subjected to threats of violence, isolation, denigration and rejection to a far greater extent than their male counterparts, just because they are women, with a view to jointly strengthening national, as well as international mechanisms for protecting women human rights defenders and addressing specific challenges and differences.

3 [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181)

4 <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=24232&LangID=E>

As Barcia stresses in her report (2014) for the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), in order to understand key mechanisms for protecting women human rights defenders it is important to understand the following types of security:

- **Personal security:** physical, psychological and economic insecurity (unemployment, volunteering, low salaries, irregular salaries...), lack of self-care;
- **Security for family members:** direct effect of fear and threats on people close to them, which aggravates their vulnerability;
- **Institutional security:** includes measures to ensure the protection of offices and staff (e.g. security cameras, connection with the police);
- **Collective security:** financial fraud allegations, constant inspections, various criminal offence charges (e.g. defamation);
- **Digital security:** awareness that the increased use of the internet and ITCs is helping to raise visibility, which concurrently increases the risk of technology-related forms of violence and threats, online surveillance, hacking of websites;
- **Structural safety/violence:** flawed access to justice, failure to report violence, failure to follow up investigations, poor cooperation with competent authorities that show distrust, neither understand the context nor show interest in it, but most commonly treat an attack against women human rights defenders as an isolated case.

If we want to contribute to the safety of women human rights defenders and people close to them, it is paramount that we recognise the importance and value of their work, that we give them well-deserved credit for that and protect them from risks closely linked to the work they do.

Furthermore, it should be highlighted that without raising awareness undertaken by governments and competent institutions about the status, vulnerabilities and risks that women human rights defenders are subjected to, as well as without protection in the form of enacting primary and secondary legislation and public policies, we cannot expect any serious or considerable changes.

## 4. METHODOLOGY AND SURVEY IMPLEMENTATION

### 4.1. METHODS AND IMPLEMENTATION

This study is a result of considerations and wishes to launch such an initiative by Dušica Popadić, psychologist, Ljiljana Bogavac, medical doctor (both from the Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade), Maja Mamula, PhD, psychologist (Women's Room, Zagreb). They were all members of the team which designed and implemented the study.

#### The main goals of the survey were:

1. Find out what the main characteristics of women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence are, as well as what their core values are on the basis of which they engage in work initially.
2. Find out which changes have been brought about by women human rights defenders' work and which changes they see as key results of their work.
3. Find out all about the risks women human rights defenders are exposed to because of their work related to sexual violence, about their personal strengths and vulnerabilities.
4. Find out what forms of violence women human rights defenders experienced and who the offenders were, both on the personal level and at the level of the organisation/institution they work in.
5. Find out if any changes have occurred in their own lives as a consequence of their work related to sexual violence, and if they have, what kind of changes they are as well as what self-care strategies they practice.

The survey methodology was designed by Maja Mamula and Dušica Popadić, who also created the study report.

The methodological design for this study and the decision concerning the design was not an easy process. In the past several years in international social studies a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods has increasingly been used, that is, the mixed methods approach (Este, Sitter and Maclaurin, 2009), while this approach is still rare in these parts, because it is not simple and raises many issues with regard to its usage (Sekol and Maurović, 2017).

Quantitative methods within the framework of a mixed survey approach enable the quantification of an occurrence, identification of data patterns and a cause-and-effect relationship, whereas qualitative methods enable a deeper insight and participation of survey participants, their observations and perspectives, which is extremely difficult to achieve by quantitative surveys.

Taking into consideration the advantages of the combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, which implies, first of all, being mindful of the sensitivity of the topic of this study (the field of sexual violence), as well as of a whole series of very personal questions posed to the participants, the mixed methods approach was selected because it entails the use of structured questionnaire as part of quantitative methods and a semi-structured interview as part of qualitative methods. Apart from this, the mixed methods approach was chosen with an equal status design (the role of the qualitative and quantitative approach is equally important in the study), and given the implementation of both parts of the study, the method is sequential (in the study one approach is used first, and then the other), i.e. the sequential explanatory design was chosen, which entails data collection by means of quantitative, and subsequently qualitative methods (Sekol and Maurović, 2017).

Given the sensitivity of the topic and data collection, all the contacts with women human rights defenders, the information, the questionnaires and the interviews were handled by the three abovementioned members of the team, each of them with more than 25 years of continuous, first-hand experience in the field of sexual violence, still very active in their work and pioneers in working on the SV issue in their respective countries. Numerous meetings were held, where all the steps to be taken were discussed in detail regarding the development of the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, as well as joint work on the development of specific, additional questions for the semi-structured interview.

In data collection and in accordance with the study goals, two methods were used:

- a) **questionnaires** that were filled in individually (on-line), for which every participant who agreed to participate in the study was given the link (two versions were available, in Croatian or English);
- b) **semi-structured interviews** that were conducted individually.

Before the study was conducted, it was checked whether the questionnaire and the interview were comprehensible and clear enough through a pilot study with three participants. Since the questions from both the questionnaire and the interview proved to be comprehensible, there was no need for further changes or additions, and the three participants from the pilot study were included in the final sample.

**The questionnaire** was developed during several months, and special care was dedicated to the sensitivity and clarity of questions. The final version contains **80 questions**, some of which contain numerous additional subquestions.

Questionnaires were filled in individually, through the link sent to each participant in the study personally, and during the filling in, a code was used, so that no one would know who filled in the questionnaire even they came into its possession. Every participant sent a code via a text message to the main researcher on her personal cell phone number, so that the name of the person and the completed questionnaire could be matched before the interview. The average time for completing the questionnaire was between 1.5 to 2 hours.

**Interviews** were conducted individually and the purpose was two-fold: to clarify some of the answers from the questionnaire, as well as to pose additional questions, giving the participants time and space for clarifications, descriptions, their own personal accounts. The interviews were conducted in agreement with the interviewer and the participant of the study, using different platforms (Zoom, WhatsApp video call), because the study was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic. The average time for the interview was about 1 hour.

The first calls for the participation in the study were sent to the selected potential participants in the middle of September. The questionnaires were completed from the end of September to the middle of December 2020, while the interviews were conducted from the middle of October 2020 to the end of January 2021.

## 4.2. ETHICAL ISSUES

After the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview were developed, the Governing Board of the European Women's Network against Sexual Violence received them to express their opinion and give consent for carrying out the interview. The usual procedure would have been to have obtained an opinion by the Ethics Committee, but it had not been constituted yet as the working body of the Network. The Governing Board delivered positive feedback on the proposed study and the instruments for data collection.

The Survey, gathering data and their analysis are based on all the key **ethical considerations related to the implementation of the feminist research**.

In connection with accepting participation in the Survey, **informed consent** was exceptionally important. Taking into consideration all the information about the Survey, the main researcher was at disposal for all additional questions in order to facilitate the decision making process related to the participation.

All the participants of the Survey take part voluntarily and in accordance with their estimation to withdraw from participation at any stage of the Survey. In the case of a withdrawal, it was clearly stated that all the data would be deleted and there would never be pressure on the participant to continue to participate.

The research team guaranteed **confidentiality** and **anonymity** to all the participants at all stages of the Survey. Online questionnaire was filled under a code. The data were processed and published only as a group of findings. Each participant had to decide for herself if she would like her name, surname and organization to be included at all in the participants' list.

Only the main researcher and one person from the research team, both with a long-term experience in working on the sexual violence issue and experience in research were given insight into all gathered data. Both signed the contract committing themselves to guarding full protection of personal data, and we are responsible before the European Women's Network against Sexual Violence and Governing Board for treating them ethically.

The data belonging to the Survey are published with taking special care of dignity and position of women human rights defenders who participated in the Survey. Certain, particularly sensitive parts of the questionnaire and the interview, related to personal experiences of violence, were treated with special attention.

### 4.3. STUDY PARTICIPANTS

One of the key challenges of this study was the choice of participants. From the initial definition of who women human rights defenders are, active in the field of sexual violence, the additional criteria were that they had achieved considerable results in SV issue in their country and/or at the international level, women who had made real changes, as well as the length of time spent on working continuously on the SV issue.

The study team carefully selected 36 participants who fulfilled all the criteria.

The first step was to send them an email on behalf of the European Women's Network against Sexual Violence, with detailed information on the study, goals, methods, the team carrying out the study, all the ethical issues important for the study, as well as the length of time required for completing the questionnaire and the duration of the interview.

Upon receiving a positive answer from the participants that they were willing to participate in the study, the researchers would send them a link to the on-line survey. After the participants filled in the questionnaire, the interviewer would contact them and they would agree on the time for conducting an interview.

As will be explained in more detail in Chapter 5.4. *Methodological limitations of the study*, one of the greatest challenges was related to the participants' consent to participate in the study. A considerable number of the participants required additional explanations, were interested in who the other participants were, some of them asked for a postponement, some started the process and stopped responding, and a certain number of them never replied, even after several repeated messages via email. Thus the final sample incorporated **12 women human rights defenders from eight countries** (Table 1), which is why the study team decided to include this sample in the first phase of study and to continue work in three overall phases, until the end of 2022.

**Table 1** Study participants according to the countries where they work/worked.

No.	Country where the woman human rights defender works/worked	Number of participants
1	The Republic of Serbia	2
2	The Republic of Croatia	1
3	The Republic of Slovenia	1
4	Bosnia and Herzegovina	2*
5	Montenegro	1
6	The Kingdom of the Netherlands	2
7	The Republic of Ireland	1
8	The Kingdom of Sweden	2
8 countries		12 women human rights defenders

Study participants come from **eight** organisations of civil society and institutions, and two participants is from the private sector.

Even though this sample is small and specific, the participants included in this survey represent exceptionally motivated and interested persons, who are, due to their experiences, a particularly important source of information on the position and role of women's human rights defenders in the field of SV.

### 4.4. DATA PROCESSING

To reiterate, the data collected through the structured questionnaire were analysed by using quantitative methods, while the data collected through the semi-structured interview were analysed by using qualitative methodology.

Specifically, given the small and specific sample, the quantitative analysis includes: (a) the frequency or percentage of answers to specific questions and (b) the comparison of answers from different categories (e.g. participants from the Balkan countries and participants from Western European countries).

The qualitative analysis of data collected through the semi-structured interview was carried out in several steps. The first step, or the first level of the qualitative analysis was designed according to the open coding, following the framework set by the questions. The order in which the data/results of open coding followed the structure of the questions prepared for the study report. After the initial reading of the answers, the second step entailed underlining the coding units (the basic units of the text which is analysed are summarised in the so-called key words), then summarising according to the corresponding notions/codes, and finally categorisation and interpretation.

#### **4.5. PROBLEMS OF CONDUCTING THE SURVEY**

The study on women human rights defenders in the field of sexual violence is the very first study of this kind, according to our knowledge so far, on the basis of searching the literature and discussions with women human rights defenders from various parts of the world.

For this particular reason, it was extremely challenging in various ways. Part of possible challenges could have been envisaged in advance and the strategies for mitigating the risk were developed (contacts with participants, additional explanations concerning the extent of the questionnaire etc.) However, despite all the strategies, we faced a series of problems that we want to point out.

##### **a) Low response rate**

Out of the total number of participants who were contacted via email (36), 12 of them were included in the final sample. The expected response rate was between 20 and 30 participants. Such response was somewhat surprising for the study team, despite the awareness it was a very specific sample and a very specific topic.

It was possible to monitor such low response rate through several phases of calls:

- a) Some women human rights defenders immediately responded to the first message claiming they were too preoccupied with obligations and could not participate during the period planned for the study, “leaving the option open” for their participation at some later point in time, in the second round of the survey.
- b) Some women human rights defenders first agreed to participate in the study, but withdrew at some point. Some of them withdrew without any explanation, while the others explained they could not participate because of the time the study required. A certain number of them clearly stated that due to the COVID-19 pandemic they were facing unforeseen and hard family situations, having to take care of family members, and that was the reason why they could not participate.
- c) Some women human rights defenders had a series of dilemmas as to whether to participate in the study, dilemmas concerning their identifying themselves as women human rights defenders in the field of SV, their continuation of work on the SV issue, as well as seeking information which other women human rights defenders had been invited to participate. In the invitation letter it was noted that the main researcher would be available to all the invited participants all the time during the process of their giving consent for the participation in the survey, so that she could answer all the additional questions and explain all the queries. While some of the women human rights defenders did not have a single additional question to ask, with some of them more than 10 emails were exchanged, after which they failed to give their consent.
- d) Some women human rights defenders that were assessed by the survey team as exceptionally valuable participants, even after several repeated invitations via email and phone messages, never responded to the invitation.

We believe that the extent of the questionnaire, the time needed for its completion, as well as the subsequent interview may have been demotivating. The situation was additionally aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused a series of problems in the situation of a great number of women human rights defenders, some unforeseen problems, their own illnesses or having to take care of a person close to them. Due to the pandemic, some women human rights defenders have taken on additional responsibilities at work, due to an increasing number of clients they are working with.

## **b) Technical problems related to on-line questionnaires**

The questionnaire, both in English and Croatian, was set up on Google form in such a way that it could not be saved while being done, but only when finished in its entirety and sent. Two participants were in the situation in which they had to stop filling in due to work, and when they wanted to resume the activity, the data were not saved. Even though the participants were warned there was no saving of data until the questionnaire was fully completed, we hold the survey team accountable for not giving the possibility to fill in the questionnaire in parts.

## **c) Time frame for collecting data**

Even though the time frame for collecting data, first for the questionnaire and afterwards for the interview, was not too long (for the questionnaires from the end of September to the middle of December 2020, and for the interviews from the middle of October 2020 to the end of January 2021), it was a bit longer than foreseen. The first time frame foreseen for gathering all data was at the beginning of October. However, this was changed due to the postponements by the participants themselves who agreed to participate, which affected the completion of the questionnaires within the time frame, as well as conducting the interview.



## 5. RESULTS

In this chapter, we shall present the results of the survey conducted on women human rights defenders active in the SV area, through 6 sub-chapters: basic characteristics of defenders and fundamental system of values as their baseline.

### 5.1. THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTIVE IN THE SEXUAL VIOLENCE AREA AND THE FUNDAMENTAL SYSTEM OF VALUES AS THEIR BASELINE

#### 5.1.1. WHO ARE THE PARTICIPANTS OF THE SURVEY

This survey encompassed **12 participants**. With their work, they represent **eight civil society organizations and public institutions**, whereas two comes from private practices. The survey participants come from **eight countries** in Europe and the Balkans region.

The organizations and countries where the participants come from are:

1. Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade (Serbia)
2. Ženska soba (Women's Room) – Center for Sexual Rights (Croatia)
3. Društvo SOS telefon za ženske in otroke – žrtve nasilja (Association SOS Helpline for Women and Children - Victims of Violence) (Slovenia)
4. Medica Zenica (period of 1993-2006) (Bosnia and Hercegovina)
5. SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja, Nikšić (SOS Center for women and children victims of violence, town of Nikšić) (Montenegro)
6. Change Attitude Foundation (Sweden)
7. Rape Crisis Network Ireland (Ireland)
8. Kinder- en Jeugdtraumacentrum (The Netherlands)
9. Jeugdzorgadvies and Traumacenter (The Netherlands)
10. Private entity

Of 12 participants, 10 are still employed, and two are officially retired, but still actively contributing with their work in the capacity of lecturers, consultants, etc. Further on, two do not work for the organisation they represented in the survey (Medica Zenica), but they still actively work in the SV area.

**The survey participants have worked on the SV issue in the time span of 14 to 54 years (27 years on average).** Only one participant stated to have worked for 20 years in the area of domestic violence, with more focus on SV in the past four years.

**It is impressive that these 12 women have invested 295 years in prevention and suppression of sexual violence, i.e. provision of direct assistance to survivors, development of models for working with women and child survivors of sexual violence, as well as in development of public policies and amendments to legislation.**

Seven participants started working on the SV issue at the age between 23 and 27, most often as pioneers of this area in the world or in their respective countries.

The time when they started working on the issue is also significant for understanding the survey data: one participant started in late 1960's, one in late 1970's, eight in the period of the 1990's, and two in early 2000's.

As stated by the survey participants themselves, they can't always clearly tell when exactly they started working in the SV area. Some of them started as volunteers in women's and/or peace organisations, some had worked with women survivors of domestic violence before, with SV being part of the experienced forms of violence, some of them joined the existing institutions/organisations working in the SV area. Some curtailed their previous career and opened services specifically intended for women and child survivors of SV. This quote most clearly indicates how difficult it can be to decide on time:



“

“Well, that depends on how you define ‘working on the topic’. In 1967 I went to work, as a gymteacher, at a child protection facility. It was a closed one, the children/teenagers could not leave the facility. There were several schools located ON the facility. Already some weeks after I started working there, it became clear that something was „wrong“ with the teenage girls (between 12 and 15). They didn’t want to participate in the gym classes. It looked as if they had „left“ their bodies, or were afraid of their bodies. Since I also lived at the facility, I invited the girls in my room (for tea and cookies). We started talking, and at a certain moment I asked them why they didn’t want to participate in the (my!!) gym classes. After some moments, one of the girls started talking: „But teacher, you do not know what happened to us.“ And then they told about incest/sexual abuse. Which, to be fair, I had never heard of. After the girls left, I started crying, I couldn’t understand that such horrible things happened to children. After a night with little sleep, I went to the director of the facility and told him what the girls had told me. His answer? „Francien, you don’t have to feel sorry for those girls, they are bad girls because they have seduced their fathers.“ I got very angry, and decided on the spot that this could not be true. And also decided that ‘doing something about this’, had to become my life’s work.

Well, that’s when I started working in this field. However, at that time (1967) there was hardly any literature on the topic, and I didn’t know where to look. Despite this, I jotted down everything that struck me, and tried to formulate how to help these young teenagers. Several of the ideas I formulated then became part of articles I wrote in later years. In 1970, the Dutch Association against child abuse (VKM) was founded, I became a member (and after some time a voluntary employee). The VKM already had several contacts in the USA. The VKM built a nice library, and thus I collected a lot of names of USA professionals working in the field of Child (Sexual) Abuse & Neglect. In the mean time I was trained as a psychomotor therapist, got my masters in Movement Sciences, and another master in Pedagogics. I started writing to the persons I found articles from, and bought myself a fax. I also phoned a lot with them (very high phone bills!).“ (F)

”

**The age range** of the survey participants is from 48 to 79 (the average age is 57 years of age). All participants identify themselves as women.

**By professions**, the most represented are psychologists (7), while all other professions are represented with one participant (medical doctor, political scientist, lawyer, journalist and engineer). All participants have completed higher education, 5 have a master’s degree and 3 are with a PhD thesis.

Of 12 participants, **8 are founders/co-founders** of their organisations/institutions in which they work (or have worked), one is a co-founder of an organisation dealing with the protection of children from sexual abuse which she left, and 3 have joined existing organisations.

**By position** they have (or had while working) in organisations/institutions, 9 of them (or were) in leading positions (at the time of the survey 7, one has retired and the other works in a new organization where she does not have the same function). Of the other 3, one participant is in a medium managerial position, one was not in a managerial position and

two come from their own private practice.

Furthermore, we were interested in whether according to any of their identities they are **members of a minority (marginalised social group)** given the country in which they live and work. Of the offered answers, sexual orientation (4), religious affiliation (3 - declared themselves as atheists and thus identified themselves as a minority), national and ethnic affiliation (3) were most often mentioned as minority affiliation. As for other identities that classify them as minorities, they cite economic class, but also a high sense of non-belonging to the majority with regard to race, national and other identities.

“

“I do not associate my identity with race, nationality, religion or ethnicity.” (LJB)

”

Through the interview, the question was additionally asked whether they would point out some of the mentioned identities as especially important (challenging, demanding) for their life, but also for their work. A significant part states that her experience is that by some of the identities she feels “different” in the culture/country in which she lives. Here are some of the quotes.

“

“I especially emphasize that I am a migrant worker, because I left my country and came to Zagreb because of my job and my daughter’s school. I am an immigrant.” (MS)

“I am a child from a mixed marriage, my ex-husband was Slovenian, so during the war there were insults, abusive names (mongrel) for who was against the regime. My daughter had problems at school, during the war and the awakening of nationalism. Being a lesbian is the biggest basis, as well as being a member of an NGO, it was all challenging for life and work, a basis for discrimination.” (LJB)

“My last name was a constant source of problems, because in my country it was recognised as the last name of a member of the people who are most hated in Croatia and it was specially marked (it was the last name of a former naval admiral in the Yugoslav People’s Army that later committed aggression against Croatia). During the war, as well as in the years to come, the “recognition” of my surname was one of the basic negative influences on my life, present even today. I heard that I was a “Chetnik whore”, a “Serbian whore”. With everything I do, only insults piled up, and the last name was always a good foundation! Today I am worried about my daughter. Does one who bears my last name have to go through all that?” (MM)

”

Regarding the assessment of **economic status**, differences are visible with regard to countries. A larger number of participants from the Balkan countries assess their economic status to a lesser extent as good, unlike participants from European countries, although the largest number assessed the material status as “good” (8).

