



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women

WOMEN'S VOICES, KNOWLEDGE, AND LEADERSHIP

AT THE HEART OF HUMANITARIAN ACTION

JUNE 2020

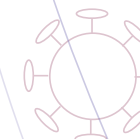
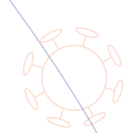
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¹ Survivor’s name has been changed to protect their identity.

Introduction

Like everywhere in the world, women in Serbia are playing a disproportionate role in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, including as frontline healthcare workers, carers at home, community leaders and mobilisers. Experience of other disease outbreaks shows that this care burden also increases their risk of infection. As the coronavirus crisis unfolds, UN Women in Serbia is working hard to support different groups of women, ensure their equal voice in decision-making, and analyze COVID-19’s impact on women. This publication aims to showcase some of these extraordinary women and their work in the period April-June 2020.





Jelena Hrnjak is a programme manager at Atina NGO, which advocates for the rights of victims of human trafficking and other forms of exploitation. As partner of an EU-UN Women programme in Serbia, Atina was focused on women's social entrepreneurship to economically empower survivors of human trafficking. Their social enterprise Bagel Bejgl had to close its doors to visitors amid the COVID-19 lockdown and are focusing on deliveries to alleviate the economic impacts. Hrnjak spoke to UN Women about how this situation will affect survivors and their economic independence.

TAKE FIVE:

“WOMEN'S SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IS THE RIGHT RECIPE TO OVERCOME THIS AND EVERY CRISIS”

How has the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic affected survivors and Atina?

Through Atina's hotline, we are receiving seven times more calls than before the pandemic. Hundreds of women from across Serbia are calling us to get information and seek support, mostly for medical reasons, urgent food or hygiene necessities. Most need information about their trials, which are ongoing despite the situation.

In the three safe houses we run, we have 80 per cent occupancy. We do regular checks and supply provisions to the women and children there. We have also set-up online counselling with psychologists for girls and women in the state-run shelter and other social care institutions, as well as for those residing in their homes and other places.

What is happening with Bagel Bejgl now?

All of us are here, spreading love and delivering bagels! We have signed contracts with the two largest delivery agencies [for voluntary delivery], and we are sending an optimistic message: Stay home and eat bagels! We have created the most delicious menu that can be tasted every day by fellow citizens in our beautiful town of Belgrade.

Do you think Bagel Bejgl will survive the crisis?

Bagel Bejgl has to go through this crisis first, just like everyone else. We are adapting along the way. We are aware that difficult times will come after the crisis, probably more difficult than ever. They will be challenging in a different way, currently unknown to us. That uncertainty scares us all. On the other hand, we in Serbia constantly live through new beginnings, and this will be a similar story of starting from scratch all over again.

How will this situation affect your efforts to economically empower women victims of human trafficking?

Traffickers deprive women of their freedom, integrity, independence and free thoughts. Now, the situation of isolation divests these women even more, as their freedom is limited once again. Current circumstances have caused regression, a return to a position of dependency. Unfortunately, this trend will likely continue after the state of emergency and curfew end.

In the first weeks of the pandemic, 31 per cent of women survivors informed us that they had lost their jobs. By the second week, it was 55 per cent. In week four, as I write these lines, 92 per cent of these women are without any income. It is inevitable that the pandemic's consequences will be visible in all areas. Clearly, we have a great test ahead of us. I strongly believe that continuing to invest in women's social entrepreneurship is the right recipe to overcome this and all other crises.

What do you see as a way out, or hope, in all this?

I see us, women supporting each other, as a way out and hope. Today, I believe in feminist principles more than ever – in feminist ethics of care, in the much-needed transparency of actions, in solidarity and cooperation. I think we should make the best of this crisis, which is a crisis of humanity. In addition to disinfecting our hands and space, I believe it is also time to disinfect our thoughts and emotions. I know that women will find a way to fight, just like they always have – heroically and with a smile on their face.





Jelena Ruzic is a passionate advocate for women's rights in the Kolubara District, in western Serbia. She is the founder of the Women's Association of Kolubara District, which promotes the political participation of women and supports their economic empowerment through education and networking. In light of the coronavirus pandemic, Ruzic and 122 women involved in a UN Women-run, EU-funded project are asking decision makers to consider the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown on individual women agricultural producers, and protect them.

IN THE WORDS OF JELENA RUZIC:

“ECONOMIC LOSSES WILL BE TREMENDOUS, AND WOMEN FARMERS DO NOT EVEN DARE TO CALCULATE THEM NOW”

“The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent declaration of the state of emergency in Serbia forced us to adjust our activities, but also to find ways to contribute to our local community. First, we tried to help with the most urgent thing, which was the lack of protective equipment. We immediately engaged our social enterprise (from the Association) and made fabric masks for those on the COVID-19 front line – police, public health workers and civil servants.

Then, just weeks after the state of emergency was declared, we could already feel economic implications. In our daily communication with women farmers, we learned that agriculture is facing enormous consequences and that individual producers are now invisible to decision-makers. Rural women are among the most vulnerable groups in Serbia, and the discontinuity of production caused by COVID-19 and the imposed lockdown will cause long-term harm, especially on women's income.

Farmers lost their market for sales of products overnight – green markets are closed; public transport is shut down; and alternative couriers do not accept to transport food. What is particularly challenging is a total ban on movement for people over the age of 65 now, during seeding time [given that many women farmers are over that age]. Buyers have used the opportunity, in the absence of anti-dumping measures, to drop their prices by 30%. This has especially affected small milk producers who are selling milk at prices cheaper than water! Farmers are faced with a difficult dilemma: sell products that are grossly underpriced, or toss them. Economic losses will be tremendous, and women farmers do not even dare to calculate them now, as the results will certainly be defeating.

To address all these issues, we gathered 122 women working on a UN Women project. Together, we drafted an open letter and sent it to the Serbian Minister of Agriculture, asking for protection for individual producers, suggesting alternatives for public transport and sales, as well as the

withdrawal of sanctions for movement [for farmers, as essential services], and seeking [improved communication with and] adequate protection from the widespread abuse from buyers.

