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# From evidence to action:

How to design social  
services for vulnerable groups  
through a gender lens

## **From evidence to action:**

How to design social services  
for vulnerable groups  
through a gender lens



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## INTRODUCTION

**W**hat if gender equality was not an add-on, but a built-in in our interventions? This question served as a starting point for numerous (local) actors in the Western Balkans working in social service provision within their municipalities.

Social mapping often reveals a hard truth: Existing social services do not always reach those who need them most. Even with the best intentions, some people remain in the shadows of local support systems. Women and girls in particular are often overlooked - their needs unseen or unspoken of. In 2023, 14 municipalities from the Western Balkan region, supported by their Local Government Associations (LGAs) - the National Association of Municipalities of Albania (NAMA), the Association of Towns and Municipalities of Republic of Srpska (ATMRS), the Association of Municipalities and Cities of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (AMCFBiH), the Association of Kosovo Municipalities (AKM), and the Association of the Units of Local Self-Government of North Macedonia (ZELS) - went on a journey to initiate change in this respect. More specifically, they asked themselves: **How can we design social services on local level that are actually used by those they were designed for? How can we induce real change in our communities?**

The project “Regional Cooperation for Better Social Inclusion at Local Level”, implemented by the Network of Associations of Local Authorities of South-East Europe (NALAS) and the LGAs, provided the frame to find adequate answers as well as practical solutions on local level, within selected municipalities. The project was implemented in cooperation with the regional project “Social Inclusion of Disadvantaged Groups in the Western Balkans” (SoRi) implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

This publication presents the individual interventions and approaches to make social services for vulnerable groups more gender-transformative. By sharing these practices, it aims to inspire other local actors to replicate these approaches within their own local contexts.

All examples presented have one thing in common: When we focus on those most left behind - be it girls, women, elderly people, returnees, or persons with disabilities - everyone benefits. They also remind us of something essential: Equality is not about treating everyone the same - real change happens when we use transformative approaches that respond to people’s real needs and when we actively involve them in shaping solutions.

While the circumstances in each municipality differed, the process followed a shared logic: First, social mappings were conducted to understand the specific needs of the community in a participatory way. Based on these insights, concept notes for social service provision were designed, with a clear focus on women and girls. Finally, these concepts for (new, or redesigned) municipal social services were implemented on the ground over a period of twelve months.

***“True inclusion means looking behind the scenes, beyond visible actions, to discover the deeply rooted norms and beliefs that shape how we see others. That is where real transformation begins.”***

– Marija Kao,  
Gender Equality Expert

Following this idea, we invite you to explore the following practical examples that show what we can achieve if we move beyond inclusion and begin to shift unequal norms. We hope to inspire you to adapt and replicate these approaches in your own context – moving toward greater equity for all members of your community.

# Inclusion in Action: Empowering Children with Disabilities and Their Families through Creativity and Confidence



## What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Although daycare centres for persons with disabilities in the municipality of Elbasan already offer a variety of services, recent social mappings identified important gaps. Specialised services for children with disabilities, such as art therapy, were missing. These types of therapy support **emotional well-being, communication skills, and social inclusion**. In addition, in the Balashe Social Centre (BSC), children with visual impairments had no access to learning Braille, which limits them in both their education and their ability to use basic (digital) communication tools. Further, the municipality has recognised the urgent need to provide **psychosocial support to parents of children with disabilities**, who often face emotional stress and lack adequate services.

The municipality of Elbasan followed a multi-pronged approach to strengthen social services for children with disabilities. As part of this effort, 20 children with disabilities (5-18 years old) participated in physiotherapy and art therapy sessions led by trained professionals, including music and creative expression. These activities helped them to improve their motor, cognitive, and social skills. In addition, at the BSC, children with visual impairments were taught the Braille system and gained skills in using digital devices on their own – greatly boosting their independence and confidence. To strengthen the overall support system for children with disabilities and their families, the BSC established targeted services for families, especially for mothers, who often carry the main caregiving role. This helped mothers to relieve stress, build confidence, and improve the home environment for their children.

## What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Creating personalised training plans** for children with visual impairments – including learning Braille, using digital tools, and navigating independently with a white cane
- **Improving the facilities** of the BSC by revitalising the physiotherapy room and equipping it with tools suitable for children with visual impairments
- **Building staff capacities** at different day care centres in Elbasan through training in art therapy for professionals and educators, and preparing youth volunteers from the Elbasan Youth Council to work with children with disabilities
- Establishing a **support group for parents** and providing psychosocial support tailored to their needs
- **Raising awareness** among parents and the wider public about the services available for children with disabilities



**“We have seen how tailored support like art therapy for children with disabilities or Braille training for visually impaired children at BSC translates into real change. These programmes not only help children grow in confidence and ability but also show how social services can become more inclusive with the right support.”**

- Enkeleda Hysa, Coordinator at NAMA

Amer, a boy with Down Syndrome, comes from a large family and faces challenges in physical coordination, strength, and daily mobility. Thanks to physiotherapy he improved his strength, skills, independence and mood.

*“It is such fun; I want to come more often!”*



A young boy with visual impairments, learnt Braille in an individualised approach. With no prior formal exposure to Braille training, he successfully learnt his first letters and gained confidence in using tactile tools supported by his trainer. He says the project has brought light to his life.

## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- 20 parents and family members, mostly mothers received psychosocial support – reporting **reduced stress and greater confidence** in supporting their children with structured guidance from daycare centre staff.
- 20 children with disabilities (12 girls and 8 boys) attended physiotherapy twice a week, **improving strength, balance, and coordination**. Parents actively joined sessions and learnt exercises to use at home.
- 21 children took part in weekly individual and group art therapy, using creative methods like finger painting and cognitive play to **improve fine motor skills and sensory stimulation**.
- 22 **professionals** (psychologists, therapists, social workers) were **trained in art therapy** and applied it successfully in local centres, helping children to express emotions and connect.
- 40 educators and support teachers were trained to bring basic art therapy methods into public school.
- Five children with visual impairment learnt **Braille** and **improved their digital literacy** using screen readers and accessible apps.
- An Open Day allowed parents to observe therapy sessions and discuss their children's progress with professionals.
- Ten **young volunteers** from the Elbasan Youth Council were **trained to support children with disabilities** during inclusive community events, like concerts and fairs.



Struggling to express emotions and with only limited verbal communication, a young boy on the autism spectrum, discovered an alternative way of communication through arts therapy. He showed progress in emotional expression and confidence. Art became a safe and effective outlet for him to connect with others and start developing basic communication skills.

## What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- Be aware of children's general health conditions** as some may have overlapping diagnoses. Check their health status and support their parents in providing healthcare to their children, based on doctors' advice.
- Respect the factor of intersectionality.** Disabilities might not be the only reason why children and their families experience discrimination. It can encompass a broad spectrum of differences, including ethnicity, gender, age, religion, and socio-economic background.
- Enhance gender equality among parents** by addressing both mothers and fathers, e.g., when setting up training plans for their children or providing direct support to parents. Actively involve fathers when discussing the well-being of the entire family.
- Identify and mobilise change agents** among beneficiaries to share their stories and promote new services.

*Through this project, we have seen real progress - not just in access to services, but in how people relate to each other. Children and families who were once isolated now feel part of the community. The increased cooperation across social groups - especially among those who previously could not connect due to gender, ethnic, or social differences - shows that inclusion truly benefits everyone."*

- Eltiona Kolla, Director of Social Protection and Inclusion at the municipality of Elbasan

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## Connected & Protected: Helping Youth and Their Families to Combat Cyberbullying



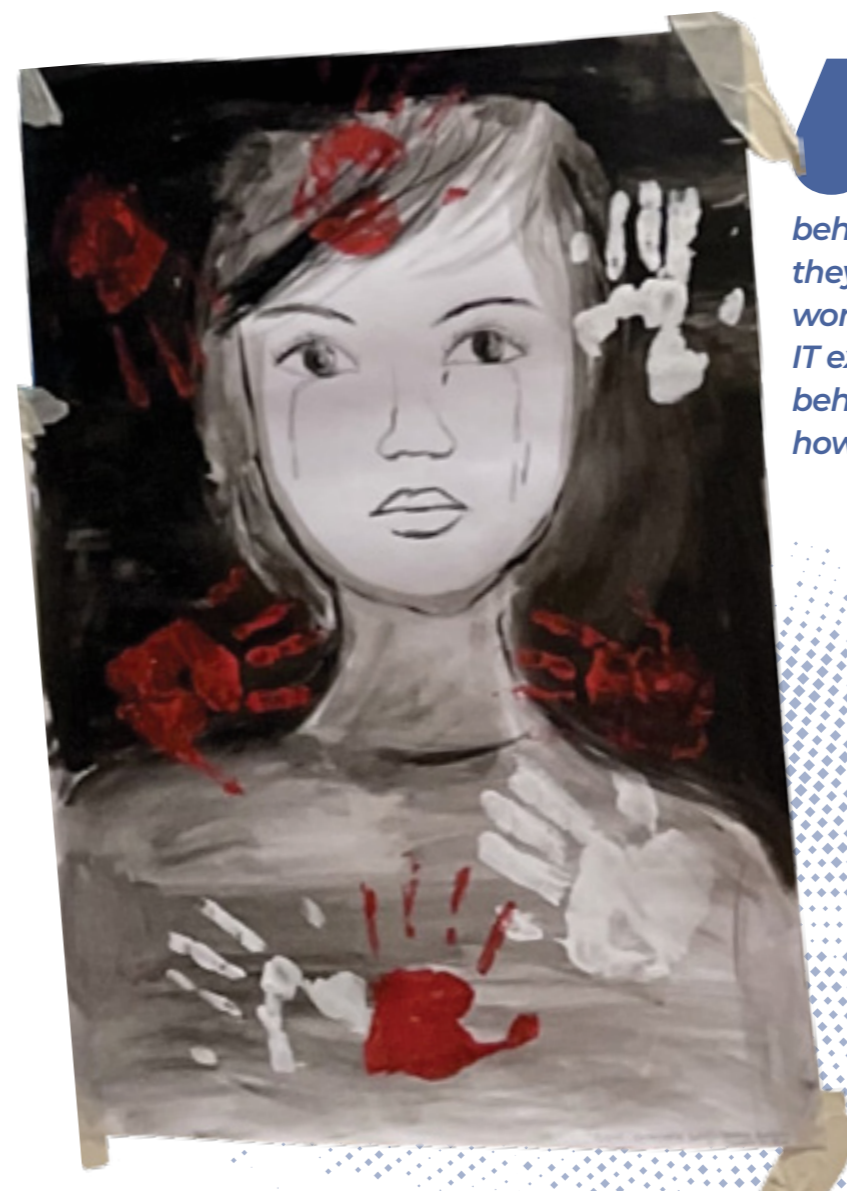
### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Cyberbullying is a growing issue for young people globally, especially for girls, young women and marginalised groups. Likewise, in the municipality of Himarë there is a growing urgency for action. In 2023, at least 14 cases of cyberbullying (7 girls, 7 boys) were reported in Himarë only, with some incidents even escalating into physical violence.

