

Collection of Essays on Theory and Practice of the Gender Struggles in Western Balkans



COLLECTION OF ESSAYS ON THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE GENDER STRUGGLES IN WESTERN BALKANS

Edited by Viktorija Borovska and Kalina Lechevska

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Mjellma Vula

**BEYOND INCENTIVES:
SUPPORTING GIRLS' PARTICIPATION
IN STEM**

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields are crucial for building inclusive and sustainable societies, yet the significant underrepresentation of girls in these fast-growing sectors that drive innovation, social welfare, and economic competitiveness remains a global issue. While incentives such as scholarships and mentorship programs have increased girls' participation, especially in upper-secondary education, they fail to address the deep-rooted factors that hinder access to STEM from early education through to career development¹. Globally, only one woman secures a job in a STEM-related field for every four men. Influenced by stereotypes, a lack of role models, and perceptions of STEM as a male-dominated field, girls often disengage from STEM as early as primary education.²

This imbalance is even more pronounced in higher education, where choices of career path further widen the gap that has remained unchanged for the past decade, with women making up only 35% of STEM graduates. This disparity is particularly evident in fields like engineering and information technology, and the gap continuously widens in higher-ranking positions, with only 3% of science-related Nobel Prizes having ever been awarded to women.³

The gender gap in STEM is not driven by lower enrollment or test scores for girls, but rather by social factors such as gender roles and biases, which discourage girls from pursuing STEM in the first place. From early childhood, girls are often socialized to believe that STEM is a male-dominated field, impacting their perceptions of intelligence and confidence by as early as six years old.⁴ These stereotypes are especially evident in educational settings, where textbooks frequently depict men as scientists and women

¹ Bello, A. (2020). *Women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) in the Latin American and Caribbean*. <https://ilac.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Americas/Documentos/Publicaciones/2020/09/Women%20in%20STEM%20UN%20Women%20Unesco%20EN32921.pdf>

² María, A. B., & Estébanez, E. (2022). *An Unbalanced Equation: Increasing Participation of Women in STEM in LAC*. <https://forocilac.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/PolicyPapers-CILAC-Gener-ENG-VFEB22.pdf>

³ UNESCO. (2024). *Global education monitoring report 2024, gender report: technology on her terms*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54676/WVCF2762>

⁴ Eble, A., & Hu, F. (2019). *How important are beliefs about gender differences in math ability? Transmission across generations and impacts on child outcomes* (EdWorkingPaper). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.26300/8txd-ed83>

as teachers, and where teachers may unconsciously steer girls toward the humanities while encouraging boys to pursue math and science, contributing to a self-fulfilling prophecy where girls gradually lose self-confidence in these subjects before they even consider them as career options. Additionally, in many households, parents may encourage sons over daughters to pursue STEM careers, reflecting societal attitudes that further discourage girls from entering these fields. The gap continues into higher education and the workforce, with structural barriers limiting access to research, mentorship, and leadership roles. In Kosovo, where women are 15% less likely than men to enroll in STEM-related tertiary programs, these challenges are even more pronounced.⁵

While scholarships, mentorships, and awareness campaigns have increased interest in STEM, these measures alone are insufficient to address the systemic barriers discussed. In Kosovo, where traditional gender roles limit opportunities for women and girls, a more comprehensive approach is needed, namely one that combines educational reforms, shifts in societal norms, engages parents, and creates supportive environments to sustain girls' participation from education through to careers.

Kosovo's education system reflects and reinforces gendered divisions of labor that manifest early in life, where traditional perceptions of STEM as "male" domains persist in curricula, textbooks, and classroom practices. Girls often do not see themselves represented in these fields, nor do they receive the encouragement they need to pursue these subjects. Scholarships and STEM promotion campaigns, while useful at the individual level, are only part of the solution. Despite progress, only 32% of young women in Kosovo are enrolled in STEM fields at the University of Prishtina. Once enrolled, these young women face institutional barriers, such as insufficient support systems, limited family encouragement, and the absence of gender-sensitive environments at educational institutions, which further curb their aspirations.⁶ Even in programs with higher female enrollment,

⁵ Hammond, A., Rubiano, E., Kathleen, M., Sai, B., & Kumaraswamy, K. (2020). *The Equality Equation: Advancing the Participation of Women and Girls in STEM*. www.worldbank.org

⁶ Ferati, M., Demukaj, V., Kurti, A., & Mortberg, C. (2022). Generation Z Enters STEM: Obstacles and Opportunities in the Case of Kosovo. In 6th Annual International Symposium on Future of STEAM (sciences, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) Education (pp. 31–32). Athens Institute for Education and Research. <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1719120/FULLTEXT01>

like computer science, the transition from education to employment remains challenging, with only 24.2% of women employed compared to 57.8% of men in these fields.⁷

Incentive-based approaches, such as scholarships, have been widely implemented to increase girls' participation in STEM. While these measures have led to a rise in enrollment, they fall short of addressing systemic barriers that persist throughout the educational pipeline. Government-backed financial support programs, like those led by the Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation (MESTI) in Kosovo⁸, while representing a positive step forward, are often short-term solutions that fail to secure retention beyond the initial engagement. Many women leave during university or early in their careers due to insufficient support, work-life balance challenges, and discrimination. As a result, the "leaky pipeline", where women gradually drop out of STEM fields at various stages of their academic or professional journey, continues to limit women's advancement into senior roles in STEM. For incentives to be truly effective, they must go beyond financial aid and focus on retention, career progression, and cultural perceptions, creating inclusive, supportive work environments.⁹

In conclusion, to close the gender gap in STEM, Kosovo must adopt a comprehensive approach that goes beyond financial incentives and awareness campaigns, to address the deep-rooted structural barriers that hinder access and retention. Incentives alone, while valuable, cannot drive long-term participation, and sustainable change will require collective effort across sectors. To ensure lasting change, Kosovo must adopt a multifaceted approach that fosters an enabling environment for girls in STEM, addressing biases early and throughout their educational and career journeys. Educational reforms, societal changes, and institutional policies must be implemented in tandem to create a supportive ecosystem that encourages girls to pursue and thrive in STEM fields.

⁷ STIKK - Kosovo ICT Association. (2021). *W O M E N I N I C T: An Analysis of the State of the Kosovan Women in the ICT Sector*. <https://stikk.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Women-in-ICT-Report-2021.pdf>

⁸ UNWomen. (2024). *Breaking barriers: How STEM scholarships are empowering Kosovo's Young Women*. UNWomen. <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/08/breaking-barriers-how-stem-scholarships-are-empowering-kosovos-young-women>

⁹ UNESCO. (2024). *Global education monitoring report 2024, gender report: technology on her terms*. UNESCO. <https://doi.org/10.54676/WVCF2762>

First, MESTI should prioritize the introduction of gender-responsive teaching materials and provide training for teachers to counteract unconscious biases, as these are essential steps toward reshaping perceptions of STEM. Additionally, early exposure to STEM should be facilitated through interactive and hands-on activities, such as coding clubs, robotics camps, and field visits, to ignite interest and build confidence from a young age.

Second, in collaboration with civil society, targeted outreach interventions, such as parental training programs and workshops, should be implemented to engage parents and challenge cultural norms that discourage girls from pursuing STEM careers. Additionally, greater collaborative efforts are needed between secondary and tertiary institutions to increase girls' interest in STEM before they reach higher education, ensuring they have access to role models, mentors, and career counseling.

Third, MESTI should prioritize the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data to assess the impact of its interventions and refine its future incentive-based policies. To create a more holistic approach, these incentive-based initiatives should be complemented by professional development and mentorship programs. By providing mentorship opportunities and fostering partnerships between civil society, educational institutions, and the private sector, these combined efforts can help combat the "leaky pipeline".

Finally, special attention should be given to marginalized groups, including girls from low-income backgrounds, rural areas, and minority communities, such as the Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian communities. To effectively address the unique barriers these girls face in accessing STEM education, it is essential to implement tailored support through community engagement initiatives. Without targeted interventions, current and future efforts to close the gender gap in STEM may fail to reach the most vulnerable.

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Bio: MJELLMAVULA is a gender equality and social inclusion specialist with extensive experience in inclusive policy development, stakeholder engagement, and workforce development. She has contributed to projects funded by USAID, the World Bank, the EU, and Global Affairs Canada, collaborating with organizations such as Save the Children, American Councils, Legacy International, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo, and Legacy International. Mjellma's work focuses on advancing equitable access to education, employment, and decision-making for women, youth, and marginalized communities, particularly in Kosovo. She has led initiatives to increase gender diversity and youth participation in the energy sector, managed large-scale vocational training programs, and supported inclusive early childhood education policies. Mjellma holds a Master's degree in Education and International Development

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Aleksandra Filipova

**BRIDGING THE GENDER GAPS IN
YOUTH GUARANTEE IN NORTH
MACEDONIA**

Youth employment is an important policy priority for all governments in the Western Balkans. Along with general economic development, all economies have experienced a positive trend in youth employment creation in recent years. However, youth unemployment remains stubbornly high, while activity and employment rates are far below the levels seen in the EU, with a strong gender bias. Female youth employment rates are everywhere below the male youth employment rates, reflecting the gender gap in youth activity rates. The average gender gap in youth employment rates in the region is 10.3 percentage points (p.p.), more than twice the gap in the EU-27 (4.5 p.p.). The highest gender gaps are in Serbia* (11.4 p.p.) and North Macedonia (10.8 p.p.) (Regional Cooperation Platform, 2021)¹. Young women were more seriously affected than young men. This is closely linked to gender patterns observed for Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEETs) young people, which will be also discussed later in this paper. As young women are more likely to be inactive, their first steps to (re)enter the labor market tend to be even more challenging. This can be linked to several factors, such as socio-cultural norms, less favorable working environments, and family duties. This has been documented by the European Training Foundation's work in its partner countries and is also a clear pattern observed in EU countries (European Training Foundation, 2021)². NEETs are at higher risk of being socially and economically excluded and so are more likely to become vulnerable in the long term. Yet, this category contains a variety of sub-groups, some of which are vulnerable and some not, with young women facing specific challenges. The high heterogeneity of the NEET population, particularly the gendered differences in inactivity due to caregiving responsibilities, socio-cultural expectations, and limited access to employment opportunities, needs to be further considered when designing policies for vulnerable groups and their re-engagement with the labor market or the education system. Without addressing these gender-related barriers, young women remain at a disproportionate risk of long-term exclusion.

When it comes to the situation with NEETs in North Macedonia, the Employment Service Agency (ESA), in collaboration with the Ministry of Social

¹ Regional Cooperation Platform, Youth Employment and Gender Gaps in the Western Balkans (Belgrade: RCC, 2021), 12.

² European Training Foundation, Youth Transition and Skills Mismatch in Eastern partnership countries (Turin: ETF, 2021), 7.

Policy and Labor (now reestablished as the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography, and Youth), conducts NEET mapping. According to the data collected by this mapping, in 2021, NEET rates were higher for women compared to men (26.1% and 22.4%, respectively), for young people in the 25-29 age group compared to the younger group (34.4% and 17.8%, respectively), for young people living in the Northeastern region (39.7%), and for young people with a secondary education (27.5%). Among inactive NEET individuals, there is a prevalence of young people distanced from the labor market due to care and family obligations (22.1% of the total NEET population, or over 20,000 individuals) and discouragement (16.2% or 15,200 young people). The share of inactive NEET individuals due to discouragement began increasing in 2019, reaching its peak in 2021 at 16.2%, which is double the share recorded in 2016 (7.5%). The gender gap in NEET rates – 3.7 percentage points in 2021 – is primarily explained by the predominance of women among those inactive due to family and care obligations (96.7% of the total NEET individuals in this category). These young women mainly belong to the low- to medium-skilled category and mostly live in rural areas, in non-poor households. On the other hand, young men are more represented in other NEET categories, especially among the long-term unemployed and discouraged workers. The findings from this mapping also shows that: (i) young people aged 25-29 are less likely to become both unemployed and inactive (by 14.7% and 7.7%, respectively) compared to those in the younger group (15-24 years); (ii) young men face a lower likelihood of becoming NEET compared to women (5.2% for unemployment and 18.4% for inactivity), with the greater “inactivity” effect for young women stemming solely from the “care and family obligations” group (20.4%); (iii) compared to young people with only a primary education, the likelihood of becoming NEET decreases by 16.6% and 15.9% for unemployed young people with secondary and higher education, respectively; (iv) living in an urban area decreases the likelihood of becoming NEET (but only for inactive young people), while living in Skopje increases the likelihood of becoming unemployed or inactive; and (v) in 2021, NEET levels remained concerning in Skopje (more than 27,200 NEET young people), the Polog region (over 22,800), the Northeastern region (over 14,000), and the Southwestern region (over 12,600).

The North Macedonia Youth Guarantee program, since its piloting in 2018, has not significantly evolved to address the gender-specific challenges faced by young people, especially young women. The program offers the same opportunities and services to both young men and women, without considering their distinct needs and the socio-cultural factors that contribute to the employment gap or why they are in the NEETs category. Even though there are concrete gender-related statistics and sufficient data that explains why there is a gender gap when it comes to entering the labor market, there is still a lack of measures that will appropriately address this. The percentage of all participants signed up for the Youth Guarantee in 2018, 2019, 2020, and 2021 varies between 51% and 50%, yet the number of NEET girls is still higher compared to NEET males, proving that the measures need to be readjusted and tailor-made. The persistence of a high percentage of NEETs in North Macedonia, despite equal enrollment rates in the Youth Guarantee program, underscores a critical need for tailor-made and intersectional policies. The fact that girls continue to represent a larger share of the NEET population, even when they have higher levels of education than their male counterparts, underscores the inadequacy of standardized approaches to youth employment. These approaches often fail to address the complex and unique challenges faced by young women, particularly those from vulnerable groups. The key to the success of any youth policy lies in its ability to be truly inclusive and responsive to these differences. A youth policy that does not account for gender disparities or neglects intersectional concerns risks reinforcing existing inequalities and widening the gender gap. To ensure the long-term success of youth policy, gender-sensitive and intersectional strategies must be integral to both policy development and implementation, creating pathways for all young people to thrive in the labor market.

To address the gender gap and the aforementioned approaches, the following modifications could be implemented:

- The state should introduce childcare and family support for young NEETs: Introducing effective childcare and family support measures for young NEETs, including the piloting of flexible working hours, remote work, and assistance with on-site or near-site child-

care in collaboration with the private sector. Family-friendly policies could reduce the caregiving burden that disproportionately affects women, such as offering paid caregiver leave.

- The Employment Service Agency (ESA) should introduce targeted training and education options for young NEETs, such as encouraging vocational training for women in traditionally male-dominated fields like technology or engineering, addressing stereotypes that limit young women's choices and encouraging young men to enter social care, education, or other fields that are traditionally female-dominated. The existing training options that are part of the Youth Guarantee reinforce the existing job stereotypes, and there is an evident need for a drastic shift in the offered training programs. Online and modular learning that allows young women, especially those with family obligations, to learn at their own pace will also help tackle the gender gap, since currently, participants need to physically attend the training sessions, which is impossible for rural or remote area NEETs, those with disabilities, or those with caregiving responsibilities. Mobile training centers for rural areas could offer skills development, career counseling, and job placement services, reducing the barriers faced by both rural women and rural men in accessing employment opportunities due to a lack of technical resources (internet, computers, or lack of digital skills for using technical devices).
- The Employment Service Agency should incentivize employers to hire young NEETs: Currently, the ESA may subsidize payments for young employed NEETs, but this measure needs to be further explored and refined, for example, to provide incentives for employers to hire young women, particularly those re-entering the workforce after a period of inactivity due to family duties.**
- The Employment Service Agency should provide psychological support for NEETs: Young women may face mental health challenges such as anxiety, discouragement, or low confidence, particularly those who have been unemployed or out of the workforce for

extended periods. Young men face challenges such as discouragement and giving up, and both groups have a need for counseling services and personal development programs that will help them build the mental resilience needed to navigate the labor market.**

- The Employment Service Agency should enhance gender-disaggregated data collection: There is a need to ensure that the Youth Guarantee program collects gender-disaggregated data to continuously assess how different interventions affect young men and women. This can help identify which aspects of the program are succeeding or failing in addressing the gender gap and meeting the employment needs of both girls and boys.

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Irena Majko

**DIGITALIZATION POLICIES FOR
INCLUSIVE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION
IN ALBANIA**

Introduction

The vocational education system in Albania, like many others, reflects gender disparities that mirror broader societal patterns. Girls are more likely to pursue non-technical fields such as health care and social services, while boys dominate technical sectors such as mechanics, construction, and IT, etc. This division is influenced by cultural norms and societal expectations, as evidenced in the Draft National Education Strategy (2021-2026), which highlights the gender-based division in educational choices.¹

As Albania embraces digitalization, policies outlined in documents such as the Digital Agenda Strategy (2020-2025) and the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2021-2030) offer opportunities to address these disparities. This position paper explores how digitalization policies can be used to make vocational education more inclusive, while proposing adjustments to ensure they effectively promote gender equality.

Gender Disparities in Vocational Education

The Draft National Education Strategy (2021-2026) acknowledges the clear gender divide in education. Girls are predominantly concentrated in fields related to health, education, and the arts, while boys are more likely to enroll in technical and scientific disciplines, although this observation focuses on higher education, similar trends are evident in vocational training, where societal expectations continue to influence students' choices.²

The strategy suggests a need for promoting STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) education more widely among girls. However, this alone is insufficient to dismantle the cultural biases that guide career choices. Digitalizing teaching and learning in vocational education and training provides a concrete opportunity to break gender barriers by exposing girls to tools, platforms, and role models that may help them reconsider their career paths. The e-VET Modernization Roadmap highlights that digital learning environments and the implementation of technology, such as blended learning, offer flexible and interactive ways for students to

¹ *Draft National Education Strategy (2021-2026)* (Republic of Albania, Ministry of Education and Sports), 65.

² *Draft National Education Strategy (2021-2026)* (Republic of Albania, Ministry of Education and Sports), 65.

learn. This also presents an opportunity for students to explore and demystify STEM subjects, making them more approachable for girls who often perceive technical fields as outside their abilities due to societal stereotypes. Digitalization can reshape these perceptions and foster inclusivity.

Addressing the Digital Divide in Vocational Education

The e-VET Modernization Roadmap identifies limited access to vocational education as a major barrier for vulnerable groups, including students from rural areas, marginalized communities, and those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. These students often lack access to quality educational resources, face financial constraints, or live in areas with limited infrastructure, making it difficult for them to fully participate in VET programs.³ This digital divide contributes to unequal educational outcomes and limits the future career prospects of these students. The strategies in place, such as the Digital Agenda Strategy (2020-2025) and the e-VET Modernization Roadmap, address aspects like infrastructure investment and teacher training but fail to provide concrete plans for ensuring that vulnerable groups can access the digital infrastructure and tools they need. While there are provisions to improve digital infrastructure, including internet access for schools and hardware provisions, the implementation plans often overlook the need for ensuring sustained access and support for students in these disadvantaged groups and demographics.⁴

The strategy should place a stronger emphasis on targeted infrastructure support by providing subsidized or loaned devices (laptops, tablets, etc.) for students from vulnerable backgrounds. Currently, the focus is primarily on upgrading school infrastructure, such as broadband connectivity and classroom devices. However, without ensuring that all students have personal devices at home, digital learning efforts will continue to exclude a portion of students.

Given the financial constraints many vulnerable students face, prioritizing mobile-based learning platforms is crucial. Swisscontact Albania's "Skills for Jobs" project, which supports nine VET schools through the MësoVET

³ *e-VET Modernization Roadmap* (Republic of Albania), 2.

⁴ *Digital Agenda Strategy (2020-2025)* (Republic of Albania), 24; *e-VET Modernization Roadmap* (Republic of Albania).

learning management system (a Moodle-based platform), is a valuable example in this direction. One key feature of this initiative is the online and offline application, allowing students to access content without constant internet connectivity. In addition, digital learning materials have been developed by experts for each subject, aligned with the curricula, and are uploaded into the platform. However, this initiative should not be limited to just these nine schools but should be expanded across the entire VET system. Since mobile phones are more affordable and accessible than laptops or desktops, using this technology would enable more students, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to participate in online learning and bridge the digital divide.

Enhancing Digital Skills for the Labor Market

The National Strategy for Employment and Skills (2023-2030) highlights the importance of equipping students with digital skills to facilitate a smooth transition into the labor market. It recognizes that digital competencies are essential for employability, particularly as technological advancements reshape industries. Specifically, it notes that “strengthening digital skills is crucial for better employment opportunities in a modern economy”,. While the strategy emphasizes digital skills, it does not explicitly address the unique challenges girls face when transitioning into the labor market. To improve this, the strategy should include the revision of the curricula and subjects that are available in different programs of VET to not only teach technical skills but also to teach digital skills and prepare girls for leadership roles in the digital economy. For example, training in digital entrepreneurship or digital marketing could empower girls to use technology as a tool for career growth, not just as employees but as creators and innovators.⁵

Recommendations:

1. Implement targeted digitization initiatives in vocational education to create interactive STEM learning environments that actively encourage female participation and provide role models, thus help-

⁵ *National Strategy for Employment and Skills (2023-2030)* (Republic of Albania, Ministry of Finance and Economy), 39.

ing to dismantle gender stereotypes and broaden career choices for girls.

2. Prioritize the provision of subsidized or loaned personal devices to students from vulnerable backgrounds to ensure equitable access to digital learning resources and bridge the educational digital divide.
3. Expand mobile-based learning platforms, such as the MësoVET system, across all VET schools to provide accessible online and offline learning options, thus enabling broader participation from students in disadvantaged and rural areas.
4. Revise the VET curriculum to include targeted digital skills training, such as digital entrepreneurship and digital marketing, to empower girls as leaders in the digital economy, addressing the unique challenges they face in transitioning to the labor market.

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Bio: IRENA MAJKO is passionate about research, continuous learning, and embracing new experiences that contribute to personal and professional growth. She holds a degree in Gender Studies, where she developed a strong academic interest in exploring the complexities of social inequalities affecting women in Albania. Her research also takes a broader perspective, examining the intersection of gender, ethnicity, and class, and how these dynamics shape opportunities and challenges for marginalized communities.

She works as a trainer for young Roma girls and boys, delivering capacity-building sessions that focus on education, life skills, and personal empowerment. Through her work, she aims to inspire young people to pursue education and professional opportunities, fostering greater inclusion and self-confidence. In addition to her training activities, she coordinates development projects that focus on improving and digitalizing formal education systems, while supporting a smoother transition for young people from school to the labor market.

Xhoelda Shelqetja

**GENDER SENSITIVITY POLICY
FOCUSES ON THE PROCESS OF
MIGRATION**

"We cannot and should not stop people from migrating. We must give them a better life at home. Migration is a process, not a problem" – William L. Swing.

Background

Immigration refers to the international movement of people to a destination country where they are not natives or do not hold citizenship, with the aim of settling as permanent residents or naturalised citizens. The process of relocating individuals involves various social, economic, and psychological effects that influence their vulnerability and ability to adapt to the community and meet its reintegration needs. The primary concern is not about preventing people from leaving, as this is a normal process, but rather the social issues that countries face, especially when women return to their home countries, which raises concerns in several nations.

Policy supporting returned migration is an evolving strategy that encompasses both successes and challenges, which must be assessed to determine the necessary adjustments for fostering a better environment for women.

According to the report in the Multi-dimensional Review of the Western Balkans: From Analysis to Action, OECD (2022) provides suggestions and recommendations for three strategic priorities that can help create opportunities and enhance the quality of life. First, better education and more skills form the foundation for increasing productivity, generating jobs, encouraging civic participation, and making the region more attractive. Second, social cohesion is the cornerstone of resilient societies and demands stronger labour market policies and adequate social protection that can ease people's hardships and offer them new opportunities.

Many in the region lack access to opportunities in the formal labour market, particularly the long-term unemployed, women, and citizens from dis-

advantaged groups; this presents a significant challenge to building cohesive societies (OECD 2022).

Based on data from Eurostat, 1,255,640 persons applied for asylum in EU countries in 2015, an increase of 123% from the previous year and an increase of 487% compared to 2010. A large number of asylum seekers were from Western Balkans countries, specifically from Albania (5% in 2015).

In the article “Development on the Move, Measuring and Optimising Migration’s Economic and Social Impacts” (Ippr and GDN 2010), two points in particular stand out. First, it is interesting to note that the type of emigration often assumed to have the greatest development impacts—that is, recent emigration in which the migrant leaves other household members behind—actually occurs. Second, when considering the “rates of return cases,” for example, in Macedonia, the government reported 34 migrants returned for every 100 who had departed.

Migration dynamics in the Western Balkans

Theories on return migration emphasise that the development impact of return migrants largely depends on whether the policies in the country of origin provide a supportive environment for their return (Dhëmbo, E., Duci, V., & Vathi, Z. 2019). Despite the significant brain drain experienced by the Western Balkan countries and the importance of increasing the return of highly skilled emigrants, there are still no targeted reintegration policies in place. The various ad-hoc initiatives implemented so far have been part of programmes funded and carried out by international donors and organisations, with state institutions usually playing only a minor role. The national policies of Western Balkan WB states addressing this issue predominantly focus on the readmission and reintegration of asylum seekers whose applications were refused and emigrants with irregular status in the destination country. In contrast, highly skilled emigrants are only addressed indirectly through a number of recent strategic documents.

In the 1990s, a decade marked by transition, conflicts, and economic collapse, the emigration of highly educated individuals further increased. The inflows of refugees from the Western Balkans to the EU throughout

the 1990s were unprecedented (INSTAT & IOM, 2014). During the 2000s, migration was mainly driven by labour opportunities. Between 2010 and 2014, the number of Western Balkan nationals seeking asylum across EU Member States was relatively high compared to the previous period. Still, it represented a small share of the overall population in the source countries or the number of asylum seekers from other nations (INSTAT & IOM, 2014). These flows of asylum seekers were encouraged and facilitated by a combination of several factors. The first was that, from the end of December 2008, Albanians could travel without visas to EU countries. The second was the rumours spread through personal social networks regarding employment opportunities in Germany or other EU countries (Gëdeshi, I., & Xhaferaj, E. (2016), 64).

Mass emigration has led to brain drain, demographic decline, and economic stagnation, particularly in less developed regions of the Western Balkan countries. This has resulted in an ageing population, a rise in elderly households, inadequately managed agricultural land, and other issues. In 2015, the UNDP explicitly incorporated migration into global development policy for the first time, while also addressing factors that highlight migration from a rights-based perspective. They contribute significantly to a holistic understanding of migration by considering the entire cycle, including the return process and migrants' (lack of) rights (Dhembo, 2018).

Recommendation

The lack of information for returnees could be addressed by providing information leaflets at main entry points such as airports and border crossings. These leaflets would contain detailed instructions for returned migrants on how to access their rights, where to find information about job opportunities, how to certify their degrees, and what procedures they need to follow if they wish to start a business, among other things. This should include social services, housing, education, healthcare, and other essential services that return migrants require. In particular, educational institutions in the Western Balkans should improve their procedures concerning the documentation requested for enrolling returning children upon their return to the country of origin. A more flexible approach, which accepts partial

completion of the school year while abroad, is recommended. The relevant state authorities should increase awareness among return migrants about their rights and the procedures to access the healthcare system. They also need to improve cooperation between pertinent different institutions and administrative bodies.

Furthermore, it is also believed that, in most cases, beneficiaries have received numerous services, such as: The registration fee and other service charges are determined by the governing board in each regional directorate of public vocational training. Education services, procedures for registration in compulsory education of Albanian students returning from emigration, social services, housing, and public health in the municipality offer community services, housing, direct support, case management, and more. NGOS such as IOM, GIZ, DIMAK, Terre des Hommes, SOS “Villages of the Children”, and others deliver projects providing services to empower women, families, and support their reintegration into the community.

Some recommendations to improve the system include extending the duration of services and establishing facilities that deliver services in a timely and high-quality manner. Ensuring the sustainability of projects focused on empowering families is also vital. This can be accomplished by creating an integrated programme for the target group of migrants, offering a comprehensive package of services. A key aspect of this process is the coordination of efforts among all structures—government, local authorities, and NGOs—to promote the well-being of families and their integration. Furthermore, developing programmes to foster family independence and decrease reliance on services is essential.

Therefore, measures and policies implemented by responsible public institutions, whether short-term, mid-term, or long-term, should be grounded on updated profiles of returned migrants.

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Simona Mladenovska

**GUARDIANS OF TRADITION OR
THREATS TO EQUALITY? ANALYZING
THE IMPACT OF ANTI-GENDER
MOVEMENTS AND DEMOGRAPHIC
POLICIES IN THE WESTERN BALKANS**

In recent years, the Western Balkans have witnessed a troubling rise in anti-gender movements, which are deeply intertwined with the right-wing demographic policies advocated by nationalist and conservative forces in the region. These movements, which vehemently oppose gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and reproductive freedoms, are not isolated phenomena. Instead, they are part of a broader, transnational network that seeks to reinforce traditional family structures and social hierarchies. This position paper argues that the interconnection between anti-gender movements and right-wing demographic policies in the Western Balkans poses a significant threat to gender equality and democratic governance in the region. By examining the origins, strategies, and impact of these movements, this paper aims to highlight the dangers they present and the urgent need for coordinated resistance.

Anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans have their roots in a complex interplay of local, regional, and international factors. At their core, these movements are driven by a reactionary ideology that seeks to preserve traditional gender roles and family structures. The term “gender ideology,” as used by these movements, is a catch-all phrase that encompasses everything they oppose, from LGBTQ+ rights to comprehensive sex education. This ideology is often framed as a defense of the traditional nuclear family against what is perceived as a liberal, Western agenda that undermines societal values.

Right-wing political parties across the Western Balkans have aligned themselves with anti-gender movements, implementing pro-natalist policies aimed at reversing population decline by promoting traditional family values and opposing immigration. This reflects a broader nationalist agenda that seeks to reinforce ethnic homogeneity and preserve national identity. The influence of international actors, particularly conservative religious institutions such as the Serbian Orthodox Church, and right-wing think tanks, has been instrumental in the rise of these movements. These actors provide both ideological and financial support, enabling local movements to gain traction and influence national policies, while reinforcing traditional family values.

The right-wing demographic policies in the Western Balkans prioritize traditional family values and aim to increase birth rates among the ethnic majority populations. For example, Macedonia's "baby boom" program faced legal challenges for discriminating against minorities. In Serbia, the newly established Ministry of Family Care and Demography focuses on reversing demographic decline by promoting traditional family structures and implicitly opposing gender equality initiatives.

These demographic policies are closely linked with anti-gender movements, which argue that gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights undermine the traditional family structure. By framing gender equality initiatives as foreign impositions or threats to national sovereignty, these movements reinforce the demographic goals of right-wing parties. The result is a mutually reinforcing cycle where demographic anxieties fuel opposition to gender equality, and anti-gender rhetoric justifies restrictive demographic policies.

The link between anti-gender movements and right-wing demographic policies in the Western Balkans is based on shared ideals of nationalism, traditionalism, and religious conservatism. These movements aim to protect traditional family values by opposing liberal, feminist, and LGBTQ+ agendas. They employ strategies such as framing gender equality initiatives as foreign threats and co-opting human rights language to restrict the rights of women and LGBTQ+ individuals.

Another tactic employed by anti-gender movements is the exploitation of existing social and political tensions. In the Western Balkans, these movements have successfully leveraged ethnic and religious divisions to advance their cause. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, anti-gender rhetoric has been used to stoke fears of demographic decline among the majority ethnic groups, reinforcing support for right-wing demographic policies that prioritize the protection of the "traditional" family. This tactic not only strengthens the position of anti-gender movements but also deepens social divisions and undermines efforts to build inclusive and democratic societies.

The alignment of anti-gender movements with right-wing demographic policies has had significant implications for the Western Balkans. It has led to the rollback of gender equality measures and the erosion of women's rights

in countries like Serbia and Croatia. These movements are often associated with nationalist and authoritarian tendencies, undermining democratic institutions. The influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in Serbia and the rise of right-wing political movements in Croatia have shaped the anti-gender movement, resulting in regressive policies that restrict reproductive rights and undermine gender equality initiatives.

The complex ethnic and religious landscape of Bosnia and Herzegovina provides fertile ground for the interconnection between anti-gender movements and right-wing demographic policies. In this country, anti-gender rhetoric has been used to stoke fears of demographic decline among the majority ethnic groups, reinforcing support for policies that prioritize the protection of the traditional family. These movements have exploited the country's fragile post-war society, deepening social divisions and undermining efforts to build a more inclusive and democratic state.

Opponents of anti-gender movements argue that these movements are not genuinely concerned with protecting the family or national identity but are instead tools for maintaining existing power structures. The demographic policies promoted by right-wing actors are often criticized for being exclusionary and failing to address the underlying social and economic issues that contribute to population decline. For example, rather than addressing the root causes of low birth rates, such as economic instability and lack of social support, these policies focus on restricting reproductive rights and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

From a human rights perspective, the suppression of gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights is seen as a violation of fundamental freedoms. Advocates argue that true demographic sustainability can only be achieved by creating inclusive societies where all individuals, regardless of gender or sexual orientation, can thrive. This perspective challenges the notion that gender equality and family values are mutually exclusive, emphasizing that protecting all individuals' rights is essential to building strong and resilient communities.

The convergence of anti-gender movements and right-wing demographic policies in the Western Balkans is not just a regional issue; it is a direct

threat to the fundamental principles of gender equality, human rights, and democratic governance. These movements, fueled by nationalist, traditionalist, and religious conservative ideologies, aim to roll back hard-won gains for women's rights and LGBTQ+ communities under the guise of protecting "traditional values." The promotion of exclusionary, regressive policies that focus on birth rates and ethnic homogeneity over inclusive social welfare is deeply problematic. These efforts not only undermine gender equality but also deepen social divisions, foster illiberal governance, and weaken democratic institutions.

To counter this alarming trend, it is imperative for regional and global actors to take coordinated, policy-specific actions that address the underlying issues while promoting inclusive societies. Policymakers should prioritize comprehensive gender equality legislation that safeguards reproductive rights, protects LGBTQ+ individuals, and promotes equal opportunities across all sectors. These laws should be integrated into national human rights frameworks, with penalties for non-compliance and independent oversight bodies to monitor enforcement.

In addition, inclusive social welfare policies should focus on improving social welfare systems by providing accessible childcare, parental leave, and healthcare, particularly in marginalized communities. This would help address demographic concerns by creating environments where families, regardless of ethnicity or socio-economic status, can thrive without the need to impose regressive measures on reproductive rights.

Education systems must also be reformed to include comprehensive gender and human rights education, challenging harmful gender stereotypes and fostering inclusivity from an early age. Initiatives to introduce or strengthen sexual education should be pursued in collaboration with civil society organizations, ensuring they align with international standards and promote equality and respect for diversity.

Strengthening civil society and human rights institutions is crucial to this process. Civil society organizations should be empowered through increased funding, training, and international partnerships. Governments should create safe spaces for civil discourse where diverse voices, particularly from

feminist and LGBTQ+ groups, can contribute to policy-making processes. International organizations must pressure governments to allow these groups to operate freely without fear of repression.

International institutions and donors should tie financial aid and support to measurable improvements in human rights and gender equality. This includes holding governments accountable for regressive policies that target women's rights and LGBTQ+ communities, using mechanisms such as diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, or incentives for countries demonstrating genuine progress.

Lastly, to combat the spread of anti-gender ideology, policymakers should invest in public awareness campaigns that debunk disinformation about gender rights and promote evidence-based discourse on issues such as reproductive health, LGBTQ+ rights, and family welfare. These campaigns should be coordinated at regional and international levels to counter transnational networks of anti-gender movements.

The future of the Western Balkans depends on rejecting these reactionary movements and reaffirming a commitment to building equitable, democratic, and resilient societies. Through these specific policy actions, regional and global actors can promote environments where all individuals, regardless of gender or background, can flourish and contribute to sustainable development.

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Tereza Vujošević

INTEGRATION OF FEMALE
MIGRANTS/ASYLUM SEEKERS/
REFUGEES/PERSONS WITH
GRANTED INTERNATIONAL
PROTECTION - MONTENEGRIN CASE

Montenegro has increasingly become a transit and destination country for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees, particularly after the refugee crisis of 2015.¹ Among those seeking refuge and safety, a significant number are women. Regardless of their legal status, they face unique challenges in integration. Montenegro's national framework for migration, refugee protection, and integration is still developing, and the integration of female refugees and migrants requires specific policies tailored to address their gender-based vulnerabilities.

This position paper seeks to highlight the barriers to the integration of female migrants and refugees in Montenegro, examine the current policy landscape, and propose recommendations to improve their integration, protection, and empowerment in Montenegrin society.

Demographic Context

While Montenegro has not experienced large-scale immigration flows like its neighboring countries, it has seen an increasing number of migrants and asylum seekers, particularly since the early 2000s. Migrants in Montenegro often originate from conflict zones in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia,² with a significant influx from Eastern Europe after 2022. (Since February 2022, over 171,000 Ukrainians entered Montenegro, and by the end of September 2023, nearly 62,000 Ukrainians, mostly women, *had registered for some form of legal status in the country*),³ seeking safety from persecution, gender-based violence, unstable political conditions, and other reasons. Many women arrive alone or with children, increasing their vulnerability and dependence on support structures.

Challenges of Gender-Based Vulnerabilities

Female migrants and asylum seekers face unique challenges that differ from those of their male counterparts. Many have been victims of sexual violence, human trafficking, or domestic abuse, exacerbating their mental

¹ SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Berane, *Crna Gora u procesu integrisanog upravljanja migracijama: Monitoring Izvještaj* (Podgorica: SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Berane, 2020), 5.

² Institucija zaštitnika ljudskih prava i sloboda Crne Gore, *Analiza postupanja državnih organa u odnosu na tražiocje međunarodne zaštite u Crnoj Gori* (Podgorica: Institucija zaštitnika ljudskih prava i sloboda Crne Gore, 2022), 8.

³ UNHCR, "Ukraine Situation: Refugees Arriving in Montenegro," accessed September 30, 2024, <https://www.unhcr.org/countries/montenegro>.

and physical health needs.⁴ In Montenegro, societal norms and the *absence of gender-specific protections* often make it difficult for women to access necessary services like psychological support or safe housing. Moreover, language barriers, a lack of education or job skills, and family obligations limit their ability to access the labor market and fully participate in Montenegrin society. One of the recommendations in the Monitoring Report was related to the importance of *developing and implementing a gender dimension in asylum policies in accordance with the Istanbul Convention for state authorities*.⁵

Legal and Institutional Framework

Montenegro's asylum system is relatively new, with laws governing refugees and asylum seekers primarily codified in the *Law on International and Temporary Protection of Foreigners*.⁶ While these laws offer protections for all individuals, they do not specifically address the gender-specific needs of female refugees and migrants. This omission often results in inadequate protection and assistance for women, especially those who require health-care or legal support due to experiences of gender-based violence. Additionally, the lack of gender-sensitive policies hampers efforts to provide safe housing and financial assistance to women and their children.

Social and Cultural Integration

Gender roles and expectations within both Montenegrin society and refugee communities can prevent women from engaging in education, employment, and social activities. The lack of tailored language courses or vocational training designed for women, combined with the cultural pressure to fulfill household duties, limits their opportunities to fully integrate and contribute to society. Social exclusion and isolation are further exacerbated by inadequate childcare services, forcing women to remain at home and away from public life.

Conclusion

⁴ European Parliament, Directorate-General for Internal Policies, Policy Department, Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs, *Female Refugees and Asylum Seekers: The Issue of Integration*, 2016, 39–40.

⁵ SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Berane, *Crna Gora u procesu integrisanog upravljanja migracijama: Monitoring Izvještaj* (Podgorica: SOS telefon za žene i djecu žrtve nasilja Berane, 2020), 66.

⁶ Zakon o međunarodnoj i privremenoj zaštiti stranaca, "Službeni list CG", br. 2/2017, 3/2019, i 77/2024.

The integration of female migrants, asylum seekers, refugees, and persons with granted international protection into Montenegrin society requires a comprehensive, gender-sensitive approach. While Montenegro has made progress in developing its asylum system and integration programs, much more needs to be done to ensure that the specific needs of women are addressed. By enhancing legal protections, improving access to healthcare, promoting economic empowerment, and fostering social inclusion, Montenegro can better support female refugees and migrants, enabling them to contribute to and thrive in their new communities.

Recommendations

Adopting a Gender-Sensitive Legal Framework

Montenegro should revise its legal framework for migration and asylum to explicitly recognize the gender-specific needs of female refugees and migrants. This includes enhancing protections for victims of gender-based violence and trafficking, providing legal aid for women who need to navigate complex asylum procedures, and ensuring that shelters and housing facilities are safe and cater to the specific needs of women and children. Furthermore, gender-disaggregated data collection should be implemented to monitor the effectiveness of integration programs and policies for women.

Enhance Access to Healthcare and Psychological Support

Female migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers often arrive with significant mental and physical health needs. Montenegro should expand its healthcare services to include free, gender-sensitive medical and psychological support. This includes specialized counseling for victims of gender-based violence, sexual abuse, and trauma. Health services should be provided in a culturally sensitive manner, taking into account language barriers and the specific health needs of women, such as maternal and reproductive healthcare.

Promoting Economic Empowerment Through Vocational Training and Employment Opportunities

To support the integration of female refugees and migrants into the labor market, Montenegro should invest in gender-specific vocational training programs and language courses. This can include offering *language courses with childcare services to enable mothers to participate*. Partnering with businesses to create mentorship and apprenticeship opportunities for women would also enhance their employability. Economic independence is a critical factor in reducing vulnerability and enabling women to take control of their lives.

Raising Awareness and Engaging Host Communities

Public awareness campaigns should be launched to challenge stereotypes and reduce discrimination against female refugees and migrants. Engaging local communities through volunteer programs, cultural exchange activities, and dialogue can foster greater understanding and acceptance of women from diverse backgrounds. These initiatives should emphasize the valuable contributions that female migrants and refugees can make to Montenegrin society while also promoting gender equality and women's empowerment.

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Throughout her studies, Tereza has received several recognitions, including the award for Best Student of the Political Science Department, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung scholarship for outstanding students, and the UNU-GEST fellowship.

Since 2018, she has been applying her expertise in the field of humanitarian work.

Irina (Solaja) Jankovic

**MARRIAGE EQUALITY, INCLUDING
THE POSSIBILITY OF ADOPTING
CHILDREN**

Introduction

The Human Rights Campaign tracks developments in the legal recognition of same-sex marriage around the world. In the broadest sense, marriage equality means not only concluding marriages between the same sexes, but also enabling the creation of offspring naturally (e.g., artificial insemination) and through legal means (e.g., adoption).

There are currently 36 countries where same-sex marriage is legal: Andorra, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Denmark, Ecuador, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Iceland, Ireland, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Uruguay. These countries have legalized marriage equality through both legislation and court decisions. Starting from the fact that Bosnia and Herzegovina has received the status of a candidate for membership in the European Union, whose regulations and those of other member states allow great freedom to enter into marriage with both the same sex and different sex, as well as the possibility of adopting children, the author of this policy position paper seeks to examine the views of 1000 citizens participating in a survey in the Doboj region regarding same-sex marriages and the possibility of adopting children.

The survey was structured with 5 questions that offered multiple-choice answers and the option for respondents to give their own opinion. Citizens aged 16-56, of various occupations, including civil servants at administrative bodies, as well as high school students, waiters, and craftsmen, were questioned. The survey was anonymous, and it was conducted with the aim of achieving honest responses as to whether Europe always provides good answers to people's needs and whether it is the best solution. This is particularly relevant since, as noted above, the members of the European Union were obliged to harmonize their regulations and their judicial practice in the field of marriage equality and adoption. Moreover, below in the text, the author will discuss the significance of not recognizing same-sex

unions with adopted children when crossing borders and during migration in general, and the goal of the European Commission in that direction. As such, the position paper revealed the interesting attitude of the citizens of a region in Bosnia and offered them an answer from Germany's practice as an example to citizens, but also for possible consideration by legislators when enacting new laws and establishing justification for the social interest (lat. *ratio legis*) of future laws.

Survey Results

Respondents believe 100% that the question of choosing a partner is still a personal matter and that we should not deal with it. In addition, 100% of respondents are sure that it is not in the best interest for a child to grow up with two parents who are of the same sex. The opinion of 74% of the respondents is that if they meet the financial conditions, same-sex unions should still achieve their desire for a child. That's where the author was surprised that the commercial character could be attractive to the respondents and that they also think that financial security is important for children. Thus, she decided to present to the legislators and population several recommendations for future regulations, following the example of Germany.

Same-sex marriage in Germany

Same-sex marriages have been allowed in Germany since 2017, and at that time, there were 65,600 registered same-sex marriages. In that regard, the way was cleared for the adoption of children. Studies show that the way in which the family is lived - not the family form - is crucial for the good development of children and for a successful parent-child relationship.¹ Various areas of child development were examined, such as the relationship with parents, psychological well-being, emotional and behavioral problems, educational success, social development, and sexual orientation and gender identity. No significant differences were found in any of these areas depending on the sexual orientation of the parents.

¹ *The Expertise and Research Centre for Adoption (EFZA)* (The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs at the German Youth Institute, 2015), 34-58.

With regard to parenting behavior, some studies found differences between same-sex and heterosexual couples. However, these differences generally indicated a higher quality of relationship between parents and children in same-sex couples. According to the study, mothers in same-sex partnerships were characterized by a higher level of warmth and affection towards their children, used less punitive parenting behavior, and had fewer conflicts with their children than heterosexual parents.

^[1] The Expertise and Research Centre for Adoption (EFZA) (The Federal Ministry for Family Affairs at the German Youth Institute, 2015), 34-58.

In addition, a study² of the development of highly stressed adopted children from foster care found no differences in the development of behavioral problems and cognitive development between children who grew up with same-sex or mixed-sex couples.

Moreover, it is very important to consider amending documents, granting citizenship to children, and recognizing the crossing of state borders for children who are in same-sex unions. Many rainbow families lose fundamental rights when crossing European borders, and their children face a disproportionate risk of becoming stateless. The European Commission is now working towards upholding the rights of children of rainbow families and their parents, including by setting out the protection of the rights of rainbow families as one of four key pillars for action in its five-year LGBTIQ Equality Strategy. As part of the strategy, the European Commission is starting a legislative initiative to establish the mutual recognition of parenthood between EU Member States, and to explore possible measures to support the mutual recognition of same-gender spouses and registered partners' legal status in cross-border situations. This would also minimize issues with recognition of civil status, birth registration, the legal parentage of children, and any related consequences on the child's right to a nationality or their enjoyment of fundamental rights.

In all issues concerning children, decision- and policymakers should maintain a child-centered approach and respect the primacy of the best inter-

² Ina Bovenschen, Paul Bränzel, Sabine Heene, Fabienne Hornfeck, Seline Kappler, Heinz Kindler, Maria Ruhfaß, *Recommendations of the Expertise and Research Centre for Adoption for the further development of the German adoption system and for reforms of German adoption law* (German Youth Institute, 2017), 89-102.

ests of the child, regardless of their parents' status or their sexual and/or gender identity.

Recommendations

Reducing inequalities requires combined, coordinated, and coherent interventions at various levels, adapted to country circumstances.

1. The organization of social dialogue, including collective bargaining, to discuss different possibilities and the presentation of the rights and obligations of both spouses and children.
2. Campaigns that would have a key role in bringing together government and society to discuss and develop adequate national strategies to combat inequalities and promote inclusivity in society, even for those who do not correspond to the traditions in the country, addressing what is the difference between the sexes who get married and have offspring. With the obligation of monitoring and evaluation of their effectiveness of such strategies.
3. Finally, political support is vital, requiring adoption of amendments to the family law, including civil unions, cohabitational unions, de facto partnerships, registered partnerships, and marriage. This includes changes to terms such as 'parent', 'child', 'direct descendant', or 'direct relative in the ascending line', as well as identity documents or passports, etc.

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Ivana Cilevska

**MENSTRUAL LEAVE IN THE
WORKPLACE IN NORTH
MACEDONIA: A STEP TOWARD
EQUITY AND PRODUCTIVITY**

Menstrual leave, an emerging topic in gender equity and workplace policy, recognizes the significant impact menstrual discomfort can have on women's performance and well-being at work. With varying symptoms like severe cramps, headaches, and nausea, menstruation can inhibit daily activities and productivity. The stigma surrounding menstruation exacerbates the issue, making it difficult for women to seek relief or adjustments without fear of judgment or professional repercussions. In light of these challenges, some countries and companies across the world have started implementing menstrual leave policies, which allow women suffering from severe menstrual symptoms to take time off work. In North Macedonia, where discussions around gender equality in the workplace are still continuing to evolve, implementing menstrual leave could demonstrate a progressive commitment to acknowledging and accommodating diversity. This paper argues that such policies, when carefully tailored to the Macedonian context, can support affected employees and enhance workplace morale and efficiency.

The adoption of menstrual leave policies can be contentious, with critiques often centered on their perceived fairness and potential for abuse. Concerns include reinforcing gender stereotypes or creating workplace inequalities, potentially leading to resentment among those not eligible for the leave (Barnack-Tavlaris, Hansen, Levitt, & Reno, 2019). There are concerns about the potential for abuse of such menstrual leave policies, with some suggesting that it could lead to decreased overall productivity (Shoosmiths, 2020). Additionally, the practicality of implementing such policies varies significantly across different sectors; industries that require constant physical presence, such as healthcare and manufacturing, may find it challenging to accommodate menstrual leave without affecting operational efficiency.

However, the benefits of menstrual leave can be substantial when policies are carefully crafted and implemented with safeguards against abuse. For example, countries like Japan and South Korea, which have long-standing menstrual leave policies, report that such measures can lead to improved morale and productivity among female workers (Bobel et al., 2020). Japan was one of the first countries to implement menstrual leave in 1947. The policy allows women suffering from debilitating menstrual symptoms to take paid leave. While the law is progressive, its uptake has been limited

due to cultural stigmas around discussing menstruation openly. This reluctance can lead to underutilization of the policy, with some women preferring to suffer in silence rather than face potential embarrassment or scrutiny (Kaneko, 2019). Meanwhile, South Korea introduced menstrual leave in 2001, granting women one day of unpaid leave per month if they experience painful periods. However, reports suggest that many women do not take advantage of this leave due to fear of discrimination or job insecurity. Despite these challenges, the policy underscores the government's recognition of menstrual health as a legitimate workplace issue (Lee and Suh, 2021). These policies demonstrate a commitment to workplace equality and acknowledge the real physiological challenges some women face. For North Macedonia, adopting a similar policy could not only improve working conditions for many women but also promote a broader cultural acceptance of menstruation as a normal aspect of life rather than a taboo.

The evidence suggests that supportive workplace policies like menstrual leave not only aid those directly affected but can also enhance the overall work environment by fostering a culture of understanding and accommodation. The implementation of menstrual leave could serve as a progressive step towards accommodating biological diversity in the workplace, which is a cornerstone of genuine gender equality.

When considering recommendations, it is important to note that in North Macedonia, the perspective on workplace policies, including menstrual leave, varies significantly between local businesses and international companies. Local Macedonian companies often adhere to traditional business practices and cultural norms, which can be more conservative and less flexible regarding employee diversity initiatives that challenge traditional views, such as menstrual leave. On the other hand, international companies operating in North Macedonia typically bring with them a global mindset, standards, and practices that are more inclusive and progressive. These organizations are more likely to implement policies that support diversity and inclusion, including menstrual health benefits, reflecting broader, more modern attitudes towards employee well-being and gender equality. This disparity in approaches can lead to differing experiences for employees, impacting their perception of workplace fairness and support. As North Macedonia continues to integrate into the global economy, reconciling these

varying perspectives poses a significant challenge for policymakers aiming to create cohesive, fair, and progressive labor laws that align with both local cultural sensibilities and international human rights standards.

Recommendations for North Macedonia:

- **Adaptive Policy Design and Pilot Program:** While it is important to develop menstrual leave policies that are adaptable to different industries, it is pragmatic to initiate these policies in sectors where they can be implemented more easily. Starting with industries that are better positioned to accommodate such changes allows the public and the workforce to become familiar with the concept and witness its benefits firsthand. Once there is broader acceptance and understanding of menstrual leave, this can create momentum that encourages its gradual introduction into more challenging sectors. This phased approach not only facilitates smoother implementation but also helps in building a supportive public and corporate environment that can advocate for and sustain the expansion of these policies across all industries. Additionally, piloting the policy in various sectors to gather data and feedback, helps with the adjustment of the approach as needed to suit the specific conditions and needs of different workplaces.
- **Education and Awareness:** Conduct educational programs for all employees and management to explain the policy's benefits and logistics, aiming to reduce stigma and promote a supportive work environment. In North Macedonia, many large international companies already conduct sexual harassment training, providing an existing framework where content on menstrual leave can be integrated. Additionally, numerous NGOs working on gender and health issues in the region can offer valuable support during this transition. Their expertise and outreach can be instrumental in broadening understanding and acceptance, thus facilitating effective knowledge-building and smoother policy implementation across various sectors.
- **Regular Review and Adjustments:** Establish mechanisms for ongoing evaluation of the policy's impact on productivity and employee

well-being, with adjustments made based on empirical data and employee feedback.

Implementing menstrual leave in North Macedonia could serve as a landmark decision in the country's efforts to enhance workplace equality and support women's health. While recognizing the challenges, particularly in industries where physical presence is crucial, the potential benefits to employee well-being and overall productivity make a compelling case for its adoption.

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Bio: IVANA CILEVSKA is a passionate feminist and activist committed to advancing equality, inclusion, and community well-being. With experience in recruitment, people operations, and cultural facilitation, she combines professional expertise with a dedication to social impact. Beyond her corporate work, Ivana actively contributes to feminist and grassroots initiatives, including PERIOD Skopje, a non-profit fighting menstrual stigma and poverty, and past involvement with student and NGO organizations. Known for her curiosity, energy, and commitment to learning, she uses her skills in communication, conflict resolution, and project management to empower communities and encourage inclusive spaces. Ivana's work bridges professional excellence with activism, reflecting her belief that meaningful change begins with informed, engaged, and compassionate action.

Fabiola Rukaj

**ROLE OF SCHOOL AND TEACHERS
IN CREATING GENDER-SENSITIVE
POLICIES FOR YOUNG GENERATIONS**

The development of gender policies for young people and teenagers within the education system has become essential for Albanian society. Schools play a crucial role in shaping the attitudes and beliefs of young people, making them pivotal in promoting gender sensitivity. Educators and psychosocial services are at the forefront of this effort, working together to develop and implement gender-sensitive policies that can positively influence young generations. It is crucial that Albanian youth and students have the means to address their concerns related to this issue within the school and psychosocial systems. According to UNESCO, "Gender equality is the equal valuing by society of the similarities and differences between men and women, and the roles they play. It involves men and women being equal partners in their homes, communities, and society" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 17). In contrast, "Gender equity is the process of ensuring fairness for men and women. To achieve fairness, specific measures may be needed to address historical and social disadvantages that prevent equality. Equity is a means to achieve equality, which is the end result" (UNESCO, 2003, p. 17).¹

Textbooks are an important aspect of addressing gender issues in the education system. Gender disparities in textbooks and teaching practices must be identified and reassessed to create new policies that ensure every child's right to education is upheld. For example, Sadker and Zittleman (2007, p. 144) have concluded that "students spend almost 80 to 95% of their time in the classroom using textbooks, and teachers make most of their learning decisions based on textbooks".² Gender stereotypes and gender roles are a serious issue in education since they risk limiting both girls' and boys' visions of what they are and what they can become in the future. Addressing gender equality is the starting point for this process. Many OECD countries have now integrated gender equity into their education policies and strategies. Key priorities for a robust education system include human rights, inclusiveness, and equal access.³

Over time, children may encounter various gendered patterns through their interactions with teachers. This underscores the importance of all

¹ UNESCO. (2003). *UNESCO's Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework*. Retrieved January 23, 2015, from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001318/131854e.pdf>

² Sadker, D., Sadker, M., & Zittleman, K. (2009). *Still failing at fairness: How gender bias cheats girls and boys in schools and what we can do about it*. New York: Scribner.

³ OECD. (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II): Where All Students Can Succeed*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

teachers, particularly those in elementary schools, being well-versed in gender education, including concepts and theories related to gender equality and equity. Teachers who understand the significance of gender education are less likely to hold biased expectations of their students. They avoid discriminating against boys or girls and work to challenge gender-based stereotypes both in the classroom and beyond. Teachers and schools, as the most formal and long-term educational institutions, have a crucial role in promoting gender equality and equity. They are instrumental in shaping the classroom environment and addressing gender-related issues in psychosocial contexts within and outside of school.

The current education system structure in Albania stems from the most recent basic education reform, including the curriculum reform, which was introduced during 2003-2007 and has been applied ever since. The Albanian Ministry of Education and the Institute of Curricula and Standards suggested that the gender perspective be mainstreamed in three aspects, including the pre-university and university curriculum review and development, developing new textbooks, and developing instructional materials for mainstreaming the gender perspective into the curricula (Albania, 2007).⁴

In Albania, elementary school children typically have the same head teacher for most of their subjects. This means that teachers spend a significant amount of time with their students in the classroom. As a result, teachers' views on gender roles and stereotypes can significantly influence the students' learning environment through their everyday teaching practices. Therefore, it is essential for elementary school teachers to advocate for gender equity and to incorporate awareness of gender equality into their daily teaching methods and language.

In recent years, psychologists working in the education system have observed a significant need for students to address gender-related issues as experienced by their peers in school. An important aspect of this starts with gender equity in the education system. In Albanian schools, collaboration between teachers and school psychologists has increased awareness

⁴ World Bank. (2014). *Education quality and opportunities for skills development in Albania: An analysis of PISA 2000-2012 results*. Retrieved January 15, 2015, from http://www.wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2014/09/17/000470435_20140917085339/Rendered/PDF/907420WPoP1519MPLETEoONLINEoAugo27.pdf

and promotion of gender education. In recent years, more girls and boys are engaging in discussions and counseling sessions about gender issues. The younger generation is increasingly aware of how gender issues affect their lives. Specifically, young people aged 16 to 18 are not only capable of discussing these topics but are also playing a significant role in activism related to gender issues.⁵

At the policy level, it is primarily recommended that the Ministry of Education focus on improving the curriculum and enhancing the practical skills of teachers and schools to effectively address emerging challenges related to these topics. Given the need for gender education and the current efforts in Albania, it makes sense for schools to concentrate more on gender-related issues, specifically in the following areas:

1. Gender stereotypes,
2. Consulting school psychologists about gender issues,
3. Teaching styles,
4. Curriculum choices,
5. School activities and organizations.

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Bio: FABIOLA RUKAJ, Licensed Psychologist, is a specialist in educational psychology currently working within the public school system in Tirana, Albania. Her professional focus centers on promoting students' academic achievement, social-emotional development, and behavioral well-being through evidence-based psychological practices. She collaborates extensively with educators, parents, and multidisciplinary teams to foster safe, inclusive, and supportive learning environments.

Her work encompasses comprehensive psychological assessments, the development of individualized intervention plans, and the provision of counseling services for a wide range of issues, including learning difficulties, behavioral disorders, and social integration challenges. Drawing on professional experience both in Albania and internationally, Rukaj has contributed to national and cross-border initiatives aimed at bullying prevention, mental health promotion, and inclusive education for children with special needs.

In addition to her role in educational settings, she maintains a clinical practice, offering psychotherapy and psychological support tailored to individual client needs. Her clinical work addresses a broad spectrum of psychological concerns and is grounded in ethical standards and evidence-informed approaches.

Rukaj is also actively involved in community engagement and public advocacy, with a focus on improving mental health awareness and access. She curates a professional digital platform through which she shares psychological resources, contributes expert content, and fosters interdisciplinary dialogue in the fields of mental health and education.

Gordana Vukov Ciganjik

SAFE SPACES FOR A SAFER WORLD

Many become activists because they see injustices, inequalities, or problems in society that they feel compelled to address. They want to make a difference and bring about positive change. A strong sense of morality or ethics can drive people to activism. Personal experiences with discrimination, oppression, or witnessing the struggles of others can motivate individuals to take action and fight for justice. Activists often have a deep sense of empathy and compassion for others. Activism can create a powerful sense of belonging and shared purpose. Art is a powerful medium for expressing ideas, emotions, and messages. Artists (activists who use art in their activism) often aim to provoke thought, inspire action, or challenge viewers to see the world differently.

Due to various factors (precarious conditions, overtime **work**, overload of tasks, often a **second job**, desire **for self-improvement**, unpaid work performed by women in the family, gender inequality, hard-to-find financial **resources**, and exhausting bureaucratic procedures), the mental health of female activists and artists who work with the community is threatened.

As many as 92% of activists in Serbia have at least one psychological problem, according to the results of the research on the mental health of activists, **"Do You Hear? Do You Feel? – Activist Struggle and Mental Health"**¹. Among the recorded psychological difficulties, symptoms of secondary traumatization **affect** as many as 83% of respondents. Symptoms of depression **affect** 83% of **respondents**, anxiety **affects** 62%, and symptoms of burnout **affect** 41% of respondents. **Burnout syndrome, characterized by** feelings of physical and emotional exhaustion, overload, and frustration², was identified in 41% of respondents².

The issues with mental health **affect** female activists **globally**: **"Activism** takes a huge toll on girls' mental health and can come at a **significant** personal cost. One in four (25%) say they've felt emotionally unwell or anxious while engaging in activism work; **among** LGBTIQ+ activists, this figure rises to one in three (31%).^{2"}

¹ <https://www.gradjanske.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/ISTRAZIVANJE-Da-li-cujes-Da-li-osecas.pdf>

² "YOUth Lead: A Toolkit for Transformational Leadership to Support Gender Equality." - chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ciwil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CIWiL-YOUth-Lead-Toolkit-Being-Your-Best-Self.pdf

There are examples³ of toolkits that provide creative tools for **supporting** the mental health of female activists and **building safe spaces** for support. **Further research reveals** very little is said about the mental health of women who are fighting for social change. When it is **discussed**, it is **often suggested that** rest is resistance **while overlooking the community's role in fostering resilience**.⁴ Women activists are **often left to manage their well-being alone**, which is sometimes impossible because they **lack the strength, time, or financial resources**. **Many consider** tools and methods for maintaining the mental health of female activists, but few offer **concrete, systematic programs or established support networks**. Attempts to gather activists at **organizational venues** for mutual support or discussion also exist in Serbia.⁵

My activist experience shows that retreat programs **exist globally and in Europe**, but they are rarely free and **accessible for** activists who **lack the financial resources or time** to participate. Reflecting with **colleague activists**, I've noted that these programs are often designed by **individuals outside the activist sector, who may not fully understand or address the group's and individuals' needs**. By being in a group, we relearn to function in our favor. **The organization Klara i Rosa in Subotica**⁶ practices a seven-day retreat program as a safe space for selected participants from **specific countries (typically the Balkan region)**. The process **unfolds across seven days** is co-created by the group **without a designated leader; instead, an initiator emerges organically, fostering an experimental space for connection, support, and collaboration**. The rules are set at the beginning of the program, and the group creates the **process pathway**. The selection of participants is **crucial (maximum 15 participants)**, as is their readiness for intensive and dedicated work in an intimate and gentle process, the depth of which **is defined by the capacities of the group itself**. Using the open space method, the group sets its dynamics. It is important to **note that** creation of a non-hierarchical arrangement with gentle accep-

³ "YOUth Lead: A Toolkit for Transformational Leadership to Support Gender Equality." - chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://ciwil.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CiWiL-YOUth-Lead-Toolkit-Being-Your-Best-Self.pdf

⁴ <https://shesapiens.com/mental-health-as-an-activist/>

⁵ <https://www.gradjanske.org/prirucnik-za-aktiviste-ostani-mentalno-zdrav-dok-pokusavas-daspases-svet/>

⁶ <https://www.klarairosa.com/grounding-retreat-in-kelebia/>

tance and **open flow** leads to deeper connections built on trust and sincerity. It would be **essential to establish and sustain** such programs **continuously and develop** networks of mutual support that **provide members with** mental support , **resource sharing, strengthened internal capacities, information exchange, and opportunities for collaborative future projects**. This is how **a self-sustaining network is built, with members motivated to support, connect, and collaborate**.

Activist organizations should establish safe spaces for the mental health and well-being of female artists and activists involved in community engagement and social change **within their capacity**. This can be in the form of Peer Support Networks (Peer Counseling; Support Groups) or specially designed programs **such as** retreats or restorative spaces. The mental health of female activists **can also be supported** through Digital Support Platforms (Online Counseling and Therapy, Virtual Communities), **enabling global access to support, resource sharing, knowledge exchange, and shared experiences**.

Activist organizations should collaborate to advocate for international donors to recognize this issue and allocate funding for projects supporting the mental health of women in activism. International donors should support grants for Professional Development (Work-Life Balance Training, Grants for Self-Care). It is necessary to advocate **for donors to adopt a more compassionate approach toward female activists, prioritizing process over solely results and formalities**.

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Bio: GORDANA VUKOV CIGANJIK, born in 1984 in Subotica, Yugoslavia, graduated from the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Cetinje, Montenegro. An actress by profession, she works with communities using a multidisciplinary approach. She is a co-founder of Klara i Rosa (<https://www.klarairosa.com/>). In 2023, this Subotica-based organization opened the first independent civic cultural center in the city, a space for encounter, experimentation, and exchange. She designs, initiates, and implements various projects and programs, embracing curiosity and the unknown. Gordana works with diverse social, age, and language groups, creating inclusive and participatory cultural practices.

Marta Stevkovska

THE BROADER INFLUENCE OF
ANTI-GENDER MOVEMENTS: THE
DIGITAL SPACE AS A PLATFORM FOR
SPREADING HARMFUL NARRATIVES

The digital space plays a pivotal role in modern communication, offering both opportunities for advocacy and community building, as well as a platform for the proliferation of harmful narratives. On one hand, online platforms provide vital support for vulnerable groups, marginalized communities, and initiatives promoting gender equality. On the other hand, these platforms have become a fertile ground for the dissemination of hate speech, disinformation, doxing, cyberstalking, and other forms of on-line violence. The rapid rise of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans—closely aligned with far-right political actors—has made the digital landscape increasingly perilous by amplifying misinformation and fostering a hostile environment.

Anti-Gender Movements in the Western Balkans

Today, the actors of the anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans are a mix of civil society organizations (often with religious affiliations), political parties, intellectuals, and the church. They have close links with each other and cooperate. Some ferociously anti-gender American intellectuals are influential in the Balkans. Jordan Peterson, a Canadian intellectual famous for his anti-feminist, anti-left, and transphobic positions, has had his work translated into Serbian. Generally, the triggering issue for the anti-gender movements in the Balkans is the question of LGBTQI+ rights.¹

In North Macedonia, the anti-gender movement has arisen in a way that could qualify as a backlash against gender equality. During the very traditionalist and religious government that ruled for ten years, from 2006 to 2016, the values that were promoted were traditional and religious, and the government itself campaigned against abortion, and generally emphasized the traditional role of women. As the anti-gender rhetoric was coming from the state itself, there were few movements as such fighting against women's and LGBTQI+ rights.²

Since then, anti-gender movements have strengthened their influence by

¹ Lucille Griffon, EuroMed Rights, Charlotte Pruth, and Maria Johansson, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, *THE FIERCE AND THE FURIOUS, Feminist Insights Into The Anti-gender Narratives And Movement*, (November 2019), 16

² Lucille Griffon, EuroMed Rights, Charlotte Pruth, and Maria Johansson, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, *THE FIERCE AND THE FURIOUS, Feminist Insights Into The Anti-gender Narratives And Movement*, (November 2019), 17

forging alliances with far-right politicians and conservative religious organizations. The digital space, with its ability to rapidly spread content, has been instrumental in extending their reach, visibility, and impact.

Anti-gender movements often present themselves as grassroots organizations representing the concerns of “ordinary citizens” or parents. However, these movements are frequently part of a well-organized, transnational network of religious associations, political parties, and other interest groups. Through coordinated propaganda campaigns, they actively oppose gender equality, framing it as a threat to traditional values and the protection of children from so-called “gender ideology.”³

In the Macedonian context, there currently are several active anti-gender organizations and groups, as well as a coalition titled “Coalition for the Protection of Children,” which unites 26 entities (associations of citizens, informal initiatives, religious groups, etc., and political parties).⁴

Online Narratives and Gendered-Based Disinformation

Anti-gender movements have harnessed the power of social media to mainstream their messages, often cloaked in the language of protecting children and preserving family values. By exploiting fears related to sexual education and transgender rights, they have sown distrust among parents and the broader public.

For example, in North Macedonia, anti-gender actors spread disinformation about the introduction of Comprehensive Sexual Education in schools and Gender-sensitive Education, claiming it would expose children to harmful “gender ideology.” Although these claims lack factual basis, they have nonetheless succeeded in mobilizing public opposition to educational reforms approved by national authorities. Mainly, regarding the Comprehensive Sexual Education program, in the groups for anti-gender mobilization, various contents are published about how the educational materials are finally “debunked and really interpreted.” Their implementation is always talked about anecdotally, or about certain assumed intentions of

³ Sara Milenkovska, *How Do Anti-gender Movements Set Back the State of Gender Equality and the Fight Against Gender-based Violence?*, (National Network to End Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, December 2022), 3-4

⁴ Manja Velickovska, Irena Cvetkovic, *Who Is Afraid of Gender?*, (Coalition Margins, 2022), 15-16

individuals in the government or the civil society organizations, by which they slip in a lot of untrue and unverified information. Through the social media posts, they address their followers directly and keep them informed with their activities, constantly reminding them of what has happened so far and what comes next. In this way, among the social media users, the excitement of membership and contribution to a particular group of like-minded people with whom they identify is maintained.⁵

The report, "*Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation*," highlights how media outlets have facilitated the spread of anti-gender narratives, enabling these movements to dominate the public discourse.

This analysis, which reviewed over 1,000 online reports and 7,000 Facebook comments related to events like the 2023 Skopje Pride Parade and protests organized by conservative groups, reveals that the media often serves as a conduit for disinformation. Rather than fostering informed debate or countering harmful stereotypes, media outlets frequently amplify the messages of conservative organizations, indirectly promoting hate speech and gender-based violence. This trend underscores the broader societal challenges of entrenched patriarchal norms and low public awareness of gender equality issues.⁶

Moreover, these groups have targeted feminist and civil society organizations, as well as human rights defenders and journalists, with coordinated online harassment. Hate speech, personal attacks, and the public sharing of personal information (doxing) are commonly used tactics, making activists vulnerable to both online and offline violence.⁷ A large proportion of the media outlets do not have a policy for regulating the content of their comment sections, by concealing or deleting content containing gendered disinformation, hate speech, insults, and other harmful content. Taking into account that the spread of gendered disinformation mainly happens through social media, with the absence of regulation, the media contribute

⁵ Manja Velickovska, Irena Cvetkovic, *Who Is Afraid of Gender?*, (Coalition Margins, 2022), 83-85

⁶ Bojana Jovanovska, Jovana Jovanovska, *Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation*, (Institute of Communication Studies, 2023), 37-40

⁷ Manja Velickovska, Irena Cvetkovic, Elena Gagovska, *Sexual Minorities, Gender, and Media*, (Coalition Margins, 2021), 64-70

to the spread of these contents and enable the mobilization of the public for support and the additional creation of new content.⁸

A recent example of a coordinated attack by the anti-gender movements was the attack on the Macedonian journalist Snezana Lupevska Sozen, who, in her investigative journalism TV show „KOD,” researched and analyzed how the anti-gender movements are financed. Before and after the show, she was a target of hate speech, defamation, and insults by a series of posts on the anti-gender movement’s social media platforms that had a goal to discredit her work and her as a journalist, while personally attacking her and the other journalists who worked on the investigative TV piece.⁹

These findings indicate that the anti-gender movements have successfully leveraged social media to create and spread gendered disinformation, particularly in the Macedonian context. Social media platforms have emerged as a key battleground for the perpetuation of gender stereotypes and the incitement of gender-based hate speech. This disinformation is often embedded in broader narratives that vilify the LGBTI+ community, with alarming levels of hate speech and explicit calls for violence being commonplace in online discussions.

Conclusion

The rise of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans poses significant challenges to gender equality and inclusivity. These movements have capitalized on the digital space to amplify harmful narratives, often with the use of the unregulated online space. The proliferation of gendered disinformation, hate speech, and online harassment against vulnerable communities underscores the need for robust policy responses. Media organizations, civil society, and governments must take concerted action to counter these harmful trends and protect the rights of marginalized groups, while fostering an online environment that supports equality and inclusion for all.

By acknowledging the dangers posed by these movements and their dig-

⁸ Bojana Jovanovska, Jovana Jovanovska, *Gender Equality in a Time of Gendered Disinformation*, (Institute of Communication Studies, 2023), 37-40

⁹ See more: <https://www.facebook.com/koalicijazadecata/>

ital strategies, policymakers can work towards creating a safer and more equitable online space that promotes inclusivity and combats harmful disinformation.

Policy Recommendations

In order to address the systemic drivers of digital gender-based violence and to ensure a safer, more inclusive online environment, this paper recommends the adoption of the following measures:

Criminalize Digital Gender-Based Violence

- Define and criminalize cyberstalking, doxing, online harassment, and other forms of digital gender-based violence.
- Hold platforms accountable for allowing harmful content by requiring clear reporting mechanisms and timely responses.

Enhance Law Enforcement Capacity

- Provide specialized training for law enforcement on handling digital gender-based violence and supporting victims.
- Ensure victim-centered reporting processes that offer confidentiality and legal support.

Incorporate Intersectionality in Policy

- Design policies that address the heightened risks faced by marginalized groups, including women, LGBTQI+ communities, and minorities.
- Engage affected communities in policymaking to create inclusive and effective solutions.

Introduce Gender-Sensitive Education

- Implement comprehensive sexual education that promotes gender equality and counters harmful stereotypes.
- Teach media literacy to help young people recognize and resist gendered disinformation.

Collectively, these recommendations provide a comprehensive framework for governments, institutions, and civil society to combat digital

gender-based violence and uphold the rights and safety of all individuals in online spaces.

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Maja Atanasova

**THE NEED FOR GENUINE GENDER
EQUALITY AT THE MUNICIPAL LEVEL**

Despite widespread political rhetoric on gender equality, its implementation remains superficial at the municipal level, where local governance plays a critical role in shaping community life. Many municipalities fail to address the specific needs of women, often perpetuating gender inequalities rather than resolving them. For local policies to be effective, they must move beyond rhetoric, be grounded in a nuanced understanding of gender disparities, and be tailored to the unique needs of all community members. Achieving this requires that local authorities fully grasp the concept and importance of gender equality.

Why is gender so challenging to understand?

The concept of gender remains complex due to its historical and legal evolution. While international frameworks, from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the Council of Europe Istanbul Convention, have progressively recognized gender as socially constructed, the journey toward understanding gender as separate from biological sex reflects deep-seated cultural resistance.¹²

This gradual progress in recognizing and addressing gender inequality required the international community to engage in nearly five decades of conventions, evaluations, and philosophical debates. This journey illustrates why gender remains difficult to understand. The concept is abstract, and many political figures find it challenging to see the connection between gender equality and social progress. Moreover, gender equality challenges traditional norms, where male authority is central to family and societal structures. Thus, despite legal advances, understanding gender and its importance for equality and development remains a complex and, for some, controversial issue.³

Given that it took decades of scholarly and legal evolution to understand gender as a social construct, expecting local authorities to fully grasp and implement it immediately presents a significant challenge.

¹ "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," United Nations General Assembly, December 10, 1948, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

² "Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)," Council of Europe, May 11, 2011, <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/text-of-the-convention>

Istanbul Convention, Council of Europe, preamble, 2011

³ Istanbul Convention, Council of Europe, preamble, 2011

The local context

In North Macedonia, anti-gender movements in 2022 and 2023 fueled resistance to gender equality policies.⁴ Some municipalities that had previously supported the concept of gender equality shifted to “Equality between Sexes” frameworks,⁵ reflecting societal apprehension and a fundamental misunderstanding of gender. Deeply rooted traditional values and fears about the implications of gender equality have made societal readiness a significant challenge.

A society that doesn’t understand that “gender” is more comprehensive than “sex”, because it encompasses the inequalities experienced by women in the past, struggles to understand what these inequalities mean not only for women and girls but for society as a whole. In such a context, even the Law on Equal Opportunities was perceived as something abstract, redundant, and a bureaucratic necessity. Very small, even minuscule, steps were taken for society to become accustomed to the concept. School programs remained unchanged, working conditions remained the same, and there were no policies or activities to promote equality. Affirmative measures for women were included, but the rationale behind them was vague, and neither the measures nor the rationale explained the reasons that led to such inequality or the proposed path to overcome it.

Meanwhile, the international community, especially the CoE and the EU, adopted the Istanbul Convention and several Directives incorporating gender, gender perspective, and gender equality as core values. North Macedonia followed suit, incorporating “gender” in national laws, such as those against discrimination and gender-based violence. However, by 2022, when the Law

⁴ The Anti-gender movement was active on social media, strongly supported by the Orthodox Church, which co-organized public protests with the movement. See “Protivnici na Zakonot za Rodova Ednakvost: Protest na Crkvata Protiv Zakonot za Rodova Ednakvost,” *Radio Slobodna Evropa*, June 26, 2023, <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/32482626.html>; “Protest Protiv Zakonot za Rodova Ednakvost vo Skopje,” *Voice of America*, June 26, 2023, <https://mk.voanews.com/a/7160761.html>; Facebook page, *Prezemite Odgovornost*, <https://www.facebook.com/prezemiodgovornost>; Facebook page, *Koalicija za Decata*, <https://www.facebook.com/koalicijazadecata>.

⁵ “Opština Strumica Go Ukina Terminot Rodova Ednakvost” *Faktor*, August 15, 2023, <https://faktor.mk/opshtina-strumica-go-ukina-terminot-rodova-ednakvost>; Municipality of Vinica, *Minutes from the 25th Session of the Municipal Council*, p. 21, <https://vinica.gov.mk/sovet/arhiva-sovet/26-2023/Zapisnik%20broj%2025.pdf>; Municipality of Gevgelija, *Records from the 29th Session of the Municipal Council*, July 17, 2003, <https://shorturl.at/T8rdN>.

on Gender Equality was proposed to replace the existing Law on Equal Opportunities, the unprepared society resisted. This rejection was emblematic of the transformative policy challenges requiring societal adaptation, education, and legislation.

The problem is that laws promoting gender equality are not traditional. Traditional laws nurture the flow of specific social occasions and regulates them to respond to the principles and values of society and the country. (Examples include the Law on Obligations and the Law on Peaceful Assembly, where the role of the law is to provide specific rules that must be followed for the undertaken action to be legal.) Unlike traditional laws, gender equality law requires transformative change (where society must re-learn how to treat men and women equally). Many measures must be taken for such a concept to come alive; adopting a law cannot be the ultimate destination.

The result? The Law on Gender Equality was never enacted. Several municipalities changed the term “gender” to “sex” in their local action plans and strategies. By September 2024, the Ministry of Education proposed amendments to remove “gender” from the Law on Primary Education’s anti-discrimination provisions, illustrating the enduring impact of societal resistance.

Conclusion and proposed steps forward

To contribute to effective gender equality at a local level, serious efforts must be undertaken by all stakeholders, including state authorities, CSOs, and international organizations, to support local authorities in building policies and planning activities that understand and address the core of gender inequalities.

- 1. Support to understand the core and sense of the obligations under the Law on Equal Opportunities between Women and Men*
This includes technical assistance and motivation to use gender-sensitive tools like gender analysis and responsive policies to identify and address disparities. Training initiatives can transform these tools into impactful measures that meet community needs. The UN Women mentoring system should be extended, alongside

mechanisms encouraging municipalities to adopt legally binding measures, such as mandatory gender sensitivity training and regular accountability reporting.

2. Support for the development of materials and activities for transformative change

Educational activities for children and tailored training programs for young adults, professionals, and parents should be established locally. These components can be integrated into school curricula, community programs, and workplace training to foster a generational shift in attitudes toward gender equality. Engaging community members through dialogue and participatory planning can help address resistance, foster acceptance, and ensure that gender equality initiatives are locally relevant and widely supported.

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Bio: MAJA ATANASOVA is a lawyer based in North Macedonia, working in gender equality, anti-discrimination, and child protection. She has over a decade of experience in legal reform, civil society, and public policy development. Her work includes legal analysis, institutional assessments, and input in strategies, laws, and by-laws addressing access to justice, gender-based violence, and inclusive education. She has worked on projects supported by UN agencies, the European Union, and the Council of Europe, as well as with local stakeholders. Atanasova is particularly interested in how legal and policy tools promote systemic inclusion and address structural inequality. Her practice focuses on bridging gaps between international frameworks and local realities, with attention to institutional barriers affecting marginalized groups. She also contributes to interdisciplinary efforts advancing social justice through mentoring, capacity building, and public writing. She holds a law degree and remains engaged in initiatives seeking to strengthen rights-based governance and inclusive policymaking.

Ana Bojchevska Mitrevska

WHO CARES?

**ADVANCING MATERNAL MENTAL
HEALTH THROUGH INTEGRATED,
MULTIDIMENSIONAL, SYSTEMIC
INTERVENTIONS**

Introduction

Common mental health issues like depression and anxiety are major contributors to the global disease burden. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, studies estimated anxiety and depression prevalence at up to 20.8%, with anxiety alone reaching 28.8%. Research referenced in the UNICEF study on the mental health of adolescents and their caregivers during the pandemic indicates that women tend to report higher rates of depression and anxiety compared to men.¹

In 2022, postpartum depression manifested in 27.6% of young mothers in North Macedonia, while 27.8% were affected by moderate to extreme anxiety.² Despite the recognized importance of maternal mental health, national policies in North Macedonia remain insufficient to address the widespread needs of mothers. With only one maternal mental health support group in the country, access to care is severely limited, particularly for women outside the capital.³ Additionally, there are no comprehensive parental leave policies that promote shared responsibility, further exacerbating the mental health burden on mothers. These gaps underline the urgent need for reforms to improve support structures for maternal mental health.

This paper advocates for a multidimensional approach that emphasizes the intersection of mental healthcare access, support systems for caregiving, and equitable parental leave policies. This framework recognizes the systemic barriers that women face in balancing caregiving and professional responsibilities and seeks to provide holistic support by addressing mental health needs, ensuring adequate caregiving resources, and promoting shared responsibility within families through equitable parental leave.

¹ University Clinic of Psychiatry – Skopje. (2023). [Mental health of adolescents and their caregivers during the COVID-19 pandemic in North Macedonia: Final report](#). Supported by UNICEF and USAID.

² University Clinic of Psychiatry in Skopje. (2023). [The influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on the perinatal mental health of women in North Macedonia](#). Supported by UNICEF and USAID.

³ According to the 2021 Census data, 71% of women in reproductive age live outside of Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia

Feminism, Childcare, and Shared Parental Leave: A Pathway to Healthy Motherhood

Maternal mental health issues, such as postpartum depression and anxiety, affect a significant proportion of new mothers. Despite the prevalence and impact of these issues, many women do not receive the support they need due to stigma and lack of access to appropriate services.

Existentialist and feminist-informed therapeutic approaches challenge the medical model that pathologizes perinatal distress. Existentialists argue that labeling these difficulties as pathological stigmatizes women, while feminist therapies view the distress as rooted in structural gender inequality and criticize the assumption that such issues can be “cured” with medication. Feminist approaches are particularly effective in addressing feelings of loneliness, shame, and guilt among new mothers by focusing on the broader political and social contexts of their lives.

Carol Gilligan’s theory of the ethics of care⁴, though not specifically focused on mothers, is highly relevant in this context. Gilligan’s emphasis on care, relationships, and empathy aligns with the experiences of mothers, underscoring the emotional labor mothers perform and the strain it can place on their mental health, particularly without adequate support.

Regular and thorough screenings for mental health issues during the early postpartum period are essential for identifying and addressing conditions such as postpartum depression and anxiety. These evaluations are crucial for early detection and intervention, ensuring that mothers receive the support they need to manage their mental health effectively. Access to support should not be contingent upon a mother’s financial situation; therefore, affordable and accessible humanistic psychotherapy is crucial for individuals facing mental health challenges.

Improved access to mental health care alone isn’t enough; mothers also need time and resources to seek treatment. Childcare stress is a key predictor of postpartum depression, defined as the stress mothers experience from the demands of caring for their baby. This includes physical, emotional, and

⁴ Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women’s development*. Harvard University Press

psychological challenges like feeding, sleep disturbances, and adjusting to motherhood. Beck highlights that the overwhelming nature of infant care, especially without support, can lead to or worsen postpartum depression.⁵

The responsibility for home and childcare disproportionately falls on women, contributing to their exclusion from the labor market. Studies confirm the link between access to quality and affordable early care and education and the economic empowerment and improved employment opportunities for women. More specifically, in municipalities with state-funded kindergartens, the female employment rate is 34.6%, compared to 21.3% in areas without them, demonstrating the significant role that childcare access plays in women's workforce participation.⁶

In North Macedonia, 21 municipalities lack kindergartens, leaving parents of approximately 17,000 children aged six and under without access to affordable childcare services. In municipalities with kindergartens, only approximately 30% of eligible children are enrolled due to many facilities being at or beyond full capacity. This shortage forces parents to seek alternative childcare solutions, such as private kindergartens or nannies, which are often financially prohibitive for most families. Consequently, many mothers are compelled to withdraw from the labor market to provide childcare themselves, exacerbating their economic vulnerability and increasing the impact of childcare stress on their mental health.

It is important to note that including fathers in child-rearing through shared parental leave policies⁷ has substantial benefits that can contribute to the overall mental well-being of new mothers. These include more equitable household responsibilities, shifts in gender norms, and increased women's workforce participation, which promotes economic growth and narrows gender wage and pension gaps while reducing discrimination against women.⁸ In addition to that, it supports both parents in maintaining labor

⁵ Beck, Cheryl Tatano. [*Predictors of Postpartum Depression: An Update*](#). Nursing Research 50(5):p 275-285, September 2001.

⁶ Реактор – Истражување во акција. (2024). [Достапност на градинки и родова еднаквост на пазарот на труд](#).

⁷ [The OECD defines parental leave](#) as job-protected leave of absence for employed parents after childbirth to take care of their baby. On a European level, a recent directive from 2010 (Council Directive 2010/18/EU) mandates at least four months of non-transferable leave for each parent.

⁸ Реактор – Истражување во акција. (2019). [За сечие добро - кон нов модел за родителско](#)

market attachment while fostering a better work–life balance, which can reduce stress.⁹

Moreover, fathers who take leave for two or more weeks immediately following the birth of a child are more likely to remain actively involved in childcare and household responsibilities afterward.¹⁰¹¹ One of the most immediate benefits of shared parental leave is the reduction of stress associated with the imbalance of household responsibilities. This shared responsibility allows mothers to recover physically and emotionally from childbirth, which is essential for preventing postpartum depression and other mental health issues. Shared parental leave also improves marital relationships, and allows time for self-care and personal pursuits, which are critical for maintaining mental health during the demanding early months of parenthood.

From a societal perspective, non-transferable shared parental leave shifts gender norms by involving men in caregiving, reducing the traditional view of mothers as primary caregivers. This normalization of paternal involvement helps reduce societal pressure on women and creates a more supportive environment for mothers. Additionally, in countries where paternity leave is common, there is a reduction in workplace discrimination against women and a narrowing of the gender pay gap. Research from Sweden shows that for every month of paternity leave taken, a woman's salary increases by 7%.¹²

In North Macedonia, a proposed labor relations law that included shared, non-transferable parental leave was drafted with the intention of enhancing gender equality and supporting both parents in child-rearing responsibilities. However, the legislation faced significant resistance from the private sector and conservative forces opposed to gender equality, who

ОТСУСТВО.

⁹ Dearing, H., Designing gender-equalizing parental leave schemes—what can we learn from recent empirical evidence from Europe? *Z Famforsch.* 2016; **28**: 38-64

¹⁰ Huerta, M., et al., 2013. *Fathers' leave, fathers' involvement and child development: Evidence from Four OECD Countries*, Eur J Soc Secur. 2014 Dec;16(4):308-346. doi:

¹¹ Nepomnyaschy, L. and Waldfogel, J., 2007. *Paternity leave and fathers' involvement with their young children*. Community, Work & Family, 10(4), 427-453

¹² Johansson, E. (2010). *The effect of own and spousal parental leave on earnings* (IFAU Working Paper 2010:4). Institute for Evaluation of Labour Market and Education Policy.

sought to limit women's roles outside the household. As a result, the law was never brought to a vote and was returned to the working process.

Conclusions

Maternal mental health issues, including postpartum depression and anxiety, are common and have a profound impact on new mothers, yet stigma and limited access to services often prevent women from obtaining the necessary support. Regular and thorough screenings for mental health issues during the postpartum period are crucial for early detection and intervention. Access to affordable and accessible humanistic psychotherapy is essential for effective management of mental health challenges. Child-care stress is a significant predictor of postpartum depression, and the absence of adequate support systems can worsen mental health outcomes. Providing access to affordable childcare services alleviates this stress and improves maternal mental health. Furthermore, shared parental leave policies, particularly non-transferable leave, promote a more equitable distribution of household responsibilities, shift gender norms, increase women's participation in the workforce, and reduce mental health stress for mothers.

Policy Recommendations

Early Screening for Maternal Mental Health at First Check-up:

- Mandate mental health screenings as part of routine postpartum care during the first medical check-up after childbirth.
- Train healthcare providers to recognize signs of maternal mental health disorders and provide clear referral pathways to specialized humanistic mental health services.
- Develop and distribute educational materials for new mothers about the importance of mental health, normalizing conversations around postpartum depression and anxiety to reduce stigma.

Access to Affordable and Accessible Psychotherapy:

- Subsidize mental health services for mothers through public health

insurance or social welfare programs to ensure that psychotherapy is available at low cost, particularly for low-income families.

- Increase funding for community-based mental health services that offer maternal mental health support, including both individual therapy and group sessions.

Access to Both Traditional and Non-traditional, Context-dependent Childcare Systems:

- Expand public funding for childcare facilities, such as kindergartens and daycare centers, ensuring that they are widely available and affordable in all municipalities.
- Support non-traditional childcare systems that are context-dependent, such as community-based, flexible, or home-based childcare options.
- Introduce financial subsidies for families utilizing private childcare options or nannies in regions with limited access to public childcare.

Shared Parental Leave:

- Implement non-transferable, shared parental leave policies that ensure both parents have guaranteed time off to care for their newborn.
- Provide financial incentives for companies to support shared parental leave, including subsidies or tax breaks for businesses that implement progressive parental leave policies.
- Enforce legal protections against workplace discrimination for both mothers and fathers who take parental leave, ensuring that career progression is not negatively impacted for those who take time off for caregiving.
- Launch public awareness campaigns to promote the benefits of shared parental leave for both parents and society, aiming to shift traditional gender norms around caregiving and household responsibilities.

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Iva Mihajlovska

**WOMEN IN DECISION-MAKING AT
THE LOCAL LEVEL IN SOUTH EAST
EUROPE (SEE)**

The participation of women in local-level decision-making and governance within the South East Europe (SEE) region is a critical factor for advancing gender equality and improving the overall quality of governance and democracy as a whole. Inclusive governance systems, where both women and men contribute equally, tend to generate more effective, innovative, and sustainable policy outcomes. Despite notable progress in political and social realms over the past decades, women in SEE remain disproportionately underrepresented in key decision-making roles at the local level.¹ This underrepresentation diminishes the diversity of voices in local governance and weakens efforts to create inclusive policies that reflect the needs of the entire population.

The barriers preventing women from fully participating in local governance are deeply rooted in the region's history and social structure.² Entrenched patriarchal norms perpetuate traditional gender roles that limit women's access to leadership positions and decision-making processes.³ This is compounded by a lack of supportive infrastructure, such as mentorship programs and networks, that could help women navigate the political landscape. Moreover, societal expectations and family responsibilities often place additional burdens on women, discouraging their involvement in political careers or leadership roles.⁴ This structural inequality is further exacerbated by limited financial resources, insufficient political will to advance gender-sensitive reforms, and cultural resistance to change.

The state of women's involvement in local decision-making across SEE is varied but consistently lags behind men's representation. Although some countries have introduced quotas and legislative measures to improve gender balance in politics, these initiatives have not fully translated into substantial shifts at the local level. Women are often confined to non-executive roles or marginalized in critical decision-making processes, limiting their influence on policy.⁵ In this context, their potential contributions to

¹ <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-Womens-Rights-in-Western-Balkans-2023.pdf>

² <https://www.undp.org/bosnia-herzegovina/publications/baseline-study-barriers-political-participation-women-bosnia-and-herzegovina>

³ <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2023/01/women-leaders-power-davos2023/>

⁴ <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/breaking-the-gender-trap-challenging-patriarchal-norms-to-clear-pathways-for-peace/>

⁵ https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf

areas such as economic development, education, healthcare, and social welfare are underutilized, resulting in policies that are less reflective of the diverse needs of communities.

Data across the SEE region show significant disparities in women's participation in local governance. According to recent studies:

- Women in decision-making roles in local governance occupy approximately 2.5% in North Macedonia;⁶
- Only four female mayors preside over major cities in the South-East Europe region (Skopje, Sarajevo, Podgorica, and Sector 1 in Bucharest);⁷
- A slight increase in the representation of women mayors in the SEE region is encouraging, rising from an average of 8.35% in 2021 to 8.50% in 2023;⁸
- The participation of women in municipal councils across the SEE region has seen only a modest increase over the past two years, with progress of only 3% on average, from 28.5% in 2021 to 28.7% in 2023;⁹
- In municipal councils and mayoral positions, women hold fewer leadership roles, with representation often below the **30% threshold**;¹⁰
- Gender-sensitive budgeting and policy development are still emerging concepts in many municipalities, limiting the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing women's specific needs at the local level.¹¹

Despite these challenges, there have been some positive developments in recent years that offer hope for greater gender parity in local governance

⁶ https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-09/unw_cgpe_nmk_eng_web.pdf

⁷ <https://charter-equality.eu/event/fourth-edition-of-the-south-east-europe-women-mayors-forum.html>

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Womens-representation-in-local-govern-ment-en.pdf>

¹¹ <https://www.delog.org/news/details/gender-responsive-budgeting-grb-on-local-level-in-south-east-europe>

across the SEE region. Some countries have introduced legal frameworks that have led to incremental increases in women's representation in certain areas, though these have yet to produce transformative change.¹² Furthermore, local and international organizations are working to build the capacity of women leaders through training programs, mentorship, and networking opportunities, helping to equip women with the skills and confidence needed to navigate the political landscape.¹³

However, much work remains to be done to ensure that these initiatives translate into meaningful and sustained improvements in women's participation in local governance. Policy interventions must focus on addressing both the structural and cultural barriers that hinder women's full participation in decision-making. This includes not only expanding gender quotas but also fostering an enabling environment where women are supported and encouraged to take on leadership roles. For example, the Men for Gender Equality initiative in Sweden is a prominent effort aimed at engaging men in promoting gender equality and challenging traditional gender roles. This program recognizes that achieving gender equality requires the active involvement of men as allies and advocates. It focuses on raising awareness about the importance of gender equality, educating men about the benefits of shared responsibilities, and encouraging them to speak out against gender-based violence and discrimination. Through workshops, seminars, and campaigns, the initiative fosters discussions on masculinity and its impact on societal structures, emphasizing the positive roles men can play in creating a more equitable society. The program also seeks to dismantle harmful stereotypes that limit both men's and women's opportunities, thus promoting healthier relationships and communities.¹⁴ Capacity-building initiatives should be coupled with efforts to shift societal attitudes toward gender equality, particularly by promoting positive images of women leaders and raising awareness of the benefits of gender-inclusive governance.¹⁵

¹² <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2023/03/women-in-power-in-2023-new-data-shows-progress-but-wide-regional-gaps>

¹³ <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Womens-representation-in-local-govern-ment-en.pdf>

¹⁴ https://mfj.se/en/our-work/areas-of-work?_gl=1*belcw3*_up*MQ..*_ga*MjU2NDQ0NDEzLjE3M-jgxOTk3OTM.*_ga_2ZQNoKYN2C*MTcyODE5OTc5Mi4xLjAuMTcyODE5OTc5Mi4wLjAuMA

¹⁵ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/facts-and-figures/facts-and-figures-womens-leader->

Additionally, it is crucial to strengthen the institutional mechanisms that promote gender-sensitive policymaking and budgeting. Municipalities must be equipped with the tools and knowledge needed to incorporate gender perspectives into their policies and budgets effectively. This requires investment in training and technical assistance for local government officials and administrators, as well as the establishment of monitoring and evaluation frameworks to assess the impact of gender-sensitive policies on local communities. By mainstreaming gender into local governance, municipalities can develop more inclusive policies that reflect the needs and aspirations of all citizens, ultimately contributing to more equitable and effective governance.

In conclusion, while women's participation in local governance across the SEE region has seen some progress, significant disparities remain. Women continue to face numerous barriers to achieving leadership positions and exercising their authority within local governance structures. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that includes legal reforms, capacity-building initiatives, and efforts to change societal attitudes toward gender equality. By fostering an environment where women can thrive as leaders, the SEE region can move closer to achieving gender parity in local governance and ensuring that the voices of all community members are heard and represented in decision-making processes.¹⁶

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Dragana Božić

**GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN
BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA**

In the past 20 years, Bosnia and Herzegovina has worked intensively on developing the legal framework for gender equality. However, this progress should be viewed in relation to the possible ways of improving the legal framework, the discrepancy between the formal legal framework and actual social practices, and ultimately the absence of both gender-sensitive approaches and implementation tools.

Defining gender-based violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

We live in a patriarchy. In order to successfully engage in politics, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina need significantly more skills than men, because they are simultaneously dedicated to other roles in life. Since a woman is perceived as the pillar of the family, engaging in politics often does not fit into such a vision of reality. It is considered that her priority is to manage family, children, and parents.

Discrimination in the field of employment is prohibited by the provisions of the Law on Gender Equality in BiH, the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination in BiH and all labour laws that are in force at different levels of government in the country. Nevertheless, women continuously face discrimination in employment and working relationships, starting from advertising and job offers, to the process of establishing an employment relationship, its course and, finally, dismissal.¹

By undertaking a series of legal and institutional measures, the state has shown a formal interest in promoting gender equality, but it has not yet confirmed it in practice. Formal and legal does not mean essential, let alone real equality. Substantial equality represents relations based on parity, while the formal legal norm is at least 40% of the less represented gender (traditionally women), and the actual rarely exceeds 20%. It is quite clear that the Bosnia and Herzegovina authorities are still not fully ready to establish more humane relations between the sexes in society, which is still largely traditional and patriarchal.²

Political parties often do not allow significant and meaningful participation

¹ Alternativni CEDAW izvještaj: Izvještaj organizacija civilnog društva o provedbi Konvencije o eliminaciji svih oblika diskriminacije žena u Bosni i Hercegovini 2019–2023

² Indeks rodne ravnopravnosti u Bosni i Hercegovini 2023

of women in election and post-election processes. There is also a perception that women do not possess enough political skills, as well as the problem of the general invisibility of women in election campaigns, especially at the local level. Women from marginalized groups are hardly represented in political life. The media have a key role in this, given that gender biases during reporting confirm dominant ideologies and attitudes on the issue of women in politics, based on gender stereotypes.

Bosnia and Herzegovina does not have a state policy aimed at preventing and suppressing all forms of gender-based violence. Entity strategies focus only on preventing and suppressing domestic violence and recognizing responsible institutions and framework deadlines. These strategies do not envisage special measures aimed at preventing and suppressing violence against Roma women and LGBTIQ+ persons. Women with disabilities are not recognized by law as a vulnerable category in the context of gender-based violence, although analyses indicate that persons with disabilities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and women significantly more than men, suffer a significant amount of violence.³

The main challenge is to compel the authorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina to improve policies that will ensure equal participation of women and men in public and political life in all spheres of society, which generally affects more efficient development processes.

Recommendations to fight gender-based violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina:

1. Apply the gender mainstreaming strategy when drafting laws and public policies and defining the budget, as well as develop a methodology for monitoring the implementation of the successful strategy (gender mainstreaming) by competent institutions.
2. Laws and policies should address issues of the position of women, especially issues of intersectional discrimination. This implies continuous and adequate assessments of the situation, which will be based on gender-sensitive statistics - data classified by sex, but

³ Integrisanje principa rodne ravnopravnosti u proces pristupanja EU – Izvještaj o procjeni Bosna i Hercegovina

also on other grounds of differentiation in the context of intersectionality. To fully understand the situation, it is necessary to consider the possibility of developing qualitative methodology and instruments to take into account the specific position of particularly sensitive groups of women, such as LGBT women, single parents, Roma women and others.

3. The state should implement more efficient programs and policy measures to eliminate stereotypes about women and men and the roles they play in society.
4. The Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina should ensure greater protection of human rights and freedoms, with a special focus on the gender perspective, and taking into account the five priorities defined in the document Platform of Women's Priorities for Constitutional Changes with Amendments to the Constitution of BiH from a gender perspective, which are:
 - a) using gender-sensitive language in the Constitution of BiH;
 - b) introducing of affirmative measures in the Constitution of BiH to achieve full gender and sexual equality;
 - c) expanding the existing Catalog of Rights with provisions related to unified health, social and family protection;
 - d) enhancing judicial and legal protection of human rights and freedoms and
 - e) applying the principle of direct democracy to the constitutional reform process.⁴

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⁴ Alternativni CEDAW izvještaj: Izvještaj organizacija civilnog društva o provedbi Konvencije o eliminaciji svih oblika diskriminacije žena u Bosni i Hercegovini 2019–2023

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Radmila Jovanovska

**GENDER EQUALITY IN THE PROCESS
OF SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF
INCARCERATED WOMEN IN NORTH
MACEDONIA**

The general view of criminal justice reflects a system of three separately organized functions: the *police*, the *courts*, and *corrections*. Each has a distinct role, yet they are interrelated (Sullivan, 1977: 157). As the criminal justice system is a very wide area, because it includes “agencies responsible for enforcing criminal laws, including legislatures, police, courts, and corrections” (Reid, 2003: 355), I have decided to focus on gender inequality in the process of social reintegration of women after their release from prison.

As there is a correlation between rehabilitation and reintegration treatment programs and recidivism, meaning their use during imprisonment significantly reduces recidivism, it is essential to have such programs in penitentiary institutions and include all incarcerated women (Arnaudovski & Gruevska – Drakulevski, 2013).

Another very important issue is the need for specific programs for women (Guide, 2019), not the general ones constructed for incarcerated men. Why is this the case?

First, the penitentiary institutions and the system in general have been constructed for males and their needs, with no attention to the specific hygiene and treatment needs women have. Furthermore, most women who are convicted for imprisonment are convicted for non-violent crimes, have a lower level of education, and many of them have a history of victimization (Stanojoska, 2023).

The post-release support women need differs based on their age, the length of their sentence, health status, minority group characteristics (ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.), and substance abuse problems.

In-prison treatment programs are also connected with certain characteristics and problems, such as substance abuse, because some women use substances as a coping mechanism for their victimization or other real-life problems (Stanojoska, 2019).

In the only penitentiary institution for women in North Macedonia – the Women’s Ward at KPD Idrizovo, there is only one social worker working with incarcerated women, no specific treatment programs (only few women work in the Administrative Building of KPD Idrizovo as hygiene workers,

and few in the kitchen of the Ward, and all of them earn between 400 and 500 denars a month, which is far below a standard monthly salary), and no tailored post-release programs, as the post-penal treatment has not functioned effectively in recent years (Stanojoska, 2024).

Successful reintegration requires an understanding of women's pathways to crime and prison, such as poverty, substance abuse, victimization, mental health, caregiving, etc. This is not possible due to a lack of personnel in Macedonian prisons (CPT Report, 2023).

How can we expect any type of success in the imprisonment of convicted women, if the context and content of the penalty are different from what is required by international documents and national laws (Jovanovska, 2023)?

What should be done by the authorities during imprisonment?

- Enough staff in resocialization sectors from different profiles: social workers, psychologists, criminologists, lawyers, etc.
- Treatment programs with essential elements of the three "r"s (rehabilitation, resocialization, reintegration);

What should be done by the authorities during post-release?

- Post-release support to address issues that lead women into offending and offer viable alternative life paths.
- Support for those who should not return to their families, if that is not the best option for them after their release.
- More active work by the Center for Social Work, as their fieldwork is poor compared with their obligations by law in the post-release treatment of the incarcerated population.

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Angelina Stanojoska
GENDER EQUALITY IN THE
PENITENTIARY SYSTEM:
MAIN ISSUES AND POSSIBLE
SOLUTIONS¹

¹This position paper is prepared using the results and conclusions from previous research of the author - **Stanojoska, A.** *The Feminist Pathways Perspective: The Pathways to Crime of Female Murderers in the Republic of North Macedonia*. In: **Stanojoska, A.**, Dimovski, D., Maksimova, E. (eds) *The Handbook on Female Criminality in the Former Yugoslav Countries*. 2023, pp.105-131, Springer

Researching gender equality and the connection between gender and prisons, it should first be emphasized that prisons are generally located on the margins of society, and people, regardless of their gender, become invisible when imprisoned. However, incarcerated women are doubly marginalized and become overlooked objects during their imprisonment: *"Concealed within the hidden institution of the prison is the women's prison population, an even more shadowy phenomenon that has generally been [...] subsumed, in terms of policy needs, into the male prison population."* (Colvin, 2011: 1).

Furthermore, incarcerated women, when imprisoned, find themselves in a system that has always been designed for men. Besides this, even the social perception of incarcerated women is different from that of men.

The estimated number of women in prison in North Macedonia is around 70-75 (out of approximately 2,130 incarcerated people currently), and all of them are incarcerated in the only penitentiary institution for women in North Macedonia, the Women's Ward of KPD Idrizovo. This means that every woman convicted to imprisonment is sent to this institution, regardless of the place she lived in before conviction.

The Women's Ward was constructed and opened in 1986, and since then, the building has not been significantly renovated. It has poor material conditions, including a lack of hot water and hygiene in toilets and showers, moisture on walls, and an indoor temperature that does not correspond to the outdoor conditions, meaning it is cold inside in winter and hot during summer.

The institution has open, semi-open, and closed wards in the same building, which puts women in a less favorable position than incarcerated men, resulting in discrimination. Why? Because incarcerated men, after a certain period of imprisonment in one ward or institution, have the possibility to progress to another with more liberal treatment and less security, closer to their homes, and with more frequent contacts with the outside world. This opportunity is not available for women, meaning they cannot progress to another institution, as there is only one, but they can move from the closed to the semi-open or open ward.

There are no permanent medical personnel in the ward, no mental health services, and only one social worker in the resocialization section working with all incarcerated women. This results in incomplete treatment programs and lower chances for success in the resocialization process.

The nutritional value of food, in accordance with the Law on the Execution of Sanctions, is 12,500 joules, but the daily number of meals at the Women's Ward is only one (Stanojoska, 2023). This means that incarcerated women must receive food and goods from their families to have enough meals during the day. However, not all of them can receive food packages every month.

As most incarcerated women are from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, the lack of hygiene, lack of medical care, overcrowding, and poor nutrition worsen their already fragile physical and mental health. This is even more critical considering that most of these women have become offenders due to previous victimization or because of their financial situation.

Another issue that puts them in a less favorable position than men is the fact that, although work is underutilized in treatment, women have even fewer opportunities to work. Specifically, only a few women work outside the Ward, with most employed in the administrative building in KPD Idrizovo and are underpaid (400-500 denars per month). Furthermore, there are no organized daily activities, nor professional treatment programs, training, or courses, (Stanojoska, 2023).

There are no programs addressing substance abuse problems, only Methadone therapy, which sometimes results in interpersonal violence and conflicts, as everything in prison has its price.

As the situation in the Women's Ward is more than serious regarding basic living conditions, food, and treatment programs, we could propose the following important primary steps that should be taken by authorities:

- As the number of incarcerated women is low, and there is no economic justification for building another female prison in North Macedonia, the next natural step would be the construction of a

new facility or reconstruction of the existing building. This would improve living and material conditions in accordance with international standards.

- Given the lack of employees in the Resocialization Sector in the Women's Ward, we could propose increasing the number of staff, along with employing important professionals such as psychologists, legal experts, and criminologists.
- Engaging more incarcerated women in working activities, as an important resocialization tool and a tool against inter-prisoner violence, would help them develop work habits, earn some money for personal use, and support their treatment process.
- Integrating technology into the resocialization process, such as using technology for communication with the outside world (video calls with family, e-mail communication), and later as a tool in the resocialization and rehabilitation process, since technology is an inseparable part of everyday life.

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LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS FOR RESILIENT AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES: A THEORY OF CHANGE FOR CSE IN THE BALKANS

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1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Lack of **comprehensive sexual education and gender sensitive education** in the formal educational system leads to a series of problems among young people, such as discrimination, lack of empathy, increased bullying and violence, teenage pregnancy, online violence. Said problems lead to gradually forming and enhancing gender stereotypes and prejudice that can lead to gender disinformation and misinformation.

[Violence among youth¹](#) is growing across the Balkans, with a number of reported cases involving harassment, sexual violence, bullying, and rape. These acts are frequently committed by minors and occur both within school settings and in public spaces, raising serious concerns about the safety and well-being of young people.

[The average age of first sexual intercourse²](#) in many Balkan countries is reported to be around 15 years, with girls typically initiating sexual activity slightly later, around the age of 16. In contrast, countries with comprehensive and mandatory health education in school curricula tend to see a later onset of sexual activity among youth—often up to the age of 19—alongside improved outcomes related to sexual and reproductive health.

Teenage pregnancy rates in the region remain a pressing issue. For instance, in 2022, North Macedonia reported rates exceeding [15 per 1000 girls aged 15 to 19³](#). These figures underscore the urgent need for evidence-based interventions and inclusive educational programs that address sexual health and rights.

[Adolescents between the ages of 15 and 18⁴](#) are among the most exposed to various forms of violence in the region. Young people belonging to the LGBTI community face particularly elevated risks, being up to four times more likely to experience bullying in educational settings than their heterosexual peers. Additionally, LGBTI youth are more likely to report psychosomatic symptoms (74%), persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness (47%), and serious suicidal thoughts (30%) than their heterosexual counterparts.

[Between 2021 and 2023⁵](#), numerous cases of violence against LGBTI youth

within the education sector were documented across Balkan countries. Education emerged as one of the leading institutional settings for such violence, second only to the healthcare sector in frequency of reported incidents.

The increasing of violence, early sexual activity, and discrimination against youth—particularly LGBTI youth—in the Balkans poses serious public health, human rights, and social development concerns.

- Exposure to violence and lack of proper sexual education negatively impact both mental and physical health, contributing to higher rates of depression, anxiety, teenage pregnancy among young people, especially girls, youth from marginalized groups and LGBTI youth.
- Violence and discrimination in schools lead to absenteeism, poor academic performance, and school dropouts, limiting future opportunities and deepening inequality.
- High rates of violence within schools and healthcare systems highlight systemic gaps in protection and support, especially for marginalized groups.

In light of these factors, it is imperative that stakeholders across the Balkans prioritize comprehensive, intersectional, and youth-centered approaches to prevention, protection, and policy reform. These efforts are essential not only for safeguarding the rights of young people but also for fostering healthier, more equitable societies.

Anti-gender movements across the region have become increasingly active in shaping public discourse around education, particularly in opposing the inclusion of Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) in school curricula. Education has become a central arena for these groups to mobilize support and disseminate misinformation, often by spreading fear-based narratives that misrepresent the goals and content of CSE.

These campaigns not only hinder policy progress but also create a hostile environment that reinforces stigma, discrimination, and fear—especially towards girls, LGBTI youth, and anyone who does not conform to tradi-

tional gender roles. In doing so, they undermine the safety and well-being of students and contribute to the normalization of violence and exclusion in schools. Countering these harmful narratives through evidence-based education and public awareness is essential for protecting children's rights and promoting inclusive, fact-based learning environments.

Comprehensive sexual and gender sensitive education promotes gender equality, and is based on a human rights approach. Components of this education are: gender, sexual and reproductive health, civic aspects, pleasure, connections and relationships, violence and diversity.

Summary:

In the Western Balkans, the absence of comprehensive sexuality education in schools creates a range of interconnected issues for young people, contributing to widespread gender inequality, misinformation, and gender-based violence. This lack of education leaves students not prepared to navigate relationships, understand their rights, and protect themselves from violence or exploitation.

As a result, the region faces high rates of teenage pregnancies, particularly in marginalized communities, and increasing cases of gender-based violence and bullying in schools. LGBTI+ youth are disproportionately affected, facing higher rates of discrimination, bullying, and mental health struggles, such as anxiety and depression. In addition, anti-gender movements have grown stronger across the region, further hindering efforts to integrate inclusive and evidence-based sexual education into school curricula. These movements often spread misinformation, creating fear and resistance among parents and educators which in turn undermines young people's ability to access critical, accurate knowledge about their bodies and relationships.

Given these challenges, it is vital to prioritize comprehensive, gender-sensitive education in schools across the Western Balkans, ensuring that all students have access to information that promotes safety, equality, and well-being.

2. VISION OF CHANGE

The long-term goal of this program is to integrate Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) into formal education starting from primary education, with gradual progression tailored to the age and maturity of students, including even kindergarten. This approach ensures that foundational concepts such as human rights, bodily autonomy, boundaries, diversity, equality, and solidarity are instilled early and continuously built upon throughout a child's education.

Our vision is a world where every child learns essential values such as human rights, bodily autonomy, boundaries, diversity, equality, and solidarity from an early age within the formal education system. This foundational education will cultivate a society that is more inclusive, where individuals treat one another with respect and dignity. By instilling empathy, cooperation, and mutual understanding, we believe this approach will strengthen societal cohesion, fostering a future where diversity is embraced, and every person is valued.

Additionally, CSE serves as a foundation for the concept of collective care, encouraging students to recognize the importance of diversity and intersectionality. It helps them appreciate the varying backgrounds and experiences that shape the people around them, creating a more compassionate and inclusive community. Ultimately, this type of education supports the development of a more equitable and just society, where the principles of respect, fairness, and care are embedded in everyday life.

3. HYPOTHESIS

Example: *If comprehensive sexuality education is implemented in schools, then young people will develop healthier relationships and reduce gender-based violence because early education fosters respect, consent, and critical thinking about gender norms.*

- If CSE is implemented in primary and secondary school it will lower the rate of violence amongst youth
- If young people have CSE they will be more likely to delay the onset of sexual activity and practice safe sex.

- If young people are equipped with CSE knowledge it will reduce the rate of teenage pregnancies
- If CSE is implemented in schools, it will reduce the violence against LGBTI+ youth

4. RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

1. **Political resistance:** In several Western Balkan countries, strong anti-gender movements and right-wing governments may actively oppose the introduction of Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE). This resistance can manifest through restrictive laws or policies designed to protect ideological agendas. To address this, it is important to invest in policy advocacy, build alliances with educators, parents, and civil society, and consistently present evidence of the benefits of CSE.

2. **Religious opposition:** Religious institutions, often aligned with anti-gender movements, may resist comprehensive and gender-sensitive education. Misconceptions and fears can be reinforced through their influence. Mitigation strategies include targeted awareness campaigns, emphasizing the positive impacts of CSE, and—where possible—engaging community and faith leaders in dialogue to reduce opposition and foster understanding.

3. **Risk of increased dropout rates:** In contexts where secondary education is not compulsory, introducing CSE may unintentionally increase dropout rates. Conservative parents might withdraw their children in protest, while LGBTI youth may face bullying or alienation that pushes them out of school. In rural or economically disadvantaged communities, CSE could be seen as a barrier to education, leading to absenteeism. Creating safe, inclusive school environments, adopting strong anti-bullying policies, and engaging families early on are essential to prevent these risks.

4. **Parental resistance:** Parents with conservative beliefs or links to anti-gender movements often oppose CSE due to misinformation or fear about its content. Empowering teachers and school staff with clear, evidence-based information—and training them to respond to parental concerns with empathy and confidence—can help counter this resistance and

build trust.

5. **Teachers' capacity:** A lack of skills or confidence among teachers to deliver CSE effectively may undermine the program's success. This can be mitigated through comprehensive training programs, piloting materials in advance, and providing ongoing professional support to help teachers feel prepared and confident in leading these discussions.

5. ASSUMPTIONS.

For this program to be effective, we assume that schools and educators are willing to adopt inclusive, evidence-based curricula and to engage in continuous training.

Policymakers and education authorities must demonstrate openness to integrating Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) into national frameworks. Parents and communities should recognize the value of CSE for the health, rights, and future of young people. Finally, youth themselves must be engaged as active participants, not only as beneficiaries but as voices shaping the program's relevance and sustainability.

Effective change requires a supportive policy environment where ministries of education are responsive to advocacy and evidence. It also assumes that public opinion can be influenced through awareness campaigns, reducing resistance based on stigma or misinformation. Strong partnerships between civil society, educators, and decision-makers must be established to ensure coordinated action. Adequate resources and political will are essential to sustain training, curriculum updates, and program monitoring. Without these preconditions—policy openness, public support, collaborative networks, and resources—systemic integration of CSE would be difficult to achieve.

6. OUTCOMES (SHORT AND MEDIUM-TERM CHANGES)

Through this project, we expect significant shifts at multiple levels. In terms of **knowledge**, students will gain accurate, evidence-based information on sexual and reproductive health, consent, and relationships, while educators will be trained to deliver CSE in an inclusive and rights-based way. Regarding **attitudes**, harmful gender stereotypes and discriminatory norms

will be challenged, and respect, equality, and inclusion will be promoted within schools. In **behavior**, young people are expected to make healthier and safer choices—delaying sexual initiation, reducing unintended pregnancies and STIs, showing greater empathy and respect, and rejecting violence. Educators, in turn, will adopt more inclusive teaching practices. Finally, at the level of **policies**, we anticipate progress toward the institutionalization of CSE within national curricula and education systems, ensuring its sustainability and wide-scale impact.

Together, these changes lay the foundation for healthier, safer, and more equitable schools and societies. Better knowledge and improved attitudes reduce stigma, promote inclusion, and create supportive environments, particularly for girls and LGBTI youth. Shifts in behavior lead to measurable improvements in health outcomes, school retention, and overall well-being. Policy integration ensures that these gains are embedded in national systems and extended to future generations. Ultimately, these outcomes drive the long-term impact of advancing gender equality, protecting youth rights, reducing gender-based violence, and building more resilient, democratic, and inclusive societies—fully aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality).

7. IMPACT (LONG-TERM CHANGE)

Our project seeks to institutionalize inclusive, evidence-based Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) within national education systems across the Balkans. This means training educators, updating curricula, and creating safe, supportive school environments where all students—particularly girls and LGBTI youth—can learn about health, rights, and relationships. By embedding CSE into formal education, we secure long-term sustainability, ensuring that future generations benefit from knowledge and skills that promote equality, respect, and informed decision-making.

Impact Pathway

- **Activities:** Deliver educator training, revise curricula, and promote safe and inclusive school environments.

- **Immediate Outcomes:** Students gain accurate knowledge and practical skills; educators deliver CSE inclusively; schools challenge harmful gender norms.
- **Intermediate Outcomes:** Reduced teenage pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections; improved mental health and inclusion of marginalized youth; greater school retention and success; stronger culture of respect and equality.
- **Long-term Impact:** Institutionalized CSE across the region, advancing gender equality, protecting youth rights, and building healthier, empowered, and informed generations.

Alignment with Broader Societal and Policy Goals

This change aligns with regional and global commitments to gender equality, youth rights, and social inclusion. It supports the reduction of gender-based violence, promotes mental health, and fosters democratic values through the empowerment of young people. At the policy level, it contributes directly to the **Sustainable Development Goals—SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 5 (Gender Equality)**—while reinforcing international human rights frameworks. By fostering informed, empowered, and inclusive generations, this initiative strengthens the foundations for more equitable, democratic, and resilient societies across the Balkans.

8. THEORY OF CHANGE STATEMENT

If comprehensive sexual and gender sensitive education is implemented in schools then we will see a reduction in discrimination, violence, and inequality because we can equip children with essential knowledge about human rights, bodily autonomy, boundaries, diversity, and equality.

ENDNOTES

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TRANSFORMING GOVERNANCE THROUGH GENDER EQUALITY FOR A INCLUSIVE DECISION-MAKING IN SOUTH-EAST EUROPE

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1. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Democracy presupposes the equal capacity of all individuals to participate in shaping the rules and decisions that govern their lives. Yet in practice, access to political agency remains profoundly uneven. The exclusion of women, particularly those from marginalized groups, is not merely a representational gap. It manifests deeper epistemic and structural inequalities that shape whose knowledge, experiences and needs are legitimized within public policy processes.

In the Western Balkans and wider South-East Europe, the participation of women in political decision-making continues to be hindered by a complex interplay of patriarchal norms, institutional inertia and socio-economic marginalization. While legal frameworks may formally guarantee equality, the implementation of such frameworks often fails to produce substantive outcomes. Women's representation in local governance remains disproportionately low: only 24.1% of mayoral roles and 32.2% of municipal council seats are held by women, with even lower figures among Roma women, women from rural areas, and women with disabilities (European Institute for Gender Equality, *Gender Equality Index: Western Balkans and Türkiye 2023*, European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023).

This underrepresentation is exacerbated by a widespread absence of gender-sensitive policy tools and practices. Many local institutions lack the capacity and political will to mainstream gender perspectives into planning, budgeting, and service delivery. According to a UN Women regional assessment, fewer than 30% of local governments in the Western Balkans have operational gender equality mechanisms. Where such structures do exist, they are often tokenistic or structurally disempowered (UN Women, *Making Gender Equality a Local Reality*, UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 2022).

Marginalized women, such as Roma, single mothers, and women in informal labor, encounter compounded barriers that exclude them from civic participation. These barriers include not only poverty and discrimination, but also institutional cultures that fail to recognize intersectional inequalities. Research confirms that Roma women, in particular, remain outside

consultative mechanisms and policymaking processes, due to a lack of targeted outreach and structural bias within both state and civil society sectors (Open Society Foundations, *No Data – No Progress: Country Findings on Roma Women’s Participation*, 2019).

Moreover, civil society actors advocating gender equality often operate in fragmented or adversarial environments, lacking sustained institutional partnerships or funding streams. Their engagement is frequently consultative rather than collaborative, with limited influence on public agendas (Marko Kmezić, “The Rise of Authoritarianism in the Western Balkans,” *Journal of Regional Security* 15, no. 1 [2020]: 45–70). As a result, the transformative potential of gender equality discourse is constrained within the existing frameworks of governance.

What emerges is a dual challenge: the lack of inclusive decision-making structures that enable women, particularly those most affected by marginalization, to participate meaningfully in shaping public policy, and the absence of institutional cultures and capacities that support gender-sensitive approaches. Without addressing both dimensions, public institutions risk perpetuating inequality under the guise of procedural democracy.

Why This Problem is Important:

The exclusion of women, especially those from structurally marginalized communities, from decision-making processes is not merely a question of representational fairness; it signifies a deeper democratic deficit and a failure to realize the substantive ideals of equality, justice, and pluralism. When political institutions and policymaking spaces are dominated by homogenous perspectives, the resulting policies risk overlooking, or even reinforcing, the structural inequalities that affect diverse populations.

Extensive research demonstrates that inclusive governance—where women and marginalized voices are actively engaged—leads to more responsive, equitable, and durable policy outcomes (UN Women, *Women’s Participation in Local Government Decision-Making*, 2021). Women’s participation has been associated with stronger social investments, improved conflict resolution, and greater accountability in public administration (OECD, *Gender Equality in Public Life: From Commitments to Results*, OECD Publishing: Paris, 2014).

Moreover, the integration of gender-sensitive approaches into policymaking is essential for dismantling institutional biases and fostering long-term societal transformation. This requires not only the presence of women in political spaces but also a conscious reconfiguration of institutional cultures, knowledge production, and policy frameworks to account for the differentiated realities of all citizens. In this sense, advancing gender equality is not an isolated objective but a structural imperative for democratic resilience, social cohesion, and sustainable development.

2. VISION OF CHANGE

Long-Term Impact:

In the long term, our program aspires to help transform society so that girls and women are recognized not merely as beneficiaries of protection, but as autonomous agents of change—individuals with the authority, legitimacy, and institutional access to shape the world around them. This vision rests on the premise that gender equality is not only a normative goal, but a structural precondition for democratic resilience, inclusive development, and social justice.

By fostering gender-responsive governance, we seek to shift the paradigm from representation in numbers to participation with influence. The ultimate objective is to embed gender equity not at the margins of policy discourse, but at its very foundation—informing institutional culture, policy-making processes, and resource allocation mechanisms across all levels of governance.

If Our Program is Successful

In such a transformed landscape, girls and women, particularly those from historically excluded groups—will be actively engaged in designing, implementing, and evaluating public policies that directly affect their lives. Local governments will no longer treat gender mainstreaming as an add-on, but as a core institutional practice grounded in data, intersectional analysis and community engagement.

The prevailing institutional culture will evolve beyond symbolic inclusion or tokenism, toward meaningful leadership and power-sharing. The produc-

tion of knowledge, public policy and political narratives will shift: women will no longer be framed primarily as vulnerable subjects in need of protection, but as essential political actors and leaders whose contributions are central to the functioning of democratic society.

This transformation will not only advance gender equality—it will foster more participatory, equitable, and cohesive communities, ultimately strengthening democratic legitimacy and institutional trust at every level.

3. HYPOTHESIS

Underlying Assumption

Our intervention rests on the assumption that structural change is possible when access, motivation and institutional readiness align. Specifically, we assume that:

- We have sustained access to relevant stakeholders—including policymakers, civil servants, educators, and civil society actors;
- These stakeholders are not only receptive to gender equality principles but are also willing to adopt and institutionalize gender-sensitive approaches into policy frameworks;
- Educational institutions, particularly schools, play a formative role in empowering girls to recognize their agency and cultivate the skills necessary for civic participation
- Women already active in politics possess awareness of the gendered dimensions of governance and are open to leveraging their positions to advance inclusive and responsive policymaking;
- There is a latent but present willingness among women and girls from various backgrounds to engage in decision-making processes, provided the spaces are accessible, inclusive, and safe.

Evidence Supporting This Assumption

There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that access to education and participatory opportunities significantly increases women's civic engagement and political agency. For instance, studies have shown that

when schools provide gender-sensitive curricula and participatory pedagogies, girls develop stronger civic identities and are more likely to engage in leadership activities later in life (UNESCO, Global Education Monitoring Report 2020: Inclusion and Education, Paris: UNESCO, 2020).

In contexts where mentorship, political training, and institutional support are offered to women in politics, there is a measurable increase in both their confidence and their willingness to push for gender-transformative agendas (UN Women, Women's Political Participation and Leadership, UN Women, 2021).

Moreover, interventions that combine access to decision-making spaces with capacity-building—such as local gender equality commissions or participatory budgeting mechanisms—tend to show higher rates of women's sustained participation and influence (Council of Europe, Gender Equality and Local Democracy, Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2016).

Theories of change grounded in feminist institutionalism argue that informal norms can shift when women are not only present but also empowered with tools, alliances, and legitimacy to enact change (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell, "New Institutionalism Through a Gender Lens," *International Political Science Review* 31, no. 5 [2010]: 573–588).

In sum, our program builds on evidence that change is most likely when educational, political, and social systems enable women and girls to not only access power but exercise it meaningfully.

- If we maintain access to key stakeholders across institutions, local governments, education systems, and media, we can develop **tailor-made, context-specific approaches** that help them internalize the relevance and transformative potential of gender-sensitive policies;
- If these stakeholders are **willing to engage and integrate newly acquired gender knowledge** into policymaking and service delivery, they will begin to challenge dominant narratives, dismantle institutional bias, and **proactively create inclusive spaces** for women and girls in public life.

As these inclusive spaces emerge and **societal stereotypes begin to shift**, media outlets—sensitive to evolving public discourse—will feel empowered to **allocate more time, visibility, and legitimacy** to issues of gender equality, representation, and empowerment.

- If schools concurrently offer **curricula and teaching practices that empower girls to articulate their needs, interests, and perspectives**, young girls will begin to view themselves as competent, deserving, and legitimate actors in decision-making arenas;
- If girls are **consistently encouraged and supported** in voicing their opinions—in classrooms, youth spaces, and community settings—they are more likely to retain this confidence as they mature and to **speak out in public domains**, including media and politics. These young women, in turn, can **serve as role models**, challenging normative boundaries and inspiring broader societal change;
- If these empowered girls and women **enter political and leadership spaces**, they will be positioned to **drive the agenda forward**, using their influence to prioritize gender equality, allocate resources to underserved communities, and elevate the status of gender-sensitive policymaking as a critical component of democratic governance.

4. RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Potential Challenges, External Risks and Mitigation Strategies

The implementation of our program may face several structural, cultural, and political obstacles that could hinder its effectiveness or sustainability. Below, we outline key risks and propose strategies to address them:

1. Political Shifts and Unstable Institutional Continuity

Risk: Frequent changes in local and national government due to elections (typically every 2–3 years), along with politically motivated appointments, may lead to the loss of institutional memory, discontinuity in policy commitment, and weakened stakeholder engagement.

Mitigation Strategy:

- Develop institutional partnerships rather than personal ones, ensuring that protocols, tools, and knowledge are embedded within the institution (e.g. gender action plans, internal procedures, and staff guidelines);
- Train cross-departmental teams and build coalitions within municipalities and CSOs to foster internal sustainability;
- Produce transferable, adaptable resources that remain available regardless of staff turnover.

2. Right-Wing or Conservative Political Contexts

Risk: The rise or presence of right-wing populist governments may result in policies or rhetoric hostile to gender equality, feminism, or minority rights, undermining institutional support for gender-sensitive interventions.

Mitigation Strategy:

- Frame gender equality using inclusive, locally resonant language that highlights fairness, democratic participation, and improved public service outcomes for all citizens;
- Emphasize evidence-based and rights-based approaches aligned with international commitments (e.g. CEDAW, SDG 5, EU Gender Equality Strategy);
- Engage male allies and moderate actors in local governance to build broader political support.

3. Religious and Traditionalist Opposition

Risk: Strong affiliation with religious institutions and adherence to traditional gender norms may generate resistance—especially in rural communities or conservative constituencies.

Mitigation Strategy:

- Partner with trusted local leaders, including progressive religious

figures, educators, or community influencers, who can endorse the program from within;

- Focus initial engagement on universally acceptable topics (e.g. violence prevention, youth leadership, civic participation) as entry points before addressing deeper gender norms;
- Apply a culturally sensitive approach that avoids confrontation and prioritizes dialogue and trust-building.

4. Resistance Among Girls and Young Women

Risk: Girls from rural or marginalized areas may be reluctant to participate in empowerment programs due to fear of bullying, social stigma, or internalized gender norms.

Mitigation Strategy:

- Create safe, girl-centered spaces for participation and dialogue;
- Involve parents, teachers, and community members early in the process to build a protective and supportive environment;
- Use peer-to-peer mentoring and role models from similar backgrounds to increase relevance and relatability.

5. Program Sustainability and Resource Gaps

Risk: The program may lack long-term sustainability if donor funding is not secured beyond initial phases or if local ownership is insufficient.

Mitigation Strategy:

- From the outset, work to institutionalize key components of the program within municipal budgets, school systems, and local policy frameworks;
- Build the capacity of local actors to take over and adapt activities independently;
- Diversify funding sources and explore co-financing opportunities

with municipalities, private sector actors, and philanthropic donors.

5. IMPACT (LONG-TERM CHANGE)

Our program seeks to contribute to a **paradigm shift in governance and policymaking**, where the active participation of women, girls, and gender-diverse individuals becomes the norm rather than the exception. By embedding inclusive and gender-responsive approaches into the institutional fabric of local governments, schools, and civil society, the program aims to move beyond fragmented interventions toward **systemic transformation**.

This transformation involves reconfiguring decision-making processes from hierarchical, top-down models to participatory and co-creative frameworks—ones that actively include those most affected by exclusion and inequality. When women and marginalized groups influence the design, implementation, and monitoring of public policies, outcomes become not only more just but also more effective and sustainable.

Moreover, by fostering long-term engagement between institutions, communities, and media, the program contributes to shifting the **dominant narratives around gender roles and leadership**. As these narratives permeate public discourse, they help build the political and cultural will necessary to support deep institutional change.

This vision aligns with broader societal and policy commitments, including:

- **Sustainable Development Goal 5** (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), particularly targets on women's full participation in leadership and public life;
- The **EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025**, which emphasizes the need for gender mainstreaming across all policy areas and decision-making levels;
- National action plans and regional frameworks such as the **South-East Europe Strategy 2030**, which prioritize inclusive governance and human rights as pillars of regional stability and development.

By advancing structural inclusion and transforming institutional norms, the program contributes to building **more resilient, equitable, and democratic societies**, where power is more fairly distributed and policies are responsive to the lived realities of all citizens.

6. THEORY OF CHANGE STATEMENT

If we equip institutional stakeholders with practical tools, data, and training to implement gender-sensitive planning and budgeting, and support them in confronting discriminatory norms within their structures, then they will create and sustain inclusive decision-making processes that enable women, girls, and gender-diverse people to influence policies that affect their lives - because institutional change requires both technical capacity and political will to dismantle entrenched biases and redistribute power toward those historically excluded from governance.

THE IMPACT OF INSECURITY AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON WOMEN'S MIGRATION

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The program seeks to address the forced migration of women in the Balkans caused by insecurity, gender-based violence (GBV), and systemic inequalities. Women in the region face challenges such as weak enforcement of GBV laws, patriarchal social norms, post-conflict trauma, economic instability, and unsafe migration routes, which collectively drive them to flee their countries in search of safety and opportunities.

Millions of women worldwide are compelled to leave their countries due to pervasive insecurity, gender-based violence (GBV), and systemic inequalities. In their countries of origin, women face threats such as political instability, ethnic discrimination, harassment, and harmful traditional practices—all compounded by limited access to economic resources and legal protections (World Bank, 2023, p. 119; Mixed Migration Centre, 2025). For many, migration is an act of survival or courage in the face of abuse and discrimination, yet the journey itself exposes women to heightened risks of trafficking, exploitation, and violence, especially along unsafe routes and in transit countries (Mixed Migration Centre, 2025).

This crisis underscores the urgent need for gender-responsive interventions that ensure safe migration pathways and address the root causes of forced migration. Effective policies must strengthen legal and economic protections for women, dismantle structural barriers, and provide tailored support services to reduce their vulnerability and improve outcomes throughout the migration process (World Bank, 2023, p. 119).

Why This Problem Is Important:

In the Western Balkans, gender-based violence (GBV) persists due to entrenched patriarchal norms, post-conflict trauma, and weak legal enforcement, all of which deepen women's vulnerability and limit their empowerment (World Bank, 2024; NATO, 2024; Politics4Her, 2024). Despite legislative progress, economic barriers and lack of safe migration pathways leave many women at risk of exploitation and forced displacement (UNFPA, 2015). Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach—strengthening legal protections, expanding economic opportunities, and ensuring safe migration alternatives—to reduce GBV and improve long-term outcomes for women in the region (EIGE, 2023, p. 4; EBRD, 2022).

1. VISION OF CHANGE

Long-Term Impact:

The program visions a Balkans region where women no longer feel compelled to migrate due to insecurity, gender-based violence (GBV), or systemic inequalities. The long-term impact includes a significant reduction in GBV, improved economic opportunities for women, and the establishment of safer migration pathways. This would foster gender equality, social cohesion, and regional stability, allowing women to thrive in their home countries without fear or oppression.

2. HYPOTHESIS

If we do vocational training, we can raise awareness about unsafe migration.

If we mobilize in schools and institutions through activities, we can educate the younger generation about gender-based violence.

If the root causes of gender-based violence, systemic inequalities, and insecurity in the Balkans are addressed—by strengthening legal protections, fostering economic opportunities, and providing safe migration pathways—then forced displacement will decrease and outcomes for women will improve, because these interventions tackle post-conflict trauma, patriarchal norms, weak law enforcement, and economic instability that perpetuate vulnerability in the region.

Evidence Supporting the Hypothesis (Specific to the Balkans):

1. Post-Conflict GBV Prevention:

- Studies show that post-conflict societies in the Balkans (e.g., Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo) experience high rates of GBV due to lingering trauma from war and weak institutional frameworks. For instance, UN Women's 2023 report highlighted that community-based GBV prevention programs in Bosnia reduced violence by 25% through education campaigns and survivor support services.

2. Strengthening Legal Protections:

- Research from the European Commission (2022) indicates that countries in the Balkans with stronger enforcement of anti-GBV laws (e.g., Serbia’s ratification of the Istanbul Convention) saw a measurable decrease in reported cases of domestic violence. However, gaps remain in rural areas where enforcement is weaker.

3. Economic Empowerment:

- A study by UNDP in North Macedonia (2021) showed that women participating in vocational training programs experienced a 40% increase in employment rates, reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and forced migration. Economic empowerment also fosters resilience against patriarchal norms that often limit women’s autonomy.

4. Safe Migration Pathways:

- Evidence from IOM’s regional initiatives highlights that Balkan women migrating through regulated routes are less likely to fall victim to trafficking or exploitation compared to those using informal channels. For example, Albania’s partnership with NGOs providing legal aid and safe transit reduced trafficking risks by 30% (IOM, 2024).

5. International Cooperation:

- EU-supported programs like “Women on the Move” have improved access to healthcare and legal assistance for migrant women from Balkan countries, with 80% reporting better safety during transit (European Parliament Report, 2023).

3. RISKS AND MITIGATION STRATEGIES

Implementing a program to address women’s forced migration in the Balkans faces several challenges, compounded by regional political, economic, and social dynamics. Below is an analysis of potential obstacles, external factors, and mitigation strategies:

Challenges in Implementation

In many Balkan communities, deeply rooted patriarchal values continue to shape daily life and social expectations, often creating resistance to gender

equality initiatives. These norms can make it difficult for women to assert their rights or participate fully in society, and they frequently undermine efforts to empower women or encourage the reporting of gender-based violence (GBV). Survivors of violence also face significant stigma, which discourages many from seeking the help or justice they need, leaving them isolated and vulnerable.

Furthermore, legal protection against GBV exist in the region, but their enforcement is inconsistent, especially in rural areas where oversight is weaker and resources are limited. This inconsistency leaves many women without reliable recourse or support. Additionally, the landscape of support services is often fragmented; governments, NGOs, and international organizations sometimes struggle to coordinate their efforts, resulting in duplicated work or gaps in critical services.

Economic hardship remains a major obstacle for women across the Balkans. High unemployment rates severely limit women's access to stable jobs and financial independence. This economic vulnerability can trap women in unsafe environments or relationships, as leaving may not be financially viable. Furthermore, many programs designed to support women are dependent on external donors, making them susceptible to funding cuts or shifting priorities, which can disrupt essential services.

The Balkans' position as a major transit region for migration brings additional dangers. Women who travel along irregular migration routes are at heightened risk of exploitation and trafficking, as criminal networks take advantage of their vulnerability and the lack of safe, legal pathways. The pervasive threat of trafficking in the region underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and stronger protections for women on the move.

Factor Impact

Political: Shifting government priorities (e.g., EU accession processes) may divert attention from GBV reforms.

Economic: Economic downturns could reduce funding for social programs or exacerbate poverty-driven migration.

Social: Normalization of GBV in post-conflict societies may hinder community buy-in for prevention efforts.

Regional Instability: Unresolved ethnic tensions (e.g., Kosovo-Serbia relations) could destabilize safe migration corridors.

Risk Mitigation Strategies

1. Strengthening Local Partnerships:

- Collaborate with grassroots organizations and women's collectives to build trust and navigate cultural sensitivities.
- Train local leaders as advocates for gender equality and GBV prevention.

2. Policy Advocacy:

- Lobby for standardized enforcement of the Istanbul Convention across Balkan states, leveraging EU accession requirements as incentives.

3. Economic Resilience Programs:

- Develop vocational training initiatives tailored to local markets (e.g., IT sectors in Albania, agriculture in North Macedonia).
- Establish microgrant systems for women-led small businesses.

4. Safe Migration Infrastructure:

- Partner with IOM and regional governments to expand legal migration pathways and provide transit shelters with trauma-informed care.

5. Contingency Planning:

- Diversify funding sources by engaging private-sector stakeholders and diaspora communities.
- Create rapid-response protocols for political crises (e.g., sudden policy changes) to protect program continuity.

By addressing these challenges through adaptive, culturally informed

strategies, the program can navigate the Balkans' complex landscape and advance sustainable outcomes for women at risk of forced migration.

4. ASSUMPTIONS

To ensure the success of a program addressing forced migration of women in the Balkans due to insecurity and gender-based violence (GBV), several preconditions and enabling factors must be in place:

1. We assume that community and cultural buy-in is possible, and that patriarchal norms and stigma around gender-based violence (GBV) can be actively challenged through grassroots engagement and trust-building with local leaders.
2. We assume that governments will enforce existing GBV laws, such as the Istanbul Convention, allocate adequate resources for survivor support services, and ensure judicial systems are trained to handle GBV cases sensitively and efficiently.
3. We assume that local economies can provide viable job opportunities for women empowered through vocational training, and that robust microfinance systems and private sector partnerships will support women's economic independence.
4. We assume that effective collaboration between governments and NGOs can establish regulated migration routes, transit shelters, and accessible legal aid to mitigate trafficking risks and protect women on the move.
5. We assume that cross-sector coordination among governments, NGOs, international organizations (such as IOM and UN Women), and grassroots groups will be achieved to avoid duplication of efforts and address systemic gaps in protection and support for women.

5. OUTCOMES (SHORT AND MEDIUM-TERM CHANGES)

Expected Changes

1. Women and frontline institutions increase awareness of legal rights, GBV reporting mechanisms, and safe migration pathways, while police,

judiciary, and social workers enhance trauma-informed and survivor-centered practices through targeted training and outreach.

2. Communities reduce stigma and challenge patriarchal norms that normalize gender-based violence, with public discourse shifting to frame GBV and forced migration as systemic issues requiring collective policy action rather than individual blame.

3. Women are more likely to report GBV, participate in vocational programs, and choose safer migration routes, as Balkan governments harmonize laws with the Istanbul Convention, implement gender-responsive migration policies, and align reforms with EU standards to institutionalize gender equality.

Contribution to Long-Term Impact

These outcomes collectively address the root causes of forced migration and create a reinforcing cycle of change:

- Knowledge → Empowerment: Educated women advocate for their rights, disrupting cycles of violence.
- Attitudes → Cultural Shifts: Reduced stigma enables survivors to seek help without fear, weakening patriarchal structures.
- Behavior → Systemic Trust: Higher reporting rates pressure institutions to improve accountability, creating safer environments.
- Policies → Sustainable Frameworks: Legal reforms ensure protections outlive the program, while EU alignment locks in progress.

For example, Bosnia's community-based GBV programs reduced violence by 25% [UN Women, 2023], demonstrating how knowledge and attitude shifts can directly lower displacement risks. Similarly, Albania's safe migration corridors show how policy-behavior linkages protect women during transit.

By interlinking these domains, the program fosters societies where women can thrive without fleeing—advancing gender equity, economic resilience, and regional stability in the Balkans.

6. IMPACT (LONG-TERM CHANGE)

The program aims to dismantle systemic and structural barriers driving women's forced migration in the Balkans by reforming legal, economic, and social frameworks, including stricter enforcement of gender-based violence laws, improved victim compensation, expanded vocational and financial opportunities for women, and regulated migration pathways with protective measures. Additionally, it seeks to challenge patriarchal norms through community-led campaigns and male ally engagement to reduce the acceptance of gender-based violence.

Alignment with Broader Societal and Policy Goals:

Change Societal/Policy Alignment

Legal Reforms: Aligns with EU accession requirements (e.g., gender equality benchmarks) and UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 5 on gender equity).

Economic Empowerment: Supports national development plans in the Balkans (e.g., Albania's 2025 Digital Strategy) by tapping into underutilized labor potential.

Safe Migration: Integrates with regional security frameworks (e.g., Western Balkans Migration Route Action Plan) to combat trafficking and irregular migration.

Cultural Shifts: Advances social cohesion in post-conflict societies (e.g., Bosnia, Kosovo) by addressing trauma and fostering inclusive communities.

Examples of Impact Integration:

- Serbia's ratification of the Istanbul Convention (2023) has already spurred policy debates on GBV, illustrating how legal reforms can align with EU integration goals.
- Albania's partnership with NGOs to provide safe transit reduced trafficking risks by 30%, aligning with regional security priorities.

- Vocational programs in North Macedonia increased women's employment by 40%, contributing to economic growth targets.

By addressing root causes of forced migration, the program not only protects women but also advances broader stability, economic resilience, and EU alignment in the Balkans—goals prioritized by governments and international partners alike.

7. THEORY OF CHANGE STATEMENT

If we implement community-led GBV prevention workshops, vocational training programs, safe migration corridors, and policy advocacy in the Balkans, then forced migration of women will decrease because these interventions empower women with economic independence, awareness of their rights, and safer alternatives, while systemic reforms address root causes like patriarchal norms, weak legal enforcement, and lack of migration infrastructure.

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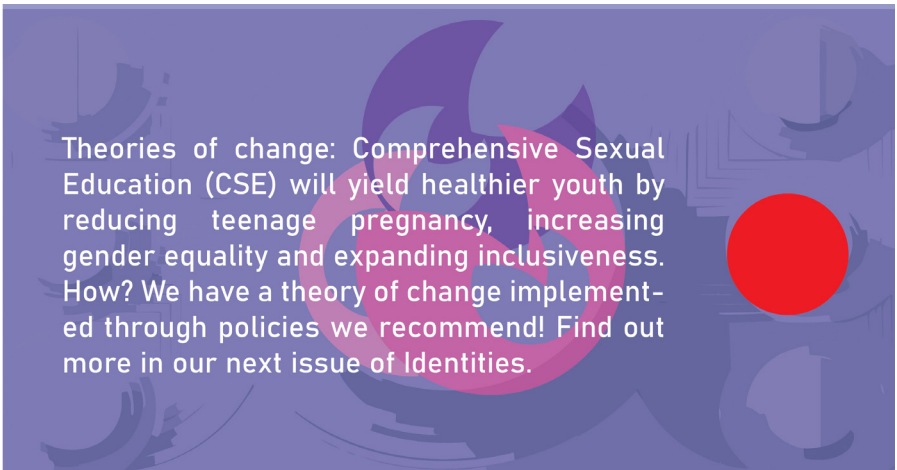
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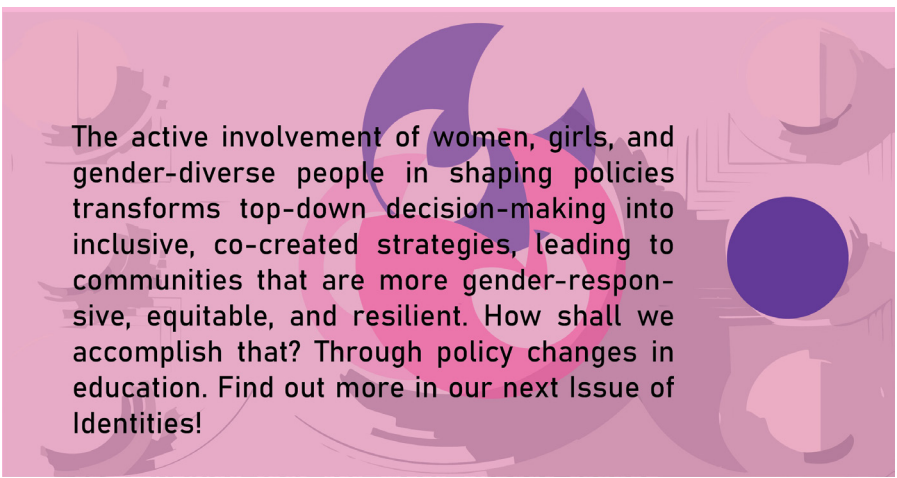
Country reports and results at the UNDP North Macedonia publications page.



Theories of change: Comprehensive Sexual Education (CSE) will yield healthier youth by reducing teenage pregnancy, increasing gender equality and expanding inclusiveness. How? We have a theory of change implemented through policies we recommend! Find out more in our next issue of Identities.



We will transform the society by bringing down the systemic and structural barriers driving women's forced migration in the Balkans by targeting legal, economic, and social frameworks. How? We have a theory of change implemented through policies we recommend! Find out more in our next issue of Identities.



The active involvement of women, girls, and gender-diverse people in shaping policies transforms top-down decision-making into inclusive, co-created strategies, leading to communities that are more gender-responsive, equitable, and resilient. How shall we accomplish that? Through policy changes in education. Find out more in our next Issue of Identities!

In 2022, postpartum depression manifested in 27.6% of young mothers in North Macedonia, while 27.8% were affected by moderate to extreme anxiety. Despite the recognized importance of maternal mental health, national policies in North Macedonia remain insufficient to address the widespread needs of mothers.

Policy recommendations:

Mandate mental health screenings as part of routine postpartum care during the first medical check-up after childbirth.

Train healthcare providers to recognize signs of maternal mental health disorders and provide clear referral pathways to specialized humanistic mental health services.


Develop and distribute educational materials for new mothers about the importance of mental health, normalizing conversations around postpartum depression and anxiety to reduce stigma.

Ana Bojchevska Mitrevska (North Macedonia)




As the number of incarcerated women is low, and there is no economic justification in building another female prison in North Macedonia, the next natural step would be building of new facilities, i.e. adding extra space and upgrading the conditions in the existing building. In this way, the living and material conditions will be improved in accordance with international documents.

Angelina Stanojoska (North Macedonia)



The evidence suggests that supportive workplace policies like menstrual leave not only aid those directly affected but can also enhance the overall work environment by fostering a culture of understanding and accommodation. The implementation of menstrual leave could serve as a progressive step towards accommodating biological diversity in the workplace, which is a cornerstone of genuine gender equality.

Ivana Cilevska (North Macedonia)



Women and girls often face increased risks of livelihood loss, gender-based violence (GBV), and fatalities during disasters. Despite progress in disaster risk reduction (DRR) policies, gender-sensitive measures often remain insufficient, especially in addressing the economic vulnerabilities of women and girls in marginalized groups. These vulnerabilities arise from pre-existing inequalities in employment, a heightened risk of GBV, and inadequate access to sexual and reproductive health services during and after disasters. It is crucial that DRR frameworks integrate comprehensive gender analysis into national and local disaster risk assessments by conducting research on intersectional vulnerabilities, ensuring that DRR strategies respond to these diverse needs.

Kristina Prishka (Albania)



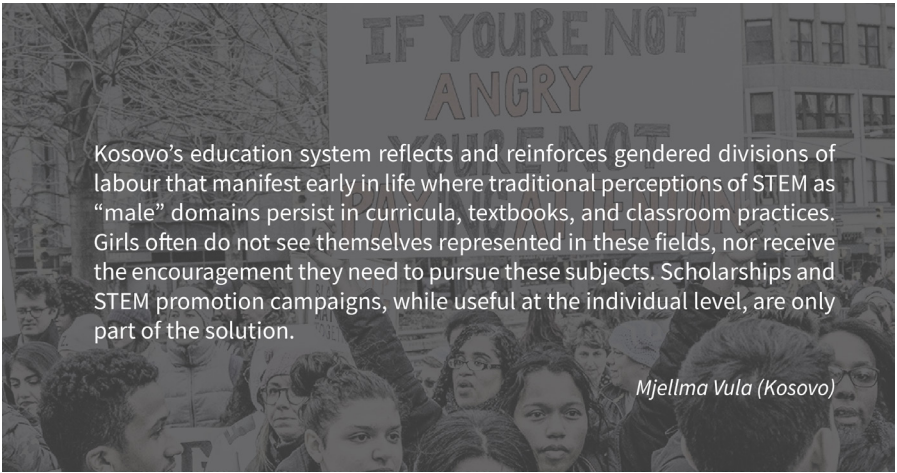
Support to understand the core and sense of the obligations under the Law on Equal Opportunities between Women and Men: This includes technical assistance and motivation to use gender-sensitive tools like gender analysis and responsive policies to identify and address disparities. Training initiatives can transform these tools into impactful measures that meet community needs. The existing mentoring system should be extended alongside mechanisms encouraging municipalities to adopt legally binding measures, such as mandatory gender sensitivity training and regular accountability reporting.

Maja Atanasova (North Macedonia)



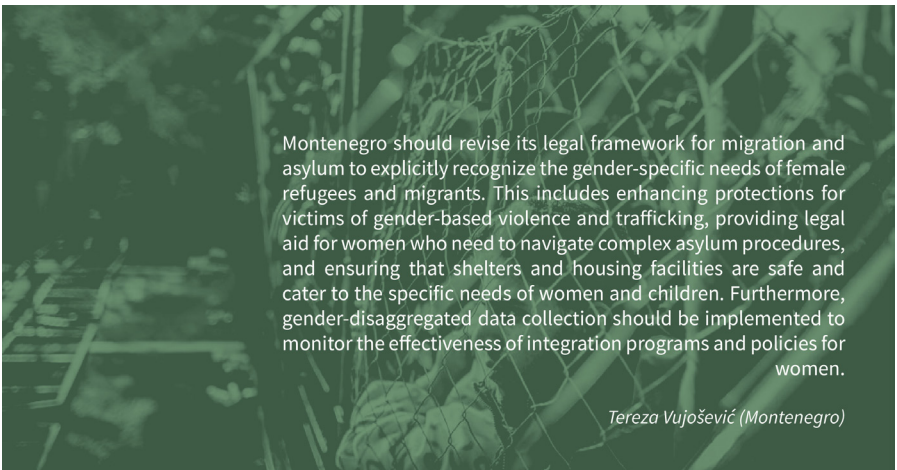
The rise of anti-gender movements in the Western Balkans poses significant challenges to gender equality and inclusivity. These movements have capitalized on the digital space to amplify harmful narratives, often with the use of the unregulated online space. The proliferation of gendered disinformation, hate speech, and online harassment against vulnerable communities underscores the need for robust policy responses. Media organizations, civil society, and governments must take concerted action to counter these harmful trends and protect the rights of marginalized groups, while fostering an online environment that supports equality and inclusion for all.

Marta Stevkovska (North Macedonia)



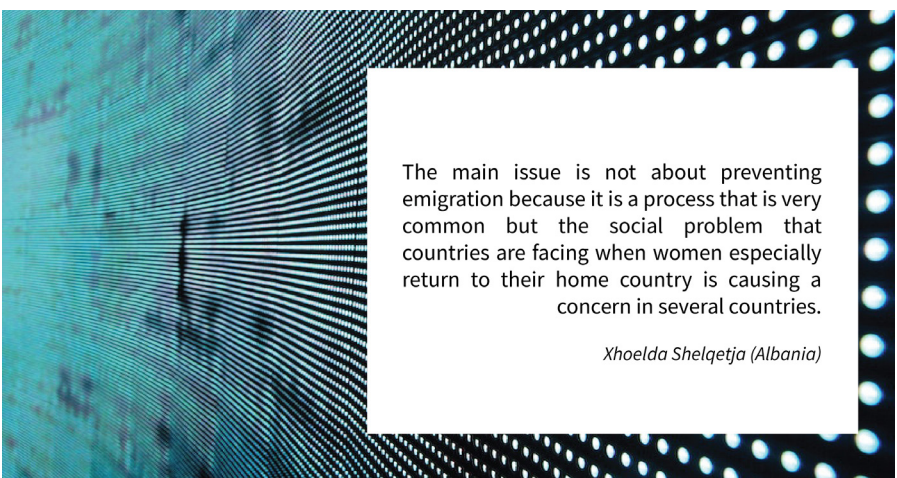
Kosovo's education system reflects and reinforces gendered divisions of labour that manifest early in life where traditional perceptions of STEM as "male" domains persist in curricula, textbooks, and classroom practices. Girls often do not see themselves represented in these fields, nor receive the encouragement they need to pursue these subjects. Scholarships and STEM promotion campaigns, while useful at the individual level, are only part of the solution.

Mjellma Vula (Kosovo)



Montenegro should revise its legal framework for migration and asylum to explicitly recognize the gender-specific needs of female refugees and migrants. This includes enhancing protections for victims of gender-based violence and trafficking, providing legal aid for women who need to navigate complex asylum procedures, and ensuring that shelters and housing facilities are safe and cater to the specific needs of women and children. Furthermore, gender-disaggregated data collection should be implemented to monitor the effectiveness of integration programs and policies for women.

Tereza Vujošević (Montenegro)



The main issue is not about preventing emigration because it is a process that is very common but the social problem that countries are facing when women especially return to their home country is causing a concern in several countries.

Xhoelda Shelqetja (Albania)

VIDEO VISUALIZATION



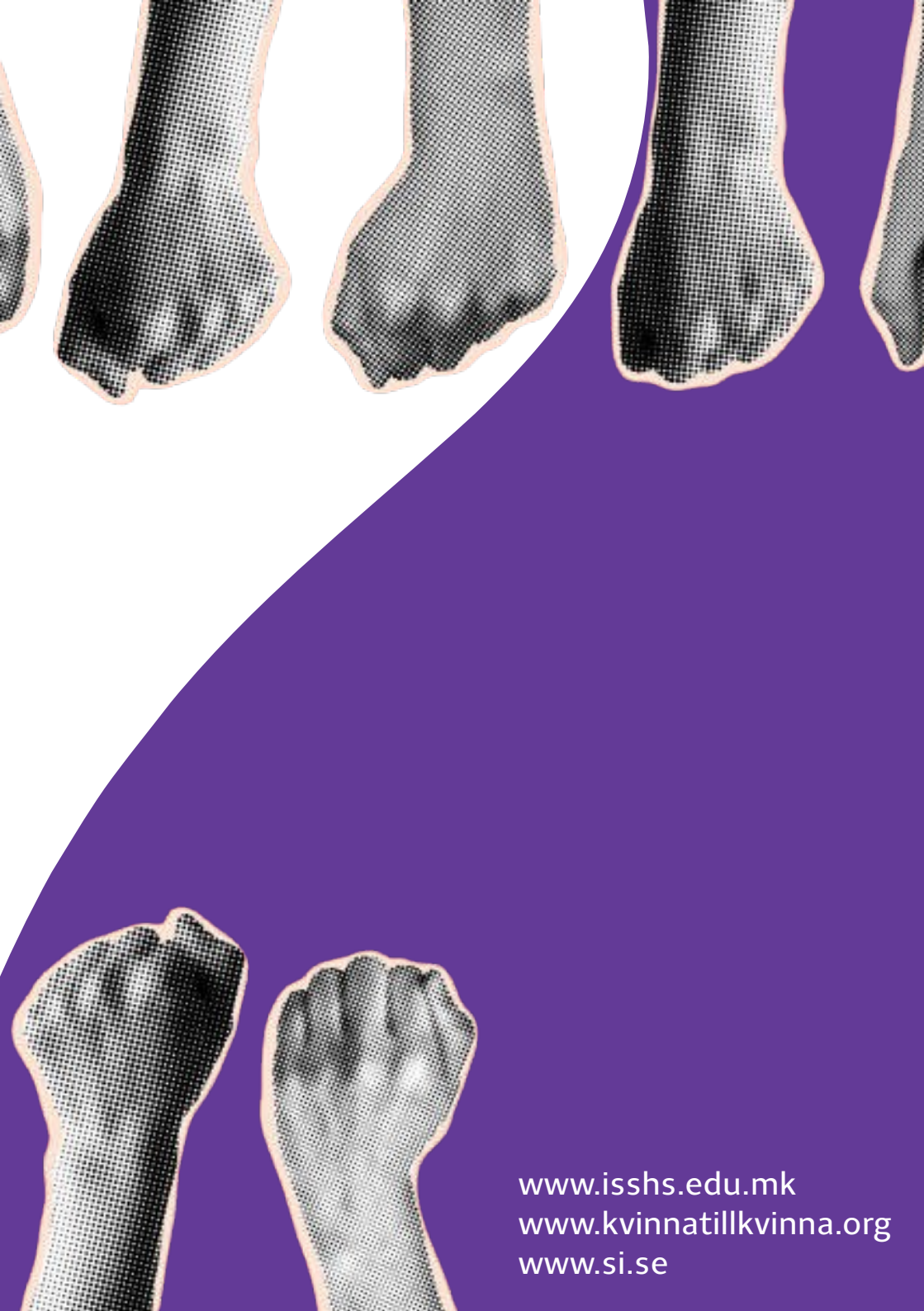
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