TRUST

Towards Replicable forms of Support and Tools for Women's Specialist Services during crisis

The TRUST project in a nutshell: objectives, methodologies and main findings

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on violence against women across the world. Violence Against Women (VAW), especially Domestic Violence (DV), dramatically increased during the pandemic, leading to a surge in demand for support services for women survivors of violence. The lockdowns created a 'pandemic within a pandemic' of violence against women, with perpetrators using social distancing measures to further control and harm their victims. Women faced multiple vulnerabilities and barriers in accessing support services, including difficulties in seeking help due to confinement measures and increased risks of violence at home.

In the absence of robust responses by governments in many countries, the pandemic highlighted the crucial role women's organisations in violence prevention and providing support for victims - buffering inadequate state support and providing an informal safety net to women and their children. Women's Specialist Support Services (WSSs) had to rapidly and resiliently adapt existing operations programmes to meet escalating demand and sustain vital services to meet the urgent needs of women and children.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic also put additional strain on already stretched operational capacity of WSSs, including the need to shift to remote service provision, lack of skills and technological knowhow, inadequate risk assessment tools, breakdown in multi-agency mechanisms, and lack of economic and human resources to respond to increased demand for services.

Various Member States attempted to support WSSs through a range of measures such as awareness raising campaigns, communication tools, emergency shelter accommodation, and protective legislation. Despite these efforts, there were gaps and bottlenecks in the support provided, emphasizing the ongoing need for ensuring that innovations by WSSs are supported to ensure continuity of high quality services for women and children impacted by violence, during and after crises.

To tackle these issues, the aim of the TRUST project (Project 101049329 — TRUST — CERV-2021-DAPHNE) was to ensure the capacity and resilience of WSSs to effectively adapt, improve and upscale their services and interventions to reflect the challenges brought by the COVID-19 crisis, as well as develop robust mechanisms in preparation for future emergencies/crises.

The TRUST partners engaged in a collaborative learning process in order to understand the context in which WSSs operate, take stock and assess measures adopted to respond to the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the needs of stakeholders and women survivors. After this first stock-taking phase, the TRUST partners implemented their pilot programmes to test innovative methods in service delivery, aiming to lay the groundwork for more resilient and adaptable WSSs in the future.

Key Questions Addressed by the TRUST Project

Understand the context: What was the impact of the pandemic on support delivery of WSSs?

Sustainability and Innovation: How can innovative practices be sustained and strengthened to better protect and support women victims and their children?

Support for WSS and Staff: How can WSSs and their staff be better supported to ensure continuity of services, resilience, and staff well-being?

Barriers: What are the legal, policy, and institutional barriers that impede effective responses to violence against women in crisis and post-crisis contexts?

Policy Recommendations: What policy recommendations can we take forward?

TRUST Aims and Objectives

The TRUST project was funded by the EU Citizens Equality Rights and Values (CERV) Programme with the main goal of **enhancing the capacity and resilience of WSSs in crisis situations**, specifically in response to the challenges posed by the **COVID-19 pandemic** and its aftermath. The TRUST project aimed to **support innovation by enhance the capacity and resilience of WSSs to effectively adapt, enhance, and expand their services**. This includes developing **strategies** and **new mechanisms to prepare for future emergencies or crises**.

Specific Objectives

Assessment: Take stock of and assess measures adopted by WSSs to protect women victims of intimate partner violence and their children during crises.

Capacity building: Improve the capacity of WSSs through the development of support tools to enhance sustainability and resilience during crises.

Staff support: Address the strain on service provider staff by developing practices and tools that support staff well-being during crises.

Knowledge sharing: Provide a platform for sharing knowledge and practices among the staff of support services to facilitate effective service delivery to women and children.

Communication: Communicate and promote project results among targeted professionals, stakeholders, and the public at national and EU levels.

Project's Consortium

The project's consortium is composed by the coordinator – the **Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies (MIGS)** – and other organisations:

- **Autonome Österreichische Frauenhäuser (AÖF)**

- **Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation (BGRF)**

- **Istituto per la Ricerca Sociale (IRS)**

- **Rel.Azioni Positive**

- **Association for the Prevention and Handling of Violence in the Family (APHVF/SPAVO)**

- **Fundació SURT**

- **União de Mulheres Alternativa e Resposta (UMAR)**

- **Union of Women Associations of Heraklion (UWAH)**

The seven-EU-countries partnership worked in close collaboration to pilot test programmes that are tailor made to respond to the specific needs of WSSs at the local contexts. This is done both in terms of service users, organisations and operators - in order to implement effective and consistent activities to foster the adaptability and resilience of WSSs.

