

# SHRINKING SPACES FOR FEMINIST AND CRITICAL ACTIVISM IN SERBIA – BRIEF REVIEW

The following brief review of the current situation regarding feminist and critical activism in Serbia is produced with the purpose of reaching out possible support in the process of consolidation and partnering for government accountability advocacy actions in Serbia. Namely, relevant new reports regarding situation in Serbia<sup>1</sup> present serious signs of democracy regress in Serbia. Simultaneously, feminist organizations from Women Against Violence Network (WAVN) in Serbia have reported shrinking space for their activities. This brief review points out the problem by providing two illustrative examples from the field – the first one is at the national level and the second one is at the local level.

At the end of the report, a brief reaction plan is noted.

For further references on implementation of the policies and legislation on violence against women in Serbia please consult the following:

European Women's Lobby publication "Mapping of policies and legislation on violence against women and the Istanbul Convention in Serbia": [Full analysis for Serbia](#), and [Regional executive Summary](#),

Independent contribution to GREVIO monitoring of the implementation of the Istanbul Convention <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/serbia>, and

For the full National SOS helpline case-study please see:

<https://rm.coe.int/ic-monitoring-contribution-by-fenomena-association-on-belhaf-of-wavn-s/168092d11e>



**Brief review  
produced in**

**Jun 2019.**

**Upon "Trag  
Foundation"  
Invitation**

**National SOS  
helpline in Serbia /  
case study**

**Problems'  
indicators at the  
local level /  
Fenomena  
Association case  
study**

**FENOMENA  
ASSOCIATION**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/20190529-serbia-report.pdf>  
<https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2019/serbia>

**NATIONAL SOS HELPLINE CASE STUDY**

The subject of the case study are the domestic violence (DV) policy related events conducted by the Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs of the Republic of Serbia (Ministry LEVS) during the last quarter of 2017 and in 2018. Ministry LEVS actions are linked to domestic and international law (Istanbul Convention – IC, ratified by Serbia). Briefly, during stated period, according to analysis of WAVN, Ministry LEVS violated both domestic legislation related to provision of social services and public procurement, as well as IC standards and stipulations, ignored the WAVN and Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) inputs and warnings, as well as many media writings concerning the suspicious actions of Ministry LEVS related to establishment of the National SOS helpline. Finally, and regardless of existing expertise of a network of women's organizations, after more than a year of advocacy for accountable and transparent public administration actions – the Minister gave, in a non-competitive process, the National SOS helpline to the institution that had no previous expertise in combating VAW or providing SOS helpline services for women who survived domestic violence. The established service is against positive standards in the field and against IC – e.g. the calls are being recorded. Oral monitoring showed that the recording is being done without the knowledge of the beneficiaries (there was no automated message at the beginning of the conversation nor the operator informs the beneficiary about the recording). The safety of recorded data is a matter of concern.

**CASE-STUDY TIMELINE**

The last quarter of 2017 → Ministry LEVS announces public procurement for National SOS helpline  
→ Actions partly in accordance with domestic law and IC  
→ Women's specialized services discouraged

The Ministry LEVS have announced that SOS helpline project is one of four priorities for 2018<sup>2</sup> and that Ministry LEVS is preparing public procurement competition procedure to obtain the National SOS helpline service<sup>3</sup>, in accordance with Law on Ratification of the Council of Europe Convention on the Prevention and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention – IC). The announcement states that within the public procurement competition, all licensed Associations who already provide SOS helpline services will be eligible to apply. There were no licensed SOS helpline service providers in Serbia in the last quarter of 2017 when the announcement was published; the participation of women's CSOs specialized services is being blocked with challenging and costly licensing requirements (especially having in mind that women's CSOs are providing non-profit social and other support services).

The confidentiality and anonymity standards are acknowledged in the announcement.

