safe hut

BULGARIA

Country-specific contextual report

Findings from the assessment and recommendations
for establishing a Women and Girls Safe Space in Bulgaria

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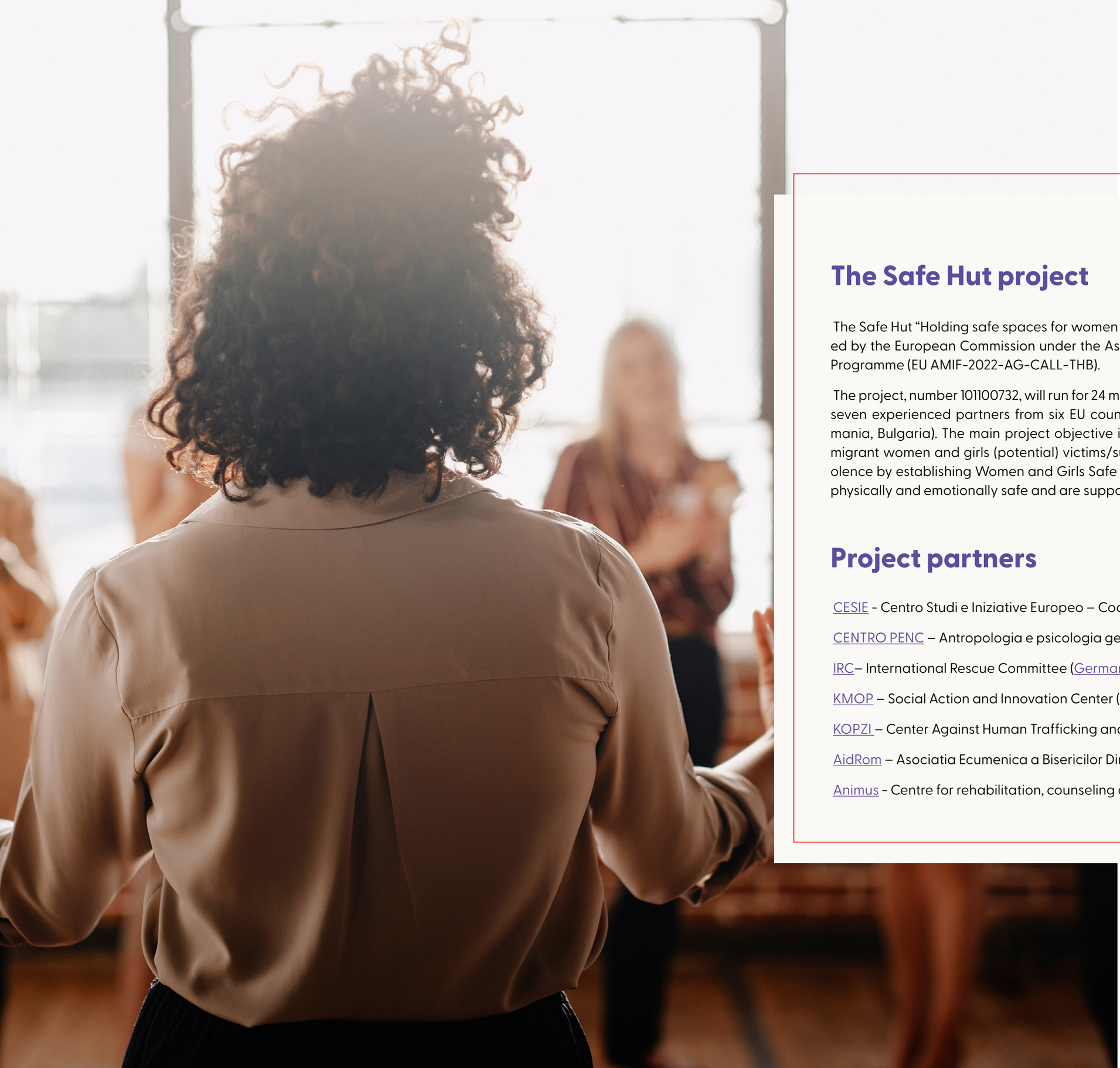


The Safe Hut project

The Safe Hut “Holding safe spaces for women and girls’ empowerment” project is co-funded by the European Commission under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) Programme (EU AMIF-2022-AG-CALL-THB).

The project, number 101100732, will run for 24 months (01/04/2023 – 31/03/2025) and involves seven experienced partners from six EU countries (Italy, Germany, Greece, Lithuania, Romania, Bulgaria). The main project objective is to support social and labor integration of migrant women and girls (potential) victims/survivors of trafficking and other forms of violence by establishing Women and Girls Safe Spaces (WGSS) where women and girls feel physically and emotionally safe and are supported through processes of empowerment.

Project partners

CESIE - Centro Studi e Iniziative Europeo – Coordinator (Italy)

CENTRO PENC – Antropologia e psicologia geoclinica (Italy)

IRC– International Rescue Committee (Germany and Italy)

KMOP – Social Action and Innovation Center (Greece)

KOPZI – Center Against Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Lithuania)

AidRom – Asociatia Ecumenica a Bisericilor Din Romania (Romania)

Animus - Centre for rehabilitation, counseling and psychotherapy (Bulgaria)

1. Introduction

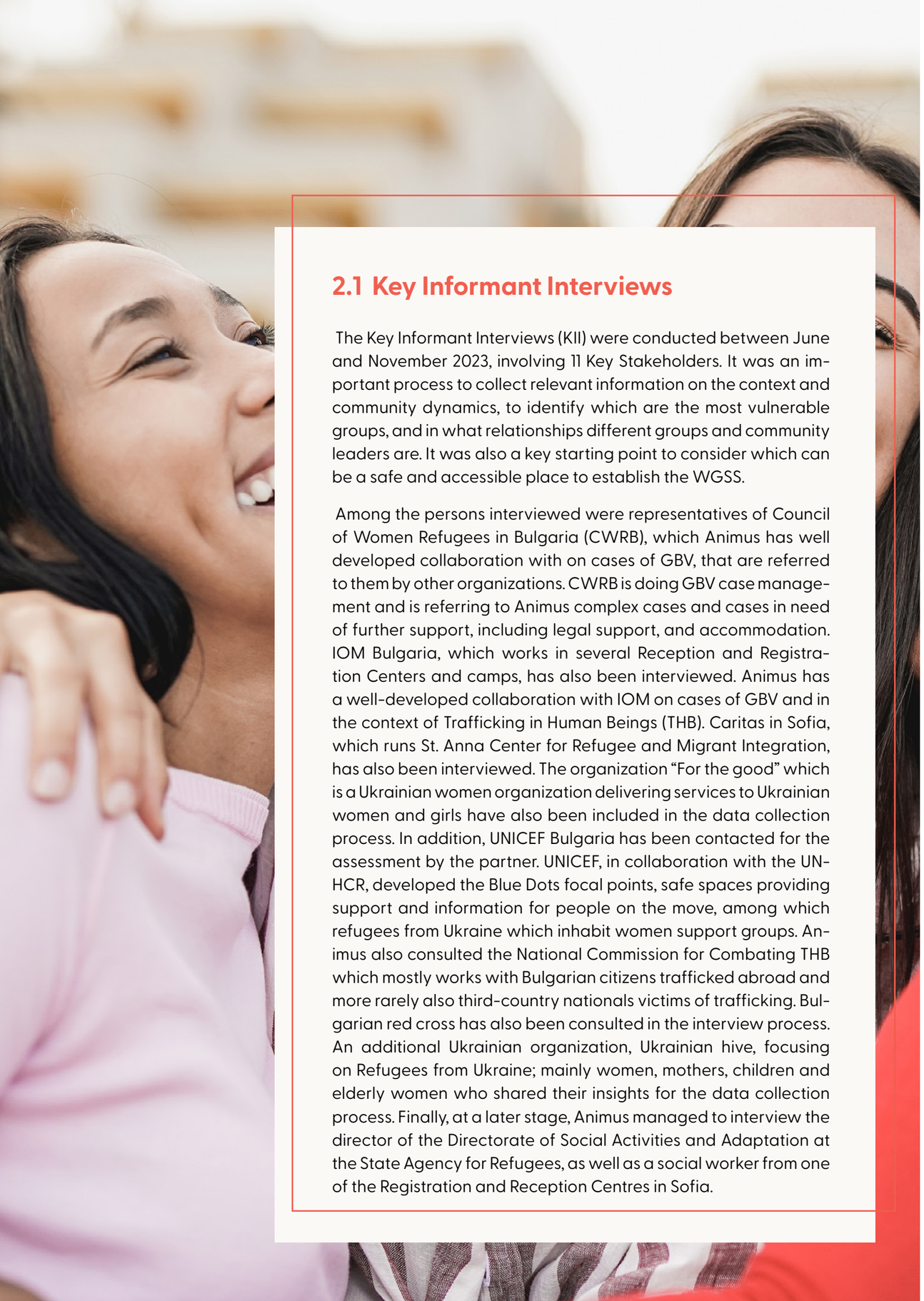
This report includes the key findings of the assessment conducted by Animus Association Foundation (Animus) in Bulgaria, as launching partner of a Women and Girls Safe Space (WGSS) in the scope of the Safe Hut project, co-funded by the European Union. The assessment was conducted at a stage prior to the establishment of the WGSS to gather important information to tailor and adapt the WGSS to the local context, under the guidance of the IRC as partner of the project. In this phase key stakeholders such as community leaders, local and international NGOs, and local authorities working in the migration and anti-trafficking field were engaged to give their feedback on the major needs of women and girls survivors or potential victims of human trafficking. In the assessment a key role is played by women and girls who are actively involved in this phase not only as informants or potential beneficiaries of the WGSS, but as decision-makers.