Although the official response from the Minister has yet to come, we have noticed that some of the measures we suggested have been taken into account, such as the creation of an online platform to connect producers and buyers. In the meantime, the Government has prepared a package of measures aimed at economic recovery, but they do not fully meet the needs of individual agricultural producers.

Even though there is barely room for civic engagement during the state of emergency, we will continue fighting for women individual agricultural producers. We will try to reach decision-makers and have them put our requests on the agenda to include women in the design of measures in these uncertain times.”





Brankica Jankovic, the Serbian Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, has been actively advocating against different forms of discrimination against women. She spoke to UN Women about discrimination against women in the context of the COVID-19 outbreak as well as the new draft law on amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Law. The draft law is being developed with the support of the EU-UN Women regional programme on ending violence against women in the Western Balkans and Turkey, "Implementing Norms, Changing Minds".

TAKE FIVE:

“IT IS NECESSARY TO IMPLEMENT SPECIAL MEASURES TO PROTECT WOMEN AND GIRLS AT RISK OF VIOLENCE”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, women have been under increased risk of violence and exposed to inequalities in the fight against the pandemic. What can be done about this?

In times of crisis, such as the outbreak of a disease, women and girls may be exposed to higher risks of domestic and intimate partner violence because of increased tensions in the household, which are impossible to avoid because of various restrictions. Thus, it is necessary to implement special measures to protect women and girls at risk of violence and adjust them to changes in terms of the capacities of safe houses/shelters for women and children victims of violence. Also, as women represent 70 per cent of the workforce in the healthcare and social protection systems and are at a higher risk of exposure to the virus, it is necessary to pay special attention to their health-related and psycho-social needs. All these and other issues have been included in our recommended measures sent to the Serbian Government.

Sexual harassment, implicitly included in the earlier Anti-Discrimination Law as an act of discrimination based on personal characteristics and sex, is now explicitly defined as a form of discrimination, echoing the provisions of the Istanbul Convention and incriminating such behaviour. How was it defined and to what end?

The amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Law propose, among other things, to define sexual harassment as prohibited – in other words, to define it as a discriminatory form of behaviour, which was not explicitly provided in the existing law. The aim of the proposed provision is to prohibit any unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, especially when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. This article also provides that parties shall take the necessary legislative measures and ensure that any such

behaviour is subject to criminal or other legal sanction.

How many sexual harassment complaints do you receive annually, and what are the most common cases?

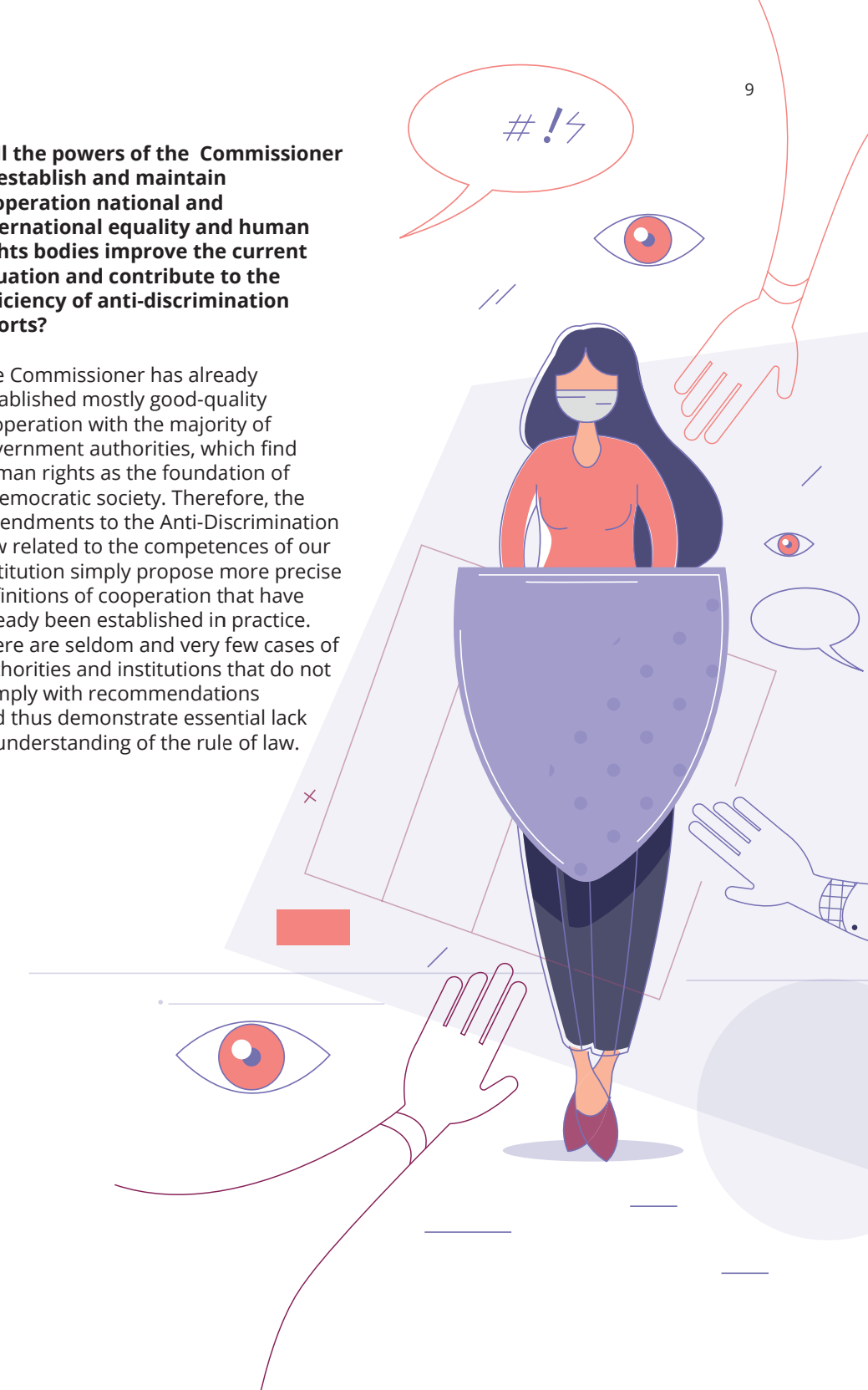
The Commissioner has received few complaints referring to sexual harassment. This year, there has been one complaint. Women's fear, together with feelings of shame, is the main reason for non-reporting. We believe that this will change in the future as individual examples of reported and sanctioned cases will be an incentive for all women who have been exposed to sexual harassment.