Beginning of November 2017 → The First public call for Associations to provide SOS helpline services for women who experienced violence<sup>4</sup>  
→ Actions NOT in accordance with domestic law and IC  
→ First public call cancelled

Regardless the fact that the Law on Social Protection requires public procurement procedure to obtain SOS helpline services, which was previously announced by Ministry LEVS, the same Ministry published the call which was not in line with said legal requirements. Instead of a public procurement procedure, the public call with vague criteria and unknown evaluation procedure was published. Furthermore, one of the vague eligibility

<sup>2</sup> The link was deleted in Jan/Feb 2019 <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/lat/prioriteti.html>

<sup>3</sup> The link was deleted in Jan/Feb 2019 <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/lat/sos-telefon.html>, please find the print-screen at the bottom of the report.

<sup>4</sup> Related documents are deleted from Ministry LEVS Public calls page <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/files/scan.pdf>, the document can be provided upon request and the public call can be found here: [https://www.euprava.gov.rs/eusluge/opis\\_usluge?generatedServiceId=3918&title=Javni-poziv-za-udru%C5%BEen%D1%98a-radi-pru%C5%BEan%D1%98a-usluga-sos-telefona-namen%D1%98enog-osobama-sa-iskustvom-nasil%D1%98a&alphabet=lat](https://www.euprava.gov.rs/eusluge/opis_usluge?generatedServiceId=3918&title=Javni-poziv-za-udru%C5%BEen%D1%98a-radi-pru%C5%BEan%D1%98a-usluga-sos-telefona-namen%D1%98enog-osobama-sa-iskustvom-nasil%D1%98a&alphabet=lat)

criteria was the ownership of the accredited training program for SOS service provision (different from working license).

WAVN reacted due to legal irregularities of the public call. Most particularly, the WAVN South-Western Region sent an official Request to cancel the call to the Ministry LEVS, pointing out the ambiguity and vagueness of the call. There were still no licensed SOS helpline service providers when the call was published. Subsequently, the Ministry LEVS without any explanation cancelled the First public call.

Middle of November 2017 → The Second public call for Associations to provide SOS helpline services for women who experienced violence<sup>5</sup>

→ Actions NOT in accordance with domestic law and IC

→ Second public call cancelled

A week after the first public call was cancelled, the Ministry LEVS published a new call for proposals. The same as previous, the public call was not in line with domestic legal requirements. The key difference was new eligibility criteria – the ownership of the working license for SOS helpline services (instead of the accredited training program as it was in the First call). However, until the public call was announced there were no licensed SOS helpline service providers<sup>6</sup>. WAVN reacted again, most particularly Autonomous Women’s Centre sent a request that Ministry LEVS cancel the call and implement a public procurement tender<sup>7</sup>. Subsequently, the Ministry LEVS without any explanation cancelled the Second public call one day before the deadline (on the 24<sup>th</sup> of November 2017)<sup>8</sup>.

End of September 2018 → The Third public call for Associations application to establish National SOS helpline for women who experienced violence<sup>9</sup>

→ Actions NOT in accordance with domestic law and IC

→ Third public call cancelled

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 2018, the Ministry LEVS published a new call for proposals. The third call, unlike previous two calls, featured detailed Technical conditions<sup>10</sup> whereby the confidentiality and anonymity standards were jeopardised by audio recording of all calls and without clear information how the recorded data will be managed and by whom<sup>11</sup>. Once again, WAVN reacted due to legal irregularities, and most specifically regarding the fact that IC is violated in its core values and standards of providing confidential and anonymous support to women<sup>12</sup>. Regardless the fact that at the moment of publishing of the third call at least four women’s CSOs had licensed their SOS services, the WAVN boycotted the third call of the Ministry LEVS due to Ministry’s continuous violation of national and international legal commitments, as well as vague and ambiguous processes<sup>13</sup>.