This analysis is key to define critical strategies to develop and plan the programming design of the WGSS that will be launched in Bucharest (Romania).

2. Summary of assessment

Animus as a launching partner of the WGSS in Bulgaria has conducted a context and community dynamics assessment following the guidance of the IRC, which provided the relevant tools according to the WGSS Toolkit that was adapted to the local contexts, with the collaboration of the launching partners of the Safe Hut project. The assessment includes the following activities: 1) Key Informant Interviews with key stakeholders in the geographic area where the WGSS will be opened – Sofia in this case; 2) Service Mapping with entities who provide services to women and girls – including but not limited to GBV, sexual and reproductive health and anti-trafficking services; 3) Stakeholder analysis to collect information on key players who are important for effective launch and running of WGSS; 4) Focus Group discussions with women and girls survivors or potential victims of trafficking and safety mapping to collect needs to ensure a tailored women and girls – led design of WGSS; 5) Focus group discussions with members of the communities and community leaders to gather information from stakeholder who can influence women and girls access to the WGSS; and 6) Community mapping to better know the accessibility and safety of services who are addressed to women and girls.

The partner listed the most important stakeholders to be involved in this process, taking in consideration who can support or block an organization from securing a WGSS. The assessment was a first opportunity for the organization to establish trust and credibility for the WGSS, ensuring that women and girls are involved in the very first step to promote the empowerment and leadership process, fundamental objectives in the WGSS programming. Safety considerations were examined before engaging women and girls, to ensure they are not put at risk.



2.1 Key Informant Interviews

The Key Informant Interviews (KII) were conducted between June and November 2023, involving 11 Key Stakeholders. It was an important process to collect relevant information on the context and community dynamics, to identify which are the most vulnerable groups, and in what relationships different groups and community leaders are. It was also a key starting point to consider which can be a safe and accessible place to establish the WGSS.

Among the persons interviewed were representatives of Council of Women Refugees in Bulgaria (CWRB), which Animus has well developed collaboration with on cases of GBV, that are referred to them by other organizations. CWRB is doing GBV case management and is referring to Animus complex cases and cases in need of further support, including legal support, and accommodation. IOM Bulgaria, which works in several Reception and Registration Centers and camps, has also been interviewed. Animus has a well-developed collaboration with IOM on cases of GBV and in the context of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB). Caritas in Sofia, which runs St. Anna Center for Refugee and Migrant Integration, has also been interviewed. The organization "For the good" which is a Ukrainian women organization delivering services to Ukrainian women and girls have also been included in the data collection process. In addition, UNICEF Bulgaria has been contacted for the assessment by the partner. UNICEF, in collaboration with the UNHCR, developed the Blue Dots focal points, safe spaces providing support and information for people on the move, among which refugees from Ukraine which inhabit women support groups. Animus also consulted the National Commission for Combating THB which mostly works with Bulgarian citizens trafficked abroad and more rarely also third-country nationals victims of trafficking. Bulgarian red cross has also been consulted in the interview process. An additional Ukrainian organization, Ukrainian hive, focusing on Refugees from Ukraine; mainly women, mothers, children and elderly women who shared their insights for the data collection process. Finally, at a later stage, Animus managed to interview the director of the Directorate of Social Activities and Adaptation at the State Agency for Refugees, as well as a social worker from one of the Registration and Reception Centres in Sofia.

CONTEXT AND CONFLICT DYNAMICS

According to the collected data, different groups of migrant, asylum seeking and refugee women are divided by nationality, segregated from each other and tend to undertake limited exchange and communication outside of their groups. Interviewees observed that in some cases Ukrainian women tend to stay among themselves for cultural and linguistic reasons. Conflicts between Syrians and Afghans have been observed and discrepancies between the Kurdish communities and other communities from the WANA (West Asia and North Africa) region have been noticed. Several organizations mentioned that communication among different communities of migrants and refugees from different countries is very difficult. According to the interviewees, hidden tensions about traditions and modernity exist among the communities between different generations. Within the reception centers run by IOM Bulgaria, all women communicate following culturally distinct hierarchies, which usually results in elderly women being regarded as leaders in women groups. They do not engage with other women who speak different languages or belong to a different cultural background. There is envy and comparisons of who got more food vouchers as well as who got increasing access to services, activities, and benefits. In those cases, Caritas offered conversations to ease tensions and reminders of Caritas rules of operation. Caritas mediates between employers and employees with a migration background, in order to explain cultural specificities and employers' requirements and to support better communication between the two groups.

According to the interviewed organizations, women from Ukraine are informed of their rights and are assertive and adaptive, but it has been observed that they also do not engage with women from different communities. In addition, according to the collected information, Ukrainian women were very cohesive in the beginning and now they create different groups and segregate among each other - those who speak Ukrainian and those who speak Russian, for example.

According to "For the good", a Ukrainian women's organization, Ukrainian women live in a closer community, having less ties and contact with the Bulgarian host communities, even with Bulgarian women. Within this group, conflicts still arise based on different expectations on how women should lead their lives such as marital status (widowed, married, single). In addition, the position towards the Russian Federation and the ongoing conflict can lead to some conflicting situations among groups of Ukrainian women. The distance from Bulgarian host communities can also be linked to the increased access to internal resources and capacities within the Ukrainian community, who can rely on psychologists, doctors, teachers and many more professional figures. As the Ukrainian community in Bulgaria tends to stay among each other, and also delivers different services and activities within their community this may hinder the chances for the newly arrived Ukrainians to create close connections with the host society or other migrant groups. In addition, the law Section 24 which applies only to Ukrainian refugees in the European union, creates differences in access to services and treatment of Ukrainian refugees compared to available services for non-ukrainian refugees or migrants un Bulgaria. In reception centers, conflicts arise when accommodating many people from different communities and nationalities in one hall, mainly in relation to children. In this case, the management of the registration center intervenes but the registration centre has no focal point for mitigation or conflict resolution. According to a Key Informant, the tensions are mostly on a personal basis between those accommodated in the shelters for victims of trafficking. Most Bulgarian victims in the centers are from the Roma community. The organization A21 works with women accommodated in NCCTHB shelters, where only Bulgarian women who were trafficked abroad or within the country are accommodated. There are no significant conflicts in A21 programs, sometimes there are interpersonal conflicts.

COMMUNITY DYNAMICS

Most forcibly displaced women are in transit in Bulgaria and do not stay long enough to form leadership dynamics. Mostly people from the Arabic-speaking communities remain in Bulgaria. They aim of many migrant women in Bulgaria is to leave for countries with a better economic status or to apply for family reunification in Western Europe. Usually those who have no relatives in Western Europe remain in Bulgaria. The main groups listed in the different Key Informant Interviews were women from Iran, Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Maghreb countries, Congo, Ghana, Guinea and Ukraine. There are women accommodated in the camps and women who live outside the camps. According to the interviews, women are a very small part of the migrant population because the journey is difficult and they rarely travel alone. Usually, they are with their families or they travel to reunite with their family in Europe, but then they travel in a group or with other relatives. Often, they are with their children. There are also elderly women. Women traveling alone are often fleeing severe forms of GBV like domestic violence, forced marriage, social isolation, and the risk of femicide.

According to the interviewed professionals, besides human rights advocates, humanitarian actors, and social workers and volunteers, men remain a closed group and will hardly accept the principles of the WGSS. If the principles are not well explained, the risk is that men from the communities will perceive the space with suspicion and will unlikely accept that women from their families attend the space, unless they get material assistance out of their participation. Therefore, the WGSS principles must be discussed with community leaders first. In the case of Bulgaria, different camps host different communities. Afghans are in Voenna Rampa; Syrians, Iraqis and Iranians are in Vrazdebna and Ovcha Kupel. Each facility has its own leaders who need to be informed of the set-up of WGSS, the nature of the space and the activities that will be carried out in it. The most important thing for these cultures is not to violate the honor of the family, by for instance meeting with unknown men. This does not apply to the women of Ukraine who are more independent from men of their communities.

The information collected throughout the interviews identifies specifically vulnerable and marginalized groups, but as mentioned by the consulted professionals, all migrating women are vulnerable. Regardless of age, children they may accompany or if traveling alone, it is always a challenge to adapt to the local culture.

Some professionals identified women at both ends of the age continuum as most vulnerable - elderly women above 70 years are often neglected and some of them have serious health issues, while unaccompanied teenage girls are particularly vulnerable. Women who travel alone are also considered at a higher risk.

Mothers with young children between 0-3 years, single mothers and mothers of children with disabilities were mentioned as a particularly vulnerable group who are isolated because of childcare and the inability to work. These mothers need a social environment and a lot of support. In addition, they do not know the local language and are not able to prioritize language learning, while they need help for the childcare of their older children. Some women are in an emotional crisis and depression. According to the information given by local organizations, quite a few women from Ukrainian communities are addicted to alcohol.

All survivors of trafficking in human beings are vulnerable, but victims with mental health challenges or physical disabilities are particularly vulnerable, as well as child victims of trafficking, and traumatized women because of the war or because of GBV. Survivors of GBV are also specifically vulnerable.

In addition, specific general needs for women were identified, such as the need for financial support, the need to work and have stable accommodation. If those needs are not met women are even more vulnerable.

COMMUNITY REPRESENTATION AND LEADERSHIP DYNAMICS

According to the organizations consulted, the way community members look at the importance of leadership differs from community to community. The collected data from the women from Syria or Afghanistan that the interviewers were in contact with, suggest that leadership belongs to older women only in cases there are any in the family/community. Otherwise, leadership belongs to men. Leaders can be found in different places such as for example informal mosques in Sofia where an Imam acts as the community leader. These mosques generally have a positive impact on the community- donations are collected and other help is provided to those in need. Regarding Ukrainian women, they usually organize themselves among the community in which their women leaders create their own support organizations. There are informal women leaders among them.

Women and girl's participation in decision making structures depends on the decisions that must be taken and on which level. As far as women and girls from Afghanistan and Syria are concerned, there is no open, visible, and public participation of women in decision-making. In the case of Ukrainian women, according to the consulted organization, they are autonomous and active and can decide about themselves and their community. Decision-making structures are in place for these women and there should be more room to take part to decision making. According to Caritas, women's involvement in decision making structures differs based on culture and country of origin. KII have all stated that women from Ukraine play a greater leadership role due to their own decision-making power in their country of origin, as well as the nature of their traveling, which is without male leaders. It is very different in other communities where the traditional leadership structures are still in place, and men control most of the decision-making power. According to the Key Informants, Ukrainian women leaders create their own organizations, where they employ other women from Ukraine.

Girls' voices are not allowed by both men and older women, there is therefore an intergenerational conflict, as girls often want to integrate into the local culture.

Traffickers and smugglers are continuously controlling and abusive towards people during their journey to Europe, as well as in accommodation centers once in Bulgaria, where some of them play roles of community leaders and have great influence. Therefore, some KII warn that communication with community leaders should be well analyzed in order to avoid risks of having traffickers and smugglers informed of the WGSS. Women should be directly asked about the possibility to involve the community leaders in the build-up of the WGSS.

SERVICE PROVIDERS AND KEY STAKEHOLDERS

All key informants mentioned the existence of leading organizations in the field of women's rights, especially women-led organizations. CWRB, Caritas, Ukrainian Hive, "For the Good", Bulgarian Red Cross, and A21 all provide services for women and girls, specifically psychosocial support, educational support, specific work with children and their mothers, and other humanitarian assistance. IOM and UNICEF also support activities targeting women and girls, specifically on GBV, child protection and trafficking in human being. Most of the organizations know each other and know Animus, and they can refer cases when they occur. However, they do not seem to have clear referral pathways. Other organizations mentioned during the Key Informant Interviews (Caritas, Bulgarian Red Cross and the State Institutions), work directly with women and girls but do not address specifically the topics around protection and GBV, as they do not consider it as part of their mandate.

The main organizations working in the field of GBV who provide services for Third Country Nationals (TCN) are CWRB, IOM, Caritas and UNICEF, alongside with the Ukrainian women organizations, while good collaboration with the future WGSS is foreseen.

In both groups that have been interviewed, WANA women and Ukrainian women, GBV is a taboo topic. For the former, the topic evokes fear because of the culturally defined position of women on dependency on men. For the latter, the underlying feeling is shame. Some organizations offer activities which deal indirectly with the issue - craft workshops, relaxation exercises, information and integration activities etc. The organization CWRB provides individual counselling in cases of GBV in a confidential way, and there is a psychologist available on the issue. The Ukrainian organizations provide similar activities. Although all organisations are aware of Animus' specialised services for women victims of violence, only the most severe cases are referred to them, when they need accommodation and active social or legal support. As a stigma towards GBV still exists, it is not always easy for the affected women to work through their experiences. The interviewed specialists have observed that women with children also tend put the needs of their children as first priority when seeking services, rather than focusing on working through their experience of GBV.

According to a Key Informant, there is very good communication with NGOs working in the field of children's rights and protection and also with the other NGOs supporting Ukrainian Refugees. In addition, there is strong collaboration with UNICEF and Junior Achievement Bulgaria, which is an educational organization. According to a Key Informant, Ukrainian organizations compete about funding among one another, while there are no structures for women to participate in decision making processes.

There are other organisations that provide activities similar to WGSS. For WANA similar activities are organized by CRWB and IOM. Ukrainian women organizations propose safe spaces for women and children. IOM is working in the camps and is recognized by the community leaders. When the activity is on camp territory their permission is not needed. IOM avoids communication with leaders and instead communicates directly with people. UNICEF collaborates with all reliable organizations working in the field of child protection and GBV. According to UNICEF, in the Blue Dots the staff is trained how to handle disclosure of GBV. The Blue Dots are doing similar activities for women and girls.

Mission Wings in Stara Zagora is currently active in **humanitarian response** and they also work in the Reception centers. Initiatives and support are sometimes individual. Some leader women from the Afghani community have been identified by key informants as key stakeholders to strengthen collaboration with. They are businesswomen, employees or teachers and are connecting other Afghan women with the services and support they need. Similarly, in the Ukrainian community, several female psychologists organize themselves to provide support to those who need it.

Key stakeholders working with women and girls in the area: Ukrainian Hive - they develop social and educational activities, and provide psychological support for women and children including services for children with disabilities and for teenagers. "For the Good" is another Ukrainian women organization. They provide humanitarian aid and psychosocial support; they have a Ukrainian kindergarden. Mati Ukraina is another Ukrainian women organization which developed a Ukrainian school.

Ukrainian organizations offer artistic activities, social support, educational activities, psychological support, integration support activities including integration on the labour market.

EXISTING REFERRALS AND FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

Considering Feedback and complaints mechanisms according to interviewed professionals, community members are not used to being asked to share their feedback. There are different obstacles to sharing feedback, such as the language barrier or not being aware of their rights and the system in place. In addition, there is mistrust if the feedback shared would be taken into account.

The feedback structures in place in the different consulted organizations in Sofia are mostly through e-mail, and some organizations offer procedures for feedback with each activity. In some cases, community members' and women's access to feedback mechanisms is done by contacting the leader of the organization directly through mail. In one of the consulted organizations, a book for complaints and suggestions is available in their building, although it is not used systematically. Another organization reported preferring anonymous feedback surveys. Feedback is also reported through social media. No existing feedback structures for girls have been reported by key informants. This needs overall attention and improvement.

GBV and THB Referral Mechanisms: Overall, key informants mentioned that there is not a structured harmonized referral pathway for survivors of GBV or victims of trafficking. In the Registration and Reception Centers, there is a specialized mechanism on protection and prevention of GBV. Elsewhere, survivors would self-identify spontaneously to the organization which is supporting them (either to organization's field staff, representatives, or psychologists), or would use the above-mentioned feedback channels to seek support. Several key informants mentioned the character of taboo surrounding GBV, explaining the low level of report from women. In the Reception centers, where IOM provides additional support, the GBV reporting mechanism is used mainly by African women because they more often travel alone. If the violence is within the family, women do not dare to report because they feel helpless without their husbands or fathers. Among Ukrainian women, GBV is creating a lot of shame and is very rarely reported. Some have experienced violence during the war but are silent about it, especially if it is sexual violence. There is great shame and fear of stigmatization by the community. There are also cases of fraud and labour exploitation or GBV in the workplace. However, these cases are not reported because women are under pressure and do not want to lose their jobs.

In other organizations, who are more specialized on GBV, such as the Council of Women Refugees in Bulgaria, strict protocols are followed and GBV cases are handled with the consent of the survivors, and referred to specialized organizations. They also comply with the mandatory reporting in case the survivor is a child.

DETAILS RELATING TO THE SUPPORT OF THE WGSS

The implementation of the WGSS should follow the guidelines and tips given in the WGSS toolkits and from the experience of IRC and Centro Penc in implementing WGSS in different settings. However, it cannot be done without a strong contextualization and adaptation from the design phase to the implementation. The assessment phase allows Animus to gather the necessary information to adapt the guiding principles of the WGSS to the context, while maintaining minimum standards. This process was carried out with the support of the IRC, and some initial recommendations for the launch of the WGSS in Sofia emerged, outlined in this section of the report.

