

**STUDY OF THE NEEDS**

**OF ORGANIZATIONS WORKING ON WOMEN,**

**GIRLS, AND VULNERABLE GROUPS'**

**RIGHTS IN BULGARIA**



**SOFIA 2025**

 **BULGARIAN  
FUND FOR  
WOMEN**

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# INTRODUCTION

## METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

This report summarizes the results of a **sociological survey conducted among organizations and activist groups across the country** that have received and/or are currently receiving financial support from the Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW). The aim of the study is to identify the difficulties faced by organizations working on issues affecting women, girls, and vulnerable groups in Bulgaria. Based on these findings, the procedures for allocating funds from BFW will be refined, and new mechanisms will be developed to help strengthen this segment of the civil society sector.

The study is a continuation of a previous project implemented in 2021: *Study of the Needs of Organizations Working on the Rights of Women, Girls, and Vulnerable Groups in Bulgaria (2022)\**. Therefore, this study also includes elements of longitudinal analysis, enabling observation of indicators that capture changes within the organizations over time.

The study consists of two parts:

The first part (quantitative study), based on a standardized questionnaire, was conducted from 24 April to 21 May 2024. It involved 108 respondents out of a total of 389 respondents previously identified in the BFW database (response rate of 28%). The estimated time required to complete the electronic questionnaire was approximately 30 minutes.

The second part (qualitative study) was conducted in the field from April to June 2024. It included 20 in-depth interviews with representatives of organizations working in the field of domestic and gender-based violence, covering virtually all active organizations in this area. These interviews aimed to deepen the findings of the quantitative study and further specify results, particularly regarding gender-based violence, which is a priority for BFW within the FORCE program, co-funded by the European Union.

In this report, the names of locations and respondents quoted from interviews have been anonymized and replaced by codes – for example, R1, capital.

\* Vaysova, L. (2022). *Study of the needs of organizations working on women, girls, and vulnerable groups in Bulgaria*. Bulgarian Fund for Women. Available at: <https://bgfundforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Study-of-the-Needs-2022-EN.pdf> [Accessed 07.12.2024].



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# 01

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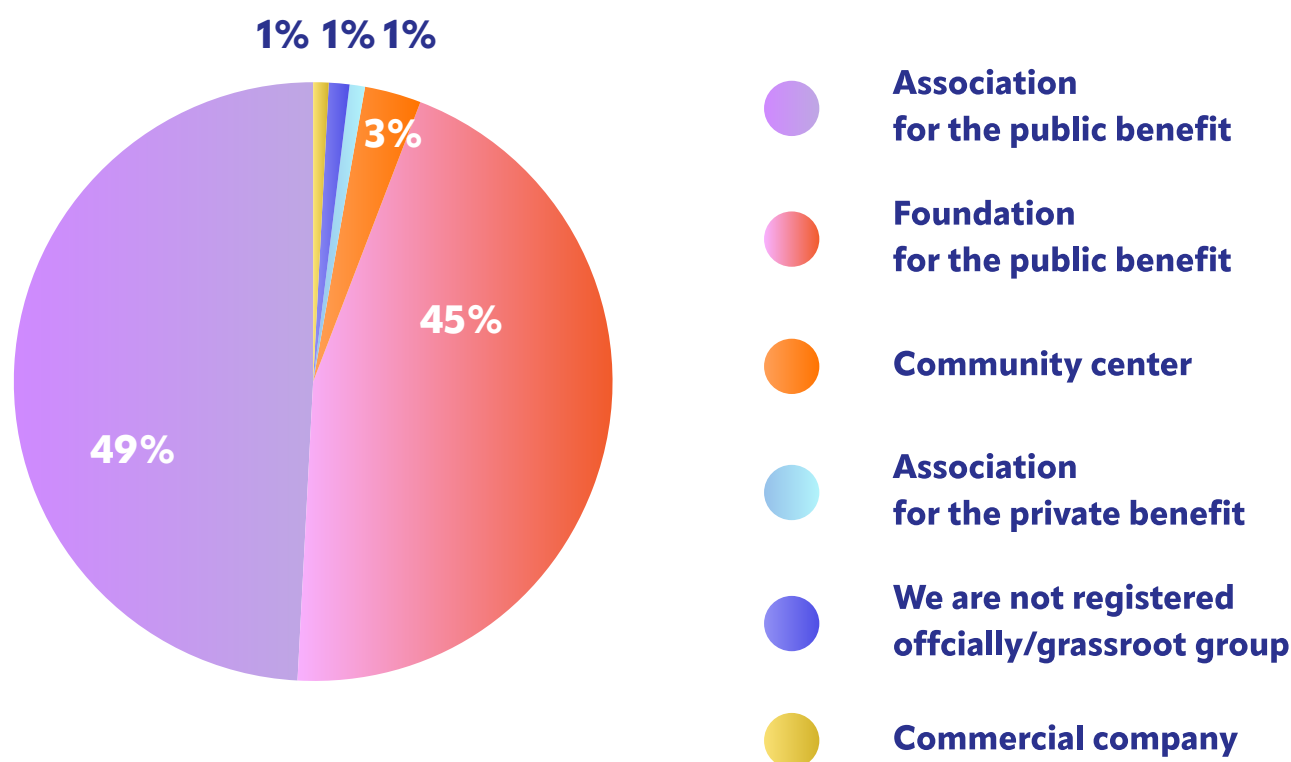
## QUANTITATIVE STUDY

### 1.1.

MAIN  
CHARACTERISTICS  
OF ORGANIZATIONS,  
AREAS OF WORK,  
AND TARGET GROUPS

FIGURE 1

## What type of organization are you registered as?



Organizations working on women, girls and vulnerable groups's rights in Bulgaria are registered (Figure 1) as **associations for public benefit (49%)** and **foundations for public benefit (45%)\***. They (Figure 2) are mainly **located in the capital (42%)** and in **regional centers (39%)**. Despite this clear trend of concentration in these locations, it should be noted that the place of registration does not coincide with the areas of their work. Therefore, interviewees indicate that (Figure 3) they primarily work **within the country – at national level (41%), at district/regional level (27%)** and **at local level (26%)**. However, it is striking that only a small percentage indicate they operate at **European (1%)** and **international/global level (4%)**.

\* The commercial company (1%) on whose behalf the survey was completed is 100% owned by a foundation for the public benefit providing services to vulnerable groups.

FIGURE 2

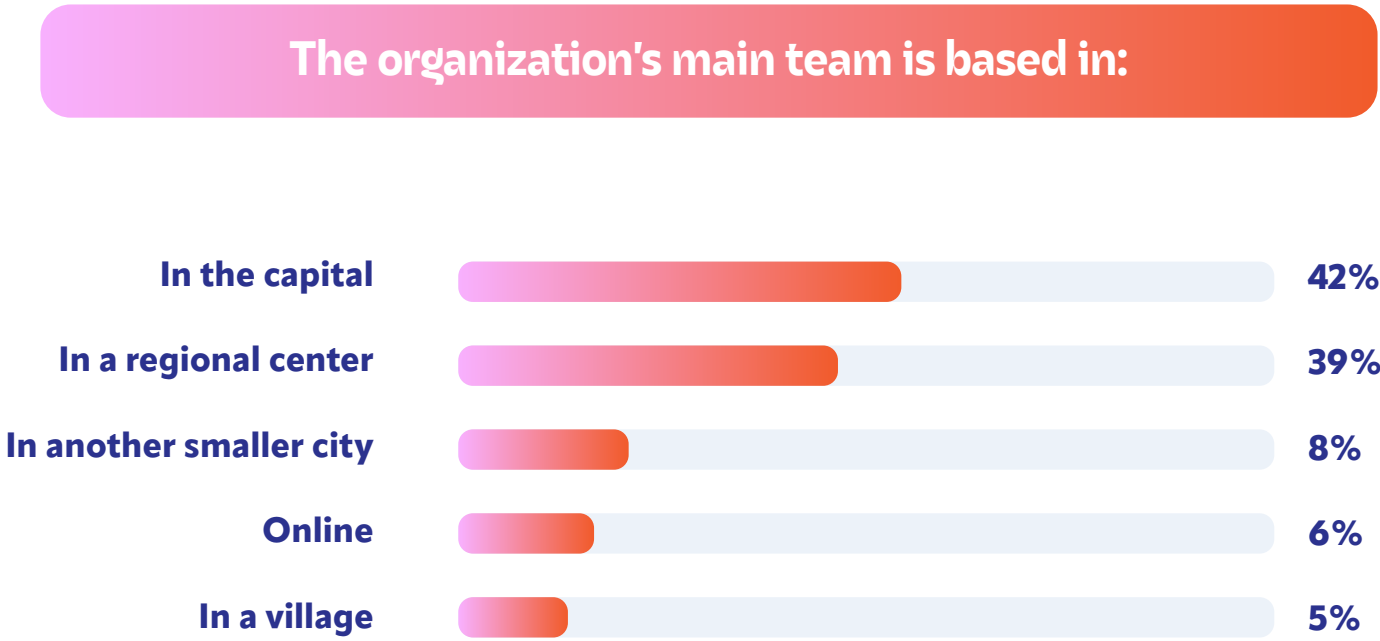


FIGURE 3

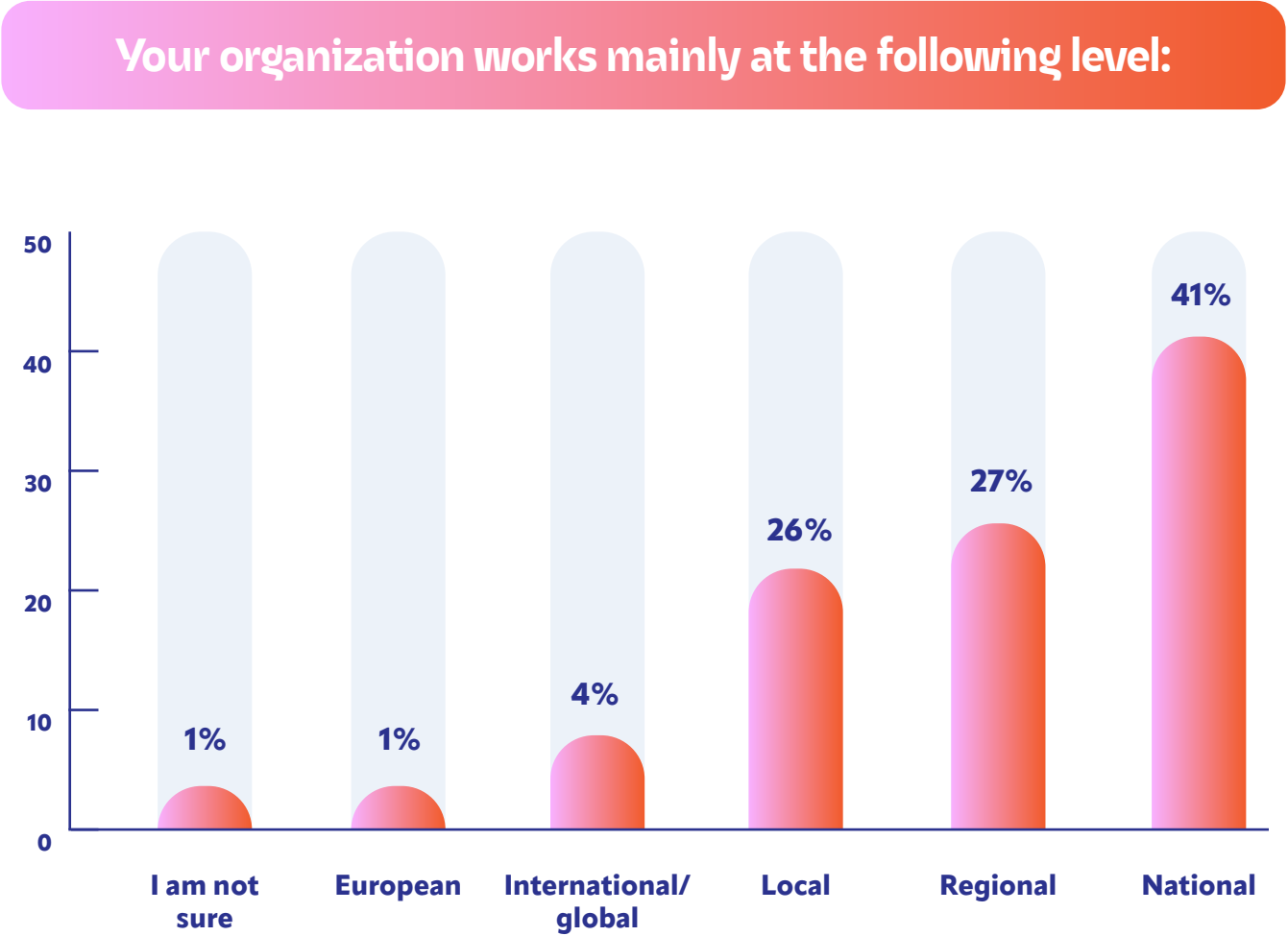
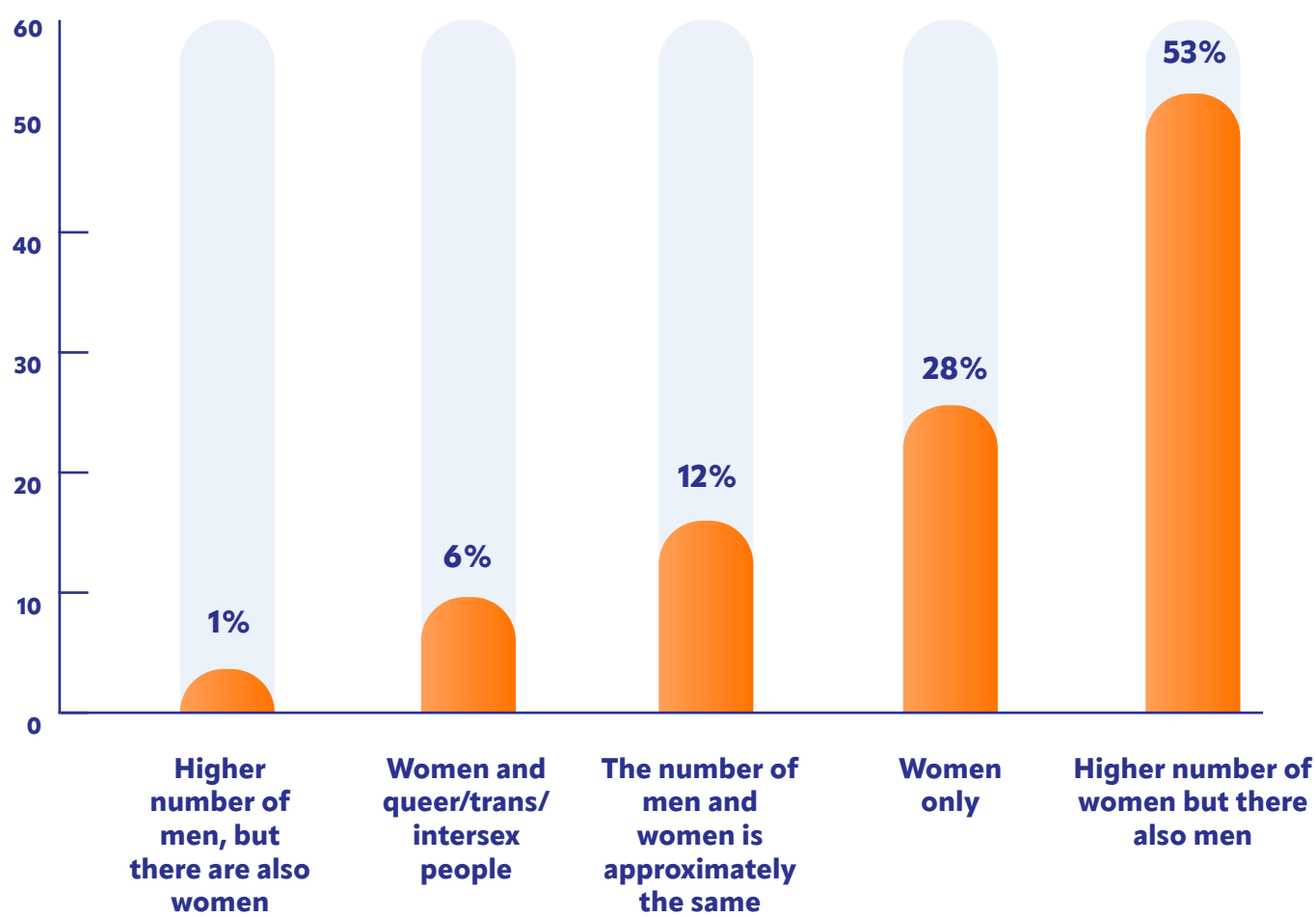




FIGURE 4

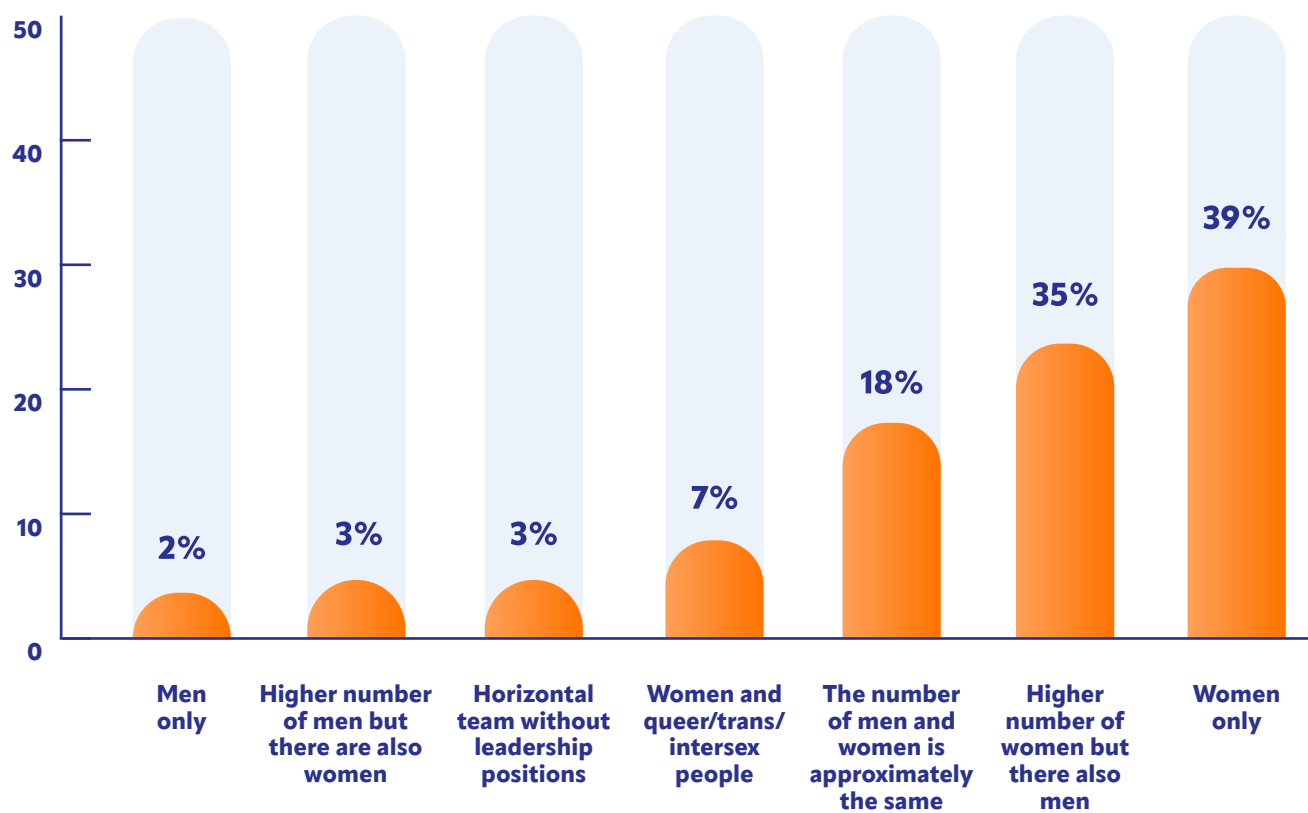
What is the gender composition of your organization's team?



