

Manual of Operation for Women's Specialist Services in crisis situations

TRUST

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Table of Contents

Project summary and objectives	4
Introduction	5
1. Critical lessons learned from the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic	6
1.1. Women’s Specialist Support Services responded during the pandemic and the role of State services	6
1.2. Women’s specialist services in the post-pandemic period	7
2. Roadmap to Change: Mitigating the impact of crises and achieving sustainable performance	9
2.1. The key elements of sustainable performance for WSSs	9
2.2. Processes and outcomes	10
2.3. The people in WSSs	11
3. Lessons learned and change in modes of operation	14
3.1. Pilot actions and key challenges	14
3.2. The Mode of Operation for WSSs	16
3.3. The Mode of operation at the ecosystem	23
3.4. The Do’s and Don’ts – Recommendations for an optimum performance	24
4. Bibliography	28

Project summary and objectives

TRUST is a two-year transnational project that aims to ensure the capacity and resilience of women's specialist services (WSS) to more effectively adapt and upscale their services and interventions in response to the challenges brought by the COVID-19 crisis and the post-pandemic environment. This includes developing robust mechanisms to meet the new reality and prepare for future emergencies or crises.

The project encompassed capacity building and training for professionals and the design and implementation of working methods and tools to support WSS to effectively support and protect women victims of gender-based violence and their children using a victim-centred and gender-specific approach.

Project activities include mapping and evaluating measures adopted by women's specialist services to protect women victims of intimate partner violence and their children in times of crisis; the development of support tools to improve sustainability and resilience of WSS in times of crisis; addressing the strain on service provider staff by developing practices and tools that support staff well-being; and communication and advocacy activities.

The project's consortium is composed of the coordinator – the Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS) (CY) – and other organisations:

- Union of Women Associations of Heraklion (UWAH) (EL);
- União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR) (PT);
- Fundació SURT (ES);
- Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (APHVF/SPAVO);
- Rel.Azioni Positive (IT);
- Autonome Österreichische Frauenhäuser (AÖF) (AT);
- Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF) (BG);
- Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale (IRS) (IT).

Through this partnership, seven EU countries are represented: Cyprus, Greece, Spain, Portugal, Austria, Italy and Bulgaria.

Introduction

The Manual of Operation provides guidelines for implementation of new models of operation based on the results of the pilot experimentation and social impact assessment carried out within the framework of the TRUST project. The guidelines serve as a “roadmap of change” for WSS in emergency/crisis situations.

The Manual of Operation has the following structure:

1. Critical lessons learned from the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic:

This chapter describes the main lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis, how WSSs responded to the challenges brought about by the pandemic and associated restrictions, and the role of state services.

2. Roadmap to change – How to mitigate the impact of crises and achieve sustainable performance:

This chapter illustrates the key elements needed for an organisation to ensure sustainable performance in the post-pandemic environment and to respond to the challenges highlighted in Chapter 1. This chapter also describes the core processes and actions that can be adopted by organisations, paying special attention to their internal structures and management practices and the fundamental role of teams in ensuring organisational sustainability.

3. Lessons learned and change in mode of operation:

This chapter introduces the pilot interventions organised by the partners of the TRUST project during the implementation of the project. As such, the Manual of Operation aims to provide comprehensive responses to the key challenges identified during the implementation of the pilot interventions and lessons learned. A new Mode of Operation is proposed as a road map for organisations to adjust their actions and functionality in periods of crisis to ensure their sustainability. A list of Do’s and Don’ts is also provided, serving as a check-list organisational staff.

This manual proposes an upgraded organisational model of performance addressing the social and political challenges taking place in Europe during the post pandemic period. The proposed mode highlights critical issues to be addressed by organisations, focusing on Women Specialist Services (WSSs), which play a significant role in combating Violence against Women and Girls. However, it is applicable to all Civil Society Organisations that aim to have a significant social impact in the societies they operate in.

1. Critical lessons learned from the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic

1.1. Women's Specialist Support Services responded during the pandemic and the role of State services

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Women's Specialist Support Services (WSSs) encountered unprecedented challenges in responding to the surge in violence against women while dealing with the restrictions and limitations imposed by government authorities to deal with the global health crisis. Reports indicated a significant increase in domestic violence cases across Europe, with women facing heightened risks due to confinement measures and restrictions on mobility. The pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and inequalities, disproportionately impacting women and exacerbating the prevalence of violence against them. In this context, WSSs responded to the urgent task of providing support to women in need, while adapting to the new reality imposed by the pandemic including constantly changing health and safety restrictions, remote working conditions, increased intensity and complexity of case management, among others.

State authorities played a crucial role in determining the sustainability and effectiveness of women's specialist support services. In some countries, state authorities supported WSSs and addressed the complex issue of violence against women during this tumultuous period while, in others, they neglected the critical need for specialised support to victims-survivors during this period.

In the EU, while most Member States took some form of action to support and protect women victims of intimate partner violence and their children in response to Covid-19, there is diversity in both measures adopted and impact. In Bulgaria, for example, when the pandemic started, the Bulgarian government did not take any measures for the protection of victims of domestic violence; shelters were closed and were not allowed to accommodate the victims. Spain, France, and Ireland in contrast, have been cited as implementing promising practices including legislative/judicial interventions, online communication tools, and awareness raising (EIGE, 2021). Moreover, few EU Member States developed detailed guidance on emergency action and, in those countries that did, they were reactive and implemented only after the outbreak and introduction of restriction measures. In addition, very limited measures were implemented by governments to provide tailored support for disadvantaged groups such as refugees and migrant women, homeless women, elderly women, women who identify as LGBTIQ or women with hearing impairments.

In some Member States, there were positive examples of state interventions to support WSSs during the crisis period. For example, one of the primary challenges faced by WSSs was the transition to remote service provision in order to comply with social distancing measures. State authorities played a critical role in facilitating this transition by providing guidance, resources, and funding to support the implementation of remote support methods, such as telephone helplines, online chat services, and digital platforms. Despite initial hurdles, WSSs quickly

adapted their service delivery models to ensure continued access to support for women experiencing violence.