As a response, the municipality of Himarë launched a set of targeted measures, with a strong focus on girls and their parents, aiming at raising awareness, providing **psychosocial support** and strengthening **prevention through empowerment**. The Mobile Outreach Team (MOT, established in 2021) plays a key role in reaching out to teenagers - mostly girls - affected by or at risk of cyberbullying, offering both direct support and early intervention. The MOT consists of educational and social protection specialists as well as representatives from institutions such as the police and local education offices.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Identification** of the most vulnerable teenagers, specifically girls and their families, and assessing their specific situation and needs
- **Empowerment and prevention** through the provision of workshops, specific trainings, and individual psychological support for students, parents, and teachers
- **Sensitisation** and awareness raising through community engagement, exhibitions, and a video campaign to spark conversation and understanding
- **Provision** of individual psychological support for victims of cyberbullying to help them heal and regain confidence



*The teenagers affected by cyberbullying often considered it normal behaviour, it was on all the applications they used, it always surrounded them. We worked together with psychologists and IT experts, to show them that their bullies' behaviour was not normal and to explain how to use digital applications safely."*

- Aida Halilaj,  
Director of Social Services  
at the municipality of Himarë



A 13-year-old girl experienced ongoing bullying at school and online, leaving her withdrawn and insecure. Through psychological support and awareness sessions, she learnt to express herself, recognise abuse, and seek help. Today, she is more confident, engaged in school life, and building stronger peer relationships.



“Cyberbullying is a problem in many communities these days. In Himarë, we addressed the issue holistically through awareness-raising efforts with the teenagers, parents, teachers, and other support structures. Individual sessions with a psychologist helped the teenagers to process their experiences and build resilience.”

- Enkeleda Hysa,  
Coordinator at NAMA



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- **20 children** (14 girls and 6 boys) were identified as being at risk of cyberbullying using an intersectional approach. Out of these, 14 had already reported cases to the police and received targeted psychosocial support.
- Three **awareness-raising workshops** were held for 46 students, 20 parents, and 38 teachers, improving their ability to recognise, prevent, and respond to cyberbullying. The sessions included contributions from the police commissariat, municipality, schools (teachers and psychologists), and the MOT team (social worker, psychologist, teacher, police officer).
- **Professional psychological support** was offered to teenage victims of cyberbullying.
- The MOT held regular **coordination meetings to ensure a gender-sensitive implementation** of cyberbullying prevention, involving key actors from education, police, and social services.

A 14-year-old boy was subjected to months of online harassment through a social media app, which left him isolated and emotionally distressed. His parents and the school reported the incident to the police, who identified the bully and shut down the account. With counselling and digital safety support he gradually regained confidence. Today, he actively raises awareness about cyberbullying in schools, using his experience to empower others.



## What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- **Mobilise community leaders and influential individuals** within your municipality to advocate for the topic and to support awareness-raising.
- **Combine online and offline means for campaigning, training and awareness-raising** to also reach those with limited or no digital access.
- **Collaborate with local organisations and other initiatives** to promote joint action. This increases your outreach, effectiveness and, last but not least, cost-efficiency of your efforts against cyberbullying.
- **Include effective monitoring** and reporting mechanisms to track cases of (cyber-) bullying right from the start. It helps you to take well-informed decisions.

“It was difficult for the teenagers to open up about their experiences, sitting them down to talk did not work. So, we resorted to art and creative writing - opening new ways for them to express themselves.”

- Aida Halilaj,  
Director of Social Services  
at the municipality of Himarë

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## Municipality of Klos

# Where Support Starts at Home: Supporting Children with Disabilities and Their Parents



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

In the municipality of Klos about 75 children need special assistance, according to a recent social mapping. So far, the support provided by the municipality has been limited to financial schemes to cover basic living expenses only. Without a daycare centre or other social services, mothers were left as the sole caregivers, leading to emotional stress and hindering them in following regular employment. Thus, there was an **urgent need** to establish needs-based support for these children and thereby allow their families and mothers to live a life in dignity.

To improve the physical **well-being of children with disabilities** and to allow for more participation in community life, the municipality of Klos implemented several measures: Based on a **holistic approach**, they provided **safe spaces, field visits, and daycare, combined with psychosocial support** for the children as well as an increased overall awareness for their special needs within the community. The daycare centre combined services at the centre with mobile services performed by a project team on the ground. Thereby, the children now receive the care they need and their mothers are able to contribute to the family income and alleviate their mental stress.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Provision of psychosocial support** to children with disabilities and their families through regular sessions with a psychologist and social worker
- **Empowerment** through educational and skill-building workshops for children with disabilities, to foster their emotional and physical expression
- **Awareness-raising and anti-discrimination efforts** by organising inclusive exhibitions and outdoor gatherings
- **Reduction of gender stereotypes** and **support to mothers** through peer-exchange-groups that encourage greater engagement of fathers

*“Social inclusion should not be just a slogan but become a tangible reality. To achieve this, we need to focus on the empowerment and active participation of marginalised groups in decision-making.”*

- Sanije Gjini, Director of the Social Service Department at the municipality of Klos



A young girl from a rural part of the municipality of Klos improved her emotional well-being, confidence, expressive and social skills considerably ever since she participated in the workshops and other activities.

*"Thanks to the workshops and activities offered by the daycare centre, she is more communicative and open with other children. She greatly enjoys the games she plays at the centre", her family says.*



*"The services introduced in the municipality of Klos have shown that a tailored approach to individual needs goes a long way. Thanks to a thorough needs assessment, the project team was able to address the needs of the children in a highly individualised manner, creating an enabling and nurturing environment for each one of them."*

- Enkeleda Hysa, Coordinator at NAMA

## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- The project team held regular meetings for the **identification of the most vulnerable children** with disabilities for the planned psychosocial activities
- Field visits were conducted in four villages to **reach out to children with disabilities in rural areas** with little or no access to daycare centres. The team provided **tailored psychosocial support** directly in their homes.
- Children participated in creative workshops using art and play to **boost their social, communication, and motor skills**. The feedback was highly positive – children who rarely interacted with others began to engage more. Many became more confident, independent, and less anxious within just a few months.
- Workshops for parents of children with disabilities created space to discuss caregiving, emotional load, and challenges with an expert. Parents received psychological support during these sessions.



## What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- **Do not only focus on the children with disabilities themselves**, but also more holistically on their parents, both mothers and fathers. Once you understand their specific situation you can address their needs adequately. Supporting parents by listening to them and valuing their insights directly benefits the child.
- **Address social, psychological, and economic aspects in parallel**, as they are strongly intertwined. For this you will need to attract skilled professionals and offer them competitive salaries.
- **As a municipality, take an active role in coordination, planning and implementation**. By doing so you can create an enabling environment for behavioural change at community level.
- **Support community-based initiatives**, e.g., led by affected families and address their demands whenever possible. Publicly advocate for people with disabilities as equal members of your community to increase awareness. They matter as much as everyone else.

*"An unexpected positive aspect of our work is recognising the children's drawing and painting skills. For some of them, this was a special opportunity to express their emotions and thoughts through art. We are impressed by their talent and the positive impact we see in them."*

- Sanije Gjini,  
Director of the Social Service Department  
at the municipality of Klos

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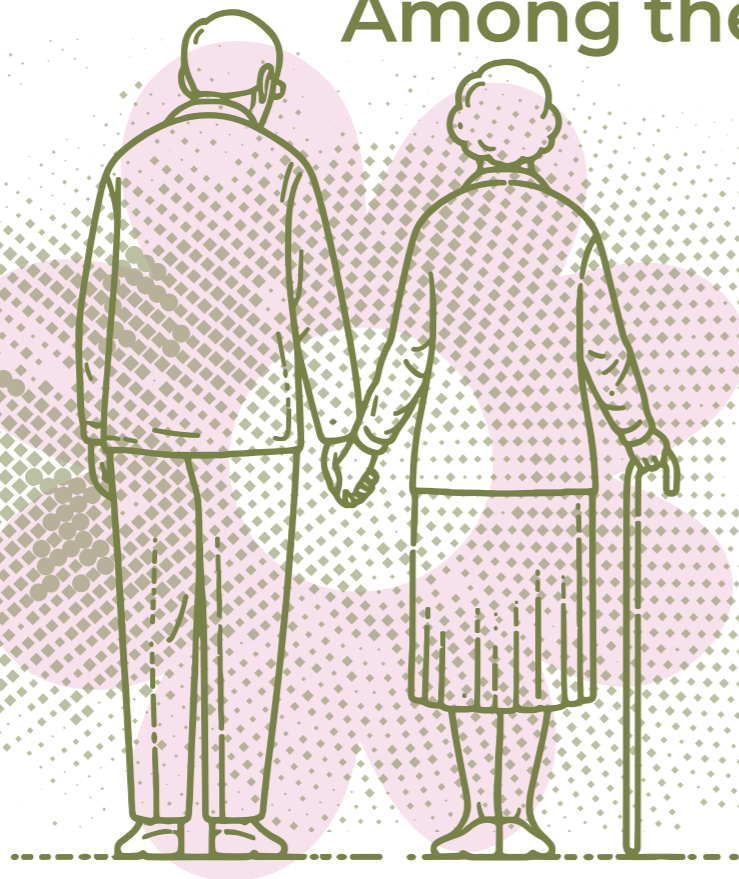
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# From Isolation to Inclusion: Preventing Loneliness and Social Isolation Among the Elderly



## What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Recent social mapping findings show that elderly people in the municipality of Mat, like in many other municipalities, suffer from **loneliness and social isolation**. They often live alone and ties to family and friends have loosened. Additionally, they often lack access to entertainment, rehabilitative, and cultural programmes. This holds especially true for elderly women. The existing daycare centre for elderly people in Mat has been used almost exclusively by a small group of men, offering little to no space and activities tailored to women. While both men and women would benefit from services such as **psychosocial support and tailor-made workshops**, women additionally needed dedicated spaces within the centre, to feel safe and comfortable.

