



**EMPOWER -
Educational Materials for Practitioners providing Opportunities for
vulnerable Women's Employability and Resilience**

Report on the Training Needs of Support Workers Working with Vulnerable Women in United
Kingdom, Greece, Iceland and Lithuania

Eleni Sakellariou,

Family and Childcare Centre (KMOP)

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Contact information regarding the present document:

Family and Childcare Centre, Skoufa 75, Athens, 106 80, Greece

+30 210 3637547, european_projects@kmop.eu

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
State of Affairs – Findings from the Desk Research.....	5
Profile of support workers in Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and United Kingdom.....	5
Available training provision for support workers working with vulnerable groups (focus on women) in their social and labour market integration	6
Focus Group Findings	8
Online Survey Findings	14
Conclusions and Recommendations	28
Annexes	29



Introduction

EMPOWER (Educational Materials for Practitioners providing Opportunities for vulnerable Women's Employability and Resilience) is a 32 month project co-funded by the European Commission under the framework of Erasmus plus Programme (Key Action 2: Strategic Partnerships for Vocational Education and Training). EMPOWER is implemented by a transnational consortium of partners, i.e. Inova Consultancy Ltd (UK), KMOP - Family and Childcare Centre (EL), VMST - Directorate of Labour in Iceland (IS) and Social Innovation Fund (LT).

EMPOWER tackles the increasing need to provide high quality support and training to vulnerable women at risk of exclusion from the labour market; these women at risk include women who experience domestic violence, women who are victims of human trafficking, homeless women and women who face immigration issues. This support takes many forms and may be professionally led (e.g. Social Workers, Healthcare professionals) but the sector continues to rely on volunteers working with vulnerable women to provide much needed support in the fields of personal empowerment, confidence and employability or entrepreneurship skills. Therefore, the project aims:

- a) to equip Support Workers and volunteers working with vulnerable women with the soft skills training necessary to pass these skills onto women in order to increase their employability and entrepreneurship opportunities;
- b) to equip vulnerable women with greater confidence, belief and resilience to succeed economically.

This aim will be achieved through the development of innovative blended training programmes, including the EMPOWER Training Programme (training knowledge, skills and abilities in tools and methods for increasing confidence and awareness of strengths for employability) and EMPOWER Circles Programmes (action learning and increased self-reflection for success).

As part of the project's activities, a survey was conducted in all EMPOWER partner countries which aimed to investigate the support and training needs of support workers, both professionals and volunteers, working with vulnerable women. The research findings will be used for the development of the EMPOWER Training Programme and the EMPOWER Circles Programmes. The present document summarizes the main findings from the research performed in Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and United Kingdom. It comprises three parts: a literature review of the profile and services provided by support workers working with vulnerable women in all involved countries, with an outlook of some organisations providing such services; the outcomes of focus groups in which support workers were consulted on their training needs and opinions



regarding the specific skills they consider essential for their services; and the results of an on-line survey, also carried out in all countries, addressed to volunteer and professional support workers regarding the same subjects in order to provide a more comprehensive picture and add to the information obtained through the literature review and focus groups. The report concludes with the “conclusions and recommendations” section which contains some overall statements on the current situation of support workers in participating countries along with a series of recommendations on how support workers’ provision of services to vulnerable women could be improved.



State of Affairs – Findings from the Desk Research

Profile of support workers in Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and United Kingdom

Support workers in Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and United Kingdom offer support to various vulnerable population groups, such as unemployed, homeless, substance abusers, victims of violence etc. They also provide support to vulnerable women which are a particularly sensitive group, due to the additional disadvantages to which they are subject due to their gender, such as discrimination, violence, stereotypes, trafficking and so on. Support workers contribute significantly to the improvement of vulnerable women's mental capacities and personal development, helping them to their (re)inclusion to society and the labour market. This group of professionals comprises workers coming from many scientific disciplines and sectors, such as:

- psychiatrists
- psychologists,
- therapists,
- doctors,
- nurses,
- sociologists,
- social workers,
- lawyers,
- pedagogist,
- adult trainers,
- educational counsellors,
- career counsellors,
- mentors,
- life coaches,
- administrative staff working in relevant services.

These workers may have various educational background levels, ranging from secondary education to university degree or post-graduate holders, while a significant proportion are specialised in the provision of services tailored to the specific needs of vulnerable women. There



is also a significant number of people supporting women on a voluntary basis, providing assistance in everyday activities as well as emotional support, through NGOs and volunteering organisations. This group may additionally include people acting as mentors and personal coaches, but without necessarily having the corresponding educational background.

The support workers who work with vulnerable women should have the following skills:

- Ability to communicate sensitively and effectively with no offence or judgement
- Good listening skills, patience and compassion
- Ability to work under pressure
- Good conflict resolution skills
- Good time management and organisational skills
- Tolerance and flexibility
- Skills in independent decision-making
- Ability to work in a team and individually
- Ability to support women with counselling, information and guidance regarding their integration into the society and the labour market

The support workers are mainly employed in support structures, including nursing homes, public services managed by the government, counselling centres, guesthouses and gender-equality support centres, municipalities' social services, VET centres, non-governmental and voluntary organisations, consulting companies and others.

Available training provision for support workers working with vulnerable groups (focus on women) in their social and labour market integration

As regards the training of the support workers who work with vulnerable groups, there is a variety in terms of types and methods among the involved countries. For instance, in Greece, privately employed professionals supporting vulnerable groups (not specifically women) are usually trained through certified programmes offered by consulting companies and VET centres, while publicly employed professionals usually receive training through programmes implemented by the Education Institute of the National Centre for Public Administration and Local Government (EKDDA). In Iceland, the training of the support workers is limited to what they receive from their formal studies. In Lithuania, support workers who work with women who have experienced domestic violence are offered trainings by Specialized Help Centres (SHC) or other NGOs



working in the field on the basis of the projects being implemented. Most of trainings are provided at workplace due to lack of resources and they rather focus on equipping support workers with skills and competences needed to offer proper psychological and emotional support to women, not on facilitating access of women into the labour market. In the U.K., some organisations and agencies provide induction, support and training in a range of key areas for Support Workers to meet the needs of their clients on a regular basis; however, in terms of organisations supporting women specifically, the training provided is ad-hoc and usually on the job training, due to limited training budgets for these organisations. In many cases, in all countries, many support workers seek out personal development through post-graduate courses and educational seminars conducted as part of European Programmes that pertain to the specific field and are implemented by various government agencies and NGOs.