Activities

Mapping practices
Identification and documentation of practices, measures, and tools adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic to address VAW.

State of the art: Understanding the "impact" of COVID-19 effects of COVID-19 on WSSs and VAW.

Repository of measures and tools: Development of a repository based on desk research and a survey conducted in Austria, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Portugal, and Spain, highlighting measures to address VAW during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods.
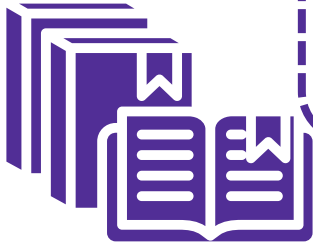
Analysis and improvement
Collection and analysis of practices in partner organisations to identify areas for improvement and implementation of local pilot programmes.

Needs assessment: Identification of major obstacles and challenges faced during the pandemic through an EU-wide survey.

Peer exchanges and focus groups: Facilitation of experience-sharing across seven EU contexts.
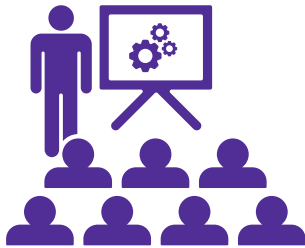
Change as an Opportunity

Capacity building
Through transnational online training to strengthen the capacity of WSSs staff.

Training workshops: **F**ive online transnational training workshops for WSS staff.

Manual of change: Documentation of novel practices and processes introduced by project partners, focusing on areas such as self-care, staff supervision, fundraising, crisis case management, digital violence, online support services, service promotion, and community outreach.

Pilot programmes
Implementation and evaluation of new practices and processes in partner organisations.

Pilot actions: Implementation of interventions across seven countries, involving training, capacity building, awareness raising, dissemination, and networking activities.

Outreach: Collaboration with WSSs operators, staff, women participants, medical staff, and stakeholders in various awareness and support activities.

Main achievements

Taking Stock

✓ **59 respondents to the EU survey**
Conducted in 7 EU countries, highlighting measures taken to address VAW during the pandemic and post-pandemic periods

✓ **2 peer exchanges**
Transnational visits in order to exchange knowledge and experience in horizontal scaling-up pratices among experts/specialists in WSSs

✓ **2 focus groups**
Online meetings to foster learning between expert organisations and the consortium

ONLINE DATABASE

A repository of practices, measures and tools for effective responses during emergency and crisis situations

Change as an Opportunity

## Training workshops

Over 100 front-line professionals trained through **5 online transnational workshops** on the following topics:

- **Self-care and well-being**
- **Team Building, communication and supervision**
- **Fundraising**
- **Community outreach**
- **Online chat services**
- **Advertisement of chat services**
- **Addressing the digital dimension of violence**
- **Case management in crisis situations**

MANUAL OF CHANGE
Collection of practices & processes
for Women Support Services
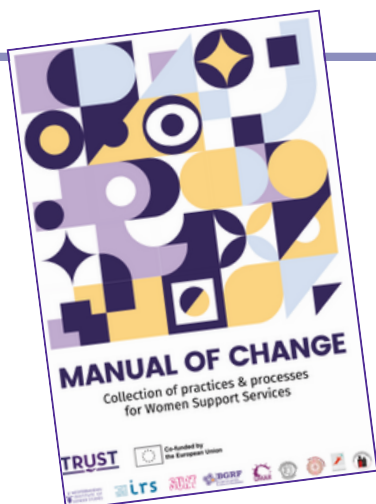
✓ **Manual of change**
Comprehensive document detailing **novel practices and processes**

Pilot 23 actions

23 pilot interventions implemented across **7** countries:
- **6** implemented internal organisational training (BG, CY, PT, ES) and capacity building activities (AT, BG, IT)
- **5** partners carried out awareness raising, dissemination and networking activities involving local communities (AT, CY, EL, ES, PT)
- **2** partners developed new services to respond to the specific needs of women affected by VAW (BG, PT)

Outreach

Engagement with **WSSs operators, and staff, women survivors, medical staff, and other stakeholders** in various activities:

- **12** counselling sessions supporting **4** women and **8** children.

- **162** WSSs operators and staff members involved in trainings and capacity building activities.

- **78** women survivors involved in awareness raising and networking activities.