Additionally, awareness-raising campaigns were launched by many Member States to inform the public about intimate partner violence and available support services during the pandemic. These campaigns, supported by the public sector, aimed to increase awareness of the signs of violence, promote help-seeking behaviour, and reduce the stigma surrounding domestic abuse. By raising awareness and providing information about available resources, these initiatives played a crucial role in connecting women with the support they needed.

Furthermore, state authorities worked to expand shelter accommodation options for women fleeing domestic violence in response to increased demand. Efforts were made to expand existing shelter capacity and establish temporary accommodation options to ensure that women had safe places to stay during lockdowns and restrictions. Legislative measures were also introduced or strengthened in some Member States to provide legal protections for victims of domestic violence and enable them to safely flee abusive situations. State authorities played a crucial role in enacting and enforcing these legislative measures, ensuring that women had access to legal protections and support mechanisms.

Despite delays in funding, in many countries state authorities provided financial support to WSSs to help them continue their essential work during the pandemic. This support was crucial in ensuring the continuity of services and meeting the increased demand for support from women experiencing violence.

In summary, through initiatives such as awareness-raising campaigns, expansion of shelter accommodation, legislative support, and financial assistance, the public sector helped mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic on women experiencing violence and ensured that they had access to essential support services.

1.2. Women's specialist services in the post-pandemic period

Even prior to the pandemic, in many countries the full range of services for victims of gender-based violence, as envisioned by international standards such as the Council of Europe Convention on Prevention and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), remained unavailable, inaccessible, uncoordinated or of low quality. COVID-19 revealed the alarming lack of access to sustainable, structural and societal support services for women and girl survivors or at risk of violence.

Within this context, WSS stepped in to fill gaps in State-provided services and social protection programmes, buffering inadequate state support and providing an informal safety net. WSSs had to rapidly and resiliently adapt existing operations to meet escalating demand and sustain vital services to meet the urgent needs of women and girls. Despite this, insufficient attention has been brought to the impact of the crisis on the capacity of WSS and front-line professionals, including strain and burnout, lack of skills and technological knowhow, inadequate risk

assessment tools, breakdown in multi-agency mechanisms, and lack of economic and human resources to respond to demand, particularly during the lockdown and post-lockdown period.

In the aftermath of the pandemic period, violence against women was no longer prioritised in the public policy agenda in terms of financial support or collaborative efforts within multi agency frameworks. WSSs faced significant challenges in maintaining the level and intensity of service provision, demonstrating a lack of organisational preparedness to adapt to the new reality after the COVID-19 pandemic. This lack of clear direction, positioning, and flexibility within WSSs led to staff burnout, silent quitting, and many individuals in the field re-evaluating their personal priorities and career goals (W. Johnson, 2022, HBR). Simultaneously, WSSs faced significant challenges in reorienting their service provision to the new post-COVID-19 era. This included restructuring internal operations, enhancing service delivery, raising awareness, and adapting to the new operational reality.

The key challenges identified by WSSs in the post-pandemic period included the need to re-define the internal setting and management towards a new approach in relation to staff diversity, flexible models of working, and of assessing the impact of service provision on victim/survivors. In doing so, adopting an intersectional approach that takes into account the lived experiences and material realities of diverse groups of women was also identified as key.

2. Roadmap to Change: Mitigating the impact of crises and achieving sustainable performance

2.1. *The key elements of sustainable performance for WSSs*

The TRUST consortium assessed the key strategies of adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic in seven EU member countries (Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Austria, Bulgaria, Portugal and Spain) and proposed a number of key steps that WSSs need to take over to maintain and upscale their performance in the post-COVID 19 period. The TRUST project partners engaged in a collaborative learning process in order to understand the context and the needs of stakeholders and women. After this first phase, the partners implemented their pilot programme experimentations, aiming to lay the groundwork for more resilient and adaptable WSSs in the future. Experimentation involved the piloting of novel procedures: activities, new processes, introduction and operation of new/updated procedures. As a result, 23 pilot actions were implemented across the seven partner countries.

This manual of Operation builds upon the “*Social Impact Assessment*” of the pilot programmes implemented at the local level. The goal was to assess the social impact of new measures introduced and/or adapted to assist WSSs and to identify potential future implications of the proposed actions. It also takes into account the outputs of the analytical activities carried out by the TRUST partner consortium including peer exchanges and online focus groups on key thematic areas such as self-care and well-being, team building, internal communication and supervision, fundraising and outreach, online chat service, and addressing digital dimension of violence.

The emerging steps highlighted by the above-mentioned analytical activities led to a re-engineering and a change in internal processes of the WSSs to foster adaptability and resilience in the post COVID-19 environment. The *roadmap for change for WSSs* is based on an upgraded mode of operation based on *flexibility* at every level of operation (top management, operations, fieldwork). Diverse multidisciplinary teams, continuous impact assessment and evaluation of actions, as well as strong evidence-based advocacy actions towards the state authorities are essential in supporting this process.

Each WSSs (as a Civil Society Organisation) operates and interacts with numerous entities in the public and/or the private sector at local/regional level. This is called an *ecosystem*. For the purposes of this manual, an *ecosystem* is defined as *a system whose members interact and benefit from the operation of each other. It can be comprised of entities of the public and private sector, including the Civil Society Organisations, and/or feminist organisations active in awareness raising and other activities* (Willie Chang, 2010).

The dynamics within an ecosystem are mainly affected by institutional interventions stemming from legislative actions by the central administration under specific national/regional level policies. The prevailing culture within the *ecosystem* is of “*helping the beneficiaries*” at all system levels. Collective/coordinated actions of the actors within the ecosystem have the

potential to shape what we define as a “social change” or “improved coordinated response”. Within this framework, for WSS, the political context in relation to violence against women and girls determines the ecosystem’s performance can be described as a coordinated response, or whether it is dominated by state agencies, such as law enforcement. In a constantly changing environment), WSSs need to show *flexibility* in performance, as well as demonstrate strong *accountability*, and *responsiveness*.

To this end, ongoing SWOT analyses correlated with social impact assessments provide an important baseline, to evaluate the impact of different aspects of WSSs operation. This evaluation needs to take place on two basic levels: From the perspective of an organisation’s internal operations on the one hand, and of the ecosystem within which the WSSs are functioning, on the other. Upper management (or members of staff who are responsible upon decision-making), need to take into account the outputs of such impact assessments and SWOT analyses and be able to “translate” them into action for upgrading operations and actions.