The majority of the organizations' teams (53%) are staffed by women (Figure 4), but there are also men, 28% are all women, the share of people of both sexes is 12%, and the percentage of organizations with both women and queer/trans/intersex people is 6%, with only 1% dominated by men.

**FIGURE 5**

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



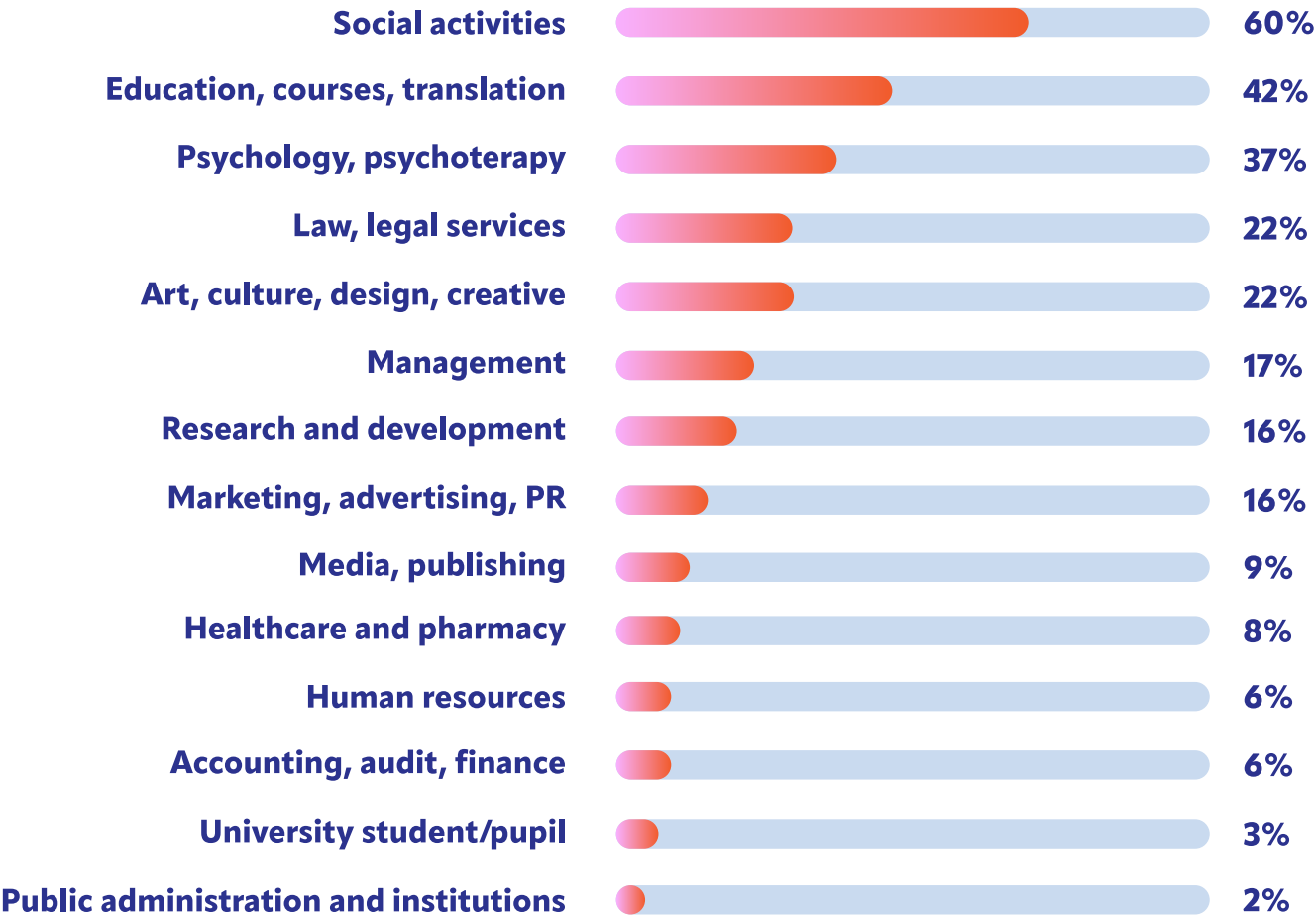
The gender composition of leadership positions (including Management Board or Board of Trustees) in the organizations is also in favor of women (Figure 5): women only – 39%; higher number of women but also men – 35%; approximately equal number of men and women – 18%; women and queer/trans/intersex people – 7%; horizontal team without leadership positions – 3%; higher number of men but also women – 3%; men only – 2%.

The above data reflects, on the one hand, the feminist nature of the organizations, while on the other hand it reproduces a broader societal trend related to the professionalization of teams, namely their specialization in activities specific to feminized sectors, such as the social and educational spheres.

Thus, in the next chart (Figure 6), we can see that most team members have **expertise in social work (60%), education, courses, and translations (42%)**, psychology and psychotherapy (37%), arts, culture, design, and creative (22%), as well as law and legal services (22%). Following with about 15% are management, marketing, advertising, and PR, research and development, etc.

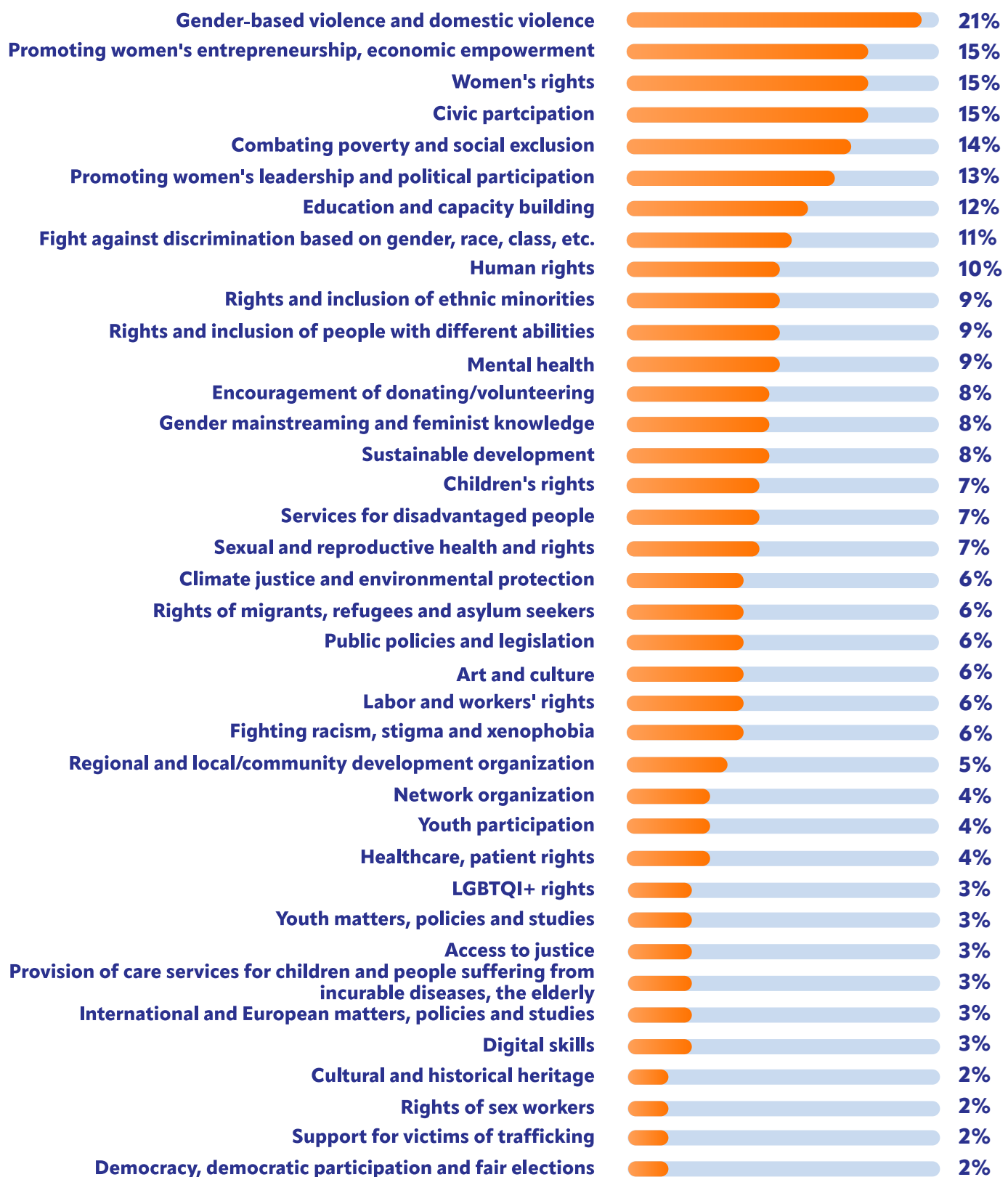
FIGURE 6

What are the leading professional areas of your team?



**FIGURE 7**

**Main areas of work**



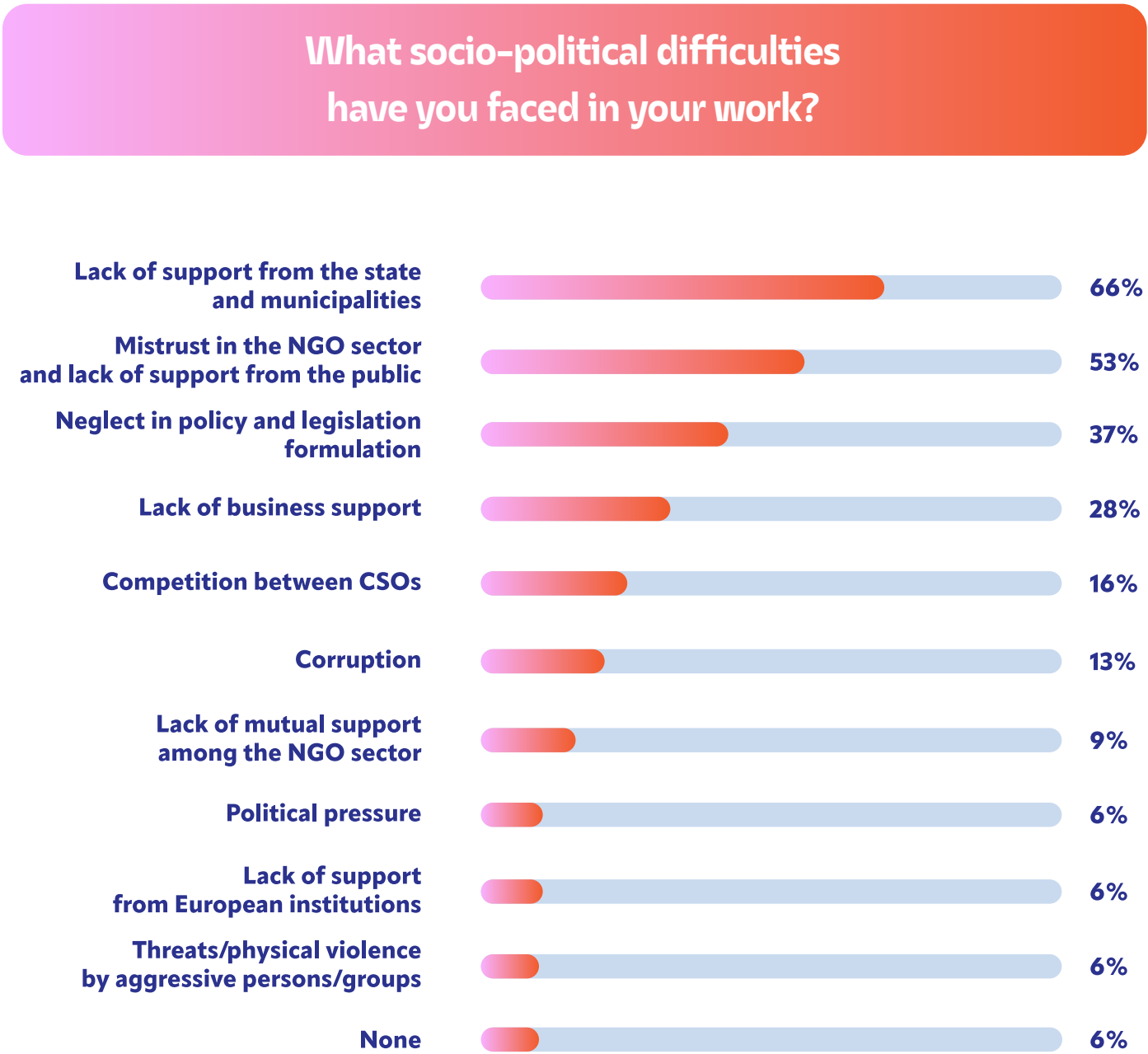
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Among the main areas of work, the organizations (Figure 7) rank **gender-based violence and domestic violence** first (21%). An explanation for this could be the fact that traditionally women's non-governmental activism since the 1990s has focused on the issue of domestic violence, and apparently the trend is sustained. **However, this is compounded by factors related to specific developments in recent years, namely the mobilization for the passage of amendments to the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (PADVA), which emerged as necessary following the announcement of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence as unconstitutional in 2018 and the strengthening of the anti-gender movement in Bulgaria.**

Certainly, when discussing organizations which see their work as connected to the women's cause, their priority is also women's rights (15%). Also, we should note the distinctive activities aimed at addressing socio-economic issues through **promoting women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment (15%) and by combating poverty and social exclusion (14%)**. Particularly noteworthy is the increased presence of the topic of civic participation (15%), which coincides with a tendency among interviewees in the study to think more systematically in the direction of civic mobilization. These changes could be interpreted as a sectoral reaction to the intensified attacks on women's and LGBTI+ organizations that began namely in the aforementioned 2018.

In this line, the following chart (Figure 8) reveals respondents' extremely negative assessment of the context in which they work. They feel that they do not receive support from the state and municipalities (66%), that the non-governmental sector faces mistrust and lack of support among the public (52%), that they are neglected in policy and legislation formulation (37%), etc.

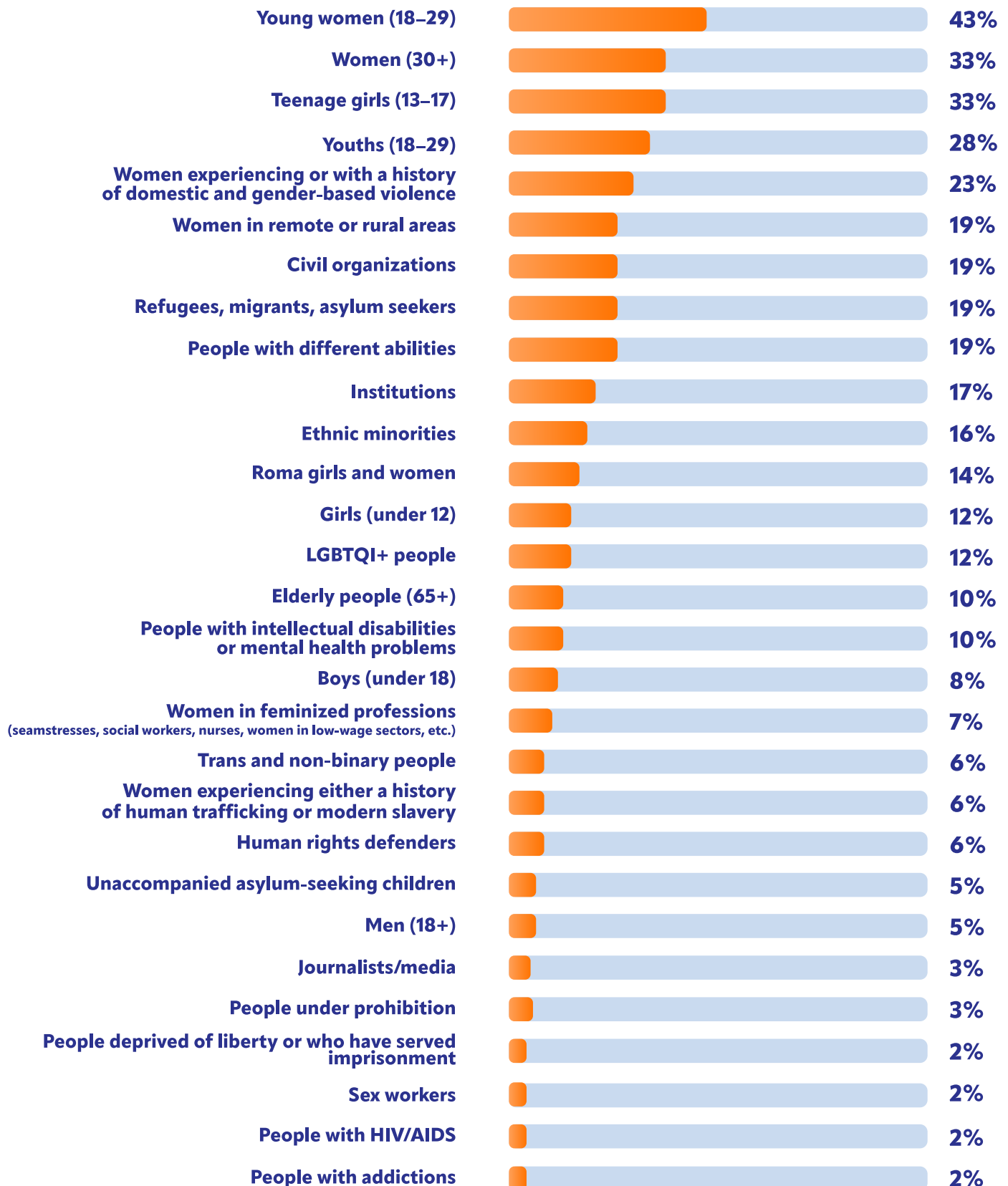
FIGURE 8





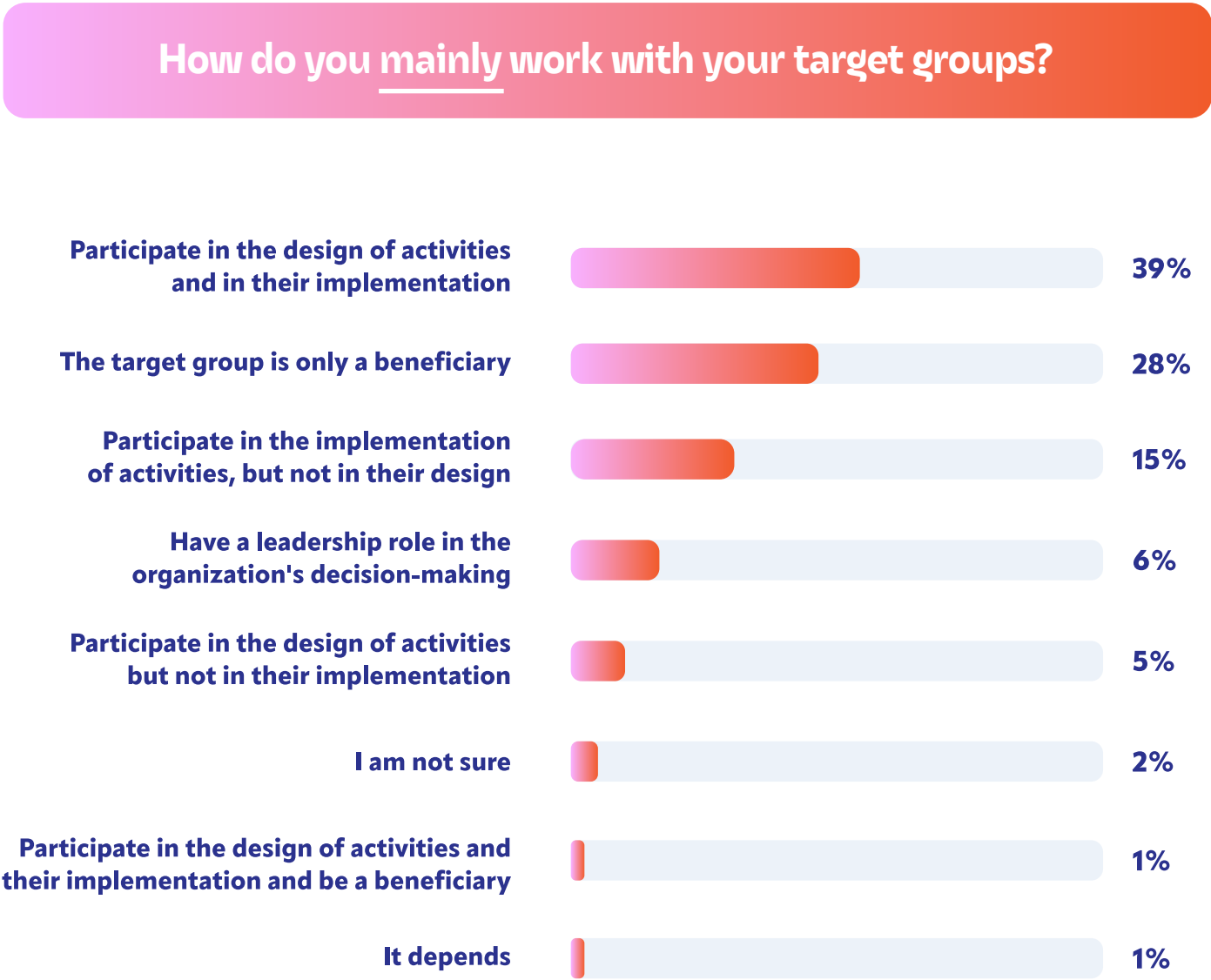
**FIGURE 9**

## Target groups



Which **target groups** do the organizations work with? The chart (Figure 9) shows that the priority target groups of the organizations participating in the study are youths, and 43% indicate that their target groups are young women (18-29) and teenage girls (13-17), and women (30+) come only third, followed closely again by young people (18-29). Among young people, 23% of the target groups are **women experiencing or with a history of domestic violence, as well as women from remote or rural areas, people with different abilities, and refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, whose problems are considered within the mentioned socio-economic framework**. It is worth noting that work with civil society organizations turns out to be an equally important target group, which also aligns with the previously mentioned prioritization of civic participation as an area of work aimed at addressing the deteriorating socio-political environment.

FIGURE 10



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When asked about the level of involvement of target groups (Figure 10) in the activities of the organizations, the majority of respondents (39%) note that target groups play an active role in the design and implementation of activities, but some of them respond that their involvement is only at the level of beneficiary (28%) or implementation (15%); only 6% of target group representatives are in leadership positions and make decisions for the organization. **Despite the expressed desire for greater involvement of the target groups in the design and implementation of activities, it should be noted that there is a marked trend for them not to hold key positions of authority.**

## IN SUMMARY

The typical non-governmental organization working on women's, girls' and vulnerable groups' issues is located in the capital or in another regional center, its scope of work is mainly at a national level and it does not prioritize working at European and international/global level. This segment of the civil sector is feminized, characterized by specialization in the field of social work and education, although a significant number of respondents have specialized in psychology and psychotherapy, art, culture, design and creativity, law and legal services. Gender-based violence and domestic violence are priority areas of work for the organizations, followed by civic participation, and the promotion of women's entrepreneurship and economic empowerment, as well as the fight against poverty and social exclusion being also high on the agenda. The target groups are referred to as "the youths", but they also cover vulnerable people – victims of domestic violence, people from remote rural areas, people with different abilities and refugees, migrants, asylum seekers. To grasp the overall meaning of responses, the next section of this report will look in more detail at the approaches used. In doing so, we will reconstruct the political imagination behind the way in which the organizations' representatives envision possible pathways to achieving change.

# 01

## QUANTITATIVE STUDY

### 1.2.

STRATEGIES USED  
TO ACHIEVE  
SOCIAL CHANGE

In order to analyze the preferred strategies for achieving social change and addressing the main issues highlighted in the previous part of the report, respondents could choose from multiple approaches related to their work. For each strategy, they had to specify a particular method of action, and as a next step, evaluate, using a scale from “most often” to “never”, the frequency with which they apply it in their practice. The chart (Figure 11) illustrates that the majority of respondents noted almost all of the strategies mentioned – training (84%), community building and strengthening (83%), community awareness campaigns (83%), advocacy and lobbying (74%), service delivery (74%), research and knowledge creation (73%), creating spaces (69%) and fundraising (65%). Scaling up the assessments reveals a more detailed and nuanced picture of the strategies for achieving social change thus summarized.

**FIGURE 11**



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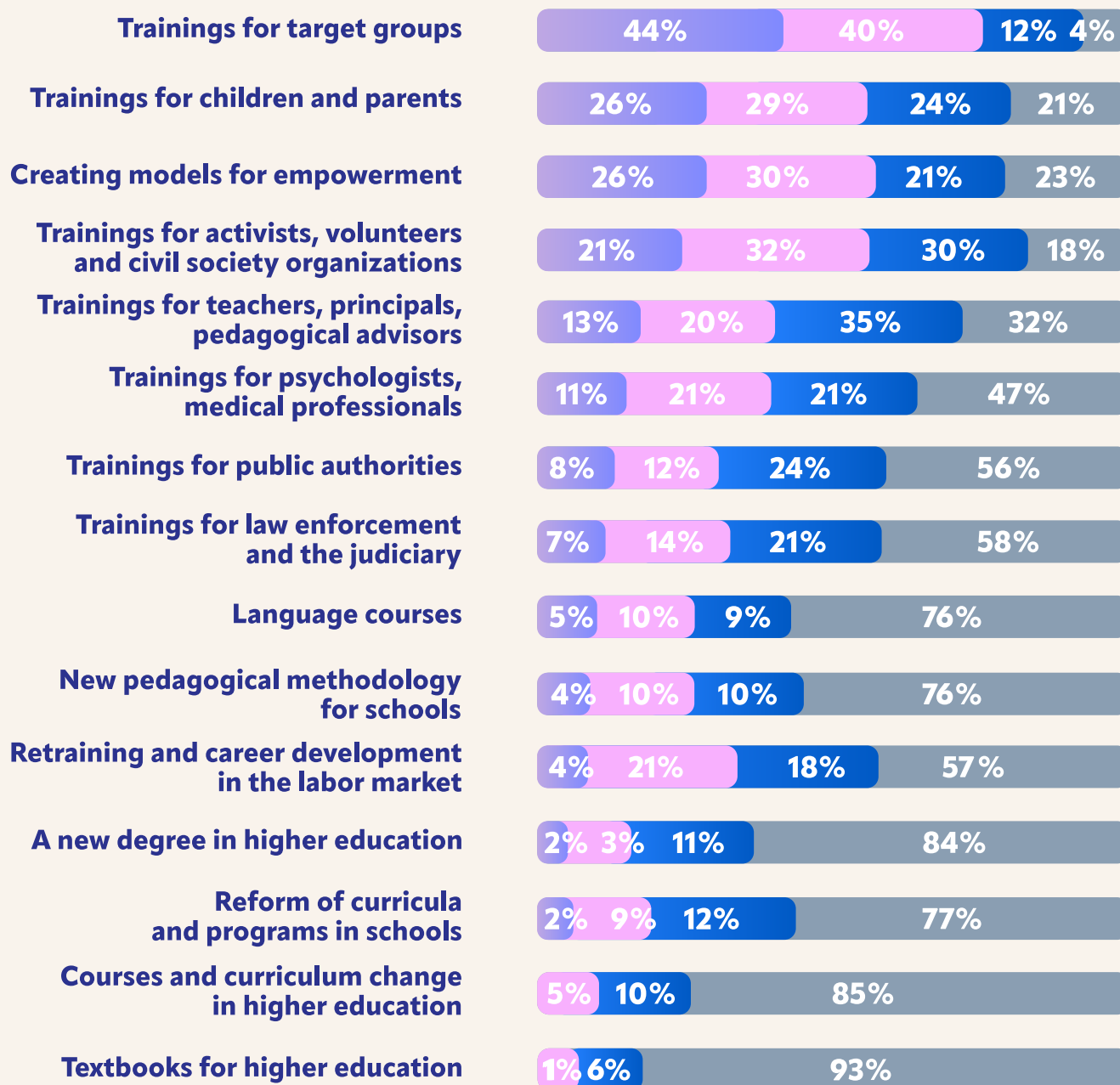
The data shows (Figure 12) that training is the most preferred strategy, matching the observation in the previous section that the main target group of organizations appears to be **youths**. A similar conclusion was reached in the previous *Study of the Needs of Organizations Working on the Rights of Women, Girls, and Vulnerable Groups in Bulgaria (2022)*. In it, we found that the impact on public attitudes is seen precisely through the lens of working with young people, mainly through educational interventions where young people are the object/subject of future social change. Inasmuch as the battle against gender stereotypes is an important issue for organizations in Bulgaria, it is based on education. **The present study confirms these observations, as 44% indicate that the educational approach they use most often involves training for the target groups, namely the youths, as well as training for children and parents (26%), also developing empowerment models (26%).**

On the other hand, we noted that **civil society organizations are among the other target groups that appear to be a priority, and that the topic of civic participation is present as one of the priority ones. Therefore, here we also see that organizations often (32%) make efforts to conduct trainings for activists, volunteers and CSOs.** It is important to note the lack of approaches related to addressing systemic issues at the institutional level concerning primary and higher education, and the absence of goals such as changing curriculum content and/or programs. It is also noteworthy that, despite the fact that promoting women's entrepreneurship, economic empowerment and fighting poverty and social exclusion are among the priority issues, resolving them is not considered possible through retraining and labor market career opportunities, as 57% responded that they never use this approach.



FIGURE 12

## We use the following training approaches:



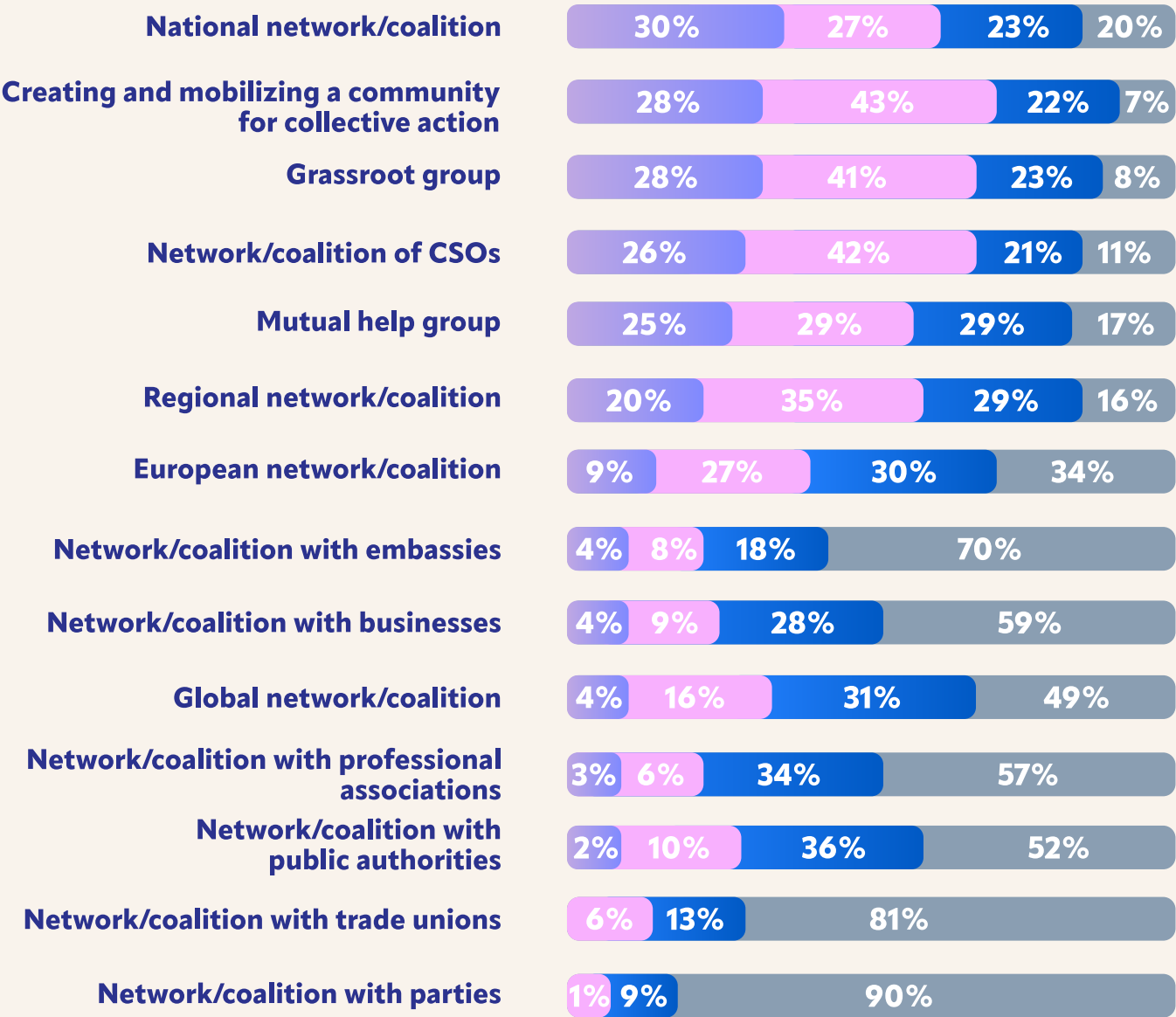
MOST FREQUENT
  FREQUENT
  RARELY
  NEVER

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Behind the second most preferred strategy, i.e. community building and strengthening (Figure 13), lie the efforts of organizations to create **coalitions/networks at national and regional level, most often between civil society organizations (42%), in an attempt to form and mobilize a community for collective action (43%)**. There is much less work on inclusion and joint activities with third parties – organizations have almost never tried to create a coalition/network with political parties (90%), with trade unions (81%), with embassies (70%), with businesses (59%), with professional associations (57%), with representatives of public authorities (52%). Also, despite the clear tendency for them not to operate at European and international/global level, this chart reveals that 27% are still members of European networks and 16% are members of global networks. As will be seen from the data on the financial conditions in which this segment of the civil society sector operates, organizations actually participate in these types of networks primarily for the opportunity to access financial mechanisms, which, however, does not necessarily lead to a better understanding of their activities as positioned within broader international developments.

FIGURE 13

Community building and strengthening



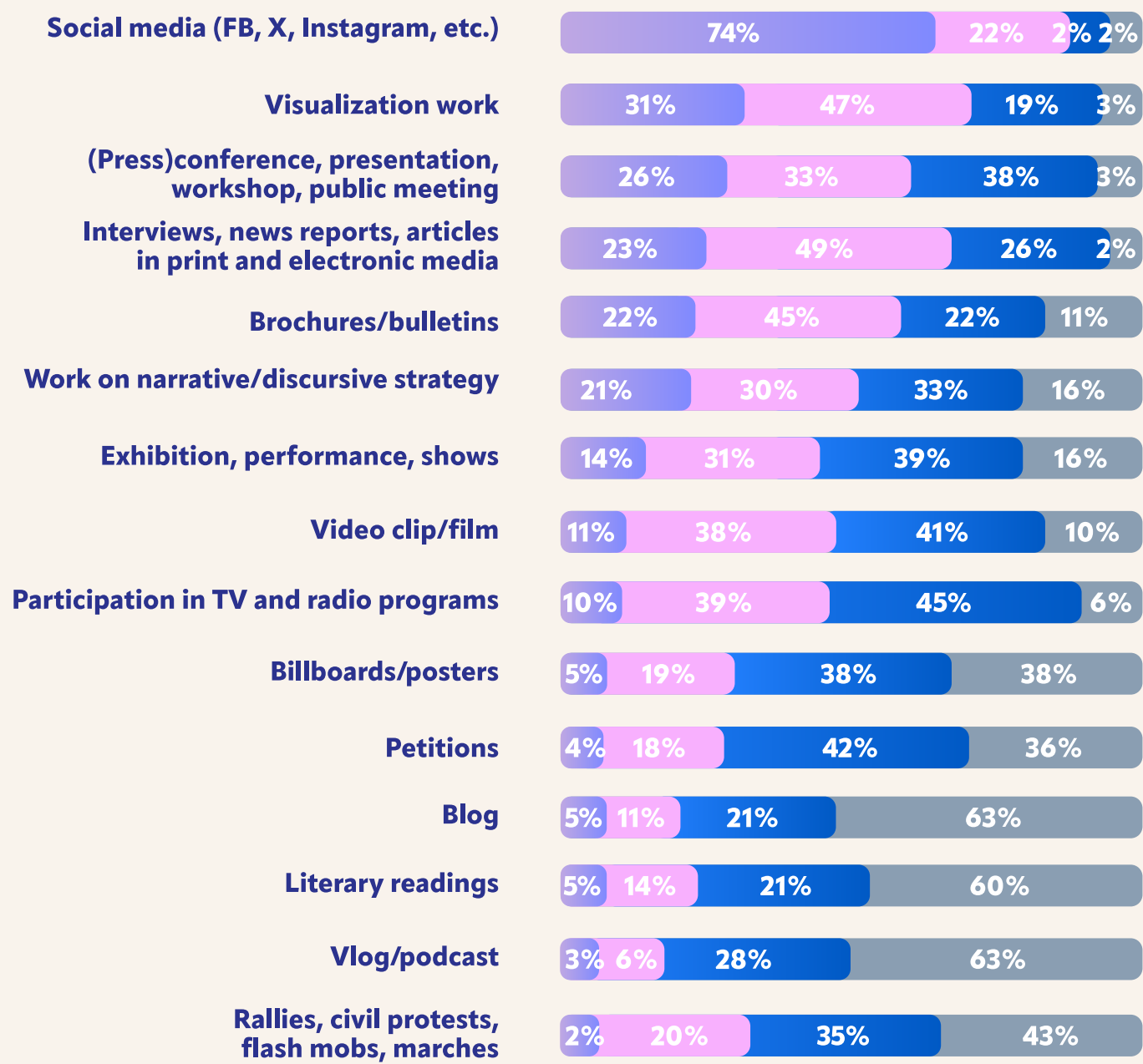
MOST FREQUENT FREQUENT RARELY NEVER

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Campaigning activities emerge as a third strategy (Figure 14). Undoubtedly, the most commonly used campaigning tool is **social media** (74%), whereas blogs, vlogs and podcasts are not among the communication tools. Organizations also frequently give interviews, write news reports and articles for print and electronic media (49%), distribute brochures/newsletters (45%), and produce videos and films (38%). However, when compared to the use of social media, print and electronic media, **only 10% indicate that they participate in TV and radio programs.** This data calls for a deeper analysis of why women representatives of the civil society sector working on women's, girls' and vulnerable groups' issues have low presence in mainstream media, revealing a worrying trend – **low representation in one of the most widely used media, such as television. Another important feature is avoidance of activities related to the organization of rallies, civil protests, flash mobs, marches – 43% have never used such means to mobilize public support, and 35% indicate that they rarely resort to this approach.**

