BULGARIAN FUND FOR WOMEN

STUDY OF THE NEEDS OF THE ORGANIZATIONS WORKING ON WOMEN, GIRLS AND VULNERABLE GROUPS' RIGHTS IN BULGARIA

Sofia, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the results of a **sociological survey among organizations and activist groups throughout the country** working in the area of women, girls and vulnerable groups' rights and gender equality. It aims to identify the difficulties the organizations face. The study consists of two parts.

The first one, the **qualitative part**, based on a standard questionnaire, was carried out in the period 03.02.2021 – 04.03.2021. It involved 114 respondents out of a total of 452 who received an invitation/query as per the database of the Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW). Thus, the response ratio of 25.17%. The time to fill out the questionnaire electronically was calculated to be 30 minutes.

During the second part, **the qualitative part**, a field study was carried out in June – July 2021. It included 39 in-depth interviews with representatives of the organizations and activist groups. The respondents had indicated their willingness to assist in advance in the questionnaire card. Through the interviews, we aimed to go deeper based on the data identified in the quantitative survey. In this report, the respondents and any names in quotes from interviews have been anonymized. A code indicates a respondent's number and the place where an organization is located. For example, R1, capital.

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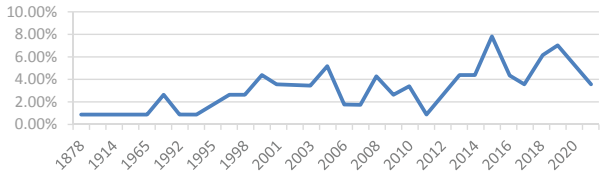
QUANTITATIVE STUDY

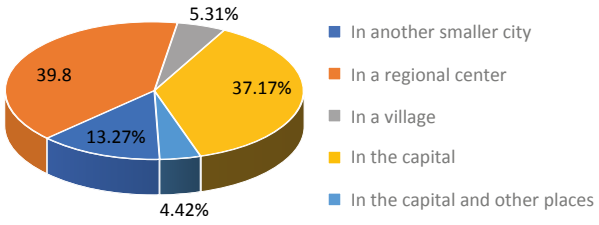
1.1 MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ORGANIZATIONS

Figure 1
When was your organization set up?



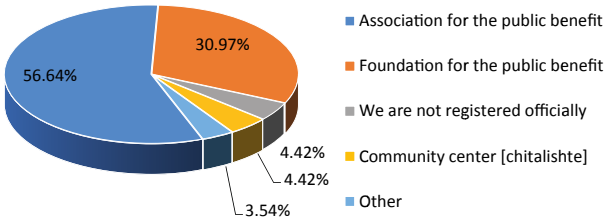
The survey data show (Figure 1) an uptick in the emergence of organizations working on women's rights from 2002 to 2004 (14 new organizations registered), while the greatest rise was after 2018 until 2020 (21 new organizations).

Figure 2
The main team/headquarters of your organization are based in:



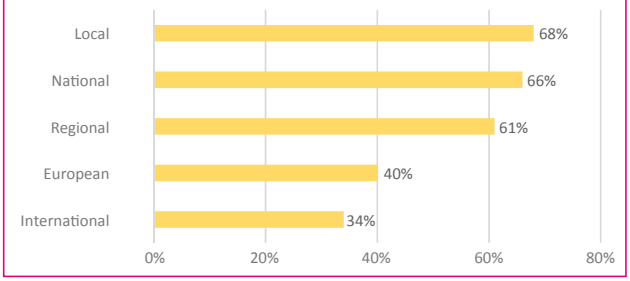
The organizations working on issues affecting women, girls and vulnerable populations in Bulgaria (Figure 2) **are situated mainly in regional centers (39.82%) and the capital (36.28%)**, with the exception of some in towns (13.27%) and villages (5.31%). Most of them (Figure 3) are registered as **public benefit associations (56.64%) or public benefit foundations (30.97%)**.

Figure 3
What form is your organization registered as?



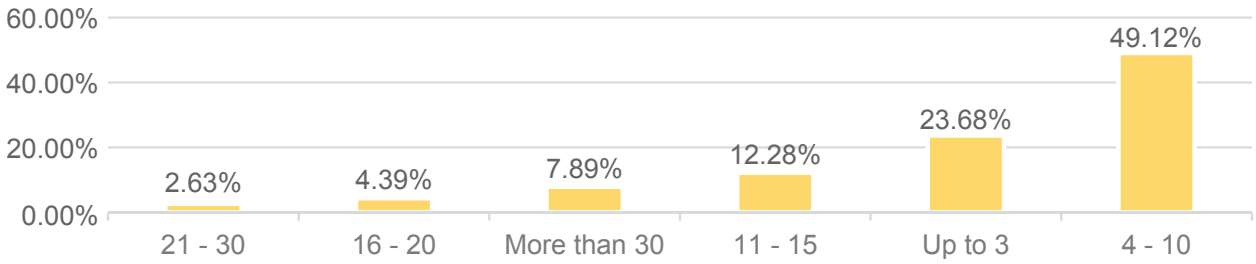
The scope of their activities is mainly within the **state** (Figure 4) – local level (68%); national level (66%); regional/district level (61%); European level (40%); international level (34%).

Figure 4
Your organization works at the following levels:



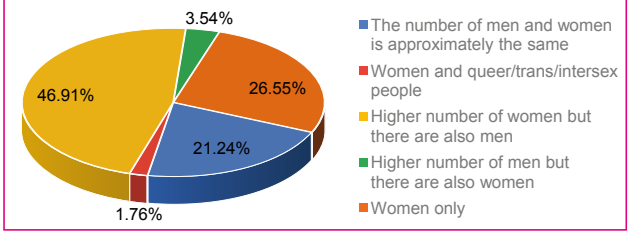
This segment of the civil sector **consists of small organizations**: 4–10 people (49.12%) and up to 3 people (23.68%), which accounts for 72.56% of the total number (Figure 5). An exception is those whose teams exceed 10 people: 11–15 (12.39%), more than 30 (7.89%), 16–20 (4.39%), 21–30 (2.63%), which provide services and focus primarily on the problem of domestic violence.

Figure 5
How many people does the team of your organization consist of?



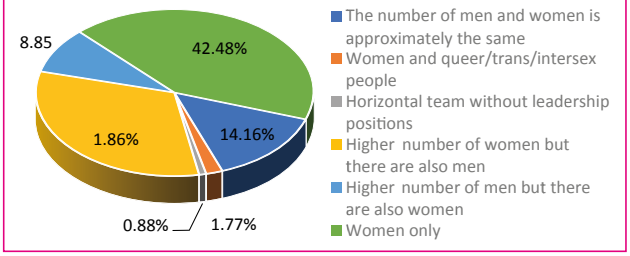
The teams consist primarily of women (Figure 6) but there are also men (46.91%); women only (26.55%); approximately equal number of men and women (21.24%); and a very small share with predominantly men (3.54%). There is no team made up exclusively of men.

Figure 6
What is the gender composition of the team of your organization?



The gender distribution of leadership positions (including Management Boards and Boards of Trustees) in the organizations is (Figure 7): women only (42.48%); higher number of women but also men (31.86%); approximately equal number of men and women (14.16%); higher number of men but also women (8.85%); again, there is no team with men exclusively. Few identify the presence of queer, trans and/or intersex members.

Figure 7
What is the gender composition in leadership positions (including Management Board of Board of Trustees) in your organization?



The organizations work with **small budgets** annually (Figure 8): from BGN 0–10 (34.51%), from BGN 10,000 – 20,000 (12.39%), from BGN 20,000 – 50,000 (14.16%). Still, there is a substantial share of organizations with budgets exceeding BGN 100,000 – 500,000 (20.35%), followed by BGN 50,000 – 100,000 (14.16%). Few have budgets exceeding BGN 500,000 – 1 million (1.77%) and above BGN 1 million (2.65%). Organizations with bigger budgets primarily offer services.

Figure 8
What is the 2019 annual budget of your organization?

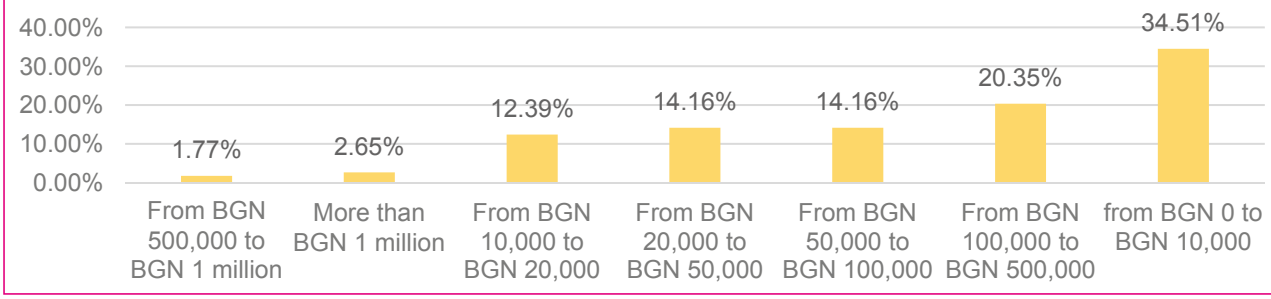
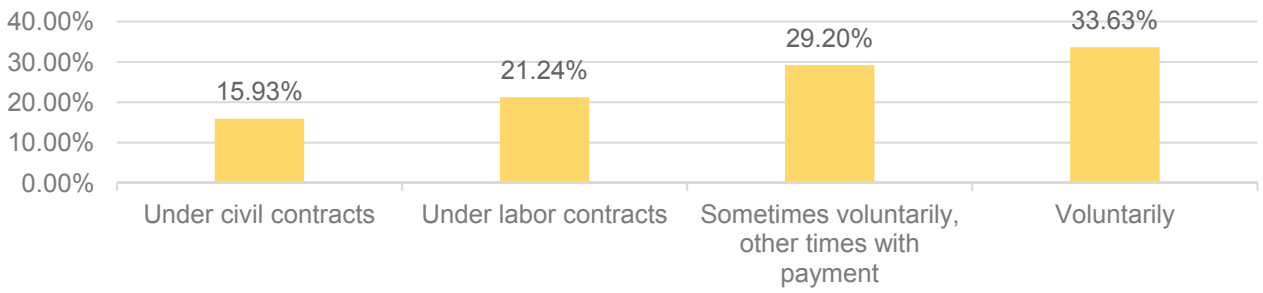


Figure 9
The greater part of the team of your organization is engaged:



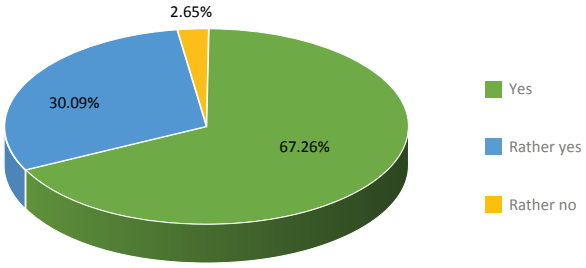
A very small part of those working in the sector are employed under labor contracts (Figure 9) and organizations mainly rely on **volunteer work** (33.63%). A small share of the team is engaged under permanent labor contracts (21.24%); others offer temporary labor contracts only in view of the current activities planned to be implemented during specific projects (29.20%); or offer civil contracts (15.93%).

Therefore, a conclusion can be reached that a typical non-governmental organization working on issues related to women, girls and vulnerable populations is located in the capital or another regional city; the scope of its activities covers mainly Bulgaria; it has limited financial resources; it depends on the availability of temporary project funding; it has a small team consisting mainly of women who often work voluntarily; and the work has been made highly flexible. This means that the sector is characterized by instability and a high degree of uncertainty.

1.2 FINANCIAL ISSUES

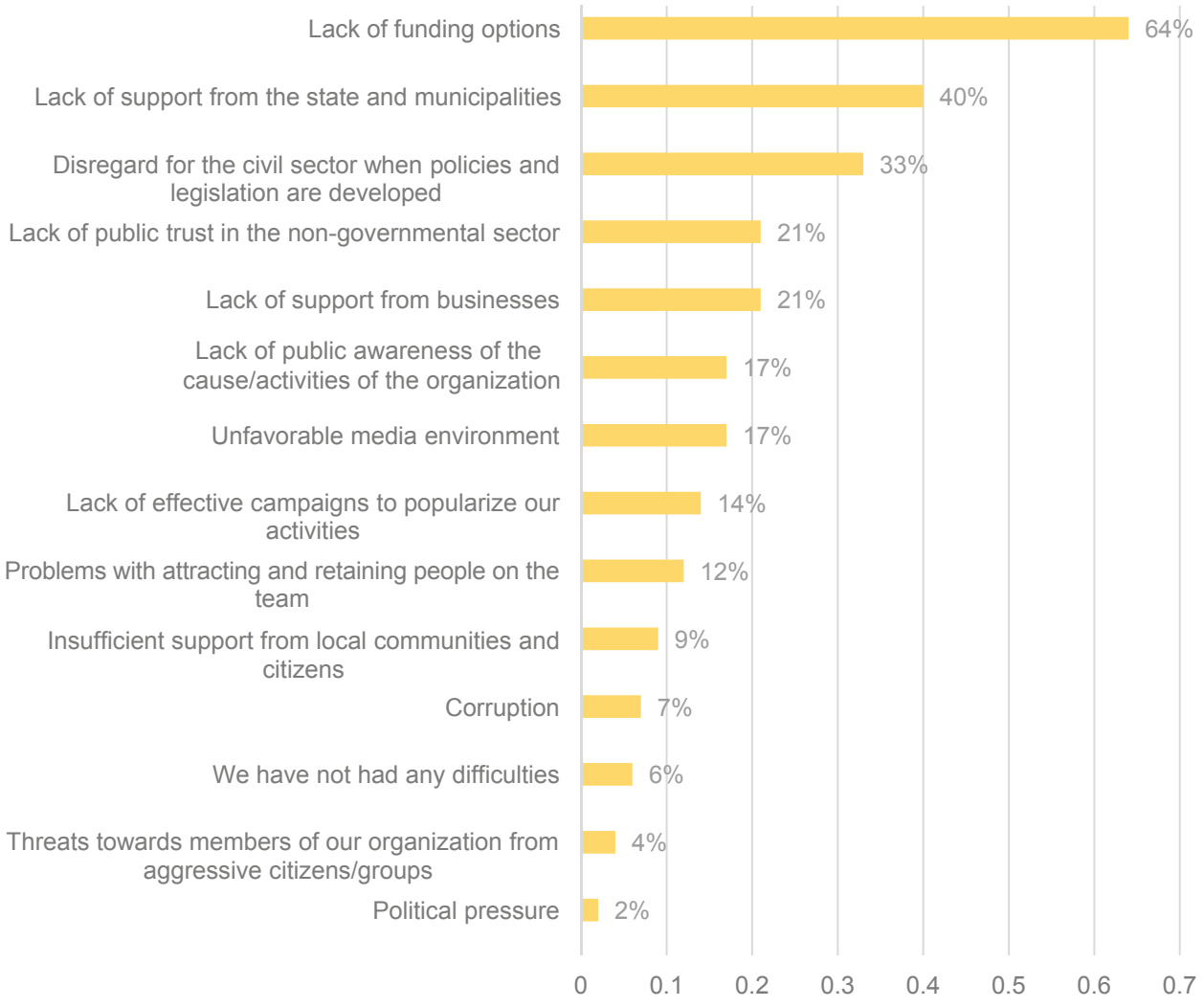
According to the respondents, for an organization to be influential and sustainable (Figure 10), it should have financial resources. 67.26% agree with this statement, 30.09% rather agree with it, and only 2.65% disagree with it. Thus, they define their difficulties mainly as **financial**.