Incitement to discrimination has also been proscribed in the Draft Law on Amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Law as a form of discrimination, which is certainly an advancement compared to the existing legal text. What does this mean in practice?

If this proposal is adopted, discrimination shall also mean if an individual or group of individuals incite someone to discrimination by providing instructions on how to undertake discriminatory actions or incite to discrimination in another similar way. Although this is not provided in the existing law, incitement to discrimination was proscribed as a prohibited form of conduct in the special Law on the Prevention of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities and has already been applied in practice.

Will the powers of the Commissioner to establish and maintain cooperation national and international equality and human rights bodies improve the current situation and contribute to the efficiency of anti-discrimination efforts?

The Commissioner has already established mostly good-quality cooperation with the majority of government authorities, which find human rights as the foundation of a democratic society. Therefore, the amendments to the Anti-Discrimination Law related to the competences of our institution simply propose more precise definitions of cooperation that have already been established in practice. There are seldom and very few cases of authorities and institutions that do not comply with recommendations and thus demonstrate essential lack of understanding of the rule of law.





Nadežda Sataric, founder of Amity NGO, is a vocal advocate for the rights of older persons in Serbia, and women in particular, as one of the most vulnerable groups. With the COVID-19 outbreak, existing vulnerabilities have deepened, putting older persons at higher risk. In addition, lockdown measures have banned older Serbian nationals from leaving their homes. Sataric speaks to UN Women about the situation and how her NGO provides solutions under the UK-UN Women programme "Redistribution of unpaid care work".

IN THE WORDS OF NADEŽDA SATARIC:

“NOW IS THE TIME TO ACKNOWLEDGE WOMEN’S UNPAID CARE WORK”

“As many as 300,000 people over the age of 65 live alone in Serbia. Many of them live in small apartments without a balcony or a yard. They have no one to have morning coffee with or meet in the halls of the building to exchange a few words. Many of them have underlying health conditions, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, asthma... Older women are hit hardest as they, in addition to all, often bear the burden of unpaid care work at home. Now, with the coronavirus pandemic and lockdown, their feelings of anxiety, loneliness and depression have only increased.

Most of them have accepted and somehow adapted to the new reality. In the first week since Serbia introduced a complete lockdown for people over 65 (on 17 March 2020), many were confused and concerned over the situation, what it would all look like, whether they would have enough food, etc. But when they saw that everything is functioning well – that volunteers or family members provide them with all supplies, that their pensions are arriving on time and being delivered to

their home addresses, and that there is enough medicine in pharmacies – they relaxed a bit.

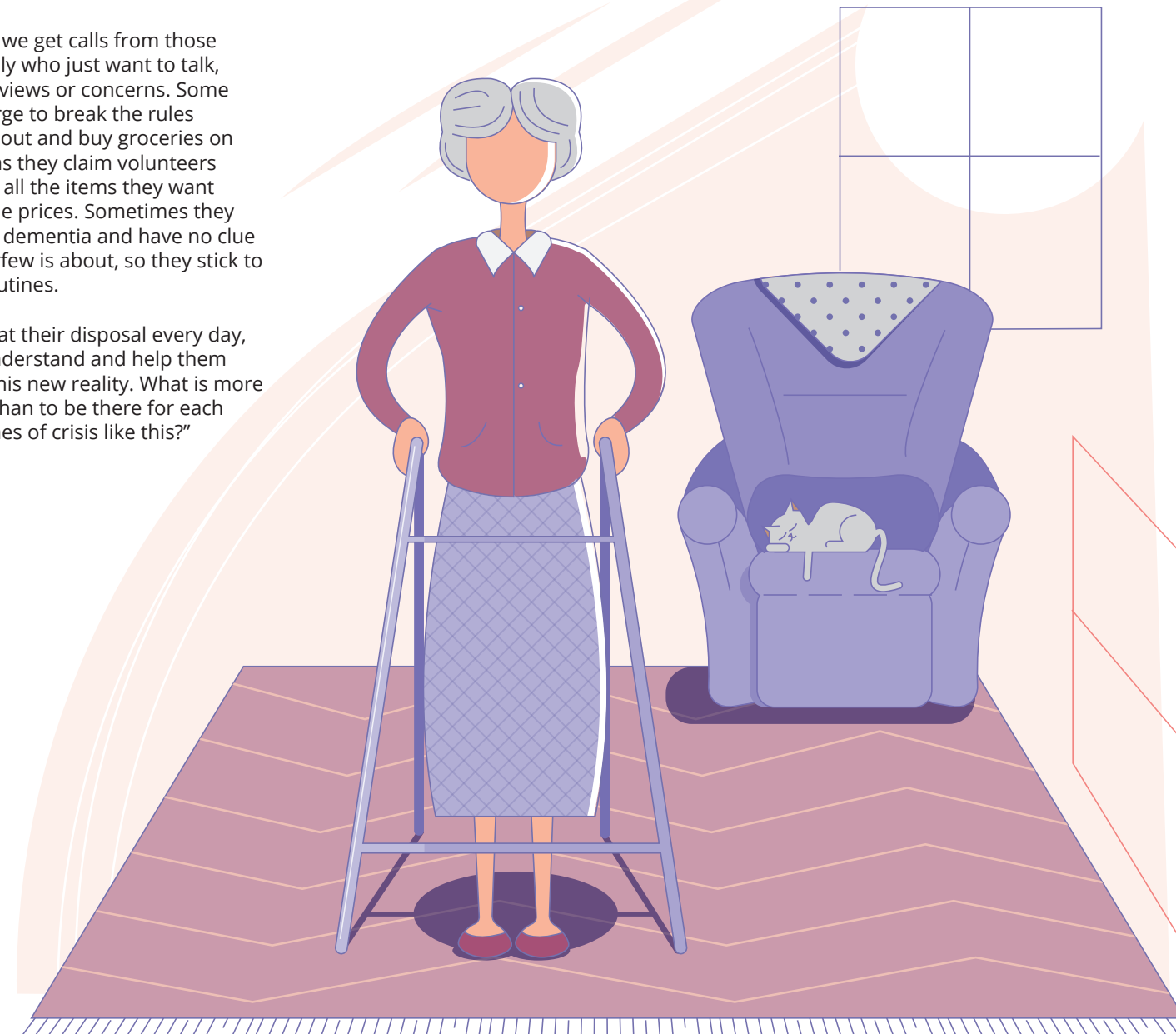
However, once assured that these basic needs were in place, different anxieties and concerns have populated their minds. It is not easy to sit at home patiently waiting for the outbreak to come to an end, not knowing when that will be. Older women are especially affected, as loads of housework now fall on them. This is why we decided to open a Counselling Centre, to provide support over the phone to those older persons in need, but also to their caregivers, who are often women. We don't want them to feel lonely, sad or overwhelmed with all the housework and care for family members.