Given the countries from which the participants come, we were interested in whether they **experienced war** in their own country. A total of 8 participants had such experience, 7 from the Balkans (disintegration of Yugoslavia) and one from the Netherlands, as a child. Of the 7, five were **active during the war to protect women’s human rights**, two of which were in their early 20s. The mentioned 5 participants took part in organised civil society organisations in their countries: Belgrade Anti-War Center, Women in Black, Belgrade SOS Telephone, Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade (Serbia), Center for Women Victims of War (Croatia) and Medica Zenica (Bosnia and Herzegovina).

One of the important questions in this research was **in what way the decision in their life to deal with the topic of SV came about**. All participants wrote their own little, special, personal story. It is clear from these stories that some of

them started working in the field of SV through work on the protection of women's human rights and lesbian rights, some started as part of the anti-war movement, some started working with women survivors of war rape and as a reaction to the consequences of the war that lasted, some through their daily professional work came into contact with the topic and decided that in this area something important needs to be changed and done. In the case of four of them, it is noticed that the decision came in the way "someone has to do something, so I have to".

Here are five quotes showing different motives for starting the work on SV matters.

“

"I started the topic with Dušica during the war years. Then the question arose as to what happened to the children who survived SV.... In SV, when you give a crumb, the other side to whom no one has given anything, sees it as a huge thing. Someone has to do something about it, and that means I have to. If not me, then who will? And I have the knowledge and ability to do so. I have decided to use my authority as someone who knows something, to do something." (LJB)

.....

"In my first year of the faculty, I decided to deal with the topic of sexuality. I was alone and the only one in Croatia. There were no books, no literature, no one to mentor me.

Also, at that time I worked actively as a part-time student on data entries of civilian victims of war, including war rapes. It was only then that it crystallized to me that the topic had always been important to me, in many ways. I volunteered with two colleagues to translate an English language manual on the trauma of rape...

Immediately after graduating from the faculty, I started working in the organisation Suncokret (Sunflower), as a leader of psychosocial programmes for young people about sexuality. On two occasions, I worked for a few weeks in Gašinci, the largest refugee camp for people from Bosnia and Herzegovina in Croatia. I worked with young people on the topic of sexuality. Women who survived SV and war rapes for some reason thought I could help them. And they started coming. I didn't know anything about the topic, I didn't know what I was doing. I just stood by them and trusted them.

When I returned from Gašinci to Zagreb after the second time, I told my best friend, "It's terrible for these women. No one works with them. And someone has to. So I will." A friend thought I was crazy. And I got a job at the Center for Women Victims of War, as a psychologist for working with women who survived the war. "

(MM)

”

“

"The mass rape of war in Bosnia and Herzegovina required a professional, human and female response, primarily from the aid professions, in order to establish immediate assistance to war survivors." (MS)

"My engagement to end sexual exploitation of children started back in 2002 when I had seen the film Lilja 4-ever by Lukas Moodysson. The film is based on a true story about Danguolė Rasalaitė who was trapped to Sweden and forced to sexual exploitation." (J)

“

“That is a long story. I started my ‘working life’ as a gym teacher. Around 1967 I started working for schools of a closed residential institution for “difficult” children and adolescent. Remember that in that time child (sexual) abuse and neglect was not recognized yet in the Netherlands. Especially child sexual abuse. If sexual violence was mentioned, it only concerned rape of adult women. Within some weeks, it became clear for me that many of the children and adolescents in that institute did “use” their bodies as an “instrument”, that they were not a body-soul unity, but felt their bodies as commodities. When I tried to talk with the, mostly girls, about their ‘hate’ for their bodies, they told me about the physical, and especially sexual abuse in their lives. Since nothing was known about these things in the Netherlands, I tried to find information in other countries, and especially the USA. From this time on I have dealt with sexual violence all my life.

“(F)

”

It was important for us to find out **what the sources of learning** were for them – from whom they learned, in what way they came to the knowledge and insights needed to work on the issue of SV. It can be seen from the answers that there are significant differences between the participants from whom they learned, especially considering the time when they started working on the topic of SV. At the beginning of the work with some participants, it is noticeable that the issue of SV was completely new at the level of world trends. For some participants it was new to their countries. The pioneers managed in various ways at a time when there was no professional literature, research on the topic and when there was no internet. Also, the experience of war (the war in the Balkans - disintegration of Yugoslavia) had a significant impact on the sources of learning of our participants.

Given the range of years of work on the issue of SV, learning sources are divided into two phases:

### a) Pioneering stages of learning

- interviews with colleagues from work, mostly in the early stages of learning when there was no literature or international conferences
- professional literature, scientific articles, reports
- books (e.g., when a member of the organisation travelled to the countries of Western Europe and America, had the obligation to bring specific books, the participants themselves translated book chapters and books, books that came through humanitarian convoys, books as donations)
- Experts from many countries who came to the war-torn countries of the Balkans (the Netherlands, Switzerland, America, Germany, Norway, United Kingdom)
- direct work with survivors
- supervision from the very beginning, by Dutch psychotherapists
- participation in international conferences, lectures, seminars

## b) The second phase of learning and acquiring knowledge – all of the above and in addition:

- learning from other specialised organisations/institutions from neighbouring countries, countries of the Region, the world (trainings, study visits)
- learning from colleagues at work who have already been experts in the field

Quote from a research participant who started working on the topic in 1967:

“

“In the beginning I learned a lot from the articles I could find. Later on, through talking a lot with the authors, for instance, John Conte, Barbara Boat, John Landsverk, John Leventhal, Bessel van der Kolk (neurological effects of CAN), Bruce Perry, and others. Also, I started going to the International Conference of Child and Family Maltreatment in San Diego, for the first time in 1993. Altogether I attended this Conference for 25 years on a row. Next to many other conferences in many countries. Also, I have been a member of ISPCAN from 1977 (when it was founded) till last year, which included the membership of the International Journal on the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect. I also was a member of the American Society on the Abuse of Children (APSAC) for some 15 years. But, I have written so much about the teenagers before for a reason: I LEARNED THE MOST FROM THESE TEENAGERS.” (F)

“...from colleagues who discovered the topic round about the same time, there wasn't much knowledge on the topic yet.” (JB)

.....

“We learned from various experts from women's groups from America, the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland. To a VEEERY great extent, we have educated ourselves from various books that Dušica procured from America and the Netherlands.” (LJB)

“I initially learned from the literature we received through donations during the war from friends and supporters of the project (I gathered the first information from: Courage to heal, Trauma and recovery, Healing power of play, Getting free, ...) and through numerous trainings which were made available to us as part of our project, or those organised for helpers from Bosnia and Herzegovina during and immediately after the end of the war.” (E)

”

When asked whether they **identify themselves as defenders of women's rights**, 11 of the 12 participants clearly identify themselves as defenders, with one pointing out that she is also a defender of children's rights. Only one participant has certain doubts about identifying as a defender, although she is aware that her work was basically precisely the protection of women's rights.

“

“My place is to take a stand in this society.” (C)

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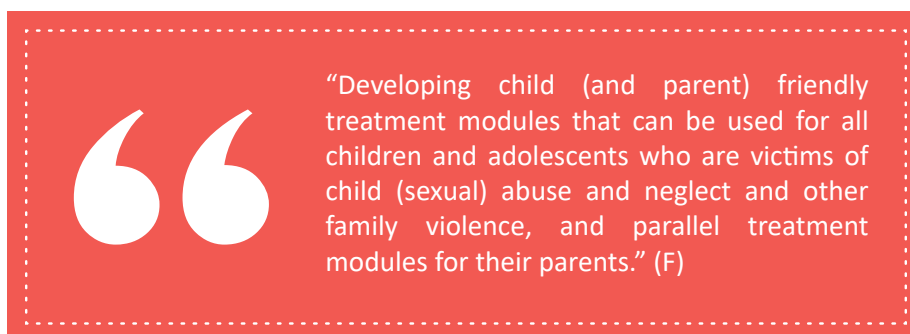
“I do not identify myself as a defender in particular and not primarily, but I think the way I have worked in this area leads in that direction.” (E)

”

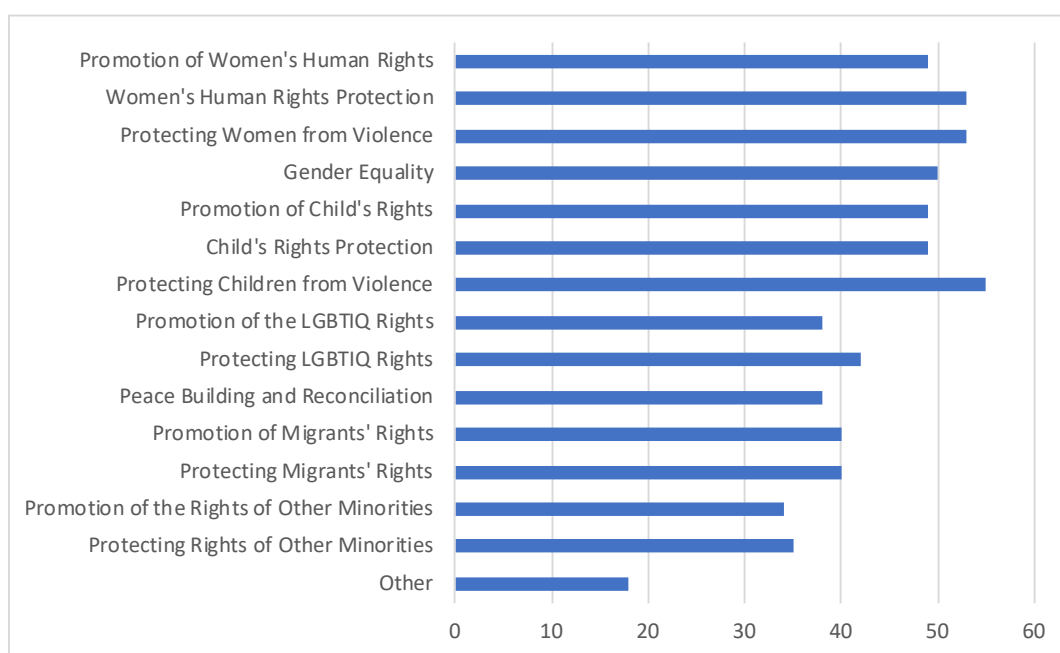
### 5.1.2. DATA ON ORGANISATIONS AND WORK OF PARTICIPANTS

We were interested in the main areas of work of organisations and institutions and private practices from which the research participants come. 15 possible answers were offered, classified according to the area of work and target groups, and the participants were able to answer on a scale from 1 to 5 (never to very often) to what extent this area is represented in their organisation/institution/practice.

**Graph 1** shows that the greatest emphasis is on the promotion of rights and direct protection of women and children, including the development of specialised services, training at the national and international level on all aspects of SV and CSA, research on SV.



Significant work has also been noted to protect the rights of minorities, including LGBTIQ persons, other minorities (e.g., Roma women, women with disabilities, women of other national minorities such as Serbs, Albanians, Egyptians), as well as migrants.

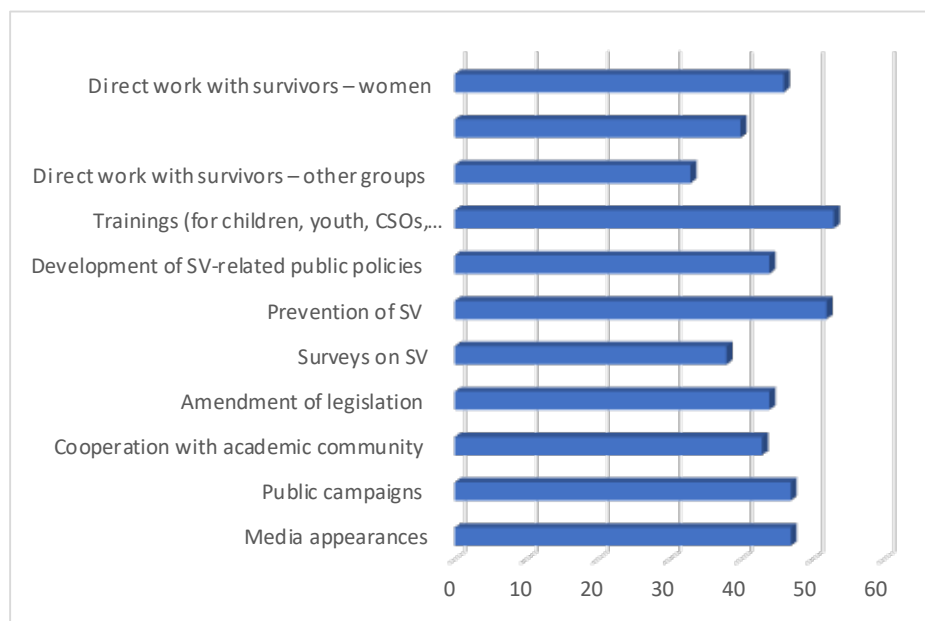


**Graph 1:** Main areas of work of organisations and institutions

In addition to the main areas of work of the organisations/institutions themselves, **we were interested in which area of work the participants are most active within their organisations/institutions.** As in the previous question, 12 possible answers were offered classified by area of work, and participants were able to answer on a scale of 1 to 5 (never to very often) as far as they deal with that area.

In the first place are education on SV for various target groups: children, youth, other CSOs, institutions and/or citizens. This is followed by prevention, direct work with women who have survived SV, public campaigns and media appearances. Legislative changes, policy development and direct work with children and youth survivors of SV are also highly represented. Research on SV is less represented, and work with other groups of survivors (LGBTIQ, men) is the least represented (Graph 2).

Two participants added under “something else” economic empowerment of women, conducting vocational training, working directly with detainees, several years of work in the private sector regarding social responsibility for corporate sexual exploitation of children.



**Graph 2: Main areas of work of research participants**

### 5.1.3. VALUE BASE

Within this subchapter, several questions were asked regarding the value base that underlies the work of the veterans who participated in the research.

All participants in the research declare themselves without hesitation as **feminists** and state how crucial feminist principles are in their work, primarily for understanding the issues of violence against women, SV and women’s inequality, and that they serve as a starting point in their work. Here are some of the quotes to the question of **how much feminist principles guide them in their work**:

“

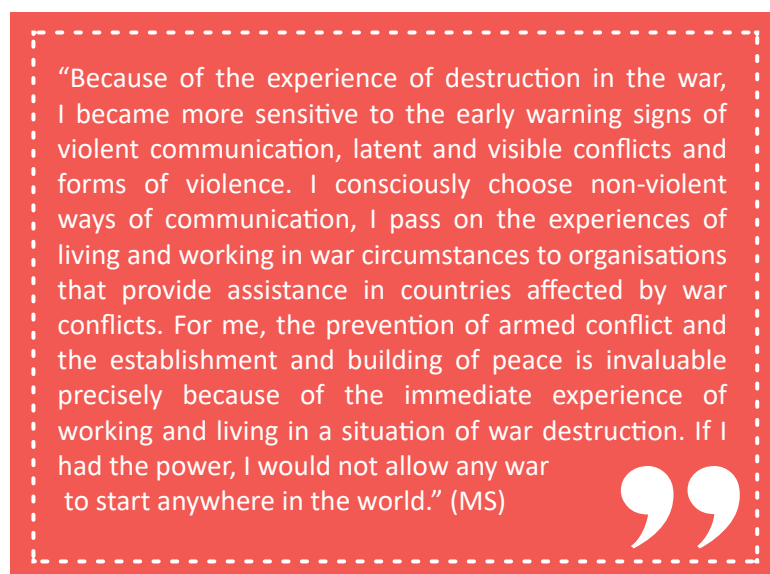
“In every step.” (MR)

“Always. I, my organisation, the membership of my board and the members of the organization believe that you cannot address sexual violence without a feminist analysis, indeed that it is unethical to provide services to survivors of sexual violence without a societal and gendered analysis of sexual violence.” (C)

”



This was followed by a question on anti-war action, which all participants described as essential, deeply connected to feminism, the struggle for human rights, the rights of the child, women's rights, as the foundations of their work and action.



Closely related to the previous two issues is **the importance and role of anti-fascism**. Again, all participants point out that anti-fascism is an essential part of their value base, a part of life, closely linked to anti-war and peace activities.



Participants were asked to list **three key principles in working with SV survivors**. Numerous principles have been cited, although large overlaps are noticeable. According to the frequency, these principles can be reduced to several common denominators: trust in the testimony of women and child survivors of SV and CSA, interventions centered on survivor of SV (survivor-centered intervention), respect for survivor of SV, surviving SV it is not a private matter, recovery is possible and SV is the most serious crime (major crime).



## 5.2. THE SOCIAL CHANGES WOMEN DEFENDERS BROUGHT ABOUT THROUGH THEIR WORK AND THE KEY WORK OUTPUTS

A significant number of participants in this study were pioneers in the field of SV ever, and some were pioneers in their own countries. As can be seen from the previous chapter, the motives for how they started dealing with SV are different, but with one common feature - a strong need to respond to the lack of a systematic approach and work with SV survivors and to work to combat SV.

Years of dedicated and dedicated work have led to significant changes in the field of SV. Some in their countries, some in the Balkans, some at the world level.

In this chapter, we asked them about the key changes in the field of SV that they want to highlight, and which have come about through many years of work. We were interested in what they are especially proud of, as well as whether they were personally and/or their organisations/institutions rewarded for their work.

Participants were asked to indicate what they would single out as **key places and successes of their work** so far in the field of SV. **Two main approaches** can be observed in the answers - part responded from personal experience and perception, and part exhaustively stated significant changes.

**The first group** of answers most often states general experiences of personal contribution to the problem of SV and significant changes in the field of SV that have resulted from their own work and efforts. These answers are related to the efforts and efforts to open the problem of SV as a relevant topic in the country, as well as work on opening the first services, developing public policies, influencing the relevant institutions, but also changing awareness of the SV issue:



**The second group** of answers lists professional successes, which are divided into several basic categories:

### a) Intervention

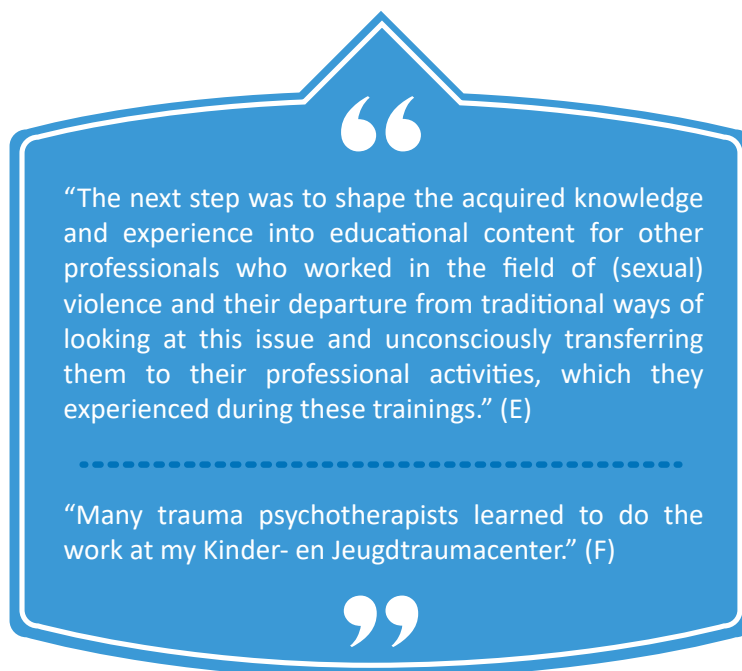
In this category, the establishment of **(first) specialised services** was emphasised, which over time became the leaders in their countries and at the same time, for a long time were (remained) the only ones as such. As part of these services, a large number of women and child survivors of SV received psychological counselling and psychotherapy. In them, the first **self-help groups** were developed in accordance with feminist politics, as well as **pioneering and innovative psychotherapeutic models** in working with women and child survivors of SV.

It is important to note that at least 5 participants began their work and the process of opening services in the war, surrounded by war destruction in the Balkans. At that time, there was generally not much literature on the topic of SV, nor was there the internet. Additionally, professional literature and specialist knowledge were a complete rarity

in war-affected areas. Coping with veterans, mutual intertwining as well as the help of experts from many European countries and America who decided to come to war-torn areas and selflessly share their experiences and knowledge with women from the Balkans is invaluable.