To address this issue, the municipality of Mat initiated measures to better **include elderly people, especially women, in social and cultural life** and to **provide psychosocial support**. They adapted the centre to become a safe and welcoming space for elderly women, while raising awareness about the centre's service offer in general. Based on the **"Leave No One Behind"** approach, the municipality identified the most socially isolated elderly women and men, assessed their needs and situations. Today, elderly women and men participate in workshops on healthy ageing, handicraft sessions, and receive psychosocial support to help them manage loneliness, stress, and health concerns. Women are encouraged to speak up and express their needs, increasing their visibility and voice in the community. On top of that, a cooperation with a local high school was initiated to foster **cross-generational social exchange** by engaging students in various activities.

## What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Identifying** the most vulnerable elderly people, especially the most isolated elderly women
- **Adapting and equipping** the daycare centre to better meet the needs of elderly people, including creating a safe and welcoming space for women
- **Introducing new services**, such as psychosocial support, educational activities, and handicrafts workshops
- **Empowering** elderly people, especially women, to engage more actively in community life and express their needs confidently
- **Involving high-school students** in workshops and community fairs to encourage cross-generational dialogue and connection
- **Advocating for stronger support systems** for the elderly through round table discussions with relevant stakeholders



An elderly woman from Mat found a new purpose through these activities. She made friends, built a support network, and even organised regular meetups with other elderly women she met. She never misses a session. These new relationships have greatly improved her emotional well-being. She feels valued, connected, and joyful. Through the workshops, she gained new knowledge, shared life experiences, and prepared to showcase her handicrafts at the community fair. She has also been informed about local services for the elderly; resources she never knew were available. She says: *"I feel better, stronger. I go out more, I laugh more, and I am not alone anymore."*



*Elderly women in the municipality of Mat started to thrive once we offered them a dedicated space to gather, socialise, and engage with each other. Through knitting and handicrafts they found occupation and purpose again and their efforts paid off when they sold their crafts at a local fair, generating income and recognition for their work."*

- Enkeleda Hysa, Coordinator at NAMA

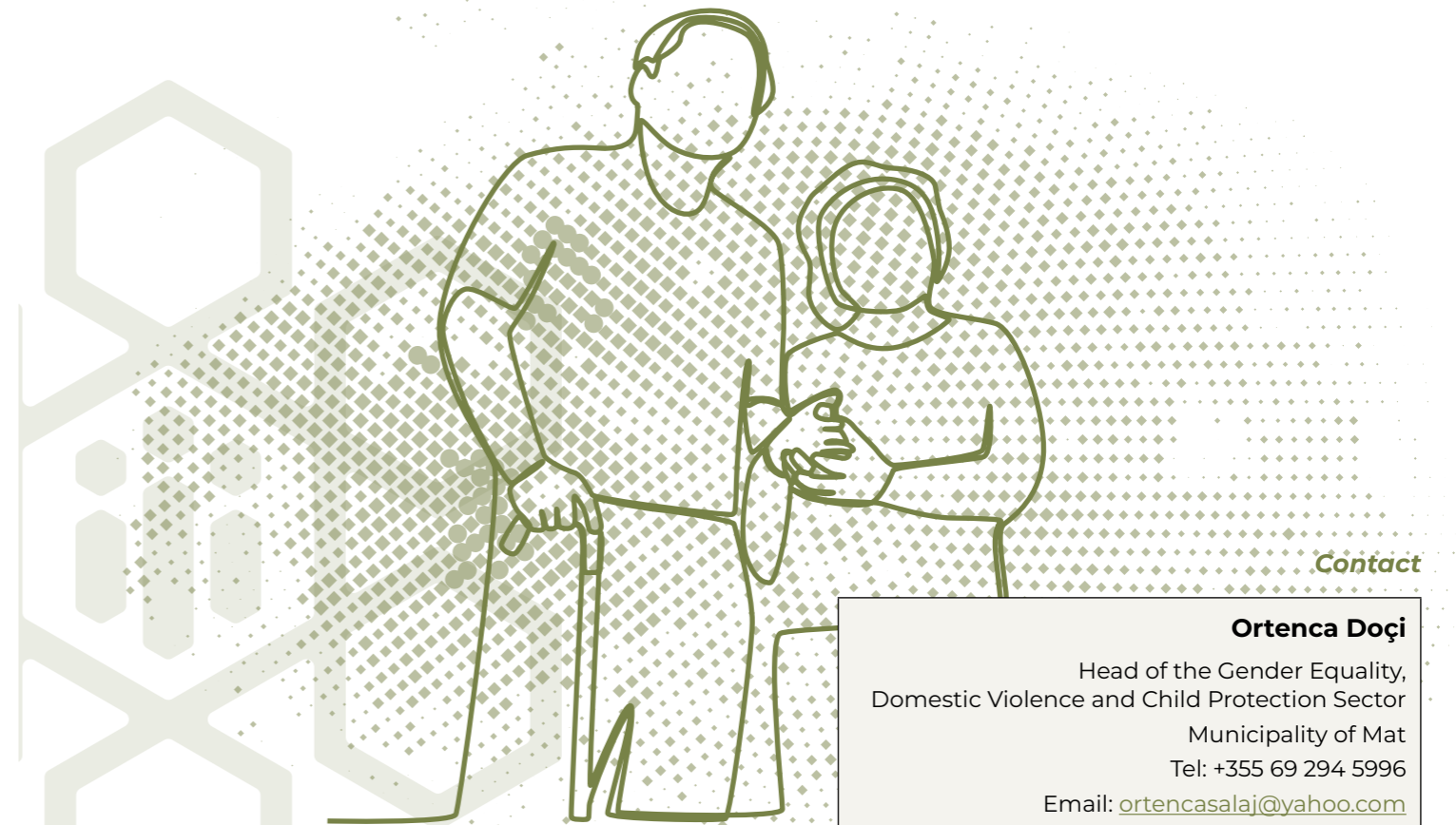


## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- A **series of workshops** for around 100 elderly participants covered topics such as health, grief, gender roles, violence prevention, and adapting to a changing society.
- Handicrafts workshop sessions promoted creativity, **skill-building, and social integration**.
- Women have been encouraged to **participate more actively in the community** and socialise with each other. Some of them continue to meet outside the centre, deepening friendships they made.
- A mobile team provided food parcels to 40 of the **economically most vulnerable men and women**.
- Elderly men also benefited, reporting **improved understanding of healthy living** and greater connection to modern society, including basic tech use.
- Preparations for a handicrafts fair, included producing and selling handmade items, boosted **confidence and community engagement**.

## What is important to know? | Some Useful Tips

- **Involve elderly people**, especially women, to understand their needs, use focus group discussions and needs assessments.
- **Reach out to the most isolated** members of your community, following the "Leave No One Behind" principle.
- **Engage with local stakeholders, businesses, and community members** as gender equality and inclusion matters for all. As a municipality, take the leading role in coordination, planning and implementation.
- **Consider mobility, cognitive, and health limitations** of elderly people. Offer diverse, accessible activities.
- **Consider traditional norms, values, and roles**. Adapt your approach to fit the cultural context and perspectives of older adults.



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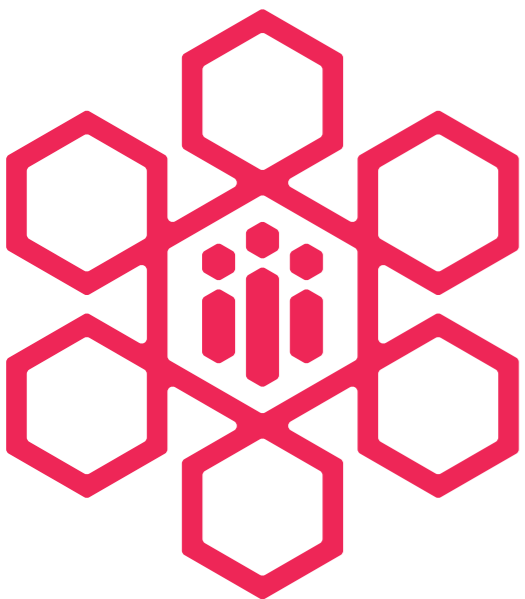


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### On the Move for Inclusion: Mobile Outreach Team Provides Professional Help and Support for Persons with Disabilities



#### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

The Centre for Social Work has identified 614 children and adults with disabilities in the city of Ljubuški. Many of them live in rural areas and face serious barriers to access care services. Long distances, lack of transport, and financial hardships make it nearly impossible for them to reach rehabilitation services like speech therapy, physiotherapy, or psychological support facilities. Recent social mappings show that most persons with disabilities live more than two kilometres from the nearest rehabilitation centre - with almost half of them unable to move independently **transport turns into a major challenge**.

To address these issues, the city of Ljubuški launched a Mobile Outreach Team (MOT) that brings **professional rehabilitation services directly to people's homes**. This home-based support includes therapy and psychosocial services for both children and adults with disabilities. The approach not only improves access to essential care but also **reduces stress and financial pressure** on families – especially on mothers, who are often the main caregivers. This approach results in significantly improved quality of life for both persons with disabilities and their families.

#### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Setting up a MOT**, consisting of professionals, to provide services and rehabilitation treatments by speech therapists, physiotherapists and psychologists for children and adults with disabilities
- **Developing individual rehabilitation and therapy plans** for persons with disabilities in their homes or referral to professional facilities
- **Offering psychosocial support for mothers** of children and adults with disabilities
- **Training mothers in providing basic rehabilitation services** for their children in the comfort of their home



**“The success of social inclusion in the city of Ljubuški was driven by strong community engagement and municipal leadership. Despite limited resources and challenges posed by the rural context, the Mobile Outreach Team approach showed how local cooperation and donor support can lead to meaningful impact. The active engagement of the community and the involvement of local actors have led to a better understanding of the needs of the target group and the context in the community.”**

– Aida Kurbegovic, Coordinator at AMCFBIH



*The introduction of the MOT was a major step forward for inclusion. Families in remote areas now regularly receive professional services at home, making essential services accessible for children and youth who previously could not attend services in urban areas. Support for caregivers – especially mothers – has been equally important. Psychological counselling helped reduce emotional exhaustion and isolation.”*

– Zora Skoko, Special Education Teacher and Director of the Educational-Rehabilitation Centre for Children, Youth and Adults with Developmental Disabilities Bučine

## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- Twelve children and adults with disabilities in rural and suburban areas received **regular home-based rehabilitation therapy** sessions through the MOT, based on **individual support plans**.
- Therapy equipment and tools** – including didactic materials, IT devices, and household appliances – were purchased to support the effective delivery of rehabilitation services in the comfort of beneficiaries' homes.
- Tailored therapy sessions were provided by specialists (**speech therapist, physiotherapist, psychologist, and defectologist**) either at home by the MOT or in nearby locations, helping beneficiaries improve their daily functioning, independence, and social inclusion.