This is not an easy strategy. It is relying upon a set of strategic decisions to be made, regarding accountability, flexibility, and responsiveness, which may challenge some of the “pre-existing stereotypes” or long-standing modes of operation of the organisation and its professionals, as well as stakeholder perceptions of the organisation’s impact. This challenge requires people in upper management that have the vision and capacity to foresee the changes ahead and that are ready to contribute to re-defining the role and scope of the organisation to adapt to these changes. It requires a management willing to “invest” in the human resources and the teams within and is able to carry out advocacy actions towards a “continuous negotiation” with the public sector upon the terms and conditions of collaborative work. It would require diverse teams, multidisciplinary work and transparency at organisational level, as well as at the level of service delivery. This approach applies at all levels of the organisational setting (operating at either strictly hierarchy or at a more collective manner), focusing equally at fostering a novel leadership mind-set and an updated professional culture proposition within WSSs.

2.2. Processes and outcomes

Internal processes also need to respond to the dynamics of the ecosystem. Changes to the ecosystem are a significant driver of change in the internal processes of each organisation. The processes taking place within an organisation are of great importance to the development of sustainable actions. The implementation of effective processes is contingent upon the effective communication between the members of the different teams within the organisation. Different teams (field workers, social workers, and management and communication people) need to have a shared understanding of the dynamics of violence against women and girls, share a “common language”, as well as a shared understanding of the operation flows within the organisation.

In hierarchical organisational structures, both the people in the managerial and/or decision-making positions, as well as those engaged in communication and advocacy, need to collaborate closely with front line professionals, to identify and address challenges in the field.

They must be able to “translate” inputs into decisions regarding the optimization of accountability, transparency, and flexibility. As such, internal processes need to be consistent with accountability and aligned with the core values of the organisation, reflecting the high levels of multidisciplinary collaboration observed across different teams.

In less hierarchical organisational structures, mainstreaming internal discussions on outcomes should be the main driver for development. The different teams (field workers, management, communication and advocacy) may have distinct tasks and operations. In every organisational structure, communication, advocacy, and multidisciplinary work should prevail. Staff of different disciplines must be able to communicate effectively at different levels with the professionals of different disciplines and of different hierarchical levels on issues that concern the aims and objectives of the organisation in relation to combating violence against women. Different disciplines and professionals may have different perspectives and “language” on issues of violence (i.e. legal approach / psychosocial approach / managerial approach etc.), and would need to develop a common understanding and perspective at different levels (front line workers versus back office professionals). In the context of effective communication, all professionals should be able to achieve high levels of communication so to be able to operate effectively and collaboratively. This is an ongoing task for management (or team leaders), who must encourage and maintain a common narrative (in the context of a constantly changing external environment), promote coordinated responsiveness, and be able to adapt services to the needs of the beneficiaries.

The organisational set-up of WSSs must ensure transparency, including at front-line level, so that it is evident what the processes and outcomes are at every level within the organisation (i.e. front-line work, advocacy, legal support, and policy advocacy). Even “failure” can be a significant driver for the updating and adjustment of internal processes. Importantly, the needs of beneficiaries must be the main driver for WSSs development, and these needs may subject to change depending on the developments within the “ecosystem”, whether from legislative or policy changes. As such, multi-agency collaboration and coordinated responses by front-line services, prevails are also a key driver to success: All state and non-state organisations, services and professionals should smoothly collaborate with each other when needed to guarantee effective case management and ensure survivors’ safety. Thus, the best possible outcome can emerge from a continuous process based on the principles of accountability, responsiveness, transparency and flexibility.

2.3. The people in WSSs

Smooth team collaboration within the WSSs is the most fundamental driver of a successful operation. Effectiveness of teams relies heavily on strategic direction, the selection of the right people, and accountable and inclusive leadership. There are five fundamental conditions for the effective operation of WSS: creating a robust team; selecting the right people; creating a supportive organisational set up; and ensuring competent team coordination (R. Wageman, D. Nunes, J.A. Burruss, R. Hachman, 2008). WSS teams need to be composed of people from different disciplines, with diverse experience and expertise, for the most impactful operation.

Information sharing about the “dynamics” of the field (input from cases supported) needs to be assessed in conjunction with information regarding the legislative/policy/societal context and the institutional changes occurring. WSSs need to foster teamwork at every level of operation and teamwork must to be supported by all levels of middle and upper management. Recruitment and engagement of professionals should be based on a vision of multidisciplinary work, and collective and collaborative teamwork. Teamwork whether in hierarchy-based organisations or in more collective based ones is supported by professional diversity. Diverse teams ensure pluralism, effective debates and brainstorming while contributing to the minimization of “professional based taboos” within the organisation.

People working directly in the field need to act in coherence, and be able to participate in multidisciplinary teams, either at case management level, or at the operational level. People from management and communication need to be able to “listen” to the people from the field, understand their “voice”, and be able to see the meaning, and show deep engagement. The latter not only contributes to personal satisfaction, but it also promotes professional performance. A weak understanding of the “*voice of professionals*” may be detrimental to the operation of WSSs as can reflect on professionals’ performance in conditions of high pressure and stress. Engagement may decline as people get tired (burned out), confused with their role and level of engagement, and feel increasingly isolated (R. Wageman, D. Nunesm J. Burruss, J. R. Hackman, 2008). In time, professionals may start missing the meaning of their work and eventually seek new meaning to their career development. Weak communication and high stress can affect the top management in the same way. Investing in the soft skills of team members promotes self-care activities, while the diversity (teams composed by people from different disciplines) contributes positively to maintaining low levels of turnover. Self-regulation along with self-awareness may help team members identify and discuss the work-related stress before it becomes overwhelming. Self-awareness, self-care and investment in soft skills can lead to more positive personal relationships within an organisation, while open communication can shape a “common narrative” among team members of different disciplines regarding the organisation's position and operation. Organisation leaders (top management – Board – team leader), should be continuously reinforce the teamwork spirit as a one of the fundamentals for the successful operation of WSSs. Team members need to feel free to express their ideas, to reflect upon day-to-day operation and stress, and contribute to their colleagues’ personal development. Acting in isolation is a route to personal fatigue, low levels of professional performance, and eventually low-level personal development.

