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Housing Solutions for Women Survivors of Violence:

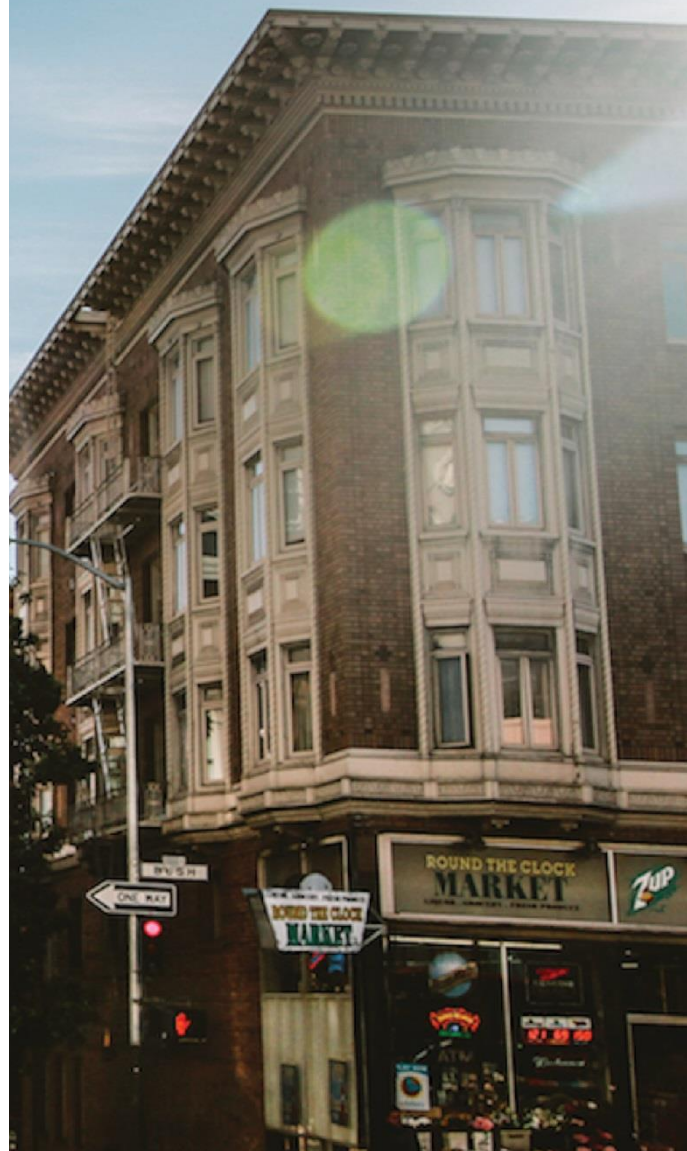
Strengthening Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

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Housing Solutions for Women Survivors of Violence: Strengthening Regional Cooperation in the Western Balkans

This paper was developed under the project *United against domestic violence in the Western Balkans – Regional cooperation and support for shelters for victims of domestic violence* funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund offices in Southeast Europe. The paper itself was developed by NGO Atina.

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Executive Summary

This policy paper highlights the urgent need for enhanced regional cooperation and targeted policies to address the housing needs of women survivors of violence in the Western Balkans. The ASB-supported paper, created by NGO Atina, draws on the EU integration mechanisms, the Istanbul Convention, the Berlin Process, and Germany's feminist foreign policy to propose a coordinated, long-term housing strategy. By aligning with these frameworks, Western Balkan countries can ensure sustainable, secure, and supportive housing solutions for at-risk women.

The paper provides an overview of the state of play in this area, examines various opportunities for improvement, and outlines key recommendations in this direction. They include, but are not limited to, legislative reforms, cross-border initiatives, and EU and regional funds that can be used to create a comprehensive housing safety net for survivors. The recommendations were made based on analytical research and conclusions from a regional workshop attended by representatives of safe houses from the countries of the Western Balkans. The paper has been developed during the implementation of the project *United against domestic violence in the Western Balkans – Regional cooperation and support for shelters for victims of domestic violence* funded by the German Federal Foreign Office and implemented by Arbeiter-Samariter-Bund office in Southeast Europe. The project supported 11 shelters from the Western Balkans in raising physical capacities through reconstruction and equipment donation, nearly 100 staff from 21 shelters to finalize certified trainings on topics like burnout or work with traumatized children and gathered more than 70 people to attend a regional conference in Skopje and join discussion with ministers and government representatives.

1. Introduction: The Urgency of Housing Solutions for Survivors

The State of Affairs

Gender-based violence (GBV) represents a serious social problem and criminal activity that requires a comprehensive response from the state authorities to enhance prevention and its suppression, adequately protect the victims, and enable their recovery. Women remain particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence, and their protection and support include the provision of various services, starting from safe housing through medical and psychosocial assistance to different forms of long-term support, including economic empowerment, employment, etc. The fight against gender-based violence and providing adequate protection and support to victims is one of the fundamental values and the basis of various policies promoted by the European Union (EU) in the last few decades. The EU demands the same approach to this problem from the countries that are candidates for membership, including those in the Western Balkan region. However, suppressing GBV and protecting the victims remains a significant problem in the countries of the Western Balkans, regardless of particular political and normative efforts that led to the undertaking in previous years, and as a result of which laws were passed in the field of preventing domestic violence, increasing gender equality, strengthening protection of survivors of violence, etc. And yet, the number of reported cases of gender-based violence and even femicide in these countries is not decreasing, which means that governments in the region must offer and implement deeper, more comprehensive, and longer-term legal, social, economic, and other respective measures to this issue.

Examples of promising practices and suitable solutions that have already been established and implemented in certain countries can guide such measures. For example, the German Development Agency (GIZ) in Serbia supports 20 local governments to develop and expand integrated and gender-responsive services for the social and economic inclusion of women and other vulnerable groups locally. It enables them to gain knowledge and exchange experiences in this matter. GIZ in Serbia also supports local and national actors in creating innovative solutions and social entrepreneurship aimed at the employment of vulnerable groups locally. It is also a good practice of UNOPS in Serbia, which provides funds for purchasing and adaptation of space to deliver innovative services for the social inclusion of vulnerable groups. Furthermore, some good examples also concern the adoption of unique normative acts on social services (such as the Law on Social Housing of the Republika Srpska, BiH), which for women survivors facilitates better access to necessary services, including social housing.

It is, therefore, clear that to effectively combat gender-based violence, women victims of GBV and intimate partner violence must be provided with appropriate protection and support services. Hence, access to safe houses for these women remains a key prerequisite in protecting them. Safe accommodation is an essential service for women victims of violence, and its primary goal is to make women feel safe there. Moreover, this service also makes it possible to work with these women continuously and provide them with other necessary services in support and long-term empowerment. In this regard, it is essential to ensure access to this service to all women who are victims of gender-based violence, especially to those who belong to multiple vulnerable groups, such as Roma women, refugees and migrants, LGBTQ+ women, etc. Only if all these women have access to safe accommodation can it be said that there is a sufficient framework for the successful recovery of all women survivors and a prospect for combating GBV in general. However, this is often not the case; hence, it remains one of several persistent challenges in victim protection in the Western Balkan countries.

Key Challenges in the protection of GBV survivors in the Western Balkans

As mentioned above, equal access to emergency shelters and then long-term housing for women survivors of GBV remains one of the key challenges in the Western Balkans. Firstly, even though immediate shelters exist, their capacities are insufficient to meet the needs for safe accommodation in the region's countries. According to the report *Women's Specialist Support Services in Europe and the Impact of COVID-19 on their Provision (2021)*¹, there are a total of 891 beds in safe houses for women victims of gender-based violence in the Western Balkan countries, which is barely 50% of the total needs in these countries. Furthermore, the number of safe houses in the region is also low (according to the same report, there are a total of 65 shelters available to women in the countries of the region), which means that in many parts of these countries, there are no shelters for women victims, and therefore no safe accommodation for this vulnerable group at all. Secondly, even when shelters exist, access to safe accommodation for some women victims of GBV is limited, particularly for those from multiple vulnerable groups, such as refugee and migrant women, Roma women, LGBTQ+ women, etc. The findings of the evaluation reports of the Council of Europe's GREVIO expert group, which monitors the application of The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (so-called Istanbul Convention), and various research, also speak about this. For example, in its 2020 baseline evaluation

¹https://wave-network.org/wp-content/uploads/WAVE_Country-Report.pdf

report for Serbia, GREVIO underlined the need to “expand the provision of shelters while ensuring de facto access for all women, in particular women with disabilities, Roma women and women migrants/asylum seekers”².

What also proves to be a challenge is the functionality and sustainability of safe houses. Namely, many need more financial or human resources to function or provide other support services. For example, many operate without appropriate licenses because they cannot meet the standards for obtaining such licenses. This often relates to needing more professional staff or unresolved property rights relations and facility ownership. According to a 2023 survey³, out of 14 shelters operating in Serbia, half (50%) did not have the necessary operating license.

Further on, women survivors also lack long-term solutions aimed at their recovery and reintegration, thus forcing many women to return to unsafe environments or become economically dependent, which perpetuates the cycle of violence. In other words, providing emergency safe housing for women is not enough; it is only the first step in protecting them and building long-term support that will enable them to recover and become fully independent. In this regard, the countries of the Western Balkans lack numerous long-term services intended for women victims of gender-based violence, including effective economic empowerment and employment programs, as well as long-term housing solutions for these women. Because of this, some emergency shelters have additional pressure to enable longer-term support for women, and this issue remains to be solved spontaneously and selectively.

Additionally, in some countries of the Western Balkans, there is no regular cooperation between safe houses at the national level, nor are there mechanisms and initiatives that would gather safe houses at the national level and strengthen their voice towards the competent authorities, advocate for the improvement of their position and increase the visibility of the problem of GBV and the need for safe housing for victims. For example, at a joint meeting of representatives of safe houses 2023 in Belgrade, the necessity of forming a joint coalition of safe houses at the national level was expressed. Its goal would be to enable the representatives of all safe houses to clearly and accurately state their needs and the challenges they face every day, as well as to increase the visibility of all shelters for victims of violence operating in the territory of the Republic of Serbia.⁴

Another challenge is limited access to EU funds for social housing programs tailored to survivors. Moreover, access to social housing, in general, and particularly for vulnerable groups, has also become one of the significant social and economic challenges across the EU, which is why the European Commission devoted itself more to this issue and issued an Operational toolkit on the use of EU funds for investments in social housing and associated services⁵. This, however, also implies insufficient support in this area for the candidate countries and indicates the need to pay more attention to the issue of access to European funds for social housing programs for the Western Balkan countries.

² GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report Serbia, p. 7, <https://rm.coe.int/grevio-report-on-serbia/16809987e3>

³ Functioning and the work of safe shelters for women victims of violence in Serbia (in Serbian), p. 34
<http://atina.org.rs/sites/default/files/Funkcionisanje%20i%20rad%20prihvatali%C5%A1ta%20za%20%C5%BEene%20%C5%Bertve%20nasilja%20u%20Srbiji%20-%20Analiza%20zate%C4%8Denog%20stanja.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.atina.org.rs/sr/preko-potrebno-formiranje-koalicije-svih-sigurnih-ku%C4%87a-za-%C5%Bertve-nasilja-u-srbiji>

⁵ <https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/042f7559-fd3f-11ee-a251-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>

The need for closer cooperation

It is essential to find appropriate responses to all these challenges. Since many of them are shared by all countries in the Western Balkans, it is necessary to open up space for standard solutions and cooperation. However, insufficient collaboration between safe houses at the national level, which was mentioned as one of the challenges in this area, goes hand in hand with insufficient and sporadic regional cooperation between safe houses in the Western Balkans. The need for closer collaboration between different actors who provide support services for women victims of gender-based violence is evident. This cooperation is necessary to provide support to these women as efficiently and quickly as possible and ensure that they get out of the circle of violence, recover, and become independent. At the same time, stronger cooperation is needed between the safe houses themselves, which are located in different countries in the Western Balkans. This would improve the exchange of information between these safe houses, enable better and faster protection for women victims who move between countries, strengthen the voice of service providers, and increase the visibility of this problem at the regional level.

That is precisely why the need for better regional cooperation was highlighted at the regional workshop in Skopje in October 2024, attended by representatives from numerous safe houses from the countries in the region. That event showed that representatives of safe houses need to be made aware of the existence of safe houses in other cities in the region's countries, and they need to know what other support services they provide. However, this gathering also demonstrated the great willingness of the region's safe houses to cooperate and seek solutions to the challenges they face jointly.

2. Legal and political instruments for improving cooperation

To improve insufficient regional cooperation in this area and foresee answers to other common challenges, this policy paper intends to examine the possibilities offered by various legal mechanisms and political processes of importance for the region. This primarily refers to the obligations arising from the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, as this Council of Europe's act represents the most important legal instrument in this area and has been signed or ratified by all countries in the region. Further on, the European integration process and the Berlin process, two major political processes in which all countries in the region participate, will also be analyzed in this regard. Finally, the opportunities offered by Germany's feminist foreign policy will also be examined since it may also be of current and future importance to the region in this matter, given the intention of the German government to invest in this area.