Additionally, WAVN members alarmed the media about the irregularities in the process of establishing National SOS helpline, whereby many media reports were published<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, WAVE office in Vienna sent a Letter of Concern to Ministry LEVS regarding the National SOS helpline public call, calling the Minister to align policy actions with IC and providing useful manuals to this regard. On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October Ministry LEVS replied to WAVE stating that the public call is in line with both domestic law and IC articles 9 and 24, and proceeded further with the call. The Ministry LEVS, in the said letter to WAVE, state that:

“The public call 24/7 Helpline was proceeded in agreement with the aforementioned legal instruments and regulations as well as in accordance with provision contained in Article 9 of the Istanbul Convention, because our position has been explicit: that the services of the 24/7 Helpline should not be provided by a state body, but a civil society organization in order to encourage and support, at all levels, the work of relevant non-governmental

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2017-12/sos\\_-\\_javni\\_poziv.pdf](https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2017-12/sos_-_javni_poziv.pdf) and [https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2017-12/sos\\_-\\_smernice.pdf](https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2017-12/sos_-_smernice.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/vesti/766-saopstenje-za-javnost-licenciranje-sos-telefona-nemoguca-misija-a-licenca-uslov-konkursa-ministarstva>

<sup>7</sup> [https://womenngo.org.rs/images/vesti-17/PDF/Komentari\\_na\\_novi\\_Javni\\_poziv\\_SOS\\_telefon.pdf](https://womenngo.org.rs/images/vesti-17/PDF/Komentari_na_novi_Javni_poziv_SOS_telefon.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> Related document is deleted from Ministry LEVS Public calls page [https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/files/odluka\\_o\\_stavljanju\\_van\\_snage\\_odluke.pdf](https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/files/odluka_o_stavljanju_van_snage_odluke.pdf), the document can be provided upon request.

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2019-01/javni\\_konkurs.pdf](https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2019-01/javni_konkurs.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2019-01/smernice\\_za\\_podnosioce\\_predloga\\_programa.pdf](https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sites/default/files/2019-01/smernice_za_podnosioce_predloga_programa.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Translation of the Technical conditions can be provided upon request.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/vesti/912-reakcija-mreze-zene-protiv-nasilja-na-izjavu-ministra-za-rad-zaposljavanje-boracka-i-socijalna-pitanja-povodom-raspisivanja-konkursa-za-uspostavljanje-nacionalne-sos-telefonske-linije>

<sup>13</sup> <https://cssplatform.org/womens-network-violence-boycotts-third-call-ministry-establish-national-sos-phone-violating-law-%Do%BC%D1%8o%Do%B5%Do%B6%Do%Bo-%Do%B6%Do%B5%Do%BD%Do%Bo-%Do%BF> and <https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/vesti/910-otvorena-pitanja-ministarstvu-rada-zaposljavanja-borackih-i-socijalnih-pitanja>

<sup>14</sup> Press clipping available upon request.

organisations and of civil society active in combating violence against women and establish effective co-operation with these organisations.”

However, the Ministry LEVS cancelled the public call for the third time (on the 24<sup>th</sup> of October 2018) with the explanation that there were no applications submitted by the deadline<sup>15</sup>.

End of December 2018 → The Fourth attempt: NO Public Call, NO Public Procurement Procedure

→ Actions NOT in accordance with domestic law and IC

→ National SOS helpline established

On the 20<sup>th</sup> of December, media house *Al Jazeera Balkans* broadcasted a short report regarding previous two cancelled and one failed public call and the news that Ministry LEVS issued the new decision that the SOS helpline will be provided by public social protection “Centre for protection of infants, children and youth” (“Zvečanska”)<sup>16</sup>. Said “Zvečanska” institution had no previous expertise in combating VAW or providing SOS helpline services for women who survived domestic violence (DV).