It turns out that most of the calls we get are from either older or younger women who care for their older relatives and family members, who found themselves in an endless cycle of cooking, cleaning and care at home during the lockdown. Now is the time to acknowledge this unpaid care work and redistribute this burden, which

can adversely affect a woman's health. Men and women should share all the work at home and make it easier for the whole family in this situation and in general.

Sometimes we get calls from those feeling lonely who just want to talk, share their views or concerns. Some have this urge to break the rules and just go out and buy groceries on their own, as they claim volunteers cannot find all the items they want at affordable prices. Sometimes they suffer from dementia and have no clue that the curfew is about, so they stick to their old routines.

But we are at their disposal every day, to listen, understand and help them cope with this new reality. What is more important than to be there for each other in times of crisis like this?”





Marijana Karajovic, 29, is a volunteer who recently joined the Serbian Red Cross to help the most vulnerable during the COVID-19 crisis. She was tasked with distributing humanitarian and hygiene kits to marginalized groups of women under the EU-UN Women programme "Support to priority actions for gender equality".

IN THE WORDS OF MARIJANA KARAJOVIC:

"IT IS TRULY REWARDING TO MAKE WOMEN'S STRUGGLE DURING COVID-19 A LITTLE EASIER"

"Volunteering is a powerful way to have a positive impact on the health and well-being of the most vulnerable. When the COVID-19 outbreak started, I wanted to spend my free time giving back to the community and making a difference in the lives of others, so I joined the Red Cross volunteer team in Kragujevac, Serbia. Every day, I bring hygiene and humanitarian kits as well as leaflets with different important information (on preventive measures, mental health, violence against women, etc.) to women in need. Helping them in this situation really makes my heart full. I gain a sense of achievement and satisfaction that I have personally helped someone.

On the other hand, by volunteering, you do a job. It is a demanding process that requires a lot of responsibility, involves a large number of people who have to agree on different things, arrange the procurement of food, medicine, as well as transportation to the homes of people we are assisting, and all that in a short period of time.

We are often in a hurry and running to get all our tasks done on time, but then all of a sudden it all slows down when an older woman, who could easily be your grandmother, appears at the door and greets you with a sincere smile and words of gratitude. These are the moments to remember.

Before I started volunteering, I could have never imagined that one could feel so enriched when helping another human being and how touching these scenes are. So far, I have had many very emotional experiences – meeting single mothers, women who care for children with disabilities, older women – and all of them show great appreciation for what I have been doing. It is truly rewarding to see that you have somehow managed to make their struggle a little easier.

All these women call me a sweetheart and ask me if I am tired. These caring and courageous women, mothers and grandmothers, encourage us volunteers by showing us the true meaning of helping others."





Sijetlana Timotic is the founder of NGO “...iz kruga Vojvodina” (Out of Circle-Vojvodina) from Serbia, dedicated to eliminating violence against women with disabilities and ensuring accessible services for women with disabilities in situations of violence. The NGO is an implementing partner of the EU-UN Women regional programme on ending violence against women in the Western Balkans and Turkey, “Implementing Norms, Changing Minds”. She spoke to UN Women about the impact of COVID-19 on women with disabilities and how this pandemic reinforced the deeply-rooted marginalization of women with disabilities at all levels.

TAKE FIVE:

“IN TIMES OF PANDEMIC, WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES REMAIN INVISIBLE”

In your opinion, what has been the influence of the coronavirus pandemic on women with disabilities?

While everyone fears the coronavirus infection, women with disabilities do not only fear the health-related risks, but also the risks that come with living in a discriminatory society. Healthcare is already largely inaccessible to women with disabilities, a reality that has intensified in the circumstances of the pandemic.

Women with disabilities, systematically denied freedom of movement, are now faced with the fact that all those things they were told were impossible to provide to them are now available in alternative forms to serve the general population in quarantine (online jobs, online schools, home delivery, virtual cultural programmes), emphasizing to them their marginalised position. There are also disruptions to communication; for example, persons with hearing impairments cannot read lips in an environment where everyone is wearing masks. See-through masks are

available only on individual initiatives. These masks are known as masks for persons with hearing impairments, even though we should all wear them as universal-design masks.

What particular difficulties are encountered by women with disabilities during the pandemic and the state of emergency?

Women with disabilities agree that all the measures taken since the pandemic have been directed at elderly people, while they have remained invisible. Due to lack of support, some women testify to being overburdened with work and family care. As a result, they put their needs last, which will certainly affect their health.

Women with disabilities living in violence are in a particularly risky position, as they are now continually exposed to violent partners or family members. Some women report being more exposed to digital violence, to the point that, even though social networks are the only means to contact their loved ones, they remove their profiles.

No one is even talking about women in residential institutions, who are written off once again.

What needs do women with disabilities have related to information, medical, psychological and legal support during this period?

Since the state of emergency, the operating hours of majority of services have changed, such as the centres for social welfare, courts, and medical institutions, presenting an additional obstacle to accessing information. Women with disabilities most often want to know how to get permits for the movement of their personal assistants and informal caregivers during curfew. Also, women often ask us about their rights when it comes to the enforcement of court decisions regulating custody arrangements, especially during weekend curfews.