Focus Group Findings

All partner organizations carried out focus groups with both professional and volunteer support workers with the aim to explore their training needs and opinions regarding the services they provide to support vulnerable women in employability and entrepreneurship. In the UK, Inova has organized two focus groups which took part at the same date (19 April 2016), in Sheffield; there were a total of 12 paid workers (Support Workers) and 12 volunteers (Support Workers). In Greece, two focus groups took place, on the 14th of April 2016, in KMOP's offices in Thessaloniki, where 9 professionals and 8 volunteer support workers attended each group, respectively. In Iceland, VMST organized two focus groups with professionals, in total 10 participants and one focus group with volunteers, in total 6 participants. In Lithuania, SIF organized one focus group with 10 support workers, which was carried out on the 1st of April 2016 and one with 10 volunteers which was organised on the 4th of May 2016. In all involved countries, the majority of the participants from both categories were women, most of which are holders of University degrees. They were employed at NGOs, municipal social services and other public services. Most provide support to vulnerable women, but some worked with various vulnerable groups, among which were women.

The main findings of the focus groups from all involved countries are summarized below:

- Participants identified a series of training and support services which help women in their (re)integration into the labour market. These include the services provided by the public agencies which offer employability related services, various women's and vulnerable groups' psychosocial support programmes provided by NGOs, voluntary organisations and municipal social services, and vocational training and lifelong learning programmes, provided by public institute and private training providers.
- As for the effectiveness of these services, there was a variety of opinions. For instance, the majority of the respondents from Lithuania and the U.K. consider the employment related services very beneficial to the women who use them, as they help them to build their self-confidence, discover their own strengths, realize the opportunities and motivate them to make positive changes in their lives. On the other hand, many of the respondents from Greece consider these services ineffective, as they tend to be temporary placements that neither add to the vulnerable women's skills nor do they provide sufficient aid so that the women can escape hostile environments that make them vulnerable (e.g. domestic violence victims). Many participants, also, mentioned that the effectiveness of these services has been affected by the public budget cuts, especially in Greece and in the U.K.



- The support workers stated that the vulnerable women face various barriers that prevent them to seek employment or to set up their own business. The main barriers are presented below:
 - Low self-esteem and self-confidence
 - Lack of motivation to make changes which is the result of not being able to recognize own skills and competences
 - Illiteracy, lack of basic education, lack of skills
 - Lack of information and knowledge regarding job search, employment processes, business startups in the countries they live, benefits system.
 - Mistrust of State policy regarding taxes for those who wish to start own business
 - Childcare issues – women are fully responsible for them and due to insufficient funds to pay for childcare services they don't know where they can leave their children in case they go to work; the shortage of childcare facilities was also mentioned
 - Lack of psychological support in their environment (family support)
 - Lack of financial resources
 - Geographic: this concerns especially the women who live in remote and/or poor rural areas and those who do not have their own transport.
 - Cultural barriers: these concern the lack of the knowledge of the national language, religious aspects and traditions, etc.
- The respondents suggested some motives which could prove effective in facilitating women's access to support services and to their attending to a training course:
 - better dissemination of information regarding the availability of support services;
 - better promotion of the services, giving emphasis on the fact that the courses are offered free of charge and that they can significantly help them to improve their position into the labour market;
 - building trust with the organisation and making them feel safe;
 - granting childcare provision (preferably on-site);
 - organising training within school hours;



- letting women have a taster session, just to try it out and to get confidence to come to future sessions knowing what it will be like;
 - service providers should extend their outreach to women instead of waiting for women to seek support on their own;
 - providing a certificate of attendance/completion of the training;
 - providing information and services in other languages too;
 - providing role models/success stories with similar backgrounds and same situation in the past, who managed to change their lives;
 - providing a small financial support or compensating the transportation costs for arriving to the training.
- Both the professional and the volunteer support workers have identified some particular approaches for supporting women and improving their employability. These include:
 - personalised support according to the needs of each woman;
 - mentoring approach – both individual and group mentoring, specifying that group mentoring helps women to acquire effective communication and conflict resolution skills;
 - specialised trainings as well as advantage group activities with drama elements which help women to reproduce different situations and find the best ways to solve them;
 - combining employability support with psychosocial counselling;
 - job/ skills matching with companies and paid apprenticeships;
 - building of trustful relationships and establishing of effective communication between the specialist providing support and the vulnerable women.
 - The respondents mentioned the following skills and support needs of vulnerable women in order to become economically active:
 - Basic skills, such as reading and writing;
 - Language skills;
 - ICT skills job;
 - Communication skills;
 - Time management skills;



- Stress management;
 - Resilience;
 - Presentation skills and public speaking;
 - Ability to set the goal and prepare the action plan to achieve it;
 - Social skills;
 - Employment-related skills – how to search for work, how to prepare CV, how to prepare for job interview and so on;
 - Start-up business courses
 - Understanding of local cultures.
- As for the competences that they consider essential for support workers and training providers who serve vulnerable women who wish to become economically active, the respondents expressed the following opinions:
 - Strong communication skills, i.e. being receptive and a good listener;
 - Professional and life experience;
 - Experience in leading training to encourage, support and bring positivity;
 - Empathy and compassion;
 - Building a relationship of trust with women and being free of stereotypes and from being judgemental;
 - Having the necessary emotional intelligence and maturity to support these women effectively;
 - Ability to convey information in informative, understandable and attractive to vulnerable women way;
 - Patience and understanding of women, letting them to acquire information and make changes in their own pace;
 - Emotional resilience and ability to work under stress, ability to solve conflict situations;
 - Positive attitude and ability to empower others;
 - Good knowledge of the appropriate services and ability to refer to them.