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of December, WAVN sent another letter to Ministry LEVS asking for additional explanations, requesting that Ministry stop ignoring the work and expertise of WAVN network (among which some organizations provide SOS services for women since 1990), to stop with Minister’s arbitrariness and attempts of corruption, and start with strict adherence to domestic and international legal obligations<sup>17</sup>. The Ministry LEVS sent a response on the 21<sup>st</sup> of January 2019 stating that at that moment there are six non-governmental organisations and one public social protection institution with license to provide SOS services<sup>18</sup>. The letter does not explain the reasons why the project and public funds are given without competition, why the advantage was given to a public institution without expertise, experience and proper training, neither why the Ministry insists on the audio recording of the calls.

Meanwhile, on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2018, the information about initiating National SOS helpline and service provision by “Zvečanska” was confirmed by the Ministry LEVS at the press conference. The Ministry press release did not provide information about the legal basis for providing public funds to “Zvečanska” without public competition, however the Ministry LEVS confirmed that<sup>19</sup>:

- “Republic of Serbia stands behind this SOS number”,
- all eight persons working at SOS helpline are trained and licensed,
- “Intelligent National SOS helpline will learn from everyday events and improve its work in this way” 24 hours 365 days a year,
- all conversations will be recorded,
- the National SOS helpline project will be funded by the City of Belgrade public budget and partially by Ministry LEVS,
- the SOS helpline is dedicated to all citizens of the Republic of Serbia.

Gender inequality and power misuse are not addressed, women are not mentioned as National SOS helpline beneficiaries but persons in general, gender-based violence and violence against women are not noted.

The last action that was recorded in the case study was the Complaint to the Inspection Supervision Department within Ministry LEVS regarding the allocation of the National SOS telephone service to the “Center for the Protection of Infants, Children and Youth” filed on 31<sup>st</sup> of December by Autonomous Women’s Center (AWC), WAVN member<sup>20</sup>. AWC demands that said mandatory Department prevents the illegal provision of SOS helpline service and the damage it could make to women violence survivors.

The case study research did not record any data regarding the Gender Equality Coordinating Body’s (Republic of Serbia’s responsible IC coordinating body) actions towards prevention of violation of the Istanbul Convention related to processes of establishment of National SOS helpline in Serbia conducted by Ministry LEVS during 15 months period.

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<sup>15</sup> The document is no longer available at the Ministry LEVS web site, but it can be provided upon request.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y7FEPC6YaDk&feature=youtu.be>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/vesti/939-dopis-ministarstvu-za-rad-zaposljavanje-boracka-i-socijalna-pitanja>

<sup>18</sup> [https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/images/vesti/2019/Odgovor\\_Ministarstva\\_za%20rad\\_21.1.2019.pdf](https://www.zeneprotivnasilja.net/images/vesti/2019/Odgovor_Ministarstva_za%20rad_21.1.2019.pdf)

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/356519/otvorena-sesta-nacionalna-sos-linija-za-zene.php>

<sup>20</sup> <https://womenngo.org.rs/vesti/1354-zalba-odeljenju-za-inspekcijski-nadzor-povodom-dodeljivanja-usluge-nacionalnog-sos-telefona-centru-za-zastitu-odojcadidece-i-omladine>



## SHRINKING SPACE FOR ACTIVISM AT THE LOCAL LEVEL – FENOMENA ASSOCIATION CASE STUDY

Briefly, Fenomena Association has been working on service provision for women DV survivors, policy improvement advocacy and GBV prevention for more than a decade. Fenomena has been piloting many initiatives, including multi-agency work at the local level, whereby many positive developments were recorded related to cooperation with public administration, until 2015. Most particular, Fenomena, as feminist organization working towards the equality of women and men, became an active member of local DV suppression Multi-agency Team composed of public institutions, a member of local Gender Equality Council, a member of local Security Council, whereby SOS helpline and services for DV survivors were annually co-funded by the local public budget, and the association significantly contributed to local GE related policy formulation and adoption. Using public resources for advocacy, informing the public, raising awareness actions, training, etc., was never an issue since the establishment of the association (public spaces, premises in the city administration building, public administration vehicles...).