What has been the direct response of your organization to the current crisis to meet the needs of women with disabilities?

When the state of emergency began, most of our women beneficiaries said that they organized themselves and had the support of parents, friends or neighbours. The new situation has brought up anxiety, fear for the future, as well as fear of escalating violence, which is why the psychological support we provide is very important for them. We use our Disability Portal to publish up-to-date information on the impacts of the pandemic on people with disabilities, as well as updated contact lists of organizations providing support. We have initiated a section titled Quarantine Stories, which we use to

publish personal experiences of women with disabilities. It is important that there is a virtual space showing diverse experiences, because the pandemic does not affect everyone equally.

What would be your message to women with disabilities in these difficult times?

This is a time when the entire society can learn from the experiences of women with disabilities, because most of them regularly face the challenges brought by this emergency. The impact of the pandemic is a clear illustration of the social model of disability: we are not limited by disability, but by the society not respecting diversity as a main human characteristic. The pandemic has served as a litmus test, clearly and undoubtedly showing the deeply-rooted marginalization. The state of emergency will end, but will women with disabilities remain in isolation, as they did prior to COVID-19? It is the responsibility of us all not let this happen.





Snezana Zivadinovic heads the Association for the Development of Creativity in Aleksinac, Central Serbia, and is a vocal advocate for an equal distribution of care and domestic work, especially in rural areas. The coronavirus has increased the demand for care work in many families in rural areas of Serbia where the workload falls heavily on women and girls. Zivadinovic speaks to UN Women about the situation and how her NGO provides solutions under the UK-UN Women programme 'Redistribution of unpaid care work'.

FROM WHERE I STAND:

“RURAL WOMEN ARE NOW FACING AN EXTRA BURDEN OF CHILD-REARING, HOUSEWORK, AND OTHER UNPAID CARE”

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought many challenges to the already difficult life of rural women around Aleksinac. With relative isolation from markets, infrastructure and services, including health and education, villages in this region were hit hard by the coronavirus pandemic and the imposed state of emergency. In addition to the existing challenges, which have amplified, new ones appeared, mainly because of existing gender roles and responsibilities.

Older rural women are especially at risk during the crisis as some of them live alone in remote and inaccessible villages. Previously they relied on their neighbours' good will to bring them groceries and other essentials, but with the lockdown measures imposed, this is no longer possible.

On the other hand, rural women living in households with more family members at home all the time are now facing an extra burden of childrearing, housework, and other unpaid care. There are more dishes to be washed, more laundry to be done, more food to

be made, more cleaning for all. There is more taking care of those who are not feeling well; more fear around how to take them to hospital as public transport is not working; and more standing in lines in front of pharmacies and grocery stores. All this has led to increased stress and fear among women in rural areas and therefore they need comprehensive and diverse support.

Through different field visits, we tried to listen to these women and learn about their needs so we can address them properly. As a result, we have developed a package of different support services based on their needs and created a team to support it. This included everything from medical advice and psychosocial support to informal and friendly chats. The only rule we have is to always be positive and encouraging, and also to speak in a plain informal way, yet professionally. This approach creates a feeling of closeness and special connection.



The women we worked with really got attached to us, to the people they met over the phone. They would always ask for “their” Irena, Jelena, Saska, Sneska, Sladja or Javorka. And, these conversations over the phone are something they loved most. To know that someone is there for them, that they are not alone and that they have someone to just listen to them, to share their concerns with, but also some happy thoughts and moments.

It is hard to measure what this support means to them, but their feedback and expressions of gratitude over the phone are assuring us that we are doing the right thing.”



As risk of domestic violence is high during the coronavirus crisis, women in situation of violence in Serbia will be able to reach SOS helpline services 24/7 and also get necessary psychosocial and legal counselling thanks to the Norwegian embassy support.

KEEPING THE SOS HELPLINES OPEN DURING COVID-19

All women in situation of violence in the country will have SOS helpline services available 24/7 including online advices and psychosocial and legal support.

“Home is the most dangerous place for women.” This is the main finding of a UN global study conducted in 2018 but also of the latest study on femicides in Serbia in 2019.

When households are placed under increased strains that come from security, health and money worries with the COVID-19 pandemic and the imposed state of emergency, levels of domestic violence and sexual exploitation, which is already an epidemic in the Serbian society, spike. Although there is no official data, women’s organisation from the field have reported a rise of domestic violence cases in the country.

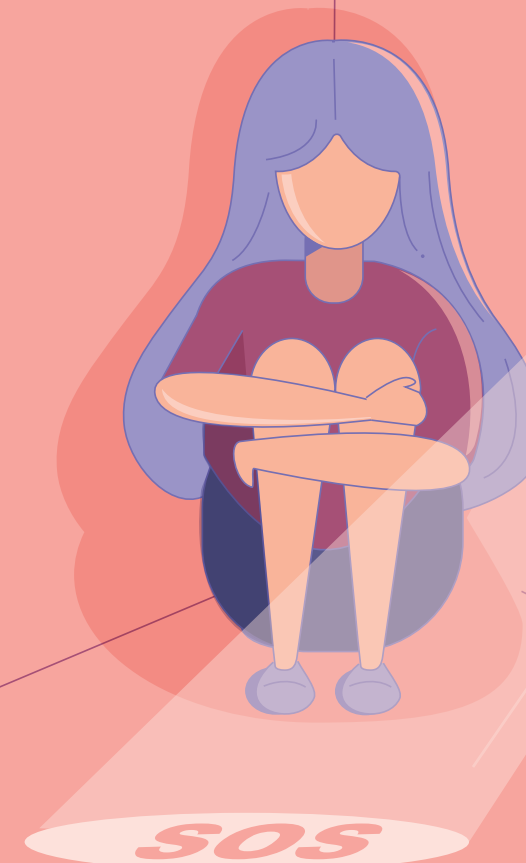
As a rapid response to this situation, UN Women in Serbia has modified its activities with the Ministry of Interior as partner under the Norwegian embassy funded project “Improved Safety of Women in Serbia” to support women grass root organizations in providing

services to women in risk of intimate partner and other forms of domestic violence during the state of emergency.