People who engage in teamwork, as well as those who engage in self-care and are developing their personal well-being, are better able to realise and adapt to changes. They are able to act in coherence, mitigating the impacts of any unforeseen extraordinary challenge/ outbreak. Adaptability to change is then an inevitable response to crises, tailored according to the dynamics and mentoring by the leadership (team leaders, top management).

Changes in the political context, institutional developments, and changes occurring at the society level may affect the internal structure and/ or at the greater context within which WSS operate. Organisations need to be ready and have the competence to collaborate at high levels

of performance with all front-line services either from the public sector, or from the civil society ecosystem. “Professionalism” in service provision requires the use of the appropriate tools for intervention, effective personal data management and protection, the systematic use of risk assessment tools, and continuous evaluation of performance and efficacy of interventions to ensure survivors’ safety. As many cases of violence have significant legal implications, front-line professionals need to act in coordination, use scientifically sound tools for their operation, and consider intersectionality¹ as a core activity in responses to violence against women. Thus, in response to any crisis, management and Board need to “revisit” the organisation’s key priorities and values, and make significant efforts to review their positioning and public performance.

Sustainable performance in the era after the COVID pandemic requires a significant investment in human resources and processes within the organisation. It needs a re-orientation of the management and Board, towards intersectionality, team working, and multidisciplinary work as a key driver of optimum performance. Diverse teams, smooth and open communication at all levels, information and knowledge sharing, and investing in soft skills and self-care of WSS staff, could be the determinants of a successful operation. In parallel, at the strategic level, organisations need to prioritise flexibility, accountability, transparency and responsiveness. These can be achieved with a robust and well-functioning operation of an organisation’s team.

It is becoming evident that frontline professionals (of various disciplines) require further education and training in order to effectively engage in multidisciplinary work and integrate intersectionality in their everyday work. As societies are in a constant state of change, WSS need to regularly revisit their position and operation, with a particular focus on highly specialised professionals who have a sound understanding of the various implications of intimate partner violence (legal, social, institutional), and of needed interventions to address the needs of victims. At the same time, top management and leaders of WSSs must understand the constantly changing political context and the challenges and threats it presents. This will enable them to respond effectively at the political level, to be flexible, to maintain integrity and to be effective in their work for the safety of all. Policy advocacy with central and local administrations and awareness raising are also key priorities for each WSS.

The proposed mode of operation presented in the next chapter aims to incorporate not only the present challenges, stemming from the post-COVID era, but also possible future ones as a practical guide for sustainable operations development of WSS.

¹ Tool for analysis, advocacy and policy development that addresses multiple discriminations and helps understand how different sets of identities impact on access to rights and opportunities. Intersectionality is an analytical methodology for studying, understanding and responding to the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. It starts from the premise that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history and the operation of structures of power. Intersectional analysis aims to reveal multiple identities, exposing the different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities. It aims to address the manner in which racism, patriarchy, class oppression and other systems of discrimination create inequalities that structure the relative positions of women. Intersectional analysis posits that we should not understand the combining of identities as additively increasing one’s burden but instead as producing substantively distinct experiences. It is therefore an indispensable methodology for development and human rights work. (Source: Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (2009). Glossary of Gender-Related Terms).

3. Lessons learned and change in modes of operation

3.1. Pilot actions and key challenges

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a "tough exercise" for WSSs across Europe. They had to rapidly adjust to an uncertain reality, where the demand for support services was increasing, and lockdowns and associated restrictions imposed a new context for operation, while existing operations were at stake.

WSSs had to adapt to the new reality of COVID restrictions and the emerging needs of women, at a significant cost. These costs highlighted the gaps and key issues for service delivery change. The role of the public sector, either during the COVID 19 pandemic or in the long term, is a critical determinant of sustainable operation of WSSs. Within the framework of the TRUST project, all project partners carried out SWOT analyses to highlight the key elements of risk in their operation, but also the key pathways for upgrading and developing their operation. Critical risks and deficiencies were highlighted, including fatigue of staff, lack of motivation, understaffing, and lack of financial resources. These challenges highlighted the need for a shifting in operations and in the mind-set of organisations; the digitalization of service provision in response to the digitalization of violence; increased outreach among local communities; intensive and well-structured fundraising actions; prioritisation and mainstreaming of policy and advocacy; and space and time for staff to reflect upon the operation and future of the organisation.

The second evaluation of the SWOT analyses carried out within the TRUST project highlighted the following factors:

- TRUST partners (WSSs) are well-established organisations with a thorough knowledge and capacity for providing services to the women in need.
- They are solid and active organisations not only at local level but also at regional, and (in some cases) at national level.
- They all faced the challenge of understaffing and staff turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath, especially among field workers.
- COVID-19 highlighted the vulnerabilities of WSSs in terms of human resource management and the need for mainstreaming self-care practices. At the same time, it highlighted the gaps among management for a solid human resources plan and for an action plan to respond to unexpected changes or crises. "Silent resignation" phenomena took place as people felt that they had "lost the meaning" of their work, or they felt that the overwhelming stress was simply too much.
- Funding remains a key factor for the sustainable operation of WSSs. The lack of adequate funding remains as a key challenge, and sufficient and sustainable funding from the public sector could play a decisive role in mitigating this risk.
- Legislative and policy changes (such as those that occurred during and after the pandemic) showed how the political context can significantly affect WSS operation and highlighted the need for organisations to remain flexible.

- Policy advocacy and lobbying need to be an integral part of the communication activities of WSS.

The analysis of the critical parameters for the effective performance of WSSs reveals some critical factors that can be considered “external interference”.