The Istanbul Convention: Legal Obligations and Opportunities

The Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as "the Istanbul Convention," was adopted by the Council of Europe in 2011 and, in the meantime, was signed or ratified by all the countries of the Western Balkans, which made it part of their internal legal systems. The Istanbul Convention is a comprehensive legal framework that obligates signatory countries to provide protection and support for women survivors of violence, including safe shelter and long-term housing solutions. This is a key legal

document in the protection of women who have experienced some form of violence and the basis for the development of support services.

Key provisions of the Convention in this regard are listed in Article 23, which requires the state parties to establish sufficient shelters and housing options for survivors of domestic violence. According to its provisions, parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to set up appropriate, easily accessible shelters in sufficient numbers to provide safe accommodation and reach out proactively to victims, especially women and their children. Furthermore, in Article 20, state parties are invited to “take the necessary legislative or other measures to ensure that victims have access to services facilitating their recovery from violence.” Services include legal and psychological counseling, financial assistance, housing, education, training, and help in finding employment. This is supplemented by the provisions of Article 22, which refers to specialist support services and states that “parties shall take the necessary legislative or other measures to provide or arrange for, in an adequate geographical distribution, immediate, short- and long-term specialist support services to any victim subjected to any of the acts of violence covered by the scope of this Convention.”

However, despite being a fundamental mechanism for combating gender-based violence and supporting survivors, the Istanbul Convention is not a priority in many European countries. In some countries, this document has been contested. This goes hand in hand with the growth of anti-gender policies across Europe. Therefore, the governments of the Western Balkan countries must show more significant commitment in implementing the obligations set out in this document.

EU Integration: Using European Funds and Directives

Their desire to join the European Union unites all Western Balkans countries regarding foreign policy. This represents a long-term political aspiration (given that the European perspective was offered to the region's countries more than two decades ago), and all Western Balkan countries are at some stage of the EU integration process. In this regard, North Macedonia has come the furthest, followed by Serbia and Montenegro, which have been negotiating EU membership for more than ten years and have adopted several laws and other acts to align themselves with relevant European directives. All this awaits Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania, and Kosovo, which are also official or potential candidates for future membership.

During the accession process, EU candidate countries can use various support instruments, including combating gender-based violence and improving the position of women while at the same time aligning their internal legal systems, institutional mechanisms, and practices with common European values and standards. Since European integration is carried out according to a methodology that currently includes clusters (to be opened with candidate countries), these issues are discussed within cluster 1, which refers to fundamental rights. Given that the EU is firmly committed to social inclusion and gender equality, the integration process can offer substantial opportunities for Western Balkan countries to enhance their housing systems for survivors of violence. However, in the previous period, these opportunities were not used enough.

First of all, on the European integration path, the candidate countries need to harmonize their legal systems with the European communitarian law, also in the field of combating gender-based violence and improving the position of women, including the housing solution for women GBV survivors. This primarily relates to Directive 2012/29/EU,

which refers to providing support to victims of crime. This directive provides minimum standards for crime victims' rights, support, and protection, mandating access to adequate housing for survivors. This Directive aims to ensure that victims of crime receive the appropriate information, support, and protection and can participate in criminal proceedings. The directive recognizes individual access to victims and protection against secondary victimization as one of the basic principles. Therefore, through the harmonization of their internal legal and institutional mechanisms with this directive, the countries of the Western Balkans undertake to enable better protection for victims of gender-based violence, access to appropriate safe housing, other support services, empowerment, and long-term recovery programs.

Further on, within the framework of European integration, some other mechanisms are available to the candidate countries, such as the EU Gender Action Plan III (GAP III). This plan, adopted in 2020 by the European Commission, aimed to promote gender equality and women's empowerment through all external actions of the European Union. In this regard, GAP III aims to reduce violence against women and increase access to social services, including housing, as well as to accelerate progress on empowering women and girls and safeguard gains made on gender equality during the 25 years since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and its Platform for Action and amid covid-19. In more detail, this initiative rests on five pillars - contributing to gender equality and women's empowerment in 85% of all new actions throughout external relations by 2025, sharing strategic vision and close cooperation with EU member states and partners at multilateral, regional and country level, accelerating progress and focusing on the key thematic areas of engagement (such as fighting against gender-based violence and promoting the economic, social and political empowerment of women and girls), leading by example and measuring results. The strength of this plan lies in its transformative approach to policies and actions, as it envisages that women, girls, and young people entirely use their rights and increase their participation in political, economic, social, and cultural life.