- Moreover, the support workers mentioned the following methods that they use in order to identify vulnerable women's strengths and help them to build on strengths/confidence for employment/entrepreneurship:
 - Effective conversation with vulnerable women aimed to gain their trust in support workers;
 - Psychological consultations during which women complete different tasks that help to reveal their personalities as well their strengths and skills that they may not be aware of;
 - Self-understanding tests, methods of own achievements analysis, feedback when working with the group, modelling different behaviour situations and their analysis, SWOT analysis.
- When respondents were asked what could help them in better support the vulnerable women they serve, they provided the following answers:
 - Skills and competences to better evaluate the psychological condition of the vulnerable women;
 - Awareness on targeted training programmes for professionals;
 - Basic knowledge where and how to start when looking for employment;
 - Basic knowledge about entrepreneurship;
 - Up-to-date information and knowledge about the labour markets and its demand;
 - Networking with other associated agencies and services, coordination with these agencies in order to provide more comprehensive services and exchanging good practices with European colleagues in order to gain more expertise and know-how;
 - Establishing and maintaining connections with employment agencies (not only Labour Exchange office) as well as Business Advice Centres, and VET institutions – interagency cooperation;
 - Establishing contacts with employers in order to facilitate placement of women upon accomplishment of trainings so that women can get work experience and gain more self-confidence;
 - On-the-job-training, especially for volunteers, mentioning that experience will lead to the development of the necessary skills regardless of formal training;



- In closing, the support workers from all involved countries were asked about their expectations from the EMPOWER training programme. The main answers are provided below:
 - Practical information and detail guidelines as well as clear course outline and summary;
 - State of art of counselling and training methods to support vulnerable women in relation to their integration into society and the labour market;
 - Special training for volunteers on how to approach vulnerable women and effectively support them;
 - Such a programme will need to aid the empowerment of women and provide access to knowledge, tools and resources available to other organisations across Europe in order to facilitate the exchange of technical expertise;
 - Adaptation of the training programme to the national/ local contexts and cultures;
 - How to strengthen self-confidence and increase motivation of vulnerable women to look for a job or set own business and gain economic independence;
 - The ways to prepare for employment: creating CV, cover letter, searching for job vacancies/employers, preparing for job interviews;
 - Where to look for information to get skills necessary for employment or self-employment;
 - Emphasis on the development of soft and transferable skills;
 - Training on mental health issues, post-traumatic stress disorder, addiction;
 - Certification would make the material and training more attractive;
 - An electronic training platform would also facilitate intragroup networking between trainees and Support Workers.



Online Survey Findings

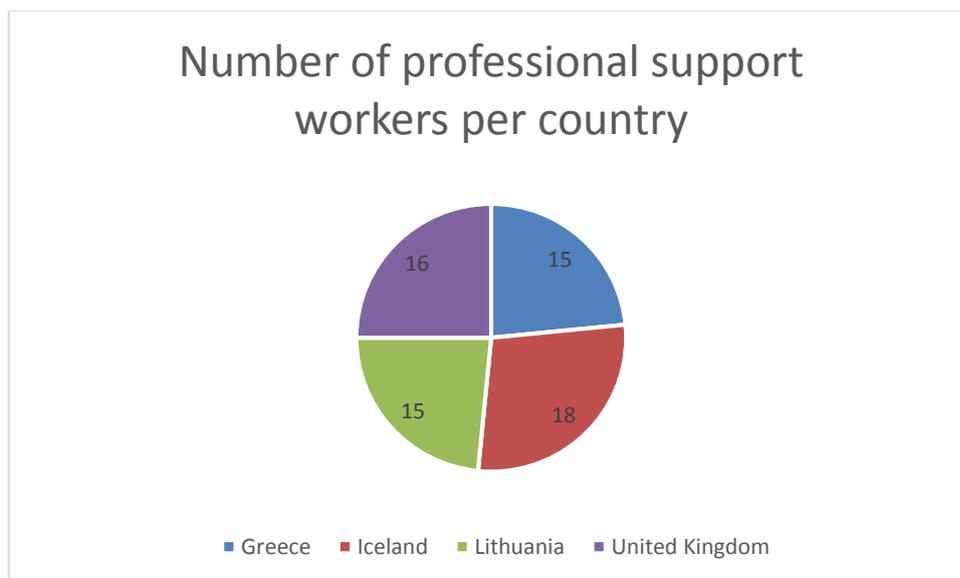
In order to further investigate the training needs and challenges of the professional and volunteer support workers, who support vulnerable women in their re(enter) in the labour market, the partner organizations of the EMPOWER project carried out an online survey addressed to support workers. A common online questionnaire was shared to relevant organisations and service providers. In total, 130 anonymous answers were collected, 64 from professional workers and 66 from volunteers, coming from Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and the U.K.

The main findings obtained through the relevant responses were as follows:

- **Background information of the participants:**

- Number of professional support workers per country

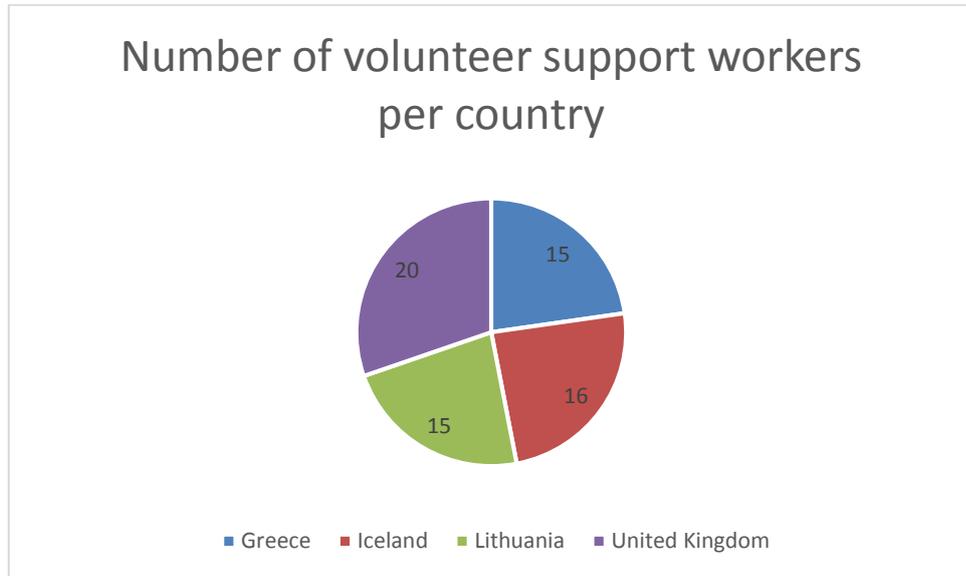
From Iceland, 18 professionals responded to the online survey, from the United Kingdom 16 professionals, whereas 15 professionals responded from Greece and Iceland.



- Number of volunteer support workers per country

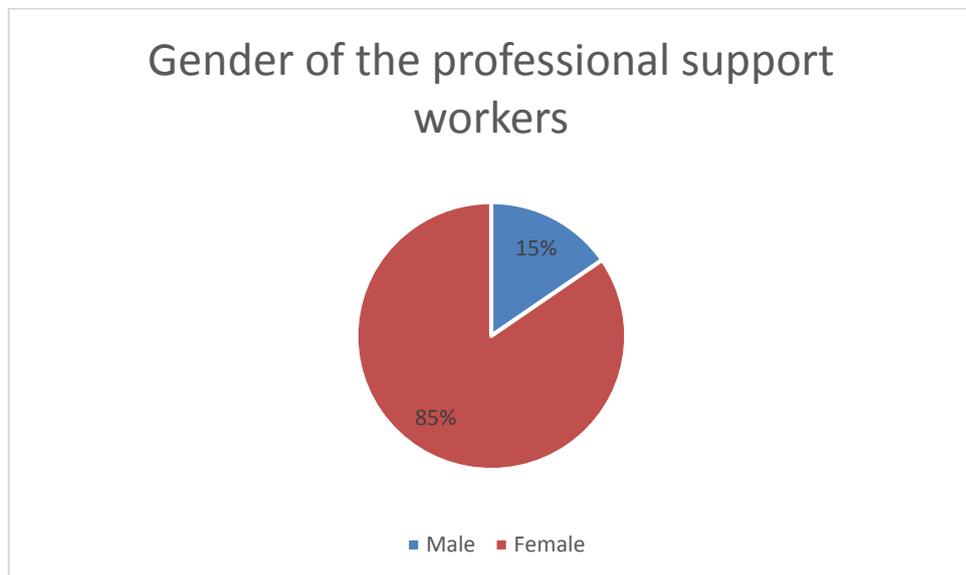
As for the volunteer support workers who participated in the online surveys, 20 of them come from the United Kingdom, 16 from Iceland, and 15 from Greece and Lithuania, respectively.





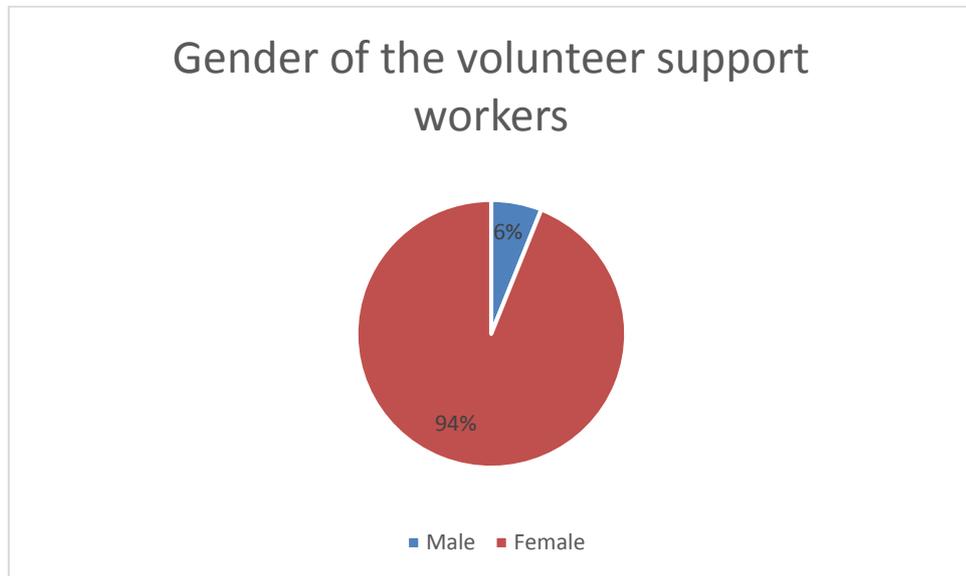
- Gender of the professional support workers

85% of the professional workers are women and the rest 15% is men.