FIGURE 14

Approaches to campaigning



MOST FREQUENT    FREQUENT    RARELY    NEVER

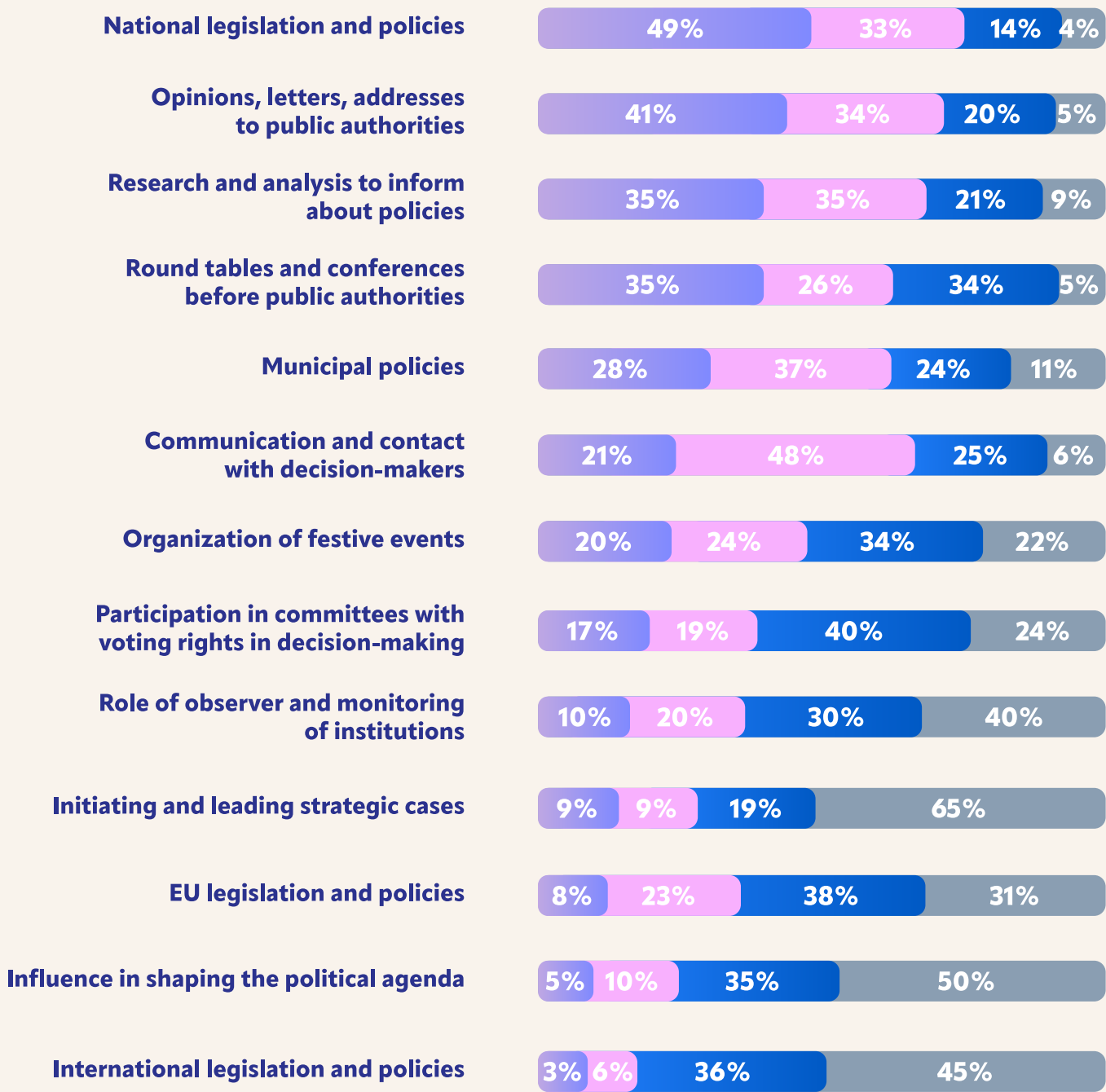
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When organizations engage in advocacy and lobbying (Figure 15), they most often target **national legislation and policies (49%), but a significant proportion often link them to municipal policies (37%)**, indicating that they actively work at the local level and are directly involved in the problems of their beneficiaries. It should be noted that 23% also frequently apply European Union legislation and policies as a means of bringing about change, which however should not be seen as an area of work aimed at raising an issue within the EU. The most common approaches used in this process are writing position papers and letters (41%), organizing roundtables and conferences in front of public authorities (35%), where research and analysis aimed at informing about policies are presented (35%), and often women representatives of organizations try to establish contacts with decision-makers (48%). **More than half of the respondents have no experience or only partial experience in participating in voting committees where they might have decision-making powers; they also do not try to influence the policy agenda.**



FIGURE 15

Advocacy and lobbying



MOST FREQUENT



FREQUENT



RARELY



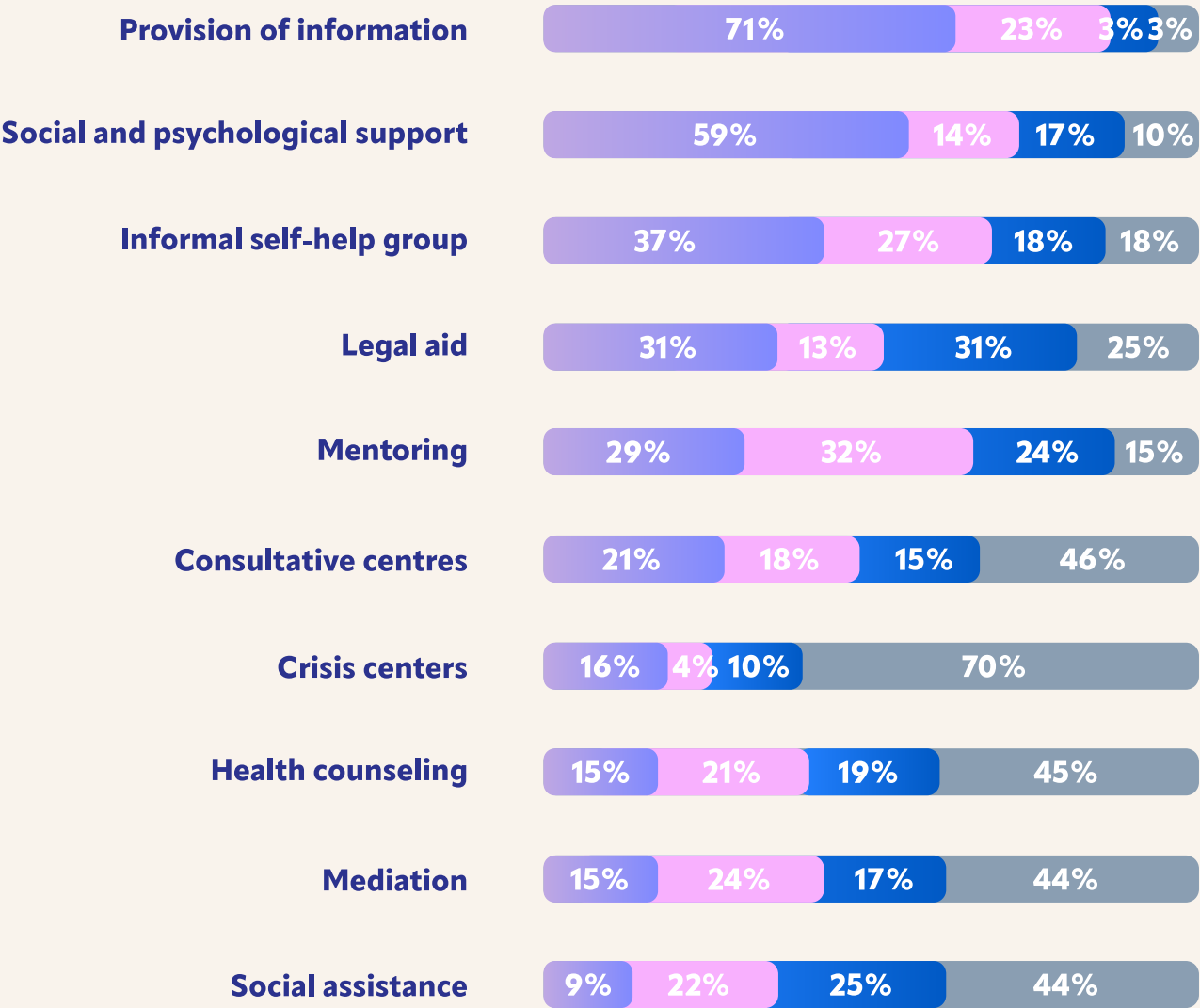
NEVER

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Among the strategies for achieving social change, service delivery approaches rank fifth (Figure 16). These most often consist of **providing information (71%), social and psychological support (59%) and legal support (31%)**. A large number of organizations do not maintain a crisis and/or a counseling center, while this is expected, given that this type of activity is a priority for organizations working in the area of domestic and gender-based violence.

FIGURE 16

We use the following service delivery approaches



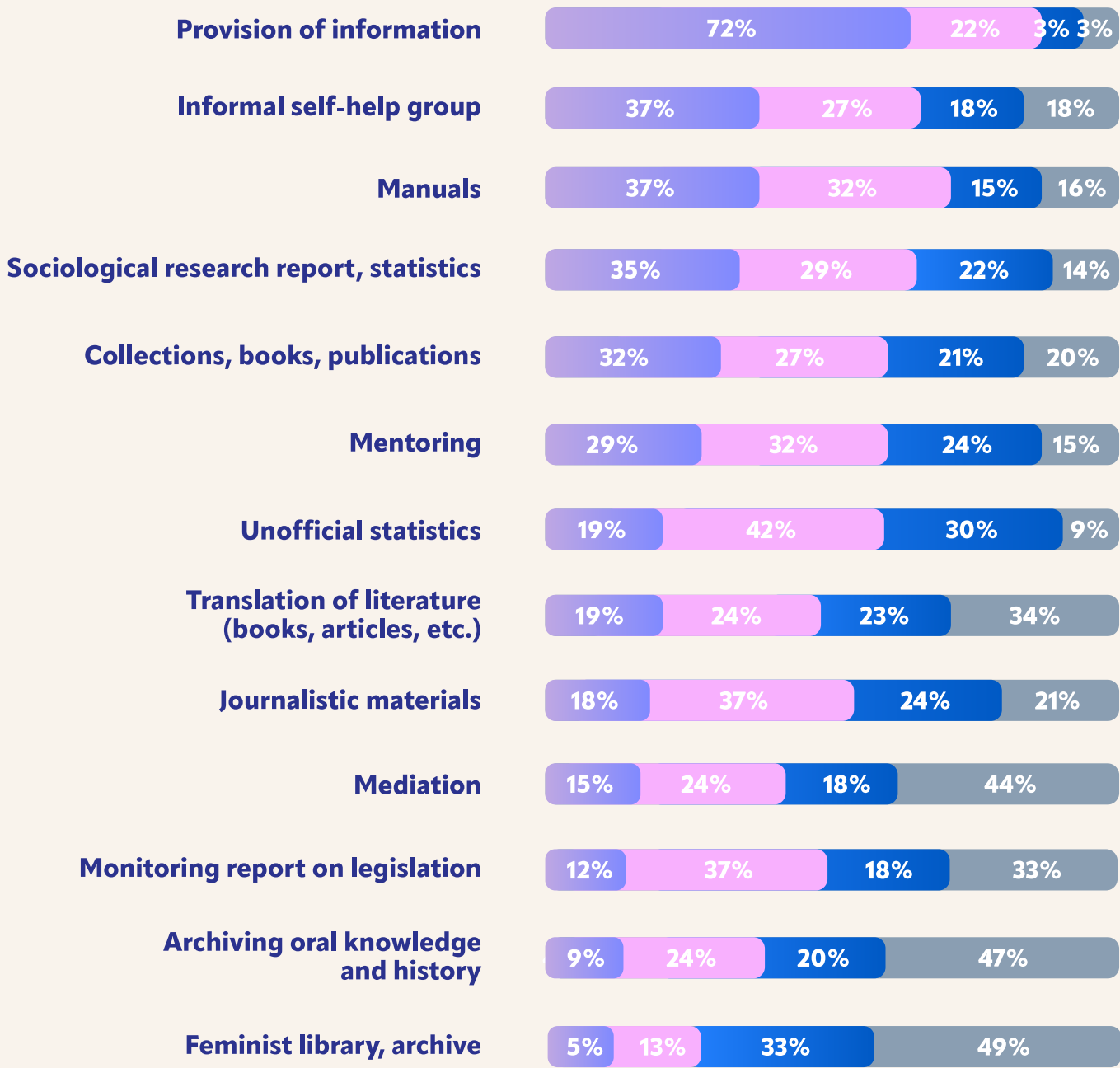
MOST FREQUENT    FREQUENT    RARELY    NEVER

---

Interestingly, the *Research and Knowledge Creation strategy* (Figure 17) again replicates the approach relying on **information provision with a similarly high percentage of 72%**. Respondents are likely to place an “equal” sign at this point between providing a social service and creating knowledge for the supported persons. A significant portion (37%) adopt an approach towards establishing a mutual support group for exchange of information. Other highly preferred approaches relating to knowledge creation include publishing manuals (37%) and reports from sociological studies (35%), including informally collected statistical data (19%). Notable is the absence of key activities related to **generation of feminist knowledge, such as creating a feminist library and archiving oral history. It seems that women's history is not considered a priority tool for achieving social change.**

FIGURE 17

Research and knowledge creation



MOST FREQUENT



FREQUENT



RARELY



NEVER

FIGURE 18

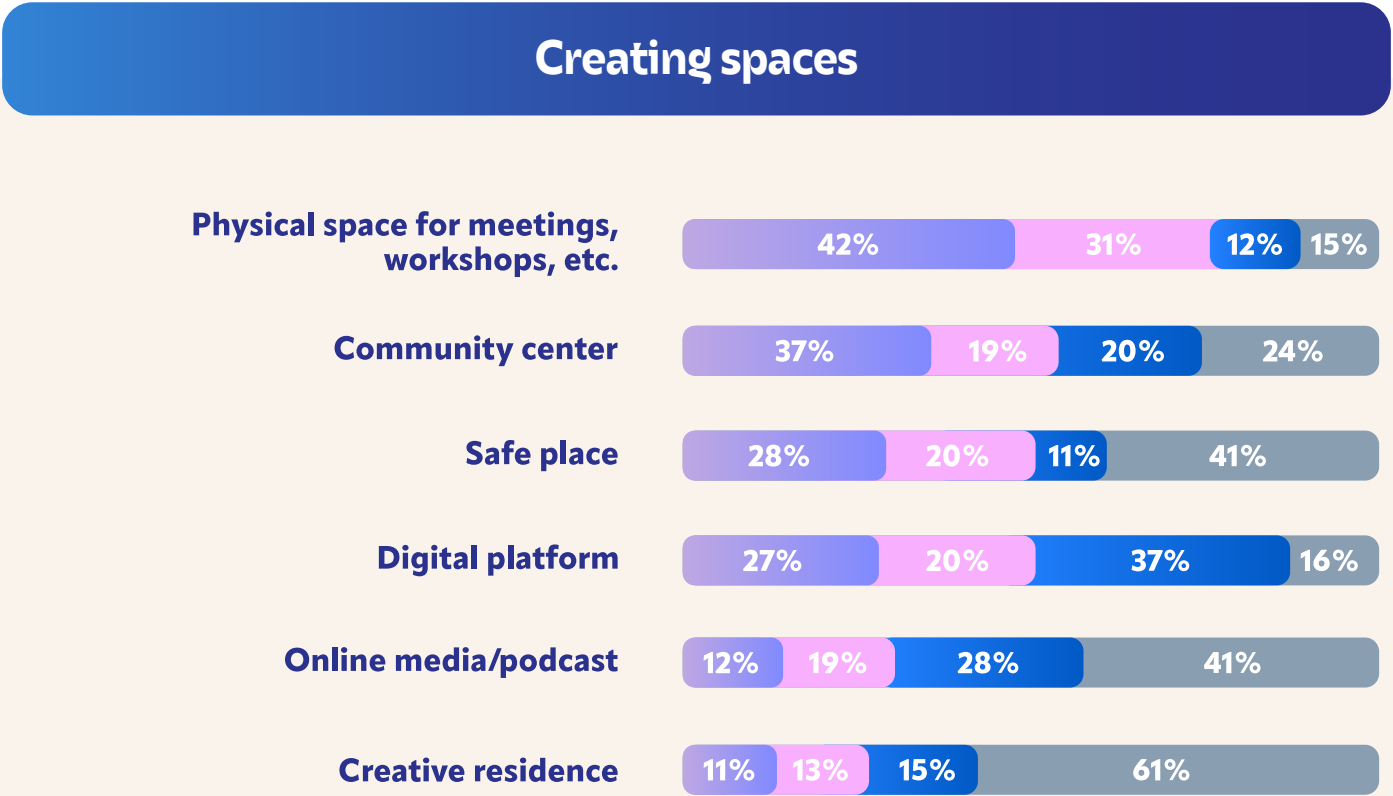
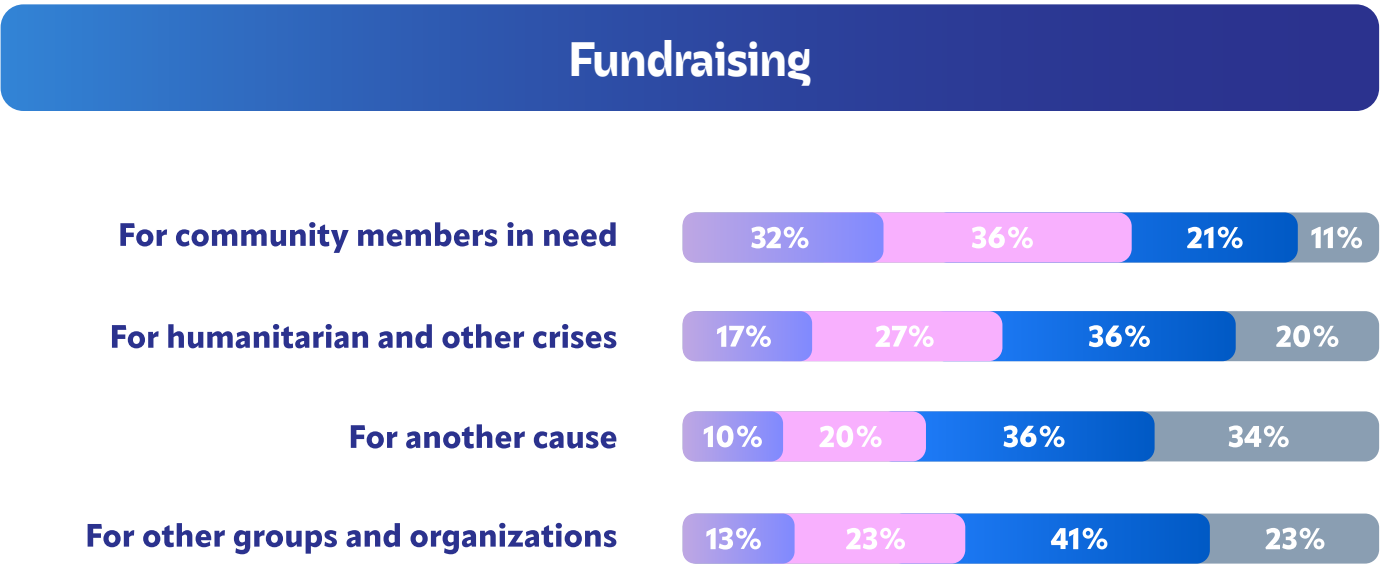


FIGURE 19



MOST FREQUENT



FREQUENT



RARELY



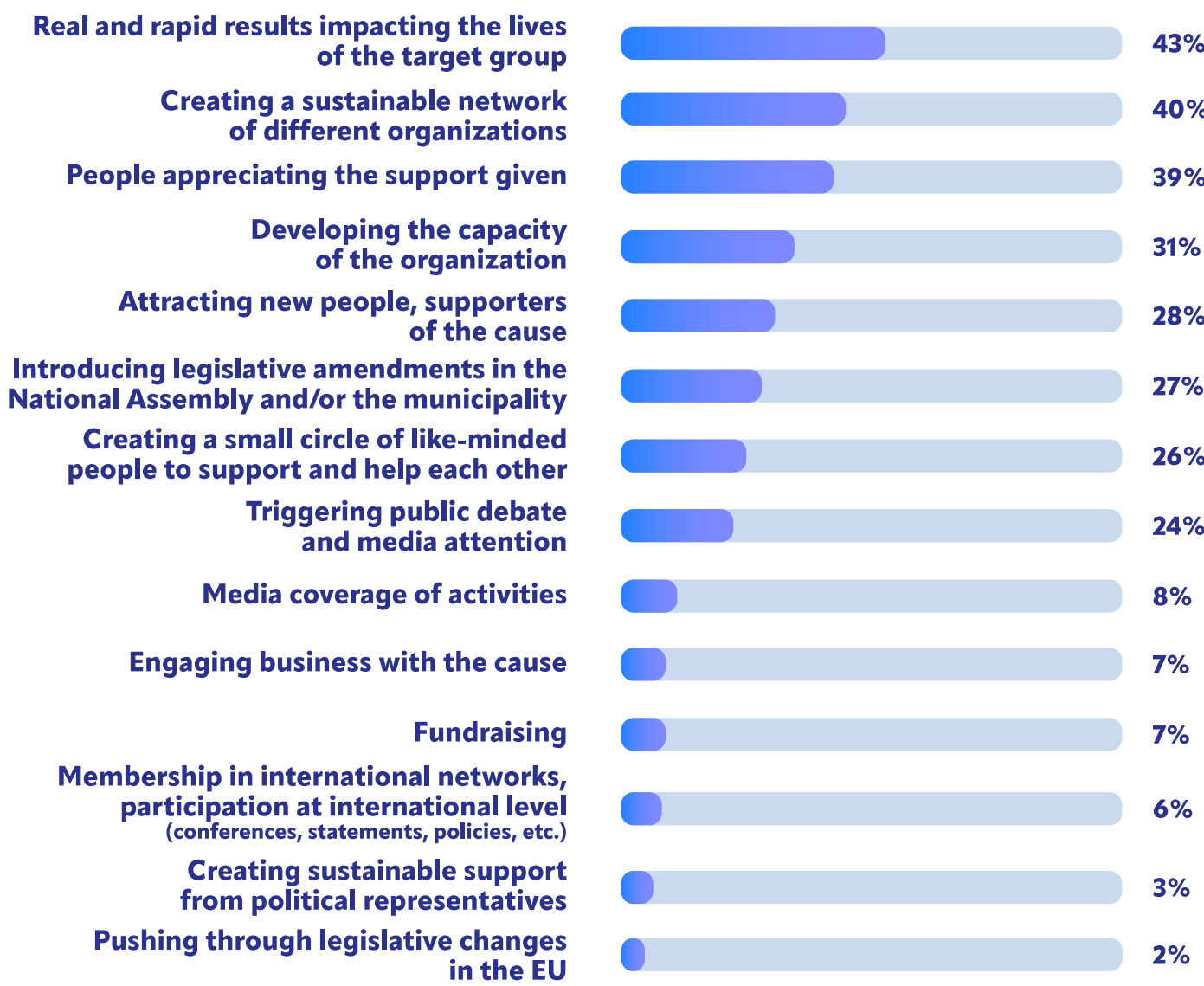
NEVER



Among the recent strategies used are space creation and fundraising (Figure 18), with physical meeting spaces being the most common (42%), and the highest proportion of respondents are involved in fundraising (Figure 19) for community members in need (32%).