- *Legislative changes, public policies and political context* play a significant role in the effectiveness of organisations, as effective service delivery is highly dependent on legislation (i.e. legislation to combat violence against girls / institutional recognition of service delivery etc.). Changes at the legislative and policy level can play a positive or negative role in the performance of an organisation. WSS management needs to understand these changes and make decisions that will address the “flexibility / adaptability” of the organisation.
- *The needs of beneficiaries (women)* are constantly changing in terms of safety needs and empowerment. Understanding these needs, from an intersectional perspective, and translating them into supportive actions is a key challenge for the teams of WSSs. Innovative actions or changes in the way services are delivered to beneficiaries, the use of new tools for field workers, need to be at the forefront of WSS decision-making.
- *Policy advocacy, lobbying and communication* are as significant as awareness raising for WSS. Policy advocacy, lobbying and communication need to reflect, among others, the accountability, responsiveness and transparency of the organisation’s operation. Accountability towards its values, goals and beliefs in supporting beneficiaries, the adequate responsiveness towards the constant changing needs of beneficiaries, and the flexibility of the organisation to adapt its resources towards its strategic mission, need to be reflected in all its advocacy and communication activities. Policy advocacy needs to be supported with robust data and needs to follow the organisation’s strategic plan for societal change. Communication activities help maximise the visibility of advocacy/lobby activities, and contribute to strengthening the position of the organisation in the national/ local context.
- *Funding* for WSS remains an ongoing challenge. Organisations need to resolve this ongoing dilemma: to what extent is public funding affecting the integrity, accountability and independence of the organisation, and to what extent is public funding a “critical factor” for the upscaling and sustainability of the organisation? On the other hand, project-based restricted funding helps to foster innovation in organisations, but sustainability remains a critical issue. On the other hand, core operating funding would ensure continuous performance, financial security and sustainability of actions over time. However, depending only on public funding entails the risk of driving the organisation toward replicating the same operational deficiencies of the public sector, compromising its independence and transparency. Choosing to combine both core operational funding with project-based funding seems to ensure a better chance for long-term sustainability and growth. Project-based funding can support “Research & Development”, fostering the pathway for innovation and change, while core operational funding can ensure sustainability, and growth. As mentioned

above, the top management / decision making team of the organisation plays a significant role in this process.

These critical external factors together with the internal factors described above, seem to be main determinant factors for shaping the mode of Operation at the post COVID 19 era for the WSS.

3.2. *The Mode of Operation for WSSs*

Taking into account the above factors, in this chapter we propose an alternative Mode of Operation based on the outputs of the TRUST project, and especially the Social Impact Assessment² and the Manual of Change³.

The mode of operation focuses on the incorporation of key elements of the TRUST analysis and proposes a mode of operation embedded in the principles of flexibility, transparency, accountability and responsiveness. Communication is a horizontal parameter, which acts as a key element of successful operation.

The mode of operation focuses on the following steps:

1. **Input assessment.** Social impact assessment in interaction with a continuous SWOT⁴ analysis routine. SWOT analyses should be carried out at least twice a year, at two levels: one constituting a collective brainstorming of all WSS staff, and the second constituting the management (team leaders) and board level. The unbiased “voice of the staff” should be incorporated in the SWOT analyses of the management and board. Social impact assessments should be carried out annually, incorporating (if possible) methodologies of Social Return on Investment⁵. The outputs of the aforementioned process should be annexed to the Annual Action Plan of the organisation.

It is further recommended that this process is carried out every 3 years in full transparency with staff, and that it is discussed at the annual meeting of the management and staff. In addition, focus groups with beneficiaries are recommended (every 3 years), that will bring the “*voice of the beneficiaries*” and translate them into Decision-Making and Action (see next steps). The effective “translation” of the voice of beneficiaries into service provision that effectively meets their needs can often “reset” many existing

² Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale, (2023). Social Impact Assessment. TRUST EU Project – Deliverable 4.2.

³ Manual of Change; Collection of practices & processes for Women Support Services, (2023). TRUST EU Project – Deliverable 3.2.

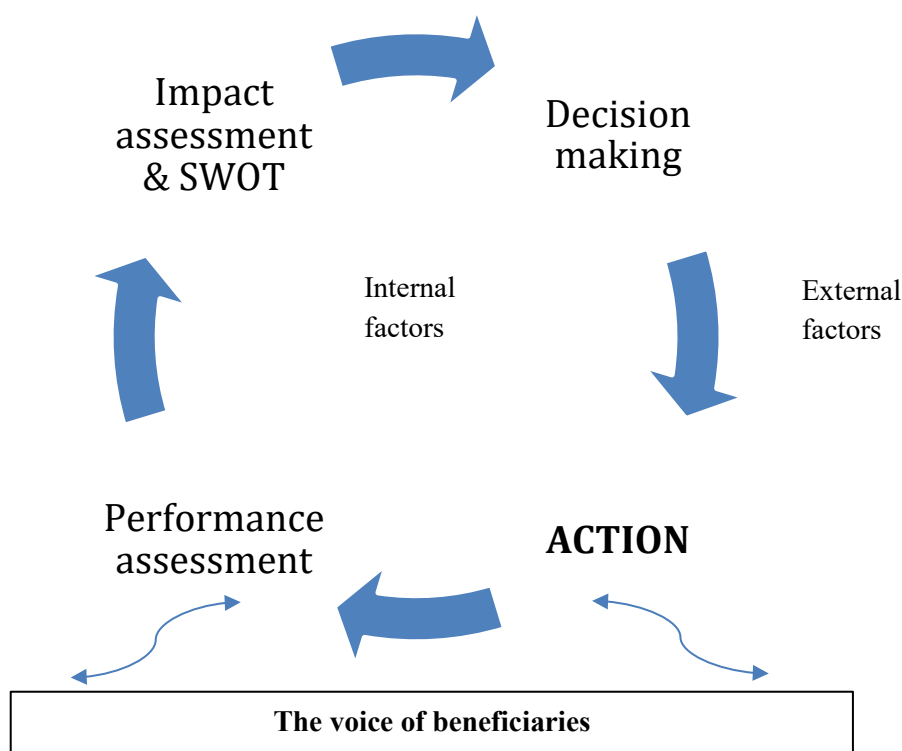
⁴ SWOT analysis is a strategic planning and strategic management technique used to help a person or organisation identify Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats related to business competition or project planning (Wehrich, 1982).

⁵ Social return on investment (SROI) is a methodology that allows a deeper understanding of the social, health, environmental and economic values created by a range of NGOs implementing projects under social contracting. It is a framework to measure and account for the value created by a programme or series of initiatives, beyond financial value. It incorporates social, health, environmental and economic costs and benefits. Source: The SROI Network, (2012). A Guide to Social Return on Investment.

organisational routines and processes, and will bring new insights about the perception / stereotypes of professionals.