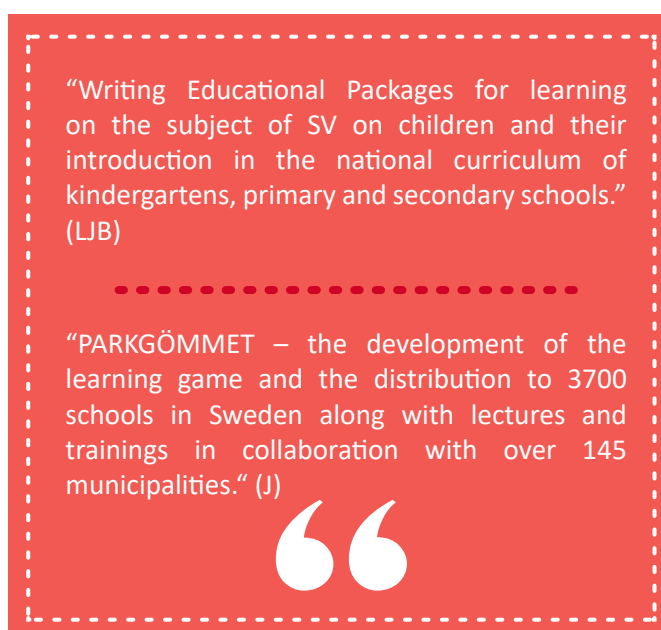
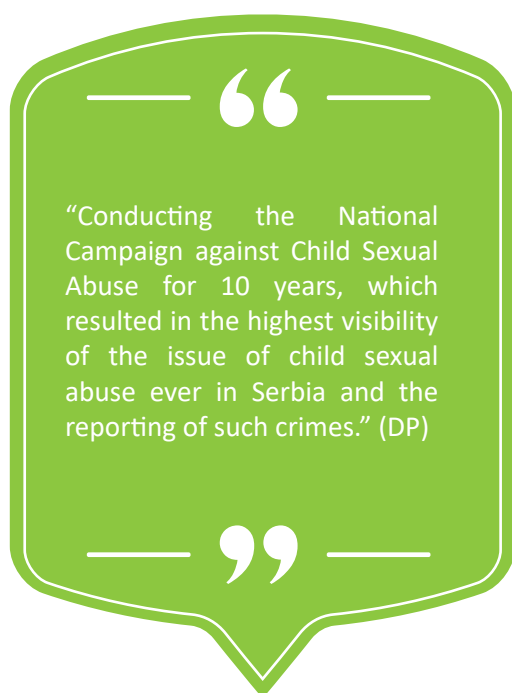
Years of learning and personal development have led to the development of organisations/institutions that have credibility and legitimacy not only among SV survivors, but also among representatives of institutions and other CSOs.

Direct work and interventions were the basis for the next step - **the development and implementation of specialised educational models** in the field of domestic violence, sexual violence, child sexual abuse and diversity issues, as well as **the development of professional literature (books, manuals, etc.)**, which had an extremely important impact on generations of new professionals from different professions, but also on children, teachers, parents/guardians...



## b) Prevention

Another extremely important place of success is the development of SV prevention programmes for children and youth, conducting public campaigns and the like. Here are some examples:



### c) Legislative changes

A significant proportion of participants recognise the importance of their work on changes to SV-related legislation in their country. Examples are:

“

“Abolition of the statute of limitations for criminal offenses of sexual abuse of children in Serbia. This is a legal solution that only the United Kingdom until that moment had in Europe.” (DP)

.....  
“Successful advocacy for legal solutions which determined the status of civilian victims of the war for war rape survivors within the Act on Social protection in Bosnia and Herzegovina and participation in drafting the Act and determining the status of victims of sexual violence in the war according to Act on rights of victims of sexual violence in the war in Croatia.” (MS)

”

“

“Initiating and participating in several criminal law reforms, e.g. the introduction of marital rape as a qualifying form of rape, the abolition of the criminal offence of “sexual intercourse without consent” and the introduction of a new concept of the criminal offence of rape by which rape also includes every inconsistent sexual intercourse or sexual action equalised with it (so even when there is no use of force or threat on the life and body of the raped person or persons close to her), further changes in the procedural preconditions for prosecution for the criminal offence of sexual harassment are ongoing.... And we still have so much planned ...” (MM)

”

“

“Amendments of the legislation: the trafficking legislation, child pornography legislation, the extraterritorial legislation and so on.” (J)

.....  
“Establishing the definition of consent within the law (2017 Act).” (C)

”

### d) Public policy development

In this area, too, the participants cite exceptional changes in their countries, which are the result of long-term and dedicated work. These are changes that have a long-lasting positive effect not only on the country in which they were adopted, but also on neighbouring countries, but also on progress in combating SV and providing assistance and support to survivors at a wider level.

“Based on the alarming findings of the first National Study on the Prevalence of Sexual Abuse of Children, conducted by Incest Trauma Center – Belgrade in primary and secondary schools, we recommended the Ministry of Education to develop a Strategy in Education for the Prevention of Sexual Abuse of Children. 90% of the text of the Strategy was written by us, at the invitation of the Ministry, and in November 2015 it was adopted by the Government of the Republic of Serbia and together with the Minister of Education we presented it to members of the Serbian Parliament.” (DP)

”

“

“A special unit at the police dealing with Swedish traveling sex offenders abroad. A compulsory training on sexual exploitation of children (csec) for judges. A special unit of specially trained national prosecutors working with CSE. Resources tripled to the police unit working against sexual abuse online. The blocking of child sexual abuse material, a collaboration between the national police and the largest internet service providers. The financial coalition – a coalition with the majority of the financial institutions, national police, Ministry of Finance and ECPAT aiming to stop the misuse of the financial systems when it comes to CSE.” (J)

“We encouraged development, made the first draft, participated in every step of development, led the process and finally lobbied for the adoption of the Protocol on the procedure in the case of SV in Croatia. It was adopted by the Government of the Republic of Croatia and is binding on all institutions.” (MM)

“Designing and coordinating the campaign “For dignity of survivors “which contributed that for the first time the status of civilian victims of the war was legally recognised for survivors of war rape in Bosnia and Herzegovina.” (MS)

“Transforming sexual health education to include sexual violence prevention by mainstreaming consent as sexual violence prevention.” (C)

”

### e) Research and impact on the academic community

Participants designed, organized and conducted pioneering research on the topic of SV, some first in general and some right in their countries or the Region. Some of them came from the position of the academic community, and some from the CSO, and it is noticeable that some of the participants continuously and in parallel combined the experiences, knowledge and practice of the CSO and the knowledge and insights of the academic community. Active members of the academic community transferred experiences to the CSO sector or as members of organisations were active as pioneers and lecturers in introducing the topic of SV to faculties. Through their work, they have influenced generations of students, both graduate and postgraduate levels (MA, PhD). After lectures given at colleges, a significant number of female students applied to volunteer at CSOs and joined the women’s movement.

“

“...and did a lot of research on the topic. Several of my former VU students did their PH.D. on child (sexual) abuse and neglect and family violence, and are still working as researchers in the field.” (F)

“Organising and conducting the first pioneering research in the country, but also in the Region, some of which are still unfortunately the only ones. Introduction of the course “Psychology of Sexuality” in 2 departments of psychology (taught for 18 years)... Mentoring the preparation of seminars and diploma theses... reviews of professional and scientific texts that are about (or touch on) SV.” (MM)

”

“

“Transforming sexual violence research from a highly neglected discipline to a subject with considerable academic status.” (C)

“The co-founding of an academic consortium where research takes place on trauma treatment and the multidisciplinary approach on child abuse and neglect.” (JB)

”

## f) Other forms of work

In addition to all the above, there are a number of other forms of work that are difficult to classify, and which have had a long-term and important impact on changes in relation to the topic of SV. This primarily refers to networking and the development of strong cooperation of all relevant actors in the reporting and processing of SV with services and the academic community.

“

“Establishment of the Network of Cooperation between Governmental Institutions and Non-Governmental Organisations, which brought together more than 30 experts from all relevant fields of work, related to SV.” (MM)

”

“

“We initiated, founded and managed networks that were the first of their kind in Serbia, we know that they were the first and geographically wider...

Starting in 2001, for six years we ran the first multidisciplinary network in Serbia, which consisted of 7 women's NGOs, 2 key police departments, a section of social workers, 3 health clinics, 7 homes for children without parental care... We all together agreed that it should be called the Network of Trust - that we deserve the trust of survivors and for the development of trust among ourselves. She has been a model of cooperation for many since then...

Then, in 2007, we initiated and formed the Women's Human Rights Defenders' Coalition, which consisted of leaders of 26 women's groups from our country... Then, many years later, in 2017, came the National Network of Schools and Kindergartens against Sexual Violence as “a cherry on top” so many beautiful long-term collaborations with dear colleagues from education. They gave us the privilege to teach them and we learned a lot from them, and we applied all that together for years in preventive activities. In the end, we created Educational Packages together, which officially introduced the topic of sexual violence in the national curriculum of kindergartens, primary and secondary schools.”

“In the end, we were persistent in founding and reviving the European Women's Network against Sexual Violence.” (DP)

”

Furthermore, continuous direct assistance in the establishment and development of women's CSOs led by women members of marginalised social groups and working on issues of marginalised social groups is mentioned.

“For us at the Incest Trauma Center, it was an honour to be invited to be allies in the founding and directly participate in developing concepts and work strategies for the first Roma women's organisation, the first group for women with disabilities, the first lesbian organisation... and then we held the first trainings for them... Among other things, in addition to my regular job, at the invitation of the organisation for lesbian human rights, I established and ran a psychological counselling Center for women of lesbian and bisexual orientation for five years. It was an honour they expressed that the counselling Center would be on the premises of the Incest Trauma Center.” (DP)

There are also two exceptional films in this category:

- The film by Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade “It's new that I was abused?” (2009), whose value is still invaluable and for which the organisation in 2010 received the State Award for “a special contribution to raising public awareness of the unacceptability of sexual and gender-based violence”. This film is still used today as an educational tool in the Region. (LJB and DP)
- MS participated as a consultant in the screenplay of the Bosnian film “Grbavica” about a woman who survived a war rape and gave birth to and raised a child. The film has won 12 awards, including the Golden Bear - Best Film on the 56th Berlin International Film Festival (2006) and two nominations (Sundance Film Festival - Grand Jury Prize and European Film Award - Best Film and Best Actress).

We were interested in what the research participants were **especially proud** of in their work, and what should not have been the most important achievements for the organisation, but for them personally. Here are some of the key quotes:

“

“I am proud of everything I have done.” (DP)

“What I survived, what is behind me is a completely good and strong organisation, which I raised to its feet from nothing...” (MM)

”

“The fact that we have managed to remain independent in our work, that we have never given up our principles, standards and ethics, regardless of political state torture or lack of money... I am proud of my now grown clients (they came to the Center as little girls), with whom I am in contact, and they are now students, mothers, teachers, beauticians, and they hold their lives in their hands well enough.” (LJB)

“

“

“I am especially proud of the Psychosocial and Psychological Assistance to Women and Children Victims of Violence and Sexual Abuse programme that we have developed over the last ten years and which was verified last year by the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities and thus co-financed at the following seven years by the ministry.

Then, more than 10 years ago, we started alarming on incompetent practices related to court experts’ work in this area (by organizing conferences, workshops, open letters, door-to-door visits to the Ministry of Justice). The Ministry of Justice made a certain progress but still on the concrete level it did not change much. However, it got louder and louder in public that methods have to be changed and follow the latest perspectives of child friendly judiciary.

Last year, as part of that program, I did an interview with a woman, who survived 14 years of sexual abuse by her grandfather. For me personally, this was a great success, in terms of a year of regular work with a survivor, who wanted to help as an activist with her experience. Following the philosophy of work not to “deliver” survivors, we recorded an anonymous interview... The survivor had control over all steps taken as part of the awareness campaign, and of course during the recording of the interview...” (MPL)

”

“

“I had the choice to stay in the war-torn country and dedicate my professional, human and women’s engagement to women who survived war rapes. I think that because of that I became a better person, that I took responsibility for the situation in my community and learned from experience that with my work, telling the truth, perseverance and invested love I can change a difficult situation for the better.” (MS)

“My first project within the field of CSEC which I made on a voluntary basis. It was a collaboration with the European Law Student Association (the world’s largest organisation for law students and young lawyers) during ten years - which resulted in thousands of young lawyers learning and taking actions against CSEC.

The ECPAT Hotline – I started and managed the ECPAT Hotline for 10 years. The hotline received thousands of reports yearly about CSEC – reports which would not have been reported otherwise.

The learning game PARKGÖMMET due to the wonderful results. The game is a concrete preventive tool making it easier for schools to address CSEC. The national police have also said that the learning game facilitates their crime prevention work in this regard.” (J)

”

“

“I led a campaign to hold back the movement to lower the age of consent, it involved starting from a minority position, building the analysis, convincing a wide range of allies and then turning public opinion.

The job has a real meaning. I feel privileged.” (C)

“That, despite a lot ‘negativity’ I succeeded in putting child sexual abuse on the agenda.

And that the Kinder- en Jeugdtraumacenter I founded is still THE place to be for children (and their parents) victimised by sexual and family violence.” (F)

”

”

“Helping people move on with their lives. There is a life and there CAN be joy again after the trauma.” (MR)

“The trust of children and their families.” (JB)

“



In the end of this chapter we wish to particularly emphasise that the women defenders of women's rights that took part in this survey, their work, as well as organisation/institution that they established and/or in which they work are recognised by the national and international public.

So 5 participants were awarded (24) or nominated (4) personally as many as 28 times.

7 organisations/institutions in which the defenders work have been awarded (18) or nominated (2) at least 20 times.

Some of the defenders did not receive an official award, but their work has been recognised in other ways.

“

“No medals or that kind of things but a lot of appreciation and respect and a lot of invitations to be a member in the board of all kind of innovative organisations on the approach of family violence (that I gladly accepted after my retirement).” (JB)

”

## INDIVIDUAL AWARDS FOR WORK

**5 women have been nominated or individually awarded – 28 times**

### DP:

1. 2009 – 2015: Every year in December, selected by the **Serbian daily “Blic”** appeared on the **annual list of “200 most powerful women in Serbia”** as a *spokesperson against Childhood Sexual Assault* (this list was issued until 2015).
2. 2013: Appeared in the **1st Lexicon “WHO IS WHO in Serbia”** published by the state (*The Institute for Textbooks*).
3. 2016: **US World of Children Award Honoree – Protection Award** (The US media often refer to World of Children Award as the Nobel Prize for child advocacy; the 1st winner of Protection Award).
4. 2017: Nominated **by the Delegation of the European Commission to Serbia** for **the European Parliament’s Sakharov Prize**.
5. 2017: **Recipient of Fulbright Award 2017**. »Leader 2017: For professional accomplishments and contribution to positive social changes during 2016 in the field of support provision to child and adult survivors of sexual assault and work on prevention of violence against children through educational programs.«

### MM:

1. **Fierce Women WoW Award** (VoX Feminae) for individual work in the field of SV and Women’s Room (2020)
2. Award of the **Croatian Psychological Society “MARULIĆ: FIAT PSYCHOLOGIA”** as public recognition for exceptional contribution to and promotion of Croatian applied psychology
3. Award of the **City Assembly of Zagreb “ZAGREPČANKA GODINE”** (Zagreb Female Citizen of the Year) for affirmation of women and protection of women’s human rights (March 2010)
4. **Recognition of the Croatian Association for Protection and Advancement of Mental Health of the Croatian Medical Association** “for general contribution to the protection and advancement of mental health” (February 2010)
5. **THE GAEA FOUNDATION Award** – Sea Change Residencies for activism (2007)

### MPL:

1. For the 2015, country’s best-selling **national daily newspaper “DELO”** (eng. LABOUR) which has its enclosure, **women’s magazine ONA** (eng. SHE), awarded me for my work as **“ONU 365”** (THE WOMAN 365); the selection committee chose me among 50 female nominees in Slovenia coming from various fields of work and life.
2. In 2020 I was **nominated by “DELO” and “ONA”** alongside another 9 women for **“THE WOMAN OF THE DECADE”** for my work.

### MS:

1. I was **one of the 1000 Nobel Peace Prize women nominees** from all over the world
2. I have been nominated for the Evening Post Seal (Večernjakov pečat)
3. I have been picked as one of the **Start Review’s “Magnificent Seven”**
4. I have been made **Honorary Citizen of San Diego**
5. I earned a full **US Government Ron Brown scholarship** for postgraduate studies on the International Trauma Study Programme at NY University

## F:

1. 1990: **Award of the Feminist Organisation** “Man-Vrouw-Maatschappij”
2. 1994: **Medal of Honor** of the **Stichting Steunfonds Medisch Kleuterdagverblijven**
3. 1996: **“Friend of Polish Children” Medal**, Polen
4. 2000: **Award** of the **Stichting Medisch Kleuterdagverblijven**
5. 2000: **The Henry Kempe Ehrenurkunde**, Stuttgart, Germany
6. 2002: **Publication Price Steunfonds Medisch Kleuterdagverblijven**
7. 2004: I was awarded by **The Dutch Queen (Beatrix)** and became an **“Officer on the Order of Oranje-Nassau”**
8. 2009: I got The **“Jaap Christoffels Medal”** for my work in the field of diagnostics and treatment of traumatized children
9. 2010: **Certificate of Recognition and Appreciation** for many years of national and international leadership; attendance, promotion as an ambassador, and participation as a faculty member at the conference; and working together to care for abused children. San Diego Child Maltreatment Conference
10. 2012: The **“Dries van Dantzig Medal”** for my work in Child Abuse and Neglect
11. 2016: **ISPCAN Distinguished Career Award** 2016, Calgary, Canada

## HAS YOUR ORGANISATION BEEN AWARDED FOR ITS WORK?

**7 organisations have received or been nominated for 20 awards**

## AWARDS/RECOGNITIONS/NOMINATIONS:

### Incest Trauma Center - Belgrade (Serbia):

1. State **Excellence Award** for “special contribution to awareness-raising concerning the unacceptability of sexual and gender-based violence” (*The Ministry of Social Policy of Serbia, 2010*);
2. 2011 finalist and 2012 recipient of the **award “REWARD”** of the *National PR Society of Serbia* in the category “Communication in the non-profit sector”; note: ITC has been the only competitor that in both aforementioned years created and implemented its Campaign on our own, without hiring a marketing agency;
3. Appointment by the *Council of Europe in Strasbourg* as the **official national partner** in the *Campaign against child sexual abuse for the Republic of Serbia*; the Campaign was entitled **“ONE in FIVE”**, based on the Lanzarote Convention (according to the signed agreement, in the course of the entire Campaign, 2012-2015);
4. The **official song “Stop the Silence!”** of the ITC Campaign in Serbia was handed over in 2012 to the Council of Europe in Strasbourg and was **designated as the official song of “ONE in FIVE” Campaign at the European level** to be used by the member-states;
5. Starting from **March 2017**, ITC received appointment **to act in the capacity of the Country CAN Partner of The International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect** (*An ISPCAN Country CAN Partner*);
6. Both in March 2016 and March 2017, ITC was **nominated for The With and For Girls Award**. It is an initiative of the *With and For Girls Collective* which is a group of eight funders: EMpower, Mama Cash, NoVo Foundation, Plan UK, The Global Fund for Children, Nike Foundation, Comic Relief and Stars Foundation, whose aim is to identify and recognize strong grassroots organizations working WITH and FOR girls through their annual Awards. The procedure allows for nominations to be made only by trusted referral partners because the Nominee has demonstrated effective practice in creating a supportive and empowering environment for girls;
7. In March 2018, ITC **received the FEMINIST RECOGNITION FOR THE ACT OF RESISTANCE IN THE PUBLIC DOMAIN** “for the work on creating Educational Packs for learning about the CSA issue and the act of resistance against veto on implementation of Educational Packs.” The Feminist Recognition was awarded **by the BeFem**, Serbia.

## Women's Room (Croatia):

**Fierce Women WoW Award (VoX Feminae)** for individual work in the field of SV and the work of Women's Room (2020)

## Association SOS Helpline for Women and Children - Victims of Violence (Slovenia):

1. 2015: **Medal of Merit** – President of Slovenia Borut Pahor awarded the SOS Helpline with a medal for their 25-year systemic, professional and committed assistance to women and children victims of violence.
2. 2012: In June 2012 Head of Police Janko Goršek decorated the SOS Helpline with a **Brass Police Badge** for cooperation in strengthening safety
3. 2009: **Ljubljana Capital Award** – Mayor Zoran Janković awarded the Plaque on behalf of the City of Ljubljana for 20 years of humanitarian volunteering – for selfless assistance to victims of violence, through which members of this society have made an immeasurable contribution to the social security of citizens of Ljubljana, both male and female.
4. 2003: **A Certificate of Appreciation** for goodness, nobility and philanthropic endeavours was awarded to the SOS Helpline in 2003 by the Ministry of Labour, Family and Social Affairs and Magazine Naša žena (Our Woman) under the auspices of Štefka Kučan.
5. 2000: **The City of Ljubljana Plaque** – Mayoress Vika Potočnik presented the SOS Helpline with the Plaque on behalf of the City of Ljubljana.
6. 1999: **Brass decoration** – the Ministry of the Interior awarded this recognition to the SOS Helpline in 1999 for their significant success in ensuring safety.

## Medica Zenica (Bosnia and Hercegovina):

Medica Zenica Organisation has been awarded the **Jerusalem Women in Black peace recognition**

## Rape Crisis Network Ireland:

1. **Rethink Ireland grant** to do innovative work on Covid adaption
2. In 2019, the **annual 'Jim Kemmy Thirst for Justice award'** from the Labour Party

## Kinder- en Jeugdtraumacenter (The Netherlands):

2000: **Innovation Price** (€ 10.000, Jan Brouwer Fund) for the development of a treatment method for traumatized young children

## Jeugdzorgadvies and Traumacenter (The Netherlands):

**The reward to form the Academic Working Place** on the approach to child abuse and neglect, including scientific research. It was received by the organization which granted funds for research and development, amounting to EUR 1.3 million, on behalf of the Ministry of Health.