FIGURE 20

Which of the following activities indicate success?



# IN SUMMARY

From the data derived so far, we can conclude that two strategies emerge based on which the interviewees envision the achievement of social change. On the one hand, conducting trainings for young people continues to be a preferred method – a result of considering young people as carriers of future progressive societal transformation. On the other hand, emphasis is placed on organizing training for civil society organizations, as well as training aimed at creating activists and volunteers. This trend is in line with efforts to create and mobilize a community for collective action, which predominantly represents a coalition/network of civil society organizations operating at regional and/or national levels. Based on data showing a strongly negative assessment of the socio-political context, it can be concluded that the interviewees obviously recognize the need for building broader alliances and are making such attempts.

In addition to actions aimed at building coalitions for political change, organizations add the need for conducting campaigns that are intended to reach a wider audience and mobilize public opinion in favor of the women's cause. However, these campaigns are almost entirely positioned on social media – a symptom of a structural problem related to the lack of female voices in mainstream media, and specifically in national television, which remains the mass communication medium. A problem also arises from the lack of experience in organizing and conducting rallies, civil protests, etc. It appears that mobilizing broad bottom-up public support is still not recognized as a means of exerting pressure in the current socio-political context.

In terms of advocacy, organizations tend to act through the established institutional channels of pressure – by writing position papers, letters and addresses to public authorities, organizing round tables and conferences with the participation of representatives of civil society organizations and public institutions, as well as through meetings with persons in key public positions. However, this is an activity that according to the following chart (Figure 20) is not recognized as satisfactory and as a sign of success, unlike the creation of sustainable networks of organizations. We could explain this phenomenon based on the dissatisfaction with the political representatives identified above (we have seen the respondents' assessment of them who also feel neglected by them). This critical attitude is also probably caused by the political crisis\* in Bulgaria, marked by the many successive parliamentary elections – the result of the failure to form a permanent government. An important observation is that creating feminist knowledge is reduced to providing social services for women and other beneficiaries in vulnerable situations (information provided through manuals and formation of mutual support groups) or, on the other hand, to research that serves as a leverage for proposing legislative changes. However, it is not prioritized as a means of attracting public support through narrative strategies. The battle for feminizing history and historical memory is also marginalized, which means that the collective memory field does not represent a political resource.

\* For more information see Kaleynska, T. (2023) *The Political Crisis in Bulgaria (2021–2023): Internal and External Consequences*. *Perspective Politice*, 16, pp. 101–111.

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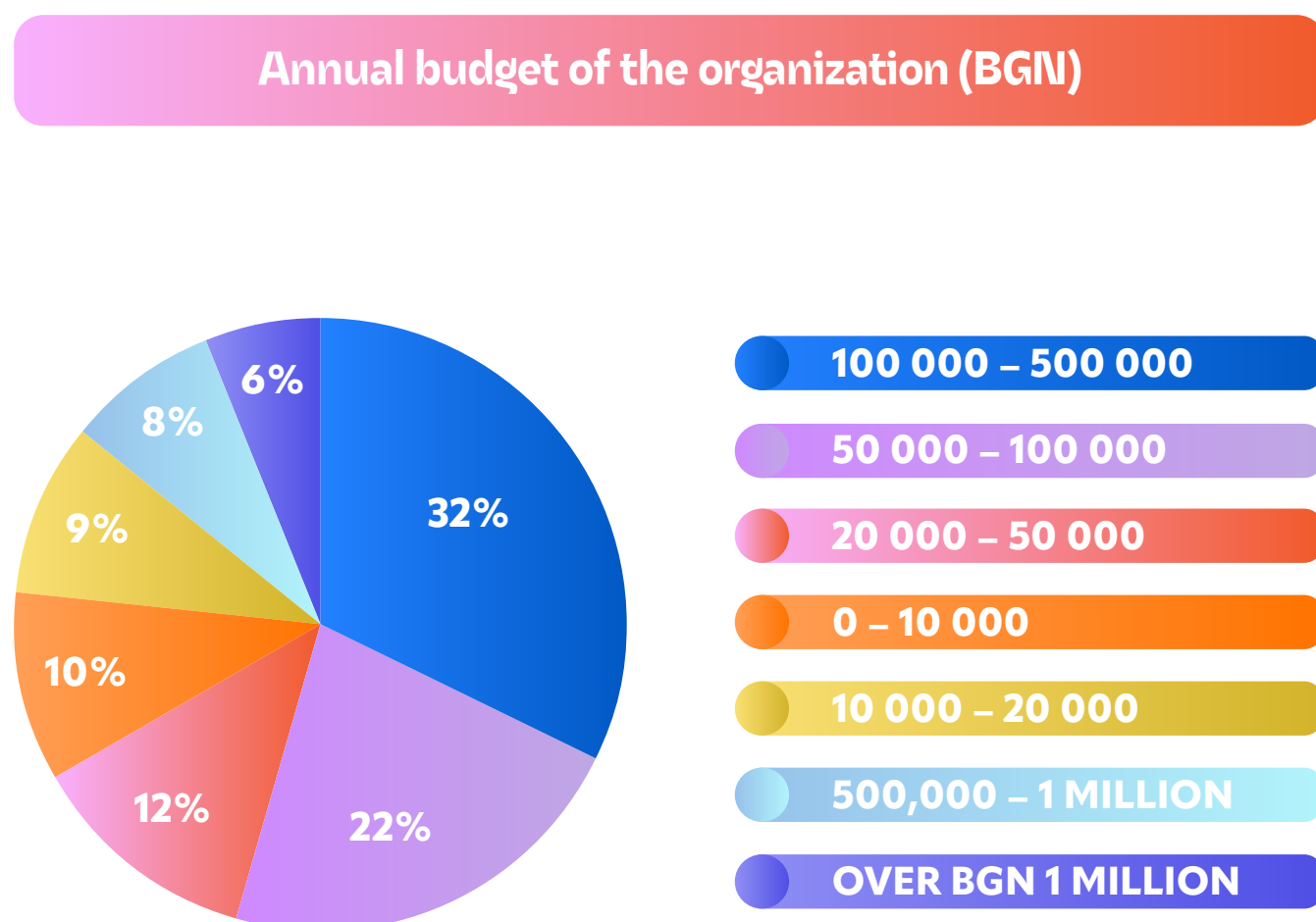
# QUANTITATIVE STUDY

1.3.

FINANCIAL  
CONDITIONS

In the previous study,\* a conclusion emerged that the majority of organizations operate with small annual budgets, specifically BGN 0 – 10,000 (34.51%), BGN 10,000 – 20,000 (12.39%), or BGN 20,000 – 50,000 (14.16%). By 2024, an improvement in the financial status and budget growth was observed (Figure 21). Now, the majority of organizations (32%) have an annual budget of BGN 100,000 – 500,000, 22% have a budget of BGN 50,000 – 100,000, the budget of 12% is BGN 20,000 – 50,000, 10% have a budget of BGN 0 – 10,000, and 9% have BGN 10,000 – 20,000. Organizations with a budget of BGN 500,000 – 1 million (8%) and over BGN 1 million (6%) come last.

**FIGURE 21**



\* See Vajsova, L. (2022) Study of the Needs of Organizations Working on the Rights of Women, Girls, and Vulnerable Groups in Bulgaria. Bulgarian Fund for Women. Available at: <https://bgfundforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Study-of-the-needs-BG.pdf> [Visited on 07.12.2024]

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To explain this increase, we must consider several trends that, on the one hand, are characteristic of the civil society sector as a whole, and, on the other hand, are the result of the development of BFW in recent years, which respectively increases the budgets of the organizations funded by it.

The same trend was reported in a study conducted by the Open Society Institute in 2023:

"In 2023, the largest share of interviewed active NGOs with annual budgets of up to 20,000 BGN was observed, representing 35% of the total. However, this figure has decreased significantly when compared to the data from 2017, where nearly half of the active NGOs interviewed had such annual expenditure. **The proportion of organisations with annual expenditures between 20,000 BGN and 100,000 BGN has increased by four percentage points (from 27% in 2017 to 31% in 2023). In the same period, the proportion of active NGOs interviewed with a budget for the previous year between 100,000 BGN and 1 million BGN has increased almost twofold, from 13,6% in 2017 to 24,2% in 2023.** Additionally, the proportion of NGOs with expenditure exceeding 1 million BGN has increased, from 1.3% in 2017 to 5.9% in 2023. However, this group remains the smallest in terms of overall representation." \* (emphasis added – L.V.).

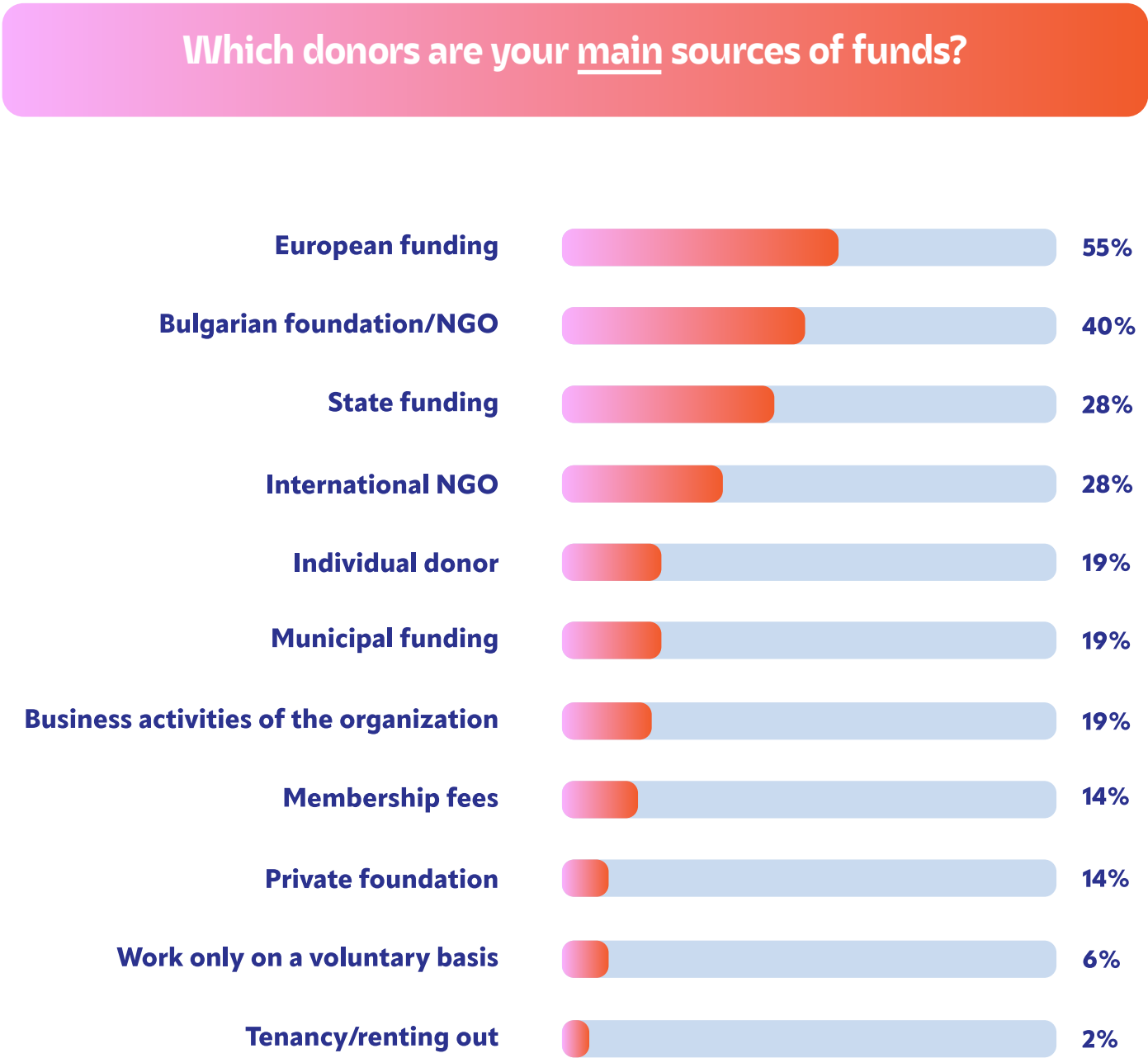
At the same time, since 2017, BFW has seen the beginning of an extremely rapid and high growth, the increase in the organization's budget in 2023 compared to 2004 being 75 times. European funding has been the major contributor to this increase over the past two years, dominating the Fund's budget with 35.4%. There is a similar finding in the Open Society Institute report already cited, namely that increasing access to EC programs is also helping to improve the financial situation of the NGO sector:

"In Bulgaria, the assessment of the role of the Active Citizens Fund (NGO Support Programme) under the European Economic Area Financial Mechanism (EEA FM) is that the Fund has maintained its position as a leading entity in the development and assurance of civil society sustainability in Bulgaria. **In comparison to the data from 2017, the influence of both the European Commission's programmes and the Operational Programmes in Bulgaria has increased, indicating a greater capacity of the sector to operate with the support of these programmes.** Additionally, the role of the state budget has increased, though it remains the lowest-ranked item on the list. Furthermore, the proportion of NGOs that have acknowledged it has risen from 1/5 to 1/4" (emphasis added – L.V.).

\*See Zahariev, B., Yordanov, I. (2023) *Dynamics of the Non-Governmental Sector in Bulgaria*. Open Society Institute Foundation – Sofia. Available at: <https://osis.bg/?p=4697> [Visited on 07.12.2024]

The same funding structure is reflected in the responses of interviewees regarding the main sources of financial resources for their organizations (Figure 22). These are revenues coming primarily from European funding (55%), from a Bulgarian foundation/NGO (40%), and 28% is funding from international NGOs and the same percentage is state funding. **We could assume that combining various funding sources aims to ensure the sustainability of the organizations' activities, but what stands out is precisely the prominence of European funding and the funding provided by a Bulgarian foundation/NGO, which we have identified as some of the major donors for this segment of the civil society sector.**

FIGURE 22



Despite the improved financial situation, organizations continue to face serious difficulties. In response to the question “What are the main difficulties your organization has faced so far in terms of funding opportunities?” (Figure 23), respondents first point to insufficient and short-term funding from other grant-providing sources (49%); lack of financial support from public institutions in Bulgaria (44%); EU financial resources are difficult to access (41%); insufficient and short-term project-based funding from the state (31%). Thus, from the data presented we see that our respondents are critically minded. The main target of **criticism are public institutions in Bulgaria and the state** due to their low commitment to the non-governmental sector. In addition, for some organizations, EU financial resources remain inaccessible.

FIGURE 23





In this regard, the main difficulties faced by organizations when applying for funding (Figure 24) are: burdensome administrative procedures (39%), different donor priority areas (36%), lack of funds to provide the required co-financing (31%), lack of flexibility on the part of the funding institution (27%), non-paid work for application writing (26%), lack of capacity to prepare and format project documentation (25%), etc. The data shows that, on the one hand, difficulties stem from the development of the organizations' capacity to acquire the necessary administrative skills, and from their ability to provide the necessary time for application preparation. On the other hand, there is also a perception among respondents of a lack of relevant proposals and of unresponsiveness of donors to the needs of the civil sector.

FIGURE 24

What are the main difficulties you face when applying for funding?



# 01

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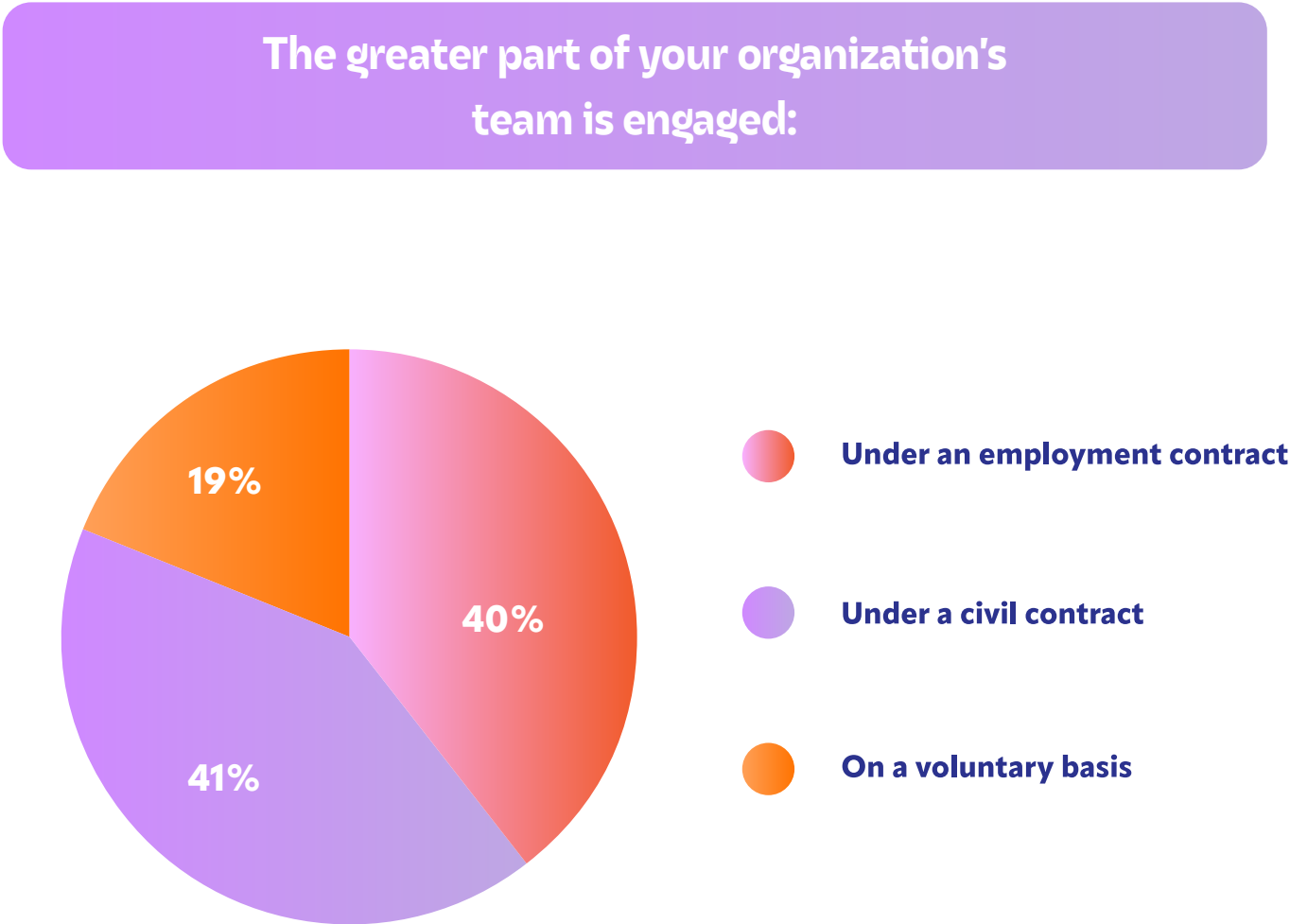
## QUANTITATIVE STUDY