- **2** hospitals, involving approximately **25** medical staff and **6** stakeholders (local associations), were involved in awareness raising and networking activities.
- **100** persons participated in community outreach activities

✓ Manual of operations

A roadmap for WSSs outlining **pathways to resilience and sustainability**.

Social Impact Assessment

The project envisaged a social impact assessment of the pilot programmes implemented at the local level. The goal was to assess the social impact of new measures introduced and/or adapted to assist WSSs and to identify potential future implications of the proposed actions.

The Theory of Change approach underpinned the social impact assessment. This strategic planning process allowed the consortium experts to identify potential challenges and risks in advance, thereby enabling them to proactively develop mitigation strategies.

The Theory of Change approach helps identify the necessary conditions to achieve the objectives of the pilot programmes, as well as to collect qualitative and quantitative information on the perceived changes generated by the pilot interventions. The adoption of the Theory of Change approach throughout the TRUST project activities helped align the allocated resources with the planned activities towards achieving the desired outcomes. It contributed to clearly outlining the pathways from inputs to impacts.

Theory of Change

Root causes

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Inputs

↓

Outputs

↓

Outcomes

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Impacts
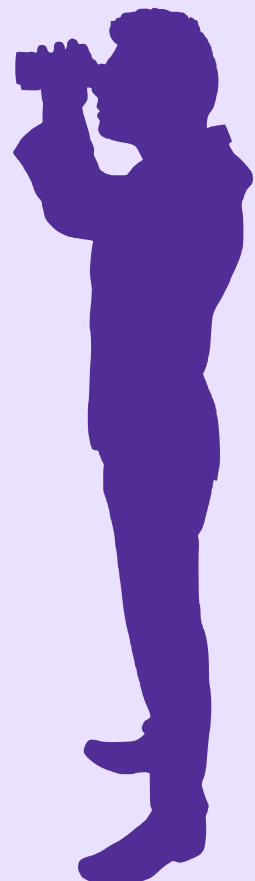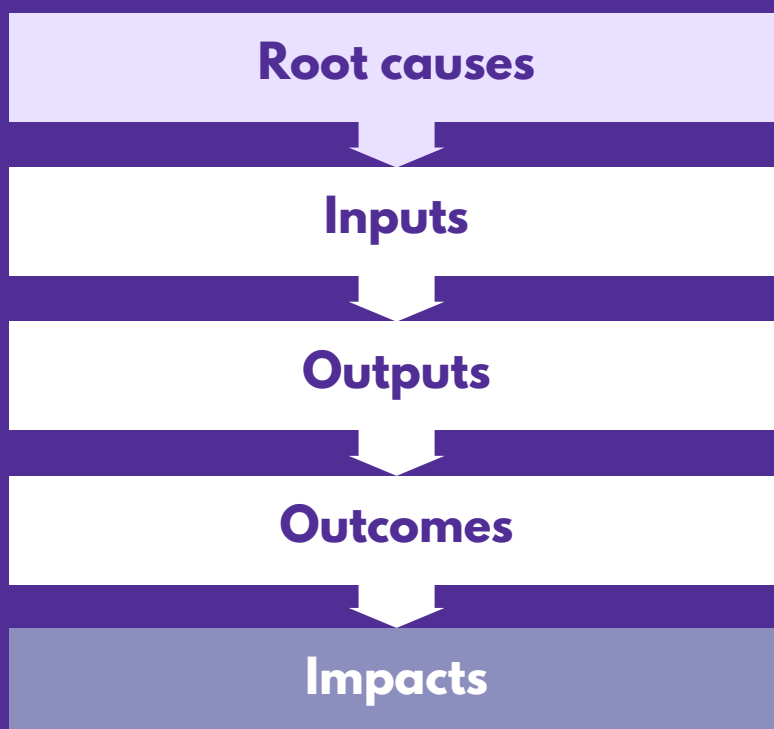
Root causes	• • Increasing in incidence and severity of VAW during the pandemic • • Changes in survivors' needs • • Lack of awareness of VAW among citizens • • Need for stronger safety networks for women • • Low competencies among operators for the delivery of specific support • • Increased strain and burnout for WSSs operators • • Lack of awareness on the digital dimensions of violence • • Barriers in reaching women survivors of violence or at risk • • Lack of effective and flexible WSSs' organisational structures • • Lack of financial resources • • Increased vulnerabilities of both survivors and WSSs operators