This way, all women in situation of violence in the country will have SOS helpline services available 24/7 and provided by 22 women CSOs. They will also be able to get online (chat, SMS, call) advices and psychosocial and legal support.

In addition, this initiative is not only potentially lifesaving to women in situation of violence but also to SOS helplines and the CSOs providing this service which are no longer financially supported by local self-governments.

To ensure that these information on available SOS helplines reach as many women across the country as possible, UN Women Serbia is due to launch a campaign targeting women on both traditional and social media. The campaign is designed to inform women that they are not alone and that they should report any form of violence even during the pandemic and the state of emergency.





In an undisclosed location in Sombor, Serbia, 41-year-old Marija Tomic* is putting the finishing stitches on face masks. She has made hundreds of these fabric masks since Serbia declared the COVID-19 epidemic in March.

IN A SERBIAN TOWN OF SOMBOR,

SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE ARE SEWING FACE MASKS FOR THOSE IN THE FRONT LINE OF COVID-19 RESPONSE

Tomic is a survivor of domestic violence and lives in a safe house for women survivors. "I got support in this society when I needed it most and now it feels great to give something back," she said. "It's a wonderful feeling to be able to provide a little help in this situation. And my heart feels full knowing that this can protect or even save someone's life."

Women who have been in abusive situations like Tomic understand the danger that can come from being isolated at home. The coronavirus crisis has placed women around the world at higher risk of intimate partner and domestic violence because of heightened tensions in the household. A recent study on femicide in Serbia conducted under the EU-UN Women regional programme indicated that the most dangerous place for women is their own home. While official data on domestic and intimate partner abuse in the Covid-19 context in Serbia has not been released, women's organizations in the country are saying that reports of violence and requests for assistance are on the rise.

Tomic has been working in a sewing factory for years. Shortly after the pandemic was declared, Serbia saw shortage of face masks, now recognized as an important personal protective equipment in the context of COVID-19.

Since the safe house had five sewing machines, Tamara Savovic, head of the shelter, swiftly procured some fabrics and Tomic delivered a quick training to current and former beneficiaries as well as volunteers who wanted to help make face masks.

Within a couple of weeks, the safe house donated the first batch of face masks to the local taxi drivers' association, as they are driving healthcare workers free of charge during the country-wide lockdown. Subsequently, the women have donated more masks for representatives of public utility companies in the town.

The mask-making project has been a big hit in Sombor. By sewing face masks, the women survivors and volunteers are not only contributing to



protect the health of essential workers such as healthcare workers, taxi drivers, cleaners, and others on the front line of the pandemic, they are also feeling empowered and valued.

Like many countries in the region, Serbia declared a state of emergency on 15 March and consequently introduced various lockdown measures.

Within the first few weeks of the crisis, UN Women, together with the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (SIPRU), secured and distributed hygiene kits and household essentials for 138 women survivors of violence in 11 safe houses across the country, including the one in Sombor.

Milana Rikanovic, head of UN Women office in Serbia, stressed on the importance of supporting women in safe houses during the coronavirus crisis. "As we respond to the COVID-19

outbreak, we must ensure that all victims of domestic abuse have all the support they need. Only when they have the psychosocial and other support, as well as all the necessary hygiene kits to keep themselves safe during the pandemic, we can encourage them to participate in the COVID-19 response," said Rikanovic.

Dragana Jovanovic Arijes from SIPRU agreed: "It is important not to forget their potential, to encourage and support any initiative through which they contribute towards overcoming the challenges we are all facing as a society."

UN Women continues to support women survivors of violence in Serbia and integrate gender concerns in COVID-19 response around the world.

*Name has been changed to protect the privacy of the person.



Slavica Vasic is the chair and one of the founders of BIBIJA Roma Women's Centre in Serbia, a partner of the EU-UN Women regional programme "Ending violence against women in the Western Balkans and Turkey: Implementing Norms, Changing Mind". She spoke to UN Women about the impact of COVID-19 on Roma women and girls and vulnerable groups in Serbia and in the region, and how the lives of many women will change after the outbreak.

TAKE FIVE:

"AFTER THIS PANDEMIC, WE WILL HAVE TO WORK MUCH HARDER THAN BEFORE TO IMPROVE ROMA WOMEN'S LIVES"

What is the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak among women, especially Roma women and girls?

Violence against women and children during the Coronavirus pandemic have increased, including in Roma settlements, where three generations live together in a single room. We are trying to support women by talking to them every day, telling them who they can refer to, and providing them with psychological and legal support. Self-isolation during lockdown enables abusers to assert greater control and revert to violence and prevents women from contacting support services and institutions that provide protection.

What are the specific challenges Roma women and girls face during COVID-19?

Many Roma, including Roma women, do not have the necessary knowledge about what they need to do during the state of emergency declared in the Republic of Serbia. It is difficult for many of them to access timely and accurate information. In Serbia,

25,000 Roma people live in informal settlements without adequate living conditions, including access to running and clean water. They are often confined to overcrowded conditions with many family members living in a small space where it is impossible to effectively implement isolation measures. So, this population is particularly vulnerable and women and children, especially young children, pregnant women and nursing mothers, are the most vulnerable.

Vulnerable groups, including Roma families living in informal settlements, need to be able to access healthcare and other support services available to all citizens of Serbia during this period. They need to have timely and accurate information on what their rights are and how they can exercise these rights. But they are not able to obtain such information, and we believe that certain services that were previously available to them are now not sufficiently at their disposal.

What was your immediate response to the current crisis in addressing women's needs?

From the very beginning of this crisis, with support from various donors, we have been trying to provide hygiene and food packages for Roma people living in non-hygienic settlements. We believe that all resources at this time should be directed to this activity as Roma people live in unhygienic conditions, lacking access to water, electricity, and food. This will be our priority in the next few months. We also aim to support women in enrolling their children in pre-school, primary and secondary education.

How did COVID-19 influence your work and how did you adapt to the changing context?

We had to reduce our activities on the ground during the pandemic [due to the state of emergency]. But we know that Roma women need help, so we set up a call center to support them with their questions and needs related to the pandemic. Women call us every day because they face many problems, from poverty and inadequate living conditions to domestic violence. Women who do not have a phone credit to make a call can send us a text message, and we call them and answer all their questions. We also try to support Roma communities through online consultations we organize for the settlements. In crisis situations, violence against women and children in the settlements increase. So, we are trying to help as much as we can in this situation.

How do you think this pandemic will have an impact on Roma women and girls in the future?

This pandemic affects everyone all over the world, but like any other disaster, we know that after the pandemic, the poorest will be even poorer. We know that discrimination and violence against women, especially women from vulnerable groups, will increase, and that we will have to work much harder than before to improve women's lives. Prior to this crisis it was bad, but now it will be even worse. Our message to Roma women and girls is to stay at home, if they have one, and to take care of their health and the health of their loved ones. They need to be as strong as they can and cope with this situation. We urge all Roma women, and women from other groups, to report violence.





As many as 122 women farmers gathered around the UN Women-run and EU-funded project created an online farmers' market in response to the COVID-19 lockdown.

WOMEN'S ASSOCIATION OF KOLUBARA DISTRICT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19:

SETTING UP ONLINE FARMERS' MARKET

Rural women are among the most vulnerable groups in Serbia and discontinued agricultural production and the lockdown measures in place due to COVID-19 have caused long-term harm, especially on women's income. Farmers are banned from selling their products—fresh markets have been closed for roughly a month; there is no public transport, and alternative couriers refuse to transport food. Economic losses will be tremendous, and women farmers do not even dare to calculate them now, knowing that the results will most certainly be defeating.

"The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent declaration of the state of emergency in Serbia forced us to adjust our activities, but also to find ways to contribute to our local community. First, we tried to help with the most urgent thing, which was the lack of protective equipment. We immediately engaged our social enterprise (from the Association) and made fabric masks for those on the COVID-19 front line – police, public health workers, and civil servants," Jelena Ruzic, president of

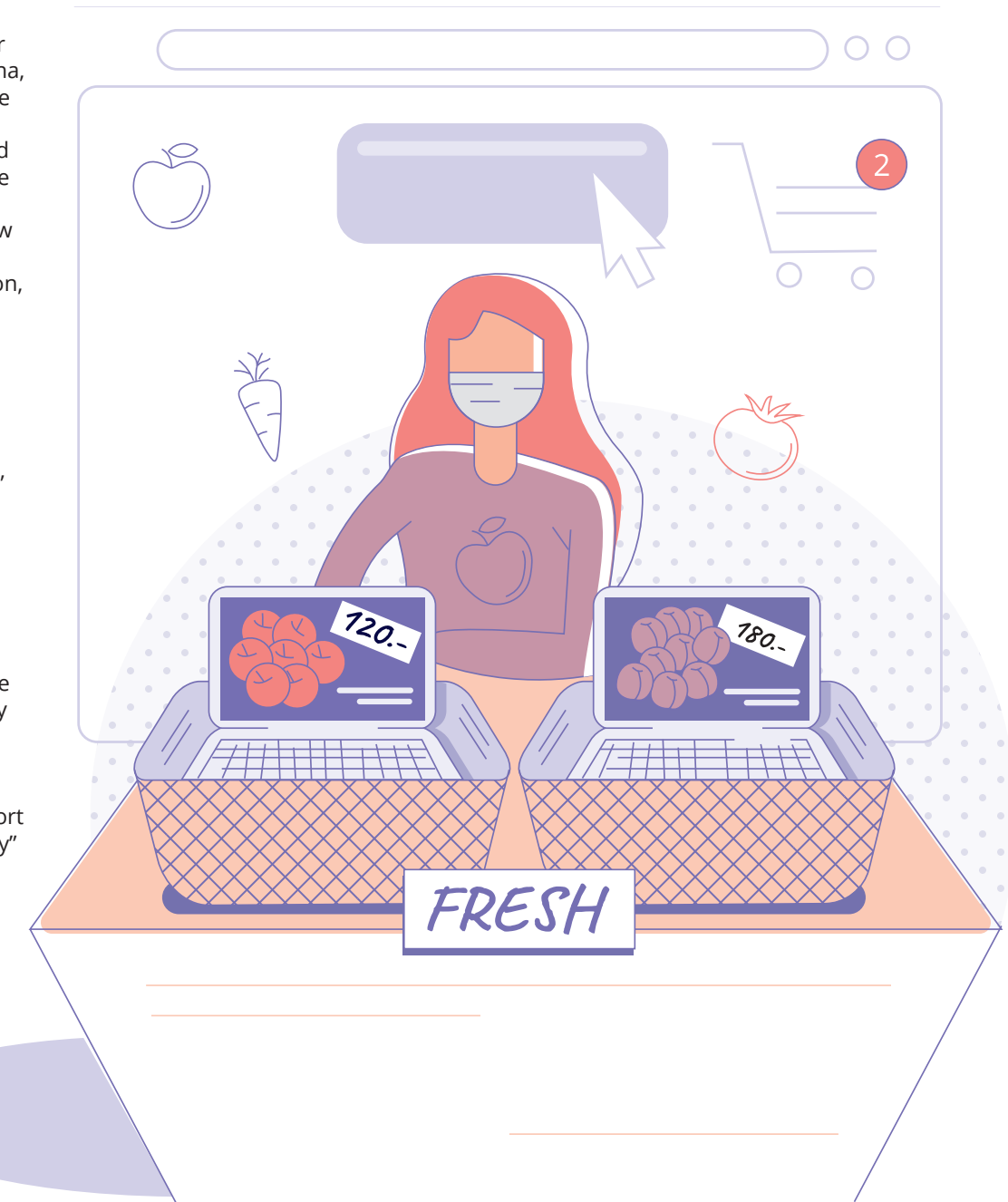
the Women's Association of Kolubara District, proudly explains, adding that just a couple of weeks into the state of emergency, women could already feel the economic implications. "In our daily communication with women farmers, we learned that agriculture is facing enormous pressure and that individual producers are invisible to decision-makers," she says.