### 5.3. THE RISKS FOR WOMEN DEFENDERS AND SOURCES OF THEIR PERSONAL STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY

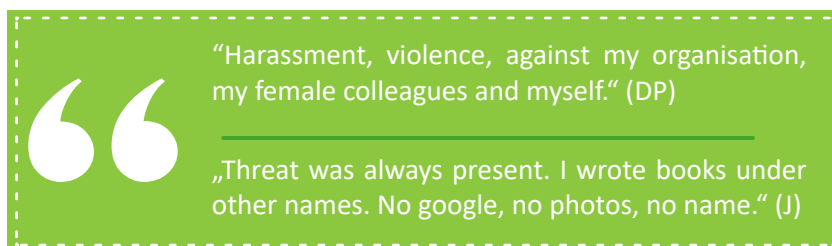
The work in the field of human rights protection entails a significant level of risk from various forms of discrimination and violence, especially in transitioning countries with young democracies, with predominant authoritarian regimes/ or with strong right-wing options in the government and/or in the parliament.

We inquired into what the defenders saw as potential or actual threats and jeopardizing for themselves or for persons close to them, as a consequence of the work they are committed to. We were interested in the way the defenders saw potential or real risks and danger for themselves and persons close to them. Then, their perception of protection by competent state institutions, if any and to what extent. Besides, it was important to find out from close colleagues within the organisation/institution and from other organisations working on protection of (women's) human rights.

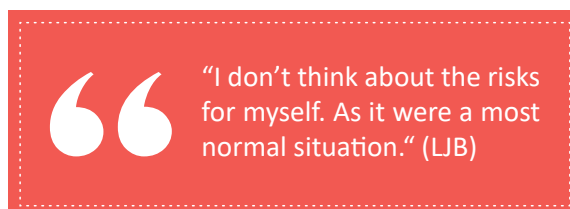
#### 5.3.1. THE RISKS RELATED TO THE WORK OF WOMEN DEFENDERS

First of all, the question poised was **what types of risk stemming out of their work** they identified for themselves, for the organisation they act within, as well for the persons close to them. The answers are grouped in three categories. While some of them clearly recognise and list the risks, others internalise the risks, although aware of them, and some think there is no actual risk, referring to physical violence only. For each of the categories, we provide a quote below.

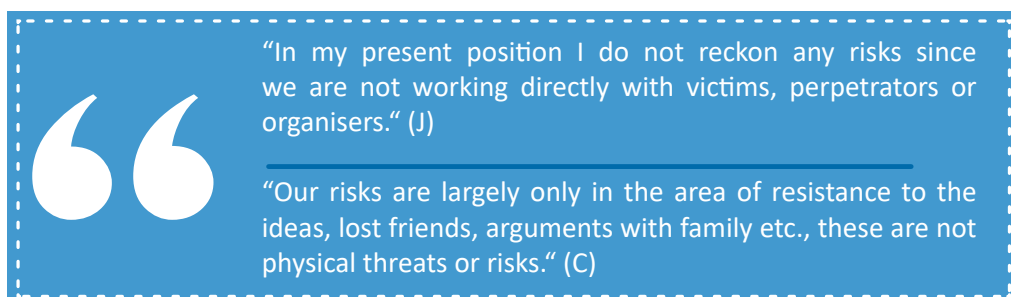
##### a) Risk identification in all areas:



##### b) Internalising the risks, although aware of them:



##### c) Perception that there are no real risks, because they do a not so exposed job:



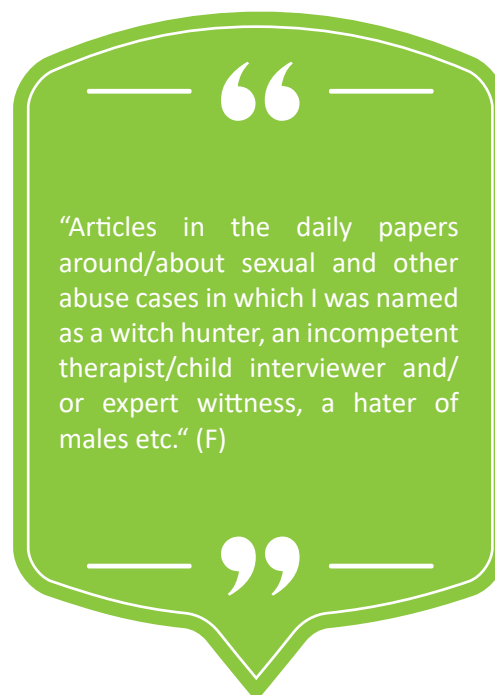
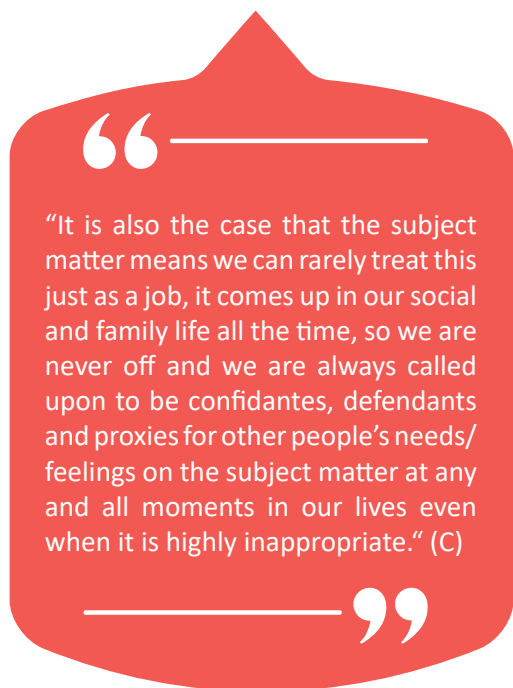
The women defenders who named the risks, according to the question, most often did classify them into three categories: risks for themselves, for their organisation and for the persons closest to them. However, it is visible that the said risks often overlap in some dimensions and it is impossible to draw clear partition lines.

##### a) The risk identified for themselves

The most frequently mentioned risks are simultaneously the already experienced forms of violence assessed as likely to be repeated any time. Some of the risks refer to the general work on the SV issue or direct work with survivors, such

as constant and endless struggle, work without an end in the horizon, exposure to the lack of understanding, burnout in work, secondary traumatising, the influence of work on own everyday life, being outcast from the community and/or close persons).

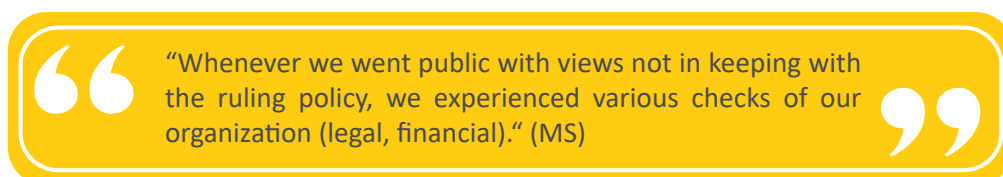
Other risks named are specific forms of harassment and violence, by various offenders, such as: warning (letters with threatening tone), anonymous intimidating letters, devaluation of work and knowledge, direct and indirect threats from nationalist organisations, telephone interception, summons to police for interview after travelling abroad, unannounced entry into the premises and informative interview by the police and national security service, threats from offenders of violence in high positions of power, unexpected aggressive visits at home by CSA offenders, public persecution, “my child being kidnapped”.



## **b) The risks they identified for the organization**

The most frequently named risks refer to the lack of understanding for the work, importance and role of the organization, through underestimation of their work, discreditation of the organisation and employees individually, lack of funds, permanent problem of ensuring the necessary funds for the organization to survive and carry on with their work, being smothered by bureaucracy required by the donors.

Part of the participants named specific examples of threats and violence, such as: spoken messages and subtle ethnically motivated threats, interception of phone communication, unannounced entry into premises and informative questioning by the police, threats by the offenders, unexpected aggressive visits to the office or outside the office or at home by perpetrators or organisers of sexual exploitation of children, intimidation of the organization, inflicting damage to the organization’s reputation by the offenders and politicians and pressure exerted by politicians (both male and female).



Some of the participants named specific problems, related to the life in smaller communities, where it is challenging to ensure the security of helpers, since everything is well known and secrecy and anonymity are hard to keep, both for the organization’s address and for the defenders’ names.

### c) The risks they identify for their close persons

The defenders are aware of the risks their close persons are exposed to, precisely for their work. The risks vary in levels, from bringing their families and close friends into connection with their area of work, due to which they are exposed to derision, but also to threats and violence, by various offenders. Most often they refer to family members, like children, parents, etc.



“My mother and daughter have also experienced ethnically motivated threats.” (MS)

„A lot of risks!!!!!!! For myself and my loved ones.

1) In cases of child sexual abuse in which it was decided that a child has to be taken out of the home: threats that the parents would abduct my children. Several times. In one of these cases I even had police protection for several weeks around our house.

2) Telephone stalking. For a long time I have forbidden my young children to answer the telephone (keep in mind that in the beginning of my work on CSA we only had landlines, no mobiles).“ (F)



Further on, we wanted to know whether the defenders had **a feeling of being protected by relevant national authorities and institutions** in doing their work as defenders and in the work of their organizations. It is conspicuous that the Western European participants had a significantly higher sense of protection, although not entirely present either. A quote may best describe this:



„Largly yes, but I wouldn't trust them to have our back on all matters.“ (C)

On the other hand, the participants from the Balkan countries do not have such a feeling at all. They believe that national authorities and institutions not only fail to recognize the importance and role of defenders, but by their inaction they encourage violence, by their media appearances and comments on the work of the defenders' organizations. They agree that the question of protecting the rights of human rights' defenders is not recognized in the legislation or national policies in any country of the region. They state that there have never been actions in order to raise awareness of the issue, that there are no public policies and, least of all, a specific form of protection that would be provided for the defenders, with risks extremely growing or violence already taking place.

A lower number of participants said they had a certain feeling of being protected by the institutions they closely cooperated with, but that it is not the question of actual system protection, but rather on an individual basis. Also, a participant stated that in her country, after the murders of women social workers, the legislation has been amended and the category of “official persons” expanded, for the first time including the defenders running services for survivors, which made violence against them qualified act of violence (violence against official person). But, from her experience, that is just in theory for the time being, still not visible in practice.



“

“There are incessant attacks in the country, prosecution, threats against the NGOs working on protection of human rights, women’s human rights, violence against children and women, so I can’t imagine that there could be any protection. The state enables any citizen to freely attack you, verbally or physically ...” (LJB)

”

Most defenders **are familiar with some international documents, mechanisms and institutes dealing with protection of human rights’ defenders** (8). They mostly emphasize (by order of frequency):

- UN Declaration on Rights and Duties of Individuals, Groups and National Authorities on Improvement and Protection of Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1999.)
- The Council of Europe’s Human Rights Commissioner with human rights’ defender within the remit (since 1997), special Declaration (2008.) in order to reinforce the Commissioner’s competences
- The European Union’s Guide on human rights’ defenders (2004 and revision in 2008).
- UN Resolution on Protection of Human Rights’ Defenders (2013)<sup>5</sup>
- CEDAW Committee for Elimination of Violence against Women
- UN Special Rapporteur on the situation with human rights’ defenders
- UN Special Rapporteur on the situation with human rights’ defenders
- Frontline Defenders
- JASS
- Other (mentioned once each): instruments against torture, Convention on the Rights of the Child, Istanbul Convention Committee, Lanzarote Committee, PROMISE golden rules and European Family Justice Center Alliance

In this, most of them stated that in their respective countries **there is no special form of protection for defenders** (5) or they do not know if it does (5). Only two participants (Ireland and Sweden) stated that there are protection mechanisms, but they emphasized the UN Convention, not any national documents or the European Court of Human Rights.

To the question of knowing **any experience with protection by competent national authorities and institutions for defenders** in their respective countries, none of the participants stated that they were familiar with such an example. Moreover, one named an opposite example:

“

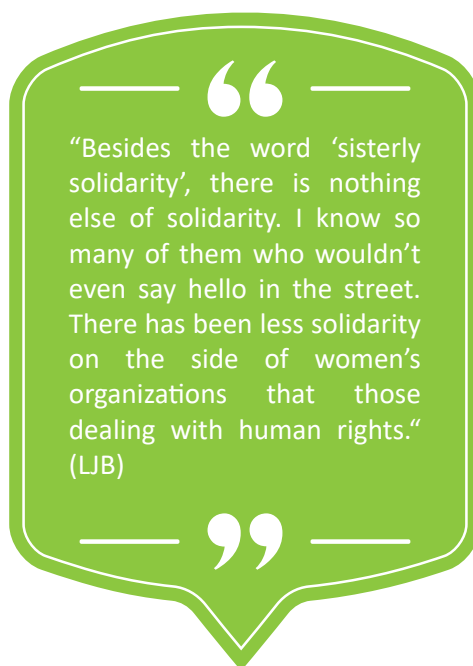
“Precisely the opposite, I know of activists apprehended to police hearing after rallies or because they transported migrants.” (MS)

”

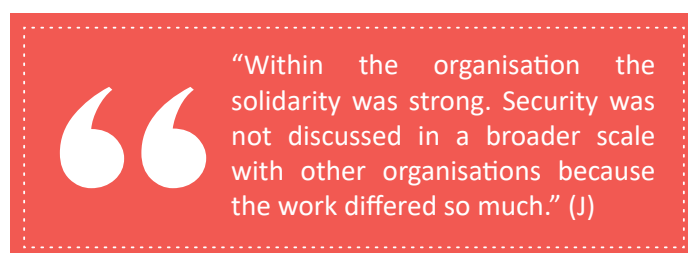
<sup>5</sup> [https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181](https://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/181)



Besides the protection of rights and position of defenders by the international community and at the national level, we wanted to know about their experience of **solidarity inside the circles of their work** when they were exposed to risks. Half the participants stated there was no solidarity, which they ascribed not only to the political climate negative towards civil society organizations, instigating rivalry, but also to the lack of donors ready to invest in networking and higher level of the sense of solidarity.



A part stated that they can feel solidarity only inside their own organization (4).



To the question of what **the actual experience was when they needed support** of their colleagues at work and from similar organizations, most participants said they didn't have such a situation, 4 of them said they got support within their own organization, from close colleagues and, sometimes, external colleagues, but broader than that. A respondent said that she had never asked for support.



### 5.3.2. THE SOURCES OF PERSONAL POWER AND VULNERABILITY OF WHRD

One of the important questions to the defenders was **what gave them strength to work on suppression of SV**. The participants gave several answers, **grouped into 5 basic topics**, from direct work with women and child survivors of SV, via the role of the issue itself, to the importance of support from close persons.

### a) Direct work with women and child survivors of SV

In this group, most women emphasized precisely the role and value of direct work with child survivors of SV and women survivors of SV, their strength, complex history and recovery. The importance and perception of their progress in recovery and towards better quality of life, the strength to survive and flexibility of psychological resources they have are the source of power and inspiration, as well as each individual case with a successful outcome. Helping changing peoples lives.

“What gives me strength is the sense that the needs of victims are large and permanent, with only few helpers and other available services in this field. I take the work in this field for my responsibility and area where I gladly share my knowledge, experience and engagement.” (MS)

„The children I witnessed in the documented sexual abuse material every day during 10 years.“ (J)

„Being a therapist and working with victimized children. That brings a lot of joy and fulfillment. And, being able to learn young therapists to be a good traumatherapist, and helping to combat sexual violence also gives a lot of strength.“ (F)

### b) Specific area of work on SV

The second place belongs to the work on SV precisely, which for most participants means much more than work – their life path and mission. They emphasize the inexhaustible persona motivation for the issue, deep and intrinsic, and some of them also stressed the importance of belief that it can be different and better.

“The issue. It is so clearly a wrong that is so often excused and overlooked. I enjoy it intellectually as the issue is insidious and incredibly politically embedded in our culture so it is always a challenge to peel back the layers and see it and have it be seen.” (C)

### c) Organizations of work and networking

A significant part of participants emphasized the importance of the organization they work for, their colleagues who share the same values and commitment, mutual respect, appreciation and support of the colleagues. Part of participants emphasized connections, not only inside their own organization, but networking, formal and informal, like the European Women’s Network against Sexual Violence.

### d) Support from close persons

The next group of replies is related to the role and importance of support they have for their work from their partners, as well as close friends. Some participants stated that it is very important for them that their partners work in the same field and thus there is mutual understanding and great trust in work. They stressed the role of love, support, peace and strength that is necessary for continued work.

To the sub-question of the support the defenders have in their work from their close persons (family members, close friends), we see its exceptional importance: 6 defenders stated they had tangible and specific support, but only in some cases, while 6 stated that they had actual action support of close persons who would stand by them in any situation.

“And, very important: having a stable relationship, a partner who understands that you are working (too) hard, and understands that this work is of utmost importance.” (F)

### e) Other

In this category, there are individual replies of participants on their sources of strength. Thus, they named the results of their work, achievements, permanent work on own growth, interventions, supervisions, as well as the fact of seeing things moving forward in the society.

The next question was on **what took their strength away** while working, with a noticeably wide range of responses, from lack of adequate minimal conditions for work, via negative state influence, poor legislation or the existing legislation not implemented, traditional values, extensive workload, lack of funding, to slow pace of change in the society.

As most frequent reasons for losing strength, the participants name lack of understanding, with two main directions: lack of understanding on the side of public and community where the defender works, as well as lack of understanding on the side of uneducated professional public on the problem. Lack of understanding and ignoring of the issue by the relevant authorities, institutions, even donors. Lack of collaboration, competition and undermining by allies.

“Retraumatization undermining the victims’ recovery, emerging due to the ignorance of institutions’ representatives or lack of understanding and acceptance by the close persons or surroundings.” (MS)

.....

“Meeting people just interested in power and acting like perpetrators.” (MR)

Also, one of the most prominent reasons for losing strength is being overwhelmed by work, which seems not to have an end. There, the participants mentioned permanent struggle with the system, which is extremely difficult in change, extremely slow change in the area of SV, especially amendments to legislation. Slow pace of change was mentioned several times.

Problems related to specific country, policy of the country where the participants live and work and the general situation in the country were particularly referred to.



“Impossible working conditions in this area caused by the state of Serbia.” (DP)

This is followed by traditional and cultural values prevailing in the country, such as patriarchy, omnipresent misogyny, stereotypes, prejudice, standing up for the offender.

Additionally, a significant number of participants found the cause of their loss of strength in the extremely difficult and problematic financial situation, both personal and in terms of the organization's survival. The organizations have no funds to work in accordance with the desired quality standards. Personal financial instability and uncertainty of work in civil sector constitute a hardly surmountable obstacle to a significant part of participants.

In the end, part of the participants emphasized the seriousness of work on the issue of SV itself, leaving marks and scars.



“Definitely the endlessness of the work and, occasionally, the impression that it is futile. A colleague put it excellently: The moment I think I have seen and heard all the abominations, there occurs a new case with abomination yet unheard of.” (E)

Some of the important issues were the defenders' **personal vulnerabilities**. In the first place, they emphasized fatigue, burnout, exhaustion, apathy. Consequently, self-neglect and the feeling of pessimism, as a result of all the above. Further on, they stated that their vulnerability is related to too much work, bad relations in the team and private life, which occasionally happens, and is caused precisely as a result of too much work encumbrance.

“Fatigue. Exhaustion. Constant struggle. Burnout. Saturation. And all this because I work in these working conditions (NGO) and because I deal with the issue I deal with.” (MM)

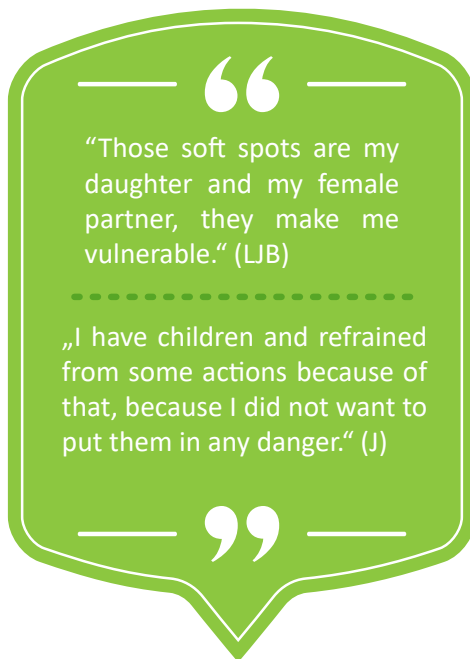
„You have to take care of yourself - this field can easily absorb you.” (MR)



“The needs of the survivors stemming out from their jeopardized security and traumatization, need to exercise rights, their social and material needs, I level to my needs and due to the assessed necessity of giving adequate response to their needs, I neglect and suppress my own needs.” (MS)



For some participants, the soft spots of vulnerability are close persons, who make them feel even more exposed.



For part of the participants, it is a permanent struggle with institutions, as well as the feeling of powerlessness in concrete situations, followed by the insufficiently good financial status and efforts to survive. Part of the participants said that their source of personal vulnerability was precisely the attitude of the society towards the issue of SV.



Because of all the above risks, sources of the loss of strength and of vulnerability, we were interested, given the work on SV, whether they sometimes **felt tired or thought about change**.

Five participants said they felt fatigue from time to time, given the workload, constant struggle with the system, project-based financing, or they have an impression that they have reached their maximum in their respective countries and any further change would be extremely difficult. The sense of saturation and the lack of system support to the cause is reiterative. The five participants have thought about leaving the field, and some of them have already developed exit strategy, but still remained.