## What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- Investing in the skills of professionals who support** children and adults with disabilities helps ensure high-quality care. Peer-exchanges and ongoing guidance for the MOT members strengthen their abilities and allow them to offer more effective and tailored support to the beneficiaries.
- Help mothers build basic rehabilitation services, so they can support** their children with disabilities between MOT visits. This also deepens their understanding of their children's needs.
- Work directly with parents** to build trust and challenge social and cultural barriers, especially around gender roles and caregiving.
- Keep families engaged** through ongoing psychological support and community activities that promote positive behaviour change and a more inclusive environment for everyone.

*The cooperation between local institutions contributed to a better communication and deeper understanding of persons with disabilities and their needs in the community. Today, the premises of the high school in Ljubuški are a platform of exchange between students, teaching staff, and the students of the special education department. The community members have become more open and supportive.”*

– Zora Skoko, Special Education Teacher and Director of the Educational-Rehabilitation Centre for Children, Youth and Adults with Developmental Disabilities Bučine

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## Municipality of Živinice

# Where Care Turns into Community: Improving the Lives of Families with Children with Disabilities



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

In the city of Živinice, 221 children with disabilities (110 boys, 111 girls) have been identified. Many of them live with multiple disabilities and require specialised care. Although the “Bring Back My Smile” daycare centre already offers a wide range of social services, parents – especially mothers – highlighted the urgent need for a **sensory room** to help strengthen their children’s sensory, social, emotional, and cognitive development. They also pointed out the lack of basic adapted services, such as hairdressing, which are often overlooked but essential for **inclusion and daily care**. In addition to the limited services for children, parents face considerable challenges, particularly mothers who take on most caregiving responsibilities. Many experience emotional strain, mental health issues, and social or economic exclusion.

To address these gaps, the city of Živinice, together with the “Bring Back My Smile” daycare centre, expanded its offer. A sensory room was established to **support the developmental needs** of children with disabilities. Psychosocial support services were introduced for parents, with a focus on easing the burden on mothers and encouraging **shared caregiving roles**. Services like hairdressing adapted to the needs of children with disabilities were also made available. Based on the principle of **Leave No One Behind**, families experiencing multiple layers of discrimination received priority access to the new services.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Identifying and assessing the needs** of families and children with disabilities, following the **Leave No One Behind** principle
- **Providing individual and group psychosocial support sessions** for parents, focusing on mental health and shared parental responsibility
- **Encouraging** fathers to get more involved in childcare through peer group sessions
- **Introducing a hairdressing service for children with disabilities**, equipping the daycare centre and training vocational students in hairdressing services for children with disabilities
- **Establishing a sensory room for children with disabilities**, including education training, new equipment, and sensory therapy sessions



*“This project gave us a chance to challenge old assumptions - especially the idea that only mothers should care for children with disabilities. Through workshops and steady encouragement, we saw more fathers stepping in, slowly breaking down gender stereotypes. At the same time, mothers were empowered through vocational activities like hairdressing, creating both dignity and connection. What started as services became something deeper, a sense of community. Students, parents, professionals, we all grew through this. This is what real inclusion looks like.”*

- Said Čerkezović, Assistant to the Mayor at the city of Živinice



Senada is mother to a son with disabilities. Her life changed completely when she stepped foot through the doors of the centre: *"I used to cry every time I had to cut my son's hair. My fear of hurting him was unbearable, but there was no hairdresser who understood his needs. Today, when my scissors touch a strand of his hair it is no longer a sign of fear but of my new strength."*

She also participated in the psychosocial counselling sessions: *"I was afraid I would never be good enough as a mother. But in the sessions, I realised I was not alone. When I first shared how hard things were for me, and the other mothers nodded, I finally felt seen and understood."*

For Senada, the centre is not just a service provider, but the start to a new life: *"The help I have received at the centre did not just give me tools. It gave me the opportunity to overcome my greatest fears and discover talents I have never dreamt of."*

## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- 15 mothers of children with disabilities received **psychosocial support** through group and individual sessions, covering topics like stress management, family dynamics, parenting skills, partner relationships and peer support.
- 28 vocational hairdressing students participated in workshops, gaining practical experience, and **learning about disability inclusion**.
- Twelve half-day gatherings brought together hairdressing students, children with disabilities and their parents. Some mothers learnt **basic hairdressing skills** and now they provide this service at the centre.
- A fully equipped hairdressing salon was set up at the daycare centre, now a permanent service, so **children with disabilities can access inclusive grooming**. The project was a **community effort**, with fundraising by hairdressing students and hands-on support from parents.
- Six workshops on the rights of children with disabilities and their families concerning social protection, education, and healthcare were held, attended by 87 parents, reflecting **increasing community interest**.
- Fathers took part in peer group sessions, sharing personal stories and challenging gender norms. Despite some initial hesitation, they recognised that being engaged in their children's lives helps **strengthen family bonds**, supports **children's development and the well-being** of the whole family.
- A sensory room was established with support of the city of Živinice and the private sector, offering children professional services for their **cognitive, social, and emotional development** in a supportive environment.
- Community-led initiatives on awareness and fundraising** for persons with disabilities supported the daycare centre and the hairdressing salon. **Joint initiatives** with secondary schools increased the social cohesion, visibility and community engagement of children and youth with disabilities.



## What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- Combine **psychosocial support with practical care services**. This may help to build trust among families, who experienced discrimination in the past, to open up and share sensitive family issues.
- Encourage fathers to take a **more active role in childcare** and challenge gender roles. Equal responsibilities in childcare benefit the family as a whole. Rely on role models to inspire change in others.
- Involve youth (here: **vocational students**) **right from the beginning**. This helps them build new skills and become champions for positive change, challenging stereotypes and encouraging more inclusive attitudes toward persons with disabilities in their communities.
- Having access to **basic care services (like hairdressing)** can have a **huge impact** towards a life in dignity for all members of the community.

*"It was beautiful to see how a younger generation engaged in recognising specific needs of persons with disabilities and worked actively to meet those needs and provide tailored services. The success goes beyond a simple hairdressing service for persons with disabilities, but it developed students' social responsibility and created a foundation for constructive change in social norms."*

- Mirsada Bajramovic, Social Inclusion Expert

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## Reaching Families, Empowering Futures: Bringing Support to the Doorstep



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Recent social mappings in the city of Dobož suggested a need for gender-sensitive services for children with disabilities, especially with a focus on supporting girls. In response, the Mobile Outreach Team (MOT) was relaunched with a new concept that prioritises these needs. The MOT is anchored within the Centre for Social Work in cooperation with the daycare centre of Dobož.

Data shows that mothers bear the majority of care work for their children with disabilities. Yet, there are **very few services that support** mothers' mental well-being or daily challenges. To change this, the new outreach approach focussed on building **social support structures for parents**, especially mothers, so they can share caregiving responsibilities more equally with their partners and fully participate in community life.

The MOT services are designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities as well as their families. The services combine **individual and group counselling**, with a focus on strengthening child-parent relations, offering **psychosocial support**, and encouraging **shared responsibility in caregiving**. The aim is to foster healthy and supportive family dynamics that benefit everyone. In addition to counselling, the team offers group meetings for parents and recreational activities for children, creating space for both connection and relaxation. The MOT now conducts **regular home visits** and provides tailored support to meet the specific needs of each family and child.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Reestablishment of gender-responsive MOT services** that are tailored to the needs of families, using insights from recent social mappings and individual support plans
- **Providing home visits** and recreational activities for 25 children with disabilities, along with regular **group meetings** for their parents
- **Recruiting and training** staff members of the MOT to deliver personalised, high-quality support
- **Building partnerships** with local businesses and NGOs to help anchor the approach sustainably in the long run



*Sometimes it is only small things the families need. Things that can be easily provided by the municipality or in cooperation with the associations and it makes all the difference for the families."*

– Vladana Popović- Đorđić,  
Coordinator at AMTRS

Ivana, a young girl with birth defects, had recently undergone surgery and was unable to attend school or access therapy. Through MOT visits she got connected with physiotherapy services. With support from her family and the MOT team, Ivana regained her strength and participated in school activities again. Her mother also received counselling and support through the MOT, helping the family to better manage daily care routines.

**“We have seen greater awareness on gender equality and social inclusion both among families and within our own team. What made the biggest difference was meeting people in their own homes. That familiar setting helped us build trust from the very first visit. It created space for honest conversations and set the groundwork for deeper, more meaningful engagement.”**

– Danijela Janković, Social Worker and MOT Member in the city of Doboj

Dejana lives in a rural area and provides 24/7 care for her daughter. During MOT visits, she shared her emotional struggles and received strong encouragement to seek support for herself. The MOT helped her connect with psychological services and suggested joining a parents' support group. Dejana gained new confidence, began attending public meetings, and expressed a desire to help other families in similar situations. *“Thanks to the support I receive today, I now understand that no problem is insurmountable. All I needed was sincere support”, she says.*



### What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- **Invest in adequate and continuous training of staff members as well as supervision.** Specifically for MOT services, motivation and acknowledgment of your professionals is crucial to have a positive impact on the targeted families.
- **Build strong alliances with local businesses and NGOs,** not only for funding and joint action, but also for raising public awareness.
- **MOTs can bridge limited access to social services for persons with disabilities living in rural areas.** People with disabilities may have additional logistical needs that make it difficult to access social services. MOT services can reduce the travel burden and deliver tailor-made services in the comfort of people's homes.

