

Ecumenical Women's Initiative

ANNUAL REPORT

2023

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Foreword

"Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."

- Helen Keller

While this year ushered in dark times for many countries and communities, we witnessed outpourings of solidarity and collective voices which opened avenues of hope. In such times it is clear that we are not alone nor can we act alone, and it has been many of the collaborative actions which have opened new opportunities for EWI and the women in our region. Collaborative resource mobilisation saw us accessing a significant EU grant in partnership with two other women's funds which will enable us to offer larger grants to grassroots women's organisations working on combatting and preventing gender-based violence. More collaboration with women's funds resulted in unexpected funds for grantmaking in the region from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs while after the arid pandemic years, new revived networking events brought us into new regional and international spaces for exchange, debate and strategising. In collaboration with women's funds in Europe, we raised issues in the European Parliament, advocating for changes in how civil society is funded.

Despite tectonic shifts in the funding landscape with some key private funders withdrawing from the sector, we continued to increase our grantmaking programme both in the number of grants made and in the amount of funds being moved to women-led grassroots organisation in the region. Advocating for changes in international funding practices was one of our priorities this year and will continue into 2024 and beyond. It is our hope that the trends used by women's funds like EWI will be brought into mainstream philanthropy and that we will be successful in influencing future funding models. This we hope in the long-term will ensure women's access to accessible and manageable financial support that does not overwhelm but enables them to flourish as they nurture their spaces and make connections, inspiring and motivating other women to become changemakers for peace.



Carolyn Boyd Tomasović
EWI Director

Ecumenical Women's Initiative

“When you are having a hard time somehow, you come across a person, an event that brings you back to the vision you are striving for, and that for me is the beauty of engaging for peace and the beauty of standing up for justice.”

Ana Raffai, feminist theologian and peace activist

EWI is a Croatian women's fund which acts at a regional level offering solidarity and financial resources and accompaniment to women's organisations and activists in Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia for creative and innovative approaches and support in line with their needs.

EWI facilitates safe spaces for diverse actors to engage in inter-faith dialogue on peace and reconciliation, bridging secular and non-secular women, institutions and other civil society actors, and enabling peace building initiatives. At an international level EWI advocates within the funding community for investing in women and girls as actors for social change.

Our vision is of a just, pluralistic and peaceful society in which:

- diversity is a source of understanding and connectivity, and a strength and source of creativity,
- women live in safe spaces and have a role in private and public life in harmony with their talents and personal choice, and
- society and religion bring people together and promote and support the achievement of full equality for women in dignity and opportunities.



Bočarski klub osoba s invaliditetom Nada grada Požege i PSŽ

Grantmaking

Supporting community activism

EWI supports an informal grantee network of over 160 women's organisations to cultivate their creativity and develop their own ideas as they address issues impacting their lives and those of their communities while ensuring they have the autonomy to make their own decisions about how resources are used.

Through several open calls, EWI's grantmaking programme supports women's groups and activists to cultivate their creativity, develop their own ideas, while maintaining their autonomy to develop their own budgets.

This year, EWI made 85 grants totalling over €460,000 to 49 women-led organisations in the region, an exciting increase on the previous year. Through the activities of our grantee partners, some of the most frequent issues being addressed were related to combatting and preventing gender-based violence, social inclusion of women and girls living with disabilities, and women in leadership. Other topics included women's mental health, income generation, gender discrimination and intercultural/religious dialogue.

The success of their approach is the credibility and trust they have built, and the spaces and connections they nurture which inspire and motivate other women to act. Women bringing change in their communities contributes to changing public opinion.

“The presence of women in building peace brings new dimensions, new ways of understanding the conflict itself and also the resolution of that conflict because they bring their own experiences as those positioned differently in society.”

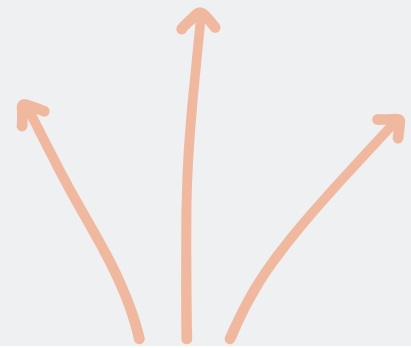
Zilka Spahić Šiljak
feminist theologian



Udruženje Ženska Vizija, Bosnia & Herzegovina

Combatting injustice

Issues addressed by grantee partners



Social inclusion of women and girls living with disabilities

Grantee partner: Udruženje žena NERA, Bosnia & Herzegovina

Supporting mothers of children with disabilities with psychological support, occupational therapy and social inclusion activities.

For the first time in many years, I heard myself laugh out loud. I became a volunteer and was invited to be a panellist at the "Planet of Women" Festival. I am happy to be Amra again. My identity has been restored; I'm not just living the role of a mother of a child who requires constant care.



Gender discrimination

Grantee partner: Udruženje građana Romani cikna, Serbia

Empowering and training Roma women to take on the role of workshop leaders to raise awareness and build realisation that they have the right to a life without violence.

I know that I don't have the same attitude towards daughters and sons in the family, and I see that this is a big mistake. That's why men are also violent later, because everything is allowed to them since they were little! And in the end, they get all the inheritance. Nothing is given to female children. I will behave differently in the future. I will try to talk to my husband as well, so that he changes the relationship.



Combatting and preventing gender-based violence

Grantee partner: Udruga za pomoć žrtvama Bijeli krug Hrvatske, Croatia

Offering legal and psychological assistance to victims/survivors of domestic and sexual violence, strengthen partnership and networking in the support system.

After we gave her all the necessary legal information and advice, she took her children and left and decided to take her husband to court. We managed to fund a lawyer to make sure she succeeds with her lawsuit. After all that, what changed the most about her was that she gained the will to live and the strength to fight for her rights.

Affording change

Actions led by grantee partners



Women in leadership

Grantee partner: OŽ Žensko Lobi, North Macedonia

Strengthening local women's councils through educational of rural women on civic activism and women's participation in local government bodies.

We managed to sustain the continuity of our work and to maintain the informal network of rural women that we created over the past two years. Through networking and educating twenty-three of the most active women, their capacities and skills for starting and representing local initiatives improved and we contributed to the sustainability of Local Women's Councils in nine villages.



Women's mental health

Grantee partner: Gruaja Fermere, Kosovo

Raising public awareness around prevention of violence, strengthen mutual solidarity around gender discrimination and offer support services to women survivors of violence.

She survived psychological and moral violence. She attempted suicide several times and was saved at the last moment by her sister. Attending the training and talking with the trainer and other women helped her to turn her life around. She returned to her family and sought the inheritance that belongs to her according to the advice of our trainer, who is a lawyer by profession. Now she is thinking of opening her own business to complete a trade where she could be financially independent in the future.



Women's well-being

Grantee partner: Klub žena liječenih na dojci Omiš, Croatia

Awareness raising among women on breast cancer prevention and increasing quality of life for post-op women through public education and campaigns.

The findings showed a malignant tumour in my right breast and I tried to be positive after a radical mastectomy. I joined a group providing psychological help. I met other women and new friendships were formed. I started volunteering and try to participate in all the Club's activities. I advise my friends and acquaintances to perform preventive examinations and participate in training sessions. All these activities had a positive effect, and I feel stronger and more confident in myself.

Grantmaking

Power of the collective

“Feminist ethics are aimed at creating horizontal networks of activists and associations. Not a hierarchical type of leadership or way of acting rather the network model advocated by women where all should be involved, all voices are heard, and that together we bring all our resources to the table and not cultivate competitive models.”

Zilka Spahić Šiljak, feminist theologian

Creating partnerships and building alliances is a key building block in movement building. Yet, the ability to travel and have meaningful encounters with peer organisations is a luxury particularly for rural grassroots organisations working on a volunteer basis with stretched resources. In response to this priority, EWI last year supported nineteen women-led grassroots organisation with over EUR 70,000 to travel to different countries in the region, exchange knowledge and experience with peer organisations, share and coordinate their resources and build strategies. The aim was to strengthen and encourage activism at a regional level around common issues and build the power of the collective. Of these grantee partners, several have gone on to develop joint activities and campaigns through EWI's Collaborative grants.

Grantee partner: Dečiji centar, Serbia

Building a roadmap of organisations and institutions working with girls and youth from vulnerable groups and strengthen capacities to provide better professional support to young people.

Grantee partner: Udruženje građana oštećenog vida Tuzla, BiH

“The UN invited us to the presentation of the Report on the State of Human Rights of Persons with Disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. We raised the question about to what extent safe houses are accessible for women with disabilities and about the unequal access to voting in elections for blind people in BiH, which representatives of our partners from Serbia and Montenegro also pointed out. Here the voices of women with visual impairment were heard.” (grantee partner)



Dečiji centar, Serbia

Networking

“Challenges come in life and then people and opportunities come to strengthen you in these challenges. By testing your courage you strengthen yourself, the empowerment comes from others.”

Ana Raffai, feminist theologian and peace activist

Networking opportunities challenge women’s organisations and activists to enter different spaces, share ideas, learn from collaborations, and strategise together. The pandemic demonstrated the importance of in-person meetings where the collective wisdom and energy of peers builds personal motivation and inspires.

By bringing together diverse voices and sectors, women feel part of a bigger picture, raising their visibility and acknowledgement. Building group dynamics in a safe space creates a space of trust where criticism can also be expressed. Ensuring a cross-section of participants supports the transgenerational transfer of knowledge. The creation of meeting spaces offers opportunities to learn from each other, exchange knowledge and expertise with other organisations, access new approaches and trends, so contributing to nurturing the movement.

And now you speak sister, hosted by TPO fondacija in Sarajevo: a four-day interdisciplinary and interreligious exploration on advocacy for gender equality with the inclusion of arts where the key experience of the forty women participating was newfound strength and new ideas in standing up for gender equality. Topics presented included The importance of art in women's activism; Defense of the integrity of believers; Spiritual and religious violence; Our daily patriarchy.

Militarism and peacebuilding, hosted by EWI in Omiš: brought sixteen cross-generational civil society actors from a variety of backgrounds and experiences to explore and discuss the position of peace activism in the current climate. Question raised included: Is peacebuilding today being denied legitimacy? Is lack of opposition to military escalation civic apathy, silenced voices or an ideological response? Is society becoming more accepting of violence in response to violence?



Accompaniment

Non-financial support

“Breaking the stage fright, paying attention to non-verbal communication, finding my optimal voice. I received so many positive experiences and attitudes that I have a new strength to learn and progress.”

Grantee partner

Throughout the year, EWI supported the personal growth of activists and individuals according to their own ambitions and needs. Included was support for organisations going through transitions in their structure, plan or leadership, creating adequate space for the organisation to flourish. A variety of training events took place both in person and online on topics such as financial management training to build greater organisational confidence to approach new funding sources. As a result, in 2023 a total of 207 women activists have raised competences and skills due to newly gained knowledge and expertise.



Since the pandemic, we have been seeing an increasing number of grantee partners engaging in advocacy actions from meetings with local government to engaging with the media. For this reason we decided to hold an intensive communication training weekend on interpersonal communication, communication with the media and public speaking which brought together thirty-two women activists both online and in person.

As well as learning how to address the media i.e. conversation management; how to talk to a journalist, how to answer questions and turn a negative into a positive, how to integrate verbal and non-verbal communication, how to prepare a statement and a live interview in a TV studio. In addition, participants learned how to invite journalists to an event, how to create an invitation for the media and attract their attention, how to create press releases and get their posts published instead of ending up in the editor's bin.

Self-care

Building resilience

“The feminist ethics of care demand respect, cooperation, consensus and care for each other.”

Zilka Spahić Šiljak feminist theologian

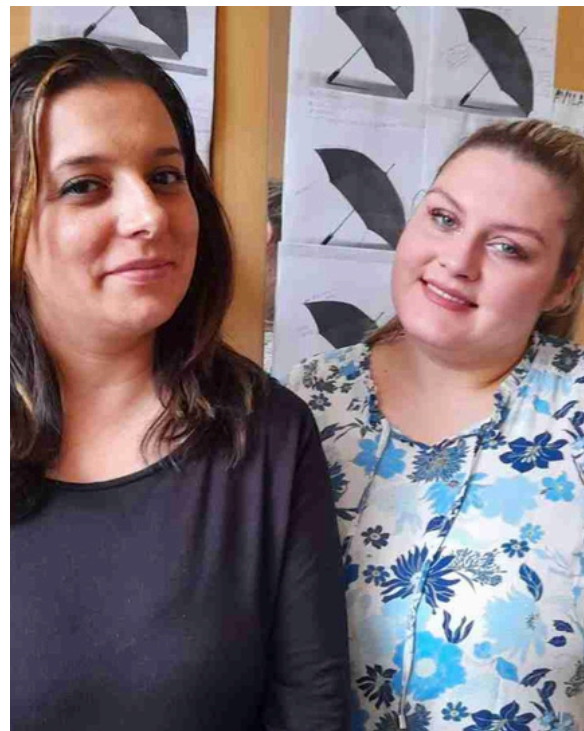
An important element of EWI's accompaniment is to support the care and well-being of women activists and to create spaces and opportunities to inspire, build and encourage one another. Throughout the year, EWI offered Urgent Response grants to meet the unforeseen needs of its grantee partners and emergencies. While many looked to bridge funding gaps to cover rent arrears and even to meet the costs of flood damage to equipment and office spaces which are often in inadequate buildings, others looked to pre-empt burn-out and exhaustion.

Grantee partner: SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Bijelo Polje, Montenegro

A teambuilding trip for 6 members of grantee as a healing space to counteract exhaustion and potential burnout syndrome. During this time the team were re-motivated enabling them to plan for the future.

“Because of our long-standing work in providing services to clients in this field which includes SOS telephone services, mediation in institutions, legal counselling, psychological support and help, provision of a trusted person to accompanying clients to the institutions in the state system, our activists-volunteers are entering a syndrome of chronic fatigue or a state of exhaustion. The impact of unforeseen circumstances such as the Covid 19 pandemic was felt on all the women in our organisation. For this reason, we need to put us activists at the centre of the recovery plan.”

“After this time to step back and to put our wellbeing in first place, we see we have a stronger degree trust and a healthier atmosphere within the team. On a personal level we all see an improvement in our general health and increased levels of concentration and creativity.”



Feminism & Religion

FER online school

Exposure to new knowledge, ideas and perspectives brings deep and lasting change to the individual and to the relationships between people and their expectations of society.

This continues to be a flagship initiative and one unique not only to this region but also in Europe, providing an online space for those looking to academically question their beliefs, attitudes, knowledge and practices about human rights and freedoms and who want to research how gender stereotypes shape the lives of women and men in the family and society.

Now in its second year, the Feminism and Religion (FER) online school saw 120 women and 5 men graduate in 2023 from its ground-breaking academic courses researched, built and delivered by twenty-one prominent feminist theologians and scholars from the region. To complement the academic materials, thirteen podcasts (subtitled in English) were developed and launched on a variety of topics to provide a non-academic audience with an accessible entry point to new insights, ideas and life changing concepts.



Feedback from those teaching and from those learning showed strong levels of self-confidence as a result of acquiring knowledge and practicing argumentative discussion, and high levels of motivation to engage in society and in their religious community at an inter-ethnic and inter-religious level. Already we are seeing some of the women who have graduated from FER online school have started to collaborate across the region on some projects, such as Hollaback Girl to monitor and report gender-based violence in streets.

“Some see religion as an obstacle to women’s freedom especially within religious texts. That is why feminist theology and the liberation of women are somewhere at the centre of feminism.”

Ksenija Madga, feminist theologian

Advocacy

Changing the face of philanthropy

EWI is committed to advocating within the funding community for investing in women and girls as agents for social change.

EWI advocates for the importance of funding women activists and organisations through women's funds (WF) as ultimate funder partners because WFs offer connections to communities, we are agile and can move funds quickly, we have accessible application/reporting procedures and proven high levels of financial management. We support movements and can measure impact using creative monitoring and evaluation tools.

This year, EWI participated in several events:

Balkan Donor Forum III, Belgrade: brought together key civil society funders, private foundations, bilateral funders, government representatives, and women's funds with a focus on funding trends and priorities over the coming period. **Philanthropy East Forum, Sarajevo:** a space to reflect and connect, explore new horizons for peace, justice, and democracy, and the role of foundations in supporting the activists, civil society organisations and communities that serve societies under the title: Peace, Justice and the Promise of Democracy – What Did We (Not) Learn? **Balkans Philanthropy Forum, Belgrade:** focused on improving cooperation of community foundations at a sub-regional level. **PHILEA Forum, Šibenik:** brought together around 900 people from European and global philanthropic foundations under the title A New Compass for Europe: Forged in Crisis, Forward in Hope.

EWI Director was a panellist on the topic of **Feminist Cooperation across Cultures and Borders** at an event at the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Berlin for the presentation of its new feminist foreign policy. With the support of the German women's fund filia, Reconstruction Women's Fund and the Bulgarian Fund for Women, she spoke on feminist cooperation across cultures and borders accenting the politics of money and the urgency of flexible funding if civil society organisations are to be sustained and flourish.



Advocacy

Knocking on EU's Door

Raising the visibility of women's funds at the heart of the EU's decision-making institutions

EWI Director continued to co-coordinate the advocacy actions of PROSPERA Women's Funds Europe (WFE) towards EU institutions to increase WFE visibility as a focal point for gender quality policy in Bruxelles and to secure long-term funding from the European Union.

With the 'doors' now open and WFE a recognisable brand, we engaged with special advisers (the most senior civil servants) to the European Commissioners for Equality, Values and Transparency and International Partnerships and to the Chair and Coordinators of the FEMM Committee, the most influential mechanism for shaping gender equality legislation in Europe. Senior briefings with three Commissioner teams of special advisers and lead Directorates on the WFE funding model secured the eligibility of relevant grant financing opportunities for WFE grassroots women's civil society organisations in the Citizens, Equality, Rights and Values (CERV) Programme. As a result, WFE secured EUR 5.5 million for regranting in 2023.



EWI Director moderated WFE's panel on *Mobilising funding for the feminist movements through WFE* in the European Parliament which focused on how to strengthen the voice of the feminist movements in Europe and strengthen legislation within the upcoming Gender-Based Violence Directive. With over 60 participants the event served to cement the impact and make a strong call for action for long term funding for women's funds in Europe.

This was one of multiple meetings and consultations which took place throughout the year and which through which high level support from the European Commission for strategic input and policy endorsement for women's human rights in Europe was gained.

Next Steps

Three areas we are looking forward to in 2024

This year EWI held a webinar on the concept of dialogue aimed to facilitate a conversation on the role of radical, life changing dialogue with individuals whose use of dialogue demonstrated its power to counter violence, de-escalate potentially dangerous outcomes and turn around hate narratives. With a large audience participation from both inside and outside the region, discussion revolved around three key questions: Can (restored) communication change the course of violent action? Can dialogue counteract spiralling conflict? Can dialogue act as a bridge connecting the seemingly incompatible?



01 Restoring dialogue

A cycle of in-person specialist training seminars to build dialogue skills among grassroots activists as a nonviolent tool for social change.

02 Collaborative resource mobilisation

In partnership with Calala Women's Fund of Spain and the Mediterranean Women's Fund we look forward to implementing a 3-year EU grant aimed at preventing and combatting gender-based violence across 11 countries.