Inputs/Activities	**Capacity building for WSSs operators to improve the sustainability of services post-pandemic**	**Empowerment of women survivors to overcome challenges**	**Innovations to WSSs service delivery**	**Community engagement in countering the VAW**

Outputs	• Trainings and capacity building meetings and workshops • Operators involved	• Women and operators involved • Meetings held • Number and typology of tools used	• Number and typology of beneficiaries and stakeholders involved in the activities • Operators involved • Innovative activities identified and implemented	• Citizens and stakeholders engaged • Meetings held

Outcomes	• Increased knowledge and awareness on VAW (including the digital dimension of VAW); • Enhanced skills of operators; • Better case management; • Increasing attention to operators' needs.	• Increased knowledge and awareness on VAW (including the digital dimension of VAW); • Increased involvement in WSS activities.	• New approaches in provision of support; • Raised awareness on innovative activities for support.	• Creation of a support network; Stronger collaboration among stakeholders; Increased engagement of women and citizens in WSSs' activities/services; Raised awareness of VAW.

Impacts

On WSSs' operators

- Empowerment and improvement of capacities
- Improvement in the efficiency in support provision
- Enhancement of engagement in support activities
- Improvement in well-being and resilience

On women and women survivors of violence

- Empowerment of women at risk/survivors of violence
- Improvement in engagement of women at risk/survivors of violence in support activities
- Improvement of capacities and awareness
- Improvement in resilience

On community and organizations

- Improvement in visibility of WSSs
- Improvement of provision of support for women through enhanced capacities of WSSs
- Improvement of WSSs' resilience
- Improvement in engagement and empowerment of communities and stakeholders

From theory to practice: key findings of the pilot programmes

The social impact assessment reveals that the TRUST project resulted in significant progress and had promising initial impacts. These points to the importance of sustained efforts and strategic actions to ensure long-term sustainability and empowerment for WSSs as well as the communities they serve. The implementation of pilot programmes produced both immediate outcomes and potentially long-term positive impacts on the support services provided to women survivors of gender-based violence. The Social Impact Assessment's main findings refer to the relevant following key areas.
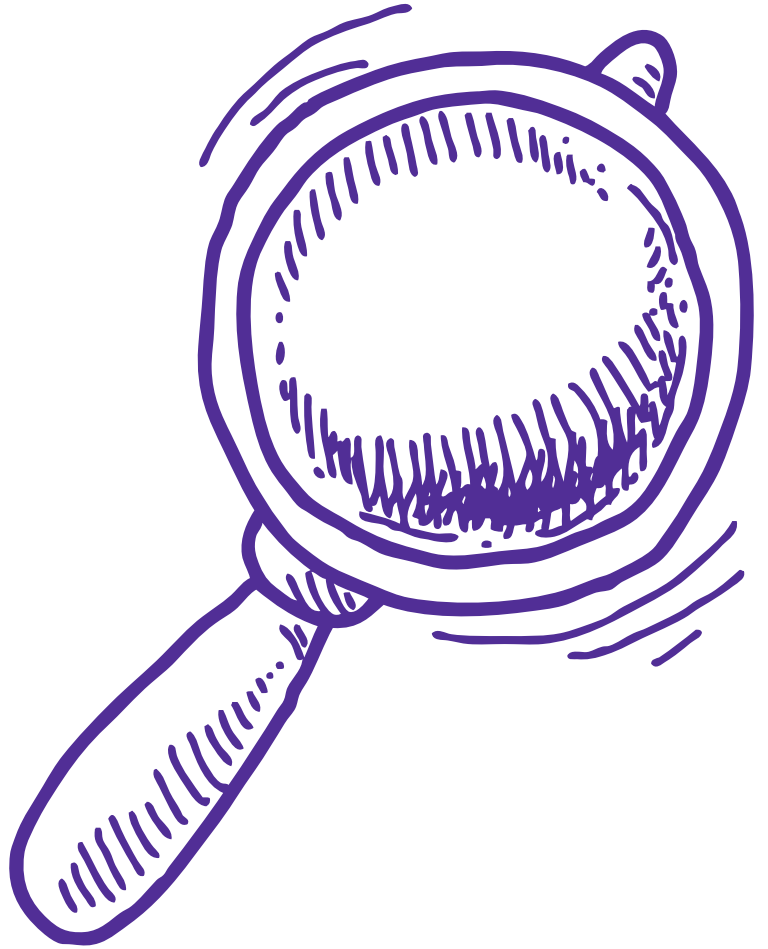
Enhanced capacity and sustainability of WSSs