### 1.4.

INTERNAL  
CAPACITY

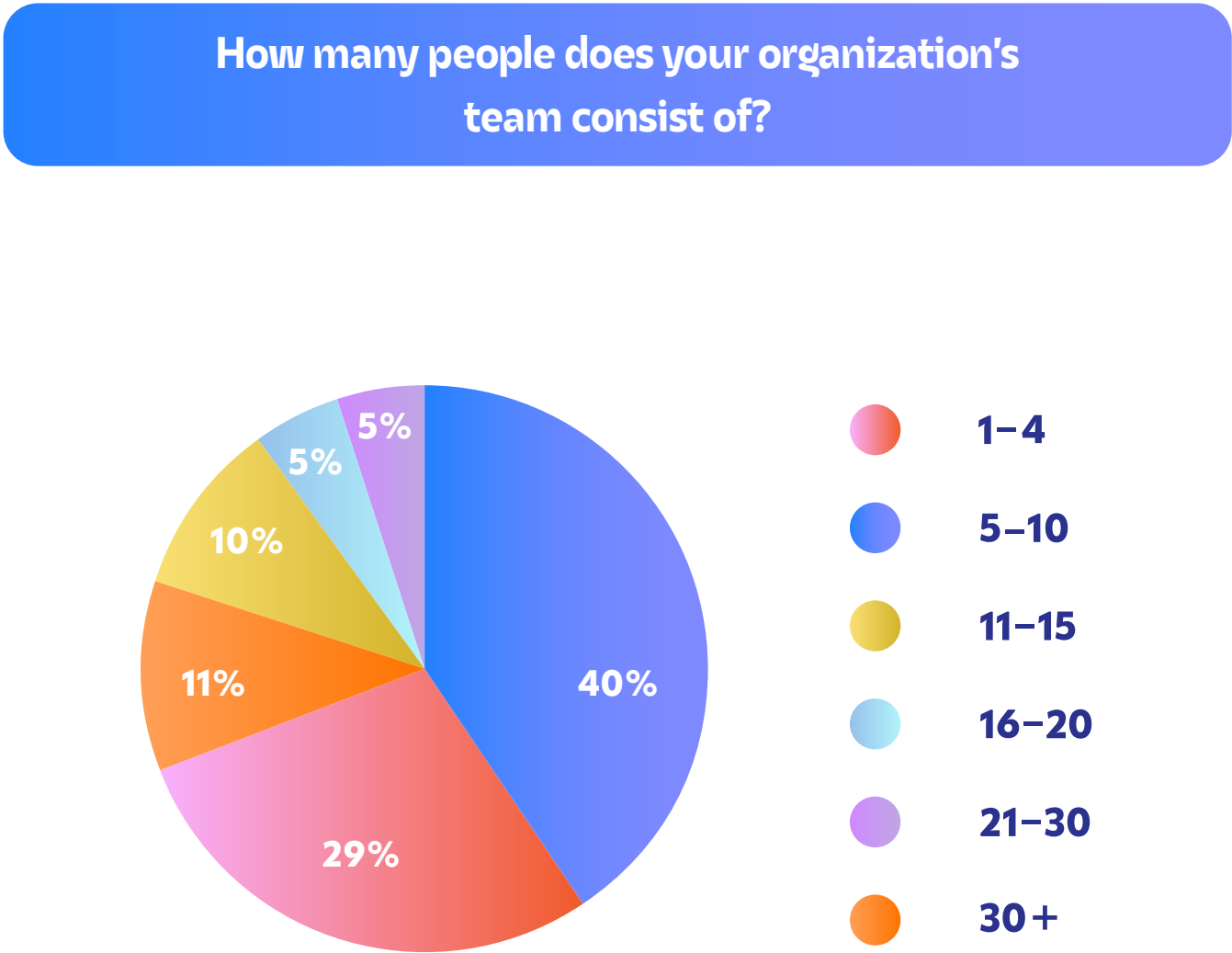
Let us address the issue of the internal capacity of organizations in the context of the financial picture thus revealed. In the previous 2022 Study of the *Needs of Organizations Working on the Rights of Women, Girls, and Vulnerable Groups in Bulgaria*, it was found that a small proportion of those working in this segment of the civil society sector have labor contracts and mainly rely on voluntary work (34%). A small percentage work under a permanent employment contract (21%), a temporary employment contract may be provided for current activities planned for the implementation of specific projects (29%), or a civil contract is signed (16%). The low level of permanent employment contract members and the reliance mainly on volunteer work or work on current activities assigned under projects indicate that there is a high degree of precariousness in the sector. **However, the data (Figure 25) from this analysis shows a decrease in voluntary work (19%) at the expense of an increase in permanent employment contracts (40%) and civil contracts depending on current activities (41%). Thus, the increase in the organizations' budgets has had a positive impact on achieving greater organizational stability.**

FIGURE 25



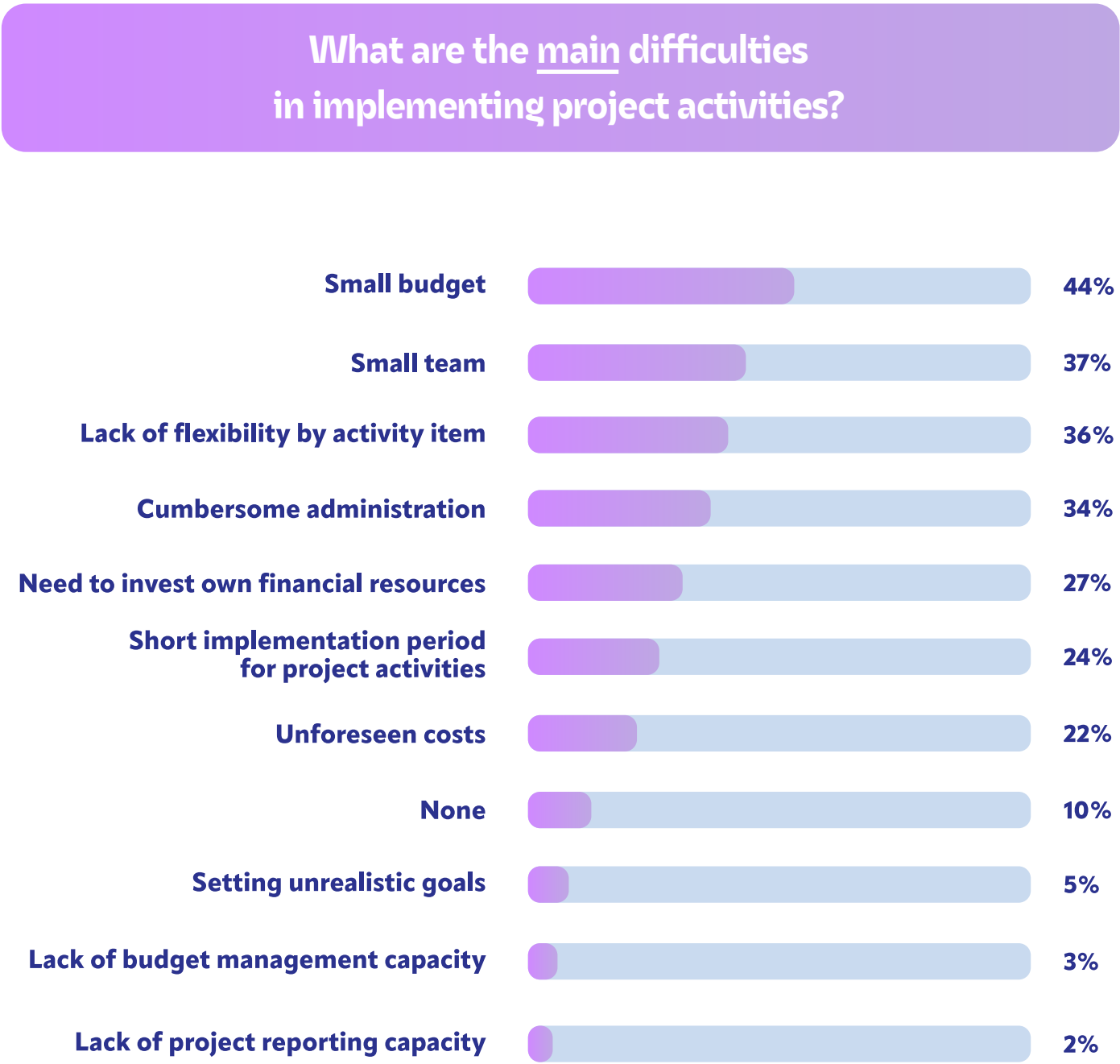
However, the following chart shows that the increased access to funding as well as employment contracts at this stage have not yet resulted in an expansion of the number of the organizations' teams, and this segment of the civil society sector continues to **consist of small organizations** (Figure 26): 40% have a team of 5–10 persons and nearly 30% have a team of 1–4 persons. The exceptions are teams with more than 10 members: 11–15 persons (10%), more than 30 (11%), 16–20 persons (5%), 21–30 persons (5%). **As we can see from the data, the improved financial situation is a relatively new phenomenon, so organizations at this stage are still making efforts mainly to stabilize themselves and do not risk expanding their teams, which does not mean that there is no clear desire and need in this respect.**

FIGURE 26



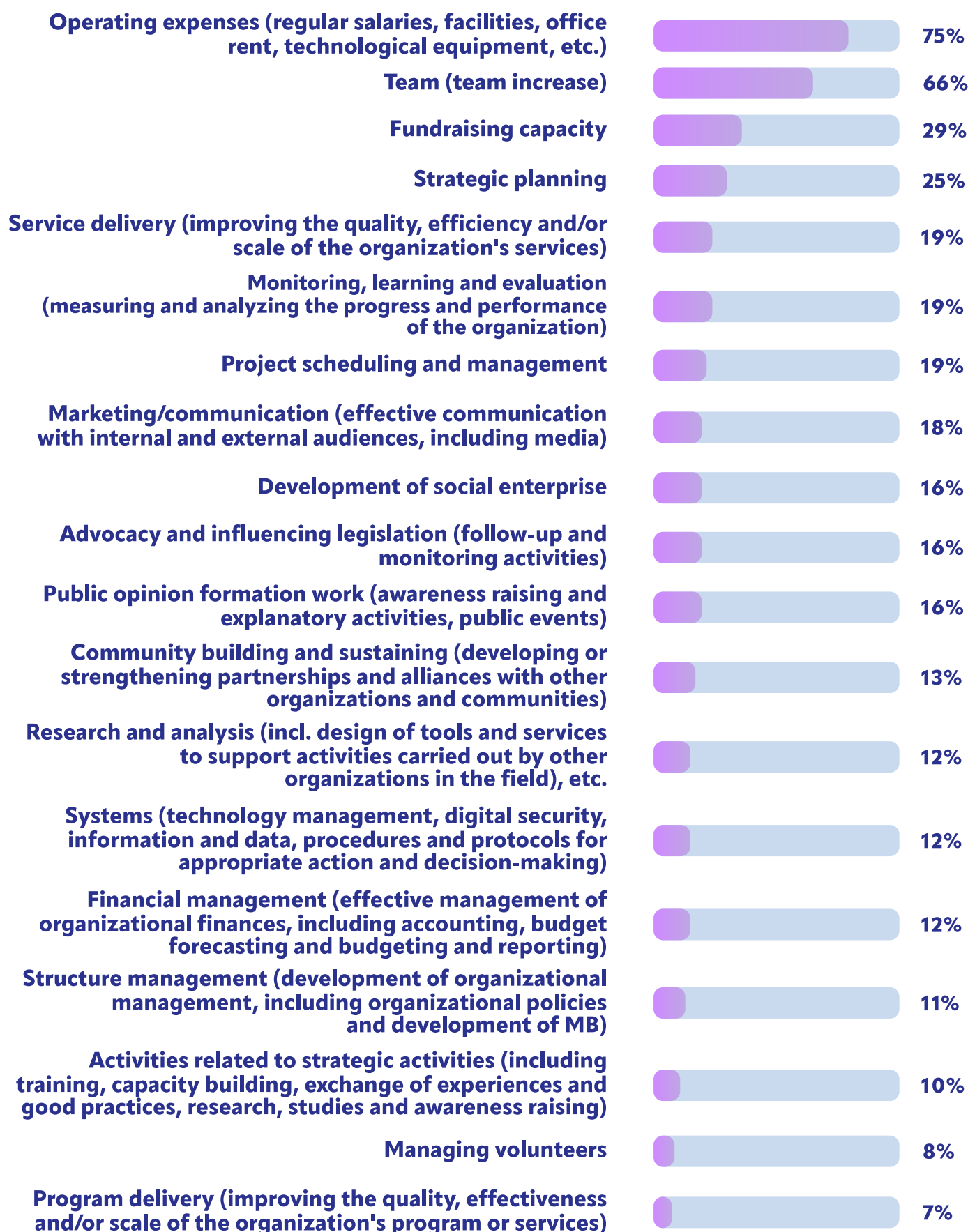
This need is evidenced by the answers to the question “What are the main difficulties in implementing project activities?” (Figure 27), where the respondents first mention the small budget (44%), and **second comes the problem with the small teams** (37%). These are followed by the lack of flexibility on line items (36%), cumbersome administration (34%), the need to invest their own funds (27%), short implementation deadlines (24%), etc. Therefore, logically – to be able to continue growing – organizations **insist on the need to be able to cover operational costs, but also to expand their teams**. When asked what they lack funds for (Figure 28), 75% of respondents cite operational costs and 66% state team (increasing the team).

FIGURE 27



**FIGURE 28**

## You lack funds for:



One of the biggest obstacles to the implementation of the strategies and visions for social change of the NGO sector seems to be the lack of sustainability and the development of internal capacity. It is therefore natural for organizations to focus on survival and team retention/expansion. To the question “What difficulties has your organization faced in relation to your team?” (Figure 29), respondents again state first and foremost the lack of funding for regular salaries (78%), the team working on multiple parallel projects (52%), the lack of fundraising capacity (46%), and the mental strain, so-called burnout (46%) as a consequence of the way their work is structured in the financial situation described.

FIGURE 29



In terms of improving internal capacity, organizations highlight as their main needs (Figure 30) training in fundraising (finding donors, writing and managing projects, etc.) (47%), strategic planning (41%), new team members/new jobs (37%), improving media communication (training in PR and media campaigns, media contacts) (33%), and self-care (28%).

FIGURE 30





# IN SUMMARY

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A conclusion to be drawn when comparing this period with the previous study period is that, over these four years or so, the organizations' budgets have increased, resulting in a reduction of voluntary work and an increase in permanent employment and civil contracts. However, at this stage the number of team members did not increase, hence efforts are being made to stabilize the current state of organizations. At the same time, there is a clear desire to increase the number of team members. The women's organizations interviewed clearly highlight the need to cover operational costs precisely so as to meet salary costs, which requires development of administrative and organizational support programs for donors. Other expectations that can be derived from the difficulties mentioned in applying for funding reflect the need of simplified administrative procedures, of the autonomous setting of priority areas and activities in line with the experience and needs of the specific socio-political context, and the need of flexibility in disbursing grants.

# 02

## QUALITATIVE STUDY

ISSUES FACING  
ORGANIZATIONS WORKING  
IN THE FIELD OF DOMESTIC  
AND GENDER-BASED  
VIOLENCE

Based on 20 in-depth interviews held with representatives of organizations working in the field of domestic violence, the findings of this quantitative study are put in the specific context of gender-based violence, which is also a priority focus for BFW within the framework of the FORCE program, co-funded by the European Union. The starting point is the analysis of the financial relations established between organizations and public institutions, as well as the alternative approaches to fundraising. The research is also focused on examining the political stakes for the organizations after the rejection of the Istanbul Convention and shedding light on their strategies for achieving social change.

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## 2.1.

**FORMS OF FUNDING  
AND ENSUING ISSUES.  
INTERNAL CAPACITY**

## 2.1.1.

**FINANCIAL RELATIONS  
ESTABLISHED BETWEEN  
ORGANIZATIONS  
WORKING IN THE FIELD  
OF DOMESTIC AND  
GENDER-BASED  
VIOLENCE AND PUBLIC  
INSTITUTIONS**

Until 2023, organizations were able to receive financial support from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ). This financial relationship was established under Article 6 (7) of PADVA. After the adoption of the National Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, each year the State Budget of the Republic of Bulgaria Act, in relation to the budget for the respective year of the MoJ, allocated funds for projects of social service providers licensed under the Social Services Act and of legal entities registered under the Commercial Register and Non-Profit Legal Entities Register Act working in the field of protection of victims of domestic violence. With the Act amending and supplementing the Protection against Domestic Violence Act (Amending and Supplementing Act to PADVA; promulgated in SG No. 66 of 2023), for the first time a specialized, permanent collective and advisory body for the implementation of the state policy on prevention and protection from domestic violence was established under the Council of Ministers (CoM) – **the National Council for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence (National Council)**. It consists of 17 members, representatives of ministries, government agencies and NGOs, for which a quota of four representatives is provided and which cannot apply for funding under the PADVA\*.

The National Council has drawn up a Regulation for the implementation of PADVA\*\*. A National Program for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence for the period 2024–2026 has also been developed. It envisages BGN 6.2 million for solving problems related to domestic violence, and **BGN 450,000 were publicly pledged for 2024 for this purpose\*\*\*. However, the amount of funding is equal to the amount allocated in 2021, when BGN 25,000 per project was allocated for a four-month implementation period. As a result, there was no improvement in the period under review, and there were no calls for contracts in 2024.**

Organizations working in the field of domestic and gender-based violence can also receive financial support through a delegated state activity, if it is requested by the municipality concerned. In 2021, the uniform cost standard for a “crisis center” social service was BGN 13,304 and **in 2024 there was an increase and now it is BGN 24,690**. In addition to activities under PADVA, organizations also have a pledge under the delegated state activity for the provision of specialized residential care for domestic violence victims under the Social Services Act, but its alignment with PADVA is yet to be implemented.

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\* This requirement is highly disapproved by respondents as it limits direct participation of experts in the National Council. Available at: [https://iisda.government.bg/ras/executive\\_power/council/3713](https://iisda.government.bg/ras/executive_power/council/3713) [Visited on 07.12.2024]

\*\* REGULATION for the implementation of the Protection against Domestic Violence Act. Available at: <https://legislation.apis.bg/doc/417071/0> [Visited on 07.12.2024]

\*\*\* More than BGN 6.2 million will be used to fund the fight against domestic violence until the end of 2026. Available at: <https://www.gov.bg/special/bg/prestsentar/novini/s-nad-6-2-mln-lv-shte-se-finansira-borbata-sreshtu-domashnoto-nasilie-do-kraya-na-2026-g> [Visited on 07.12.2024]

What is the impact of the financial situation described above on the organizations and what is their attitude towards public institutions?

The interviewees are critical of the policies pursued by the state. For them, the financial commitment of the state should ensure budgetary stability, which would enable them to develop a higher standard for their activities in a sustainable manner, and be accessible to all citizens on the territory of Bulgaria. Instead, the MoJ is redistributing scarce resources available for only a few months. The short time set for the implementation of the activity contradicts the logic by which the services themselves are implemented. Legal counseling is not a one-off act and cases are sometimes litigated for years. The process of going through psychological therapy itself requires long-term work with the victims and perpetrators of domestic violence. Interrupting this process with the completion of the project activity would be detrimental to the beneficiaries. Some interviewees even noted that they have opted out of covering the costs of services through financial support from the MoJ and are allocating funds mainly to prevention. Therefore, one of the causes of the organizations in the National Council of the CoM is to **increase the timeframe for the implementation of project activities to three years, which should go hand in hand with an increase in the financial commitment of the state.**

"They started to give 10 organizations BGN 20,000. There could not be any planned services at all! Because then you open the service for six months and when the woman

comes in October, you tell her, "The end of the project is this December, we're not going to support you." And thus, it became impossible to provide any services at all, just some little fragmented prevention projects that we even stopped applying for."