The European Union's determination to invest in issues of gender equality and women's social inclusion is demonstrated by the adoption of the European Social Fund Plus (ESF+). This fund represents a combination of various EU financial instruments and is designed as the primary EU mechanism for investing in people and their social rights in 2021-2027. The ESF+ aims to support EU policy implementation and national structural reforms in the fields of social inclusion and integration (including housing for vulnerable groups such as women survivors), education and skills (by advancing quality and equal opportunities in education and training), and employment (by also contributing to EU member states' efforts to reduce unemployment). By recognizing the importance of ESF+, the European Union intends to make it possible to use it even after the specified deadline, maintaining a strong focus on economic, social, and territorial cohesion.

Given the aspirations of the Western Balkan countries to join the European Union, the EU, financial institutions, bilateral donors, and the governments of the Western Balkans jointly launched the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF) in 2009. This initiative aims to enhance harmonization and cooperation in investments for the region's socio-economic development as a contribution to the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries. In other words, the WBIF supports socio-economic development and EU accession across the Western Balkans by providing finance and technical assistance for strategic investments. Although numerous projects in the sectors of the economy, transport, energy, and others have been implemented within the scope of this

framework in the past, in recent years, greater emphasis has been placed on the issue of human capital, i.e., on supporting projects in the areas of education and skills, employment, and social protection and inclusion, in line with the priorities of other EU connected processes and instruments.

The Berlin Process: A Platform for Regional Cooperation

The Berlin Process, launched in 2014, was designed to promote regional cooperation among Western Balkan countries and strengthen their EU integration pathways. All Western Balkan countries and several European Union member states participated in it, including Germany, France, Italy, and Great Britain. Although initially focused on infrastructure and economic connectivity, the process also offers opportunities for social inclusion projects, particularly for marginalized groups like women survivors of violence. Although the Berlin Process was "gender-blind" for a long time (as it resulted from Kvinna Till Kvinna's assessment from September 2024), i.e., it lacked a gender perspective in proposed policies and decisions. However, the 2024 summit included the "Gender Equality Forum" for the first time. This forum aimed to improve the gender sensitivity of the Berlin Process framework to respond to the key shortcomings of gender mainstreaming in the Western Balkans. In this regard, the forum strongly advocated institutionalizing the Gender Equality Forum as a permanent component of the Berlin Process. Furthermore, the forum discussed three main topics: economic empowerment and social security of women, women's inclusion in decision-making, and feminist perspectives in the reconciliation processes. In the context of improving the socio-economic position of women (the first topic), the forum also underlined the need to address gender-based violence and enhance social security standards as key steps in achieving this goal.

In connection with this topic (as well as with the other two), the forum brought several key recommendations, namely that it is necessary to improve gender-disaggregated data collection (to track key indicators of gender equality, such as employment rates, wage gaps, and access to social services), then to strengthen GBV policies and social security (aimed at combating gender-based violence and its consequences), as well as to enhance support for women entrepreneurs (by providing targeted financial support to women entrepreneurs, including grants, loans, and investment opportunities). Furthermore, to achieve the set goals and recommendations, the Gender Equality Forum underscored the need for establishing a dedicated regional funding mechanism that would provide sustainable financial resources for gender equality initiatives, enabling national and local governments, along with civil society organizations, to address the identified challenges effectively.

Considering this improved perspective of the Berlin Process, which now includes gender equality issues and the fight against gender-based violence, new opportunities are opening up for the Western Balkans countries in these areas. Those possibilities, first of all, include best practice exchange, which means that countries in the region, within this process, can share successful models for housing women survivors, drawing on lessons from the EU. Furthermore, since establishing a regional funding mechanism is announced and supported, countries in the region can also design and apply for joint housing projects. Such projects can improve social housing infrastructure across the Western Balkans and help women victims of gender-based violence in the best possible way. Also, within the framework of the Berlin Process, the possibility for more efficient legal harmonization in this area opens up. In other words, countries in the Western Balkans, which are also on the way to European integration, can use this

process as an additional engine for aligning national housing policies with EU standards, especially those addressing vulnerable groups like women survivors of violence.

Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy: A Model for Empowerment

Feminist foreign policy is a concept that has been developing for the past ten years, since 2014, when the Swedish Minister of Foreign Affairs first promoted it at that time, Margot Wallström. After being elected as foreign minister, she presented a foreign policy agenda that for the first time included the following goals: fight against sexual and sexist violence; the education of women and girls, and that of men and boys; the economic emancipation of women across the world; involving women in politics and decision-making; involving women in peace negotiations and treaties. From 2014 on, feminist foreign policies have been adopted by several countries, including Sweden, Canada, Mexico, and Germany. Introduced by the German Federal Foreign Ministry and the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the German Feminist Development Policy marks a new step aiming at eliminating discriminatory structures of all kinds and promoting a feminist approach in both Germany's foreign and Development policy as well as among its ministries. As the prevention of GBV, both offline and online, is an integral part of German Development Cooperation, offering thus also perspectives for the fight against digital violence against women, this illustrates a chance to implement measures of combating GBV in the Western Balkans as part of German development cooperation in the region.

Through this type of foreign policy, Germany wants to „advocate for the realization of the rights of survivors of sexual and gender-based violence and the provision of holistic, stress- and trauma-sensitive support to them, based on a survivor-centered approach.“ This should be achieved, for example, by introducing so-called *gender budgeting*. Therefore, one of the key features of Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy is the support for housing projects. Germany has funded several housing initiatives worldwide, focusing on protecting vulnerable women through safe and sustainable housing solutions. The Federal Foreign Office also has ambitious goals regarding the allocation of project funds. By 2025, 85% of project funding should be allocated in a way that also acknowledges the needs of women and marginalized groups. Another important topic for this policy is women survivors' economic independence and empowerment. Therefore, housing initiatives supported by Germany often integrate economic empowerment, helping survivors achieve long-term stability through skills training and employment.

Germany's Feminist Foreign Policy, with its focus on women and marginalized groups' rights, representation, and adequate resources, cuts across all areas of activity of the Federal Foreign Office, thus aims at promoting feminist approaches and principles in all its international cooperations. Consequently, Germany sets standards for its partners, pressuring them to adapt to feminist principles while considering the respective country-specific situations. Hence, this makes Germany, together with other countries following feminist principles, a role model in times of „anti-feminist pushbacks, “e.g., by the development of counterarguments to rising anti-gender narratives, contributing thus to the „norm diffusion“ trying to persuade more states to implement gender perspective in their work. Therefore, through its foreign policy actions, Germany can stimulate its partners, and Western Balkan countries can think critically and reflect on the topic. On the other hand, there are also doubts about how important considering feminist perspectives in its policies is to the German government: With the introduction of a feminist perspective in its foreign, thus „outward-looking“ policy area, instead of in its domestic politics, the question arises

whether it would be too „politically and socially controversial“ for Germany to address that issue in its inward-looking policy area.

3. National and Local Strategies for Housing Solutions

While regional cooperation and international funding are critical, national governments in the Western Balkans must also develop their strategies for effectively protecting women survivors of violence and providing them with housing solutions. The key national strategy should refer to the improvement of the laws on housing, which should prioritize women and survivors of violence and ensure that they are given priority access to social housing. However, although necessary, this is not a sufficient step, as it must be ensured that this is implemented on the ground. For example, in some countries, such provisions are already included in domestic laws but have little impact on practical implementation. Thus, the Housing Law in Serbia recognizes victims of domestic violence who do not have sufficient resources to independently solve their housing needs as a group entitled to housing support. Still, there were no measures on the ground to operationalize these provisions.

Therefore, it is also necessary that states, in addition to legislative acts, adopt appropriate strategic and action documents to operationalize these provisions. However, these national action plans must align with EU directives and the Istanbul Convention, ensuring structured support for women survivors. This issue must be prioritized and addressed on time instead of only initiating acts and then abandoning or never adopting (as is the case with the Housing Strategy in Serbia for 2022-2032, which was drafted but never adopted or implemented).