**“We have seen greater awareness on gender equality and social inclusion both among families and within our own team. What made the biggest difference was meeting people in their own homes. That familiar setting helped us build trust from the very first visit. It created space for honest conversations and set the groundwork for deeper, more meaningful engagement.”**

– Danijela Janković, Social Worker and MOT Member in the city of Doboj

### What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- 25 children with developmental disabilities (24 girls and 1 boy) and 21 family members (primarily mothers, along with father and siblings) received **individualised support and psychosocial counselling**, reaching 46 beneficiaries in total.
- The MOT visited 19 families in both urban and rural areas of Doboj, building **trust and dignity** through regular home visits. The team offered psychosocial counselling and made **referrals to additional support services** where needed.
- Parents received **hands-on guidance** on everyday caregiving, hygiene, school integration, and legal issues. During visits, the team also distributed **customised hygiene and educational kits**.
- Thanks to **MOT referrals**, several families accessed the local daycare centre for the first time, where their children received speech therapy and mental health support, they had not been able to access before.
- Many mothers shared that this was the first time they felt truly **heard and supported**. The MOT's caring and respectful approach created space for honest conversations and empowered them to join peer support groups and participate in community life.

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## Stronger Together: Improving Services for Children with Disabilities and Supporting the Mental Health of Their Parents



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

The social mappings conducted in the city of Prnjavor identified a mismatch between available services and the needs of children and youth with disabilities. Especially **speech therapy, sports and recreational activities** that support children's cognitive, motoric, and social development were lacking. The social mapping showed a need for teachers at the local elementary school to be more aware and understanding of the challenges faced by children with disabilities. It was also important to offer psychosocial support to parents, especially mothers, since they take on most of the care responsibilities. So far, little attention was given to the latter issue, specific support structures were lacking or not accessible, especially for families living in rural areas. Therefore, the city decided to offer additional social services and supportive structures for children with disabilities and their mothers.

To adequately address the needs of children with disabilities for speech therapy as well as sports and recreational activities, the "NEVEN" Association is providing these services to 15 and 10 children with disabilities, respectively. While these activities benefit the children directly, they additionally have a positive impact on their parents, mothers especially, as they gain more time for themselves. The association offers **workshops on mental health, self-care and healthy family dynamics** to parents. The offer is complemented by **occupational workshops** to improve mothers' socioeconomic situation, as well as excursions to tend to their psychosocial needs and give them opportunities for peer-exchange. Lastly, with the sensitisation of the teaching staff to the special needs of children with disabilities, new services are offered at the "Nikola Tesla" Elementary School that meet the needs of the children. The focus was to strengthen mothers' mental health as well as to increase their participation in socioeconomic activities, in combination with improved daycare services for their children.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Introducing new services for children with disabilities**, such as speech therapy and recreational activities, to support their healthy development
- **Organising workshops** on mental health and selfcare for mothers, and on healthy family dynamics
- **Providing individual psychosocial counselling, occupational workshops and excursions** for parents, especially mothers, to encourage peer-exchange and strengthen mental health and inclusion
- **Supplying materials** for occupational workshops and upgrading school facilities, like creating a new outdoor classroom that is accessible for all children
- **Training teachers** to better understand and support the needs of children with disabilities



Novka is single mother to a son with disabilities. When she took over the management of the "NEVEN" Association she felt overwhelmed by the responsibilities the position entailed at first. Thanks to psychosocial support she identified where she needed additional support to unlock her full potential. Soon enough she confidently managed her new role. She organised trips, collected support for a new van. *"I thought I was just a mother but after a few months on the project, I woke up with new ideas for the association and for myself. I proudly stood at all receptions and official events as director of the association and a mother, with my son by my side."*

**“It is not about big investments but simply sitting down with families and asking, ‘What do you need?’ and make them feel seen for the first time. That simple act has already a transformative effect.”**

- Vladana Popovic Dordic, Coordinator at AMTRS



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- Occupational workshops for up to 19 parents of children with disabilities focused on **improving family dynamics, understanding gender roles** and exploring income-generating activities. Products created during the workshops were sold at a local fair.
- Sessions for up to 19 children with disabilities including speech therapy, sports and recreational activities to **strengthen their well-being**, communication, social, and motoric skills.
- Day trips to national parks and recreational activities helped to **reduce stress within families**, especially with mothers and their children with disabilities.
- Individual psychological counselling offered parents a **safe space to talk** about their needs, challenges, and emotional well-being.
- Training for teaching staff **increased awareness and sensitivity** to the needs of children with disabilities in the classroom.

**“In the past, the needs of mothers of children with disabilities were invisible to the community, they were unheard, unrecognised and neglected. Through the project, we have given mothers the opportunity to talk about themselves and find out what it is they need. That is why for me, one of the key results we have achieved in the project is the greater openness and confidence of mothers. They are more active in the local community and speak up for themselves, their children, and their needs.”**

- Dragana Radulovic, Director of the Centre for Social Work in Prnjavor

## What is important to know?

### Some Useful Tips

- Invest time in carefully selecting and addressing the target group.** Specifically, families from rural areas often suffer from social isolation and higher barriers to access services.
- Team up with local organisations**, such as NGOs already active in your municipality. Working together – like in this case with the Association of Children with Physical and Mental Disabilities “NEVEN” – can benefit everyone and creates win-win-situations.
- Support self-help initiatives and peer-exchanges between parents** wherever possible e.g., in organising regular exchange, self-help groups or joint social events.



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## Opening Doors: Improving Access to Services for Children with Disabilities and Psychosocial Support for Mothers



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Mothers of children with disabilities face many factors that affect their mental health daily. A recent social mapping in the city of Zvornik confirmed that these mothers often struggle to **balance caregiving responsibilities and their own needs**, feeling socially isolated - especially in rural areas where services are scarce. At the same time, children with developmental disabilities face **limited access to essential services** like speech therapy due to a shortage of specialists and resources. So far, little attention was given to this issue, structured support systems were either lacking or not accessible for mothers and their children.

To improve the social support system of children with disabilities and their mothers, the municipality introduced additional social and specialised therapy services, including speech therapy. A specific focus was on single mothers and mothers with two or more children with developmental disabilities. The improved availability and access to services was built on existing support schemes provided by the Centre for Social Work and "Ruka Ruci" Association, a daycare centre that offers occupational therapy services. The approach aimed at **strengthening mothers' mental health** and increase their **participation in socio-economic activities**, while also improving **access to services and speech therapy** for their children. By enhancing daycare facilities and expanded therapeutic services for children with disabilities, the initiative ensured that both mothers and children receive the necessary support they needed within the community.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Organising workshops** on mental health and self-care for mothers, along with sessions on healthy behavioural patterns within families
- **Providing individual counselling, recreational group sessions, and group therapy** for parents, especially mothers, to encourage peer-exchange and the creation of community-led groups
- **Delivering specialised trainings for professionals** to improve their ability to offer individual and group therapy for children with disabilities and their caregivers
- **Implementing a structured speech therapy programme** for early interventions and ongoing support for children with developmental disabilities and speech difficulties
- **Upgrading daycare facilities through the procurement of materials**, including a digital speech therapy kit and a vibraphone
- **Running public awareness campaigns** through radio programmes, community outreach, and educational events to support long-term engagement



*This was the first time the city of Zvornik acknowledged the emotional burden carried by mothers of children with disabilities. The project not only gave them a voice, but it provided vital mental health support and recognition. What impressed me most was the feedback from local coordinators who told me, 'It was great to speak with fathers and mothers directly, to finally hear what they need.' This project did not just fill a gap, it created a platform for real dialogue, trust, and lasting change."*

- Vladana Popović-Đorđić, Coordinator at AMTRS

**“Raising awareness in the community and among parents is not a one-time activity, it requires continuous efforts. Yet we already see the positive impacts, especially among fathers, who have become more involved in the daily challenges of their families, sharing caregiving responsibilities with their partners more equally. This is but the first step towards mothers' empowerment.”**

– Nikola Drobnjak, Project Coordinator at the Centre for Social Work in the city of Zvornik



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- A speech therapist was recruited and trained to provide **specialised services using newly procured equipment**, including a digital speech therapy set and a vibraphone.
- 20 children with developmental disabilities (12 girls and 8 boys) participated in **individual speech therapy treatments**, focusing on early development and communication skills.
- 14 mothers participated in the workshop “Strengthening the mental health of mothers of children with disabilities,” focused on **emotional self-awareness** and recognising burnout amongst caregivers.
- 20 parents (15 mothers and 5 fathers) received individual psychological counselling to help them **cope with stress**, emotional fatigue, and daily caregiving challenges.
- 15 school professionals (9 women, 6 men) received targeted training on **inclusive practices** and how to support families of children with disabilities.
- **Community awareness** was raised through a targeted outreach campaign, including a radio programme, printed flyers, and a promotional video.

## What is important to know? | Some Useful Tips

- **Invest time in carefully selecting and reaching out to the target group.** Families living in rural areas often face social isolation and have greater barriers to access services.
- **Support initiatives by parents** wherever possible e.g., in organising regular exchange, community-based group initiatives or joint social events.
- **Combine social services for children with disabilities with psychosocial support for parents**, since caregivers often face mental health challenges related to their responsibilities.
- **Encourage fathers** to take on a more prominent role in caregiving and household responsibilities. This not only eases the burden on mothers but also helps create a more harmonious and supportive home environment.
- **Ensure these approaches are sustainable** by working together with different partners and advocating for ongoing support. Reliable, long-term services have a lasting positive impact and help build trust with the community.



