Building accessible justice for gender-based violence victims in Turkey

National UN Volunteers with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Turkey devote their skills to help women and girls subjected to violence access legal aid. As young women leaders themselves, Eda Senel, Kivilcim Kardelen Yok, and Pelin Kocer work together to fight gender-based violence, which has been on the rise during the pandemic.

Eda Senel, Kivilcim Kardelen Yok, and Pelin Kocer were always interested in gender issues. Now, as UN Volunteers, they apply their knowledge gained throughout their
academic studies and previous internships, to contribute to the improvement of coordination and operations.

Eda Senel is a UN Youth Volunteer Project Clerk in UNDP, working in “Support to the Improvement of Legal Aid Practices for Access to Justice for All in Turkey Project Phase II (ILAP)”. The project aims to implement pilot practices for specialized legal aid services towards gender-based violence (GBV) victims, especially women and girls. The pilot practices comprise the establishment of 7 Violence Prevention Centers (VPCs) in Denizli, Balıkesir, Samsun, Rize, Mardin, Antalya and Nevşehir. Enhanced coordination is targeted between NGOs, public institutions, and bar associations to improve the legal aid system in these provinces.

"This work requires exceptionally effective performance from me. It encourages me to work even harder. Everyday I feel I am a part of a meaningful project and my contribution counts," explains Eda Senel, national UN Youth Volunteer.

The project is funded by SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) as gender equality is fundamental to their work.

"We are proud to be supporting the UNDP legal aid for vulnerable groups program in Turkey. We follow its implementation towards establishing seven new violence prevention centers in seven cities of Turkey based on a successful model by the Ankara Bar association which has been providing legal counselling and legal aid to women, girls and other vulnerable persons on a pro-bono basis with
volunteer lawyers. We are also pleased to see that the program benefits from UN Volunteers who in this way gain experience from contributing to the realisation of the SDGs in Turkey," states SIDA Turkey Country Representative Malin Stawe.

The establishment of VPCs will support local violence prevention mechanisms by providing qualified legal counseling to people subjected to violence. Legal aid lawyers who are experienced in finding durable solutions for people subjected to violence are engaged at each VPC. The project aims to build a sustainable legal aid service within the framework of VPCs and to support the capacity development of legal aid practitioners.

"I believe that enhancing vulnerable groups' access to justice and provision of quality legal counseling is very important to build a just and fair society. Improving alternative support services such as psycho-social counseling and empowerment services is also crucial for sustainable results. Another important point is that prevention of secondary trauma throughout legal processes should be ensured," explains Kivilcim Kardelen Yok, national UN Youth Volunteer.

The project requires developing mechanisms for better coordination and improving networks among legal aid service providers. To provide effective legal aid services, the Union of Turkish Bar Associations (UTBA), the Ministry of Justice, and NGOs are working in cooperation and hoping to improve their coordination for a more effective violence prevention system. Training will be organized within the scope of the project to increase the capacity of lawyers practicing legal aid. Training sessions will be conducted online because of the health risks due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The content will include topics on legal aid, application of national legal instruments
according to international standards, gender equality, psychology, and social services.

Kivilcim explains that they are currently working on designing training modules. "I provide support to our project team and our main project beneficiary UTBA, with the authorization of the training modules, and coordination of the training materials. I serve as the focal point between UNDP, UTBA, and seven pilot bar associations. I believe that it is crucial to build good dialogue and effective coordination in order to enable sustainable mechanisms and solutions for GBV survivors", the UN Volunteer says.

National UN Volunteers with UNDP Turkey Eda Senel, Kivilcim Kardelen Yok and Pelin Kocer. Photo credit: UNV, 2021

UN Youth Volunteer Pelin Kocer serves in the “Enhancing Access to Public Services and Recourse for Violence Against Women Survivors Project”, also under the same portfolio of UNDP: Inclusive and Democratic Governance Portfolio. Pelin strives to enhance access to public services and to improve counseling and protection services for GBV survivors by improving the capacity, engagement, and coordination of relevant public institutions and civil society organizations. She contributes to the development of a more structured and effective response mechanism in which every woman can access protection mechanisms and find immediate legal solutions. Pelin also acts as a bridge between the project team and civil society organizations in the field of women’s rights and relevant public institutions.

"Working for creating solutions to overcome this societal problem boosts my motivation even more. It makes me feel like I am being the voice of GBV survivors," states Pelin Kocer, UN Youth Volunteer.

Eda Senel, Kivilcim Kardelen Yok and Pelin Kocer are driven to shape a just
future for all. Eda is currently working on her Master’s thesis on the European Union, Kivilcim is writing a master’s thesis on the Political Subjectivity of LGBTI+ people in Turkey and Pelin is currently doing her Master’s in Human Resources Management.

"UN Volunteers make a major contribution to development. They inspire creative approaches and foster civic engagement. Volunteers facilitate knowledge and experience sharing, specifically among youth in terms of development of local expertise. UN Volunteers are driven to help vulnerable communities in terms of supporting them to access essential services such as physical and legal protection. UNV promotes and inspires others to change and works towards achieving SDGs," states Orhun Yurtvermez, Project Manager, UNPD, Turkey.

If you are inspired by their example, have relevant education, and have at least two years of work experience and a higher technical diploma or beyond, register in UNV Talent Pool to get access to opportunities to serve UN development projects as UN Volunteer.

• Gender Based Violence Women’s Rights

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality