VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality and Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans

Annex III: North Macedonia

Author: Sara Milenkovska

YOUth
Inclusion, Equality & Trust

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INTRODUCTION

The regional nature of the project 'Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality & Trust', financed by the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund, and implemented by UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO and UN Women, builds on the transnational potential of a collaborative approach in the search for improvement of social cohesion and gender equality. When political challenges become an obstacle in regional collaboration, focus on youth development can show the regional potential for solidarity, and finding mutual solutions.

This youth-led and youth-participatory research served also as a platform for sharing diverse ideas about tackling obstacles to social cohesion through enhancing gender equality. By positioning the role of the youth as the main principle of this project, the outcomes of the results can be used to create informed decisions about future projects, initiatives, and strategic planning of civil society, institutions, and international communities in the region.

Whilst there is some improvement, the Women's Rights in Western Balkans Report (2022), indicates that the implementation of the institutional framework mandated by the Istanbul Convention[1] and the United Nations Essential Package of Services[2] is still incomplete. This framework encompasses various aspects, such as policymaking, service coordination, data collection, monitoring and evaluation, and collaboration with women's civil society organisations. As Stavrevska (2021), a feminist peace scholar, argues "The policy responses to the multiple unfolding crises have both highlighted the continuity of gendered, classed, racialised, and colonial inequalities and have also, hopefully, challenged our understandings of peace".

This research supports prioritising the need for increased advocacy towards social cohesion and gender equality as prominent political issues on both the local and international levels. Since the advancement of women's rights and gender equality in the region is closely intertwined with EU integration, maintaining the course towards the EU is essential for effectively addressing human rights issues, including women's rights.

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[1] *Entered into force on 1 August 2014, signed by 46 member states of the Council of Europe (EU and non-EU countries) and ratified by 33 of them, the Istanbul Convention is the first international treaty specifically addressing violence and abuse against women and girls. The Convention contains a legal and policy framework to achieve the purpose to protect women against all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence.*

[2] *Launched by the UN and implemented through collaboration among UN Women, UNFPA, WHO, UNDP and UNODC, United Nation Essential Services Package (ESP) is a global joint programme on essential services for women and girls subject to violence. It aims at providing better access to some essential services (such as healthcare, social services, and services related to police and justice) for all women and girls who have experienced gender-based violence.*

Key Findings

- Young people in North Macedonia recognise the challenges in achieving gender equality, practising social cohesion, and reaching the full potential of youth development. However, they feel alienated in their pursuit among their peers and seek to create collaborative solutions in which they can participate directly as initiators of social change.

- The majority of young participants in the research (79% [3]) in North Macedonia recognise the impact of traditional gender norms and agree that society, culture, and traditions set different expectations for women and girls than for men and boys.

- Young participants believe that the main obstacles to building a stronger and fairer society include corruption (94%), ethnic division and tensions (74%), political tensions and instability, as well as nepotism (both 68%), discrimination (65%), and the presence of hate speech and disinformation (both 59%).

- The mixed and experimental method of research created space to dive deeper into the perspectives of youth. With this specific approach, the research activities created space for youth engagement who interacted in search of common solutions. Youth expressed the need to create further spaces and forums that facilitate community conversation on topics related to gender equality and social cohesion.

- Women in politics emerge as a key component to social cohesion and gender equality, and to decreasing overall inequalities.

- The rise of anti-democratic politics presented through the anti-gender movements, and often disseminated among young people through online media has been recognised by youth, who called for enhanced education on the impact of social media in the antagonisation and disinformation on gender equality.

- Young people point out the need for systemic change in the near future, which should encompass improving value systems of solidarity and collaboration.

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[3] *The differences noted between men and women were not considered relevant to the objective of the Paper, which was to give an inclusive representation of young people's perceptions of the issues under study.*

- Research participants state that poverty is seen as the main factor influencing youth well-being in North Macedonia (54% of survey respondents indicated this factor as very impactful); Lack of education and employment opportunities, as well as lack of healthcare services, are also considered prominent issues hindering youth well-being (49%); Domestic or family violence, and lack of infrastructure represent a further noteworthy concern for youth in North Macedonia (37%).

Key findings in North Macedonia

11% Percentage of respondents who believe that North Macedonian society is marked by social cohesion

36% Percentage of respondents who believe that North Macedonian society is marked by gender equality

Contexts of gender inequality
- Media
- Workplace
- Family
- School
- Religious environment

Obstacles to social cohesion
- Corruption
- Ethnic division and tensions
- Political tensions and instability
- Nepotism
- Discrimination

Grounds of discrimination
- Racial or ethnic
- Sexual orientation / gender
- Social status
- Language
- Religion