(R1, capital)

"A social service must meet the criteria set by foundations, which require a dedicated team, consistent activities, which means a financially supported system. The small projects from the MoJ for four months or from the Active Citizens Fund, which have a slightly longer implementation period, cause us problems. If they were three years, this would be a huge contribution coming from the state. If we had that kind of revenue, we would not be looking for donors. This requires a different type of work. There is no way, when the project is completed, to dissolve the team you have invested in training within a year and then you have to start over. It's crazy, I can't stand it! If you want quality, you need to approve funding."

(R17, regional center)

"We are currently working on the Regulation to the Act, to stipulate the methods of funding, and the call for contracts. The funding will now be for three years, which gives sustainability. Because we have not stopped providing services in Sofia and other cities. Many other colleagues have decided, for example, to stop their perpetrator program. This is dangerous for the victims and is extremely unworkable. And that's why these programs need to be constantly running."

(R11, regional center)

Organizations operating crisis centers, as already mentioned, are entitled to benefit from delegated state activity that can be requested from the municipality. Those of them that manage to combine funding from projects, donations and delegated state activity are in the most favorable situation. In the previous study, \* interviewees insisted that the uniform cost standard for delegated government activity was insufficient. A crisis center operates 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 number of 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 have few beds available and, as a result, the amount provided to the center cannot cover the necessary annual maintenance. An inability in planning the number of placed people has also been identified, which can be used respectively to project a budget that meets the needs. Thus, the daily food allowance and the salaries remain at a minimum, resulting in staff turnover. On the other hand, inflation and the political crisis also have an impact. The aforementioned increase in the uniform cost standard has been accompanied by an increase in the minimum wage and running costs, for example the payment of industrial electricity.

"The budget for the state-delegated service should be split between the 24-hour social workers and those who are supported. It also depends on how the centers are heated – the situation with water and electricity is terrible. We also need funds for medication. And if the organizations don't have additional donations, there will be no fruit and vegetables for the children. We are well known and we get a lot of donations, so we always have food and clothes. Yet this financial standard is not sufficient. Many of our colleagues are leaving. We have a staffing problem, the pay is not good, there is a lot of turnover. And you have to work two or three years until you improve."

(R1, capital)

"In relation to the political instability of the country, I have to say that state-delegated services are dependent on the state budget, and when the budget adoption is delayed, we are operating on a prior-year basis, and at the same time we are in a new price environment. And the resources that one has lived on last January, one must live on in the new January. And from 1 January, usually a change in the minimum wage comes into effect, which is linked to our pay. There is an ordinance to this effect and the Association is obligated to update employee salaries, but at the same time there is a delayed adoption of the state budget. [...] And our other difficulty stems from the fact that there is a European agreement which stipulates that, although we are a social service, we have to pay

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\* Vajsova, L. (2022) *Study of the Needs of Organizations Working on the Rights of Women, Girls, and Vulnerable Groups in Bulgaria*. Bulgarian Fund for Women. Available at: <https://bgfundforwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Study-of-the-needs-BG.pdf> [Visited on 07.12.2024]

electricity at industrial rates. This is absurd – for a service that is supportive and does not generate revenue, to pay high energy rates as if it generated a profit or products.”

(R19, regional center)

We already mentioned that the delegated state activity puts the organizations in a relationship with the municipality, but in this sense it is also dependent **on the will of the municipal administration**. Thus, a municipality may request a budget for a specific type of social service and award a competition-based contract, but it may also decide not to allocate funds to make this happen; funds for maintenance and overhaul are rarely provided. Therefore, these costs are covered entirely by the organizations. Thus, one of the interviewees states that they even had to cease activities in the territory of the respective municipality after the funding was withdrawn and the intended use of the building was redefined, which forced them to move to another municipality.

“The mayor decided that this money could not be delegated to us forever. We are a kind of burden to him. And he didn't allow us to manage our finances anymore because, again, I say, it's a lot of money and our activity seemed redundant to the new local government. They immediately re-assigned the buildings, so that they were not to be used as a crisis and counseling center for victims of domestic violence, but as a complex for social services. Something like a hodgepodge, all services in one place. The two buildings they had given us before were

good for nothing. We put an awful lot of money in there, starting from the roof – you could see the sky back then. It was all run-down. [...] We have not received any delegated state activity since 2018. For 18 years we have developed what I have told you about and suddenly, just because a lot of money was involved, we were cut off. And that's the money for the team. That's the power, to be able to keep the team, to be paid normally. We never aimed for any high salaries, but wanted to be paid so that the experts could stay and support themselves and help. And now everybody on the team is working elsewhere so that we can keep the organization going.”

(R11, regional center)

To be able to carry out their activities in the conditions of scarce and uncertain state financial support, even nonexistent in 2024, organizations are employing different coping strategies. Often they rely on additional fundraising by applying to other donors (Bulgarian foundation/NGO, international NGO funding and European funding) or through donations; some also collect membership fees. The following section therefore focuses on the fundraising practices of organizations as alternatives to state funding.

# 02

## QUALITATIVE STUDY

### 2.1.2.

ALTERNATIVES TO  
STATE FUNDING.  
APPROACHES AND  
CHALLENGES



**Interviewees expressed their critical attitude toward project-based work, which in itself does not foster sustainability,**

describing it as a constant and exhausting struggle. Once the project ends, organizations enter a vicious cycle of applying to multiple donors with no certainty of securing a new one, and thus there is no certainty they will be able to continue providing services and retain their team of experts. In the absence of access to other financial sources, they start operating on a voluntary basis, driven by dedication to the cause. But organizations often go as far as having to close programs, thus reducing access to services, as well as the number of civil-contract professionals.

"We are applying through the MoJ, where funding is currently severely inadequate because it is only for a few months. At the moment it is only for four, five or six months, as has been the case for years, and now it is even decreasing. And, of course, all the time we are applying for European programs and projects, through the European Commission. This way we achieve a certain sustainability, and basically it could be said that sustainability is achieved to the extent that the Commission is always providing funding for legal activities. So being in a consortium, different forms, different degrees of help and support are provided – legal, psychological and social. And of course, we apply to all kinds of other external sources, including outside the EU, mostly American organizations and foundations. We have also approached corporate funding opportunities – we have connections with businesses interested in social causes. They provide us with various grants, schemes, whatever they have decided, assessed, found. The principle is of

the open fan where you apply for everything; we have no restrictions, we have no major donors and we don't expect anyone to fund us until the end of September. It is a day-to-day fight."

(R18, regional center)

"We were left without funding for both centers because the state does not give money directly to marginalized communities – it does not give money to Roma people, it does not give money to refugees. If through some social service or program someone sneaks in to use this service, okay, then they will close their eyes. That's why we don't have any funding at the moment, and some of our team members specifically in these activities continue working as volunteers. And we continue to look for funding, we continue to beg, we continue to look for project funding. We're streamlining some key activities so that we can retain key staff. But it's very difficult, it's around the clock work, now I've got a project that I've delayed and we've got to write it up. The municipality has agreed to give us some BGN 24,000 for the Roma district, but I am fine with that funding for a few months. And then again, and again. Therefore, it's hard, it requires a big fight all the time." (R 14, regional center)

"It was good that there was sustainable funding through the MoJ and it happened every year. The bad thing is that it is for a very short period of time – four, five, in very rare cases six months – and the rest of the time we actually continue working on a voluntary basis, because if on 30 November the project ends and on 1 December a person comes, we cannot tell them that the project is finished. So the

colleagues – the psychologist and the social worker who are working on a voluntary basis – meet these people and work with them. But of course it's not that extensive, unlike when we have a project. In addition, when we start a project, we announce it to all the district courts in the area, so that they know they can periodically send perpetrators convicted of domestic violence who have to go through programs with us. But the courts continue to send them to us after the project is over and the colleagues put them on their schedules, but also it's not the same like when there's a project."

(R21, regional center)

Another strategy shared by interviewees is the introduction of paid services, which however limits access. In relation to lawsuits, they rely on them being finalized, so that the costs will be reimbursed, but this also does not bring security.

"It is very difficult with the funding, with the sustainability. I am in charge of these things. It is difficult. Over the years, I've tried to get people to write and report projects, do the administration. We haven't been successful in that respect, but it may be my failure, I don't know. It's hard work, but we're still working. We are only funded through projects. The MoJ was a good option for us over the years. Now we don't have a project funded by them. I'm tired myself, I'm twenty years into these activities. That's why I withdrew, I don't know if someone will replace me, I don't see that person yet, so I don't know how we're going to continue. People know us, they even come to us now for paid consultations. We continue to work on the subject, but we don't offer free services to that extent.

When we have a project, of course we offer, and we allocate funds for lawsuits and for psychological counseling. We have long-term clients, they continue to be with us, they continue to pay some minimal funds themselves."

(R10, regional center)

"It includes non-residential services that cover psychosocial and legal counseling, preparing an application for court filing, etc. Some time ago, we set up a financial fund to support women victims of violence, which would involve legal representation so that the service would be free of charge for women. The fund was also meant to cover counseling. Of course, we have our own criteria for when, to what extent, under what conditions, what proportion of the amount to give from it. The idea is to recover these funds. When a perpetrator goes through a court procedure, when there is a verdict, the funds will be recovered, the fund will be supported with these funds, so that it can be used by others. Unfortunately, a lot of these funds sink – the woman stops, drops the case, withdraws the application, and these amounts remain unrecoverable."

(R19, regional center)

ewly emerging organizations most often rely on short-term and low-budget projects, funded by a variety of donors, where payment is mostly under civil contracts according to the planned ongoing activities. Access to resources is also limited by the requirement to have a financial backing. Under these conditions, new organizations find it difficult to stabilize jobs and have people on permanent contracts, and to maintain a team of professionals to deliver services.

**Thus, for team members, the activity turns into a sideline to their main employment, which is outside the organization. Respondents note that in such conditions they cannot fully engage either in their workplace or with the organization.**

"O. and I have employees, a business running in parallel, and whether or not we work affects not only us specifically, but other people who are on salary. If 50% of my time goes into the civic organization and in volunteering, that means I'm depriving my business of my labor [...] Things get tricky to balance. So we need to get financial support, that's more than clear, to ensure sustainability and to be able to plan for more than a year. Because the money that we took for E. was actually for 12 months, but until we choose a person, until this, until that – we end up with 10 months in which we cover her salary. And at the end of November, if we don't get other funding, we have to let her go. How can I plan anything for next year if I don't know if there's somebody to do it?"

(R6, capital)

"Due to a lack of sufficient funds, people usually do not work for us on an employment contract, but on a civil contract. This hampers our activity. The psychologist, the lawyer, for example, are on civil contracts. [...] Many of the team members work, but we don't have the money to pay their remuneration. Charity work is a temporary thing, you can't make people work like that."

(R4, regional center)

"I don't know how sustainable we are. For us, the advantage has always been that we

do not get our salaries through the Foundation. Generally the team has one-two-three people max who are on an employment contract, depending on what programs and projects are underway at the moment. All the other experts work on civil contracts. And because with us the work is rather legal, not so much psychological and social, all the colleagues who are lawyers have their offices and practices elsewhere."

(R18, regional center)

**Fundraising also requires internal capacity for project writing and donor communication, which not every organization has.** If it is not possible to appoint a staff member dedicated entirely to this type of activity, it is combined with other activities, which results in **work overload** or often even in refusal to participate in such calls. This is also a prerequisite for the development of **partner networks**, which in turn also leads to a reduction of financial resources.

"We have 21 people in the organization, 12 of them are employed under an employment contract, not all of them full-time. The rest – some are active volunteers, others are less involved. But it turned out that the work in the Community Support Center and the Crisis Center, where the colleagues are employed, is very busy, there is a lot of paperwork and colleagues do not have time to deal with additional things. In practice, it turns out that R. and I are the two persons who, if we have to write projects, write the projects. If something extra needs to be done, there's no one to do it – it's the two of us again. And that is very stressful! At the same time, we also have to coordinate the activities in the crisis center!"

(R12, regional center)

"In addition to state delegated activities, we apply to various donors, usually in the country, because we lack the resources to apply to external donors. We don't have a person, a team to develop projects. That's why we apply for Bulgarian projects. The last one we did was a three-year project funded by the Active Citizens Fund."

(R5, capital)

"Yes, we apply to international funds. We prefer to be partners there because we don't have the capacity. We cannot spend a month writing a project in English, there are matrices, the procedure is much more complicated. We'd rather get involved as partners. But for example with the last two big projects, I am starting to lose interest, because for example the project is EUR 780,000 – the lead organization wins it, but it has 13 other partners, we are one of them, and for two years we get EUR 20,000. It's paperwork, it's commitments, you have a lot of responsibility. But actually we get a small part of it and I still can't secure funding [...] It's difficult!"

(R14, regional center)

The **required co-funding** is also a problem when applying for EU funding. Looking for options to secure it, the civil society sector in one of the regional centres united, demanding that the municipality forms a fund to be used for such purposes. However, it appears that the fund is not functioning as intended at this stage, despite the pressure from organizations:

"We have gone through a period where we had no funding. That was in the first six years, when we would make ends meet for a month here, six months there, then again... We have had periods without

funding, but we have not stopped working. We were once involved with other NGOs in setting up a public council on social issues for child protection, which helped to set up a financial fund in the municipality to support NGOs in applying for projects through co-funding. I'm talking about the share that is required as own contribution from the organization. But we had no business and no income and no way to have funds except from donations, for example. The fund still exists. Even yesterday we had a meeting about this fund, which has now been reduced from BGN 100,000 to BGN 30,000. Its scope has also been expanded so that it can be used by the mayors of smaller settlements, by the community centers as well, and so it is barely functioning in the way intended. We had a meeting in the municipality to revive the fund and change the criteria."

(R19, regional center)

Winning projects in turn presents organizations with another challenge – a very heavy administrative and coordination workload. This is imposed as an additional commitment, especially for unstable and under-developed organizations, and leads to overload and inability to fully implement the other activities of the projects. **There is a strong critical attitude among the interviewees against the burdensome administrative work imposed on them as a requirement especially by the public institutions in Bulgaria. To date, however, this dissatisfaction has not led to a joint initiative to raise the issues for discussion at institutional level.**

"We are administratively handicapped. We hope to ease the administrative work.

Entire teams are involved in filling in all the information. This leaves no time to pay attention to the victims and other things. The documentation takes two-thirds of our time. This is insane, it needs to be simplified."

(R20, capital)

"Everything national is problematic, so we avoid as much as we can everything that is national. Usually, especially if the funding is through the MLSP and the operational programs, then project administration is a nightmare. You've got to have someone working 24 hours a day to fill in their stupid, insane systems that don't care how many people you've reached and how you've changed their lives, and how you've saved their lives. All they care about is the commas and how many indicators you've covered. Only people who have no experience and have not faced real problems and situations with real victims do such stupid things. So, frankly, we focus our attention on external donors. Less nerves and less trouble. Even the European Commission is perfect in this respect. People care that you have achieved a good result. They look at what work you have done and how well you have done it. That's why we focus on international funding when it's available."

(R13, regional center)

"Our organization is not in the worst position because we have a state-delegated activity to work with victims of domestic violence. The funding we have received this year is not small, maybe for the first year we can feel at ease. But the state-delegated activity requires an awful lot of administrative work. We have paid the price with thousands of reports, pointless report writing every three months, which again

distracts us from the work we should be doing. We spend an insane amount of effort and time filling in this insane paperwork."

(R9, regional center)

The analysis of the interviews conducted with representatives of organizations working in the field of domestic and gender-based violence reveals the structural budgetary uncertainty, set by the funding logic, which prevents them from providing social services on a sustainable basis and free of charge for all citizens within the territory of Bulgaria. Participants in the study report the practice of maintaining their desired level of quality entirely at the expense of overburdened workers. They often cannot afford the number of staff needed to receive decent pay. Team members therefore carry out several activities at the same time, with a particular emphasis on participation in tendering procedures, project administration and coordination. They have recourse to third-party services through civil contracts if the current state of their budget allows it; sometimes, but rarely, they introduce paid services or directly close programs. In most cases, they say that they volunteer their labor because the specific nature of their work does not imply an interruption of work with victims and perpetrators, which would be detrimental. To cope with the burnout situation, interviewees state that they practice supervision of the organizations and also express willingness to devote time resources to strategic planning. Some of them insist on forming a culture that implies spending more time on self-care. However, it should be pointed out that for the interviewees,

public institutions, and the state in particular, are an important factor that could guarantee the quality, sustainability and equal access to social services through their financial commitments. Although at the time the field study was conducted, the funds announced by the Council of Ministers have not been set in motion, it remains to be seen how the amendments to PADVA will affect the sector.

# 02

## QUALITATIVE STUDY

### 2.2.

POLITICAL BATTLES ON THE  
DOMESTIC VIOLENCE GROUND  
AFTER THE REJECTION OF THE  
ISTANBUL CONVENTION. STRATEGIES  
TO ACHIEVE SOCIAL CHANGE



In 2018, as we mentioned in the first part of the report, the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, or the so-called Istanbul Convention (IC) was rejected in Bulgaria as unconstitutional after an unprecedented conservative wave established a lasting presence among some of the political representatives\* of the anti-gender discourse\*\*. **For interviewees, the attacks were completely unexpected and losing the battle was experienced as a traumatic event. Many have been subjected to harassment through letters and online threats, and have been the target of hate speech. Fear of seeking support from organizations has been identified among victims of gender-based violence, and working with institutions has deteriorated.**

**Some have even had to change their name, removing the word "gender".**

Its presence in the name of organizations proved to be a problem, as opponents of the ratification objected to the concept of "gender" in the sense of "social sex" as translated in the IC, where gender is understood as a social construct and not a biological endowment (sex)\*\*\*. The debate unfolded around it, as the gender concept was perceived as an attempt to legalize a "third sex" and therefore to empower the LGBTI+ community. With this, an equivalence was drawn between "gender" and "third sex", which generally came to be used interchangeably with "gay".

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\* In the field of politics, the debate in Bulgaria against the IC in early 2018 was initiated by:

- The far-right political party United Patriots ("UP") – a former nationalist coalition in Bulgaria. In April 2017, UP signed a coalition agreement for the governance of Bulgaria with GERB. Therefore, at the time of the debate, UP was part of the ruling coalition. Evangelical religious organizations found a lobby through them. Before the Convention debate, these organizations had no public position and were not visible.
- Another key player is the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP), represented by its former chairwoman Kornelia Ninova.
- Publicity was also given to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. It should be noted here that until 2018 the Church had not intervened in political issues. Its involvement was extraordinary and atypical.
- The debate over the IC has also given a platform to many conservative journalists and intellectuals.

\*\* For more information on the battle against the IC, see Smilova, R. (2020) *The Ideological Turn in Bulgarian Constitutional Discourse. The Rise Against 'Genders'*. In: András Sajó, A. and Uitz, R. (eds), *Critical Essays on Human Rights Criticism*. Eleven Publishing International, pp. 177–197; Darakchi, S. (2019) *The Western Feminists Want to Make Us Gay: Nationalism, Heteronormativity, and Violence Against Women in Bulgaria in Times of "Antigender Campaigns"*. *Sexuality & Culture* 23(2), pp. 1208–1229; Gueorguieva, V. (2020) *The Legacy of Authoritarian Ideologies in Recent Conservative Mobilizations against Women's Rights in Bulgaria*. In: Cinzia Leone (eds.) *Gender Remembrance: Donne, totalitarismi e la nascita dell'idea di Europa / Women, totalitarianism and the birth of the idea of Europe*. Wroclaw: Società Dante Alighieri, pp. 273–291.

\*\*\* For more information on the debates around the concept of gender, see Slavova, E. (2019) *Translating gender, transgressing reason, and the misappropriation of Judith Butler in Bulgarian public discourse*. In: *Traditions and Transitions* 1, pp. 223–242. Sofia University Press.



In everyday usage, the term took on a pejorative homophobic meaning\*.