“I am taking a break right now. At times I feel tired, but it is not only because of my work on the issue, but other things now too (family issues, care for parents...). If I could work only with clients, I would never get tired. But because we work on hundreds of other projects, I feel fatigue.” (LJB)

“

“Following my processes through supervision, through personal therapy, I notice that fatigue appears in periods when the workload is too heavy, when I do not take a break in time (I practically never do) or if the relations at work are not worked out fine.” (MPL)

”

Five participants stated they didn't think about change, although they felt saturation or frustration related to the attitudes of their environment, lack of supervision, fear of whether they were good enough in their work. Some of them clearly stated that giving up on the issue was not an option.

“No, not until no child is victim of sexual violence. Once committed you cannot stop, but you can work on different levels, which has been useful sometimes – for example working daily with sexual abuse images and then change to more strategic advocacy work.” (J)

”

We were interested also to know whether they had had during their work **any experience with the loss of interest in the issue of SV as defenders, a sui generis experience of “fall” and “breakdown”** and, if they had, what motivated them to rise up and get back to the issue.

All 12 participants stated that they never gave up on the issue. 7 of them openly said they had crises, difficult days, difficult periods, situations when they could no longer see strength or sense, occasional collapses and disheartening, but none of them really went away from the subject matter, so there was no need to return.

“I've had different periods, I think twice. Once, when our relations within the team were not good. That started hindering our work... The other time was when some women started leaving our group, great young women, who had learnt the ropes and knew how to do the work, but we were not able to provide salaries for them through the projects and keep them with us. Nine smartest and most talented girls. So much talent for work with children. That was the worst thing for me. Everyone leaves because you cannot secure salaries for them... But I didn't leave. I was motivated by the children and women I work with.” (LJB)

”

“Perhaps it would be more applicable to call it occasional downfall or discouragement in my case, mainly related to the feeling of powerlessness and endlessness of the work... I think what kept my head above the water was often my (too) great dose of hedonism, which made me strike a balance with all my powers and capacities and resources ... the sense of degree, dosing that resulted precisely in diversification of our potential among different activities that have nevertheless, in different ways, contributed to the same goals.” (E)

“

“

“No but I do occasionally have to catch myself as I have a completely pragmatic and dispassionate response to horrific things, sometimes I pause and reconnect with the emotional/human meaning of these things. Sometime the emotional response will surprise me.” (C)

”

To the question of **what keeps them to the topic and makes them think they can go on working on this topic for another ten years**, not a single participant gave a negative answer. Two of them who are retired did not answer the question and others said they would continue for another 10 years, as they are hopeful and believe in change. They emphasize that what keeps them to the topic is deep internal motivation, passion for work in this field after all these years, close persons at work with whom they share wishes and plans for the future work, desire to keep working on everything about the topic that they are genuinely and profoundly interested in.

— “ —

“To be able to endure, actually it is not a matter of endurance, it is a pleasure for me.” (MS)

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“Yes, I will be going on until my death. I have heard the children crying when being abused while working with the hotline.” (J)

— ” —

## 5.4. EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE DUE TO THE FACT THAT THEY ARE WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Women human rights defenders are exposed to different forms of violence, precisely because they are women human rights defenders, because they are women, because they work to protect women's rights, gender equality, to protect reproductive and sexual rights, on direct protection of women against all forms of violence. Because of their work and their challenging of the traditional values of the patriarchal society, they are subjected to additional forms of violence compared with men human rights defenders.

In order to understand the risks and dangers of the work of women human rights defenders, a significant part of the survey covers the actual experiences of violence. The approach to the problem of surviving violence is seen through **two dimensions**: the experiences of violence during childhood and the period of life before they became active as women human rights defenders, as well as the experiences of violence after they became active in protecting women's rights.

Why previous experiences of violence, including exposure to violence in the immediate family, previously perpetrated by partners or any other forms of violence? In order to be able to answer one of the fundamental questions, which is often asked – to what extent previous experiences of violence affected the decision of women human rights defenders to engage in protecting women's rights.

A significantly greater emphasis is placed on the experiences of violence resulting from the fact that they are women defending women's rights in the field of SV, both at the personal level and at the level of the organisation. We wanted to know whether they experienced violence because of work, which forms of violence, how often, who the offenders were and what the most common basis on which they experienced violence was. Furthermore, we were interested in whether there were differences in the experience of violence among the countries from which they come and whether they were pioneers in working in the subject area of SV, who were the first to raise the subject and pave the way for the establishment of specialised services and institutions, development of models of working with survivors, the first education models, legal amendments, at the international level and/or in their country.

**It is particularly worth mentioning that neither the names nor the initials of the participants will be mentioned in this chapter.**

### 5.4.1. EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE IN LIFE PRIOR TO THE START OF WORK AS A WOMAN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDER

The participants were asked three questions about the experience of violence **before the start of active work as a woman human rights defender**. The possible answers were: *yes, no, I am not sure whether it can be called that and other (if so, what)*. With each question about exposure to violence, four additional questions were asked:

- If they have experienced violence, what forms of violence were they?
- Who was (were) the offender(s)?
- How long did the violence last?
- How did they break the cycle of violence?

#### **Experience of violence in the primary family prior to the start of active work as a woman human rights defender**

**Seven participants** went through an experience of violence in the primary family (Table 2). The most common form of violence the participants experienced was emotional/psychological violence, most often by the father, mother or family member, and it lasted for several years. It is followed by SV perpetrated by a family member or mother. In one case, the father's physical violence was cited, which was long-term.

The way they most often broke the cycle of violence was to leave their families by growing up and moving. Of the seven participants who experienced violence in the immediate family, three experienced multiple forms of violence in the



hands of the same offenders.

**Table 2** Experiences of violence in the immediate family (before the start of work as a woman human rights defender): forms, offender(s), duration and breaking the cycle of violence.

Form of violence	Offender(s)	Duration of violence	Breaking the cycle of violence
Emotional/ psychological	Mother	23 years	I left, cut off all contact.
	Father	19 years	It stopped after I moved to the city to study.
	Father	18 years	It stopped when I grew up, resisted, left home.
	Family member	Months	I told him to stop.
	Parents	4 years	I moved out.
	Father	10	Growing up and behaving “properly”.
Physical	Father	18 years	It stopped when I grew up, resisted, left home.
Sexual	Family member	Months	I told him to stop.
	Mother	10	I left, cut off all contact.

### Experience of violence in partner relations before the start of active work as a woman human rights defender

**Five survey participants** experienced some form of violence in partner relations (Table 3). The most common form of violence against the participants committed by their partner/husband was emotional/psychological violence, during one to two years. It is followed by physical violence, which in all three cases lasted for two years. One of the participants experienced SV committed by her partner, which happened once. The most frequent way of breaking the cycle of violence was severing the ties and divorce. Of the five participants who experienced partner violence, three were subjected to multiple forms of violence by the same offender.

**Table 3** Experience of violence in partner relations (before the start of work as a woman human rights defender): forms, offender(s), duration and breaking the cycle of violence.

Form of violence	Offender(s)	Duration of violence	Breaking the cycle of violence
Emotional/ psychological	Partner	1 years	I left, cut off all contact.
	Partner	2 years	I started volunteering for a women’s organisation and recognised that I was experiencing violence.
	Husband	2 years	I got divorced.
	Partner	2 years	I broke up with him.
Physical	Partner	2 years	I started volunteering for a women’s organisation and recognised that I was experiencing violence.
	Husband	2 years	I got divorced.
	Partner	2 years	I broke up with him.
Sexual	Partner	1 event	I left and stopped any contact.

### Experience of other forms of violence before the start of active work as a woman human rights defender

**Five participants** experienced violence unrelated to the immediate family and partner relations (Table 4). The most common form of violence the participants experienced was SV, most commonly committed by acquaintances. Of these six SV experiences, four occurred once, one lasted for half a year, and one was prolonged. In addition to SV, one participant cited the experience of physical violence committed by other children. The experience of discrimination based on sexual orientation was cited once.

Of the five participants who experienced other forms of violence, two experienced multiple forms of violence by different offenders.

**Table 4** Experience of other forms of violence (before the start of work as a woman human rights defender): forms, offender(s), duration and breaking the cycle of violence.

Form of violence	Offender(s)	Duration of violence	Breaking the cycle of violence
Physical	Other children	One-time	My mother intervened.
Sexual	Acquaintance	One-time	I left, cut off all contact.
	Acquaintance	One-time	I left, cut off all contact.
	Close person	One-time	I decided to forget in order to survive.
	Colleague of my mother's	3-5 years	The family moved to another city.
	Acquaintance	One-time	I never saw him again.
	Distant relative	Half a year	I was 13 years old, I confided in my best friend, who told her mother. She reacted by telling my parents everything. My parents cut off contact with the abuser, threatening to kill him. Through multi-party mediation, the conflict was put to rest. Then there was absolute silence.
Discrimination based on sexual orientation	Close friend	Several times during adolescence	I left, cut off all contact.

**Of the 7 survey participants who experienced some of these forms of violence before actively starting to work as women human rights defenders, 3 indicated that, in some way, this must have affected their decision to deal with the issue of SV.**

#### 5.4.2. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE OF VIOLENCE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF THE WORK OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

In addition to the same forms of violence experienced by women and men human rights defenders, women human rights defenders also experience specific forms of violence – gender-based violence, as a form of attack resulting from entrenched gender stereotypes and ingrained social perceptions of what women can and may do. Women human rights defenders are exposed to a number of forms of violence precisely because of who they are and what they do. The aim of violence and attacks is to denigrate their work, to delegitimise their position and reputation in society and to intimidate them, so that they would stop with their work.

The participants were asked **whether they personally experienced any forms of violence because they were women human rights defenders**. The table listed **34 different forms of violence** and the participants were able to respond to whether they had experienced it and if they had, how often (once, several times or often). There was also a field for them to list the forms of violence they had experienced that were not included in the table (Table 5).

Of the 12 participants, only one stated that within her engagement in the current organisation, she had not experienced any of the listed forms of violence. At the same time, it is a woman human rights defender who has experienced numerous forms of violence at her previous job, precisely because she is a woman human rights defender.

Of the 34 forms of violence, **8 forms were not experienced by any of the survey participants**: economic and physical violence within a family, sexual violence within a family, economic violence based on sexual orientation, sexual violence based on sexual orientation, attempted rape, rape and attempted murder.

**The most common forms of violence**, experienced by a number of participants **several times and often are**: misogynous, sexist and homophobic statements (e.g., not a real woman, a whore, a lesbian, a feminist, has no children, bad mother, lousy wife, lousy daughter, a witch, etc. (7), the use of gender and sexual stereotypes to tarnish the reputation and to delegitimise the public image and work (e.g., rumours about their private life, sex life, violating social norms, killers of unborn children, against family, men haters, home wreckers) (7).

The next are accusations (e.g., danger to the country, society, foreign mercenaries, spies, defying customs and tradition, undermining the reputation of the country in the world, why they are doing this of all things, who is paying them, what their real role is, etc.) (6), persecution and stalking (by telephone, e-mail, social networks, in person), public delegitimisation of work (6), stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about them personally (5), psychological threats (e.g., they should be committed, prevented from working with women and children) (5), threats against life and body (e.g., you should be ambushed and beaten up, I'll cut you open, I'll slit your neck) (5). Somewhat less frequent, but nevertheless still experienced by the same number of women human rights defenders is harassment (e.g., calls, messages, messages affixed to the wall or doors of the organisation and/or home, emails, social networks, in person) (5) and social isolation (e.g., avoidance by persons from other organisations and/or institutions, refusal of contact and cooperation) (5).

Notably, physical (serious physical injury) and psychological violence based on sexual orientation was recorded in two participants. It is worth noting that 4 participants identified themselves as having a sexual orientation other than heterosexual, so these experiences of violence are rare compared to all 12 participants, but, at the same time, they account for half of the participants stating different sexual orientation.

The next is the publication of personal data, photographs and information about them in the media (2).

Other forms of violence are also present, but the women human rights defenders had experienced them less often. For all of these forms of violence, it should be noted that the number relating to violence is not the total number of participants who have experienced it, but of the participants who have experienced it several times and/or often, so those are the forms of systemic recurring violence.

**In view of the countries from which the survey participants come**, it is worth noting that these are more indications of direction, given the low number of participants per country.

It is worth noting that some forms of violence are a common experience for all participants, regardless of which country they come from, while some forms of violence are shown to be much more frequent in some of the Balkan countries. In that regard, experience of violence is rarely mentioned for Slovenia, while the specificity of Montenegro is that it is only in the past three years that a longer-lasting campaign for raising awareness of the SV issue has been conducted by women's CSOs, thus raising the topic.

Data analysis shows that there are clearly forms of violence that are equally common in Western European countries and in the Balkan countries. Such forms are: stigmatisation of women human rights defenders personally, misogynous, sexist and homophobic statements, media (smear) campaigns aimed at public shaming.

**To a slightly greater extent** the following forms of violence are present in the Balkan countries (except Slovenia): public delegitimisation of knowledge of women human rights defenders, persecution and stalking (by telephone, e-mail, social networks, in person).

**Significantly more prevalent and pronounced** (or exclusively present) forms of violence in the Balkan countries (except Slovenia) are: stigmatisation of work of women human rights defenders, delegitimisation of their work, publication of personal data, photographs and information about them on social networks, publication of personal data, photographs and information about them personally in the media, accusations (danger to the state, society, foreign mercenaries, spies, defying customs and tradition, tarnishing the reputation of the country in the world, why they are doing what they are doing, who is paying them, what their role really is, etc.), threats against life and body, harassment (e.g., calls, messages, messages affixed to the wall or the doors of the organisation and/or home, e-mails, social networks, in person), physical violence (from spitting, pushing and shoving, to light and severe personal injury), sexual harassment, threats of sexual violence, domestic violence as a consequence of the work they do (psychological).

We would specifically like to point out that certain forms of violence are more frequent in participants **who were pioneers in the field of SV**, even when they come from Western European countries, but also from the Balkan countries. Of all the participants, five of them systematically listed different forms of violence as their experience, and they are the ones who began dealing with the issue of SV in late 1960s or early 1970s in Western European countries, as well as the women human rights defenders who raised the topic in the early 1990s in the Balkan countries. We note that the pioneers from Western European countries experienced violence much more often only in pioneering times, while the pioneers from the Balkan countries proceeded to experience violence continuously, to this very day.

**Table 5** Participants' personal experience of violence because they are women human rights defenders.

Forms of violence women human rights defenders personally experienced	Never	Once	A few times	Often
Stigmatisation, (unfounded) gossip and rumours about them personally	5	2	1	4
Stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about their work	8	1		3
Public delegitimisation of their knowledge	7	1	1	3
Public delegitimisation of their work	6		5	1
Misogynous, sexist, and homophobic statements	5		3	4
Use of gender and sexual stereotypes to tarnish reputation and delegitimise public image and work	5		3	4
Publication of personal data, photos and information about them on social networks	9	1	1	1
Publication of personal data, photographs and information about them in the media	10		2	
Accusations (danger to the state and society, foreign mercenaries, spies, defying customs and tradition, tarnishing the reputation of the country in the world, etc.)	6		5	1
Threats – psychological (e.g., should be committed, prevented from working with women and children)	5	2	2	3
Threats - against life and body (e.g., you should be ambushed and beaten up, I will cut you open, I will slit your throat)	6	1	3	2
Threats – against the life and body of persons close to her (children, family, etc.)	6	2	3	1
Social isolation	7		3	2
Harassment (e.g., calls, messages, messages affixed to the wall or the door of the organisation)	6	1	3	2
Persecution and stalking (by phone, email, social networks, in person)	5	1	4	2
Violence based on sexual orientation - psychological	10		2	
Violence based on sexual orientation - economic	12			
Violence based on sexual orientation - physical	10	2		
Violence based on sexual orientation - sexual	12			
Destruction of personal property	10	2		
Media (smear) campaigns for the purpose of public shaming	7	2	2	1
Physical violence - spitting, pushing, etc.	9		2	1
Physical violence - slapping, punching	11			1
Physical violence - light bodily harm	11			1
Physical violence - severe personal injury	11	1		
Sexual harassment (e.g., catcalling, unwanted body commentaries, touching)	7	1	2	2
Sexual violence - threats of sexual violence	10		1	1
Sexual assault - attempted rape	12			
Sexual assault – rape	12			
Experience of domestic violence as a result of the work they do - psychological	11			1
Experience of domestic violence as a result of the work they do - economic	12			
Experience of domestic violence as a result of the work they do – physical	12			

Forms of violence women human rights defenders personally experienced	Never	Once	A few times	Often
Experience of domestic violence as a result of the work they do - sexual	12			
Attempted murder	12			

Five participants cited additional forms of violence, which included: threats that they would lose their jobs and that they would never be able to get another one, negative comments about their work by extended family members, offenders blaming women human rights defenders for divorce and calling them “home wreckers”, the processes of whistleblowing in the previous institution in which she worked, because she stood up against the poor treatment of female and male colleagues, a high level of psychological stress as a CSA offender publicly shouted severe insults.

To the question what they believe **the most common basis (grounds/cause) for violence** was, the participants mentioned (according to frequency):

- The subject area of SV itself, working on the topic, working on SV against children, working directly with survivors (5)
- Work in a CSO that is women’s and feminist (4)
- Revenge of the offenders who ended up in prison, anger and fury of the offenders, offenders were angry that they were found out (3)
- Because I am a woman (3)
- Advocating LGBTQI rights (2)
- Sexual orientation - because I am a lesbian (2)
- Because we publicly express our views and publicly blame the church for what it does to women in general, to women survivors of violence, to the LGBTIQ community (2)
- Participation in the anti-war movement, because we are against war, because we speak of committed crimes, because we advocate facing the past (2)
- Because of working on legal amendments and lobbying for amendments related to SV (1)
- Violation of entrenched gender roles and norms, “danger to society” (1)
- Most were men (and a few times women) that were angry because I interfered with their upbringing and afraid that they would lose their child. Speaking up for injustice exposes you to risks (1)

The participants were asked to present some **typical examples**, which lasted longer or there were multiple offenders.

The following are quotes:

“Constant phone tapping since the 1990s by the government.

At least 10 years of continuous harassment over the cell phone and home phone, by a woman, despite the fact that I changed the phone numbers more than once. She knew where I was going, where I was, who I was with, stating the exact place where I was, if I was out of Belgrade and who I was with. Telling me what people close to me were doing at that moment. Calling from different phone numbers, after I reported her. After reporting the number to the provider, she would change the number and call again. Different landline numbers. Sending text messages. Leaving messages on the answering machine at home.

After the activities of the Women in Black in the streets, right-wing activists speculated online about which women were involved with each other, among which I was named.

Direct questions at press conferences on my cooperation with a lesbian human rights organisation.

The first bloody Gay Pride in Belgrade, physical violence.”



“A man who threatened me for over a year and a half with over 27 different phones, with terrible calls and messages (I am going to kill you, rape you, cut you open, slit your throat, I know where you are, I know where you are going. I know where you left your car...).

Messages (sometimes composed of black cut-out letters), left at the front door of the building where my organisation is located, filled with misogynous insults and names, with an emphasis on my “unworthy” ethnic belonging and work.”

“In relation to the Educational Packs, it was about all of us, on social networks, terrible, for many months (lesbian, corrupting children, teaching boys to be girls and girls to be boys, spy, foreign mercenary, Ustasha or Albanian whore, then back to work at the Anti-war Action Center and joining the activities of the Women in Black.

My involvement as expert witness in criminal proceedings related to children has been followed for many years by attacks by defence lawyers: that we are foreign mercenaries, spies, traitors, unprofessional, lesbians, that they will report us, send us to jail, that will be the end of us... Judges do not react and are silent, prosecutors, too.

After the adoption and start of use of the Educational Packs on the subject of sexual abuse of children in kindergartens and schools, the church, ultra-right-wing organisations, “Orthodox Parents” ...we were accused of attacking the culture and traditions of the Serbian people, of teaching young children to be lesbians, promoting homosexuality, inappropriately talking about sexuality in children or young people. Media and social media attacks against the ITC and each of us personally lasted for months.”

“

“...he first indirectly sent me threats, then directly, at hearings, accused me of being “a foreign mercenary, making money off his marriage...” One time, while I was walking with my 5-year-old nephew, he intercepted me and tried to scare me by approaching me at a 10 cm distance. He is constantly trying to discredit me by saying that I am “unfulfilled, cursed, look like a mess...”. Some people tried to dissuade me from getting involved in this case, because this is a dangerous person, who spent 8 years in prison for dealing drugs, is a member of an organised crime group and can have me disappear overnight...”

“When our organisation organised a conference on testifying as an expert witness in CSA/SV cases..., fathers belonging to the Fathers for the Child’s Rights to Their Fathers association came as a group to the event. An offender was there (who abused two girls, I worked with their mother, the girls were in therapy in other institutions), but the father knew me. He stalked me at the conference, during the break he found a way to stay very close to me, he followed me around the room, and I have to admit that despite the fact that there were other people around, I felt unsafe and perceived his behaviour as a threat. People from that association wanted to record our event, so we had to warn them repeatedly not to do so.”

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“I stood up for my colleagues being harassed and controlled for years and got very badly treated.”

“High conflict divorce where I stood up for mother and child(ren) and the other parent was an intimate terrorist (long periods of events, lawsuits, etc...)”