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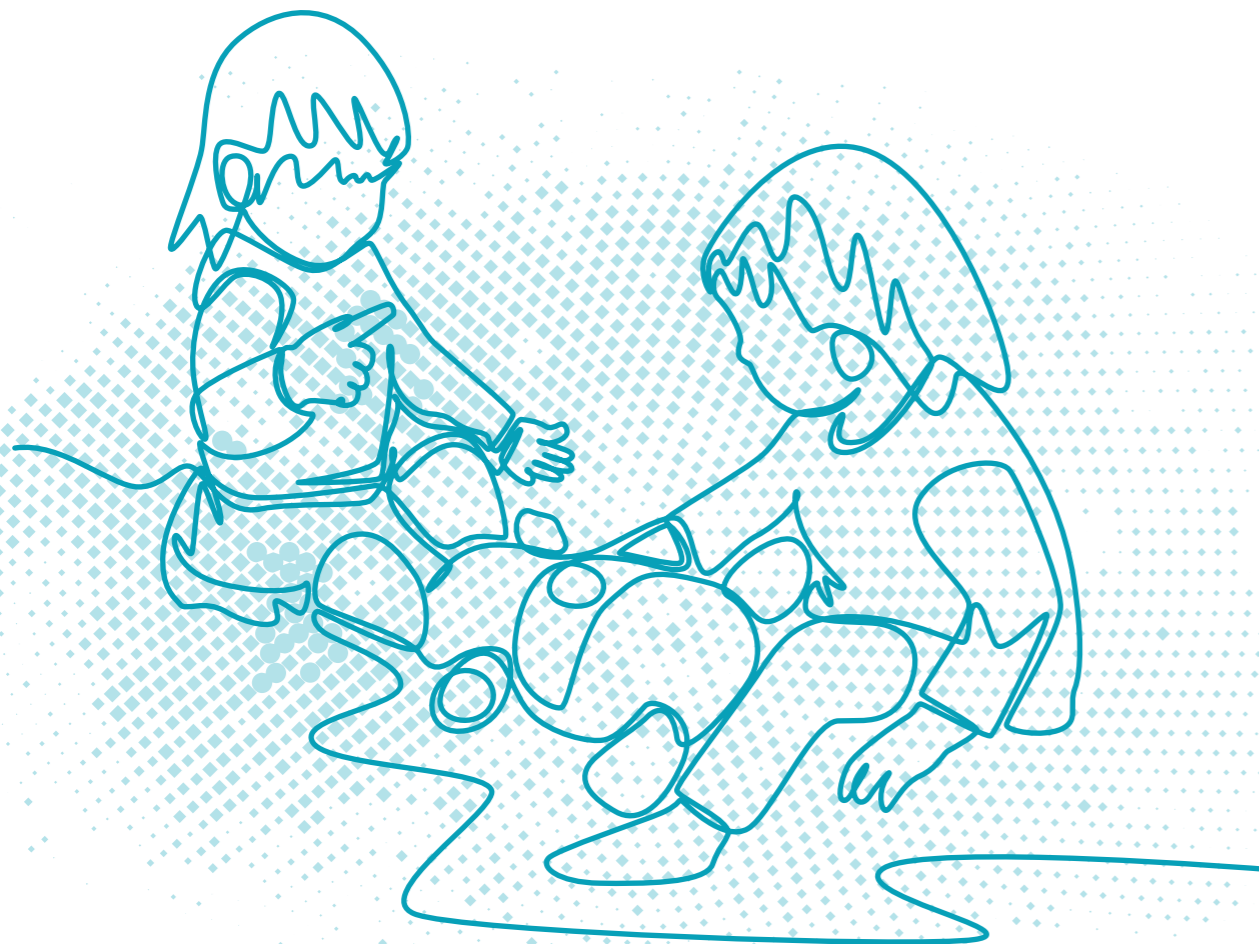
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## Coming Home: Empowerment and Gender-Sensitive Reintegration of Returnees



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

The municipality of Fushë Kosovë registered more than 1,000 families having repatriated from different countries, most of them belonging to Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. Many face serious **psychological and social challenges**. Around 120 individuals are dealing with depression, psychological stress, social isolation, and difficulties reintegrating into their community.

Through the Mobile Outreach Team (MOT), the municipality of Fushë Kosovë launched targeted support measures. The team began by visiting selected returnee families to understand their individual situation and develop tailored support plans. These plans cover key areas such as mental health, education, health care, and economic stability. The approach places special focus on **women and girls**, who often face additional barriers to **reintegration**. At the same time, it also supports men struggling with mental health issues linked to the pressure of starting over again.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Identifying returnee families** and their **specific needs** through municipal data and home visits by the MOT - Selection of ten beneficiaries (7 women, 3 men) from Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian, and Albanian ethnicity
- **Forming a 13-member-strong MOT** with representatives from health and social services, NGOs, and other community stakeholders
- **Providing individual and family psychosocial support** sessions based on individually tailored support plans
- **Organising peer group activities** such as picnics for social connection and **occupational workshops** to enhance employability
- **Establishing a roundtable** platform with the MOT, local NGOs, businesses, and other community stakeholders for coordinated support



After returning from Germany with her family, a young girl in Fushë Kosovë struggled to connect with others and felt increasingly isolated. Her mother's poor health added to the strain. Over time, and with psychosocial support, she gradually opened up, built friendships in her neighbourhood, and now feels more settled. "Today I feel calmer and closer to my friends", she says. Having a circle of peers nearby has brought a sense of belonging and stability to her daily life.

**“Change does not happen overnight. It takes consistent engagement and long-term commitment. Therefore, it is crucial to empower local leaders and grassroots organisations to lead sustainable change. What we need now is even more community engagement to shift mindsets and make inclusion the norm, not the exception.”**

- Edona Fazliu, Coordinator at AKM



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- All ten beneficiaries received support based on individual plans, **identifying** their **specific needs** in areas such as income, education, health and reintegration.
- Beneficiaries facing trauma, depression, and psychosocial distress were introduced to individual coping strategies to **strengthen** their **emotional resilience** and improve their mental health.
- Psychological counselling sessions helped participants to better **manage stress and emotional instability** by using practical tools like relaxation and cognitive restructuring.
- A workshop on employment and life skills exceeded expectations, offering **guidance on job opportunities**, CV writing, and access to public services, involving both beneficiaries and their family members.
- Over time, **trust and openness grew** among beneficiaries, many of whom had initially hesitated to participate in the services offered, due to stigma, fear, or emotional vulnerability.

## What is important to know? | Some Useful Tips

- **Focus on the empowerment of families as a whole** as families can be a strong support structure in themselves. Women are key actors for change, often taking responsibility for the well-being of the whole family. Thus, empowering women can boost the intended change and have a positive impact on the family as a whole.
- **Address social, psychological, and economic aspects in parallel**, as they are strongly intertwined. Already small improvements in one aspect (e.g. economic) might initiate ease in other aspects (e.g. psychological).
- **Support self-help initiatives and community building** e.g., by affected families, and support their initiatives whenever possible.

**“Gender-sensitive reintegration means more than just offering support. It is about removing the real-life barriers that prevent women and marginalised groups from fully participating in society with dignity and equality. Through a mix of awareness-raising, inclusive policies, and active community involvement, we are not just helping people fit in, we are creating spaces for them to lead. When reintegration is done right - with a gender lens and a human focus - it does not just support individuals. It changes the whole system.”**

- Rexhep Gojnovci, Executive Director “AKTI”



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## A Place to Grow and Learn: Creating a Daycare Centre for Children with Disabilities



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Municipal data and social mapping show that currently 107 children with disabilities (42 boys and 65 girls) live in the municipality of Istog. Yet, no specialised daycare centre existed to support them. As a result, mothers, often the primary caregivers, faced economic hardship, social isolation, and emotional stress. Many were forced to leave their jobs due to the **lack of childcare offers**. Their children miss out on early intervention services, and those living in rural areas are further isolated by transport barriers. The lack of services also reinforces stigma and exclusion, limiting children's chances for long-term participation in community life.

To improve the living conditions of children with disabilities and their families, the municipality of Istog decided to establish a daycare centre for an initial number of 20 children. The children were selected based on the principles of **"Leave No One Behind"**, prioritising low-income families, single parents, rural residents, and minority groups. The centre now provides group and individual therapy, including speech, occupational, physical, and behavioural therapy. Another focus lies on **psychosocial support for mothers** and stronger **involvement of fathers** in caregiving.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Identification of appropriate spaces and recruitment of staff** (psychologists, special educators, social workers)
- **Identification of individual needs** of selected children with disabilities and their families
- **Establishment of a daycare centre** as a safe, nurturing space for children to receive individualised care, therapy, and developmental support
- **Introduction of specialised services and curricula** on an individual and group base, including speech, occupational, physical, and behavioural therapies
- **Provision of psychosocial support to mothers** through monthly workshops and sessions, while encouraging fathers to share caregiving responsibilities
- **Awareness-raising** to promote inclusion through roundtable discussions with local authorities, schools, businesses, parents, and community members
- **Fostering peer learning and trust** through a "Human Library" event, where parents share experiences with other families
- **Establishment of a joint round table** with the Centre for Social Work and the daycare centre to develop training plans and evaluate service quality



A young boy with developmental disabilities, has made remarkable progress in basic academic skills. Starting with holding a pencil and connecting dots, he has advanced to drawing straight and curved lines and colouring. Not having any prior schooling, the support he received at the daycare centre is a great boost for him. There is noticeable improvement and his will to proficiently write increases every day.

**“We have noticed an increased interest among men to engage in discussions about gender equality. This is a great first step in recognising and addressing unequal care responsibilities in the families. Additionally, the community is more open and cooperative towards vulnerable people, including children with disabilities and their families. Women and youth feel more empowered to take a more prominent role in our community.”**

– Merita Bytyci, Director for Social Welfare at the municipality of Istog



A young girl diagnosed with moderate intellectual disability, began her journey at the daycare centre with deep social withdrawal, fear of interaction, and separation anxiety. She rarely spoke, avoided peers, and struggled to adapt to the classroom setting. With consistent support from the psychologist, social workers, and speech therapist, she now engages in group activities and communicates more openly with others. She has learnt to recognise and write letters and is developing key skills such as counting, recognising geometric shapes and colours, as well as using imagination and logical thinking. She looks forward to going to the centre each day, a reflection of her growing confidence and sense of belonging.

## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- Up to 15 children with disabilities regularly joined structured group and individual therapy sessions, helping them **improve fine motor skills** like pencil control, colouring, and recognising letters.
- Many children showed **fewer challenging behaviours**, such as throwing objects or aggression. One child even made progress in **walking independently**, thanks to a personalised support plan.
- Social interaction and confidence** grew through daily routines, group play, and sensory activities that encouraged connection and communication. Staff and parents built stronger collaboration through regular workshops and meetings, improving both understanding and teamwork.
- Mothers learnt **practical skills to better support their children** and formed peer support groups, helping to **reduce feelings of stigma** and isolation.
- The municipality committed **funding for staff and provision of the premises of the daycare centre**, covering utility costs, and ensuring the centre's **sustainability**.

## What is important to know? | Some Useful Tips

- Invest time in building trust in institutions among parents.** Former experiences of social isolation might have led to a lack of trust in public institutions. This trust must be rebuilt first e.g., through personal contact and workshops.
- Ensure high commitment and continuous funding within your municipality.** Supporting children with disabilities and their families is a long-term investment in your community as a whole. Involve all relevant stakeholders in the long-term planning of the services.
- Set a clear focus when selecting the beneficiaries.** This allows you to provide more focused and adequate services to the individuals. E.g., focusing on early childhood development makes school integration at a later stage more likely.
- Address gender disparities.** The unequal care responsibilities of mothers need to be actively addressed through psychosocial support and shared childcare responsibilities among parents.
- Ensure adaptability of services.** The needs of children with disabilities can change. The flexibility to adjust services over time ensures the daycare centre accommodates the evolving needs of children with disabilities.



