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Can tools from a small crisis centre in Norway improve shelters and support services in Romania?

"The specific approach used with children is just one of three areas in which the Crisis Centre in Salten excels," says Monaliza Cirstea, Director of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities.

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State Secretary Luminița Popescu (in the middle) was convinced that the training in Bodø would provide them with the best social services model. Here together with project manager Carmen Niculescu (to the left) and Monaliza Cirstea, Director of ANES. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

"Inter-institutional coordination and the assessment of risk tools are the two other important areas of knowledge we've gained from our training days in Bodø, Norway," says Monaliza Cirstea.

The National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES), together with 26 participants from the social and support services in Romania, recently visited the north of Norway to learn more about the Crisis Centre in Salten and its work to combat violence against women and domestic violence.



Wanja J. Sæther, Director of the Crisis Centre in Salten, sees the cooperation with ANES and the exchange with the Romanian participants as part of a global volunteerism. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

“The purpose of the visit from Romania has been to share how we coordinate our work with others. It’s about demonstrating our routines, procedures and cooperation agreements and how we’ve lowered the threshold to the other support agencies,” says Director of the Crisis Centre in Salten Wanja Jeanette Sæther.

Strategic and coordinated support for victims

The Crisis Centre in Salten was established in 1983 and is one of 43 crisis centres in Norway. Sæther has more than 30 years' experience working with abuse and violence. She was only 19 years old when she started as a dayworker at the shelter in Bodø. The few times she has left the centre has been to gain broader experience of, among other things, leadership, the child welfare service and working with drug abusers.

The crisis centre is a cause Sæther is highly dedicated to and considers it a lifelong commitment. She is therefore also keen to work with the employee's motivation. She does this, among other things, by offering the employees further education, guidance and the opportunity to influence their own working day.

In addition, there is one thing that distinguishes this shelter from other shelters in Norway, according to Sæther:

“We work on three levels: The individual level, group level and community level. Many crisis centres only manage to work at the individual level with individual users because they don’t have the resources and/or have not managed to develop a strategy that can generate these resources.”

Sæther feels in particular that strategic work on the crisis centre's reputation has been crucial to being able to work beyond the individual level.

At the group level, the centre has initiated different projects and had a particular focus on working with vulnerable groups such as older adults, minorities, youth and trans-persons.

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> **Our overall vision at the crisis centre is that we want to combat the global pandemic of violence against women and children.**

The Crisis Centre in Salten carries out education, information and training initiatives in the municipality at lower secondary schools and at the universities in and outside Bodø. It considers these activities to be strategic and preventive action. By attending major national conferences in Norway, the centre also gains recognition from outside Norway, Sæther explains.

See also: Measures for the prevention of gender-based and domestic violence

“One of the things we’ve spent a lot of time on is formalising our cooperation with the support services and other agencies,” says Sæther.

The centre’s collaborating partners presented their work and the nature of their cooperation. This included the Domestic violence and Sexual Assault Center in Bodø, the police, the organisation “Alternative to violence”, the National Association of Private Kindergartens, the “Statens Barnehus” and a lawyer (see a selection of the presentations in the fact box).

A safe place for the children

“Every year, more than 40 million children in the world are exposed to severe assault. In Norway, the government believes that up to 100,000 children annually are exposed to violence and about 1,400 children flee to one of the Norwegian shelters every year," explains Sæther.

According to its annual report, 27 of these 100,000 children stayed for a period at the Crisis Centre in Salten in 2021.

“I know from our cooperation with Romania that they want more expertise in how to work with children at the crisis centre. This includes methods, follow-up, procedures and issues relating to contact with parents” says Sæther.

The Crisis Centre in Salten has a special focus on children and has extensive experience of working with children exposed to violence.

“I think our crisis centre excels the most in this area,” says Sæther.



Wanja J. Sæther, Director of the Crisis Centre in Salten gives a presentation on the conditions in Norway and their work at the centre. (Photo: Carmen Niculescu, ANES)

One of the good practices they shared was two information films from their work with children, “The Shelter” and “The Birdhouse”. At the request of ANES, the crisis centre translated and dubbed the two films into the Romanian language. The films in Romanian were launched as a surprise at the training.

The films’ key message is to tell children at the crisis centre that they are safe there, that they are not alone and that what happened is not their fault.

Sæther is keen to share good practices both within Norway and with other parts of the world. “The films are good concrete tools that can be used in counselling, and managers in the municipalities can implement them directly,” she says.

"Their approach to helping children, such as the information films, is something we need in Romania, but I’m sure we can take this idea and apply it in the system in Romania,” says Cirstea from ANES.

Risk assessment: "It's about providing safe and secure services"

In addition to the work with children, the risk assessment and the many specialists working at the centre were other examples of good practice that the Romanian delegation would like to become better at and implement in their work at the shelters in Romania.