We were interested in **how surviving violence affected the work of women human rights defenders**. They most commonly highlighted the sense of vulnerability, mistrust, exposure and fear.

“He made me even more wary and more cautious than I was. I have become even more closed than I was before. And I was sure I was doing the right thing. And continued to do so.”

“Awareness of vulnerability, sense of exposure.”

”

“

“...that my work may affect me personally with respect to my safety and some unpleasant events... more in terms of thinking about the safety plan for the future.”

At the same time, however, they stated they had developed different mechanisms for coping with fears, a certain bold attitude, a place of strength and defiance within them to be able to go on. Some of the participants emphasised the importance and role of supervision, in the course of which they analysed how they had been affected personally by their work. They also highlighted the role and importance of close associates and family.

The next additional question was about how many things **they decided not to do (did not do them) in their work/ life because of the fear of risk, threats, danger and violence**. Equal numbers of participants responded that they had never given up on anything they wanted to do regardless of the risk assessment, or indicated that there had been cases in their work, when they took a decision as an organisation and/or at a personal level based on an assessment of how dangerous the action/activity was for the organisation and did not always do exactly what they wanted. Or not at that moment.

“

“None.”

“When you get rid of fear, you learn to accept risk. When you realise how much you are willing to lose, you have no fear.”

”

“We generally weigh things, there are backlash possibilities to almost everything we do, from all sides, we try to have clarity for ourselves before we move/speak out as we know we may have to hold the ground against opposition.”

“

“

“I decided to keep a low profile in media in the beginning of “my career”, because I had children. I would have done otherwise today.”

”

The next question was whether they had had an experience of **persons close to them receiving threats and/or being subjected to violence** due to their work. As many as 7 participants cited these experiences, which were particularly difficult for them.

“My daughter and my mother suffered, but my only burden was around my daughter, what could happen to her, which would happen to her, and you learn to live with it, and you do not withdraw from what you believe and what you do. And fortunately, nothing happened to her.”

We were also interested to hear if they had experienced **a form of violence, when it happened the last time**. Two participants did not respond to this question, and among the remaining 10, we see that three participants have experienced violence in the past 12 months, two in the past two years, three in the past 5 years. Two of the participants (both retired) said they had experienced violence before, from 8 to 20 years ago.

An important question of this survey was about **the place(s) of being exposed to violence** because they are women human rights defenders. The table listed **16 possible responses** in terms of different locations of violence, and the participants could respond whether they had experienced it in a specific place and if they did, how often (once, several times or often). There was also an open field for them to name the places where they had experienced violence that were not included in the table (Table 6).

Of 12 participants, it was only at the extended family home and in other organisations active in the field of human rights protection that **none experienced violence**.

When looking at the answers “several times” or “often”, the women human rights defenders **most often experienced violence** in their organisation, by telephone and/or e-mail by offenders of violence (8) and when the offenders came personally to the organisation (6), followed by the violence they experienced in institutions (5), with the following institutions listed: police (3), courts (2) and Centers for social work (2). It is of particular concern that violence was repeated several times and often in all of these institutions, so it is a repetitive form of violence. In addition, they were most often exposed to violence in open public spaces (e.g., street) (5).

To a lesser extent, violence was experienced over a personal cell phone (4), at their own home over telephone or e-mail from the offender (4), in a public closed space (4), at outdoor public events (e.g., peaceful demonstrations) (4), at indoor public events (e.g., during a panel discussion, lecture, press conference, etc.) (4) and via the media (4).

Two participants listed other places of violence, which were not included in the answers offered. These are the authorities responsible for refugees (1) and other child rights protection organisations (1).

Looking at the places where violence was experienced, **given the countries from which the women human rights defenders come**, as in the previous question about personal experience of violence, it is worth noting that these offer **indications of direction**, rather than a possibility to reach conclusions.

When data is analysed, there is notably one place that is **more often** highlighted in Western European countries – at the home of women human rights defenders, with the arrival of the offenders in person. It is worth pointing out that both participants that listed their own home were pioneers in their country and that this was a time when the issue of SV was just being raised globally.

**To a slightly greater extent**, the places of violence present in the Balkan countries (except for Slovenia) are: in the organisation of the woman human rights defender - by phone and email, over a personal cell phone, at home – over the telephone and/or e-mail, in an indoor public area (e.g., bar, cinema, library, etc.), at indoor public events (e.g., during a panel discussion, lecture, press conference, etc.) and through the media.

Significantly more frequent locations (or the only locations) in the Balkan countries (except Slovenia) are: in the organisation of the woman human rights defender following the arrival of the offender in person, in open public spaces, at outdoor public events (e.g., during street protests), via social networks (FB, WhatsApp, ...), in institutions (police, courts and Centers for social work).



**Table 6** The place where women human rights defenders experienced violence and its frequency.

Place of experiencing violence	Never	Once	A few times	Often
In the organisation, over the telephone and/or email by the offender	3	1	6	2
In the organisation, the offender's arrival in person	3	3	6	
Over a personal cell phone	2		2	2
At home, over the phone and/or e-mail by the offender	6	2	3	1
At home, the offender's arrival in person	10	2		
In extended family home	12			
At a friend's home	11	1		
In an open public area (e.g., street)	6	1	3	2
At indoor public spaces (e.g., cafe, cinema, library...)	8		3	1
At outdoor public events (e.g., during street protests)	7	1	2	2
At indoor public events (e.g., a panel discussion, lecture, press conference etc.)	7	1	2	2
Via social networks (FB, WhatsApp, ...)	8	1	1	2
Through the media	7	1	3	1
In other organisations (working in the field of women's human rights)	9	1	2	
In other organisations (working in the field of HR)	12			
In institutions (which ones)	7		3	2

One of the extremely important questions was **who the offenders of the violence were**. The table listed **18 possible offenders of violence** and the participants were able to respond to whether they had experienced violence by such offender and, if so, how often (once, several times or often). There was also an open field for them to list the offenders of violence that were not included in the table (Table 7).

Of the 12 participants, **none** experienced violence committed by the current partner.

**The most often mentioned offenders**, for whom the participants gave a response **several times and/or often** are: individuals (5), right-wing organisations (4), religious leaders (4), representatives of government authorities and institutions (4), media representatives (4), other organisations working in the field of women's human rights protection (4), followed by other groups (football hooligans, who often belong to ultra-nationalist organisations) (3), offenders of violence and offenders' families (3). Less often, the community in which they live and other organisations working in the field of human rights protection are cited as offenders.

Only one of the participants cited a former partner (often) and a child (several times) as the offender of violence.

One participant cited an additional group of offenders – non-educated professional community that supports misogynous and clerical views, nationalism and supports the non-facing of the past in Serbia.

Given the offenders and **countries from which the participants come**, we notice that the following are **equally** cited as offenders in **all countries**: other groups (hooligans, etc.), the community in which they live, their own friends and other organisations working in the field of human rights protection.

Offenders that are **significantly more often** cited in the Balkan countries (except Slovenia) are: politicians, representatives of institutions, media representatives and individuals.

Offenders **who are exclusively cited in the Balkan countries** (except Slovenia) are: religious leaders, religious organisations, unknown offenders, other organisations working in the field of women's human rights protection, right-wing organisations, extended family, immediate family, a former partner and child.

**Table 7** Offender(s) of violence against women human rights defenders and the frequency of violence.

Place of experiencing violence	Never	Once	A few times	Often
Unknown offender	7	2	1	1
Politicians	7	2	2	1
Representatives of institutions and government authorities	7	1	3	1
Religious leaders	8		3	1
Religious organisations	8	1	1	2
Right-wing organisations	8		2	2
Other organisations (working in the field of WHR)	8		4	
Other organisations (working in the field of HR)	10	2		
Other groups (specify which)	9		2	1
Media representatives	7	1	3	1
Individuals	6	1	4	1
The community you live in	10		1	1
Own friends	9	2	1	
Extended family	9	1	2	
Immediate family	9		3	
Partner (current)	12			
Partner (former)	11			1
My child/children	11		1	

When asked whether they believe the offenders acted **independently and/or as part of an organised group**, the participants selected both responses equally.

“Many times, as part of an organised group: both when we were standing at a peaceful anti-war protest with the Women in Black, and at the first, bloody Gay Pride held in Belgrade, they were organised by the state tabloids at the press conference at the start of the National Campaign against Child Sexual Abuse, which subsequently lasted for the next 10 years, and much more.”

“Depends, sometimes independently as a reaction to a media appearance or a case, sometimes as part of an organised group (e.g., a negative comment on the work of women’s organisations mentioned by name in the parliament).”

“Both independently (such as someone spitting on me in the street or kicking me). And as part of an organised group (organised media campaign against us - pro-government television stations and social networks that are on fire because of the “Orthodox Parents” campaign).”

Furthermore, we were wondering whether, if they had survived any form of violence, **they reported it to the competent institutions**. In this group of questions, questions were also asked whether there was **a possibility of reporting violence against women human rights defenders in their country** precisely because they are women human rights defenders, as well as if they reported violence, **what the competent institutions’ reaction was**, but also the reactions of **close associates** from the organisation and **other persons close to them**.

## Reporting violence:

Only 6 participants responded to this group of questions. Of these, 2 failed to report, although they experienced violence and 4 reported at least one form of violence, but not all violence they experienced.

Some of the participants who did not report (any forms of) violence cited the following reasons:



“Mistrust of institutions that are supposed to provide protection.”

“I reported some earlier cases and nothing happened. After that, I stopped reporting, because of the complete lack of trust that anything would be done, based on previous experience.”

## Is there a possibility of reporting to the competent institutions:

Seven survey participants said that violence against women human rights defenders could be reported in their countries, but they said it was (mostly) just lip service.



“Yes, in theory. In reality, once when I consulted on the matter with a woman police inspector (whom I knew, whose work I respected and whom I trusted), she advised me against it. That I would end up with more trouble than help. I took her advice because I trusted her.”



## Reaction of institutions to reported violence:

The response to this additional question shows significant differences between reports of violence in the Balkan countries and the Netherlands. There was no real protection or reaction in the Balkan countries, while in the cases from the Netherlands (2) concrete forms of protection by the police and other competent authorities were cited.



“Nothing special happened. Institutions do it because they have to. But in reality, nothing. It is like at the Gay Pride when I got into a police car looking for protection. First, they tried to force me to get out of the car, and when I did not want to, they drove me away from the mob of hooligans to a police station, stopped outside and told me I could go then. They did not do anything.”

“I received police protection for myself and my family. The police spent a certain period of time in front of and inside my home.”

„Supporting. In one case the police came to patrol a lot of time since the opening hours of our institution and they were ready to come immediately if we phoned.“



## Reactions of close associates and persons close to them:

The participants stated that they had received support - some more often from colleagues from their organisations, some more often from people to them, some equally.

### 5.4.3. ATTACKS ON SELF-ORGANISING WOMEN

The next question was whether they had experienced attacks and violence **directed against the organisation/institution** in which they work. **The table listed 13 different forms of violence** and the participants were able to respond whether they had experienced it and if they had, how often (once, several times or often). There was also an open field for them to list forms of violence not included in the table (Table 8).

Of the 13 forms of violence listed, only one was **not experienced by any participant**: violence perpetrated by institutions by taking away the equipment of the organisation, computers, cell phones, documents, while all other forms of violence were represented.

**The most commonly experienced forms of violence against organisations, experienced by a number of participants several times and often are:** stigmatisation, gossip and rumours in public (e.g., spy organisation, working against family, poisoning children and youth, doing it only for a lot of money, unprofessional, organisation that receives too much money, poisoning families with fictitious violence) (8), stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about the organisation in front of donors (e.g., not working to protect women's human rights, having too much money, not operating in accordance with the law) (5), stigmatisation based on sexual orientation (4), threats (e.g., this organisation should be closed, burned down, banned) (3), violence by the church - influence through institutions, religious organisations and media to promote traditional values and delegitimise the work of the organisation (3) and violence by institutions through constant inspections, oversight, operation control, in order to find some irregularity. etc. (3).

“Asking a donor to erase from the final report the part regarding the responsibility of the Serbian Orthodox Bishop for child sexual abuse and the threat that if this is not deleted, we will not receive the last payment of the funds.

An MP, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Committee for Human and Minority Rights and Gender Equality, when we were for a moment alone on public event, used insults on the basis of assumed sexual orientation (“Get **your Prime Minister** to resolve the issue with your Educational Packs, speak to her”, note - *the Prime Minister is out as a lesbian*).

We were conducting a training for teachers in the presence of representatives of the Ministry of Education. Two people laughed about the topic of SV against children, and three times we asked them to explain what it was about and they did not respond. They were asked to leave and did not receive a certificate after the training. Since they were unable to justify it at their school, they said that the Incest Trauma Center was spreading lesbian propaganda. That is what their principal reported to the Ministry. Since the Ministry's representatives attended the training, they knew that this was not true. They phoned us and asked us to send a letter to the Ministry stating that there had been no lesbian propaganda during that training. We refused and asked them to send this request in writing. The letter never came through. The training was organised in partnership with the Ministry.

For example, a reporter with whom an interview was arranged for a daily newspaper entered. He said: “I have received a tip-off about you” (concerning sexual orientation). I showed him the door.

Coming from other women's NGOs - that we closed the ITC, that we did not work with clients, spreading a variety of misinformation, that we have very high salaries, etc.

The donor who banned the video clip about SV against children because they felt that the prevalence cited as the current global data was “too disturbing for the citizens of Serbia”

Education Packs - intensive smear campaigns, football fans, hooligans, right-wing activists, the church, the government and the Minister of Education himself.”

“Disputing the legitimacy of the organisation for advocating the rights of SV survivors, members of a certain ethnic group. 2) Highlighting the legitimacy of the religious community and challenging the legitimacy of the organisation to present the topic of giving voice to war rape survivors from a particular ethnic group.”

“Threats by emails and letters.”

“Threat by abusive parent(s), to be taken to a disciplinary court.”

“E-mails of offenders with threats of reporting our organisation for “supposed” failure to comply with the laws and violation of their rights.”

“Social inspection and the Ombudsman conducted a thorough review of the organisation’s work at the time of the most restrictive measures against COVID-19 on the basis of reports by offenders, while, because of safety risks, women with children were in the SOS shelter for women and children who have experienced violence.”

The survey participants experienced less often in their organisations media isolation (2), social isolation (e.g., none of the other organisations, institutions, donors, etc. wish any longer to cooperate with the organisation) (2), destruction of the organisation’s equipment (e.g., breaking windows, doors, breaking the organisation’s equipment, causing electric shock that destroys equipment) (2), organisation’s (2) website crashed (hacked), violence by the media (ongoing unethical reporting on the organisation’s work, inaccurate, malevolent, etc.) (2).

It is again worth noting that these are the “sometimes” and “often” answers to the question, while the total number of participants who have experienced such forms of violence is higher. In addition, we emphasise that these forms of violence were repetitive, i.e., the participants have experienced them several times.

“

“The website was hacked - we were forced to put the highest security for the website.”

“Serious undermining, did not meet with 3 last ministers, blacklisted by particular ministers, put in bad corner by elected member of government in order not to be taken seriously.”

“It was published on social networks how much money we get, on the list of organisations that are against abortion, which poison society with violence which does not exist.”

One of the participants cited violence by corporations as an additional form of violence:

“When we initiated the blocking of commercial websites containing child sexual abuse material, we were accused of wanting to block the internet and introduce censorship of the internet.”

When these forms of violence experienced by the participants and their organisations are analysed from the aspect of **the countries from which the participants come**, we notice that social isolation and hacking of the organisation's website is **equally present in all countries**.

The forms of violence cited in all countries, but **more frequent in the Balkan countries** (except Slovenia) are: stigmatisation, gossip and rumours in public (e.g., spy organisation, working against family, poisoning children and youth, unprofessional), stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about the organisation in front of donors, threats (e.g., this organisation should be closed, burned down, banned) and violence by the media – a pattern of continuous unethical reporting.

Violence that is **to a greater extent or exclusively present in the Balkan countries** (except Slovenia) is: stigmatisation based on sexual orientation, media isolation, destruction of the organisation's equipment (e.g., breaking windows, doors, breaking the organisation's equipment, causing electric shock that destroys equipment), destruction of the organisation's premises (e.g., arson, causing flood, total destruction of premises), violence by institutions through continuous inspections, oversight and operation control and violence by the church - influence through institutions, religious organisations and media.

**Table 8** Forms of violence against the organisations / institutions in which survey participants are employed.

Place of experiencing violence	Never	Once	A few times	Often
Stigmatisation, gossip and rumours in public (e.g., spy organisation, working against family, poisoning children and youth, doing it only for a lot of money, unprofessional)	3	1	6	2
Stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about the organisation in front of donors (e.g., they are not protecting women's human rights, have too much money, do not operate in accordance with the law)	5	2	3	2
Stigmatisation based on sexual orientation	7	1	3	1
Social isolation (e.g., other organisations, institutions, donors, etc. does not wish to cooperate with the organisation)	7	3	2	
Media isolation (e.g., media do not want contact with the organisation, do not come to events)	10	1	1	
Threats (e.g., the organisation should be closed, burned down, banned)	5	4	2	1
Destruction of the organisation's equipment (e.g., breaking windows, doors, causing electric shocks)	7	3	2	
Destruction of the organisation's premises (e.g., arson, causing flood, total destruction of the premises)	10	2		
Hacking of the organisation's website	7	3	2	
Violence by institutions through constant inspections, oversight, operation control, in order to find irregularities, etc.	9	2	1	
Violence by institutions - seizure of equipment (computers, cell phones, the organisation's documents, etc.)	12			

Place of experiencing violence	Never	Once	A few times	Often
Violence by the church - influence through institutions, religious organisations and media to promote traditional values and delegitimise the work of the organisation	8	1	1	2
Violence by media - a pattern of continuous unethical reporting on the organisation's work: false, malevolent, etc.)	8	2	2	

To the question which they believe **was the most common basis (grounds/cause) for violence against their organisation**, the survey participants cited the following (responses are ranked according to the frequency):

- Topic of SV, topic of SV against children, public speech against SV against children and women, uncovering sexual violence, direct work with survivors (5)
- Revenge of offenders who ended up in prison, because we made it clear who the offenders could be, angry offenders (5)
- The fact that it is a women's and feminist organisation that protects the rights of women (3)
- Because it is about women self-organising to protect their rights, because we are the women who set up the organisation (3)
- Because we work on the issue of women's equality (2)
- Anti-war, anti-fascist and peace-promoting public activity (2)
- Advocacy of LGBTIQ rights (2)
- The organisation's supranational activities, working with survivors from all ethnic groups (2)
- Sexual orientation, because I am a lesbian (2)
- Because of the protection of women who survived SV and domestic violence (1)
- Uncovering war crimes committed by members of all ethnic groups (1)
- Values opposed by right-wing organisations cooperating with the Catholic church (1)
- Corporations will be deprived of their profits because of the removal of CSA material from the internet (1)
- Competition between organisations (1)

When asked who the most common **offenders of violence against the organisations / institutions** in which the survey participants work and operate were, they listed the following (according to the frequency of the answer):

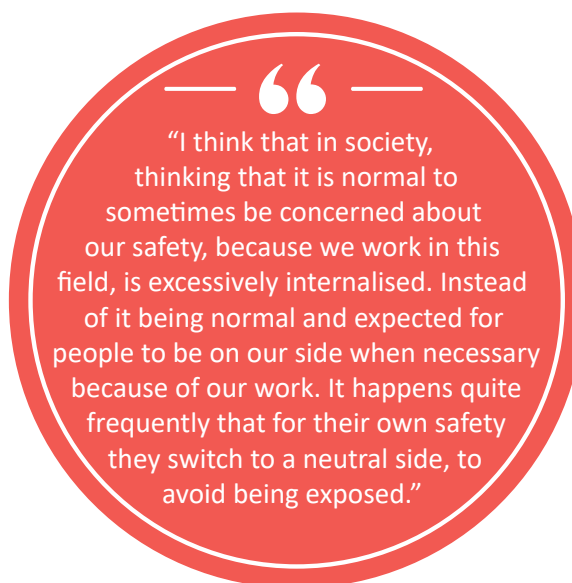
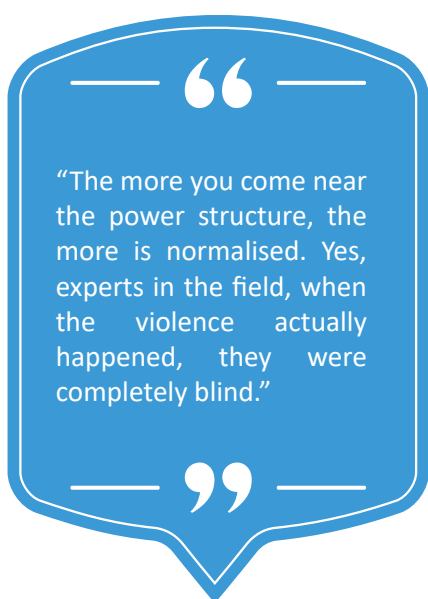
- **Offenders of violence against women and children with whom the organisation works:** unknown offenders that we have managed to put in prison, based on final judgements, offenders of violence that use e-mail or telephone threats to put pressure on our work, offenders who commit violence against women and children who come to us for help, (step)fathers (7)
- **Representatives of institutions:** non-educated and prejudiced judges and lawyers of the accused of SV, representatives of the Public Prosecutor's Office, representatives of the police and Centers for social work, the Ministry of Education on two occasions based on homophobia and misogyny, Minister of Education (4)
- **Politicians:** right-wing politicians. The government of Serbia (all regimes since 1994) and orchestrated negative campaigns that most often included the Serbian Orthodox Church, government-controlled media, right-wing groups (3)
- **Right-wing, nationalist and religious organisations:** nationalist-oriented individuals, right-wing groups, religious and nationalist-oriented institutions (3)
- **Donors (2)**
- **Other women's rights organisations,** Nationalist women's organisations (2)
- **Cited 1:** individuals, media, individuals and organisation claiming to promote free internet (1), allies, people in powerful positions.