However, during the last three to four years, all above-mentioned developments have retreated. Fenomena Association was, one action at a time:

- excluded from local Multi-agency team,
- excluded from local Gender Equality Council,
- excluded from local Security Council,
- denied co-funding for SOS helpline from local public budget,
- excluded from local GE policy re-drafting process,
- denied straight answers to public policy and budgeting questions,
- exposed to strenuous administrative procedures related to using public spaces (which result in canceling the public actions),
- denied response when requesting utilization of town administration premises (which result in using private/commercial premises).

It is important to underline that currently at the national level, women's organizations are:

- required to obey costly SOS helpline working standards issued by the state, while
- denied public funds, especially managed by Ministry LEVS (the case requires complete new case study), and by other ministries as well.

In addition, and related to previous National SOS helpline case study, Fenomena Association had the oral agreement with the Director of "Zvečanska" (public institution who was granted National SOS helpline by Ministry LEVS) to provide accredited training to their employees. The Director of "Zvečanska" misled Fenomena representative regarding the reasons for the training. However, several days before that training, the information about the need of "Zvečanska" to pass the accredited training as a licensing condition, was revealed by the knowledge from media and WAVN google group, therefore the training was canceled. Fenomena sent official e-mail response to "Zvečanska" saying that the training must be canceled due to conscientious objection (related to irregularities and probable breaking the law of involved entities) and conflict of interest. Regardless the fact that "Zvečanska" practically had no chance to fulfill the required conditions for acquiring the SOS license – the Ministry LEVS gave the service provision contract to this institution. Subsequently, Ministry LEVS invalidated the SOS training accreditation to Fenomena Association.

As a conclusion, by shrinking space for feminist and critical activism towards public administration's transparency and accountability, several aspects are considered:

- denial of using public resources: public spaces, premises, funds, obstruction of access to mass-media,
- denial of means for work: funds, accreditations,
- denial of monitoring mechanisms (regarding policy, activities, budgeting): exclusion from public administration bodies, denial of answers,
- denial of participation in policy and legislation improvement: exclusion from public administration bodies, denial of answers.

## NEXT ACTIONS

Fenomena Association, in cooperation with other women's organizations from WAVN in Serbia, wishes to partner with lawyers and other law-oriented NGOs (e.g. YUCOM), to form a team to:

- analyze presented cases from a legal point of view,
- prepare and send required information request letters to public administration,
- re-evaluate the potential cases,
- initiate the available legal measures (e.g. lawsuits),
- draft the public advocacy action related to worrying shrinking space for feminist and critical activism in Serbia (the action may focus to one issue – ignoring, exclusion and aggravating the work of specialized women's NGOs in providing support to women GBV survivors and in prevention of GBV).



Početna > Projekti > PRIORITETI 2018 > SOS TELEFON

## SOS TELEFON

### Sprečavanje porodičnog nasilja - SOS TELEFON

Nasilje u porodici je problem kojem naše društvo i institucije poslednjih godina posvećuju dosta pažnje. Zajedničkim delovanjem civilnih organizacija i državnih ustanova dolazi do velikih pomaka u kreiranju agende i mehanizama za prevenciju nasilja i zaštitu žrtava. Skupština Republike Srbije usvojila je predložene zakone i stvorila sistemske uslove za efikasniju borbu protiv nasilja u porodici. Prema izveštavanju medija, nasilje u porodici je najčešći vid nasilja u našem društvu. Štiče se utisak da je ono u stalnom porastu, a prema podacima ženskih organizacija, više od polovine žena iskusilo je neki vid porodičnog ili partnerskog nasilja. Podaci nadležnih institucija, takođe, ukazuju na kontinuirani porast prijavljivanja slučajeva nasilja u porodici policiji i centrima za socijalni rad.