**“Seeing tangible improvements in community attitudes and witnessing an improvement in the quality of life of children with disabilities, and their parents that is what makes this work meaningful.”**

– Edona Fazliu, Coordinator at AKM

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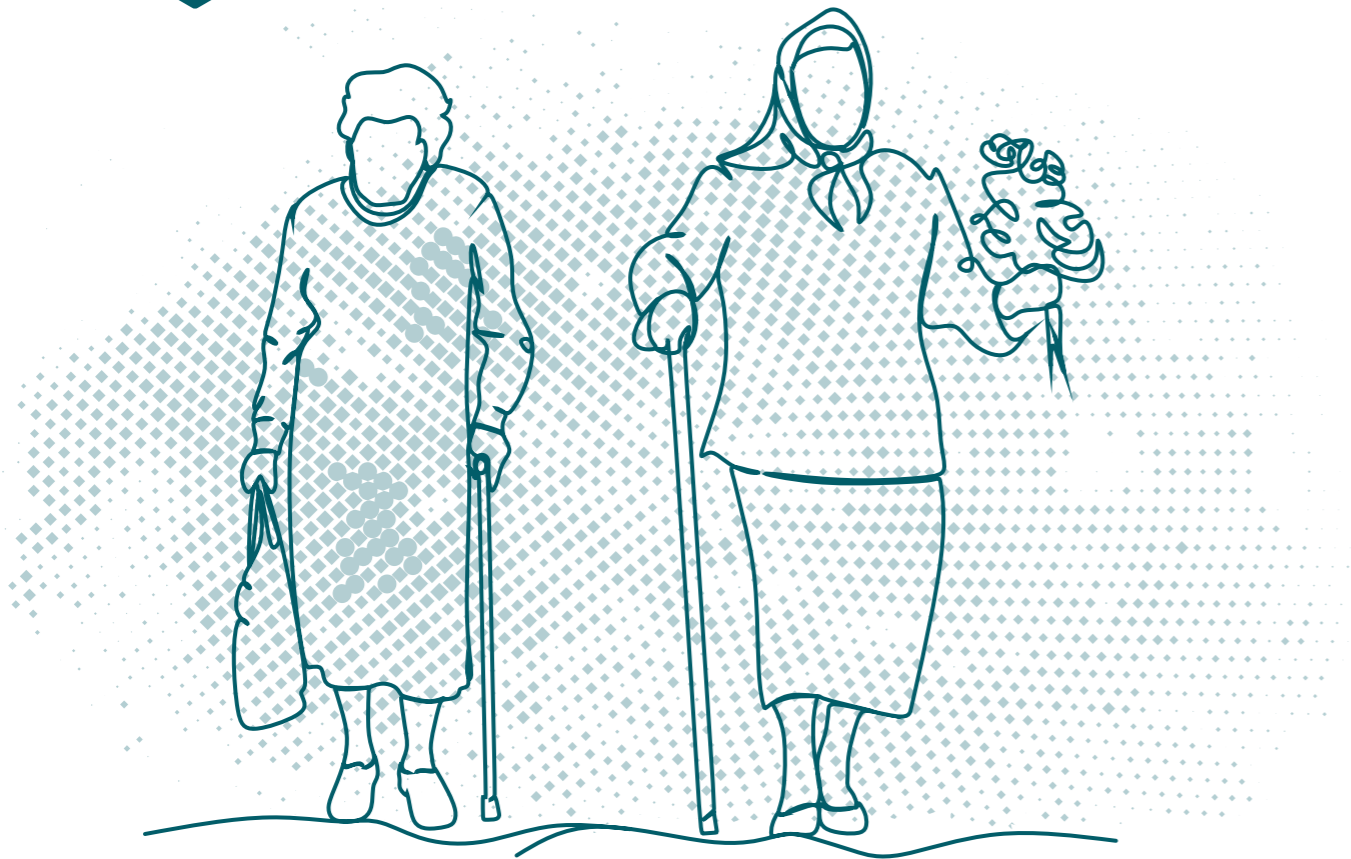
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## Moving Towards Connection: Creating Welcoming Spaces for Elderly Women



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

While elderly men in the city of Pristina frequently used the services provided by social and cultural centres, many elderly women, influenced by traditional norms, were reluctant to visit these facilities. This reluctance led to a significant risk of **social isolation among elderly women**, particularly those in rural areas and members of marginalised communities. Recent social mappings highlighted that elderly women face significant challenges related to limited access to healthcare, social isolation, and economic instability. As a result, their mental health needs are particularly pronounced due to the loneliness and socioeconomic difficulties they are experiencing.

To tackle social isolation and mental health issues among elderly women, the municipality of Pristina followed a twofold approach. Firstly, by raising awareness about the risk of social isolation and the services offered by the municipality and the centres - directly reaching out to elderly women already or at risk of feeling left behind. Secondly, by providing **gender-responsive activities in daycare centres and community-building to create welcoming spaces** where elderly women feel encouraged to participate and engage in social and emotional support programmes. The measure integrates awareness-raising campaigns, psychosocial support, and structured social activities to enhance the well-being of elderly women and foster their inclusion in the community.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Launching public awareness-raising campaigns** to promote services and reach elderly women
- **Organising social events** like tea parties, excursions, workshops, and picnics tailored to the needs of elderly women
- **Offering educational and recreational workshops** on mental and physical health, human rights, gender equality, as well as handicrafts, such as knitting and sewing
- **Providing individual and group psychosocial support** sessions with licensed psychologists to boost coping skills and confidence
- **Creating support and peer-exchange groups** for elderly women



**“I have never imagined that something as simple as knitting could bring back meaning to my life. Through the workshops, I have not only learned a new skill, but I also have made friends. We laugh, we share stories, and I feel connected again.”**

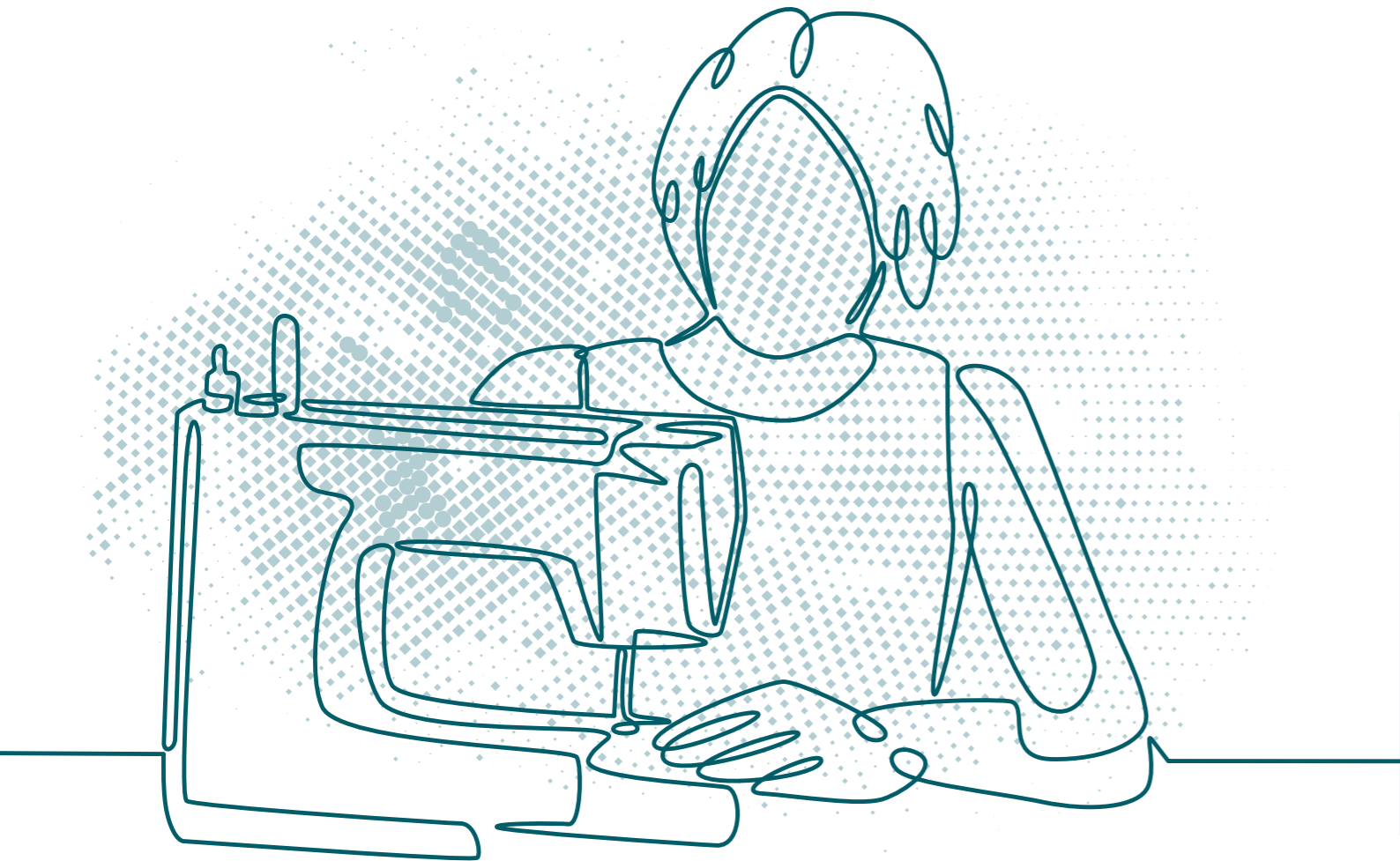
– Hana is an active participant in the centre's activities. She now helps organise group events and supports new members joining the sessions.

Another lady says: *“This programme gave me a new purpose and brought joy back into my life. I feel seen and valued.”* She regularly attends group discussions and the weekly knitting circle. Through these sessions, she strengthened her knowledge of social rights and municipal services and formed meaningful friendships, reducing her feelings of isolation.