At the same time, local governments and NGOs also play a critical role in implementing housing strategies. The role of local governments in this area is multiple, starting with the fact that they are in charge of developing specific local action plans for housing survivors or local service development plans, then allocating funds for their implementation and enabling service provision. The local plans should address the specific needs of women survivors, particularly those from marginalized groups, and ensure access to safe housing services as well as long-term housing solutions for women survivors. These local plans should also be linked to broader social inclusion policies to harmonize and reinforce the necessary interventions at all levels. Local authorities should ensure the development of support services and provide appropriate funds in local budgets and special funds to support social housing. Examples of good practice in this area also exist in the region, for instance, at some administrative levels in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Further, local authorities should collaborate with NGOs to manage shelters and provide psychosocial support, drawing on the expertise of experienced organizations. In this sense, local authorities should adopt good models that these organizations apply in their work, starting with the appearance of the service, through the way of working with the user group, etc. On the other hand, the authorities could also outsource these services provided by specialized women's NGOs, provide them with financial and other support, and thus enable access to these services for women victims of GBV in their local community. This is particularly significant in the context of the Council of Europe's recommendation that in each region of an individual country, there should be a safe accommodation service for women victims of gender-based violence. This way of providing services has already been initiated in certain Western Balkans countries, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro, and it should be strengthened in other countries as well.

4. Conclusion: Building a Sustainable Future for Women Survivors

The previous analysis has outlined some of the main problems and challenges in providing safe accommodation and long-term housing for women victims of gender-based violence in the Western Balkan countries. While these problems are not equally prevalent everywhere, they are certainly a common concern for all countries in the region. The previous analysis has outlined some of the main issues and challenges in providing safe accommodation and long-term housing for women victims of gender-based violence in the Western Balkan countries. Although these problems are not equally prevalent everywhere, they are certainly a common concern for all countries in the region. In this regard, this paper raises questions about the possibilities of joint action, i.e., a common framework that can improve the position of women survivors in the entire Western Balkans. This particularly applies to their protection by providing adequate and accessible safe accommodation and long-term housing.

In this regard, particular processes and instruments of common importance to all Western Balkan countries that can contribute to results in this area were presented and examined. By leveraging the opportunities provided by the Istanbul Convention, EU integration, the Berlin Process, and Germany's feminist foreign policy, the Western Balkans can come close to effectively eliminating problems in this area. It can create a robust and sustainable housing network for women survivors of violence. In other words, Western Balkan countries can ensure survivors can access safe, supportive, and long-term housing solutions through targeted regional, national, and local measures. In this context, this policy paper proposes several essential recommendations. Cooperation targeted national reforms and local implementation.

5. Key Recommendations

On the regional level

- **Sign Common Regional Political Document:** Initiate the signing of a joint regional declaration on combating gender-based violence and improving cooperation between safe houses, and based on this, form a Working Group, with representatives from all countries of the region, in charge of its implementation. This document should outline the commitment of the Western Balkan countries to combating gender-based violence and protecting victims and their readiness for cooperation in this area.
- **Establish a Regional Housing Fund:** This fund could be specifically dedicated to supporting the construction and maintenance of social housing for women survivors. It could be part of the broader Berlin Process initiatives to strengthen social infrastructure since it has now incorporated gender equality and issues of importance to this area as its permanent component.
- **Promote Data Exchange:** Regional governments should regularly share data on housing programs for survivors to ensure best practices are followed across borders. Additionally, an address book listing all safe houses in the region should be created and shared. In this way, all service providers could see at any time what safe accommodation services are available in other countries and cities in the region and, when necessary, refer beneficiaries without further delay to them.

• **Promote Examples of Promising Practice:** Countries in the region, as well as other actors present on the ground, should promote and expand examples of promising practices in creating social services and providing funds for their functioning (for example, donor support for the development of innovative services at the local level, provided by GIZ, UNOPS, etc.). Additionally, all such (existing and future) programs should be coordinated so that their effect is synergistic.

• **Expansion of Institutional Housing:** Promote and spread the concept of institutional housing throughout the region (in some communities, for example, in Sarajevo Canton or several municipalities in the Republic of Srpska, BiH, according to their Law on Social Housing). All Western Balkan countries must learn about examples of good practices in this area in some countries. This could be done by governments in the region working together; however, support could also be provided through the Regional Housing fund.

• **Create Regional Housing Centers:** Develop multi-country, regionally accessible centers that provide temporary and long-term accommodation with integrated psychosocial support. These centers could be financed from a joint Regional Housing Fund and other sources, such as the WBIF or individual countries in the region.