Figure 10
Do you agree that for an organization to be influential it needs to have financial resources and to be sustainable?



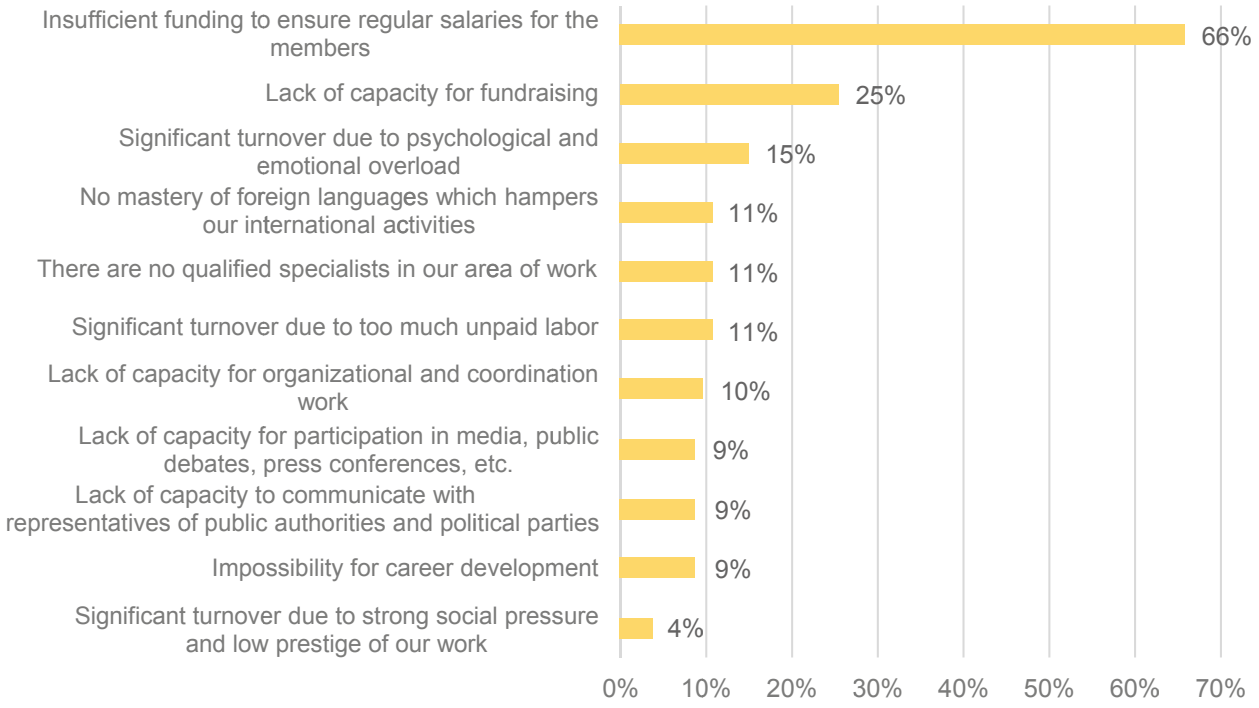
When asked "What difficulties has your organization faced in the performance of its activities?" (Figure 11), the respondents rank first the **lack of possibilities for financing (64%)**. This finding is complemented with the following problems: lack of support from the state and municipalities (40%); disregard for the civil sector in the formulation of policies and laws (33%); lack of support from businesses (21%); lack of public trust in the non-governmental sector (21%); lack of awareness of the cause/the activities of the organization (17%); unfavorable media environment (17%); lack of effective campaigns to popularize the activities (14%); problems to attract and retain people on the team (12%); insufficient support from the local communities and the citizens (9%) and others.

Figure 11
What difficulties does your organization face in the performance of its work?



Thus, in the responses to the question "What difficulties has your organization faced in relation to the team?" (Figure 12), **first comes the insufficient funding to ensure regular salaries for the members (66%), followed by the lack of capacity to raise funds (25%)**. Next comes the high turnover due to psychological and emotional overload (15%), high turnover due to putting in too much work without being paid (11%), lack of qualified specialists in the area of our work (11%), no mastery of foreign languages which hampers our international activities (11%), lack of capacity for organizational and coordination work (10%), lack of capacity to take part in the media, public debates, press conferences and others (9%), impossibility for career development (9%), lack of capacity to communicate with representatives of public authorities and political parties (9%) and others.

Figure 12
What difficulties does your organization face in relation to your team?

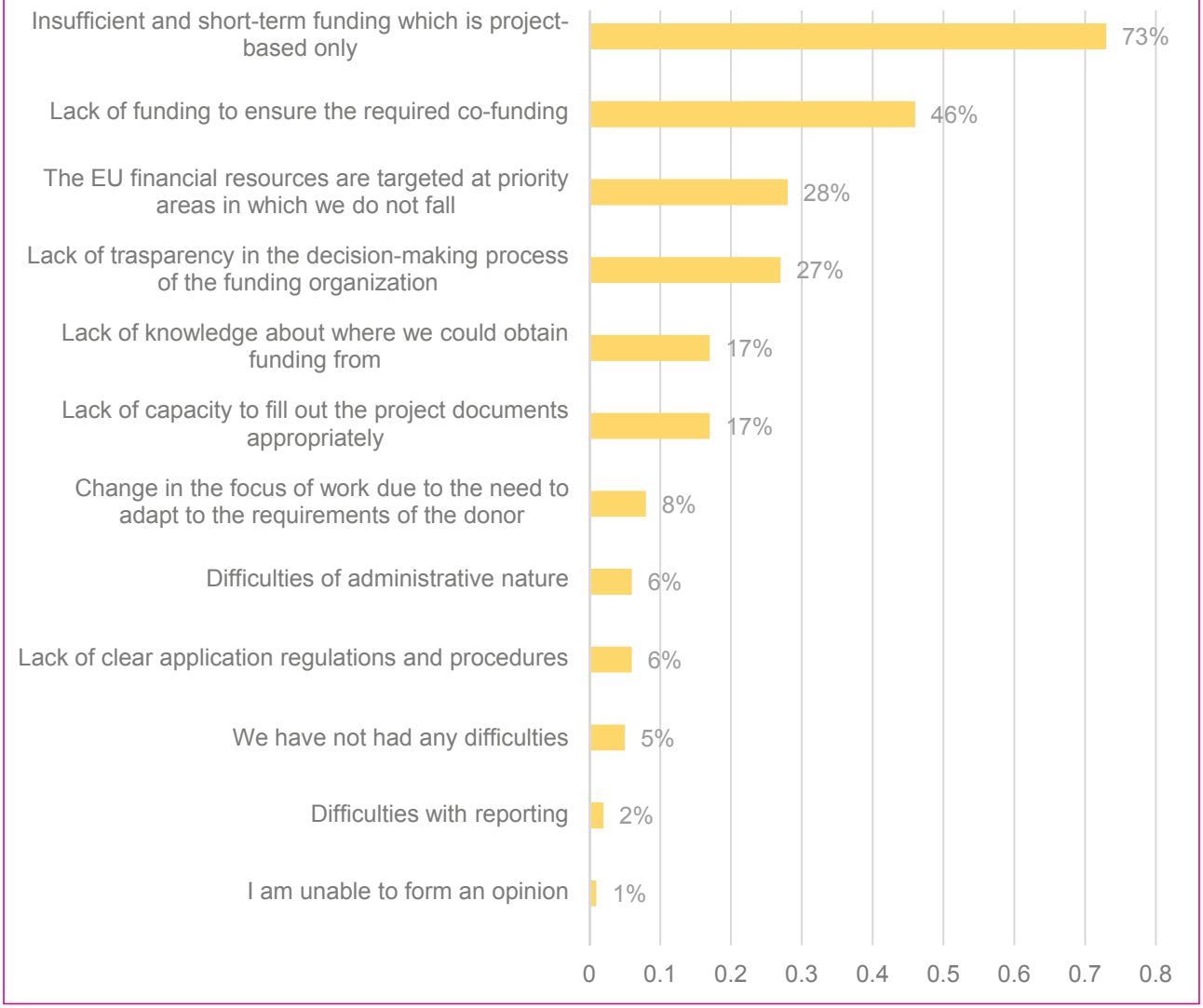


The representatives of the organizations specify the financial issues (Figure 13) **mainly as lack of funding for operational expenses (regular work salaries, facilities, office rent, technological equipment, etc.) (76%) and lack of state funding (municipalities, ministries, etc.) (38%).** Next come the following problems: lack of donors and donor withdrawal (25%); lack of an environment for the development of economic activities (25%); lack of funding for educational and qualification courses (22%); lack of funding for communication campaigns and materials (leaflets, stickers, posters, etc.) (22%); lack of philanthropists and donors (18%); lack of funding for international trips, participation in international forums, conferences, etc. (16%).

Figure 13
What financial difficulties has your organization faced so far?

When asked "What difficulties has your organization faced when applying for funding?" (Figure 14), the respondents **rank first the insufficient and short-term funding which is project-based (73%)**; lack of funds to ensure the necessary co-funding (46%); the financial resources from the EU are targeted at priority areas we do not fall into (28%); non-transparent decision-making on the part of the funding organization (27%); lack of knowledge where we could find funds from (donors, programs and other funding mechanisms) (17%); lack of capacity to fill out the project documents appropriately (they are too complex, language barriers, etc.) (17%); change in the focus of the work of the organization due to the need to adapt to the requirements of the donor (8%); lack of clear application regulations and procedures (6%); difficulties of administrative nature – in the case of applications and finance management (6%) and others.

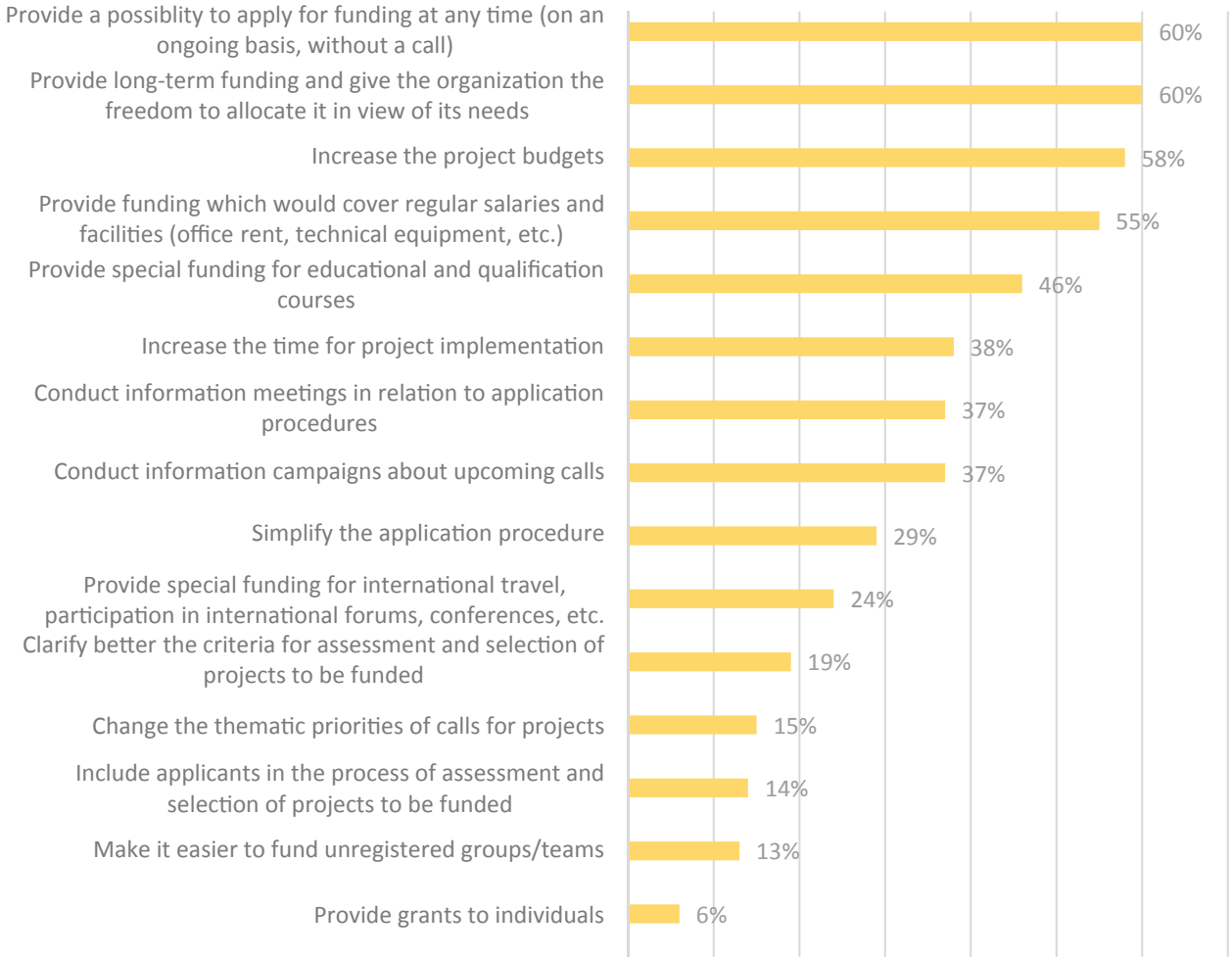
Figure 14
What difficulties has your organization faced when applying for funding?



In summary, it can be said that the organizations carry out their activities in highly insecure conditions – from a short-term project to another, they need capacity to raise funds but lack that capacity, and the projects cannot ensure regular salaries for the team. This prompts their representatives to insist primarily on the need for operational expenses and on financial support from public institutions which, we could assume, is considered a more sustainable mechanism guaranteeing stability in their work. The need to look for funding constantly, determined by the manner in which the sector is funded based on temporary projects, becomes a priority because the work of the organizations would otherwise be hampered substantially.

