



EMPOWERING UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

Annual Report 2023



FOREWORD

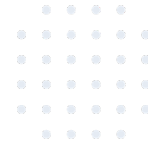
Since its establishment in 2001, AFEW International has championed the rights of all individuals in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA) who confront barriers in accessing health, justice, and social engagement. Our focus has centred on bolstering civil society actors and networks representing underserved communities—those often excluded, stigmatised, facing numerous obstacles hindering their access to essential services and full participation in civic life.

In 2023, we have redoubled our efforts to ensure that our 2023-2025 strategy and programming comprehensively address the adverse effects of the crises on the region's underserved populations.

Our updated strategy focuses on people first, ensuring that underserved populations facing high health risks are the priority. We're committed to tackling the stigma, poverty, discrimination, and exclusion they face. We work closely with communities and civil society organizations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia to develop coordinated responses tailored to their unique needs. These goals are at the core of AFEW International's mission and vision.

In the new strategic cycle 2023-2025, we continue to amplify the international visibility for the needs and rights of underserved populations in the EECA region. Specifically, we concentrate on fortifying the capacities of AFEW International and our partners, refining our collaborative programming in the Eastern Partnership countries and Central Asia. Moreover, we continue fostering resilience and stability in the region by combating stigma and nurturing environments conducive to the well-being of the populations we serve. To facilitate knowledge exchange and mutual learning, we provide platforms and opportunities for community-based organisations and experts from diverse regional backgrounds, thereby enriching the wider EECA region and neighbouring countries with invaluable insights and expertise.

We strongly believe that, given the evolving needs and crises confronting Eastern Europe and Central Asia, support to this region should once again become a priority for leading international funders, governmental institutions, and private benefactors.



Yuliya van Polanen,
Executive Director
of AFEW International

WHO WE ARE

AFEW International is a Dutch-based non-governmental humanitarian public health organisation dedicated to giving support and a strong international voice on rights and on health access to underserved populations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

Over the years AFEW International has evolved into a strong civic engagement, humanitarian actor in the EECA region committed to working with local civil society partners to support essential visibility and capacity strengthening efforts in order to ensure continuation of critical health and social services and programming while providing targeted technical and sub-granting funding support.

AFEW MISSION:

A WORLD IN WHICH UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS GAIN ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE FREE FROM STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

AFEW VISION:

CATALYZING SUPPORT AND PROVIDING A STRONG INTERNATIONAL VOICE ON RIGHTS AND ON HEALTHCARE ACCESS FOR UNDERSERVED POPULATIONS IN THE EECA REGION.

The AFEW International STRATEGY

for 2023—2025



VISION:

a world in which underserved populations gain access to health care free from stigma and discrimination

MISSION:

catalyzing support and providing a strong international voice on rights and on healthcare access for underserved populations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia (EECA)

STRATEGIC DIRECTIONS



GREATER VISIBILITY

for underserved populations' needs and rights related to health in the EECA region, including advocacy and increased resources.

What do we want to achieve?

Measurable change in awareness, levels of social justice, and funding for underserved populations in civil society across EECA with supported communities having more awareness about existing inequalities and their specific health needs.



STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTNERS' CAPACITIES

on improving health and social protections for underserved populations and communities.

What do we want to achieve?

Strengthened AFEW Partnership and partners with greater capacity working on improving health and social protections for underserved populations in at least eight countries in the EECA region (Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan).



IMPROVING RESILIENCE

of communities and addressing the negative consequences of the crisis in Ukraine and the implications for the entire region.

What do we want to achieve?

Agile targeted support for displaced migrant underserved populations due to the war in Ukraine and enhanced coordination of civil society actors in the EECA region and across Europe contributing to recovery processes.



LINKING AND LEARNING

through the provision of platforms and opportunities for effective exchanges and access to knowledge to the wider EECA region and neighbourhood countries.

What do we want to achieve?

Effective exchange and access to knowledge, best practices, innovations and research for EECA civil society actors and public authorities for mutual learning and greater awareness on underserved populations health needs and services as well as how to better protect their fundamental (human) rights.

HEALTH-RELATED FOCUS AREAS

communicable diseases with a specific focus on HIV, tuberculosis, hepatitis, COVID-19; sexual reproductive health and rights (SRHR); harm reduction for people who use drugs

AFEW INTERNATIONAL SEEKS TO DO THIS BY:

- **Advocating** for human rights for underserved populations and upholding their rights to health;
- **Building the capacity** of civil society actors in the EECA region serving these underserved populations, including operational and financial support;
- **Presenting** the EECA health/rights context at the global level – with international fora, networks and experts;
- **Facilitating** professional and public dialogues at the regional and country level.