• **Utilize ESF+ for Long-Term Housing:** Western Balkan countries should reprioritize ESF+ to develop long-term housing programs that include integrated support services such as employment training. The European Commission DG NEAR and EU member states, including Germany, should also support and push this forward.

• **Access the Western Balkans Investment Framework (WBIF):** Countries can and should apply for WBIF funding to build and renovate shelters that meet EU standards, respond to domestic legislation and procedures requirements, and obtain the necessary licenses for work. This framework has already funded housing and social integration projects for vulnerable groups.

• **Promote Cross-Border Initiatives:** It is necessary to strengthen collaboration between service providers from different Western Balkan countries and thus deepen overall cooperation. In this regard, joint applications for EU funding by Western Balkan countries could ensure the sustainability of housing projects and enable survivors to access support across borders in high-risk situations.

On the national level

• **Adjusting political priorities:** The topic of support for women victims of gender-based violence (including housing solutions) should become a priority in national political agendas. This prioritization can be monitored by adopting public policies and strategic and action documents in which this vulnerable group is explicitly listed.

• **Victim-oriented approach:** Victims and survivors should be at the center, and support must be organized around them and their needs (and not around services or other mechanisms). A victim-centered approach must be incorporated into relevant policies and related documents adopted and implemented by all competent authorities.

• **Align National Laws with the Istanbul Convention:** Countries should incorporate specific provisions for long-term housing for survivors into their legal frameworks, ensuring compliance with Article 23 and with provisions

related to providing other types of support. In this regard, laws in the field of social protection must be harmonized, but all necessary bylaws must also be adopted to implement the legal provisions.

- **Expand Shelter Capacities:** Governments must increase the number and geographic distribution of shelters to ensure that all women, regardless of location, can access safe housing. This should be done per Council of Europe standards and recommendations from GRETA countries' reports.

Provide Safe Accommodation to All Women: National authorities must ensure that safe accommodation is accessible to all women victims of GBV, particularly by those belonging to multiple vulnerable groups, such as Roma women, LBT~+ women, or refugee and migrant women.

- **Collaborate with Germany on Housing Projects:** Western Balkan countries can seek bilateral support from Germany to fund housing projects, particularly those integrating economic empowerment and skills development. In their operational documents and practice, any potential discrimination against women belonging to these groups must be prevented.

- **Capacity Building in Educational System:** Targeted training on gender-based violence (prevention and suppression) is needed for teachers and other school employees, following the development of a national program for the prevention and recognition of GBV.

- **Emancipation at the National Level:** National authorities should work on designing emancipation programs and campaigns to combat gender stereotypes, enhance gender equality, and prevent gender-based violence.

- **Attracting More Professional Staff:** National authorities should provide benefits for professional workers in safe houses (including beneficial seniority), thus attracting young people to become professionals in this area to address the shortage of skilled personnel in this field.

- **Promote Public-Private Partnerships:** National authorities should leverage Germany's (and other countries) expertise in fostering victim-centered public-private partnerships to develop sustainable housing solutions for women survivors.

- **Provide Benefits for Businesses:** National authorities should provide subsidies to companies that offer employment or invest in combating violence (for example, exempt such companies from paying taxes).

- **Adopt Specific National Measures:** Serbia adopted the National housing strategy and explicitly included women survivors of violence as a priority category for social housing; Bosnia and Herzegovina established a quota system at the entity level to prioritize survivors for social housing, ensuring consistent implementation nationwide; in Kosovo focus on improving the implementation of existing housing frameworks with additional funding from international donors.

On the local and community-based level

- **Local Housing Networks:** Establish networks of local shelters that coordinate with national and regional housing programs, ensuring survivors have access to safe housing no matter where they are in the region.

· **Training Programs:** Provide training for local authorities and shelter staff on managing housing programs for survivors, ensuring they are equipped to provide specialized services.

· **Local Economic Empowerment Programs:** Local authorities should create local economic empowerment programs for survivors to bolster economic justice for this vulnerable group as a critical strategy to ensure survivors can access housing.

· **Increased cooperation on the Local Level:** Local authorities should improve cooperation with service providers at the local level, primarily with CSOs that provide support to victims of violence and run shelters for victims, to include them in decision-making processes on these issues and jointly agree on steps to address challenges in this area.

Strengthening Local NGO Interventions: Local authorities should provide (financial and other) support to local initiatives and NGOs focused on supporting women victims of GBV and their housing. Local budgets should permanently ensure this kind of funding.

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