Empowerment of women survivors
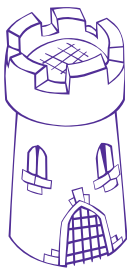
Resilience of women and communities

Innovation and adaptation

Enhanced capacity and sustainability of WSSs

The pilot programmes focused extensively on building the capacity of WSSs operators and improving the sustainability of services beyond the pandemic period through targeted initiatives. This included training and capacity-building actions, reorganisational efforts and the introduction of new services such as online support and counselling.
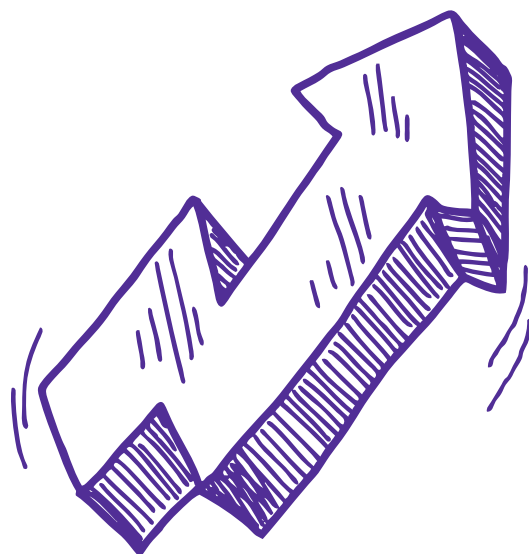
Additionally, fundraising and reorganisation initiatives played a crucial role in ensuring the sustainability of WSSs and their capability to effectively address the needs of women survivors beyond the pandemic. Networking and dissemination activities further strengthened support networks for women survivors, formalising alternative support approaches and fostering stronger community ties.

Expand training and capacity-building initiatives

Continue to invest in training and capacity-building programs to further improve the competencies of WSSs operators and increase the overall capacity of these services.

Introduce and maintain new services

Develop and sustain new services such as counselling for specific groups, to ensure comprehensive support is available.

**Strengthen fundraising and reorganisation efforts**

Implement and support fundraising and reorganisation initiatives, to ensure the financial and operational sustainability of WSSs beyond the pandemic period.

Enhance networking and dissemination activities

Focus on networking and dissemination efforts to formalise alternative support approaches. This includes building and strengthening support networks for women survivors to ensure they have access to a wide range of resources and services.

Empowerment of women survivors
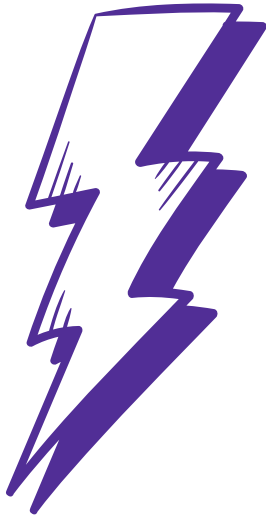
Improved access to specialist support services through awareness-raising and outreach actions were observed as crucial inenhancing their ability to seek and receive help. Increased access to specialised support services has indeed empowered women survivors by providing them with the necessary resources and support to overcome challenges. Training programmes on various challenging issues provided women with opportunities to exchange ideas, strengthen personal networks, and foster resilience. Activities promoting active community roles for women further enhanced their empowerment, creating a supportive environment for personal and collective growth.

Increase awareness-raising and outreach efforts

Continue and expand awareness-raising and outreach actions to ensure that women survivors are informed about and can access specialist support services.

Provide training programmes on various challenging issues to give women opportunities to exchange ideas, strengthen personal networks and foster resilience.

Expand training programs

Promote active community roles

Encourage activities that promote active community roles for women, thereby enhancing their empowerment and creating a supportive environment for both personal and collective growth.

Resilience of women and communities

The project also contributed to increasing women's resilience and their ability to navigate crises. Indeed, the positive changes observed in the pilot programmes have extended beyond individual survivors to impact the broader community by strengthening networks, collaboration and community engagement. Training and activities designed to improve knowledge of digital risks and security bolstered women's online confidence and autonomy. Informal platforms for discussion and exchange supported women's resilience and active involvement in feminist issues.
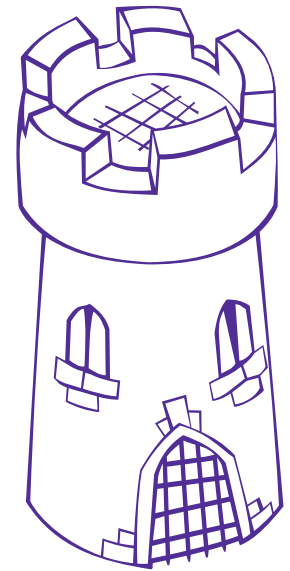
Community-based actions, including roundtables and emergency contact initiatives, raised awareness of gender-based violence and improved community support structures. Involving citizens and other service providers in networking and awareness-raising activities enhanced community resilience, fostering a sense of solidarity and collaboration in addressing gender-based issues.