The main **recommendations to the Bulgarian Fund for Women** come in this respect (Figure 15). First, the organizations insist on a possibility to apply for funding at any time (on an ongoing basis, without publication of calls) (60%); provision of long-term funding and possibility for the organization to allocate it freely in view of its needs (60%); increase in project budgets (58%); available funding to cover regular work salaries and facilities (office rent, technical equipment, etc.) (55%); special funding for educational and qualification courses (46%); increase in the time for projects implementation (38%); information campaigns about upcoming calls (37%); information meetings about the application procedures (37%); simplification of the application procedure (29%); special funding for international trips, participation in international forums, conferences, etc. (24%); clearer criteria for assessment and selection of projects to be funded (19%); change in the thematic priorities of project calls (15%); applicants in a call should take part in the assessment and selection of projects to be funded (14%); facilitation of the funding for unregistered groups/teams (13%); grants for individuals (6%).

Figure 15
What recommendations could you give for the donor programs of the Bulgarian Fund for Women?

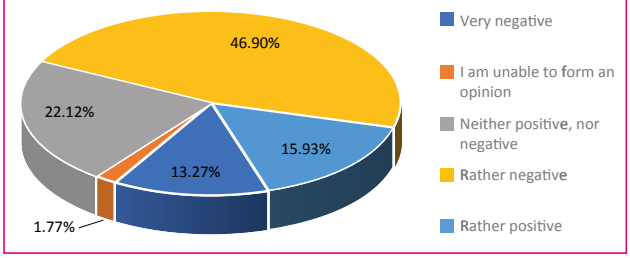


In *Other*, the respondents give their own recommendations to BFW. The following come to the fore: insistence on funding for crisis sessions for organization members who are overloaded and reach the so-called burnout; moreover, as seen from the data, a significant part of the respondents state that there is staff turnover due to psychological and emotional pressure; provision of more long-term funding for organizations which achieve results in practice and work with the target groups by monitoring their activities, thus observing the funding results principle, were a working organization would receive funding for, a longer period if there are proven results; expand the funding to diverse organizations which work on issues related to women, although not their primary focus; possibility for an emergency fund for urgent needs of victims of violence – e.g. return from another country or urgent costs for a lawyer, food, etc.; consult about the project ideas of an organization or group with BFW representatives; ensure transparency and avoid conflicts of interest; provide peer reviews to organizations for their projects.

1.3 SPECIFICS OF THE CIVIL SECTOR

Most respondents are of the opinion that they work in an **unfavorable sociopolitical environment**. They consider the attitudes of the Bulgarian society to the topics of "rights of women" and "feminism" (Figure 16) rather negative (46.90%) and very negative (13.27%), neither negative nor positive (22.12%), positive (15.93%). These are complemented with the issues identified in Figure 11 where the respondents state that they carry out their activities in the context of a lack of support from the state and municipalities (40%); disregard for the civil sector in the formulation of policies and laws (33%); lack of support from businesses (21%); lack of public trust in the non-governmental sector (21%); no popularity of the cause/the activities of the organization (17%); unfavorable media environment (17%) and others.

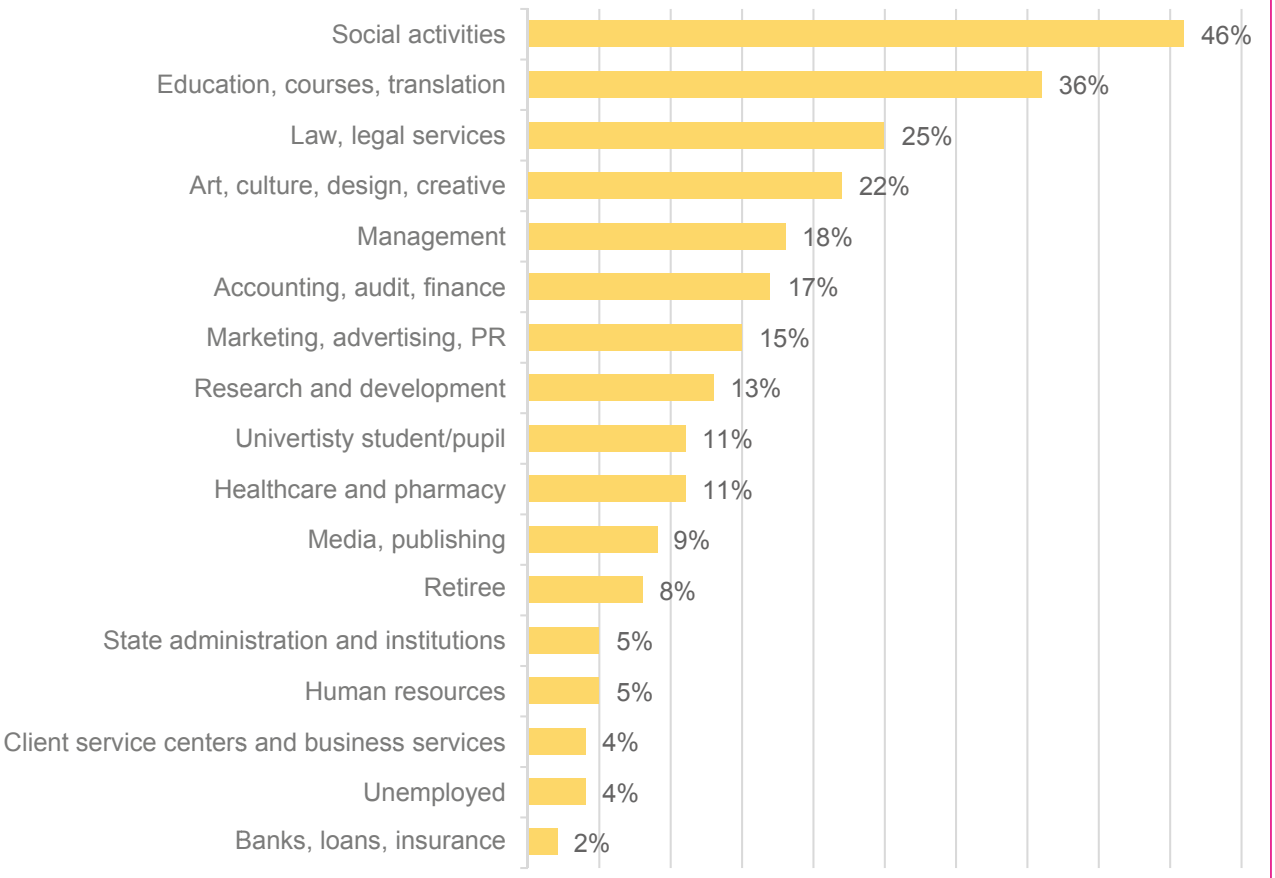
Figure 16
In your opinion, what is the attitude of the Bulgarian society to the topics of "women's rights" and "feminism"?



The question we will try to answer is whether the organizations are trying to resolve those problems of socio-political nature. Are there attempts to achieve impact at the legislative level, search for support through political parties and businesses, participate in media in order to influence the public opinion and thus exert pressure on public authorities and, in general, are there any attempts to engage the public in the causes of the organization? In brief: **is the civil sector functioning as a civil sector?**

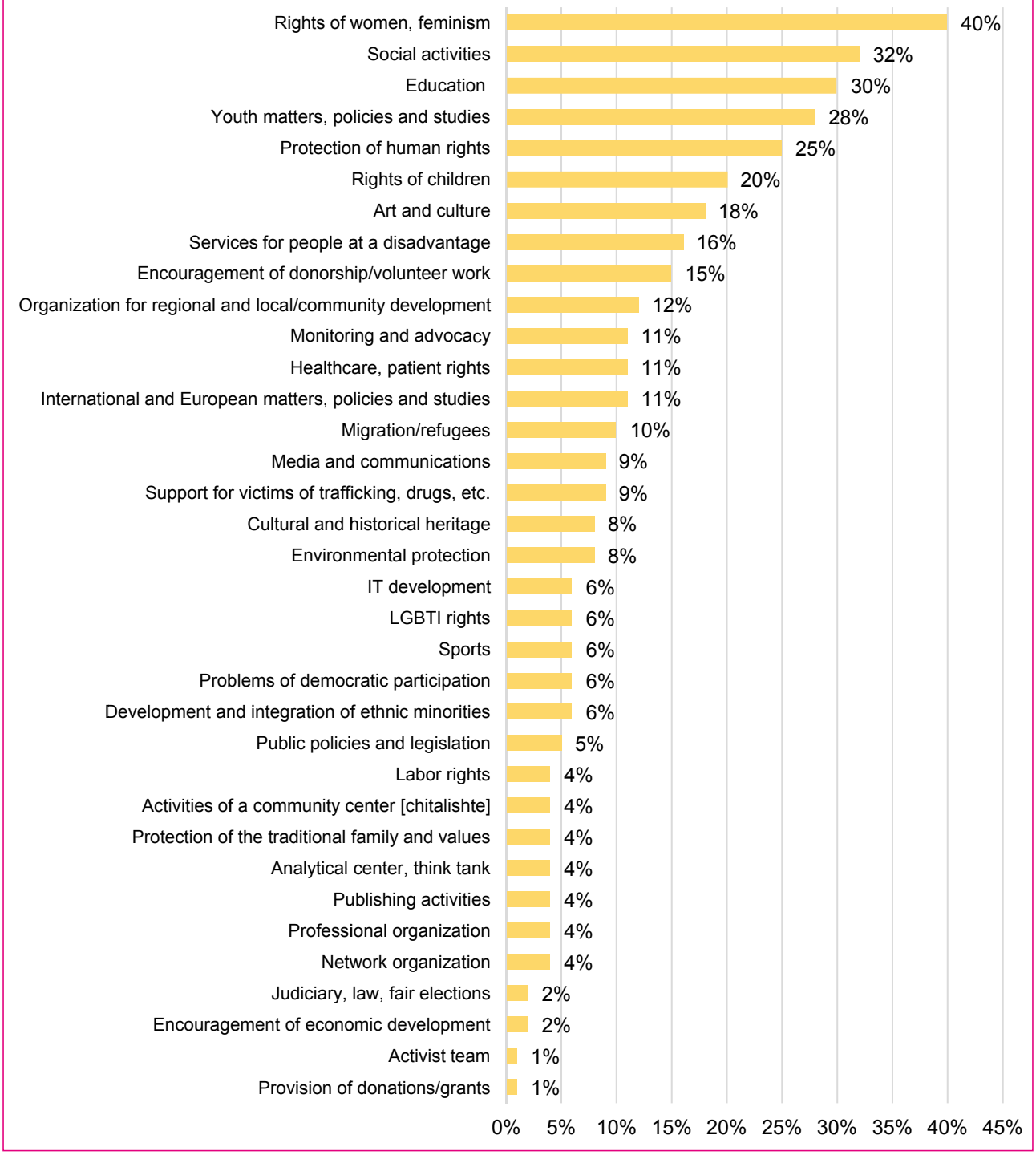
In this regard, a phenomenon seen easily (Figure 17) is that the sector consists primarily of professionals specializing in the area of **social work (46%); education (36%); law and legal services (25%)**. They are followed by culture (22%); management (18%); accounting, audit, finance (17%); marketing, advertising, PR (15%); research and development (13%); healthcare and pharmacy (11%); pupil/university student (11%); media/publishing (9%) and others.

Figure 17
Which are the professional areas of the team members of your organization?



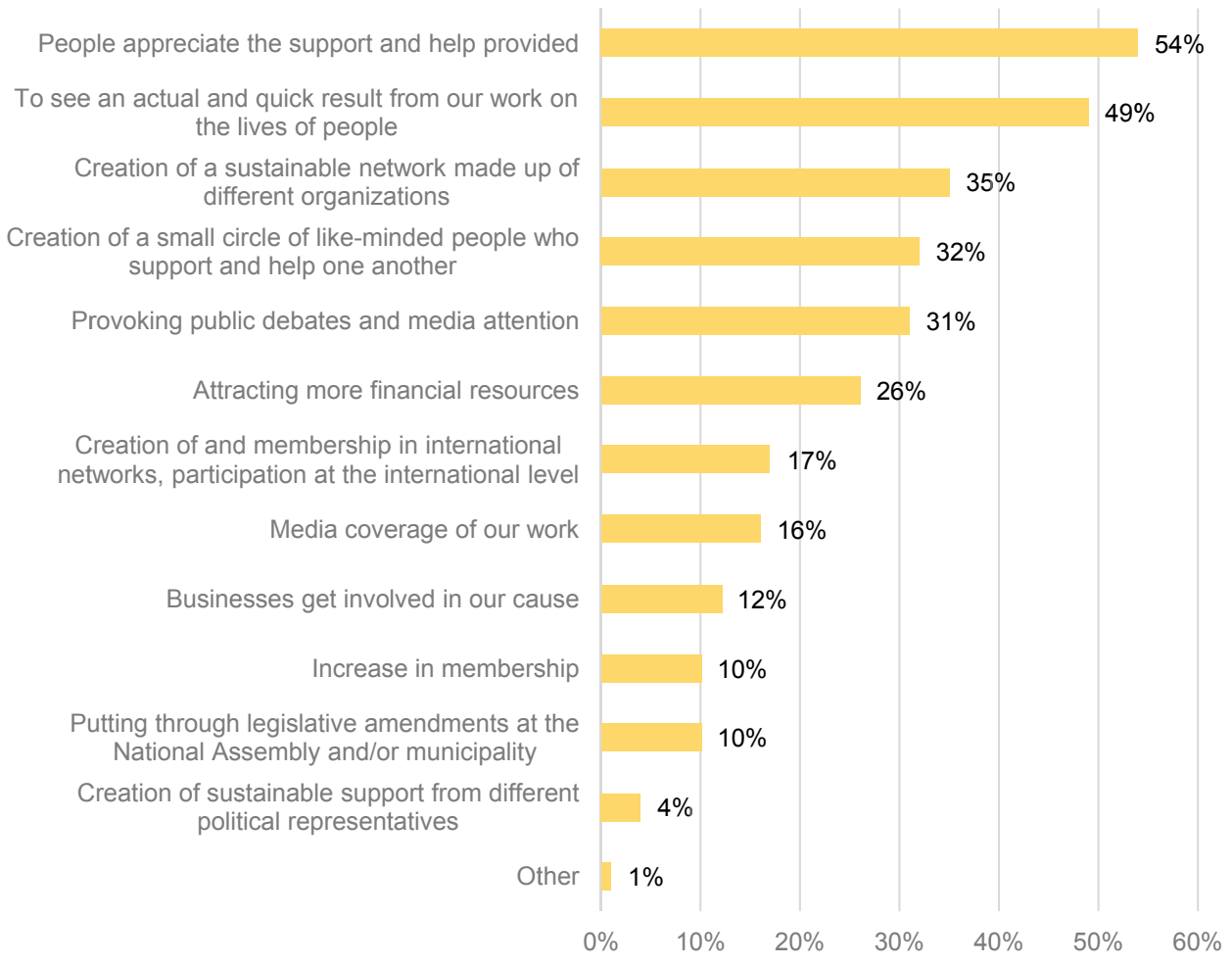
Therefore, the priority areas of their activities are (Figure 18): **rights of women, feminism (40%), followed in second place by social work (32%); education (30%); problems of youth, policies and research (38%); protection of human rights (25%); rights of children (20%)**; art and culture (18%); services for people at a disadvantage (13%) and others.