"In 2018, after the whole situation provoked by the debates over the IC, we decided that we will not change the name of the organization, because if someone has to make a change, it is not us, but people. Ultimately, after three or four years of unsuccessful attempts to work adequately, we got together with colleagues and decided that we cannot continue to waste time like this. During those years we could no longer go into schools and do any preventive work, nor could we work with young people, because everywhere we went we were asked about this "gender" thing. And in 2021 we changed the name of the organization. So now our name clearly says what we do, and we are no longer "genders". Otherwise, during the 2018 campaign itself, we received constant phone calls, threats, had our office doors broken down several times, our building broken in, signs smashed, mailboxes broken, ugly nasty emails written, messages on our Facebook page, ugly comments on our website. A disgusting situation happened to us! It's in the past, forgotten, but it wasn't pleasant. Then we had young single mothers

who were embarrassed to come to us. The situation was really bad."

(R18, regional center)

"Parties such as "Vazrazhdane" (Revival), VMRO and organizations that were against the IC emerged. They started open attacks against us. And then there was this whole period after 2018, in which nothing was done against domestic violence and which had a serious impact on the complication of cases, because our organization works directly with victims of violence. We have crisis centers, community support centers, everything that we do – counseling women – everything was getting worse because there were no strategies, no policies, no desire for change in the institutions."

(R1, capital)

**Prevention programs through educational interventions have also been disrupted as access to schools is restricted, often under pressure from parents.**

Organizations with long-standing partnerships with specific educational institutions where trust has been established are the exception. How does this situation

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\* Opponents warned that through the Convention the international political community aims to secretly push through the legalization of gay marriage in Bulgaria, hiding this intention through the otherwise "acceptable" issue of violence against women and children. Hence, it was claimed that the Istanbul Convention was unconstitutional, since the Constitution states that "marriage is a voluntary union between a man and a woman". It was with these arguments that the document was sent to the Constitutional Court for consideration, and its rejection led to the stabilization of binary understandings of gender. It is worth recalling the Court's opinion: "The Constitution and all Bulgarian legislation is built on the understanding of the binary existence of the human species. Indeed, the Constitution unambiguously embraces the social dimension of gender in interaction with the biologically determined one – Article 47(2) of the Fundamental Law. In the said constitutional provision, the biological sex 'woman' is associated with the social role – 'mother', 'childbirth', 'midwifery'. In short, the term 'sex' is used by the constitutional legislator as a unity of the biologically determined and the socially constructed. The social dimension in the Constitution does not create a social gender independent of the biological one as envisaged in the Convention." The quotation is from Constitutional Court Decision No. 13 of 27 July 2018. Available at: <http://www.constcourt.bg/bg/Acts/GetHtml-Content/f278a156-9d25-412d-a064-6ffd6f997310> [Visited on 01.17.2025]

come about? The IC provides for the prevention of gender-based violence through educational programs that target young people in schools. The aim is to counteract socially imposed stereotypes of gender perception that reproduce violence and gender inequalities. Opponents see educational interventions as a threat, because "the children of Bulgaria" will be "exposed" to so-called gender ideology, making them "gay" and "teaching them to change their sex". Thus, the figure of the child as an object of moral panic stabilized\*.

"Just at the time when people were talking about gender and how people like us were going to schools and kindergartens and changing the gender of their children, we were implementing a long-term European project to introduce gender education in kindergartens. And then we had to do various tricks, so that we wouldn't be kicked out of the institutions, I would even say so that we wouldn't be lynched in the city center as those who corrupt children. That was terrible. The only thing that saved the organization in this project was the fact that it had already existed for many years and everyone already knew us and was aware that what we were doing with children was violence prevention, not sex and gender change."

(R9, regional center)

"And you know, one of our training programs was attacked. Currently, our preventive work with schools has been minimized, if not outright stopped since the rejection of the IC.

That's disturbing because the core prevention work that we used to do, we're now re-modifying it – we're working with young people outside of schools, outreach in the Roma community, with an international youth center where we do youth training groups where young people apply to get into the program. But that mass access to schools and to kindergartens that we had a while ago is gone. Including a partnership project with the municipality. And we had creative workshops that we did in kindergartens. We partnered with a school on a completely different topic, not related to violence, but a topic on which our psychologists have the expertise to deliver training. There were parents who made petitions and complained to the Regional Education Office that they didn't want our foundation to work with their children due to fears that we would change their gender, make them gay, lesbian, send them to Norway. Years after all this happened there are still people who sincerely believe this, which horrifies me."

(R3, regional center)

However, the experience gained from the debates on the IC is leading to the rethinking of strategies. Reflecting on the reasons that led organizations to lose the battle, they are reconsidering the visions of their activities and how they could be more effective. The following aspects can be highlighted, on the basis of which we will go into deeper analysis:

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\* In the long term, the debate also has an impact on the ground of the LGBTI+ cause, as legislative amendments were promulgated in 2024 banning the propaganda and promotion of "non-traditional sexual orientation" and "determination of gender identity other than biological" in schools.

- **willingness to develop a communication strategy;**
- **community building;**
- **a sustainably functioning alliance of organizations;**
- **advocacy for legislative changes.**

A well-designed **communication strategy** has become necessary for organizations due to the established belief that they are facing a very well-organized propaganda machine that produces fake news, especially on social media, and influences public attitudes. It is therefore partly because of this understanding that public communication functions as propaganda that they insist on getting a stronger grip on social media and having a more sustainable presence on them. It was also clear from the survey responses to this study that the use of social media is one of the preferred means by organizations of achieving social change. Based on the interviews, it can be added that this is also due to the understanding that public communication is gaining power effectiveness due to sustained presence and well-harnessed social media. Interviewees state that the promotion of their work, as well as impact on public opinion, can also be achieved through marketing and PR techniques. Some also insist on long-term work with media and journalists. On the other hand, the lack of efforts to develop a communication strategy is a consequence of the **insufficient capacity**. Organizations are barely able to sustain the provision of social services, which they highlight as a priority, as well as to manage them financially and administratively, so engaging in political battles in the public domain seems to be their last concern.

Consequently, the financial conditions under which they operate have not allowed for the allocation of resources to develop communication strategies, and to engage the teams in this type of extra activity. Interviewees insist that at least one member of the team should be involved in communications.

“Prevention, fighting negative attitudes, conspiracy theories, propaganda – I admit that we are not strong in these activities. We don't have PR, as part of various projects, we don't have that much money for it. We use one, second, third PR, but we don't have a consistent approach from a person who is focused on this activity. And generally one, two, three people, in the small hours of the day, when we have time, post what we can, but it's not enough. [...] For me personally it was a period for sobering up. Because I just laughed at everyone who told me that there was a hybrid war, that Russia was fighting against Europe, and accepted these claims as conspiratorial. They were saying how important social media is and how we should be there. For me, that was the kind of event that shook me up and helped me realize that this is really a war and we're not prepared for it, and we're a handful of people.”

(R14, regional center)

“We had a very unpleasant situation that we never want to remember about the rejection of the IC. At that time the non-governmental sector, women's organizations like us were not very adequate in their communication to counter all the fake news and the smear that was thrown at them on the topic of gender equality. This is because none of us have the resources to hire professionals in communication, in

strategies, to analyze the situation and give adequate responses. And we have lost a lot because we did nothing, kept quiet and did not react in an appropriate way."

(R9, regional center)

"On the one hand, I will start with the positive side. The IC scandal has provided an impetus to organization restructuring, so that we have a dedicated person whose main task is communications, we position ourselves online and offline, because we realized that we were not talking enough or we were talking too little and people did not know what we were doing. Now we get a lot of advantages from that as an organization, although it's hard because I realized what madness it is to handle that type of activity on your own, but it's unfolding. And I hope that even in the recommendations of this report the importance of having resources that the organization can put into digital marketing, into digital security training, into communications should be highlighted. Resources should be invested in this type of organizational development because it costs money. No matter how many times I've talked to colleagues in other organizations, they say, "We don't have the resources that you have." It's not that we have it, it's not that I get a separate salary because I do the communications, it's about restructuring our activities. It's just that we've organized ourselves in such a way that I'm not doing things directly with clients, but I'm mainly doing this task because it's key to addressing the crisis that hit our whole sector after Bulgaria's refusal to ratify the IC. [...] But my main job is different – my job is to go on TV and speak up, to attend work meetings, to think about our communications strategy, to educate myself in this area, so that people

know about us. This has been key for our organization since 2018."

(R3, regional center)

Another approach that has been observed in terms of opportunities to mobilize public support for the cause is insistence on the need for **community building. The aim is to build from the bottom-up a group of survivors of gender-based violence who will receive group care and at the same time will engage in the promotion of the problem and its specific aspects.**

"We exist since 2019. Whatever it was, it is past. We have inherited this situation. Establishing ourselves as an organization, there were these dynamics associated with the strong media attack, with fake news, which in a way it's good that it happened because the organizations themselves have realized how much they have to work at the level of public attitudes.

Because we have beneficiaries and they are very important to us, but if you don't work at the level of public attitudes, you cannot do prevention. Because if society has a distorted perception of what violence is, if there is high tolerance, precisely caused by opponents in this field, from then on it is difficult for any woman to find support [...] And this is one possible course of action. We have women survivors of domestic violence who have already come out of these relationships. With us, they are in the process of creating their new lives. And it is on the topic of societal attitudes that we put a lot of effort into how to change them – attitudes towards the survivor who has been through such a relationship. Now we're on a nationwide tour to make those women speak up for themselves."

(R2, capital)

"These are the conclusions I have drawn, and I have realized one thing since then – it is more than four, five, six years – and it is that we have a great distortion. Now we're trying to gather like-minded people in different ways – through cases, through causes – and spend more time doing community events and meeting people. I often say this to colleagues, but they still don't believe me or understand it. We're very good at individual work – having the woman come to us, do therapy. Some of my colleagues are virtuosos in this respect. They have been trained in family therapy at different institutions, they work under supervision and they are really very good, but that's it. Our attempts to change personal lives go that far. Our attempts to change personal lives get to the point [...] I keep telling my colleagues that no matter how good you are with some people, working on an individual level is not enough. We have to do group programs, that's the second level. We had a very good experience I think with a group of women victims of domestic violence, which was very difficult to form, but it was a very successful project. I would like to reintroduce this format."

(R14, regional center)

The experience gained from the battles fought over the IC also **also reveals the need for a permanent alliance of civil society organizations to engage in advocacy, as organizations do not have the resources for this type of activity on their own.** In the field of domestic violence, the Alliance for Protection from Gender-Based Violence has been there for years and some of the organizations involved in the field are members. In 2018, the team of the *Girls from the City magazine*, together with them BFW,

Animus Association Foundation, P.U.L.S. Foundation organized the campaign "You are not alone – together against violence", containing five demands to the Bulgarian state in relation to the lack of will to fight domestic violence. Apart from the NGO sector, the campaign was also finding support among several independent women's and lifestyle media, such as *Maiko Mila*, *Mama Ninja*, the *Grazia* magazine, *Slaveykov Square*, etc. Over time, the campaign led to the establishment of the Facebook group "You are not alone – together against violence", which became a platform for community support and communication for victims of domestic violence. From the group, the You are not alone club was formed, which won the "Person of the Year" award of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee in 2018.

A little later, based on the experience gained from coordinating an alliance, running an advocacy campaign and managing an online community group, the conviction arose that an organization should be established to work more systematically along these lines. This is how "The Wake Up Foundation", with the support of BFW, came on the scene to initiate the emergence of the "Together Against Violence Coalition" (a coalition of 37 civil society organizations), which played a significant role during the process of advocating for amendments to PADVA. All organizations have been working hard on this activity with their available resources – organizing conferences and meetings across the country, establishing and maintaining contacts with political representatives from whom support was sought at the institutional level. The interviews mention the various attempts to establish

partnerships with all political parties, but most of all the support of the representatives of the “We Continue the Change – Democratic Bulgaria” coalition Nadezhda Yordanova (Minister of Justice in the Government of Bulgaria from December 2021 to August 2022), Kalina Konstantinova and Lena Borislavova stands out\*, who are in intensive communication with CSOs.

The organizations are preparing expert policymakers for the battle within the National Assembly. Collectively, position papers are drafted, but also the effort is concentrated on media content to mobilize public support. The informal collective “Feminist Mobilisations”, involved in organizing the marches on 8 March and 25 November, also tries to give publicity to the cause of domestic violence. Parallel working groups are being held in which the efforts of experts on amendments to PADVA continue.

“... shortly afterwards, the NGOs felt this negative result and at the same time they kept working. But it made them unite. That was the positive result – uniting together not only as women's organizations, but also with organizations working in the field of human rights, democratic organizations. Organizations that provide social services without being professionals in specific areas related to human rights or women's rights also joined the alliance. So generally speaking, there was this strong

negative effect of the rejection of the IC. On the other hand, when you hit rock bottom, it makes you mobilize and get to the first floor. This process, of course, went on many levels. It was not only happening in Bulgaria, but it created the conditions for mobilization inside at national level and at international level. Alliances were forged between organizations from different countries that had also rejected the IC, and also between others who had not rejected it but who were aware that the negative strong right-wing influences were having a bad impact on women's rights.”

(R5, capital)

“I didn't just follow it, I was part of it. The Wake-up Foundation is a natural continuation of something that started with “You're Not Alone” – the initiative that the P.U.L.S. Foundation started many years ago. [...] But then “You Are Not Alone” expanded as an initiative of the Girls from the City, Animus etc. [...] Subsequently “You're Not Alone” became an initiative of the Girls from the City, and a very big Facebook group was created. At some point, E. along with a few women decided to formalize this thing because there was a need for it and turned it into an organization. The WakeUp Foundation basically occupied a lobbying communications niche because there was this need. I have already said how we made this structural change in our organization since the IC, where I took over the communications activities. But as structural as the change is, I'm one person – I can't be

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\* For more information on the public sexist attacks against the political party We Continue the Change MP Lena Borislavova see Petkov, V. (2023) *Beyond populism: the case of the “Song for Lena”*. Seminar BG. Available at: <https://www.seminar-bg.eu/spisanie-seminar-bg/broy26/860-otvad-populizmat-kazusat-pesen-za-lena.html> [Visited on 18.01.2025]



everywhere and it is only me. And it's very important to have organizations like the Wake Up Foundation, people like Blagorodna Makeva, we as organizations to support each other, to deliver common messages and to have coordination in all that. So the initiative of The Wake Up Foundation for bringing together civil society organizations working on this issue was key. Some colleagues from other organizations said that they didn't see the point of yet another coalition and so on. The truth is that we need a working coalition to unite organizations at the national level on the issue of violence."

(R3, regional center)

"Because I would say it again: so far it has been more like mobilization. I write some things at night, I tell them one hundred times and to the coalition: "People, it doesn't matter what opinion we have if it doesn't reach the media." You can't lobby if you don't use the pressure of the public opinion. And that's our job. They all have experts – Animus, P.U.L.S. and Demetra, and they all have people who understand the administrative intricacies. My job, and the coalition's job, is to give, on the one hand, an expert opinion and, on the other hand, to make sure that all these opinions are framed as easily understandable messages to be picked up by the media."

(R6, capital)

**However, sustaining an alliance of organizations working on domestic and gender-based violence also requires resources.** The interlocutors stress the need for capacity building in this regard – to have an available coordinator to take on the day-to-day work of the network, as well as the other work.

"However, for the alliance to work, we need a secretariat. Our good will alone does not do it. We need resources and people to coordinate. Like for example the National Network for Children that has a secretariat and this makes the NNC progress and it is a factor in making policies for children. By "secretariat" I mean the organization itself should have a structure. The network itself should have a head, a coordinator, an administrative assistant, and a person who monitors the news, who rings up the members and organizes joint meetings. [...] What The Wake Up Foundation did last year was good. I can see that E. makes an effort from time to time and that's good. They release a general statement, sending drop by drop workable messages. Because even the Alliance releases letters from time to time, but when they issue a five-page press release, no media outlet will publish it. It's not a question of somebody sitting down, writing, translating, copying, but thinking about what the media would publish."

(R3, regional center)

"In an ideal world I would like that we have this coalition regulated, that it should have a life of its own, that we should pay the person who handles things, that we should have a place where we can discuss the problems of the whole sector and defend our interests, and especially our good name. Because we are losing public standing fast, we are irritating a lot of people, things are not very rosy for the future. I don't believe that they will start beating us in the streets, as we don't have an office and there is nothing to break in. But the big issue is that the golden years for this sector which I have not witnessed have passed – when the European institutions

relied on civil society organizations here to make this transition and were giving enough money – in the pre-accession period – and we were prophets in our own country. Now that time has passed. Now there are a lot of procedures, it is complicated to apply, access to funds is more difficult, while there have been easier times. But also, in general, the big problem is that many people think that we are conduits of Western influences, that we are extremely liberal. Trump, especially if he wins in the US, will prompt a strong revanchist right-wing wave, which will inevitably have repercussions here.”

(R6, capital)

The above quotes illustrate women's organizations active involvement in the advocacy campaign for changes to PADVA in response to the rejection of the IC. However, in the interviews we can trace how the complicated political situation after the rejection of the IC, followed by protests against the 2019–2030 National Child Strategy and the Social Services Act, provides a space of possible policy action in which representatives of women's organizations are tactically positioning themselves between societal mobilization and compliant political representatives. The process is compounded by several factors: the above-mentioned political crisis, which is marked by multiple parliamentary elections and which hinders the activities of the working groups and makes it pointless to establish contacts with specific individuals who are not certain to be in positions of power after the next parliamentary elections; the lack of expertise among the institutions and political representatives, which requires the

initiation of additional clarification actions each time; and last but not least – the ongoing attacks by representatives of conservative organizations and parties that have negative attitudes toward women's rights and NGOs in general. The suspicion that organizations working in the field of domestic and gender-based violence also defend the LGBTI+ cause is used as a basis for criticism against them and constantly accompanied the discussions on the amendments to PADVA. However, the effort was successful and the law was passed in 2023.

Shortly afterwards, in mid-summer, the so-called “Debora” scandal broke out, in which the case of an 18-year-old girl from the city of Stara Zagora, subjected to unprecedented violence by disfigurement with a box knife and hair cutting, gained widespread publicity. 400 stitches followed. The case triggered a massive public mobilization in defense of Debora across the country. Not only the girl's relatives and representatives of the non-governmental sector, but also many citizens joined the protests. This, in turn, led to mobilization within the National Assembly and drove the adoption of emergency amendments to PADVA that provide for protection of people who have experienced violence in an intimate relationship. The interviewees define the “intimate relationship” as a red line in the discussions on the amendments to PADVA, which no one wanted to engage with because it was perceived as granting protection to the LGBTI+ community, and this is precisely what some of the political representatives considered unacceptable. In this sense, the Debora case did provide



an opportunity, through the accumulated public energy, and gave a new impetus to a debate on an issue that has been rejected. However, at the request of BSP, the final point included in the law is that intimate relations can only be between "individuals of the male and female sex", i.e. it does not cover same-sex partners.

"Then the main problem before the Debora case was with the "intimate relationship" they didn't want to accept. The biggest fear of the government at that time was that if the term "intimate relationship" was accepted, it would allow the LGBT community to have access to protection. Which is terrible in itself! The idea was that it would regulate same-sex relationships, which they thought was bad. A colleague of ours tried her best to give examples of cohabiting partners, adults who have their own homes. Such examples hit a brick wall. And she had a few other

suggestions that were not politically favorable at that point and were not accepted. The big problem is that politicians are quite afraid to take a strong stand on the issue of domestic violence and violence against women, on which there is no public consensus. And that is why there was an escalation, triggered by the Debora case, which surprised and delighted me very much, it played a very important role."

(R3, regional center)

Last but not least, it should be noted that the Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence enters into force throughout the European Union on 13 June 2024, and after three years, all EU countries must adapt their laws, budgets and resources to the provisions of the Directive. This is probably a battle that has yet to be fought.

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# ABOUT BULGARIAN FUND FOR WOMEN

Bulgarian Fund for Women (BFW) supports feminist organizations, collectives and activists who challenge the patriarchal status quo and work towards a systemic change for women, girls, and all marginalized communities

Our mission is to support the human rights and social justice movements by advancing philanthropy aimed at achieving structural change.

Our vision is that all women and girls live in a just and equal world where their choices are respected, and their voices are heard.

We strive to overcome numerous structural problems such as lack of gender justice, ubiquitous sexism and misogyny, increasing social inequalities, shrinking space for civil society, attacks against liberal democratic values, insufficient social engagement and philanthropic support for human rights movements and for achieving social justice.

Our values are: solidarity, self- and collective care, diversity, accountability, fearlessness, responsiveness and celebration.

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