Enhance training on digital risks and security

Continue and expand training programmes designed to improve women's knowledge of digital risks and security, thereby bolstering their online confidence and autonomy.

Support informal platforms for discussion

Maintain and develop informal platforms to support women's resilience and active involvement in feminist issues.

Implement community-based actions

Organise community-based actions, such as roundtables and emergency contact initiatives, to raise awareness of gender-based violence and improve community support structures.
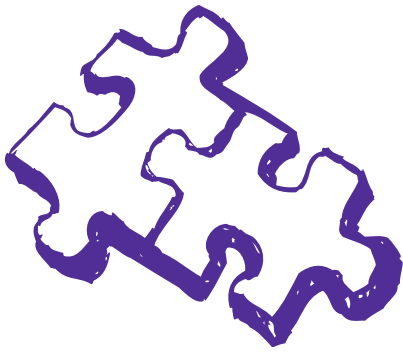
Foster networking and collaboration

Involve citizens and other service providers in networking and awareness-raising activities to enhance community resilience, fostering a sense of solidarity and collaboration in addressing gender-based issues.

Innovation and adaptation

The project can enhance its long-term sustainability and maximise its impacts on the community through investing in targeted capacity-building efforts to equip staff with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively utilise these new tools. To further build on the success of the project's innovative approaches, it will be crucial to continue refining and improving these tools and techniques.

This may involve gathering feedback from users to identify areas for improvement, testing new features or functionalities, and ensuring that the platforms and training materials are user-friendly and accessible. Indeed, fostering collaboration with stakeholders and fostering a culture of continuous improvement will be essential in driving lasting changes and ensuring the project's continued relevance in the face of evolving challenges and opportunities. Through a proactive and adaptive approach, the project can set itself up for sustainable success and make a lasting impact on the communities it supports.

The project's innovative approaches showed promising results. The use of online platforms and digital training have demonstrated significant potential in improving the efficiency and effectiveness of WSSs operations. Future efforts should focus on refining these innovations and ensuring their integration into the standard operations of WSSs.

Focus on refining online platforms and digital training methods and ensure their integration into the standard operations of WSSs. This will enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of WSSs operations, contributing to the project's long-term sustainability.

Refine and integrate innovations

Gather and implement user feedback

Gather feedback from users to identify areas for improvement. Test new features or functionalities and ensure that the platforms and training materials remain user-friendly and accessible.

Collaborate with stakeholders and foster a culture of continuous improvement and innovation. This will be essential for driving lasting change and ensuring the project's relevance amidst evolving challenges and opportunities.

Foster stakeholder collaboration

Forward Looking

The TRUST project has demonstrated significant achievements in enhancing the capacity and resilience of WSSs across 7 EU countries, creating a robust framework for supporting women victims of violence and ensuring the continuity and resilience of Women's Specialist Services in times of crisis and beyond.
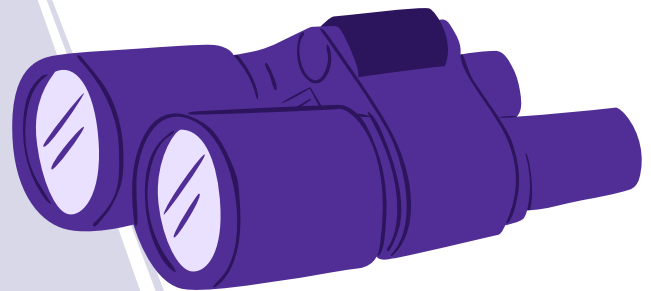
The initial results indicate that the TRUST project has successfully laid the groundwork for long-term impacts. However, to fully realise these prospects and to move forward, the project's main findings emphasise the importance of sustaining and strengthening innovative practices, supporting WSSs staff, and addressing legal, financial, policy and institutional barriers to improving responses to VAW in crisis and post-crisis contexts. The project's main findings also highlight the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of WSSs and contribute to ensuring lasting impacts.