Dоследne namere Ministarstva za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja u vezi sa rešavanjem problema nasilja u porodici prepoznaju se i kroz rad Sektora za antidiskriminacionu politiku i unapređenje rodne ravnopravnost, kao i praktičnim delovanjem na ostvarenju suštinske zaštite žrtava nasilja u porodici, odnosno definisanju nasilja kao neprihvatljivog modela ponašanja. Republika Srbija je usvajanjem Konvencije Saveta Evrope o sprečavanju i borbi protiv nasilja nad ženama i nasilja u porodici od 2011. godine (Istanbulska konvencija) preuzela obaveze koje se odnose i na preduzimanje neophodnih zakonodavnih ili drugih mera za uspostavljanje non-stop besplatne SOS telefonske linije, radi davanja saveta pozivocima u poverljivoj formi ili čuvajući njihovu anonimnost u vezi sa svim vidovima nasilja obuhvaćenih ovom konvencijom. Ministarstvo za rad, zapošljavanje, boračka i socijalna pitanja, shodno svom delokrugu regulisanim članom 16. Zakona o ministarstvima („Službeni glasnik RS”, br. 44/14, 14/15, 54/15, 96/15-dr.zakon, 62/17), zaduženo je da realizuje navedenu socijalnu uslugu.

Ministarstvo je predvidelo sredstva za konkretno delovanje – pomoć i podršku ženama sa iskustvom nasilja. Pokretanjem Nacionalnog SOS telefona stvorilo se mogućnost da svaka žena sa iskustvom nasilja, sa cele teritorije Republike Srbije, na najbrži mogući način dobije sve informacije potrebne radi zaštite i ostvarenja svojih prava. Pozivi sa svih linija fiksne i mobilne telefonije biće besplatni za pozivaoce. Ministarstvo priprema javnu nabavku usluge Nacionalnog SOS telefona, na kome mogu učestvovati licencirana Udruženja koja već pružaju usluge SOS telefona. Cilj ovog projekta je pružanje neposredne pomoći ženama sa iskustvom nasilja, kao i uspostavljanje i primenjanje mehanizama koji će obezbediti postupanje u skladu s međunarodnim obavezama vezanim za ljudska prava u oblasti seksualnog i rodno zasnovanog nasilja (Zakon o potvrđivanju Konvencije Saveta Evrope o sprečavanju i borbi protiv nasilja nad ženama i nasilja u porodici („Službeni glasnik RS – Međunarodni ugovori”, broj 012/13)).

Očekivanje Ministarstva je da će se pokretanjem Nacionalnog SOS telefona, uz jasan preventivni efekat kroz informisanje celokupne javnosti, obezbediti neposredna podrška, osnaživanje i pomoć ženama sa iskustvom nasilja. Ostvarenjem planirane aktivnosti približićemo se evropskim standardima za rešavanje ovog problema i, nadamo se, suzbiti u što većoj meri pojavu nasilja prema ženama.

- [Linkovi za SOS telefon](#)

[Potpisan Memorandum o saradnji na uspostavljanju SOS telefonske linije za žene žrtve nasilja](#)

[Ministar Đorđević na tribini pod nazivom „Srbija ujedinjeno u borbi protiv nasilja nad ženama”](#)

[Državna sekretarka Stana Božović na tribini „Zajedno u borbi protiv nasilja nad ženama”](#)

Информације о социјалним давањима у Републици Србији

Државни и верски празници у Републици Србији

#### FOTO GALERIJA



Ministar Đorđević na 17. Ekonomskom samitu Srbije



Uzmi račun i pobeđi 2018



Savet za prava deteta



Domovi za stare sa licencom



Uplatnik o trošku sredstava po osnovu namenskih transfera u socijalnoj zaštiti za 2018 god. za jedinice lokalne samouprave



Saopštenje za javnost - Prednacrt Zakona o pravima deteta i zaštitniku prava deteta



JAVNI POZIV ZA UČEŠĆE U JAVNOJ RASPRAVI O NACRTU ZAKONA O IZMENAMA I DOPUNAMA ZAKONA O SOCIJALNOJ