Figure 18
Which are the areas of work of your organization?



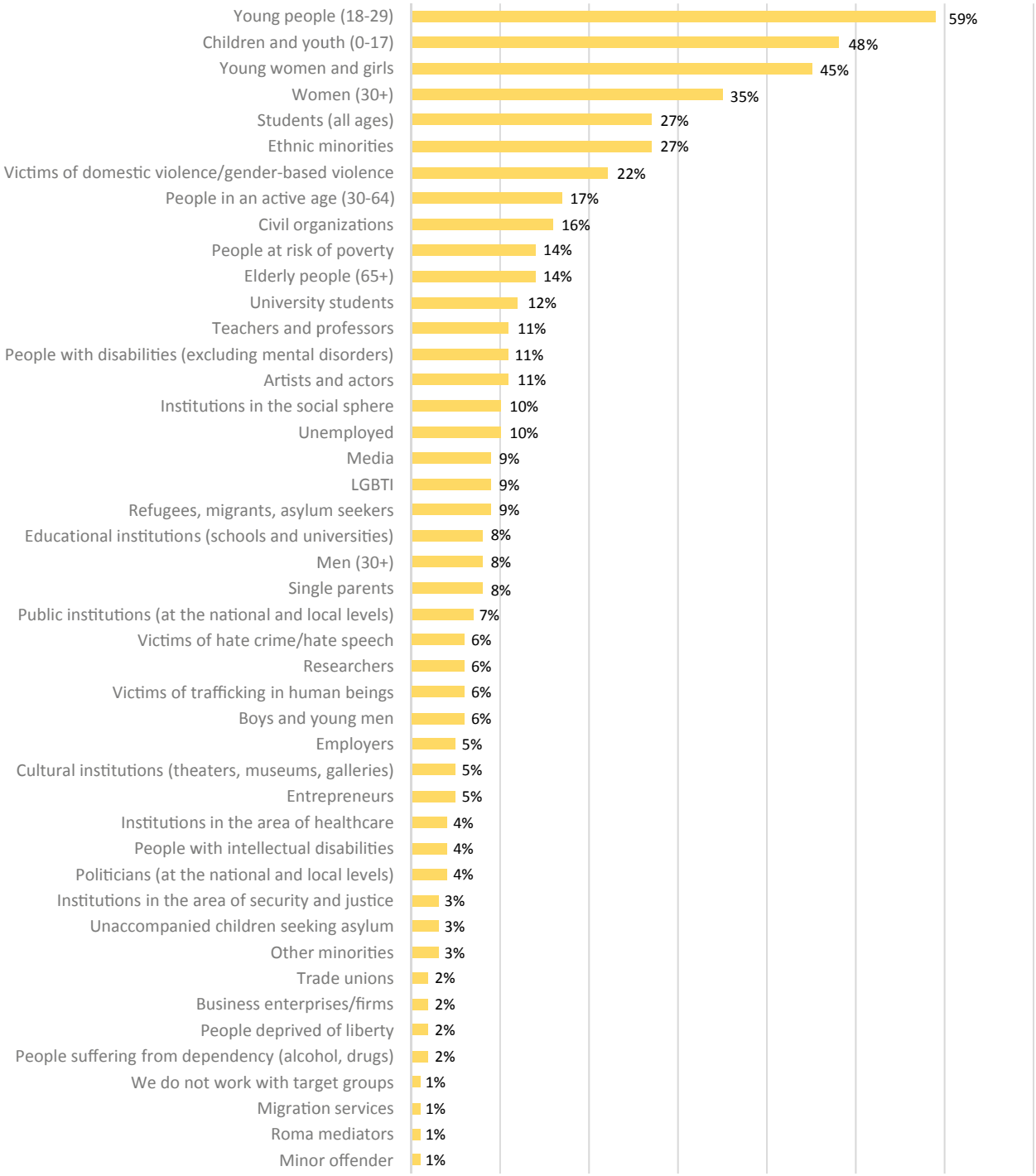
This profile of the organizations has an impact on the way in which they **define their work as effective** (Figure 19). It is important to them that, first, **people appreciate the help and support provided (54%) and see an actual and quick result on the life of people from their work (49%)**. They also feel satisfied when they manage to set up a sustainable network of different organizations (35%) and create a small circle of like-minded people to support and help one another (32%). It is only at fifth place that the responses rank the need to provoke a public debate and media attention (31%); followed by attracting more financial resources (26%); creation and membership in (international) networks, participation at the international level (conferences, position statements, policies, etc.) (17%); coverage of their work in the media (16%); commitment of businesses to our cause (12%); increase in membership (10%); introducing legislative amendments to the National Assembly and/or municipality (10%); creation of sustainable support from different political representatives through whom to exert an institutional impact (4%) and others.

Figure 19
Which of the activities listed below are an indication of the effectiveness of your organization?



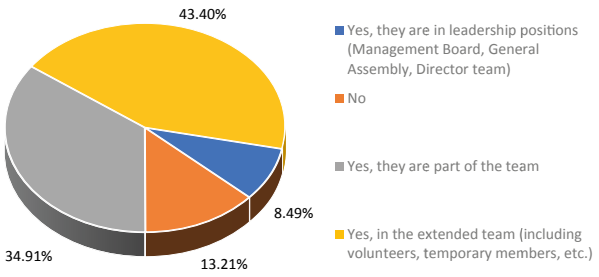
The **target groups** (Figure 20) they prefer to aim their activities at are **"youth"** and **"children", where the groups include students as well**. When asked "Which are the target groups you work with and/or whose interests you protect?", they respond: **young people (aged 18-29) (59%); children and youth (aged 0-17) (48%); young women and girls (45%) followed by women (aged 30+) (35%); students (all ages) (27%)**; ethnic minorities (27%); victims of domestic violence/gender-based violence (22%); people at an active age (30-64) (17%); civil organizations (16%); elderly people (aged 65+) (14%); people at risk of poverty (14%) and others.

Figure 20
Which are the target groups you work with and/or whose interests you defend?



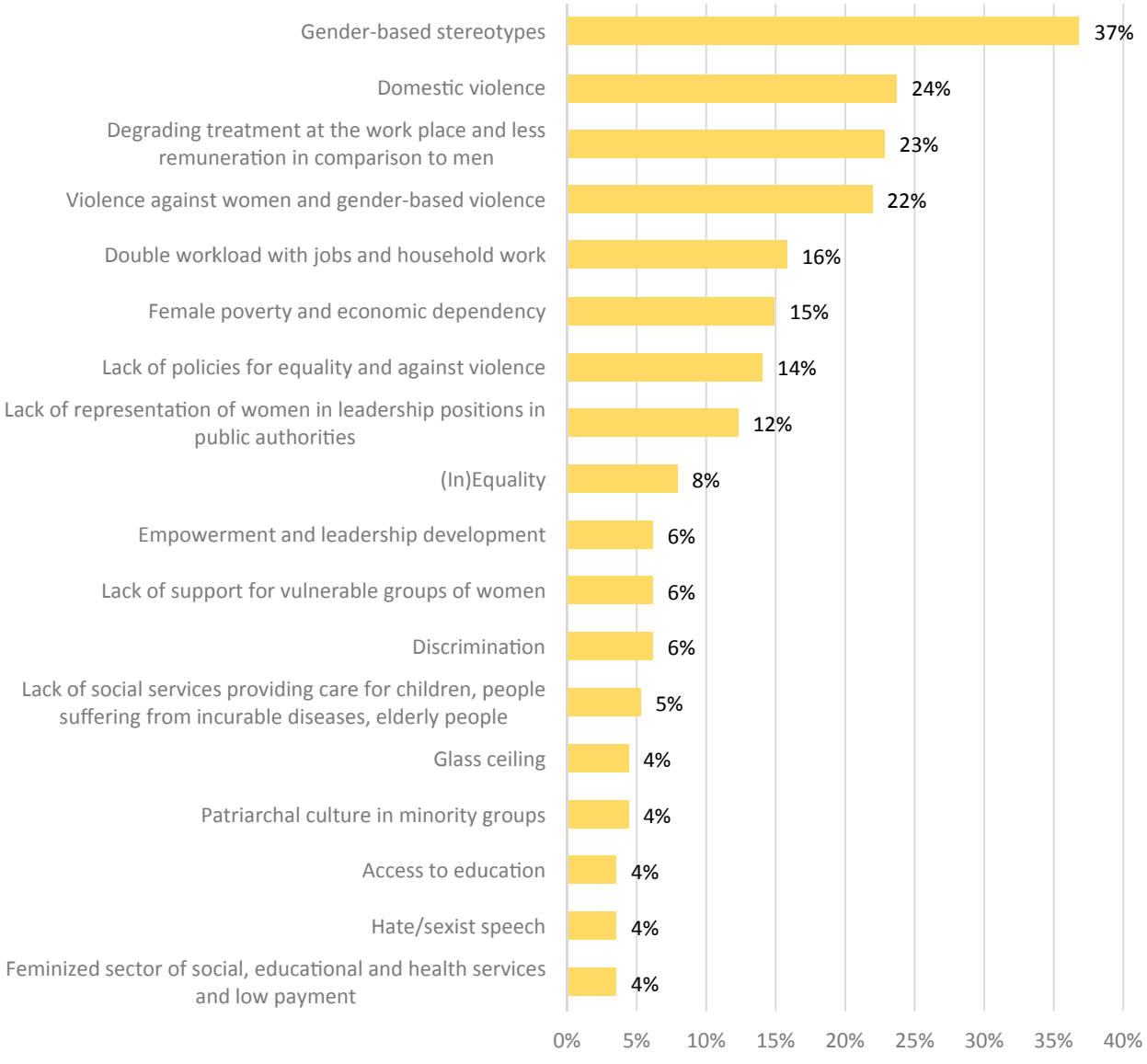
The organizations include representatives of their target groups in the organization panels (Figure 21) in most cases as volunteers and temporary members (43.40%), and sometimes as part of the team (34.91%). A small portion do not include representatives of the target groups in the organization panels (13.21%) and such representatives are rarely in leadership positions (Management Board, General Assembly, director team) (8.49%), which means that they are not permanent members of an organization.

Figure 21
Are representatives of your target groups part of the composition of your organization?



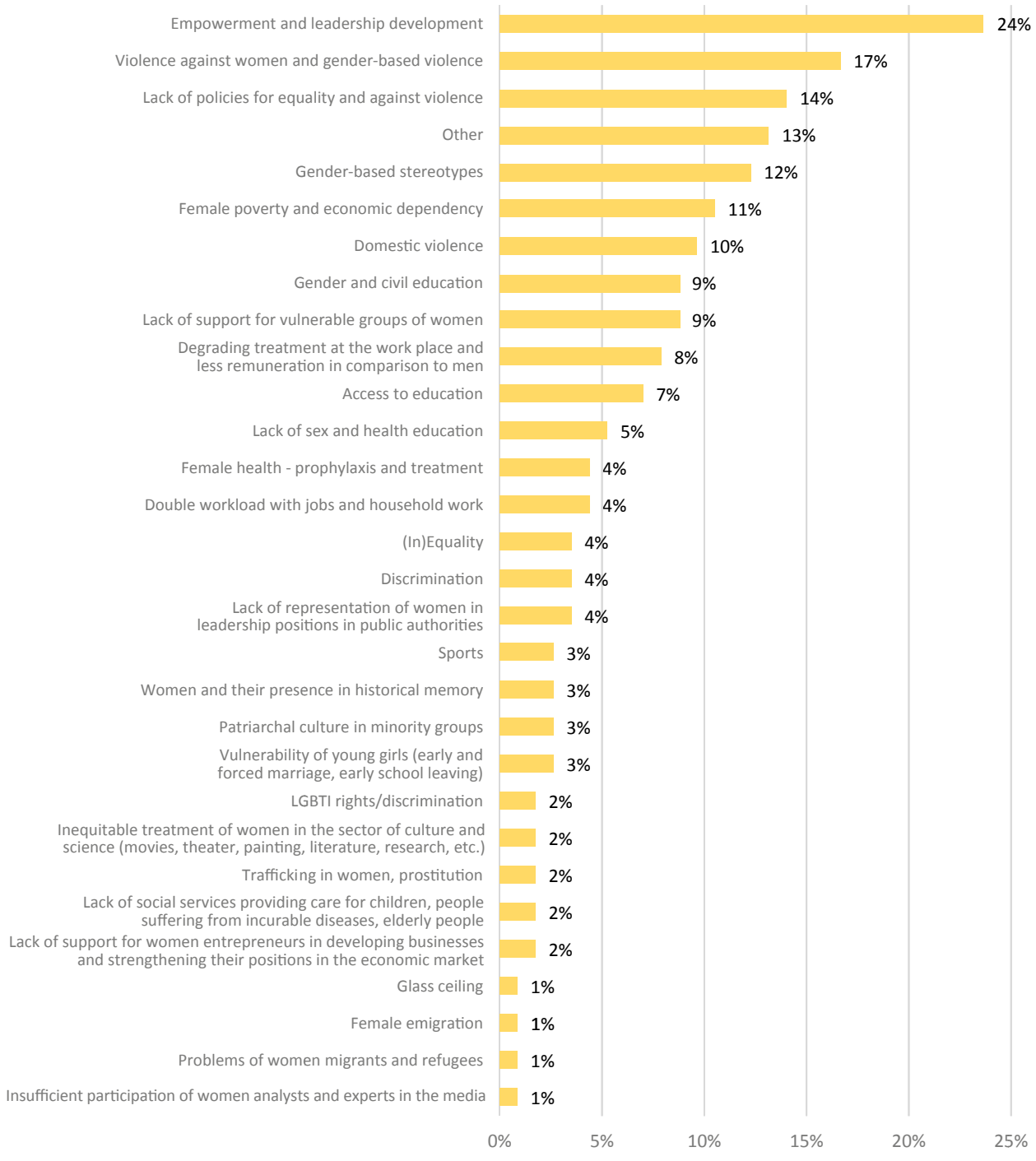
According to them, currently, the **significant issues women face** (Figure 22) in Bulgaria today are: **gender-based stereotypes (37%)**; domestic violence (24%); degrading treatment at the workplace and smaller remuneration in comparison to men (23%); violence against women and gender-based violence (22%); double workload with jobs and household work (16%); female poverty and economic dependency (15%); lack of policies for equality and against gender-based violence (14%); lack of representation of women in leadership positions in public authorities (12%) and others. However, it can be summarized that the topic of domestic violence, violence against women and gender-based violence prevails.