- Gender of the volunteer support workers

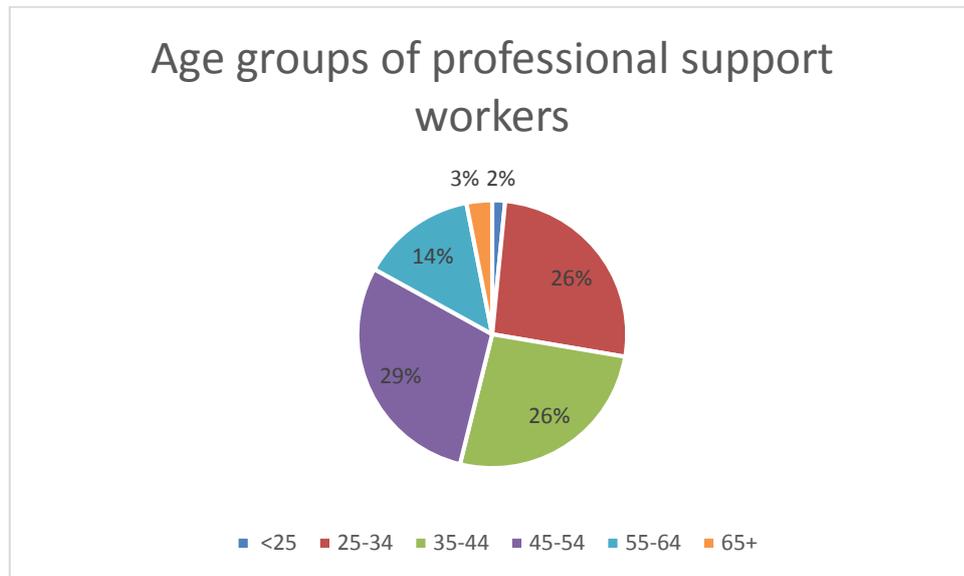
94% of the volunteer support workers who responded to the online survey were women, whereas 6% were men.



- Age of the professional support workers

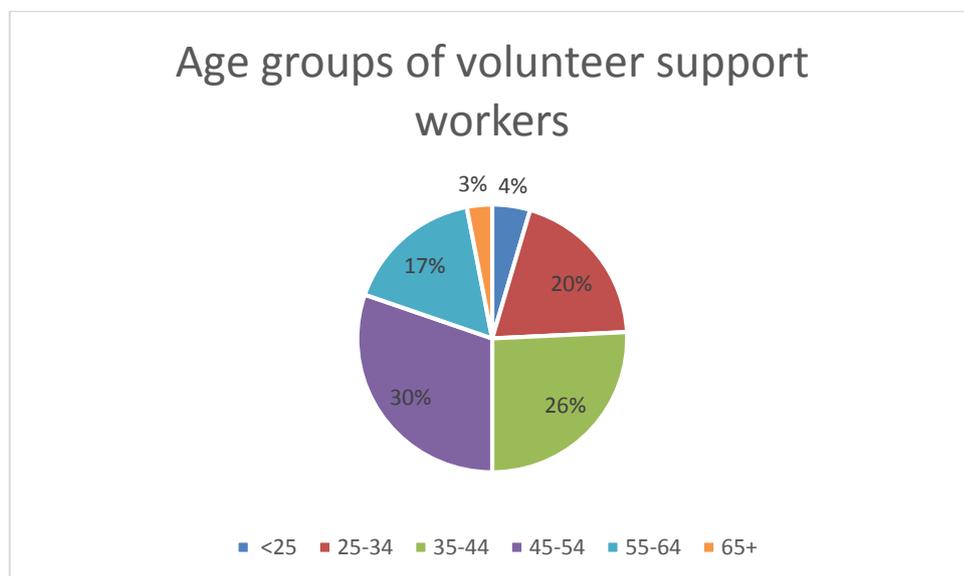
As for the age of the respondents, the majority of them belonged to the age groups of 45-54 years (29%), of 25-34 years (26%) and of 35-44 years (26%).





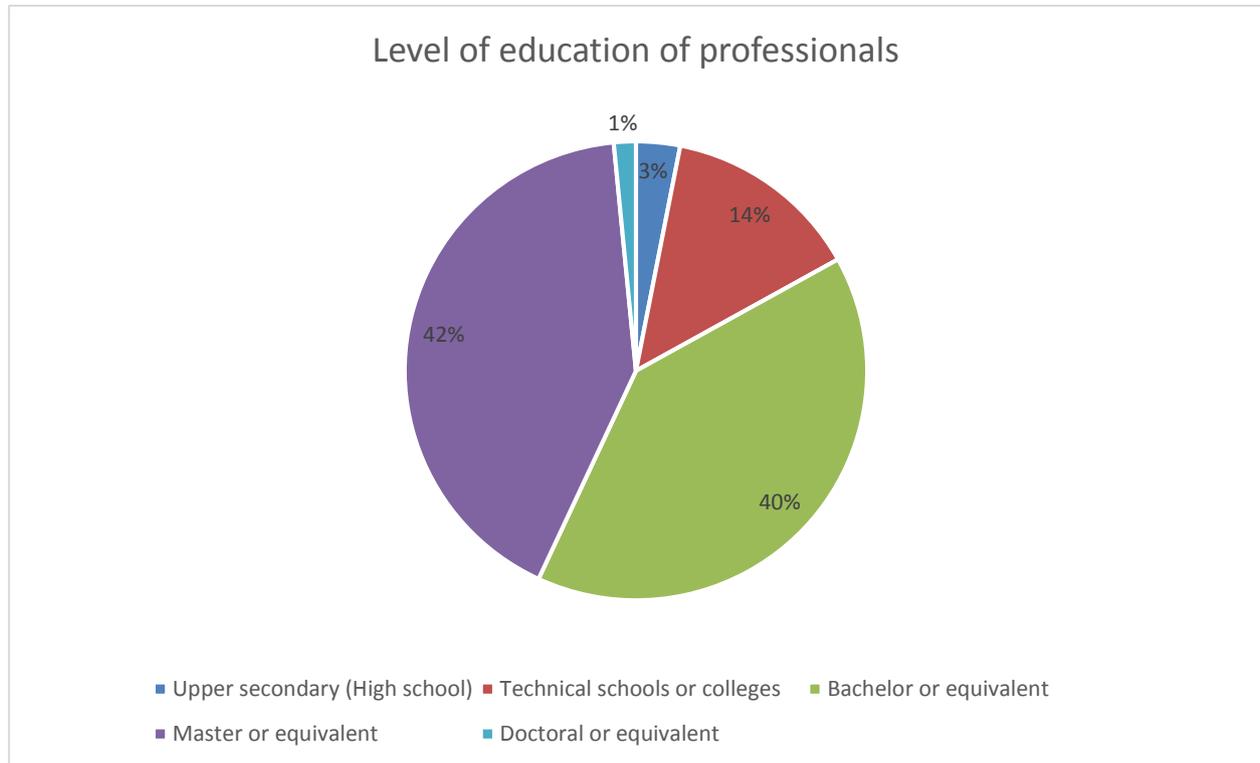
○ Age of the volunteer support workers

Similarly, most of the volunteer support workers belonged to age groups of 45-54 years (30%), of 35-44 years (26%) and of 25-34 years (20%), while there was a noticeable percentage (17%) of volunteers who belonged to the age group of 55-64 years.