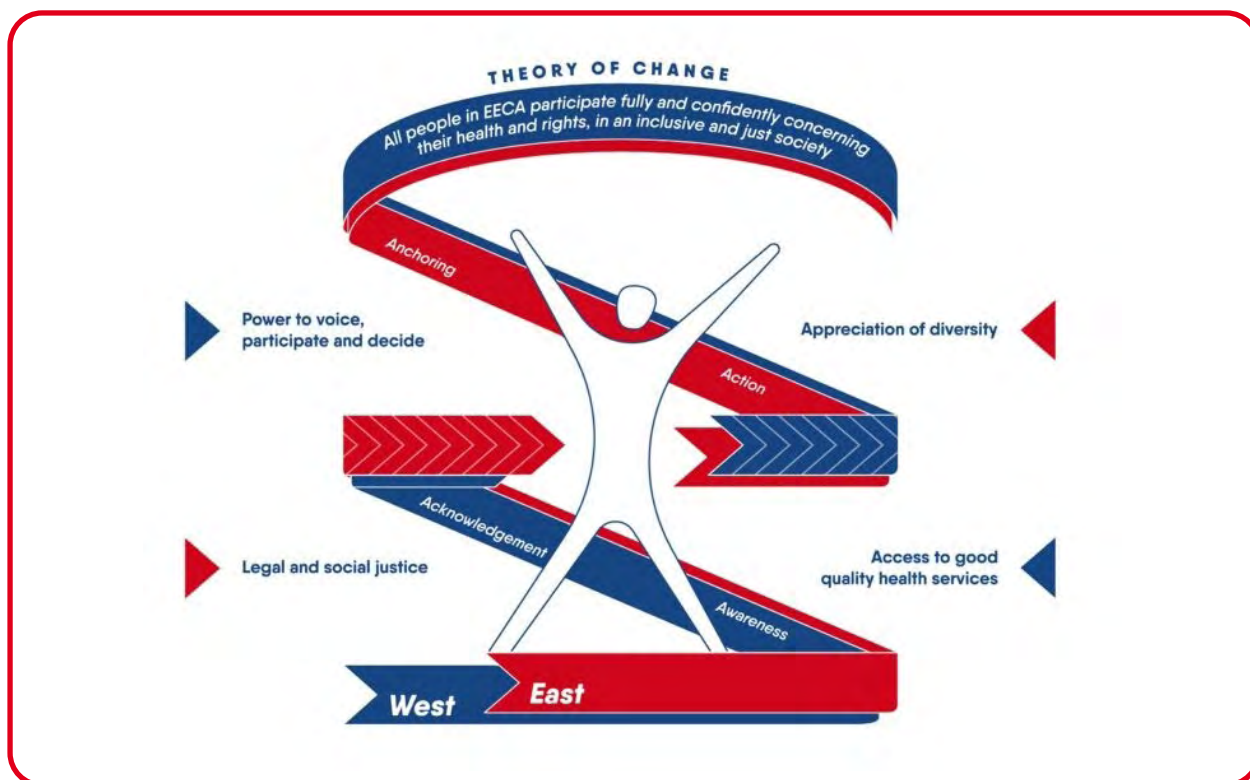
AFEW International is working with and for individuals in Eastern Europe and Central Asia region who are stigmatised and discriminated. Together with partners we build the capacity and provide support to civil society actors and advocacy groups and activists representing individuals and communities who have disproportionate burdens of HIV risk and disease and lack of access to quality, lifesaving essential basic health services.

The specific geographic focus for 2023-2025 strategy cycle was selected to be on four Eastern Partnership countries - Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, and four Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

Upon urgent needs, *AFEW International* also works in Europe with individuals who had been displaced from their EECA countries (i.e. Ukrainian refugees in Poland and the Netherlands, Russian political refugees in the Eastern Partnership countries or Europe).



AFEW International has gradually established a partnership of independent local organisations working in the countries of the EECA region. In 2023 the AFEW Partnership consisted of four members operating in **Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Netherlands, and Ukraine**, with AFEW International in the Netherlands serving as the international secretariat of the partnership.



Based upon the comprehensive analysis conducted together with its stakeholders, our vision, mission and values, and in consideration of the priorities that AFEW International has identified for the EECA region, the following four transformative strategic objectives for 2023-2025 have been formulated:



GREATER VISIBILITY for underserved populations' needs and rights related to health in the EECA region, including advocacy and increased resources;



STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS and partners' capacities on improving health and social protections for underserved populations and communities;



IMPROVING RESILIENCE of communities and addressing the negative consequences of the crisis in Ukraine and the implications for the entire region;



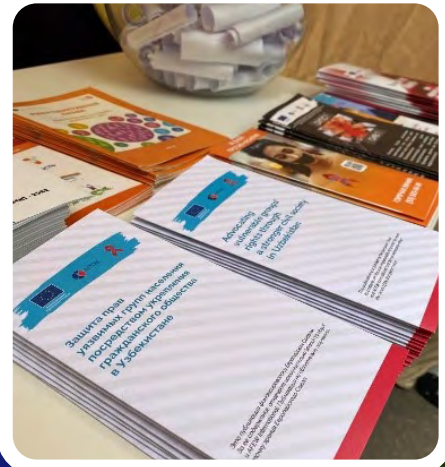
LINKING & LEARNING through the provision of platforms and opportunities for effective exchanges and access to knowledge to the wider EECA region and neighbourhood countries.

OUR ACHIEVEMENTS: PROJECTS 2023

GREATER VISIBILITY

Following our strategic objective of ensuring greater visibility for underserved populations' needs and rights related to health in the EECA region, including advocacy and increased resources, during the year we have actively engaged with key stakeholders, including by participating in the following **events and activities**:

Europe Day Festival (Tashkent, Uzbekistan), where we together with local partner «Ishonch va Hayot» presented the project "Advocating vulnerable groups' rights through a stronger civil society in Uzbekistan" at the EU-funded projects' fair. The event was organized by the Delegation of the European Union in Uzbekistan.



EECA Health Sustainability Forum (Warsaw, Poland), which aimed to gather national, regional and international partners and to mobilize expertise and experience for the dialogue on priority issues in the changing context of new political, social and economic challenges.



Human Rights Film Festival (The Hague, Netherlands), where we have spoken up about the rights and needs of women in Central Asia at the Human Rights Film Festival organised by Global Human Rights Defence (GHRD).





National Conference “Person living with HIV in the family and society”, 30th edition (Warsaw, Poland). Our project “Ukrainian refugees with HIV living in Poland engaged in HIV policy and practice”, supported by VIIV Healthcare (GIPA Accelerator Fund) was included into the conference program on November 30, 2023. We presented project participants, their initiatives and the preliminary results.

Plenary annual meeting of the Civil Society Forum on Drugs (Brussels, Belgium). The discussions have focused on crucial points, emphasising the necessity to enhance collaboration between civil society and the new European Union Drugs Agency. Enhancing rights and improving health access for underserved populations in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, AFEW International shared experiences on HIV, mental health and Human Rights in the EECA region.



Community-Led Monitoring (CLM) Training which was organized by AIDS Action Europe (Berlin, Germany). The workshop was organized in response to research conducted by AIDS Action Europe, revealing that organizations from Central and Western Europe have not been as deeply involved in community-led monitoring compared to their counterparts in other regions. The event provided invaluable insights into the significance of CLM, its potential applications in community involvement, tools for shadow reporting, and advocacy resources.



Annual Linking Research, Policy and Practice Conference, hosted by Share-Net Netherlands (Amsterdam, Netherlands). We facilitated the session «Sexual and Reproductive Rights and Inclusion» featuring thought-provoking research abstracts by emerging scholars. This annual event provided a platform for knowledge exchange and collaboration in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in international development.



COVID-19 SOCIAL MEDIA AWARDS

We co-hosted the COVID-19 Social Media Awards. The COVID-19 Influencers Social Media Awards shined a spotlight on an invaluable array of social media users – all influencers in their own context – recognizing the incredible contributions they made, and continue to make, to the collective understanding of the pandemic and responses around the world. AFEW International was a co-host of the awards in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Elena Bilokon, Director of the Revanche Foundation (Kazakhstan) won in the category “Care and Support”.

[Read more](#)



COVID-19 INFLUENCERS

2023 Social Media Awards

Congratulations to the winners

Pandemic policy and practice



Cinthia Reyes
Mexico

Staying safe



Trisha Greenhalgh
United Kingdom

Understanding the virus



Vinod Balasubramaniam
Malaysia

Young leader



Shiven Taneja
Canada

COVID-19 care and support



Yelena Bilokon
Kazakhstan

Vaccines



Benjamin Djoudalbaye
Chad

Vaccines



Hector L Frisbie
Mexico

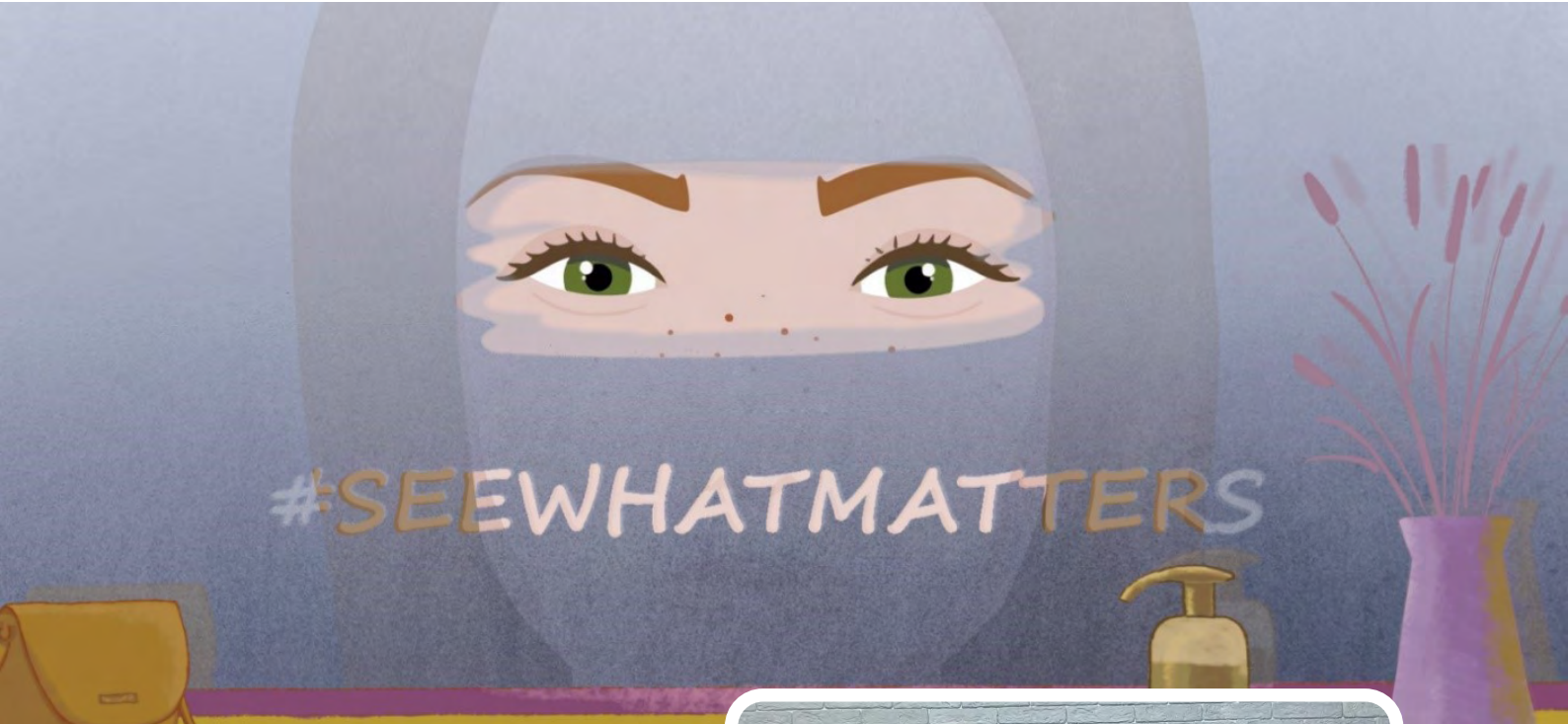
Long COVID



Padma Priya DVL
India



COMBATting STIGMA TO END HIV/AIDS IN EECA (March 2022 – March 2023)



In 2023 AFEW International has finalized the project “Combating stigma to end HIV/AIDS in EECA” (stopstigma.afew.org) including development of the social impact media campaign “See what matters” in 5 languages – Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Russian, Ukrainian and Uzbek – empowering women living with HIV to reduce self-stigma, which has directly benefited over 2000 women in 5 countries and reached over 200.000 people, with financial support of Gilead “Zeroing In: Ending the HIV Epidemic” programme.

[Read more](#)

STRENGTHENING PARTNERSHIPS AND PARTNERS CAPACITIES

In 2023 we worked on strengthening capacity of our partners on improving health and social protections for underserved populations and communities in several countries by implementing the following projects:

EXPANSION AND IMPROVEMENT OF HIV SERVICES IN UZBEKISTAN (May 2021 – April 2023)

AFEW International successfully finalized the project “Expansion and improvement of HIV services in Uzbekistan” in partnership with our local partner NGO “Ischonch va Hayot” (a community-based membership NGO uniting key populations) reaching over 9000 service users, with financial support of the Elton John AIDS Foundation.

[Read a change story](#)



ADVOCATING VULNERABLE GROUPS' RIGHTS THROUGH A STRONGER CIVIL SOCIETY IN UZBEKISTAN (February 2022 – August 2024)

We continued to empower underserved groups in Uzbekistan working with 30 CSOs and are organised a series of trainings and activities on Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) in Uzbekistan in the framework of the programme “Advocating vulnerable groups’ rights through a stronger civil society in Uzbekistan”, with financial support from the EU Delegation.

[Learn more about CBPR](#)



EMPOWERED LGBTI COMMUNITY IN GEORGIA (July – December 2023)



We helped building a more inclusive society in Georgia in the framework of the project “Empowered LGBTI community” in partnership with AIDS Action Europe supported by Deutsche Aidshilfe with funds from the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs under the Expanding Cooperation with Civil Society in the Eastern Partnership Countries and Russia programme.

A final roundtable in Tbilisi provided a platform for 15 participants to present their projects and share experiences. The event included insights from established LGBTI organisations, enhancing participants’ understanding and networking opportunities.

IMPROVING RESILIENCE

SUPPORT TO UKRAINIAN PEOPLE LIVING WITH HIV IN POLAND (March 2023 - January 2024)

Within the commitment to improve resilience of communities and address the negative consequences of the crisis in Ukraine and the implications for the entire region AFEW International started working in Poland to engage Ukrainian activists currently living there in HIV policy and

practice with financial support from the ViiV Healthcare GIPA Accelerator Fund. The project responded to the lack of adequate health system response and engagement of the new and still rising group of PLHIV in Poland – refugees flying from Ukraine due to the war.



Its objective was to increase the equal and full participation of PLHIV refugees from Ukraine in Polish HIV programming, leading to strengthened effective, inclusive and responsive programmes and policies made with the full participation of all PLHIV Ukrainian refugees living in Poland. To achieve this change, we recruited 20 Ukrainian PLHIV refugees willing to become community leaders and self-advocates, provided them with comprehensive trainings covering the essential knowledge and skills and offered them the opportunity to design and implement small-scale initiatives targeted their communities with the support of experienced mentors.

The project successfully completed all activities, including nine tailor-made trainings, mentoring, and group initiatives supporting Ukrainian HIV-positive refugees (PLHIV), PWUD, and LGBT individuals. Implemented by 20 activists in 6 regions of Poland, the project reached over 1,300 PLHIV, with direct outreach to 705 and indirect outreach to 500. Additional outreach included 120 PWUD, 50 LGBT individuals, and 100 from the general population, with over 1,500 views via social media and mentor websites.

Key achievements included a documentary film «Victory Every Day,» a concert with local and regional partners, distribution of informational materials and a Polish-Ukrainian medical phrasebook, and the creation of a platform for Ukrainian women with HIV. The project also facilitated the formation of the HelpNowHub Foundation to ensure ongoing support for Ukrainian PLHIV in Poland. AFEW International and Społeczny Komitet ds. AIDS held a final session in Warsaw, where initiative leaders shared their experiences and received feedback.

[Find out more](#)



LINKING AND LEARNING

We continued providing platforms and opportunities for effective exchanges and access to knowledge to the wider EECA region and neighbourhood countries by (co-)organising the following:

EECA INTERACT

The fourth scientific workshop on HIV, hepatitis C, and tuberculosis in Eastern Europe and Central Asia EECA INTERACT 2023 was held online on 14 December 2023. The live virtual event set the stage for EECA INTERACT 2025, which will be a face-to-face symposium in Fall 2025 that will include oral presentations by young scientists selected through peer review.

EECA INTERACT 2023 CONSISTED OF THREE PANELS FOCUSING ON:

- **Impact of the war** on Ukraine and beyond Ukraine across the EECA region;
- **Prevention** in the EECA region and PreP;
- **Session on (In)visible community**: HIV and health disparities among MSM and Trans*people in EECA.

[Read more](#)



The banner features a stylized logo on the left, consisting of a white circle inside a white triangle, which is itself inside a larger, rounded purple triangle. To the right of the logo, the text 'EECA INTERACT' is written in large, bold, black letters, with 'Virtual 2023' in a smaller, purple font below it. Further down, the text 'SCIENCE FOR ACTION ON HIV, TB AND VIRAL HEPATITIS IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA' is displayed in a smaller, black font. At the bottom of the banner, the date '14 December' is written in a large, purple font. The background of the banner is a gradient of purple and pink with a geometric pattern of overlapping triangles.

EECA
INTERACT
Virtual 2023

SCIENCE FOR ACTION ON HIV, TB AND VIRAL HEPATITIS
IN EASTERN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA

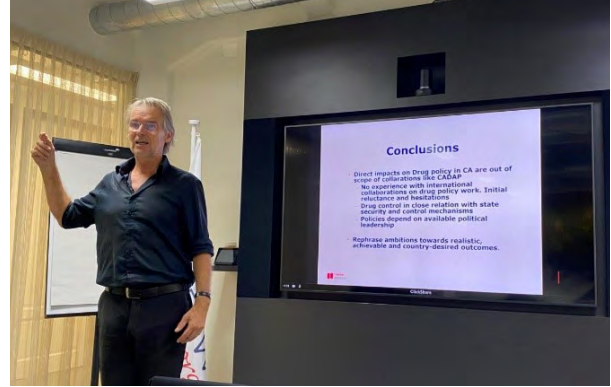
14 December

#EECAINTERACT www.eeca-interact.org

A STUDY TOUR FOR GOVERNMENTAL AND CSO PARTNERS FROM KAZAKHSTAN

On September 25-29, 2023 AFEW International organized a study tour for representatives from the government and civil society in Almaty (Kazakhstan) to learn more about the Dutch/European approach to addressing social problems and to identify good practices with the potential to be transferred to Kazakhstan.

[Watch how it was](#)



BRIDGING THE GAPS - EFFECTIVE SEX TREATMENT RESPONSE FOR LGBTI COMMUNITIES AFFECTED BY PROBLEMATIC CHEMSEX (June 2023-June 2024)

We conducted community-based participatory research analysing the needs of problematic chemsex users and counsellors in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine to help create effective sex treatment response for LGBTI communities in EECA with financial support of Share-Net International.

[Learn more](#)

SUSTAINABILITY AND THE LONGER-TERM FUTURE

While the donor development landscape is changing rapidly and in unpredictable ways, *AFEW International's* new strategic approach and operational model has already proved to be more relevant, inclusive and sustainable in supporting underserved communities across EECA. *AFEW International* will further pursue its core objectives within the framework of realistic, agile and responsive annual plans.

The strategy is being reviewed using inclusive consultation methods on an annual basis and adapted when needed. This reflects new reality of the current operating landscape where we aim to make an important contribution to both the short and longer term health and other needs of the communities we serve.

Through focusing on the wider needs of underserved population communities and working collaboratively with donors and partners in EECA and at EU level, more strategic partnership opportunities have become available to the organisation:

In 2023, *AFEW International* became a member of **Funders Concerned About AIDS (FCAA) network**, which provides timely updates and better coordination with donors of different level. Furthermore, FCAA has created a sub-group of donors focusing specifically on the EECA region that have regular calls and meetings to exchange the latest insights and align priorities for funding.

At the end of 2023 *AFEW International* has been selected via a rigorous application process along with nine other international civil society organisations as a **Framework Partner of the European Commission for the Eastern Partnership Countries** (Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine) and signed the Framework Partnership Agreement for the period of 4 years (2024-2027).

Core focus remains on expanding partners in different countries and continue to bring a 'voice' from EECA region to a pan-European donor and governmental audience, as well as lobbying for recognition and resourcing to address strategic underserved population health risks- leveraging if needed off the current geopolitical spotlight on the region.

In the medium and long term, the ambition remains for *AFEW International* to be a facilitator of change and exchange between East and West, a strong advocate for human rights and access to healthcare for all, and to raise awareness of and funding for *AFEW International* and the *AFEW Partnership* and, in more general terms, for the EECA region civil society actors as a whole.