03 Organisational growth

We look forward to expanding our staff and increasing our grantmaking programme both in the number of grants and amount of money being moved to women's organisations in the region.

Acknowledgements

Funders and networks

The work of the Ecumenical Women's Initiative is made possible by funders both in Europe and internationally and enhanced by the networks with whom we partner. We thank those named and unnamed who supported us in 2023:

- Alliance for Gender Quality in Europe
- Brot fur die Welt
- Calala Women's Fund of Spain
- filia.die frauenstiftung
- Global Fund for Women
- Mama Cash
- Mediterranean Women's Fund
- New Venture Fund
- Oak Foundation
- Particip Gmbh
- Prospera International Network of Women's Funds
- Rockefeller brothers Fund
- Sigrid Rausing Trust
- Trag fondacija

Trainers, facilitators and advisers

- Ana Raffai
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- Lana Ciboci Perša
- Mencha Nikolova
- Sean Feenan
- Smiljana Kraljević
- Stefana Došen

EWI Assembly

- Aleksandra Gligorović
- Azra Abrahamović
- Katarina Kruhonja
- Melanie Ivančević
- Mirna Karzen

We thank all our national and international partners for their solidarity, trust and passion as we strive together to make this region a place where women and girls can live and flourish in peace and safety.

Grantee partners 2023

Croatia

1. Boćarski klub osoba s invaliditetom Nada grada Požege i Požeško
2. F.O.R.T.E.S. - centar za demokratski razvoj i inkluziju
3. Intero centar
4. LUČ za dijalog i nenasilje
5. Klub žena liječenih na dojci
6. Udruga roditelja djece i odraslih s posebnim potrebama PRIJATELJ
7. Udruga za pomoć žrtvama Bijeli krug Hrvatske
8. Udruga za unaprjeđenje mentalnog zdravlja Vrapčići

Bosnia & Herzegovina

9. Kulturni centar Karneol
10. NVO Mi volimo Čajniče - aktiv žena
11. NVO Udruženje građanki Grahovo
12. Organizacija Glas žene
13. TPO fondacija
14. Udruga građana Fojničani - Maglaj
15. Udruženje građana oštećenog vida Tuzla
16. Udruženje građana Teatar kabare
17. Udruženje građana Žene to mogu
18. Udruženje Lan
19. Udruženje NOVA ŽENA
20. Udruženje Novi put"
21. Udr. roditelja hendikepirane djece i omladine Leptir Srebrenica
22. Udruženje Samostalan korak
23. Udruženje za društveno istraživanje Global Analitika
24. Udruženje za edukaciju i razvoj Dignitet
25. Udruženje žena Bubamara Banja Luka
26. Udruženje žena Derventa
27. Udruženje Žena i porodica
28. Udruženje žena LI-WOMAN
29. Udruženje žena Mozaik kultura i tradicija
30. Udruženje žena NERA
31. Udruženje žena Priroda Bratunac
32. Udruženje Ženska Vizija
33. UŽ SEKA Goražde



Klub žena liječenih na dojci



Udruženje građana Svet reči



Udruženje NOVA ŽENA

Grantee partners 2023

North Macedonia

- 34. Asocijacija za građansku toleranciju i saradnju (AGTIS)
- 35. EcHO Edukativna Humanitarna Organizacija
- 36. OŽ Žensko Lobi
- 37. Združenie Doverba-Kumanovo

Serbia

- 38. Dečiji centar
- 39. MAH Klub poštovalaca vremena
- 40. NVO Ženska alternativa
- 41. Udruženje građana Romani cikna
- 42. Udruženje građana SOS Ženski centar
- 43. Udruženje građana Svet reči
- 44. Udruženje žena Lav
- 45. Zrenjaninski edukativni centar

Montenegro

- 46. SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Bijelo Polje
- 47. SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Podgorica

Kosovo

- 48. Gruaja Fermere
- 49. NGO Women's Network Qeliza



Združenie Doverba-Kumanovo



Udruženje za edukaciju i razvoj Dignitet



Udruženje građanki Grahovo



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