To address these issues, in April 2020, the women gathered around the Association launched an initiative that resulted in the creation of an online farmers' market with the goal to help women farmers reach their customers and sell their products during the crisis. Given that express delivery services do not deal with food products, these women had to find an alternative way to deliver their products to customers. "We figured that Belgrade would be our biggest market, but we faced the issue of covering shipping costs," Jelena explains. "Fortunately, it was possible to reallocate a part of the funding from the project to fund this activity. We were thus able to hire a driver and pay for the shipping expenses. We

use our own vehicles and pack our products either late at night or early in the morning so that they reach our customers while still fresh," says Jelena, adding that for customers in Belgrade and Kolubara, the shipping is free of charge and fresh produce is delivered on Wednesdays and Saturdays. These proactive women were happy with the sales and were eager to learn how to make the online platform work by themselves. Thanks to their dedication, they now don't need an IT expert to help them run the platform.

Even though there is barely room for civic engagement during the state of emergency, they are determined to continue fighting for women farmers, and they already have plans on how to further the success of their online farmers' market initiative—to reach more customers, they are currently working to set up an online farmers' market smartphone app and provide means for long-term sustainable shipping of their products sold via the online farmers' market for which they need a refrigerator truck.

"Economic Empowerment of Women Farmers" is part of the project "Support to Priority Actions for Gender Equality" funded by the European Union and implemented by UN Women in cooperation with the Coordination Body for Gender Equality and the Ministry of European Integration.





Tatjana Stojsic Petkovic is a psychologist, laughter yoga leader, activist for the rights of women with disabilities, and provider of psychological workshops and individual support to women with disabilities in the NGO '...iz kruga - Vojvodina' (...Out of Circle-Vojvodina) from Serbia. With the support of the EU-UN Women programme "Ending violence against women in the Western Balkans and Turkey: Implementing Norms, Changing Minds," Ms. Stojsic Petkovic is a frontline worker, providing psychological support to women with disabilities in times of self-isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. She emphasizes the need for adequate support systems for women with disabilities and vulnerable women.

IN THE WORDS OF TATJANA STOJSIC PETKOVIC:

“THE COVID-19 CRISIS DEEPENS THE MARGINALIZATION OF WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES IN SERBIA”

“When the state of emergency began, women with disabilities that I work with reacted calmly: ‘I can take this. I’ve organized everything. I live alone, but I have the support of my neighbours.’ Shortly after, they were telling a completely different story: ‘This has been going on for too long, I don’t know how I’ll manage!’ I remembered a handbook that was useful for working with children coming out of the war in the nineties [Balkans war], and I noticed some similarities with the phases we are going through now: denial, panic, acceptance and raising self-motivation.

How we will go through the current situation largely depends on the relations we have with the people we live with. The relations that were already bad have now worsened. The situation of women living with violence has exacerbated. Mothers of children with disabilities feel being rejected more intensely by the rest of family members with whom they share the household. Some went to weekend houses, to be alone there with the children because other household members cannot stand being all

together in the new situation, which is devastating. The support system has changed completely, and we cannot apply the usual principles. We have lost our existing supports and our focus has shifted. Everyone is saying that now we have more time for ourselves and our families, but the family dynamics have changed completely. I offered some clients the option of writing to me instead of talking online because this is the only way they can have privacy now.

Women with disabilities feel some bitterness, disappointment, anger and rage when people complain about lack of movement and isolation, which is how they themselves have been living for years. The impulsive reaction is: Let them see what it’s like! This is not malicious, but they are conscious of what they had to overcome, give up on, and learn to live with. Fear is inevitable, and when we get out of this situation, it will be impossible to erase the fear. Women with disabilities fear being placed in the temporary COVID-19 hospitals if they test positive, as these facilities in the sports or fair halls are not accessible at all for people with

physical disabilities or with visual or hearing impairments.

On one hand, it seems like we are raising the levels of empathy and developing new support systems, but paradoxically, we can see that marginalized groups are now even more marginalized. I contacted some volunteer organizations to ask what kind of support they were providing to persons with disabilities. They said they had not even thought about it. We need to think about adequate support systems for marginalized persons.”





Jasna Pejic (50) is one of thousands of women who received hygiene and humanitarian kits as well as essential information distributed to at-risk groups across the country during the COVID-19 crisis under the EU-UN Women programme: Support to priority actions for gender equality. Jasna is a single mother of two girls who escaped after years of violence at the hands of her husband. She spoke to UN Women about what this support meant to her.

IN THE WORDS OF JASNA PEJIC¹:

“I DIDN'T HAVE A CHANCE, BUT I WANT MY DAUGHTERS TO GET EDUCATED AND LIVE THEIR LIVES FREE FROM VIOLENCE”.

“Everything changed a couple of years ago when he started beating our daughters. I would stop him and was beaten up again. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. We packed up and left. We moved to the countryside as the rent was much cheaper than in the city. Their school is now far away, but what can we do ... He doesn't get to see the children. He doesn't even pay the determined alimony amount of 4,000 dinars (35 Euros) a month. He doesn't have to pay anything, as long as I don't see him. We live with what we have and we are happy. At least we don't have to think about whether he will come home drunk in the middle of the night to harass me and the children - to beat me, to shout, to turn everything upside down in the house.

The main trigger for a violent outburst was always some nonsense such as: the lunch was not well prepared; or the remote control was out of place; or the children were not well behaved.

I was always to blame for everything and suffered all kinds of insults, which he would sometimes make me believe that I deserved. Even today I sometimes wake up in the middle of the night scared that he will come here drunk and do the same thing again ... I know that the police forbid him to do that, but I don't know what might come into his mind ...

After years of harassment and beatings, my spine is now damaged. I had surgery three years ago, but I am still not able to work; I have difficulty moving and I can't lift anything heavy. Therefore, we live on the welfare that we get from the State and support we have from our relatives. But I don't complain, we are finally happy now and girls are doing well at school.

With the package we received from UN Women through the Red Cross in Serbia, we don't have to worry for a while about what we are going to have for dinner or what we are going to wash

our hair with or use to have a bath and wash our clothes with. It's not really for me but for these girls. They are my everything and I want them to have the life they deserve. I didn't have a chance, but I want them to get educated and live their lives free from violence.”



¹ Survivor's name has been changed to protect their identity.



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality
and the Empowerment of Women