*During the project we were confronted with resistance due to deep-rooted societal norms and prejudices. To overcome these hurdles, we had to engage the whole diversity our community has to offer, tailoring our approach as we go."*

– Edona Fazliu, Coordinator AKM



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- Needs of elderly women facing **multiple discrimination** were assessed to tailor the programme.
- Awareness-raising** through flyers, brochures, social media, and workshops to promote available services.
- Group discussions helped 26 elderly women and men to open up, **build connections**, and better understand their rights and available services.
- 17 elderly women received individual psychosocial support, **improving their emotional well-being**, confidence and communication.
- Handicraft workshops on knitting and sewing helped women **rediscover purpose and joy** - earning them certificates of recognition and in some cases even an income.
- Peer-support groups formed organically** and continued beyond the project.
- For the first time, a **programme for skills development** for elderly women was launched in a daycare centre.
- Families reported **positive changes** with women taking on more active community roles.

## What is important to know? | Some Useful Tips

- Address the **intersectionality of gender, age, and poverty**, as discrimination is often experienced due to a mix of different factors.
- Build strong alliances between public administrative bodies, local businesses and NGOs.** Cross-sectoral partnerships harness the unique strength, resources and expertise of each partner, thus driving immediate positive change in local communities. Building strong partnerships ensures long term sustainability of your local initiatives.
- Move towards more gender-responsive social services** explicitly responding to women's and men's needs, considering that women and men have specific needs and interests at different ages and stages of their lives.



*Through the implementation of this project, we created a space where every woman, regardless of her background or circumstances, can feel equal and valued. One of the most unexpected but powerful outcomes was the spontaneous creation of small support groups that continued even beyond our sessions. Women started sharing advice, organising small social activities, and supporting one another. Where there was once resistance or misunderstanding, we now see curiosity, dialogue, and a more inclusive atmosphere. These are the small but meaningful steps toward real gender equality and social inclusion."*

- Premtim Fazliu, Project Coordinator at the municipality of Pristina



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# Empowering Families, Creating Change: Reconnecting to an Inclusive Community



## What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

Recent social mappings in Delchevo found that more than half of the people with disabilities solely depend on daily care by their parents or other legal guardians. In many families of persons with disabilities especially **mothers** carry the full weight of care because there are no alternative support systems or public services in place. As a result, mothers are often unable to earn an income or take part in community life. Their children, in turn, miss out on opportunities for basic **rehabilitation, learning, and social inclusion**.

This constant pressure leads to emotional and physical exhaustion. Many mothers and persons with disabilities experience deep isolation. Until now, there have been no services offering professional counselling or therapy to address these specific, gendered challenges – or to give families the support they urgently need.

To improve the well-being of persons with disabilities as well as their mothers, the municipality of Delchevo now provides **counselling and counselling therapy**. The introduction of counselling services aims to tackle gender-specific challenges within families of person with disabilities. These services support mothers by strengthening their psychological well-being, encouraging fathers to take an **active role in caregiving**, and offering targeted counselling for persons with disabilities. **Rehabilitation and reintegration** services, combined with tailored educational programmes for persons with disabilities help promote greater independence and improve their socio-economic prospects.

## What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Understanding people's individual needs** through respectful conversations and engagement with the beneficiaries
- **Recruitment of professionals for service delivery** as well as for continuous coordination among local actors (schools, municipalities, local NGOs)
- **Establishment of counselling services for groups and individuals** in a dedicated counselling centre, in line with legal requirements
- **Developing rehabilitation and reintegration programmes**, along with educational offers for adults with disabilities
- **Community work and public outreach** through workshops, local media, and a social media campaign



*Denis, a young Roma man with a moderate intellectual disability and a minor speech impediment, rarely left home and had never been apart from his father. Now, Denis is one of the most active members at Social Club of the daycare centre, which offers rehabilitation, reintegration, and counselling. He quickly gained confidence, learnt new skills, and grew more independent. Denis is the first candidate for full rehabilitation services, and he is excited to return every week.*

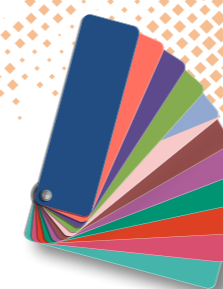
“One of the most effective strategies to promote social inclusion and gender equality has been to include vulnerable groups and their families in activities that foster their integration, while simultaneously breaking down stereotypes and discriminatory practices in society.”

– Irena Nikolov,  
Coordinator at ZELS



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- **Adaptation and equipment** of the centre to enable inclusive service provision
- **Licensing** processes were initiated for both counselling and counselling therapy services
- Setting up an interdisciplinary team to **connect professional services** in Delchevo, supported by a workshop to define roles, coordinate efforts, and identify beneficiaries
- **Revision, improvement and piloting** of existing job skills assessment programmes and instruments
- Staff gained **hands-on experience** with the assessments and began implementing them
- Licensing of the sewing machine training module was initiated as part of broader **vocational capacity building**
- **Increased emotional stability of families**, e.g. through individual psychosocial counselling sessions for mothers and fathers as well as through various workshop formats
- Continued media coverage of activities at the centre, led to **increased visibility of the centre's activities** and promoted **awareness** on disability inclusion
- Increased **sensitisation among municipal councillors** in Delchevo through workshops
- Enhanced **awareness among business representatives** (mostly from the textile industry) about the benefits of inclusive employment and the concept of social mentoring



## What is important to know? Some Useful Tips

- **Invest time in setting up functional coordination and project management mechanisms** among all local actors and institutions involved. This will help you in adequately responding to the specific needs of the target group(s) later on in a systematic and timely manner.
- **Openly address the aspect of stigmatisation and attitudes of distrust** in public institutions among persons with disabilities and their families, especially mothers. Create a non-formal atmosphere and facilitate exchange on eye-level.
- **Work preventively to avoid socio-economic isolation** of mothers and their children with disabilities from the very beginning.
- **Offer adequate support to strengthen the employability and socio-economic situation** of persons with disabilities. Combine rehabilitation and reintegration measures with adequate educational offers.

“The lack of support systems in the form of social services for persons with disabilities led to limited skills for independent living and had a direct effect on the socio-economic isolation of parents. After the workshops we have conducted, we realised parents had gained greater self-confidence and an interest in engaging in social activities and join the labour market. At the same time, businesses have shown openness to employ persons with disabilities.”

– Suzana Petrovska,  
Advisor at the municipality of Delchevo

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## Stronger Paths: Supporting the Rehabilitation and Reintegration Services for Women and Girls with Disabilities



### What was needed? | Core Problem & Demand

The “Poraka Nasha” centre in the municipality of Kumanovo was only recently licensed as a provider for rehabilitation and reintegration services for persons with disabilities. It used to serve 21 beneficiaries. Due to **limited capacities**, the centre used a “first come, first served” approach, which unintentionally led to **fewer women and girls accessing services**. Social mapping showed that many women and girls with disabilities feel disconnected from the support offered, reinforcing their social and economic exclusion.

To become more accessible, the “Poraka Nasha” centre expanded its services by using standardised, professional tools for **rehabilitation and reintegration**. The “Independent Living Skills Programme” was upgraded and became more gender-responsive, focusing on building **self-confidence and income-generating skills**. To reach and motivate more women and girls with intellectual disabilities, the centre also launched a video campaign and workshops to raise awareness about the services and their benefits.

### What was done? | Interventions & Activities

- **Expanding rehabilitative and reintegrative services** at the “Poraka Nasha” centre using gender-responsive, innovative, and standardised instruments, delivered by trained professionals
- **Developing job-related skills** for people with intellectual disabilities, with a focus on women and girls, to increase employability and access to the labour market
- **Organising sensitisation workshops for parents** to highlight the importance of supporting their children's independence, with a focus on girls and women with disabilities
- **Raising public awareness and visibility** of the centre's services to reach out to more women and girls with intellectual disabilities
- **Strengthening collaboration between municipalities** to extend access to services for more beneficiaries across different areas



*One of the biggest challenges in North Macedonia is recognising the needs of vulnerable groups and transforming them into specific, targeted services. Thanks to social mapping, it was easier to identify the needs and develop appropriate activities and measures in line with the needs of vulnerable groups.”*

– Irena Nikolov,  
Coordinator at ZELS

**“I will always be grateful for the help and support I received at the “Poraka Nasha” centre, and I hope to return the service to others down the road. At first, I was ashamed to go to the centre, but with time I understood that it is a wonderful place full of people who want what is best for me and who were by my side when I struggled most. Thanks to them, I want to go back to the faculty, learn new skills, find a job, be independent, and ultimately help others.”**

– A young woman learnt how to better deal with emotional and social challenges and improved her independent living skills at the “Poraka Nasha” centre



## What was achieved, or improved? | Results & Impact

- Printing machines and raw materials for the **production of printed products**, like tea mugs and bags, were procured to support the rehabilitation and reintegration services. The products were marketed on social media to boost visibility and support income generation.
- **Standardised tools** were introduced to assess the work abilities of persons with disabilities; 12 individual work plans were developed and the working capacity of 12 beneficiaries was assessed after staff training.
- The **“Independent Living Skills Programme”** was upgraded through the procurement of assistive devices and rehabilitation equipment, in cooperation with the municipality of Kumanovo.
- **Educational workshops** were held for parents (9 participants per session) and municipal stakeholders (13 in Kumanovo, 12 at a regional council meeting), focusing on disability rights, municipal responsibilities, and available services at the “Poraka Nasha” centre.
- The Regional Social Protection Council was reaffirmed, with preparatory meetings initiated among municipal representatives.
- The experiences from Kumanovo and the “Poraka Nasha” centre were shared with other municipalities in the Northeastern part of North Macedonia through the **Regional Social Protection Council**.
- Three **consultative sessions** with parents gathered insights on the needs and interests of their children.
- Two **individual psychosocial support** sessions were conducted with beneficiaries who have potential for work inclusion but show limited interest.
- The centre and its services were promoted through workshops and a 60-day social media video campaign, reaching over 72,000 viewers in Kumanovo and other cities (incl. Skopje, Kriva Palanka, Kratovo, Veles, etc.).

## What is important to know? | Some Useful Tips

- **Improving social services has to go hand in hand with awareness-raising** among local actors, communities, and beneficiaries. Therefore, it is helpful to integrate specific measures to increase the visibility of services as well as enhance the competences of local actors from the very beginning.
- **Including neighbouring municipalities** helps to broaden the scope of the intervention, widens the pool of beneficiaries, and encourages the replication of successful approaches.
- **Promote the talents of women with intellectual disabilities and make them visible**, e.g., by focusing on marketable products to be produced by the beneficiaries being trained at the centre.
- **Actively involve local businesses to identify opportunities for employment** for persons with intellectual disabilities, ensuring that women and girls are not overlooked.
- **Close cooperation with the Centre for Social Work** can be valuable in the identification of beneficiaries.



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