○ Educational level of support workers

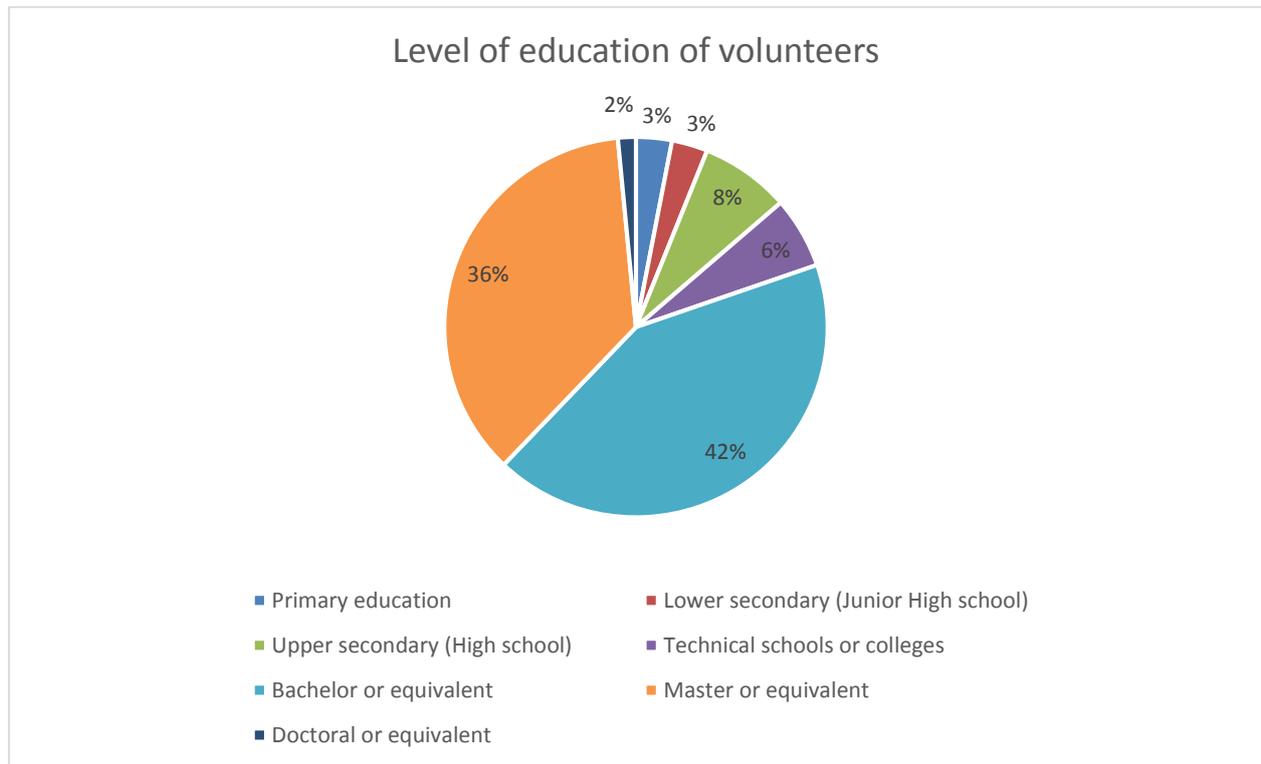
The professional support workers who participated in the online survey were very well educated, as most of them were holders of a Master degree (42%) and of a Bachelor degree (40%). Moreover, 14% of them were Technical schools or college graduates.



○ Educational level of volunteers

Similarly, the level of education of volunteers was also very high, as 42% of them were graduates of Higher Education and 36% of them holders of a Master degree.





○ Employment status of professionals

The majority of the professionals (80%) worked full-time, whereas there was a small percentage of part-time workers (11%) and of self-employed workers (9%).

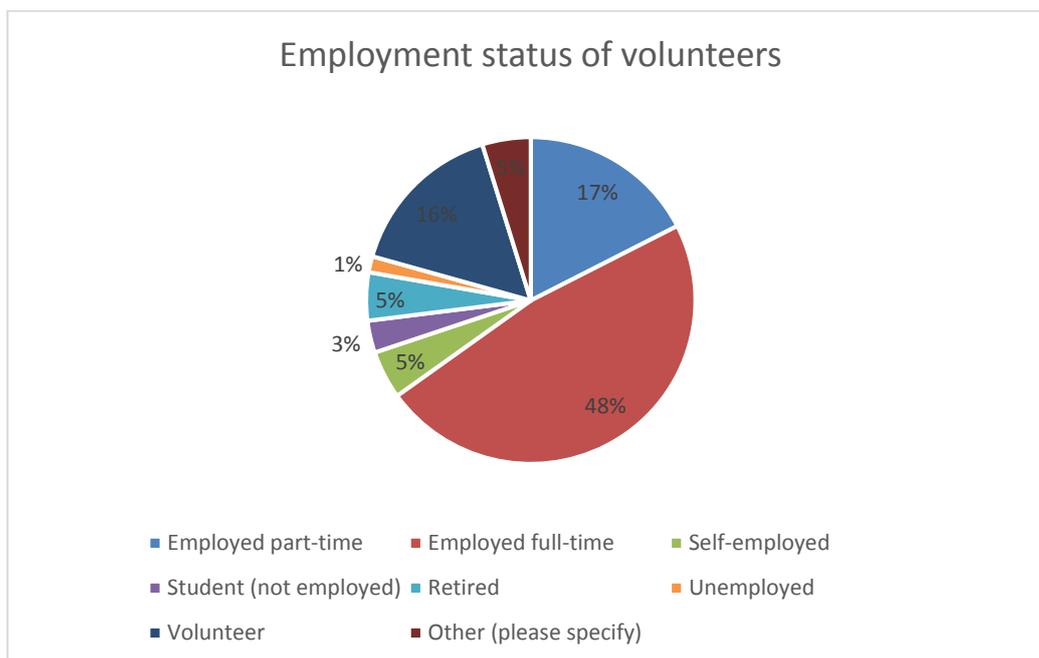




○ Employment status of volunteers

As regards the employment status of volunteers, there was a variety. Almost half of them (48%) worked full time, 17% of them were employed on a part-time basis and 16% were employed exclusively as volunteers.