2. **Decision-making** on core strategic aspects (i.e., strategy for advocacy, fundraising, and human resources management) is a critical process for the internal efficacy of each organisation. Decision-making should not be considered a “static” process but a dynamic one that is continuously adapting to new and emerging needs and realities. Impact assessment drives Decision-Making at various levels (strategic, managerial, field working) and needs to be translated into activities in the field.
3. The “**Action**” is a set of activities that range from field operations and service delivery, internal team building coordination, and self-care of staff, to awareness and advocacy with the public sector at the local level or at the national level. The “Action” step includes a diverse set of activities at different levels, fed by the organisation’s decision-making (previous step). Flexibility, transparency, and consistency are key factors for the successful operation of the “Action” step.
4. The “**Performance assessment**” step is the final step of the mode, a process assessing the impact of the decisions and activities of the organisation. This step analyses and assesses the outputs of the actions implemented either in the field or in the ecosystem within which the organisation operates. Its outputs feed into the Impact Assessment & SWOT.

Diagram 1. Schematic view of Mode of Operations for WSS during crisis



This is a dynamic process that can be understood as a “*spiral helix*” action that is “*moving*” *upwards, in the case of the organisation's development, or downwards, in the case of downsizing.*

The *downsizing* situation could be the outcome of two main “developments”: the internal processes - the aftermath of the internal (negative) dynamics of the organisation, and the external negative interferences coming from the local/regional ecosystem within which the organisation is operating. In the latter case, the role of the public sector is a crucial factor in the process (see properties of operation – influencing factors).

Instead, the *upscaling* situation is the outcome of a vibrant internal process, which includes solid management / decision-making, self-care, empathy, and effective teamwork, strong accountability transparency, advocacy, dialogue and communication, coupled with positive institutional developments stemming from effective and supportive public policies. This upscaling condition is an aftermath of effective collaboration of the public sector with the CSOs/WSSs operating at regional or national level.

The essentials of the model:

- i. Internal Communication***

Transparent communication within the organisation is the catalyst for teamwork consolidation and organisational efficacy. Communication needs to be assured among teams and among team members either at a formal level (through staff meetings or focused brainstorming meetings) or through informal and/or bilateral meetings. The “small talk”, the sharing of challenges and the sharing of outputs within the staff is a key bonding activity, ensuring the flexibility and responsiveness. Communication needs to be promoted by the management team, while sharing of “field inputs” consolidates the decisions of the organisation, tests the target setting, and inspires the staff to avoid situations leading to burnout.

ii. Team building and functionality, soft skills and self-care

Communication needs to be in place together with staff self-care activities and soft skills development. The top management needs to promote soft skills, and specialised staff members can act as internal trainers for the less skilled professionals for soft skill development and self-care.

Field workers are encouraged to share the “small victories” emerging from the cases that they support, while “fails” can also serve as valuable lessons to be learned for all the staff members. When mainstreamed in an organisation’s operations, this process forges personal relations among the staff, and promotes multidisciplinary work. Professionals need to feel safe in voicing their thoughts and feel able to speak up. The development of a culture of transparency and trust needs to be a priority for the well-being of staff and a team’s functionality. The management / team leaders need to promote the amplification of “under-presented” voices by giving space to them and publicly endorsing their insights. This proactive support disrupts biases and promotes diversity within the organisation.

Soft skills need to be prioritised to mainstream empathy and emotional intelligence among team members. To this end, collaboration, communication, empathy and goal-centric thinking as an “open minded” approach are effective tools. Troubleshooting attitude change and learning even by perceived “failures” are equally important elements of a soft skills based working environment. Smart operations include not only the exploitation of new technology but also the engagement of people who can adapt to change. The human resources need to have/develop the mind-set that will help them successfully adapt to new technologies, new methodologies, new knowledge (HBR, 2023).

iii. Leadership

Due to the considerable mental pressure in the field, leadership needs to be inclusive and have high levels of empathy for the staff, prioritise self-care, and promote internal communication and multidisciplinary collaboration.

Flexibility, accountability, transparency and responsiveness are the main strategic priorities, ensured by yearly Action Plans approved by the General Assembly (or other high-level decision-making body), to ensure solidary and social responsibility.

Emotional intelligent leadership needs to be in place contributing to the “optimal personal performance” of individual staff members.

The annual Action Plan needs to be meaningful and realistic, acting as a follow-up to the business plan, setting the agenda for performance. The business and action plan must include the SWOT analysis and its risk analysis (as an aftermath of the SWOT), guiding strategic decisions for the short-term (annual) and medium-term (3 years) for the organisation. The strategic decisions should be effectively communicated to the teams within the framework of shaping the characteristics of the day-to-day performance of the WSS.

Daily performance in the field should result in concrete outputs, which must be subject to (impact) assessment. The latter needs to be both qualitative and quantitative and include methods for determining the social return on investment (SROI). At the same time, the assessment needs to include the team's reflections on the output. This process leads to the development of a SWOT analysis – Risk Assessment that will drive the decision-making process (annual) and upscale / maintain performance.

Properties of operation – Influencing factors

The mode of operation at macro level should not be considered as a static model - it is a dynamic process moving either upwards or downwards in the form of a helix. The direction in which the helix operates, up or down, is determined by external and internal factors.

a. External factors

- i. The interactions with the local “functioning ecosystem” - Intersectionality

Interaction with the local/regional/national ecosystem is an integral part of effective performance in support of women affected by violence. Multi-agency collaboration/multi-disciplinary work needs to be the '*core working agenda*' of the organisation's teams. Team members must have the skills to work smoothly with frontline professionals from different disciplines and from different organisations. Organisations that find it difficult to work with frontline services and agencies in providing support services to women will experience negative or problematic outcomes. Inwardness and low levels of connectivity are negative aspects of an organisations' work. Conversely, outward-looking operations, the potential for multi-agency cooperation and interconnectedness offers opportunities for mutual learning and the provision of improved services and outcomes for women.