Figure 22
In your opinion, which are the significant issues of women in Bulgaria today?



The thematic areas they would like to work on in the future are (Figure 23): empowerment and leadership development (24%); violence against women and gender-based violence (17%); lack of policies for equality and against gender-based violence (14%); gender-based stereotypes (12%); female poverty and economic dependency (11%); domestic violence (10%); gender and civil education (9%); lack of support for vulnerable groups of women (9%); degrading treatment at the workplace and smaller remuneration in comparison to men (8%); access to education (7%); sex and health education (5%) and others.

Figure 23
Which thematic area related to issues of women would you like work on in the future?



The main conclusion which can be reached is that the sector does not function as "civil" in the traditional meaning of the concept. In most cases, there are no strategies to work on public opinions, take part in publicity, exert political pressure or work with political parties. The respondents are aware of the importance of this type of activities, but they do not prioritize it as a commitment of theirs. Based on the data, it could be assumed that this is due to the professional specialization, which is typical of the work of their representatives, namely immediate care (support, advice, legal defense, etc.), and the lack of capacity due to the structure of funding. The majority of the respondents see themselves as providers of support to specific recipients who need help and not as political subjects suffering from certain injustices which they oppose as victims. This is confirmed by the fact (Figure 22) that an insignificant percentage of them see, for example, the feminized sector of social, educational and health services and the small remuneration as a problem (4%) even though the majority of the respondents come from the area of social work and education. Hence, the impact of public opinions is perceived as work with "young people", "children" and "students" mainly through education who are the subject of social change. Inasmuch as an important topic to them in Bulgaria is "gender-based stereotypes", combating them takes the shape of education. Another interesting result is that, along with domestic violence, violence against women and gender-based violence, the leading problems for women include issues of socioeconomic nature – degrading treatment at the workplace and the smaller remuneration in comparison to men; double workload with jobs and household work; and female poverty and economic dependency. Still, the representatives of the organizations do not indicate that they would work in this direction in the future.

The conclusions described above will be discussed further in the second part of the study based on the in-depth interviews.

2

QUALITATIVE STUDY

2.1 FORMS OF FUNDING AND ENSUING ISSUES: BUDGET UNCERTAINTY AND EXCESSIVE WORKLOAD

In brief, the history of the ways of funding human, women, LGBTI+, vulnerable populations rights non-governmental organizations in Bulgaria are the following. The sector appeared in the post-socialist context of building a liberal state governed by the rule of law after 1989 when a number of international foundations set for themselves the goal to democratize Eastern Europe as a whole and, thus, international partnerships were widely present. At that time, they were the only source of funding provided for temporary projects. After Bulgaria's accession to the European Union, a substantial part of the donors pulled out. However, the available EU funds are not accessible to all organizations. New international foundations also appear but they are floating and also inaccessible to some organizations[1]. This is the context in which the Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW) was set up. In the meantime, the organizations prioritizing the work in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence managed to push through for the adoption of the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (PADVA), which lays down that funds may be provided in competitive procedures via the Ministry of Justice and, as suppliers of social services, they have the right to delegated state activities. How does the financial situation outlined above impact the sector?

Essential differences can be found between the non-governmental organizations with a longer standing (such as those working in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence) and the emerging ones. What brings them together, however, is a constant budget uncertainty they all try to deal with one way or another.

New organizations appear as a result of the enthusiasm of a small group of like-minded people who, in most cases, are enticed by the cause through their participation in volunteer and activist initiatives during studies outside Bulgaria; others also share personal experiences related to gender-based violence and gender/racial discrimination. Yet, not all of them start from scratch. Some people have experience from other non-governmental organizations and even political parties. The resources amassed in the form of experience, knowledge and social contacts give them better chances to develop. Barely having found their footing, however, the organizations face a number of difficulties. They start with a small budget made up of membership fees and/or a short-term project (up t0 BGN 10,000) covering mainly administrative needs (an accountant, a bank account, bank transfers), consumables, possible rent for premises and catering for a specific event as well as small payments for the team. The team members work in their free time, which gradually becomes less free because they combine studies if they are university students, workplace commitments and diverse voluntary work related to the cause. This is why winning a project means working late at night during the workweek as well as over weekends. Long organizational meetings are held at a café, a personal apartment, a park or online. Often one person combines the roles of project coordinator and implementer of the activities envisaged. To this person, the bureaucratic and organizational work handled as they go is an obstacle to the performance of the content-rich work. The respondents share that, at this early stage, conflicts arise among the members of the organization due to the allocation of tasks because the work relations are not strictly provided for and, thus, a small core, and sometimes even one person, bear the burden. The balance between studies, work, personal life (to some female interviewees, this also means caring for a child(ren)) and activist work proves to be difficult. In the long run, they all agree that the final payment they receive based on a civil contract and the work they have put in are incompatible. Some of the work remains unpaid and continues to be voluntary but they do it because they are driven by the idea of a cause. The fundraising activities – looking for donors, monitoring for calls, developing and applying for new projects – remain unpaid. Similar features are also observed with informal activist groups which are not registered as associations or foundations for the public benefit.

1 For an analysis of the way in which the financial restructuring impacted the women's movement towards the emergence of inequalities among the organizations after Bulgaria's accession to the European Union see Ivancheva, M. (2015). The Spirit of the Law: Mobilizing and/or Professionalizing the Women's Movement in Bulgaria. In: Krizsan, A. (ed.), *Mobilizing or policy change: Women's movements in Central and Eastern European domestic violence policy struggles*. Budapest: CEU, Center for Policy Studies, pp. 45-84.

"For example, non-profit organizations are now preparing their accounting reports. First, there is a mandatory fee at banks you need to cover with membership fees, then there's mandatory accounting reporting; to complete this accounting reporting, you need to hire an accountant and pay that person. Then, once the reports are ready, you need to pay at the Commercial Register in order to publish them. Let's not even mention paper and other consumables. These are things which make things harder. We've travelled around the region, we've visited thirty companies under a project, but we've done so with personal vehicles, we're depriving our families... Let`s say that one of us drives and the other two don't, then another person has to come so that there is more than one driver; that's it. Looking at these things, you see that these are purely voluntary activities we choose to do. But, more or less, these are things which come in the way at certain times. [...] For a non-profit organization to function, it first needs to have the certainty that one or two persons will be able to carry out the work, moreover comfortably and not just in between or while ignoring other duties." (R35, in a regional center)

"So, you give BGN 250 for the bank account a year. BGN 900 goes to the accountant because if you have turnover, you need to report for the year, which is another BGN 400 and, in addition, you need to report for the project or another BGN 500 – BGN 1,150; as a whole BGN 5,000 of the project's budget go to such things. In addition, there's BGN 2 for the bank transfers [...] Out of the whole thing, you are actually left with BGN 3,900. If you have a team of 4 people, that gives you approximately BGN 1,000 per person for 6 months which is not that bad. However, to ensure an actual contribution, it's not just about printing out a couple of leaflets, you need to be dedicated to it! In practice, our discussions about how to conduct sessions took up as much time as the sessions themselves. [...] Moreover, we didn't include any premises in the BGN 3,000. We wanted to use a big room; so it's BGN 234 for the room; then the coffee break is another BGN 200. And it turns out that you are doing all of it pro-bono and it's better for you to do it like that rather than handling the red tape." (R20, capital)

Our respondents insist that for an organization to be able to develop, there needs to be at least one person hired under a labor contract working half-time or full-time. However, applying for greater funding to hire potentially such an employee proves to be inaccessible to the new organizations because donors ask for a financial resume, and it takes years to gain one. Furthermore, there is a requirement for co-funding when applying for EU funds, for example, which they cannot afford. In this sense, they feel they are treated inequitably, and they possibly have a chance only if they manage to build partnerships with other organizations. There is also a concern that they do not have the capacity to handle a bigger project due to the lack of time because they also work elsewhere. Some of them never manage to make it through this first difficult stage and their activities come down to minor initiatives and gradually die down.

"Nobody cares that I have 30 projects, I've written 20 of them and they cost between EUR 250,000 and EUR 500,000. Nobody cares about my resume; they want the resume of the organization. And now I criticize the Active Citizens Fund whenever I get the chance. It's important for me that they have feedback, moreover in their archives, so that they cannot tell me one day that they simply didn't know that. They tell me, "We have a special program" because we applied for 250,000. [...] So we go there and ask for 250,000. They say it's not possible. How come? I ask them. It's a different thing that the project wasn't perfect, no need to go into that, but it would have had a chance. They tell me, "For new organizations, we have funds of up to 10,000." This is insane! Giving small money to small organizations! When they are the ones without money! Big organizations have money. For example [...], they have an administrative department maintained in every way, they have an office, accountants, their consumables are covered and a thousand other things, internet, computers..." (R20, capital)

"Another thing is that we all self-train, sometimes working on projects... We've had many occasions for discussions, we've started to apply for projects, even more serious ones, with lots of activities, big funding, and many times we've given up because we're unsure we can do it, we're just not sure, especially if a project is for a whole year, how and in what way we would be able to find the time, if the money would be enough in principle, whether we could actually manage it, right; we've had these concerns many times and we still have them but... when you don't have the possibility, when you don't have the time to make things work, then you try to pass the burden onto the partners, which is not right. So that's how it is. We are cautious and careful and... we've had the desire for more serious work but..." (R35, in a regional center)

The other extreme is occupied by long-standing non-governmental organizations which work primarily in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence. They have the possibility to obtain funding from the Ministry of Justice and through delegated state activities from municipalities, as noted in the introduction. What amounts were provided in 2021?

- Since 2010, pursuant to Article 6 (7) of the PADVA, after the adoption of the National Programme for Prevention and Protection against Domestic Violence, every year the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria Act determines, taking into account the budget of the Ministry of Justice for the respective year, funds for projects of suppliers of social services

licensed under the Social Services Act and legal entities registered under the Commercial Register and Non-Profit Legal Entities Register Act working in the area of protection of victims of domestic violence. In 2021, the amount of a call stood at BGN 450,000 with BGN 25,000 provided per project with an implementation period of 4 months.

- Pursuant to Decision No. 790 of 30 October 2020 of the Council of Ministers on the adoption of standards for the activities delegated by the State with natural and value indicators, in 2021, the social service "crisis center" is given a uniform cost standard of BGN 13,304.

The respondents are markedly critical of the social policy pursued by the State. In their opinion, the state financial commitment should offer budget certainty, allowing them to develop their activities sustainably and, therefrom, ensure an increase in the quality of the social services provided and accessible to all citizens on the territory of Bulgaria. Instead, the Ministry of Justice allocates inequitably the scarce resources forcing the organizations to compete by applying for projects. The budget provided is considered small and too short-term.

> "This is one problem which, of course, stems from the government policy. A Strategy to Combat Domestic Violence and so on is adopted every year; after that, the MoJ has a budget – BGN 450,000 – which is coordinated by the Budget Act and is meant to support victims of domestic violence. In principle, it is reserved for that. Respectively, the organizations apply for projects and, if approved, they can fund these services. Now, in principle, it was for 6 months, which is also very strange. Up to BGN 25,000; it used to be less in other years. Yet, why does the State help? By supporting the organization, it also supports victims and perpetrators so that you can provide them with the services for free and still manage to survive because there is no way you could keep the psychotherapists working for free or the lawyers working on cases for free. There are other costs too, and it's simply unbearable! But why is the policy such that financial support is provided for 6 months, I simply cannot see. They were late last year, they are just late, it was for 5 months. This year it's for 4 months. They published a call at the last minute with a very short period to prepare and submit the projects. All organizations have applied, of course, and, in the beginning of June, they'll announce who wins funding; then, contracts will be concluded to be completed in November. This is very hampering because free consultations or therapeutic work or inclusion in a program for perpetrators cannot be ensured in any other way. If it is done pro bono all the time, then the organization will cease to exist. It needs to pay rent as well, which is why some colleagues are forced to collect fees, even though just symbolic in amount, to be able to ensure the existence of the organization." (R1, capital)

The respondents also state that the uniform cost standard for crisis and consultative centers in line with the delegated state activity is insufficient. A crisis center entails a 24-hour service covering daily needs, food, transportation, purchase of consumables and medication, payment for medical examinations and treatment, maintenance of facilities, expenses for security, payment for external experts and ensuring minimum staff consisting of administrative personnel, 24-hour daily presence of a social worker, psychological and psychotherapeutic assistance, legal defense. In addition, the crisis centers working in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence have few beds available and, as a result, the amount provided cannot cover the necessary annual maintenance. An inability has also been identified to plan the number of people placed to be used respectively to forecast a budget meeting the meets. Thus, the salaries and the daily food allowance remain at the minimum.

> "... what is the daily food allowance – some ridiculous amount. The capacity is 5 beds. When a woman comes with a baby, how could you possibly turn them away?! There are many such cases: the woman runs away with a backpack and the baby. They almost always exceed their capacity; the money they get for their existence is very small and, furthermore, you need to explain again that the crisis center is not just a place when you sleep and eat; it's a place for a therapeutic program and this is the most important thing which they fail to understand – to reduce violence, you need to work with the victims, the kids and the perpetrators." (R1, capital)

> "Even if we get the delegated activity – the enormous budget people allege that NGOs have... we've been called everything but the idea is that behind the grand schemes being discussed, we're actually talking about a shameful funding where the State gives BGN 2 for food per person a day and a salary between BGN 400 and 700 for a person working full-time." (R22, regional center)

However, not every non-governmental organization manages to win delegated state activities at the municipal level. A respondent talked about years of efforts with the municipality, including building a network of contacts in order for them to be able to obtain funding, which could give them more certainty. Still, this is an improvement in comparison to the previous situation in which they relied entirely on short-term projects, some of which with international foundations, EU funds, fundraising through donations and support from businesses. A certainty which can also be uncertain if, for the specific year, the municipality does not require such a type of delegated state activity or if the respective organization does not manage to win the call at which it is supposed to compete with institutions, private commercial companies and other NGOs.