Organizations that were active in the area had been consulted during the assessment process to understand their possible interest to get involved in the space and to understand which similar activities may already be available to women in the area of Sofia. The National commission for combating trafficking will include WGSS in the national action plan for combating and preventing. THB will be available to support the development and structure of WGSS with their existing expertise. Other consulted institutions also offered to refer clients to the WGSS in the future. Similar activities as the WGSS are provided by other organizations such as the Red Cross, CRWB, UNHCR and some of the Ukrainian women organizations. Some of them provide humanitarian aid to the women, other focus on children and mothers are indirectly involved, others are working on integration and dealing with practical issues. Nevertheless, WGSS is a unique program as it focusing on safety and prevention of GBV and trafficking and also on empowerment of women.

2.2 Focus Group discussions

Animus conducted two focus group discussions for the assessment activities both with women and girls.

2.3 FGD with women

The composition of the two groups intended to focus on vulnerabilities that were identified based on Animus's experience and key informant interviews.

DIVERSITY

The first focus group discussion took place with 6 women and girls from Syria between the age of 36-40 and 12-18. The participants were women with children without their husbands, unaccompanied girls, young women who have lost their parents and elderly women widows.

The second focus group discussion took place with 8 women from Ukraine between the age of 40-70+. The group consisted of mothers with children who cannot work, unemployed women, women with health problems, and elderly women.

SAFETY

Both groups were asked questions around their safety and participated in a safety mapping, an exercise consisting at identifying the places they go to in the city (Sofia), and the places that feel the most and the least safe. This mapping is essential to identify the best suitable location for the future WGSS.

The first group mentioned feeling safe at the mosque, the central main street of Sofia, the main square, the farmers market and at the center of the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria. The women also feel okay in hospitals and public transportation. They consider the environment in Sofia safe but do not like the Registration and Reception Center (RRC) environment as the living conditions are very bad. Both groups identified reception centers (or "camps") where they are accommodated as the least safe place.

TAILORED WGSS

To be able to tailor the WGSS as much as possible to the clients who want to attend activities in this space, the following information has been asked within the interviewing process to inform Animus about the needed structure of the WGSS activities.

The general daily habits of women and girls were discussed and disclosed as follows:

- 7 pm - 9 am: Sleep and rest
- 5 am to 9 am: In school activities , personal care, employment, care for children and household, homework
- 10 am to 1 pm: School activities, care for children, household work, employment
- 1 pm to 4 pm: Homework also work for those who are employed, socializing. walking in the park, watching TV, reading/listening to books,domestic duties outside
- 4 pm to 7 pm: Socializing, women prefer not to be out that late if alone, watching TV, reading, employment, children and housework

Skills women and girls can teach one another:

- makeup
- hairdressing
- dancing
- knitting
- applied art
- doll making

Types of activities and services that support strength, assets and control of change around women and girls:

- learning Bulgarian language, particularly spoken
- learning about local culture in Bulgaria and EU
- psychosocial support (Including psychoeducation/ self-awareness)
- Sport, including yoga and stretching suitable for ages 50+
- making dolls, jewelry, etc.

3. Recommendations for establishing the WGSS

The implementation of the WGSS should follow the general guidelines and tips given in the WGSS Toolkit and the main lessons learnt from the experience of IRC and Centro Penc in implementing WGSS in different settings. However, it cannot be done so without a strong contextualization and adaptation from the design phase to the implementation. The assessment phase allowed AidRom to gather the necessary information to adapt the guiding principles of the WGSS to the context, while maintaining minimum standards. This process was carried out with the support of the IRC, and some initial recommendations for establishment of the WGSS in Bucharest emerged, outlined in this section of the report.

3.1 Naming, location, and physical layout

The location of the space must be easily accessible and safe for women and girls to reach out, including women and girls with specific needs and disabilities. Based on the findings of the assessment, it is highly encouraged that the space is located in an area close to the city center, reachable from the accommodation centers and camps, but not located directly in the same areas. This will allow women and girls to exit this environment that they perceive as unsafe and have opportunity to discover other parts of the city that are not related to the surrounding of the places where they live. Depending on funding availability, it is therefore important to include transport vouchers for the participants so to ensure their engagement.

The chosen space is within the premises of the Social Services Center for Children and Families. Animus manages the Center after winning a competition with Sofia Municipality and has a contract for the next 5 years. The space is easily accessible, and the environment is safe to get around. The launching event took place early March 2024.