- ii. The role of the public sector and its influencing institutional role

The legislative/institutional framework is an influencing factor on the overall performance of WSSs. Changes in legislation and its provisions can affect performance (positively or negatively) and, in some cases, even determine the institutional role and positioning of organisations. The latter need to review their institutional position on a regular basis; any institutional change requires a review of positioning with flexibility and efficiency.

b. Internal Factors

i. Team performance

The teams' operation and internal interactions can influence the overall performance of an organisation. Teams operating in the field are subject to significant mental strain, frustration, and pressure due to the intensity of the cases they are managing. Team members need to be effectively coordinated and self-care mechanisms should be developed and maintained. At the same time, teams working in other parts of the organisation need to be aware of the pressures and challenges professionals working in the field face on a daily basis. Recruitment needs to be contextual and specific so that people find meaning in their work. Equally important is the development of soft skills as described above. Strong internal processes for self-care and soft skills promotion can minimise fatigue, and help people maintain engagement and meaning in their work. Effective communication should incorporate data from the field (both qualitative and quantitative), evaluating needs of beneficiaries and assessing performance; therefore, impact assessment and effective performance assessment would drive the organisation forward.

However, *understaffing* due to inadequate funding remains a critical risk factor affecting a teams' performance. Management needs to take into account this risk factor in short/mid-term planning, while advocacy for fundraising should be a key priority.

i. Accountability transparency and responsiveness

Accountability is a key factor for positive organisational performance. Accountability that adequately reflects the core values of the organisation and its core mission ensures quality, resilience and effectiveness. Discrepancies and gaps in accountability can cause serious disruptions for staff, reduce the sense of purpose of engagement and ultimately minimise outcomes and overall performance.

Transparency in service delivery acts as a 'validation' of accountability, ensuring the consistency and effectiveness of organisations. Transparency can also be a very powerful organisational asset for advocacy, communication and awareness raising. At the same time, it validates performance and staff commitment to the core values and mission of the organisation. Clear and transparent procedures internally affirm the organisation's credibility and contribute positively to its learning and development.

Responsiveness reflects the dedication of the organisation in responding to the needs of the beneficiaries and this is the result of an effective team's operation. Responsiveness requires a thorough understanding of the needs of the beneficiaries, and of the dynamics within the field in which the organisation operates. Understanding the needs of the beneficiaries, direct or indirect, and translating them into action on the ground emerges as a key process for the successful operation of the organisation.

In conclusion, lack of accountability, low transparency and low levels of responsiveness contribute significantly to the downsizing of the organisations' operation, negatively affecting

the functioning of teams and their performance. These problematic aspects highlight significant management deficiencies and the necessity to restructure operations. Conversely, effective management and team functioning are reflected in high levels of accountability, transparent operations and high levels of responsiveness, all of which point the way to organisational improvement.

ii. Flexibility and accountable leadership

Flexibility in an organisation is the ability of leadership to translate changes in the field (at any level) into improved action. Organisations that are not agile do not have the capacity to recognize change in time and, if they do, the cost in terms of human and financial resources can be disproportionately high.

The effective understanding of needs implies an effective communication and data analysis from the field. The translation of needs into up-scaled activities, and the ability of the organisation to adapt to change, is a reflection of accountable leadership and management. Management acts in an inclusive mode, promoting soft skills, self-care and data understanding, while it is able to rearrange activities within different teams in an inclusive way.

It is of paramount importance to be able to listen to the voice of the beneficiaries, to comprehend the key factors that contribute to the maximisation of quality and safety in service delivery, to identify the gaps and deficiencies in the system-wide response, and to adapt accordingly. This level of information is of crucial importance for impact assessment and SWOT analysis (when performed), to facilitate more efficient decision-making processes for the scaling up of performance, taking into account the constraints posed by underfunding.

Concurrently, a comprehensive understanding of the institutional and political context, along with the implications of changes at the legislative and policy level, empowers leadership to redefine the organisation's position without constraints and to formulate effective advocacy and political negotiation strategies with public authorities.

The mode of operation presented above, is applicable to every type of organisational structure, ranging from strict hierarchical organisational contexts to more collective, less hierarchical organisational structures.

In hierarchy-based organisations (of small to medium size),⁶ the proposed mode of operation mainstreams the processes of social impact assessment (and potential SROI analysis), enhances multidisciplinary teamwork, and prioritises self-care activities for staff. It proposes a more accountable and inclusive leadership, and its close interaction with the communication and policy advocacy.

⁶ For the context of this document, we consider as “small to medium sized organisations, the ones with a staff from 3 to 20 people

At less hierarchy-based organisation (more focused on collective team working), the proposed mode of operation introduces and mainstreams the significance of flexibility, adaptability, social impact assessment and the self-care of staff. Organisations that follow norms of collective decision-making need to pursue structured processes for social impact evaluation and decision-making, and clearly realise the impact and positioning of the organisation in the ecosystem. The mode of operation could be applicable and act as a pathway for sustainable development and growth.

3.3. The Mode of operation at the ecosystem

In the previous section, we analysed the proposed mode for organisational operation, resulting from the analysis of two key parameters. The *self-evaluation of the operation* of the organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic, and the *results of the pilot actions* implemented during the implementation of the TRUST project actions.

We proposed the theoretical context of the “helix” mode of operation for WSS, adaptable in a social context that is in constant change, while the institutional framework is also changing. The need for adequate funding prevails as a key determinant / restrictive factor for successful operation contributing decisively to staffing.

Assessing the social impact of supporting women affected by violence is the cornerstone of the process. Mainstreaming the impact assessment of the organisations’ activities, SWOT analyses at different levels, and the inclusion of the “voices of beneficiaries” are the key milestones for organisational development and growth. The information (and data) from the assessment needs to be the subject of sharing among staff in the different teams, so as to consolidate the mission and to update the organisational narrative to successfully address the challenges ahead in the short and medium term. This process promotes coherence, solidarity and promotes self-care activities by asking for a continuous reflection from the staff.

The *Action* phase involves all the mainstreamed activities of the organisation which are affected by contextual restrictions (underfunding, understaffing, legislation /policy context changes), and of the different “languages” used by different professionals by different agencies. Flexibility and effectiveness at top management level, to the level of front-line professionals, needs to prioritise the wellbeing of the organisation’s teams, while designing and communicating a solid performance plan. Coordination at this level should not be perceived as a top-down approach, but rather as a two-way process in which the voice of the professionals is a core parameter of organisation’s action plan development. Leadership needs to be inclusive, responsive but consistent with the objectives (or characteristics of objectives) to be achieved.