"An advocacy campaign continued for quite a long time to make the Center a state delegated activity because the maintenance through projects – over time, we became more and more successful, we managed to raise more funds through projects but there were times with no projects and then the people working here had to volunteer until the new funding would arrive. Even if we had 2-3 year projects, they would not be capable of supporting all consultants. The psychologists and social workers who wanted security were hired under labor contracts by the organization and regardless of whether there were funds, social security had to be paid. So, it was quite hard until in the beginning the Social Assistance Agency... or maybe even the local authorities couldn't convince it that such a service was badly needed in the region. Until 2018, when the SAA adopted rules to provide state funding; again, the proposal had to go through the municipal council. The municipality obtained the budget, they published a call and, since we are the only organization on the territory of the entire region working with victims of violence, we were the only ones to apply at the call. Their three-year contract expired this year; there was another call and again it was only us. Now, this guaranteed stability; not that the funds are sufficient to support the Center but they ensure stability in remuneration; to a certain extent, we are able to cover the costs for utilities and we currently use the projects as additional funding, mainly for the program with perpetrators of violence, attorney fees, payments for people who are supervisors – individual and group ones, for the teams." (R2, regional center)

The non-governmental organizations, as a whole and not only those specializing in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence, are also connected to the municipalities in terms of the possibility to obtain premises at low prices or rent-free for offices, consultative centers of crisis centers. In this regard, the respondents also use a network of contacts as some of them used to be part of the municipal councils. Yet, even if they obtain municipal premises or buy a building directly, after that, the organization again has to look for additional sponsorship for renovation work, furniture and technical equipment.

"Well, they work all the time, it's true, because we actually work pro bono. For example, there isn't a person at the consultative center all the time; the municipality gave us a room there and they work at smaller rents; that's why we're able to maintain the room there, because we pay a mere BGN 30 a month which allows us not to give up the room. There is no person there all the time but all institutions have our contact details and they call us when necessary and we respond." (R34, regional center)

"Yes, that was up until 2018, but before we get to how we became a state delegated activity... in 2009 Y. conducted a significant advocacy campaign before the Municipality in order to obtain premises which were not part of another building but a separate building where a consultative center on violence could be housed. It was maybe a year of negotiations, the Municipality suggested different options; we got to the point where the Municipality was willing to give a building which could serve as a consultative center for victims of domestic violence, and then all municipal councilors at the Municipal Council voted unanimously in favor of giving the building for 10 years, then the term was extended by another 10 years. It was then that Y. moved out of the business center and the two rooms and we started occupying a separate house measuring 110-120 square meters; there we set up consultative offices for elderly women, children, reception rooms, training rooms. The building had been a complete wreck, hit by lightning, absolutely inhabitable for 5-6 years maybe; if you saw it, you'd never think that it could be used in such a way; but then the L. Foundation supported completely the renovation of the entire building." (R2, regional center)

Another respondent working in the area of LGBTI+ rights told the story about how they were sabotaged at the municipal council politically by representatives of the far-right, which prevented them from maintaining an office and, respectively, working.

"A long time ago we wanted to get municipal premises for the organization but people from the current National Front for the Salvation of Bulgaria responded negatively at the Municipal Council and the organization was not given an office; maybe one of the only ones not given an office but one is needed because of the people we work with, because in such a community and in general in the work for gender equality, it is essential for the local community to accept some point where they could seek help and consultation. Most people who provide support do it on a pro bono basis, that's it. This poses significant difficulties, but it is again a matter of certain financial resources, since no municipal premises can be provided at this point, even though the practice there is such that the Municipality provides some room and then votes for a minimum subsidy to be used to pay the rent to the Municipality again." (R7, regional center)

It can thus be summarized that the State does not function as a direct supplier of rights and services. It has minimized its social expenses, transferring activities to private commercial organizations and such to the public benefit, engendering competition among them which is an instrument of unequal allocation of scarce resources provided temporarily. They are forced to wage local fights in municipal councils through lobbying which is based on social contacts in order to obtain an unrenovated and unfurnished room or a delegated state activity which must also be won competitively. But even if

a room is provided, it is still insufficient because of the low uniform cost standard and the tying of the budget to a number of users. That is, the state support, if they get one at all, is incapable of covering fully the needs of the non-governmental organizations working in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence and; as a result, it does not ensure sustainability or equal access to social services for the citizens on the territory of Bulgaria. This forces the organizations to make up for what is missing by any possible means – by applying to international foundations, EU funds, raising donations, etc. – again competing against one another. However, in view of the cause – provision of free services for all – they often unite their efforts and support one another financially. One respondent even imagines this kind of state funding which would be protected against the market and remove the competition which, in her opinion, hampers the coming together of the organizations.

> "The other reason is that the project-based work culture is still in existence. The fact that from the creation of these organizations, we continue to work solely based on projects, that is, there is no sustainability giving us the ability to take more decisive steps and not compete against the other organizations all the time… this is the condition or the reason, in my opinion, why women's organizations in Bulgaria are not solidified sufficiently and do not unite their efforts on certain matters. [...] I also think that it is very important for the topic to be recognized and for the work of these organizations to be supported by the State. That is, what all of us, all these organizations, have achieved so far, we've achieved it solely with external funding, which puts us in the situation to be divided. Let's say that there is an amount of money ear-marked for Bulgaria by some external sponsor and all of us rush to apply, but only one wins and the others remain outside the scope. If the State sees what's happening and if there is a sufficient budget to organize joint initiatives with the non-governmental organizations which would give these organizations some reason to be more comfortable about their future, then there will be a more substantial unification. When we fight over getting ten levs this year while, at the same time, the ten levs cannot resolve any problems, and while the State reports that there are no problems, it doesn't matter what the State reports, we've actually turned into a small private business – I'm sorry to say this – but when you make badges, you try to make badges a little more colorful than those of the others." (R30, capital)

Thus, as seen so far, a substantial part of the energy of the non-governmental organizations is invested in ensuring financial resources and it is key to them to be able to maintain a team with a capacity for fundraising. However, winning new projects is never guaranteed, and available donors are not a given. As a result, even large organizations have moments when they are unable to meet their basic needs.

> "This is also a matter of support for the organizations themselves. Something related to resources. To us – in order to have these resources now, several people on the team writing projects, we constantly write; I'm currently waiting, I think the European Commission grants have already been announced. Because we – once approximately every two years – it is a pattern which hampers us a lot and which we still have not found a way around. Even when we have a couple of two-year projects giving the organization stability, they end at some point. Until the next ones are written and the current ones evaluated, there is usually about 1 year; we're now in such a period and we don't have money. It is difficult to survive as an organization like this. Last year we wrote a lot; we submitted at least five projects to the European Commission but their priority was COVID-19 and we didn't get any new project to be able to work. One of our donors is currently withdrawing from Bulgaria. They were our main sponsor supporting us with very good three-year projects which made it possible for us to develop a prevention program. That used to be our stability but now it's gone too. All anti-strategists, anti-Istanbul Convention people helped in their withdrawal because they had invested in many programs for years and the next thing you know there's no political will in Bulgaria for anything to happen." (R22, regional center)

The budget uncertainty for the non-governmental organizations working in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence does not make it possible, as seen already, for the social service to be provided constantly and free of charge to all citizens. Therefore, the maintenance of the desired, albeit minimal, level falls upon the people working in the sector who are overworked. As they cannot afford the necessary number of employees, they carry out several activities simultaneously, work for more than 8 hours a day and extra hours, resort to services from third parties based on civil contracts if their budgets allow for it and often work for free because the specifics of their activities do not allow for, as a respondent puts it, a "piecemeal approach"; after all, it is a matter of a cause. Leaving a victim could be fatal.

> "There were also difficulties because the State doesn't seem… the institutions don't understand the problem. That we can't apply a piecemeal approach; we can't work a victim of violence for three or four months, then leave the person, then start again when we have funding. Because when you leave a person like that, their trauma is exacerbated. The person is re-traumatized. This institutional failure to understand is quite… even to this day, it impacts our work because we again apply for projects in a piecemeal approach. The project at the Ministry of Justice is four months now; it was five last year…" (R34, regional center)

> "Legal aid is a big issue; we constantly advise victims on the phone, on-site, many of these people, if they

need it, and almost all of them need some either under the Protection against Domestic Violence Act for an order, or in a criminal proceeding, I won't even go into the Family Code because it is a big issue as well. They are in such a financial situation that the person has some property – for example, the person has 2 apartments in the center of Sofia or the person has a pension or a labor contract – if we send them to the Legal Aid Office, for example; as a lawyer I can't work pro bono all time, I've taken on 5 cases free of charge since last year. If we send the person there, they look at their property situation and the person doesn't meet the criteria for people at a social disadvantage. They won't get aid. If they pay fees for legal aid, even if it's the minimum which is BGN 400 per case of domestic violence, each successive one is BGN 100; then she'll be left without money. There are elderly women; she has a pension of BGN 400; how can you take it from her! You either need to take her on for free or to look for some organization somewhere; we've tried several times, the organization simply finds the money and pays. Otherwise, it all needs to be pro bono; but at some point, you can't stand it any longer, it's a lot of work." (R1, capital)

A similar situation is observed with the other non-governmental organizations which do not work in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence. An insignificant part of them try to develop their own business, mainly through publication activities, to find money from. In order to be able to reach a budget level allowing them to cover operational expenses, including the maintenance of a small team working half-time or full-time at labor contracts, office rent, equipment, consumables and utilities, most of them need to win several projects with big budgets, including one with funding for organizational and administrative needs (the so-called "core funding"). Some also accept donations from businesses. For example, organizations working in the area of LGBTI+ rights initially joined efforts to be able to found the Rainbow Hub community center; however, it was closed down later due to the financial inability to maintain the space. It was opened again in 2021 with the financial support of the BFW but with no clarity as to its future. Thus, the organizations keep applying without any certainty if they would win. As a result, some of them experience financial gaps while others are overloaded if they win many projects. The respondents often raise the question about the priorities of the donors which follow the current political situation which does not correspond to the work of the organizations and they thus feel forced to adapt. This results in scattering efforts to diverse problems and impossibility to specialize. In this regard, BFW meets with strong approval as it allows the applicant organizations to choose the topics they would work on.

"All of a sudden, we found ourselves in a situation; even though we expanded the team a lot – at some point, we were seven – we are now six, three full-time and three part-time, and this is not a small team for an NGO in Bulgaria, let alone for an organization working in this area. But all of a sudden, we were not enough. Because there was a lot of work. The other thing we failed to think over back then was that by applying for many projects, we applied for anything we were invited to. But nobody had thought that you'd have to organize 15 training sessions and the money you'd get would be a total of 15,000 euro because we applied on a general basis. And it turned out that the balance sheet didn't work out and even though we had a lot of work and projects, in reality we didn't have the funding to hire a new person or to outsource the work to an external expert to assist. This landed us in a very difficult situation in the last two years which resulted in burnout, overload, demotivation in the team. […] And this is not good; it's not because we are super experts in everything and we do it all, but the situation is quite tough and our philosophy is such that we need to work in several directions in parallel to be able to hope for some real change soon…" (R28, capital)

The so-called "burnout" is the result of the structure of the work conditions described above which is determined by the manner of funding the organizations as well as by the essence of their work. When an activity is targeted at a cause, it is difficult for it to be packaged and framed economically as a standard 8-hour workday. The idea of a cause entails dedication beyond economic rationality and even opposition against it. This is why the respondents are likely to commit beyond the workday without getting paid for their extra work.

"On the one hand, you need to take care of the organization. Having an organization is like having a business, regardless of the fact that it's an NGO. You can't stop taking care of it. You think about yourself in purely financial terms. You need to think about yourself, about the people around you, the premises, and it's for today, for tomorrow, for next year. It's a kind of a burden. When you work from 9 to 5, you don't have this burden. The other thing for us is that we work with human stories. Everyone who comes to us looks us in the eye and wants something. This is good because this is what we're here for. The problem is that it's a lot. What happens if we don't have support from the people who work for us? That's why we need people who will, in the good sense of the word, take care of many things so that we could work. After all, people come… with the cases they are involved in. These are very personal. To us, it's just another case, in the good sense of the word, but you could never treat a person like that. Just like a doctor can't treat us like yet another leg. So we have certainly exerted ourselves many times over by now. Because it may be Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and it never stops. 11 o'clock at night. My daughter has told me several times about how I pick her up from school and for half an hour I can't say hello, I don't even see her. Sometimes

there are crisis situations. Sometimes it's a matter of feeling it. Yes, we're learning; for years, N. and I haven't talked outside the working hours, we don't go to the same places. I mean that when we're in the same place, we only work, all we ever talk about is work." (R8, capital)

"Burnout" is also the result of working with "human stories", as the respondent above calls them, which are hard and burdensome. In this regard, the social workers in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence say that they are tied emotionally at the individual level to the recipient of their care perceived as "support". However, the accumulation of emotions is an essential part of their work. It begins at the point when the work relations are reconsidered as "family" or "friendly" ones and, hence, a connection emerges at the individual level through constant conversations which heal, encourage and empower the female victims. Thus, the economic disciplining of the cause in the form of its reconceptualization as work which needs to be regulated in time and given a value through payment, if possible, as well as the practical game with the boundary between connection and distance in the relations between caregivers and people cared for are a hard and painful road the respondents need to go down. Yet, going down this road, they often reach the point of "burnout". Last but not least, hot political situations emerge which necessitate a quick public response (organizing a protest, petition, developing a declaration, online activism, participation in traditional media, setting up coalitions, etc.) and these activities fall outside the project frame of work. Activists find themselves in antagonistic relations of battles they devote themselves to. The coordination between participation in political battles and their everyday work also results in "burnout". Therefore, most organizations emphasize the need for a psychological supervisor who will work with them so that they can handle the work overload.

2.2 STRUCTURE OF ACTIVISM[2] AND SOCIOPOLITICAL IMAGINATION

In 2021, when this survey was carried out, the debates related to the ratification of the Convention of the Council of Europe on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the so-called "Istanbul Convention") and its final rejection by the Constitutional Court followed by protests against the National Strategy for Children 2019-2030 and the Social Services Act put their mark on human rights non-governmental organizations and informal activist groups. Thus, the rest of the report will focus on the question: On the one hand, what is the structure of activism and how do the activists emerging in view of it perceive the current context in which they pursue their activities? What are the possible ways they see to build a social movement, impact and change?

2.2.1 Brief history of the emergence of women's and LGBTI+ activism after 1989

NGO activism on women's rights in Bulgaria began with the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. After the conference, a group of lawyers from Bulgaria committed to the topic of gender equality. They initiated the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (PADVA) inspired by the work of the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation with Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights (MAHR) which continued to advise them in the process of its elaboration[3]. The European Women's Lobby is also among the supporters which later became the foundation for the Bulgarian Platform of the European Women's Lobby. Thus, the 1990s were the period which saw the emergence of the phrase "women's rights" as well as "rights of the child" perceived through the topics of domestic violence and trafficking in human beings. The overall framework for any activities related to them is set by the concept of human rights. Other laws were adopted in the beginning of 2000 as a result of the lobbying of women's NGO: Child Protection Act (2000), Combating Trafficking in Human Beings Act (2003), Protection against Discrimination Act (2004). It was the mobilization in relation to the advocacy for laws that helped many women's organizations to solidify. Tisheva (Tisheva, 2005) describes the coalition created between BGRF and Animus Foundation, Gender Project for Bulgaria Foundation, Nadja Center Foundation, Demetra Association, SOS – Families at Risk Foundation – Varna, Women's Alliance for Development and others. The Alliance for Protection against Gender-Based Violence Association appeared several years after the adoption of the PADVA uniting non-governmental organizations working to protect and prevent domestic violence and gender-based violence. Some of these organizations were founded by psychologists specializing in clinical psychology who provide social and psychological consultations to victims of violence. This proved to be the start of the typical professionalization of women's NGO activism carried out by lawyers, social workers and psychologists as well as the specific focus of the post-socialist feminism on the topic of domestic violence and gender-based violence. Last but not least, in 1990 the Bulgarian Association of University Women

2 In this report we choose to indicate the social practices on site as "activism" whereby we aim to clarify the respondents' ideas about social change and their activities to achieve it which, in this sense, have sociopolitical aspects.

