

To the Ministry of Social Welfare, Serbia  
Attn: Ms Ljiljana Lucic, Deputy Minister

Dear Ms Lucic,

On behalf of the Network of Trust to Fight Gender-Based Violence I turn to you with primary goal to invite you to recognize the co-operation of 14 partner governmental and non-governmental organizations and concrete results we reached until now as a relevant factor in further creating of national policy toward gender-based violence issue. Since the Network of Trust gathers exclusively practitioners with long-term experience, we would like to express what we find in practice when assisting child and adult survivors as well as to recommend the Ministry how efficiently may use the services of our Network.

Knowing that numerous steps in protection of children and women have been done and that some of them have already showed good effects, relying on the Network's expertise and rich experience, **our organizations pay attention on the following:**

- It is necessary **to introduce the following categories / official terms into social protection system: "abused woman", "abused child" and "neglected child"**. We find them more adequate instead of those used until now "disturbed family relations", "disorder in social behavior", etc. To be precise in categorization is the basic step in recognizing the problem and providing social confirmation that problem exists. You may notice the gender sensitive structure of victims and this reflects the right understanding the phenomenon of domestic violence and sexual assault against children and women instead of making the picture vague and supporting stereotypes related to gender (both victim's and offender's).

- It is necessary to carry out **recategorization of institutions** in respect of gender-based violence. We suggest forming the network of institutions. Within individual institutions it is important to be led by protocols that precisely define the role of every individual segment of support system for survivors as well as to build a model of co-ordinated assistance given by all segments (schooling, health and social work services, NGO sector, police, legal services, media, related ministries). Lack of protocols opens a free space that in realities of children and women often prolongs or aggravates abusive situation.

- It is necessary **to educate young professionals** to work with abused children and women as well as to provide the staff supervision and monitoring of protocols' implementation. In this process it is important to embrace both the offer of governmental and non- governmental sector.

- It is necessary to introduce continual **keeping files on gender-based violence cases** into social work institutions. This should be methodologically compatible and comparable with other segments of support system for survivors (schooling, health, NGOs, police, legal services). This database should be created by researchers on the ground of practitioners' experience and with the help of practitioners only. Trained professionals **must be obliged to present results continually and particularly to general public**. This is how minimum two goals can be reached: 1. community education (prevention) stimulates reporting and 2. break of remaining taboos, prejudices and stereotypes results in breaking victims' isolation.

- In the aim of taking care of children and women who've been exposed to abuse, it is necessary to develop new institutions called **shelters**. Being informed and understanding the Ministry's guidelines regarding deinstitutionalization trend, we pay special attention that such shelters are common practice in Western-European countries since the need and method of protection in cases of abuse have its specifics. At the same time – when speaking of social protection system in place organized by the state- adequate taking care of children and women in the context of gender-based

violence hasn't been carried out since institutions' primary missions are not sensitive for this theme. Therefore it occurs that sexually abused children got sheltered into centers for children without parental care (and this may be even the best possible way in present circumstances) but the history of abuse hasn't been regularly signed in child's file by professionals. It opens many additional questions for the staff employees in these institutions.

Until now such shelters have been open within women's NGOs. Being aware that in developed countries we speak of the job taken over by the state (creating and implementing systemic solutions), we would like to emphasize this as the job of highest emergency. With respect of the history built up of experience and expertise of women's NGOs gathered in our Network, we find that shelters should employ mixed profiles (multi- and inter-disciplinary working) and naturally follow the principle of using services of both GO and NGO professionals. One of basic principles that guarantee success relates to voluntarily applying for this job position.

- Special attention it is to pay to **children and women who've been exposed to violence and they come from marginalized social groups**. By stimulating co-operation of governmental and non-governmental sector, it is possible to develop sensitivity of employees for refugee and IDPs' issues, Roma, disabled persons. It is significant to work on employees' attitude change employees within social protection system if achievements wanted in the context of domestic violence and sexual assault. Witnessing in the practice exactly the biggest social distance that marginalized groups have been suffering from, we point out this problem as direct barrier in case of need when abuse situation takes place. In our experience, we keep evidence of numerous examples of discrimination of children and women: disabled, Roma, refugees and IDPs.

- It is necessary that the Ministry requires primarily from social work centers and then from all other social protection institutions involved in care for abused women and children to obey **mandatory reporting of abuse cases** - consistently and fully. Reporting to police and court has been made obligatory by the law. It is important that the Ministry takes certain form of action to motivate employees at social protection institutions to obey **legal obligation of showing up as an expert witness at the court and to act as witness in the best interest of abused woman and / or child**. Our practical experience shows that women and children get in longer or aggravated abusive situation or experience tragic death exactly for social denial living through incomplete fulfillment of professional duty of various organizations / institutions. We faced numerous examples when professionals' taking care of personal security issue defines essentially how they work instead of that they follow the needs of abused woman and child. This action taken by the Ministry would show clearly the seriousness of problem of domestic violence and sexual assault against children and women and we may predict an outcome of this action in shape of more efficient assistance to victims and victims' feeling of being supported. Taking into account the level of awareness around this issue in our country as well as being aware of dynamics of violence and offender's strategy targeting and taking advantage of exactly professionals' passivity to protect the victim, the most important good outcome for victims would be in their feeling of being trusted.

- It is necessary that the Ministry both toward social protection institutions and general public campaigns for **118a Article from Criminal Law** that regulates domestic violence. If we are led by the best interest of abused children and women, this sends out the message of seriousness and reinforces compulsory Article's implementation. Parallel with promotion of mandatory reporting and using 118a Article, it is needed **to speak out on measures that will be taken if mandatory reporting avoided or adequate intervention lacking**.

- And last, but perhaps the most important: It is of a special relevance that the Ministry of Social Welfare reconsiders practice in co-operating with so-called 'state NGOs' since this history has been there under ex-regime and continued afterwards. Especially NGOs from the Network of Trust pay attention on this problem and expect that new partners would be recognized, so called '**real**

**NGOs’.**

To join implementation of suggested issues, organizations-members of the Network of Trust remain at your disposal with its expertise and long-term daily experience.

Cordially,

For the Network of Trust  
ITC Co-ordinator

Dusica Popadic

Belgrade, December 05, 2002