Public sector policies play a critical role in an organisation’s performance. They can affect them positively (upward helix operation) or disrupt the organisation’s operations (downward helix operation) by introducing policies that would affect the effective coordinated responses, or even change the parameters of services provision. The teams within the organisation need

to understand these dynamics and communicate any changes to management. Management needs to listen to the information, process it and modify its advocacy activities accordingly. The latter is an ongoing process, as important as the need for systematic awareness raising.

Understanding the “voice of the beneficiaries” is a key process that would provides a new input to the assessment process. This process contributes to breaking any stereotypes and “organisation taboos” coming either from the management or from the team members. Well-designed focus groups (with beneficiaries) help reveal system-wide distortions, risks, or malpractices within the organisation, and drive the proposal of new insights for upscaling the day-to-day performance. Management needs to be objective and open to the information coming from the beneficiaries, while the field professionals need to “translate” their voice into up-scaled activities. Focus groups need to be designed with great care, prioritising the protection and privacy of the beneficiaries, and avoid re-traumatization. The needs of beneficiaries must be the main performance drivers for WSSs.

In combating intimate partner violence, we need to keep in mind that WSSs have to maximise their efforts in an 'imperfect systems response', which relies heavily on societal policy changes. The system parameters, i.e., legislation, intensity/characteristics of incidents of violence due to extraordinary events (COVID-19, war in Ukraine and influx of female refugees to the EU, influx of migrants to the EU, financial crises, etc.), political decisions by the government, can and do have a decisive / disruptive influence on the operation of WSS. Therefore, the lessons learned by the COVID19 crisis signify the way forward for a renewed mode of WSS operation based on a thorough understanding of a constantly changing environment, demanding flexibility, responsiveness, and accountability as core processes for a successful performance.

3.4. The Do's and Don'ts – Recommendations for an optimum performance

Concluding, under the mode of operation, WSS need to follow a pathway that should include the following priorities, directed either to the upper management and Board or to the professionals.

Top Management

- ✓ Have a specific organisational **action plan** at annual or biannual basis. Social impact assessment needs to be an integral part of its development and should be a mainstreamed process that will determine core strategic decisions of the organisation.
- ✓ **Prioritize intersectionality & multidisciplinary work** within a coordinated multiagency collaboration framework.
- ✓ **Promote diverse teams & communication** at all levels of operation.
- ✓ Prioritize staff **self-care and well-being**.
- ✓ Focus on **listening and understanding the voice of the beneficiaries** (direct or indirect target groups of the organisation's service provision).
- ✓ Promote the **continuous capacity building of front-line professionals including on multidisciplinary collaboration** (training on different aspects of services provision i.e., legal provisions, institutional setting, data protection, use of IT tools for data collection).
- ✓ Embed **accountability** as a core value of WSS performance at every level.
- ✓ Acknowledge the **interference of the political context** on the organisation's performance.
- ✓ **Focus on soft skills, multidisciplinary work** (engagement of people from different disciplines) and emotional intelligence in recruitment processes.
- ✓ Be able to **adapt to changes** coming from crises or legislative, policy or institutional changes.
- ✓ Recognize that **policy advocacy and lobbying** are as important as awareness raising and should be a part of the annual communication plan of the organisation.

Professionals working at WSS:

- ✓ Need to **prioritize the needs of beneficiaries** at every level.
- ✓ Should be able to **work within multidisciplinary teams and in a multiagency context**.
- ✓ Be able to **follow organisations accountability and responsiveness** processes.
- ✓ Be able to **understand the institutional setting** within which the organisation works.
- ✓ Need to include **data collection and processing** as a routine part of their everyday work.
- ✓ Need to be **responsive to changes** within the organisation.
- ✓ Be **open to mutual learning and continuous capacity building** on updated procedures, use of new tools, implementation of new processes, the use of technology etc.
- ✓ Be **open to working in a coordinated way with professionals of different disciplines and** from different agencies.

The above-mentioned operating routines are non-binding; however, they shape flexibility, adaptability and accountability of WSSs. They constitute “good practices” observed during the TRUST pilot interventions, and were shown to promote inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, and the wellbeing of the WSS staff.

In promoting the proposed Model of Operation, the **Management and Board should avoid**:

- **Weak transparency** on service delivery and organisational performance
- **Weak communication** and fragmented policy advocacy
- **Fragmented and unrealistic strategic planning** (Action Plan – Business plan)
- **Dependency** on public sector funding
- **Affiliation to political party** policies or agendas
- **Ignoring the staff turnover and fatigue of staff** especially of front-line professionals
- Remaining **attached to non-inclusive but dominant management** attitudes
- **Discouraging communication** among the staff
- **Focusing only on communication and awareness raising but ignoring the importance of policy advocacy and lobbying**
- Remaining **attached to values and beliefs** that are outdated in relation to the current context and beneficiaries needs.
- **Discourage the use of innovative tools** for professionals and consider data collection as a minor priority.

At the same time **professionals should avoid**:

- **Working in isolation and independently of professionals of different disciplines**
- Allowing **personal beliefs** to impact professional performance.
- Devaluing the importance of **team working and mutual learning**.
- Disregarding **the specific needs of beneficiaries** impacted by violence and instead **integrate an intersectional approach** to service provision.

The proposed mode of operation suggests model based on a series of changes related to both management and staff. In the era of COVID-19, WSSs faced and operated in a constantly evolving social and political landscape necessitating a re-evaluation of their operations and a renewed focus on the value of human resources.

Emphasising accountability and transparency across all levels of operations, and valuing data and beneficiary feedback as central to decision-making, became crucial. The traditional top-down approach has proven to be an outdated strategy, which may contribute to the isolation and downsizing of WSSs.

The influence of the external environment has been identified as a determinant of the efficiency of operations, highlighting the need for adaptability and flexibility both internally and externally. This is a continuous challenge for all organisations working in the sector of violence against women and girls: it requires a solid and clear strategic plan, a well-organised internal structure, and a dedication (from the leadership) to invest in its people and teams. WSSs must also invest in social impact assessment processes and methodologies as a process of validation of performance and clearly and effectively assess their contribution to societal change and the safety and well-being of their beneficiaries.

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