“We were probably one of the first crisis centres in Norway to employ people with police qualifications and legal expertise. We have three full-time positions on the children's team. We also have a job coordinator and security consultant, and have agreements with psychologists and lawyers,” says Sæther.

At the training, the police from Nordland Police District gave a presentation on the risk assessment tool Spousal Assault Risk Assessment (SARA). SARA is a checklist and has a score form that is used to screen for risk factors of spousal assault so that preventive measures can be taken. All the employees at the crisis centre have been trained in this tool, Sæther explains.

“But based on SARA and other established tools, we’ve mapped the risks at the crisis centre in a way that’s more adapted to our circumstances. It's about making an assessment based on a



Police superintendent Stine Lekang Arntzberg and Wanja J. Sæther, the Director of the Crisis Centre in Salten. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)



Jenna Shearer Demir, Programme Advisor, Gender Equality Division, Council of Europe (Photo: Carmen Niculescu, ANES)

subjective analysis, the user's own presentation of their case and more objective factors such as assessing environments or other elements that could affect the case," says Sæther.

"This should be done so regularly that you take all factors into account, and the fact that the risk level can go up and down. It's about providing safe and secure services," she adds.

Jenna Shearer Demir from the Council of Europe, presented the Istanbul Convention standards on shelters and Council of Europe guidance on shelters based on these standards. According to Ms Shearer Demir, after ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the GREVIO monitoring body noted an increase in support structures for victims of violence against women, or the improvement of existing ones (read more in fact box).

"We want to combat the global pandemic on violence"

State Secretary of Ministry of Family, Youth and Equal Opportunities Luminița Popescu was convinced that the training in Bodø would provide them with the best social services model.

"They are professionals and have a lot of experience with domestic violence," says Popescu.

"We want to gain knowledge about best practices and adapt relevant measures to all women who are affected by domestic and gender-based violence – to give them hope

for a better and safer life, make their voices heard and, most importantly, ensure they are respected."



State secretary of the National Agency for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men Luminița Popescu and Wanja J. Sæther, the Director of the Crisis Centre in Salten on the first day of the training. (Photo: Carmen Niculescu, ANES)

Sæther, sees the cooperation with ANES and the exchange with the Romanian participants as part of a global volunteerism:

“Our overall vision at the crisis centre is that we want to combat the global pandemic of violence against women and children. In my lifetime, it’s never been scarier than now when it comes to women's rights and women's position.”

Sæther believes that the setback when it comes to gender rights is related to the re-emergence of the conservative church in society, but also that we are in a time of global crisis with respect to both the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing war in Europe.

“Suddenly, we find that the rights women have previously fought for are about to be taken away from them again. In Norway, for example, we now have debates about whether women should be allowed to have an abortion. We must now be on the alert,” Sæther stresses.

Coming up: exchange and training on sexual violence

The training in Bodø has been part of a series of meetings to exchange knowledge, experience and good practice between Romania and Norway. The project manager in Romania explained that the EEA collaboration project between Romania and Norway has been extended until October 2023.

“By extending the project, we want to continue our collaboration with the Norwegian partners since we’ve learned that the most appreciated activity has been this exchange of practice, such as this training," explains project manager Carmen Niculescu.



Carmen Niculescu from ANES (on the right) discuss their future activities in the project with Lene Nilsen, senior adviser in the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Public Security and project consultant Rachel Eapen Paul during the lunch break. (Photo: Vibeke Hoem)

In relation to the eight new counselling centres for perpetrators established in Romania during the project, training sessions have been held with Norwegian professionals to enhance the employees' skills in working with perpetrators, their capacity to intervene and ability to use effective new procedures and standardised tools.

"This training was a great success for the participants. We are therefore organising another training seminar in Romania with Norwegian specialists. This will be on the topic of sexual violence and what approach to use with the victims of such violence," says Niculescu.

"We've just established these new centres for victims of sexual violence and the professionals involved in the interaction with the victims are requesting this type of training."

The Crisis Centre in Salten will be one of the specialists involved in the training. The centre also feels that it has gained different levels of knowledge from its cooperation with Romania.

"For me personally, as a director and professional, I have learned a lot about women's living conditions and the support systems in other parts of the world. This applies to me and my employees," says Sæther and adds:

"I think we can learn a lot from the countries that don't have such good conditions as we have. In particular how other countries invest great efforts and take responsibility for their services by being flexible and finding good methods within the available financial framework."

The last activity that ANES would like to implement is a national awareness campaign to highlight good practices from the project.

“We want to present these good practices from our success with establishing counselling centres for perpetrators. It’s a way of closing the gap in dealing with domestic violence in Romania – we have these shelters and social assistance for the victims, but too little has been done for the perpetrators,” says Niculescu.

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