○ Professionals’ years of experience in supporting vulnerable women

The years of experience for the professional support workers who work with vulnerable women ranged from half a year to 22 years. In particular, the average in Greece was about 9 years of experience, in the U.K. it was about 9,5 years of experience, in Lithuania about 9,2 years, whereas in Iceland, most of respondents (40%) had 1-5 years of experience and 22% had 6-10 years of experience.

○ Volunteers’ years of experience in supporting vulnerable women

As for the volunteers’ years of experience in supporting vulnerable women, the range was longer, from a few months to 32 years, however the average was shorter. The average of the years of experience for volunteers in Greece was 9 years, in the U.K. 7 years, in Lithuania about 5,5 years. In Iceland, most of the volunteers (78%) had 1-5 years’ experience and 22% had 6-10 years’ experience.

○ Areas of support the professionals are involved in

The main areas of support provided by professionals included:

- Psychosocial support to unemployed, victims of violence, victims of trafficking, mentally ill women, homeless, immigrants and refugees
 - Individual and group mentoring, psychological counselling
 - Medical support
 - Emotional support and counselling for women victims of domestic violence on the phone as well as within the premises of the support centre
 - Christian mentoring, facilitating and going with women affected by domestic abuse to art/music/writing groups etc.
 - Legal consultations
 - Consultations, information and guidance
 - Training of volunteers
 - Facilitation of social support groups
 - Trainings for support workers and volunteers in overcoming crisis and avoiding burnout
 - Psychotherapy and counselling
 - Group trainings on development of life skills such as assertiveness, self-confidence, motivation, etc.
 - Support on communication with employees and worker unions
- Areas of support the volunteers are involved in

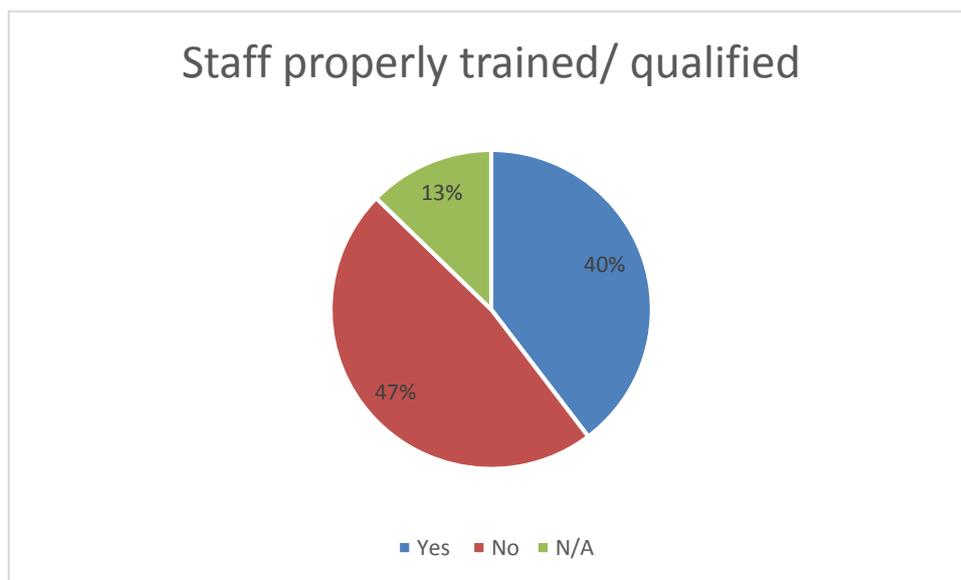
The main areas of support mentioned by the volunteers are:

- Counselling and psychotherapy
- Psychosocial support to various groups of women, i.e. victims of violence, trafficked women, women belonging to vulnerable families, immigrants, refugees, etc.
- Emotional support of victims of domestic violence on the phone
- Employability and legal counselling services
- Provision of information and guidance



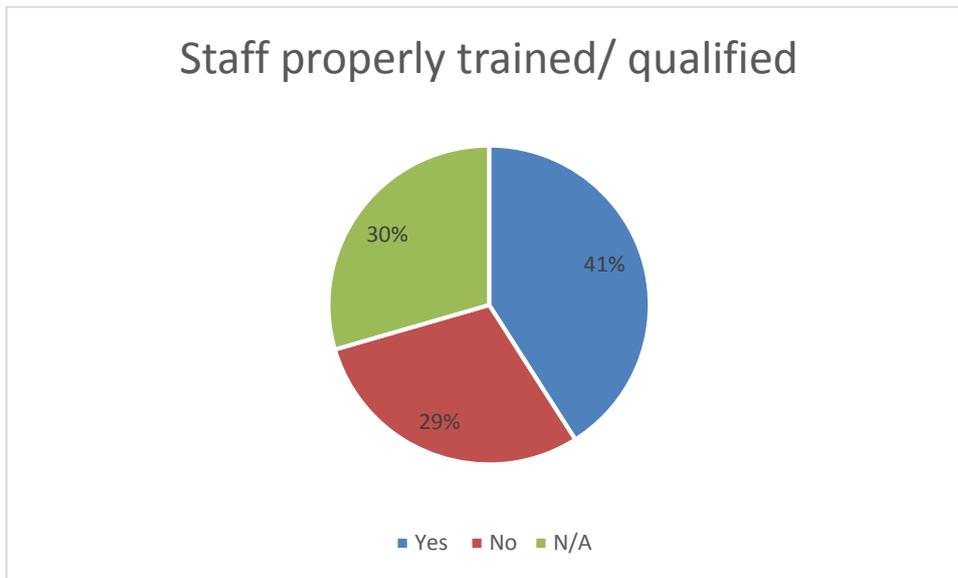
- English reading/speaking support
 - Mentoring and assisting during group sessions
 - Support with housing, benefits, managing medical appointments, applying for jobs, setting up a bank account
 - One-to-one practical support Practical support
-
- **Staff's proper training/ qualification on the provision of gender and socially sensitive career guidance and counselling**