3.2 Target population

During the assessment, it emerged that there can be tensions between different migrant groups based on their countries of origin, religious beliefs, and language spoken. People tend to build more cohesion with other people with similar characteristics, and this should be taken into consideration while establishing a WGSS. This space is not meant to create or encourage divisions, and the WGSS staff should know tensions may occur.

As mitigation measures, Animus will start with a group of women from Afghanistan, Syria and Haiti who will gather on the weekend and during the week Ukrainian women will gather. The group will be split because of different language needs, but in the future events will be planned to combine both groups for activities.

As mentioned before, uniting the different communities of women in Bulgaria is challenging, because Ukrainians have been developing their own organizations and their community has been quite closed off and self-sufficient.

In addition, Animus observed that there is some tension in the Ukrainian community because some are pro-Russian and some pro-Ukrainian. Women from Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan are only temporary in the country for transit; therefore, the focus will be on working with open groups because people will be coming and going. One of the important topics that Animus will focus on will be prevention of trafficking to Western Europe.

The role of the cultural mediator in the WGSS is to understand group dynamics, acting in the direction of settling differences, and supporting the rest of the staff in managing diversity. Staff training in cultural mediation techniques, interculturality, conflict management and diversity is highly recommended. It is mandatory for all staff to receive training on GBV and anti-trafficking, as they work in this framework.

According to the assessment, it is considered suitable to have 2 cultural mediators, one from sub-Saharan Africa and one Arabic-speaking, to cover a greater group of women and girls.

3.3 Securing by-in from the community and stakeholders

As discussed during the assessment with key stakeholders, a constant communication, interconnection and cooperation with the local bodies and the other NGOs regarding the existence of services and the available space is considered useful, raising safe space's security and validity. It is also recommended to disseminate information about what activities and services are available within the safe space, especially in the first phase of programming of the WGSS, but also throughout its time of operation. This helps manage the expectations of other actors and clients about the services offered.

It is strongly recommended to continue engaging with community leaders, both women and men, who have a positive influence on women and girls' access to the safe space. With this respect, it could be useful to have some information in advance on their role and attitudes regarding the GBV and anti-trafficking topics, since some of the informants stated that the positive influence often depends on community leaders.

Men's direct participation in the WGSS is not recommended. It is important to keep the WGSS as a female-only space, avoiding the presence of men and boys at least for the first phase of implementation, so that the WGSS can gain trust and make women feel comfortable and safe. Feedback on their involvement could be collected in a second phase of programming, through consolidated feedback channels. The implementing organization can decide whether to conduct outreach activities and awareness-raising activities around GBV and THB targeting men and boys from the community, but those activities should not be carried out in the space itself, in order to guarantee a safe women-only space.

3.4 Selection and design of feedback channels

The feedback channels within the safe space will be established together with the women and girls, e.g. by initially using the box tool to collect their ideas and feedback on the safe space, and later finding other tools that make them feel more comfortable. The channels from the community can be gathered through regular consultation meetings with key stakeholders to keep them involved in the implementation of WGSS activities.

Based on the assessment, feedback mechanisms often receive mistrust or lack of knowledge from the target groups. Therefore, it is recommended that Animus pay specific attention to co-designing feedback channels with women and girls of the space, ensuring that they have the information on their existence as well as on how to use them, that they are culturally-sensitive, available in all languages used by the clients of the space, and that they are child-friendly. Indeed, one of the comments of the assessment showcased that feedback channels are not specifically designed nor appropriate to be used by adolescent girls. The assessment did not highlight any constraints regarding access to feedback channels to diverse women and girls, however it is important to take into account age, ability, ethnic origins / language, and SOGIESC, when designing the feedback mechanisms.

3.5 Provision of services and women-led empowerment activities

Based on the assessment, Animus decided that gatherings will happen every Saturday from 11-3 pm and every Tuesday from 5-9 pm.

Activities that caught the interest of potential clients include Bulgarian lessons, dance classes and singing lessons.

Considering the limited capacity of the WGSS staff, it would be desirable to forge a strong network with other associations in the city to integrate their proposals into the WGSS, if they are in line with the goals and principles of the space. The assessment showcased different levels of knowledge, sensitivity, attitudes and beliefs towards GBV from potential partner organizations. It is highly suggested that Animus hold information sessions around GBV and THB with those identified partners that have reluctancy towards those topics, in a way to raise awareness among their beneficiaries.

In addition, the assessment has shown the high implication of individual women both from the Afghan and Ukrainian communities. It is recommended to ensure women leaders play a great role in the WGSS, from designing of activities, to ensuring safety as well as outreaching to other women and girls from the community.

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