3 The story of the PADVA is described in detail by Genoveva Tisheva. She took an active part in the long years of its development and in lobbying for it and she is also a founder of the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF) set up in 1998 immediately after the Beijing Conference. See Tisheva, G. (2005) *The Law on Protection against Domestic Violence in Bulgaria: Insights and History.* Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation. Accessible at: http://stopvaw2.extranet.urbanplanet.com/31May20055.html [Visited on 30/10/21]

was restored. Its representatives aim to popularize feminist knowledge through publications, developing lectures and university courses, programs, seminars, conferences. The topic is part of the academic curriculum.

A march passed through the streets of Sofia in 2008 cordoned off by the police; firecrackers exploded, and a Molotov cocktail was thrown in. The first Sofia Pride under the motto "My Family and I" would unite activists for LGBTI+ rights. In the 1990s, non-governmental gay activism focused initially around the organization Gemini (1992), which was active until 2010. In 2002, Gemini submitted to the Ministry of Justice an official proposal for amendments to the Criminal Code (CC). One of the texts concerned was that of Article 162 of the CC. The proposal was accepted with regard to the other texts and was voted for by the National Assembly but not the proposal for Article 162, whose main purpose was to cover crime based on sexual orientation and gender identity. Its representatives also took part in the advocacy for the Protection against Discrimination Act referred to above and in the organization of the first Sofia Pride which would later be taken over by Bilitis Resource Center Foundation. It was set up officially in 2004 as a result of a series of self-help groups for lesbians and bisexuals and initiated the Sofia LGBTI Community Fest. Their inclusion as an organizer of Sofia Pride was presented by a respondent as a necessity resulting from the need for someone to mediate the relations among the activists in the context of heightened conflicts among them. That was when the idea was born to set up an initiative committee which, as of today, includes the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Youth LGBT Organization Deystvie [Action] and GLAS Foundation. The march was complemented by a number of events such as the Sofia Pride Film Fest. The initiative was also taken to other cities outside the capital. The background of LGBTI+ activism also highlights the work of lawyers, the insistence on the need for social and psychological support; yet, what is different about LGBTI+ NGO activism unlike women's activism is the sustainable efforts to build a community. According to the respondents, a key role in this regard was accorded to the Rainbow Hub Center which spawned youth activist cores.

Last but not least, it should be emphasized that the issues of women's rights and gender equality became significant and topical for other organizations which are not fully specialized in this area. In most cases, these are organizations working in the field of human rights, fighting against the marginalization and stigmatization of diverse vulnerable groups (e.g. Roma, people with disabilities, etc.) as well as organizations making efforts to build active citizenry (e.g. youth organizations). Motherhood and the rights of the child also managed to unite and mobilize women.

2.2.2 Forms of activism

Lawyers provide advice and take on cases locally and internationally, representing persons in court. They regard this activity as a provision of services and support but also as a form of public activism which prompts media attention. They develop programs and trainings for authorities of the judiciary and the Ministry of the Interior; they lobby and monitor the implementation of laws and study the Bulgarian legislation. They take part in national and international conferences and seminars.

In 2021, the women's organizations were actively involved in advocacy for laws. They worked on amendments to the PADVA. However, the bill was not voted in Parliament during the period of this study, and Bulgaria found itself in a series of parliamentary elections. A respondent shared that, in the context of the political instability, the PADVA remained on the sidelines because "according to politicians, this is not an important political topic raising the rating results, and that's why there's no need to play that card now." Another respondent even insists that advocacy is not a process requiring a high level of publicity and, in view of the circumstances, it would be better to happen without campaigns. The next story shows how the complicated political situation after the rejection of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention followed by protests against the National Strategy for Children 2019-2030 and the Social Services Act outlined the possible political action in which the representatives of the organizations position themselves in terms of tactics – between public mobilization and political representatives taking them into account.

> "It was 2 years ago, if I'm not mistaken, it'll soon be 3, again upon the initiative of the Alliance and with the active participation of attorney-at-law Mariana Evtimova from PULSE Foundation, that we developed draft amendments to the Protection against Domestic Violence Act. We worked on them and we simply sent them to the Ministry of Justice with a letter saying that we found it pressing to adopt amendments in order to improve the protection. It was more or less in this public, open and standard way that we did it. Thank God, they agreed! A working group was set up; we went there a number of times with other organizations, Animus were there as well as others; with judges and MoJ representatives, of course, Ministry of the Interior too. In the long run, a bill was prepared; in the meantime, in 2019, you remember, the amendments to the CC which offered quite limited protection. There was some, but it was very difficult to prove under that system; still, there was a breakthrough – stalking was criminalized. The working group was quite prolonged in time; there was also opposition against some of our proposals, others were removed almost from the start. First, when we wanted to define corporal punishment against children as a form of domestic violence expressly, this was removed immediately because of the concerns for negative public reactions; but we wanted to make a connection to the Strategy for Children, when parents stayed outside in the square. This was automatically cancelled, as absurd as this may be,

because of the expected reactions. There was also opposition from the court about the extension of the deadline to submit a protection request which is one month and is very short. Bulgaria has repeatedly received recommendations from the UN that this term is too short. There was another opposition as well, I don't remember it all, but it was overcome. When the pandemic started, the working groups held its sessions online; one way or another, we got to a final text. Another very important thing was also cancelled – we wanted to expand the protection with respect to persons in an intimate relationship who don't live together and don't have a child. This was rejected outright. In the end, this is active lobbying. We achieved it with a lot of battles and then, I suppose you've seen it, the Ministry of Justice posted it for public discussion at the end of the term of office of the GERB government, opinions were received and then it all died down. Nothing was ever heard again. We wrote to the MoJ asking them about what was happening and eventually we got a reply at the very end of the term of office that many opinions had been received and additional public discussions had to be conducted, which is a little late to talk about fundamental public rights, a public consensus had to be reached. What consensus when we're talking about protection against violence? [...] In the end, as you've seen, it was not put forward before the Parliament and nothing happened." (R1, capital)

On the other hand, these organizations also had a stake in the new Social Services Act. They took part in advisory councils where the social services standards were prepared. The organizations working in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence are classified, in relation to the state delegated activity, as centers for social rehabilitation and integration. This forces them to work based on the methodology for people with disabilities without addressing the specific needs of their group.

"With the new Social Services Act, we now may have a little more freedom in determining exactly the activities we implement with the victims of domestic violence and not adapting the methodology made for people with disabilities. But this Act still lacks methodologies; there are no maintenance standards, no staff number standards, and everything is very vague and will continue to be for another two years at least. So, now, it seems that there are no standards whatsoever in the programs for perpetrators. So if we make a six-month program of 24 sessions in T., there may be a three-month program in Silistra. There are no rules as to how the programs are to be implemented. We mainly learn from the experience of colleagues abroad but we live in a territory which is very different from Italy or Germany. Maybe we need regulations or at least standards of best practice in the work with perpetrators." (R2, regional center)

At the legislative level, LGBTI+ activists continue to fight for amendments to Article 162 of the CC. They are trying to raise public awareness with respect to hate crimes on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. As a result, they should be able to lodge complaints and claims in the case of incidents. They focus their efforts on same-sex couples insisting on statutory regulation of their relations in Bulgaria through the legalization of factual co-habitation, which is also seen as important for heterosexual couples. They discuss this problem in the light of the restriction of their freedom of movement within the European Union[4] and address the issue of forced emigration of LGBTI+ people from Bulgaria. Events are organized in relation to the issues of LGBTI+ parenthood. The lawyers also pursue cases of transgender people to be able to change the sex indicated in their identity documents so that it corresponds to their gender identity. They insist on having the Bulgarian legislation aligned to the EU law. At the legal level, they see points of intersection with women's organizations in terms of the issue of domestic violence and gender-based violence in the following way:

"The Istanbul Convention comments on the violence against women, gender-based violence and domestic violence and it should certainly deal with violence in lesbian couples, for example. Because under the current Domestic Violence Act, they are not a family, therefore they are not... a victim of violence in a lesbian couple may not benefit from protection because of the Act. That is, the topic of violence is important. Then, going deeper and looking at potential perpetrators and potential victims, let's not exclude homosexual couples as potential perpetrators and victims who are to bear the consequence." (R21, Sofia)

LGBTI+ organizations are trying to focus the public attention on their legal work by organizing protests and petitions. Unlike women's organizations, however, which still meet with certain readiness for communication on the part of political representatives in legislative initiatives, LGBTI+ activists are definitely ignored.

"But it's mostly the lack of political will and desire. That's the reason. Because if there's political will, all

4 For example, a number of reports are available on the website of the Youth LGBT organization Deystvie on the following topics: "Recommendations to the Government of the Republic of Bulgaria to Implement the Commitments Stemming from Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 25 October 2012 Establishing Minimum Standards on the Rights, Support and Protection of Victims of Crime Whereby to Improve the Access to Justice for LGBTI Persons"; "Analysis of the Case-Law concerning the Rights of LGBTI+ Persons in the Republic of Bulgaria"; "Free Movement of the Citizens of the European Union – Rights and Challenges for Same-Sex Couples in the Republic of Bulgaria"; "Study of the Existing Bulgarian Legislation at the Level of Statutory Acts as Regards the Rights Provided to Married Couples and to Different-Sex Couples Living in Co-Habitation in Comparison to the Rights of Same-Sex Couples"; and "Hate Crime and Incidents Based on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression Committed in Bulgaria in 2017".

other issues will be resolved. In my opinion, the invisibility of the LGBTI+ organizations is the main obstacle before our work and the fact that we fail to sit at the discussion table. It's not that they don't hear us; they don't even invite us to have our say. […] Because the natural idea that you can go to politicians and explain to them the problems of a certain group and then hear them say "Great, we will resolve them!" doesn't work. And the absence of even one political subject represented in the Parliament who would want to communicate with us is a great challenge. Now with all the attacks in the month before the Pride, the Greens, which at the time were a political party represented in the Parliament, issued a declaration in support of the LGBTI+ community condemning the attacks. So that's a first in our history. A party like it should be. Because there used to be some enlightened people here and there in support, but a party… Still, the Greens are among the smallest parties lacking positions. So we can't rely on this resolving the issue for us. So, in terms of environment, this is certainly a challenge and it's a problem that we can't get to the point where we could work with the institutions in greater teams, to train staff, to work with doctors, because it all requires certain will and someone from up top saying "all right, go train my people"." (R21, Sofia)

At the level of provision of **social and psychological** support among women's organizations specializing in the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence, we also find an idea about feminist social change. Therapeutic work aims to empower women victims. When separated from the perpetrator, they should start living autonomously. Furthermore, in order to weed violence out of society, they insist on programs for working with perpetrators. However, in the case of this kind of empowerment of women, the respondents talk about a number of problems they face. Therapy in itself does not mean autonomy. Some women are unable to find work and maintain their own place to live. They face a number of social and economic problems. The respondents state that there is a **need for free qualification courses, initial financial support to help them rent and maintain a place to live and also cover other living expenses**. A need which has become more pressing in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Another thing missing in Bulgaria is when, because we're an organization with services, we have a shelter… so let's say we have a case with a victim of sexual violence where the risk of getting back to the same environment is very high and so on. We need to provide her with some available financial resources, which need not be a lot in any case. Let's say to change her qualification, to enroll in some professional courses, to pay her lease several months ahead, to have something to live with while she stabilizes in some way. We don't have such resources available […] From this point of view, this is something missing. Our task as organizations providing services is to assess the risk because every case is individual and the social position of the victim. Sometimes families provide support, sometimes the violence comes from families and she needs to isolate herself in some way, she must want to do it. This is not done by force; you can't just say "get a divorce". She could be separated from the perpetrator but she may still not get a divorce because of property, finance or other issues. The idea is that you assess the risk; every case is assessed separately and that's why you have the so-called "case management"; the cases have similarities but every case is different because every person is different. Everyone has different views, values, education, attitudes, etc." (R6, capital)

"Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, we've managed to perceive quite quickly that the needs of the victims have been replaced by economic and social problems. In addition to the health issues and the difficult access to doctors, to hospitals, maybe about 30% of our female clients lost their jobs or had to resign in order to stay at home and look after their children. Those who used to have seasonal jobs in farming or gathered herbs in the forests – seasonal work which still gave them some money – were left without jobs completely and it was clear from the start that they were experiencing difficulties; they say that they can't pay their electricity bills, they can't buy medicine, they need food. So, in COVID-19 conditions, we had to re-direct our work quickly. Indeed, psychological and social counseling is very important but when they don't have anything to put on the table, it's important to provide them with emergency packs of some food, disinfectants, detergents and soap, to pay their electricity, to buy them medicine. Moreover, it was wintertime and there were other illnesses in addition to COVID-19 – young kids were sick almost all the time. So the new situation reordered the needs and the way in which we understand it all, it's when they come here and rather than – indeed, they suffer violence and this is very important in any case but what they're worried the most about is that they left their homes, they moved out and now they have nothing to pay the rent with, they'll be out in the street. They have nothing to buy food with; they're worried that the social services will come and check on them, separate them from their kids. When they come here, they themselves don't talk about the violence that much, even though the trauma stays with them, but about being unable to deal with their daily needs and they are really afraid of being separated from their children, of not being able to demonstrate living conditions, of being branded bad mothers and of having their children taken away from them." (R2, regional center)

Social and psychological support is important to the representatives of the LGBTI+ organizations. They have built a network of social workers and psychologists who

are sensitive to the issue. However, the organizations also face social and economic problems prompted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

> "So, these are more or less the things we've worked on; new opportunities are open to us, such as the provision of psychological help to people from the community; this is something we did online last year, now in partnership with GLAS Foundation, Rainbow Cabinet; there is a Rainbow Cabinet providing free psychological and psychotherapeutic help to people from the community. We made a humanitarian fund last year, again in relation to COVID-19 and the needs we identified in the community, especially among intersex people and trans people mostly who found themselves in extreme poverty because of dismissals, leaving jobs as a result of COVID-19 and there were potential losses of places to live, left in the street, lack of funds for medicine and food; so we made a humanitarian fund whereby we supported at least 12 people; I'm not quite sure about the exact number of people who applied for support and we supported; so those were completely new activities; until then, we had not been involved in humanitarian help or provision of social services in this way. This is something which was outside any projects. It was just a need we identified in life and we started to develop it." (R6, capital)

The topic of prevention of **female unemployment** is also part of the work of women's organizations outside the area of domestic violence and gender-based violence. They are mainly outside the capital and they try to provide free courses, to support different economic activities of women and to help them position themselves in the labor market. They address the issue of **inequitable treatment of women at the workplace**. The workplace as a safe space is a topic for LGBTI+ organizations.