The professionals were equally split among the ones who consider that the staff of their organisation are properly trained/ qualified on the provision of gender and socially sensitive career guidance and counselling (40%) and the ones who have the opposite opinion (47%).



On the contrary, the majority of the volunteers (41%) stated that the staff of the organisations, they are involved in, are properly trained/ qualified on the provision of gender and socially sensitive career guidance and counselling; 30% of them answered “non applicable” and the rest 29% provided a negative answer.





- **Good practices/ services in supporting vulnerable women to (re)enter the labour market**

The following practices/ services in supporting vulnerable women in their (re)enter in the labour market were mentioned by the support workers (professionals and volunteers):

- Lifelong learning programmes
 - European-funded start-up support programmes
 - Employment agencies
 - NGOs and agencies targeting vulnerable women
 - Municipal services
 - Day care services
 - Personalised counselling services
 - On the job training programmes
- **Training and educational needs of vulnerable women in employability and entrepreneurship, according to support workers experience**

According to the respondents' opinions, the main training and educational needs of vulnerable women in employability and entrepreneurship can be summarised as follows:

- Effective communication skills
 - Basic literacy and numeracy
 - English and foreign languages
 - National languages
 - Courses related to job search: CV writing, search for job vacancies, applying for a job, preparation for job interview
 - Recognizing own skills and competences and ability to present them to employer
 - Training on the job
 - Job-specific training
 - Training in entrepreneurship issues and skills, e.g. financial management, marketing, etc.
 - Knowing own rights and basics of labour law and regulations
 - Life training & assertive training
 - IT literacy
 - Networking, conflict solving skills
- **Support and counselling needs of vulnerable women wishing to (re)integrate into the labour market, according to support workers experience**

Both groups of respondents agreed on the following main support and counselling needs of vulnerable women:

- Mentoring support
- Emotional and psychosocial support aiming at empowering vulnerable women
- Building self-confidence, self-esteem and self-worth
- Empowerment, assertiveness, motivation and leadership
- Coping with stress, anxiety, emotional and psychological barriers that withhold women from moving towards the positive changes in their lives
- Psychological individual consultations during which women learn to open themselves, to communicate with others, express themselves, tell their opinion without any fear and assert it



- **Acquaintance level of support workers with skills that are considered essential for practitioners working with vulnerable women**

The support workers were asked to indicate their acquaintance level as regards the following skills which are considered essential for practitioners working with vulnerable women, in order to adequately support and empower them to seek employment and/or set-up their own business:

- Group management skills including the ability to plan and facilitate group sessions effectively
- Communication skills including clear verbal delivery and positive body language
- Active listening skills and the ability to respond empathetically to the group members
- Ability to challenge participants, where relevant and necessary, in a non-confrontational but assertive manner
- Ability to handle issues such as anger in a group
- Understanding of professional boundaries and limitations when acting as a facilitator within a group, e.g. not getting personally involved with the women's lives

In general, both groups of support workers stated that their level of acquaintance with these skills is rather advanced, especially in skills such as group management, communication and active listening. Professional support workers seem to be more familiar than volunteers.

- **Comfort level of support workers in training vulnerable women on particular skills**

The support workers were asked to rate how comfortable they would feel in training vulnerable women on of the following skills:

- Communication skills
- Conflict resolution
- Goal Setting
- Leadership skills
- Networking skills
- Presentation Skills
- Resilience



- Self-confidence
- Self-Motivation
- Time Management

The respondents from both groups stated that they felt comfortable in teaching vulnerable women the above mentioned skills, especially the communication skills, goal setting and networking.



Conclusions and Recommendations

From the national studies carried out in Greece, Iceland, Lithuania and UK, it is evident that professionals and volunteers supporting vulnerable women comprise many specialties; both professionals and volunteers are employed through various schemes such as public services, municipal services, hospitals, counselling centres, guesthouses, gender equality structures, VET centres, non-governmental and voluntary organisations, consulting companies.

As regards the training of the support workers who work with vulnerable groups, there is a variety in terms of types and methods among the involved countries. At the same time, support workers' need for specialised training so as to better serve the vulnerable women is getting more demanding. Taking into account the support workers' training needs and in order to improve the services provided to vulnerable women, with the aim to improve their employability, the following recommendations could be made:

- Services should be personalised and adapted to the needs of each beneficiary.
- Career guidance should be combined with psychosocial counselling in order to improve women's self confidence and develop their soft skills.
- Low-skilled women should be provided with the opportunity to develop some formal skills, such as ICTs and language skills.
- Women with higher formal skills should be provided with specialised training, such as entrepreneurship.
- Soft skills should constitute a major part of the provided services.

Moreover, the following measures could be beneficial for workers supporting vulnerable women:

- Information dissemination regarding training programmes and professional skills' development workshops for professionals.
- Lifelong learning programmes for professionals.
- Inter-service networking.
- Coordination with other service type providers in order to offer comprehensive support.
- Networking with professionals on a European level in order to be informed about policies and practices applied.
- Training available on-line.



Annexes

Annex 1 – National Report Greece

Annex 2 – National Report Iceland

Annex 3 – National Report Lithuania

Annex 4 – National Report UK



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