After all the questions asked about personal experiences of violence, as well as violence directed toward organisations,



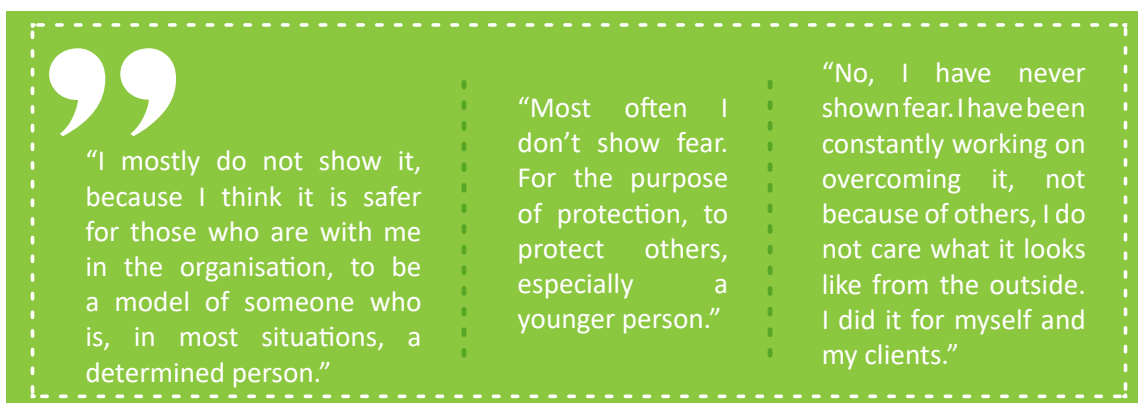
and a large number of different offenders of violence, we were interested in whether the survey participants **had a sense of normalisation of violence against women human rights defenders.**

Five participants answered yes to this question, three were not sure whether it can be called normalisation, two indicated that they did not know and one believed that there was no such normalisation.

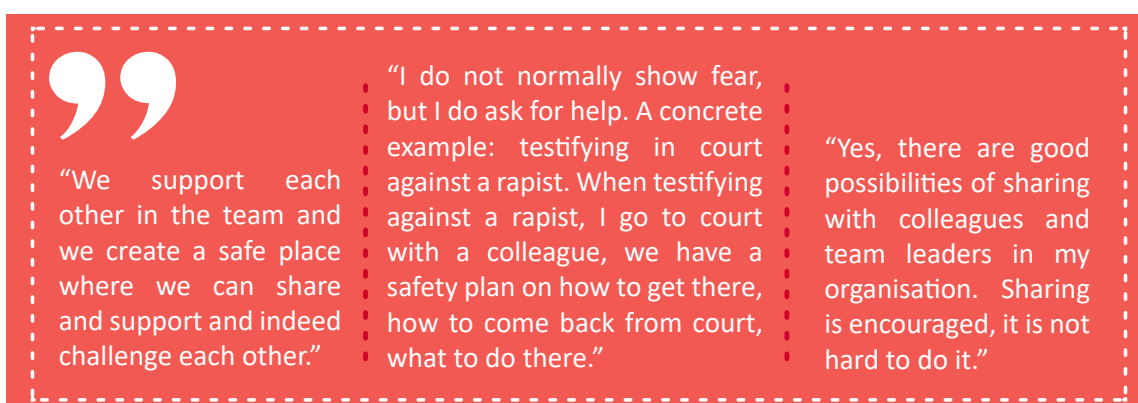


We were wondering whether, given the position they have in the organisation (most commonly senior positions), **they show fear in the face of risk, threats and danger** before other members of the organisation, and whether they may show it.

Six participants said they never showed fear, out of concern for other associates, especially younger people, or they did not show it in particular because of the survivors with whom they work.

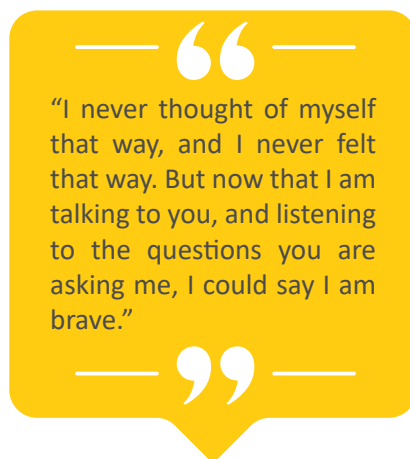


Three participants said they cared about mutual support and sharing everything, including the feeling of fear and stressed that they sometimes asked for help from their co-workers.





At the same time, one of the questions in the questionnaire was whether the participants saw **themselves as extremely brave people** because of everything they do and what they work on. Five participants clearly stated that they saw themselves like that, with some of them saying that they only got that insight during the interview.



Two women human rights defenders said they were brave depending on the situation, and two stated that they had never thought about that before. Three of the participants said they were not particularly brave or not brave at all. Notably, one of those three has brought about extraordinary changes in her country and beyond, and has been exposed to different and severe forms of violence.

The next question was whether, due to personal threats and/or threats against the organisation/institution, the survey participants **considered leaving the place of residence and/or the country or changing the job**. Seven of the participants said that they had never thought about it, one that she had thought about it, but not for the reasons mentioned. Two participants clearly stated that, in certain periods of life, under the influence of war, they had considered this, most of all, in relation to children.



None of the participants in our survey, women's rights defenders in the field of SV, indicated that because of personal threats and/or threats against the organisation/institution, **they had to leave the place of residence and/or the country or change her job**.

## 5.5. CHANGES AT THE PERSONAL LEVEL AS A RESULT OF WORKING ON THE ISSUE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE, SELF-CARE STRATEGIES AND SELF-PROTECTION SOURCES

Working in the subject area of SV affects the lives of women human rights defenders in different ways. However, this is rarely discussed except in the context of the impact of the burnout syndrome, vicarious traumatisation and secondary stress syndrome, as a consequence of working with highly traumatised individuals. At the same time, the fact that work in the subject area of SV is more complex and does not only involve direct work with survivors, is disregarded. It is only rarely that all layers of change, all areas of influence of SV issue on the lives of women human rights defenders are analysed. While changes in the perception of the world or behaviour are discussed more frequently, deeper levels of psychological changes, and in particular the impact on the sexuality of women human rights defenders are an extremely sensitive subject rarely discussed even in the closed circles of women human rights defenders.

How demanding the work on the SV issue is and how little the depth of its impact is understood is best demonstrated by the experience of the women human rights defenders who participated in the survey, which they talked about during interviews. They gave examples of hiring new staff in their organisations/institutions, when new women come in, ready to work on the issue, but with the question “How do you manage to keep this subject from affecting you and your life?”. The best answer to that question, as well as the opening sentence of this chapter, is Rachel Naomi Remen’s quote (1996):



“The experiment that we can be immersed in suffering and loss daily and not be touched by it is as unrealistic as expecting to be able to walk through water without getting wet.”

The potential impact of the SV issue and continuous work in that field is divided into 6 levels:

1. Impact **on one’s own life and changes** (feeling of changing as a person)
2. Changes in **the way they see the world** and everything around them
3. Effects on changes in **the psychological functioning** (e.g., change of views, method of coping with stress, fear, anxiety, physical safety concerns, increased anger, nervousness, feeling spent, depressed, helpless, problems with concentration, reduced feeling of empathy)
4. Effects on **physical changes** (e.g., changes in weight, tiredness, fatigue, chronic disease development)
5. Impact on **changes in behaviour** (e.g., sleep problems, hiding your job from the public, increased substance abuse, the desire to quit working in this organisation or in this field, fear of going to public places)
6. Impact on changes in self-perception **as a sexual person and on one’s own sexuality** (e.g., sexual problems such as lack of sexual desire, problems with sexual arousal, problems with orgasm, sexual aversion)

First of all, it is worth noting that the common answers to the questions about changes were “I have never thought about it” or “I have not thought about it that way”. A certain discord could also be observed between the responses to the questionnaire and later in the interviews, as if the questionnaire had caused some reflection. Some of the women human rights defenders who answered the questions in the questionnaire negatively, during the interview stated that now that they had thought about it, they did perceive certain changes and wanted to change their original response.

The authors of the survey report decided not to mention names/initials relating to the quotes on **physical changes**, **changes in behaviour** and changes related to one’s **sexuality**.

### 5.5.1. CHANGES AS A RESULT OF WORK IN THE SUBJECT AREA OF SV

Work on the SV issue affects the lives of women human rights defenders in different ways, which is rarely discussed. The women human rights defenders mentioned personal changes resulting from work in the subject area of SV.

## Effect on one's own life, the feeling of changing as a person

All 12 participants responded that years of working in the subject area of SV affected their lives and changed them as persons. While some wanted to share the experiences of these changes, 6 of them just replied with “yes”, without explanation of how they saw those changes and what that meant for them personally.

“

“I do not believe anyone can work on trauma and SV for that many years and remain the same person.” (MM)

.....

“This topic came into my focus when I started working in Medica. I had never observed or recognised it in my professional or private life. Of course, dealing with this issue and knowing all the factors that lead to it and the factors related to psychological, health and social consequences suffered by the victim have led to a number of insights that I perceive as enrichment, providing me with firm foundations and confidence in dealing with the issue in general, as well as in individual cases.” (E)

“Specifically, I cannot laugh at jokes about SV, this is an extremely serious subject. I choose people around me who are sensitive to the subject, especially in close relationships, friendships... Awareness that CSA/SV is frequent is an occupational hazard. I often think about the presence of CSA/SV when it comes to some problem with a person I work with, which others do not connect with the subject... Being alert with respect to your children (education, monitoring of their various processes, learning about boundaries, raising awareness of danger, protection, self-protection, human rights awareness...)” (MPL)

.....

“Previously, I was quite creative when not working - but that is gone. Consumed by the work I do.” (J)

”

## Changes in the way one sees the world and everything around

Again, all 12 participants responded that they saw changes in the way they see the world. As in the previous question, some elaborated on the answers during interviews, while some just answered “yes”. The main changes cited are: seeing the world as it really is – violence that is often present and manifested in different ways, awareness of violence prevalence and loss of a false sense of security.

“I see the world in a pretty realistic way, as it really is.” (DP)

.....

“Yes. Ever since I started working, I realised how prevalent SV is. It is not exaggeration; it is the reality in which we live. It changed my perception. It is not paranoia; it is the reality of women and children suffering violence.” (LJB)

“

“I learned about the cruelty of the human nature, open your eyes. Being in contact with offenders, I learned that appearances are not always reality. With words you can say anything, only actions count. The work has changed me; I feel still positive and optimistic, most people want the best for each other; but not everyone... I can see the world and people in a more realistic way now.” (JB)

“Yes. Awareness of the omnipresence of SV/CSA, of the rape culture in which we live, in any period of our lives if we are women. My perception of the world has changed under the influence of knowledge about the issue.” (MPL)

“Work has changed me, but only a little bit. Sometimes I experience some more distrust in people. But I have such a lot of lovely friends, husband, children, grandchildren and colleagues around me that support me: that is a great joy and it makes me grateful. I grant that others too and it makes me extra motivated to do this work.” (JB)

### Changes in psychological functioning

To this question, 7 participants replied that they noticed consequences on psychological functioning, 4 did not notice any, and one replied: “I am not sure if it can be called that”, which she did not elaborate on later.

The participants that responded positively cited secondary traumatisation, nervousness, nightmares, increased anxiety, sleep disorders (insomnia), anger, rage. Most of the participants highlighted changes that occur with the length of work on the issue, while one of the participants pointed out that the changes had been more pronounced for her when she started working.

“Increased anger - because of what I have witnessed and seen.” (J)

One of the responses is of particular value, because it was provided by a psychotherapist with more than 40 years of experience working on this issue:

“I feel changes. A little bit.” (JB)

### Physical changes

To this question, 7 participants replied that they had noticed physical consequences, two that they did not notice any and three said: “I am not sure if it can be called that”. Among the consequences observed, the most common ones were those related to neglecting health and development of (chronic) diseases, as a result of stress caused by overwork and difficulty in working in the field of SV.

“For the purposes of my work, I have been known to push the limits of my physical health to the extreme and ignore it. One example is that I worked for 6 months while coughing intensively, without seeing a doctor. It was not until 6 months later that I had a physical and learned that I was walking round and working with severe pneumonia.”

“Fatigue, exhaustion, burnout, chronic disease development, vicarious traumatising.”

“After the end of the war and of the blockade we lived in during that period, which is the period that coincided with my dealing with the issue of (sexual) violence, I gained a lot of weight. Later (2012) I was diagnosed with oral cancer. I am wondering because these changes can be attributed to a large number of different causes.”

“It is difficult to say explicitly, because it was also related to an excessive workload when I started working, more than twenty years ago.... Getting the organisation up and running almost from the ground up because of the Founders’ Syndrome ... that happened to us and because of which twenty years ago the organisation was on its knees... Health symptoms were worrying, but when the situation calmed down, everything was fine.”

“Insomnia, I do not eat regularly, a stomach problem is a chronic issue.”

### Behavioural changes

Changes in own behaviour were observed by 7 women human rights defenders, most often related to sleep problems, fear present in all spheres of life and closely related changes in behaviour related to hiding private life, as well as the development of unhealthy habits (increased smoking etc.). In some women human rights defenders, the need for solitude was intensified. Some noticed changes in the sense of seeing or looking for potential SV in everything.

“...smoking increased, insomnia... Hiding professional identity from the public, hiding private life... I have a fake FB profile (like an animal). I keep away from social networks. After all I have experienced, I have learned to hide as much as I can, because my name is recognised in the public arena.”

“I have heightened awareness that at any time at any place someone can attack me physically or sexually... I usually think about that when I am coming home at any time or going somewhere...”

“Ten years ago, when I started working directly with mothers who were supporting children SA survivors, my sleep was disrupted, fear that the offender, who knew me and knew where I lived, could find me, that he could find my children, hurt someone... Fear that he could tamper with my car brakes, ambush me in the darkness, hurt the children...”

“Sometimes being rigid, critical of the persons around me and how they behaved towards children. Not intrusive, but looking carefully at children and being critical of the parents, of my husband...  
No sleeping disorders, no lack of sexual desire or arousal; only looking at the behaviour of others (including friends), sometimes somewhat more critical and a bit more suspicious than required.”

### Changes in the perception of oneself as a sexual person and relative to own sexuality

The majority of the participants (7) stated they had not experienced any changes in their own sexuality, three said they had noticed them, one answered “I am not sure if it can be called that” and one answered “Other”. The three participants who responded that they felt such changes, said that years of working in this area affected that important segment of life, mostly as loss or lack of sexual desire.

“...long periods of asexuality come, lack of desire...weariness...  
You cannot work in the subject area of SV for so many years without it having an impact on sexuality.”

“Lack of sexual desire because of the huge amount of sexual violence I have witnessed during my work with the hotline.”

One of the participants who responded that there was no change in the perception of their sexuality, listed the changes that are related to sexuality in a heteronormative world:

“No changes in my sexuality, but changes in my tolerance, e.g., I am not sexually averse, but I am averse to misogyny and sexism.”

The participant who answered “Other” states:

“Working in the subject area of SV helped me set boundaries in the area of sexuality, and not just in this area.”

## After all the questions about changes...

After all the questions about changes, the participants could highlight a common denominator. It is interesting that many participants, as mentioned in the introduction, stated that they had never really thought about the changes that occur due to work in the field of SV and how these questions had inspired them to think about all these changes and look at themselves in other ways.

”

“I have not thought about it in this way, I still need to think about the psychological changes I have experienced... I have not thought about that or the links between the issue of SV and physical changes. That is another question that is important to me, to see myself from that point of view as well.” (N)

“Many of the questions in this part have encouraged me to think more deeply about why I was not sure about some changes. Somehow ever since I was a little girl, I have been taught to listen and monitor how others feel, their state and needs became more important than mine.” (MS)

”

At the end, all of the above-mentioned changes pointed out by the participants can be summed up with one quote:

“

“It is not possible to be in this line of work without people having expectations of who you are, what you think and feel. Therefore, you are prejudged and also experience both disclosure and challenge in all areas of your life. It is better now as society is more open about sexual violence, I rarely feel the need to hide my work, but 15 years ago I routinely hid what I did for a job in order to avoid it encroaching on my social life in disruptive ways.” (C)

”

### 5.5.2. SELF-CARE AND SOURCES OF SELF-PROTECTION AND STRENGTH

Given the difficulty of the job and work on SV, it was extremely important to know how the women human rights defenders cope with the issue, what helps them, what they use to recharge, how they look after themselves.

The first group of questions addressed the professional aspects of protection, primarily the supervision. We also wanted to know **if they had regular supervision**, for how long, and what supervision meant to them.

Most of the participants (9) had (while actively working before retirement) regular supervision, one did not at all, and one said that she had had different trainings organised with elements of support for the associates, but not as a systematic and targeted supervision:

“

“We used spontaneous and plentiful mutual support through conversations and socialising. In view of what has been described, I am not sure if these forms can be called supervision, but I am sure they were the best of what was available to us and that they were a significant source of support.” (E)

”



However, it is worth noting that more than half of the participants (7) have not had systematic supervision since starting work and that the possibility of participating in organised supervision was far shorter than the total time spent on the issue of SV. In this respect, it should be pointed out that the most common reason for lack of supervision was not a lack of understanding of the importance of supervision, but many other problems: from the lack of financing for supervision in organisations, to the problem of finding a suitable supervisor.



“In all 25 years of work, perhaps 3 years of supervision altogether. This has changed for the better in the past year.”  
(MM)



When asked what supervision meant to them personally, they most often responded it was important support in their work, a source of continuous learning and work on personal growth, a place of trust and safety, a place of support and exchange. They also stressed the importance of supervision for their work and their personal processes. In particular, the value of supervision in direct work with women and children SV/CSA survivors in finding and discovering new solutions, recognising their own blind spots, a form of emotional unburdening, the process of getting to know their strengths and limitations, as well as personal boundaries important for direct work with survivors.



“We have been extremely lucky and privileged to have, since our establishment, supervision by Dutch psychotherapists.” (DP)

“Absolute assistance in everything, personal (own processes) and progress in working with clients (self-assessment, new approach...)” (LJB)

“It helps to clarify and clean up your own feelings and to keep yourself resilient.” (JB)



Several participants also provided examples when some of the forms of supervision were not valuable or useful, which we believe is a significant problem in the Balkan region, where an exceptional challenge is to find trained supervisors who are experts in the field of SV. At the same time, supervisors who speak other languages were not always able to establish easily an equally good relationship, to a certain extent due to a lack of familiarity with the context and language barriers.



“Because of the war circumstances in which we began our work, we had a habit of relying on each other. I did not feel that some offers of supervision by colleagues from abroad provided to us by our founding members from Germany were the support we needed. Perhaps I (we) lacked the experience to take and properly benefit from the help offered...” (E)



Apart from supervision, we wanted to know how women human rights defenders **found the strength for their work**. The most common answers were related to the work itself and the issue of SV, the role and importance of support by



close people and co-workers, and positive changes and progress by women and children SV and CSA survivors. For each group parts of the participants' quotes are presented.

- **Attitude toward work and the issue:** *The fact that I love my job, it is my choice. Love of the issue. The fact that I am good at what I do. My interest in the field. The fact that I do it and live it. I am effective and the passion and commitment of those I work alongside. The belief that we can create a better world for all people, not only for the lucky ones.*
- **Support from close people and co-workers:** *Having people I love around me, who support me. Family, clients, colleagues, friends. Good relations in private life and at work. Generous collaboration and meeting people working in the same field. Child rights area attracts different characters, the more you are among activists, the more you have opportunities to have a real talk. There are more people with their heart in the right place.*
- **Positive changes in women and children they work with:**

"Each and every little change for the better in the SV survivors I work with, the feeling of "job well done", the sense of accomplishment, the feeling that I am doing the job that is needed at the substantive level and which responds to the actual needs of the survivors, through which I realise the spiritual values in which I believe." (MS)

"Seeing children become children again." (F)

The next were the questions about **how they "recharge" and what provides them with a balance to** the field in which they work.

The first ranked is love, in its various forms (7). Partner love, love towards children, grandchildren. Love towards pets. Recharging through solid and quality relationships in private life.

“

"If you ask me about this moment, the most important for me is the relationship with the person I love, to show that I care and how much I love her. Peace in a relationship is important to me." (LJB)

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The next is the nature, as they highlighted the importance of going to the country, to green areas where there are no people, walking by water, bathing in the sea, gardening (6).

Rest, travel, humour, music, sports and dancing were also important (6).

“

"I do not need much, yet I am content in every way. Time spent with my granddaughter; her innocence restores my energy. I like travelling anywhere, by bus, by train to a nearby town, I like to be alone, to think in peace, to walk in the countryside, to draw, to write. I especially like to write and I started doing it." (MS)

”

Brief happy moments that make up life are frequently cited, such as spending time with friends, cooking, sewing. Friends who are sensitive to the issue or share the same passion for it and for change are important.

Some of them chose solitude as a method of recharging, with a good book, a theatre play, a good movie.

As a source of recharging, the positive impact of successful direct work with women and child survivors of SV is essential.

“Strength to keep going, that is how I recharge, I also get from direct work with women, adolescent girls.... I can give the part that is “mine”, what I am as a person who works as a woman human rights defender, as a professional with all the characteristics I have... I keep seeing that the most important thing is that they have with them a person who is there for them, who cares... At the end of the day, what matters most is that when you are going through a difficult life situation, you are accompanied by someone who cares about you... Someone who cares about you as a person, not as “a case on which they are working.” (MPL)

“... the formulation of the theoretical framework within which I analysed individual cases on which I worked and the development of that framework for the purpose of designing trainings and education in that area, with a review of repercussions of that understanding on developmental and upbringing processes, on the one hand, and the design of the therapeutic approach, on the other.” (E)

Some emphasised that the foundation of recharging was proper and quality self-care.

“

“Maybe the origin is some general opinion that I am responsible for doing well, i.e., not expecting it from anyone else.” (E)

The last question in the area of self-care was **what they thought would help them feel stronger, more powerful**. Apart from the importance of a stable and peaceful private life, the role of financial security, understanding the importance of self-care, the importance of the organisation/institution in which they work, the protection of the position of women human rights defenders, networking and the context in which they work, were emphasised.

- **Private life:** peaceful private life, peace and happiness in private life, satisfaction in private life, being at peace in everything, with oneself, in friendship, family.
- **Financial security:** stable income, financial independence, the importance of women human rights defenders being adequately compensated for their expertise and their dedicated efforts.
- **Organised and paid self-care:** greater awareness of the need for rest, days off, different work reallocation, organised rest (e.g., summer camp at the seaside for defenders as a retreat where in a safe environment they would be able to discuss openly how the work in the subject area of SV affects the life of women human rights defenders and how they can protect themselves), paid self-care and care for their safety (an integral part of the budget approved by donors), I do a lot of things for myself that do me good.

“

“Retreat in a safe environment recharges me very well.” (JB)

”

- **Strengthening the capacity of organisations:** a trained and connected team, working with people I trust, stable financing independent of projects, less red tape, careful organisational planning, reasonable workload, time to talk and share with colleagues, regular and quality supervision.

“More resources and staff, what is exhausting is doing 3-4 different jobs rather than being able to focus on one aspect and doing it well.” (C)

- **Protection of women human rights defenders by the state:** adoption of laws and public policies that recognise and protect the position of women human rights defenders and their full and consistent application.
- **Networking:** with similar organisations, with persons doing the same work.
- **Change in the context in which they work:** better understanding of the work I do, a better situation in the country (political, financial):

“If I lived in my own country, but not in this situation. As much as I want it to stop affecting me, it does affect me. It makes me unhappy. And I know that it will never change, especially in the next 5 years. It has disrupted human relations, values. I have lost some friends. You can be the strongest person in the world, but if you cannot buy bread for your child or tights for yourself, it is truly upsetting. If you live like people live in Serbia, then you do not expect or think about retreats, etc. It is something far away.” (LJB)

## 5.6. FINAL WORDS AND THOUGHTS OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS REGARDING THEIR WORK

At the end of the survey, we wanted to find out from the participants if they could go back, whether they would again choose the subject area of SV for their field of work. All 12 defenders, without exception, answered positively, which speaks of their dedication and commitment to the issue that for most of them is not a “job” or “work”, but a lifestyle and life’s mission they have chosen.

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“Absolutely. I would do it all over again!” (DP)

“YES. This issue is my mission in life. I think I have something to give, that I have the knowledge and strength to make a difference.” (MM)

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“Yes, always. There is nothing else I could do. I probably think and feel like that because I am filled with an enormous amount of love and trust that my little clients have most sincerely bestowed on me.” (LJB)

“

“Yes, because it is a challenge in all aspects of life.” (MPL)

“With the insights that this field has given me, I would. Somehow, a lot of things came together and now it seems to me that it was meant to be.” (E)

“

“

“Yes, because I think that our work is needed at a substantive level and that the needs of SV survivors are crucial.” (MS)

“

“Yes. I believe it is my mission in life.” (N)

“

“Yes, I cannot see a more severe violation of human rights than CSEC.” (J)

“I am happy with my choice. I don’t think about alternate lives, this is the one I am living and I have no regrets. But I may not always work on this subject area. Even though we are passionate about this subject we should have the freedom to walk away and pursue different passions without judgement also.” (C)

“Yes!” (F)

“

“Yes, because I have seen so much restoration of confidence and happiness in children and groups-ups. I would choose the same field if I started again. I am grateful I can do this.” (JB)

At the end of the interview, the participants were asked whether they wanted to add anything that was not included in the questionnaire and interview. Three participants responded:

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“This topic of protection of women human rights defenders is important to me personally. Any self-organised action by women human rights defenders is important to me.” (DP)

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“I have already started writing short stories about clients, what I have learned from them, how they grew and transcended their difficult experiences, so I will continue to do so and I would like to publish a book about it someday.” (MS)

“

“

“I would just like to point out that I believe that working on the subject area of SV is simply my mission in life, what I do and live, and I think that is why I persevere despite all challenges.” (N)

“

At the end of the interview, thanking them for their participation, all participants were asked whether there was **anything** in the survey or interview that **hurt them or caused them not to feel well**, as feedback to the researchers. All the participants stated that they felt comfortable and well, and, at the end, here are three quotes:

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“NO. We had a really nice talk about a topic we never discuss. You never have time for that. You work and you work, and you do not have the time to think about it.” (LJB)

“Everything was fine, I felt fine throughout the interview and it was nice to meet you.” (MS)

“I did not even realise that we talked for over an hour. I felt comfortable and it was a pleasure talking about all this.” (N)

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## 6. SURVEY RESULT SUMMARY

This survey is about women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence. It is unique in the sense that no surveys have been conducted so far involving such a narrow group of women human rights defenders.

Narrowing the subject of survey to a very specific sub-group of women human rights defenders, this pioneering survey is a result of many years of reflection, as well as the understanding that women human rights defenders active in the field of SV are specific, in line with their very specific field of work.

The main objectives were to highlight the main characteristics of women human rights defenders active in the field of SV, their areas of work and successes, as well as sources of vulnerability and violence they experience precisely because of what they are and what they do. The aim was also to indicate whether and how long-term work on the subject area of SV affects women human rights defenders, as well as their sources of support.

The survey included 12 women human rights defenders from 8 organisations/institutions and two from private practices. They come from 8 countries in Europe including Balkans.

### 6.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTIVE IN THE FIELD OF SV AND THE VALUE SYSTEM AS THE BASIS FOR THEIR WORK

The survey participants have been working on the SV issue from 14 to 54 years (27 years on average). They have invested **a total of 295 years** in preventing and combating sexual violence, and providing direct assistance to survivors.

More than half of them started working very early, most often as pioneers in the field of SV globally or in their country. All the survey participants have university degrees, 5 have masters' degrees and 3 have PhDs. By profession, they are mostly psychologists.

Eight participants are founders/co-founders of organisations/institutions in which they work (or worked).

A total of 8 participants lived through a war in their country (7 from the Balkan countries and one from the Netherlands), five of which were working during the war on the protection of women's human rights.

They got involved in the field of SV for different reasons. Some of the defenders started as part of the anti-war movement, some by working with women who were war rape survivors and in response to the consequences of the war that was ongoing, some by working to protect women's human rights and lesbian rights, some came into contact with the subject through their everyday professional work and decided that something important needed to be changed and done in that field.

The survey participants work in organisations/institutions where the most emphasis is on promoting the rights and the direct protection of women and children, including the development of specialised services, national and international trainings on all aspects of SV, and conducting surveys on SV.

All participants highlighted as their core values feminism, anti-war activity and anti-fascism.

### 6.2. CHANGES INITIATED BY WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS BY THEIR WORK AND KEY OUTPUTS

The survey participants stated as key points and achievements of their work the sense of their personal contribution to the subject area of SV and the significant changes in the field of SV resulting from many years of their dedicated work. They particularly highlighted changes in the following areas:

- **Intervention** - setting up the first specialised services for working with women and child survivors of SV, developing the first self-help groups, pioneering and innovative psychotherapy models, developing and implementing specialised educational models and developing technical literature;
- **Prevention** – conducting national campaigns, a significant impact on education reforms, in particular

through the introduction of learning about the subject of SV against children in kindergartens and schools;

- **Legislative changes** – significant legislative changes;
- **Development of public policies** – key strategic documents defining systemic changes and national policies in the field of SV, which have a long-term positive impact not only for the country where they were adopted, but also for neighbouring countries;
- **Research and impact on the academic community** – conducting pioneering research on SV, continuous and parallel merging of experience, knowledge and practice of CSOs and knowledge and insights of the academic community;
- **Other forms of work** - networking and developing strong cooperation between all relevant actors in SV notification and processing.

Women human rights defenders participating in this survey, their work, as well as the work of organisations/institutions they established and/or in which they work are recognised by the national and international public. **Five participants have received (24) or been nominated (4) personally for awards as many as 28 times. Seven organisations/institutions in which the defenders work have received (18) or been nominated (2) for awards at least 20 times.**

### **6.3. RISKS TO WHICH WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTIVE IN THE FIELD OF SV ARE EXPOSED AND THE SOURCES OF THEIR PERSONAL STRENGTH AND VULNERABILITY**

Some of the women human rights defenders clearly recognise and list risks, some of them internalise risks, even though they are aware of them, and some of them consider that there is no real risk (exclusively referring to, e.g., physical violence). Women human rights defenders cite risks facing them, their organisation and the people close to them.

**The risks they see as facing them** are also the forms of violence they have already experienced and for which it is assessed that they may be repeated. Some of the risks are generally related to the work in the subject area of SV, such as feeling overwhelmed by work, exposure to lack of understanding, burnout, secondary traumatising, the impact of work on own private life. Other risks that they see include concrete forms of harassment and violence, by different offenders (e.g., threats, disparagement of work and knowledge, intimidation by police and state security services, etc.).

**The risks they see as facing the organisation** are most often related to the lack of understanding of the work, importance and role of the organisation, disparagement of work, lack of resources, struggling with red tape required by donors etc. They also cite concrete examples of threats and violence (e.g., threats, phone tapping, police interviews, threats by offenders, intimidation of the organisation, damage to the organisation's reputation, etc.).

The risks that women human rights defenders see as facing **persons close to them** because of their work are of different levels, from connecting their families and close persons to the work of women human rights defenders, which is why they are exposed to ridicule, as well as threats and violence, to concrete threats, by different offenders. The most commonly cited are family members, such as children, parents etc.

In addition, the women human rights defenders' sense of protection by the competent government authorities and institutions depends on the country from which they come. It is slightly higher among the defenders from Western European countries, while among the women human rights defenders from the Balkan countries, it is either extremely low or even opposite - they believe that government bodies and institutions not only do not recognise the importance and role of women human rights defenders, but that they create room for violence by their non-action.

Although most women human rights defenders are familiar with some international documents, mechanisms and institutes dealing with the protection of women human rights defenders, they state there is no specific form of protection in their country or they are not aware of its existence. No women human rights defenders are aware of women human rights defenders' experience of protection by the competent government authorities or institutions in their country.

Women human rights defenders draw strength to combat SV from direct work with women and child survivors of SV, the importance of the issue of SV for them personally, the cooperation and support they receive from their organisations/institutions and through networking, as well as support from persons close to them and families.

As the most common reasons for the loss of strength, the participants cite a lack of understanding of the public and



the community in which they work, work overload and constant conflict with the traditional values in society. They further cite a lack of understanding by the professional community non-educated in the issue, as well as a lack of understanding and ignoring of the issue by the competent authorities, institutions, and even donors.

As **personal sources of vulnerability**, the women human rights defenders, first of all, cite tiredness, burnout, exhaustion, apathy, self-neglect and sense of pessimism. Sometimes the source of vulnerability is related to bad relationships in the team and in private life, sometimes due to work overload. As a source of vulnerability, the participants also cite fear for persons close to them, as well as the continuous struggle with institutions and occasional sense of powerlessness.

Due to their work, they occasionally feel very tired and exhausted, seven of them said that they had had major crises and difficult periods, but none had decided to stop working in the subject area of SV despite everything and all said that they would continue to work at the same intensity.

#### **6.4. EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE SUFFERED BY WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS ACTIVE IN THE FIELD OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE**

Of the 12 participants, 11 cited the experience of different forms of violence **that they had experienced personally** because they worked as women human rights defenders. Only one participant stated that while working in the current organisation, she had not experienced any of the above-mentioned forms of violence, although it is a woman human rights defender who experienced severe forms of violence as part of her previous work.

**The most common forms of violence** (several times and often) experienced by the women human rights defenders are: misogynous, sexist and homophobic statements (e.g., not a real woman, whore, lesbian, feminist, no children, a bad mother, lousy wife, lousy daughter, witch, etc.) and the use of gender and sexual stereotypes to tarnish the reputation and delegitimise the public image and work (e.g., rumours about their private life, sexual life, violating social norms, killers of unborn children, against family, men haters, home wreckers). The following are accusations (e.g., danger to the state, society, foreign mercenaries, spies, defying customs and tradition, undermining the reputation of the country in the world, why they are doing this of all things, who is paying them, what their real role is, etc.); persecution and stalking (over the telephone, e-mail, social networks, in person), public delegitimation of work; stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about them personally; psychological threats (e.g., they should be committed, prevented from working with women and children); threats against life and body (e.g., you should be ambushed and beaten up, I'll cut you open, I'll slit your throat); harassment (e.g., calls, messages, messages affixed to the wall or door of the organisation and/or home, emails, social networks, in person) and social isolation (e.g., avoidance by persons from other organisations and/or institutions, refusal of contact and cooperation).

The most common **causes of violence personally experienced** by the women human rights defenders are identified by them as work in the subject area of SV against women and children; work in women's, feminist organisation; revenge and anger of the offenders of violence; because they are women; advocating LGBTIQ rights; sexual orientation; challenging traditional values and the church; and violation of entrenched gender norms and roles.

As many as 7 participants stated that people close to them had experienced threats and/or violence because of their work.

The most common **places** where women human rights defenders personally experienced different types of violence (several times or often) are: in their organisation, over the telephone and/or e-mail by the offender; personal arrival of the offender in the organisation; in the institutions (police, courts and Centers for social work); in open public spaces (e.g., street); over a personal cell phone; at home over the phone or e-mail by an offender; in a public closed area; at outdoor public events (e.g., peaceful demonstrations); at indoor public events (e.g., during a panel discussion, lecture, press conference, etc.) and via the media.

**The most common offenders** of violence experienced personally by the women human rights defenders (several times and often) are: individuals; right-wing organisations; religious leaders; representatives of government authorities and institutions; representatives of the media; other organisations working in the field of protecting women's human rights and other groups (e.g., football hooligans), offenders of violence and families of offenders.

Some of these forms of violence were reported by women human rights defenders to the competent institutions. While the Western European women human rights defenders received protection, the Balkan women human rights

defenders did not receive protection and have also given up attempting to report violence.

Women human rights defenders also experienced attacks and **violence directed against the organisation/institution** in which they work. The most commonly experienced forms of violence (several times and often) are: stigmatisation, gossip and public rumours (e.g., spy organisation, working against family, poisoning children and youth, doing it only for a lot of money, unprofessional, the organisation gets too much money, poisoning family with imaginary violence); stigmatisation, gossip and rumours about the organisation in front of donors (e.g., they do not work to protect women's human rights, have too much resources, do not operate according to law); stigmatisation based on sexual orientation; threats (e.g., this organisation should be closed, burned down, banned); violence by the church - influence through institutions, religious organisations and media to promote traditional values and delegitimise the work of the organisation; violence by institutions through continuous inspections, oversight, operation controls, in order to find some irregularity, etc. Somewhat less frequent, but still present is the experience of media isolation, social isolation (e.g., other organisations, institutions, donors, etc. no longer wish to cooperate with the organisation); destruction of the organisation's equipment (e.g., breaking windows, doors, breaking the organisation's equipment, causing electric shock that destroys equipment); crashing (hacking) the organisation's website; and violence by the media (a pattern of continuous unethical reporting on the organisation's work, inaccurate, malevolent etc.).

The most common **causes of violence against the organisation/institution** are: the very issue of SV against women and children; anger and revenge of the offender; the fact that the organisation is women's and feminist organisation; because it is about women self-organising for the protection of their rights; anti-war, anti-fascist and peace-promoting activities; advocating LGBTIQ rights, because the organisation is supranational (works with survivors from all ethnic groups); because of the (presumed) sexual orientation of the members of the organisation.

The most frequent **offenders of violence** against organisations/ institutions in which women human rights defenders work are: offenders of violence against women and children with whom the organisation works; representatives of institutions; politicians, right-wing, nationalist and religious organisations; donors and other organisations for the protection of women's rights.

## **6.5. CHANGES IN THE LIFE OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS AS A RESULT OF WORK IN THE SUBJECT AREA OF SV AND THE SELF-CARE STRATEGY**

Work in the subject area of SV affects the lives of women human rights defenders in different ways, which is rarely discussed. The women human rights defenders referred to personal changes resulting from work in the subject area of SV. The most common consequences are that the topic has led to general changes in both their lives and personal changes, and changes in the perception of the world around them.

More than half of the women human rights defenders cited changes in psychological functioning, physical and behavioural changes. A quarter of the participants cited changes in their perception of themselves as sexual persons and their own sexuality.

Given the difficulty of their job and work in the subject area of SV, it was important to find out how the women human rights defenders dealt with the subject, what was helpful, what helped them recharge. The majority of participants have regular supervision and stressed its importance for both their personal processes and for their work with survivors. They draw additional strength for work from the very issue of SV and its importance, then close associates/and persons close to them, as well as positive changes in the recovery of women and child survivors of SV.

Love (for their partner, child, friends, animals) is what provides them with balance. They also care about the nature, socialising, relaxing with people close to them, everyday things that make life, travel, humour. Some of them said they found it important to have the time to be alone with a book and/or a movie. And most of them repeated that positive changes and recovery of survivors were important to them.

Women human rights defenders stated that peaceful and stable family life helped them feel stronger and more powerful, and financial security, organised and paid self-care, strengthening the organisation's capacity, protection of women human rights defenders by the state, connecting with similar organisations and changing the context in which they operate, would be helpful.

## 7. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVING THE SOCIAL POSITION OF WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

Based on the analysis of the survey data and owing to the open and detailed responses of the participants and the time they invested, recommendations have been developed to improve the social position of women human rights defenders active in the field of SV.

1. **Promoting the values and importance of the work of women human rights defenders in the area of sexual violence**, the changes they have initiated and key work results. The well-deserved recognition of their work. It should come both from the organisations/institutions themselves and the government.
2. **Protecting women human rights defenders from violence**
  - a) Recognising the status of women human rights defenders in accordance with international documents.
  - b) Improving legislation and public policies with regard to the mechanisms and institutes for the protection of women human rights defenders and their consistent application. Asking women human rights defenders what it is they need in terms of protection.
  - c) Promoting mechanisms and institutes of protection among women human rights defenders and the public at large.
  - d) Increasing the visibility of the work of women human rights defenders and awareness of the risks to which they are systematically exposed.
3. **Strengthening the self-organisation of women human rights defenders and organisations/institutions working in the field of sexual violence**
  - a) Strengthening the capacity of organisations/institutions in which women human rights defenders work to identify risks and familiarity with the mechanisms and institutes of protection.
  - b) Systemically supporting networking among similar organisations/institutions in the area of sexual violence so that they can work together to strengthen their protection against potential risks.
  - c) Mobilising similar organisations/institutions working in the field of sexual violence for solidarity and protection of women human rights defenders in emergency cases of need for protection.
  - d) Systemic financial support for the work of women human rights defenders and organisations institutions in the field of sexual violence.
  - e) Ensuring organised and paid self-care.
4. **Regularly conducting comprehensive surveys on women human rights defenders active in the field of sexual violence**, as a basis and foundation for further improvement of their position and protection.

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## 9. ANNEX 1 LIST OF STUDY PARTICIPANTS

Initials for quotations:	Name and surname of participants:
<b>DP</b> .....	Duška Popadić
<b>MM</b> .....	Maja Mamula
<b>LJB</b> .....	Ljiljana Bogavac
<b>MPL</b> .....	Maja Plaz
<b>E</b> .....	Edita Ostojić
<b>MS</b> .....	Marijana Senjak
<b>N</b> .....	Nada Koprivica
<b>J</b> .....	Joanna Lundquist
<b>C</b> .....	Cliona Saidlear
<b>F</b> .....	Francien Lamers-Winkelman
<b>MR</b> .....	Maria Schillaci
<b>JB</b> .....	Janet van Bavel

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