At the level of **prevention** of domestic violence and gender-based violence, the respondents emphasize that the subservient position of women is conceptualized through the problem of socialization in the stereotypical thinking which is embedded in the social relations and which is reproduced unconsciously. Socialization in the stereotypical thinking structures social (gender) inequalities and fosters a life destiny by prescribing a social role which restricts free choice and generates violence and discrimination. The same perspective of gender inequalities is shared by LGBTI+ activists. In this key, a respondent speaks about the way in which she started engaging with the topic of domestic violence in the period of active advocacy for the PADVA in 2004–2005. She worked as a reporter at a local television station in a regional center and she covered the campaign; they invited some of the women who had initiated a petition in support of the PADVA on a television show. After that, she took part in making a training film with the participation of students – volunteers who acted out different cases related to the myths about domestic violence. It was then that she realized that:

> "I was also a victim of delusions that it was a private problem, that it affected low-educated poor families, that it happens when men get drunk, when they've had too much stress and all those myths and more which still persist in relation to the topic of domestic violence. Actually, it was when I delved into it and read a lot to make the film, it was then that I realized how serious the issue was and that it is of public significance and affects millions of women and children mainly. And that the problem is not that men are unemployed, experience too much stress, drink or take drugs; the problem is that we live in a highly patriarchal society, and domestic violence happens mostly because men want to impose power and control over the weak ones in the family – both physically and economically – women and children." (R2, regional center)

The respondent continues this train of thought, demonstrating how they successfully communicate the problem of stereotypical thinking and replication of gender inequalities against which we need to fight:

> "Yes, it's hard to understand it; no matter how much you explain, people still have some idea which continues to be strengthened via any channels. When we talk to them about equality between men and women, about the allocation of family tasks and childcare, about everyone being able to choose a profession in line with their interests, being able to develop and to have time for themselves and for the care for others – this is something they understand. Even men get it, they understand that stereotypes of the kind that only women as mothers are able to provide care for the children are actually restrictive for them and place them in a position as if they were incapable of being fathers. With these messages, even men can be attracted to the cause of gender equality." (R2, regional city)

Based on this prerequisite, the efforts of women's and LGBTI+ NGO activism are aimed at ensuring the prevention of domestic violence and gender-based violence and discrimination by organizing informal training and classes at schools. Thus, they target children and youth/students, sometimes even parents. They organize volunteer networks among students who are committed to the cause and to popularizing knowledge. Training in the vein of civil education, the lack of representation of "successful women" in the curriculum and the rethinking of the historical narrative in view of the presence of women in it are significant problems being addressed as a whole. **Education is one of the ways in which older, as well as newly emerging organizations, see the feminist and LGBTI+ impact on public attitudes; they sometimes speak about the public opinion and, hence, about social change**. LGBTI+ organizations also work toward achieving an inclusive and non-discriminatory school environment. In this line of popularizing the cause, they also carry out publishing activities.

"No, I'm not deluded that one project would change the public opinion or at least of the greater number of people, but it surely must start sometime around this age when the students begin to understand what a human right is, what the human rights are, to know about the struggle in general, either historically, either starting from the slaves in America, reaching up to the equality of women [...] So yes, it has proven to be a very interesting topic seen through the prism of history; I wish that in the future it could be seen through the prism of education because I think that, to a certain extent, it would be good to instill such a spirit in students, i.e. that they would be more sensitive citizens, be more active, regardless of whether in relation to the equality or something else, to other types of human rights." (R31, capital)

"For example, last year we wrote a project in which, over the course of a month, we had online meetings with girls who would then be the project target group, aged 16-18, and we went through a design thinking process. So that they would somehow define the problem and the solution for it. And one of the things which transpired was that they didn't see any role models and that the study content did not deal with problems of women or the contribution of women, not in any way, not in any subject. They find themselves in situations where they argue with boys mocking them "have you ever seen a female engineer or a woman with a Nobel prize". I mean that they are not prepared with information, with the knowledge to respond to this kind of accusations. They know they are not right, but they need the tools, the knowledge, to respond and the idea of the project was for young people from the Art School in T. to meet with mentors to research women from Bulgarian history who have made some contribution – be it in science, politics, culture, or other – and through art to create something, a statuette, collage, and then make an open urban exhibition in T. We thought that this would be very good because it is perceived through the experience of young people, the way they see the contribution, the way in which they can present it to the people..." (R15, regional center).

However, after the debates about the Istanbul Convention, the access to schools and/or kindergartens became problematic. Some organizations changed their names removing the word "gender". Others presented their activities in a way which did not sound like "promotion of a gender ideology". A third group was relieved to find that their personal contacts with schools and/or kindergartens built on the basis of previous partnerships and their being recognized as serious organizations by municipalities were of help to hold training and lectures in classes.

"It's become quite difficult lately, but we somehow manage to navigate the situation, to use a language which does not prompt opposition against the concept of "gender". It's never there when we talk about equality of the sexes. [...] Actually, our fears proved to be greater than the difficulties in reality. We have the advantage of being a small place and, from 2002 till now, there hasn't been an institution, kindergarten or school which doesn't know the Y. organization. These people know us in person and they know that we won't go to a school trying to turn boys into girls, to change the tags on bathrooms, changing rooms and others or to change someone`s sexual orientation, or try to promote and advocate for the legalization of same-sex marriages because there are organizations whose missions include this. Our organization is recognized as one supporting women and children who are victims of violence. The topic of equality is not related to domestic violence that much – that the main reason for domestic violence is the inequality between the sexes and that some people tend to think that they possess, control or have power, this is normal, over others. They know us and they trust is. We have established partnerships with schools and kindergartens over the years." (R2, regional center)

Others not only act in the area of education but also try to build communities in an informal way. Some organize series of seminars where they form common knowledge, discuss texts, watch and discuss films (see, for example, Study Circle Project, Chitalishte for Women). However, LGBTI+ organizations are the ones which make it their priority to invest efforts in **building communities** which foster **small activist cores consisting mainly of young people**. According to a respondent, the need to establish communities appears because of the missing political support for the LGBTI+ cause or readiness of the parties with political representation for debates, hence the need for pressure from below through different forms of mobilization which are carried out by the activist cores. They initially appeared close to the Social Center Factory Autonomy which gave rise to the Queer Squad and, as of today, the Rainbow Hub Community Center has an important role for them. These cores are essential because the activists function in the online environment which is highly hostile to them while they take part in the organization of protests offline. Some of them, though not all, are emancipated from the NGO organizations within which they feel inequitable treatment and set up their own informal collectives (e.g. Feminist Mobilizations). However, the numerous small activist cores are very often made up of the same people. Some of their members find it important to present themselves as leftist activists who are critical of collaborations between the movement and businesses and insist on cross-cutting activism addressing race, gender and class. They see themselves positioned in both the feminist and the LGBTI+ movement as they define themselves as lesbians.

Some of the "older generation" are critical of the "young ones" when they import forms of activism from the "West" without trying to comprehend the local context. In this vein, a respondent insists that the academic stud-

ies carried out by Bulgarian researchers need to be tied to "actionism" so that the activists could reflect on the local context and thus be more effective.

> "We had a public lecture with a youth organization and they were great. Meaning, really, really cool. We were worried that they'd be bored with our lists of women, let's say in literature. But, actually, they were inspired and enthusiastic, and it turned out that they knew nothing about that. All right, then, but. They were super cool, great, after all. And what is actually happening in Bulgaria... First, there is no continuity between academic feminism and actionism [...] that is, in my opinion, there should be continuity between the history of the feminist, of the women's movement in general and what actionism does. The other side should be taken into account. That is, we shouldn't borrow from the West only because this is fashionable, because an action was done like that in the Czech Republic or in Poland or in France. The context we are in should also be taken into account. That is, in my opinion, there should just be continuity." (R4, capital)

Leftist identity is not specific to informal youth teams only. There is also an organization – LevFem – which appeared in the context of the battles associated with the Istanbul Convention whose members define themselves as leftist feminist and queer activist. Most of them have a background in **social sciences and do not reside in Bulgaria**. The main focus of their work is to shed light on how gender inequalities are intertwined with economic ones, and they are critical to the totalitarian paradigm of the anti-communist discourse which is pervasive in the Bulgarian public space and which makes it difficult to shed the light as intended. For example, they address issues related to women's labor (e.g. care for elderly people and children) and how the absence of state-provided social services impacts women as a whole and on the conditions of feminized labor from the social sphere. They also take part in international networks to build the international leftist feminist and queer social movement, they are involved in publishing activities and they are active online.

Coalitions among women's and LGBTI+ non-governmental organizations and information teams come into being during **the process of organizing marches** for 8 March (International Women's Day) and 25 November (International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women). Declarations are elaborated, posters are made as well as newsletters, flyers, zines, media appearances. That is when a number of initiatives take place outside Sofia.

> "For the Eighth of March, we had several initiatives. One was on the day of the Eighth itself, although it was broadcast over three days. We had a LED screen in the center of K. which is the busiest place in the city; messages for women were shown there. It was under the motto, actually the whole campaign was under the motto "Brave Women Say: NO to Social Inequalities!" We had a video with eight different messages about equality between men and women, about violence, about the participation of women in public and political life; we paid for a day, as the contract was, but the media supported us again and showed it over three days. In practice, it started on the sixth, then the seventh and the eighth. The other thing we did was a special issue of our information newsletter in which, in addition to the messages on the occasion of the Eighth of March, we had a page with stories about the achievements of three ladies from K. Of course, in different areas. One was a mayor of a city, of Sh.; another one did sports and had a children's athletics school; the third lady was from a ladies' club which was also quite interesting. We had a round-table discussion..." (R33, regional center)

> "Well, it's the culture, the values of the people; it's more conservative outside Sofia. In this sense, we are unable to do some of the things which would probably be successful in Sofia, and even if they are unsuccessful, it probably makes sense to do them because they offer another point of view. We wanted to come up with something in line with the local context which would encourage the local community to think about these topics but not in a very radical way. What we did with the public competition was to invite people from the community to nominate the women who inspired them with a great contribution to the development of the local communities. It entailed a strong commitment; it was well accepted; then, for 8 March, for the first time in the history of the town, we marked 8 March as International Women's Day and not Mother's Day and we gave the awards to the women in the town square; we presented the women, we had several speeches talking about the problems for women." (R24, village)

The presence of "successful women" in the **public urban environment** is another important cause. In Sofia, the Bulgarian Association of University Women (BAUW) organized the so-called "feminist walks" during which the history of the Bulgarian women's movement was presented. BAUW also tried, unsuccessfully at the municipal level so far, to make sure that were monuments of women or that a Sofia metro station be named after a woman. In other cities, in Burgas, for example, there were also feminist battles to name a street after a woman which achieved their goal.

Last but not least, women's and LGBTI+ **health activism** emerged. Women rallied around reproductive problems. Psychological and information support are provided primarily. In relation to trans and intersex people, LGBTI+ organizations address the need for qualified endocrinologists in Bulgaria who are familiar with the topics of trans and intersex people.

After the lost battle associated with the Istanbul Convention, the activists, as already seen, find themselves

in a very difficult situation. Therefore, it is worthwhile to summarize the **problem areas and recommendations** to work on in the future.

Some respondents insist on building a broad coalition of organizations. They give as examples RavniBG [EqualBG], others refer to the National Network for Children. A third group insist on the need to articulate clearly the link between feminist and LGBTI+ causes which would make it possible to constitute a collective subject and not just a mechanical collection of organizations and teams in the form of a coalition. In this vein, intersection points are looked for with other vulnerable groups. The League of Equality is given as an example. However, these statements for unification are rare. The survey conducted does not give grounds to find a common strategy and a collective attempt at building a social movement around feminist and LGBTI+ causes whose aim would be to ensure broad public mobilization but rather the absence of homogeneity and dialogue. The reasons for this should be considered seriously in a joint forum in order to be able to build coalitions for effective advocacy through consolidation of the sector and better communication.

Only three respondents who were actively involved in the discussions about the Istanbul Convention see it as a shortcoming that they invested few resources in building a strategy to work on the public opinion. The organizations they are members of are trying to create a separate position for a person to take over the communication and/or advocacy functions. Communication is perceived in the sense of a PR strategy which aims mainly to popularize and clarify the work of the organization. However, a certain finding can be made about the absence of efforts for impact through participation in current public debates from a feminist point of view whereby feminism will be established permanently as a significant public cause. It is not a common practice to track the political trends in the public space which will then be taken into account in terms of strategic positioning and, therefrom, action through public opinion – resources for democratic pressure. In this regard, some also report the lack of current sociological analyses and the need for media monitoring which will pay attention, in particular, to the sociopolitical processes at the national and international levels in relation to the problems they work on because they themselves do not have the capacity for monitoring. This is why it is more than necessary to think about how to encourage the organizations to be present in the current public debates more actively and there also needs to be a strategy to create sustainable relations with the media.

The respondents also include people who make efforts to increase the sensitivity to their problems among the representatives of different political parties. The two parties mentioned are Democratic Bulgaria and the Bulgarian Socialist Party (more specifically, the fraction opposed to BSP Chair Kornelia Ninova). In these cases, however, the activists face another line of logic of functioning of the field while too few of them are willing and able to leave their current work in order to commit to party work so that they could be effective from on the inside. A conclusion can be reached that the organizations need to be encouraged to make more targeted efforts to increase the sensitivity to their causes among political parties and to work towards creating representation committed to the problems.

Last but not least, some insist that efforts need to be made to strengthen the international pressure on Bulgaria, either through European institutions or through building an international social movement.

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ABOUT BULGARIAN FUND FOR WOMEN
Bulgarian Fund for Women is the only donor in Bulgaria that exclusively supports activists, grassroot groups and CSOs working to empower women and girls and achieve gender equality in all spheres of life. We invest in capacity building of civil society actors and stakeholders and in projects and initiatives that drive social change. Our vision is that all women and girls live in a just world where their choices are respected, and their voices are heard. Our mission is to build and develop the women's rights movement in Bulgaria by mobilizing resources on a national and international level.

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