Factors helping gender equality
- Increased awareness on gender equality and discrimination
- Equal access to quality education
- Youth-led social movements
- Equal representation in decision-making
- Equal employment opportunities
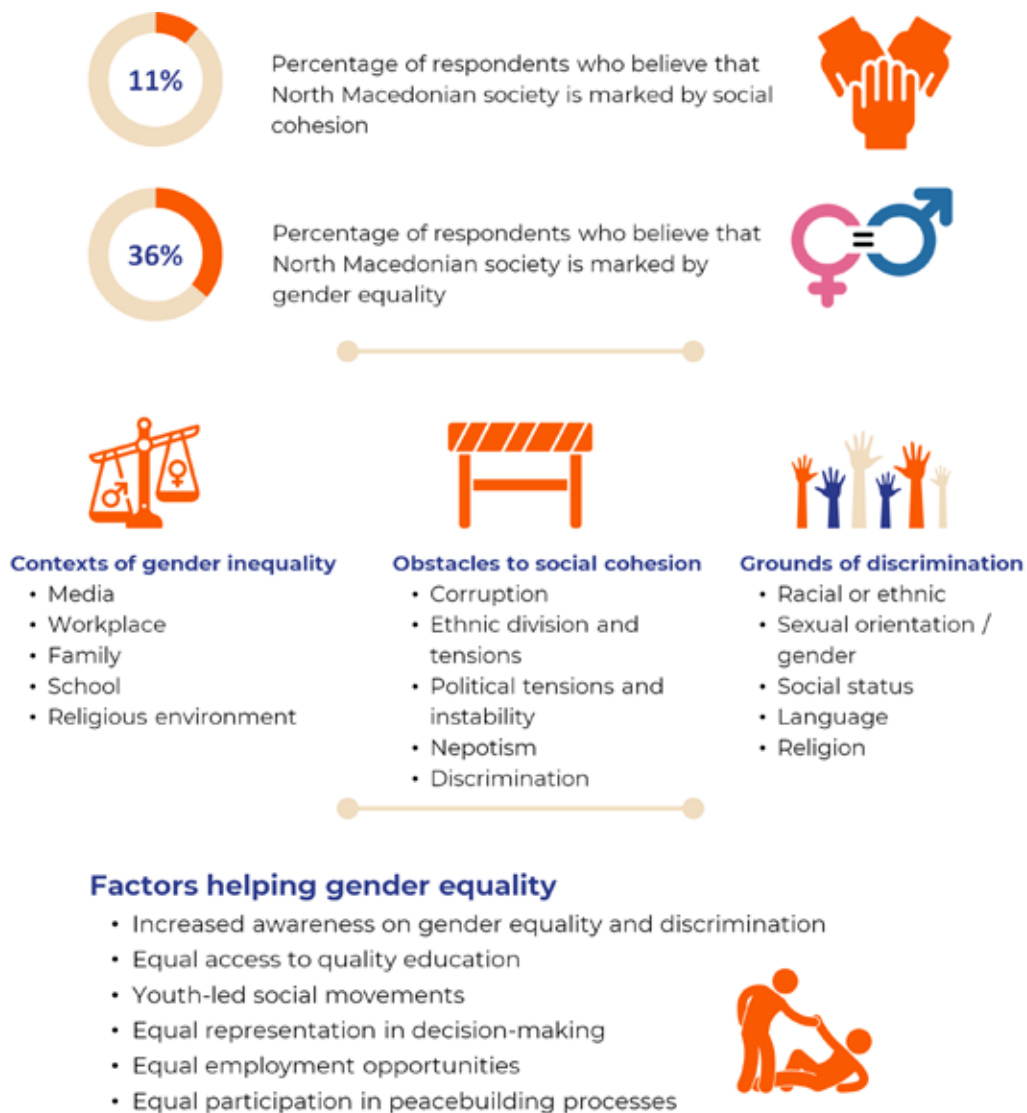- Equal participation in peacebuilding processes

Image 1. Key findings from North Macedonia

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research design and research sample

The present paper focuses on the case of North Macedonia as complementary to the rest of the project region's analysis. The research has been designed as a participatory study in all the project's countries and territory. The participatory approach of young researchers in the definition and implementation of the research activities, as well as in the analysis of resulting data, has given them the opportunity to reflect their unique perspective in the paper, due to being a group impacted by gender inequality. Including youth in identifying, analysing, and engaging with issues related to gender inequality and youth participation creates a genuine and long-term impact. Building on the practice of global disability activists saying: "Nothing about us without us"(Charlton, 1998)[4], it becomes evident that youth in all its diversity must be heard when dealing with inequalities.

Being able to conduct and reflect on the joint research-creation, feminist standpoint positionality supports the research in relation to hearing the actual voices of the youth. Standpoint theorists, such as Dorothy Smith (1989), and Patricia Hill Collins (1990), argue that adopting the viewpoint of women or other marginalised individuals increases the likelihood of recognising the significance of standpoint and generating knowledge that is rooted in personal experience, reflective, and consistent. This project made deliberate efforts to engage members of marginalised and underrepresented communities and groups, who have been involved in the research activities illustrated below.

The mixed-methods methodology gathered quantitative and qualitative data from youth in North Macedonia accounting for the following research sample:

- Local consultation with 33 participants in the group discussion;

- Online survey which engaged 72 young people in North Macedonia;

- In-depth interviews with 3 young people working in or affiliated with local institutions.

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[4] Charlton, J.I., "Nothing about us without us: Disability, oppression and empowerment", University of California Press, 1998.

Gender

1 Local Consultation in Skopje

Male
30%

Female
70%

Age

1 Survey

<18	18-21	22-25	26-29	>29
4%	26%	19%	24%	27%

71%   22%

Other / I prefer not to answer **7%**

3 In-depth Interviews

1 female
2 males
working in public institutions in North Macedonia
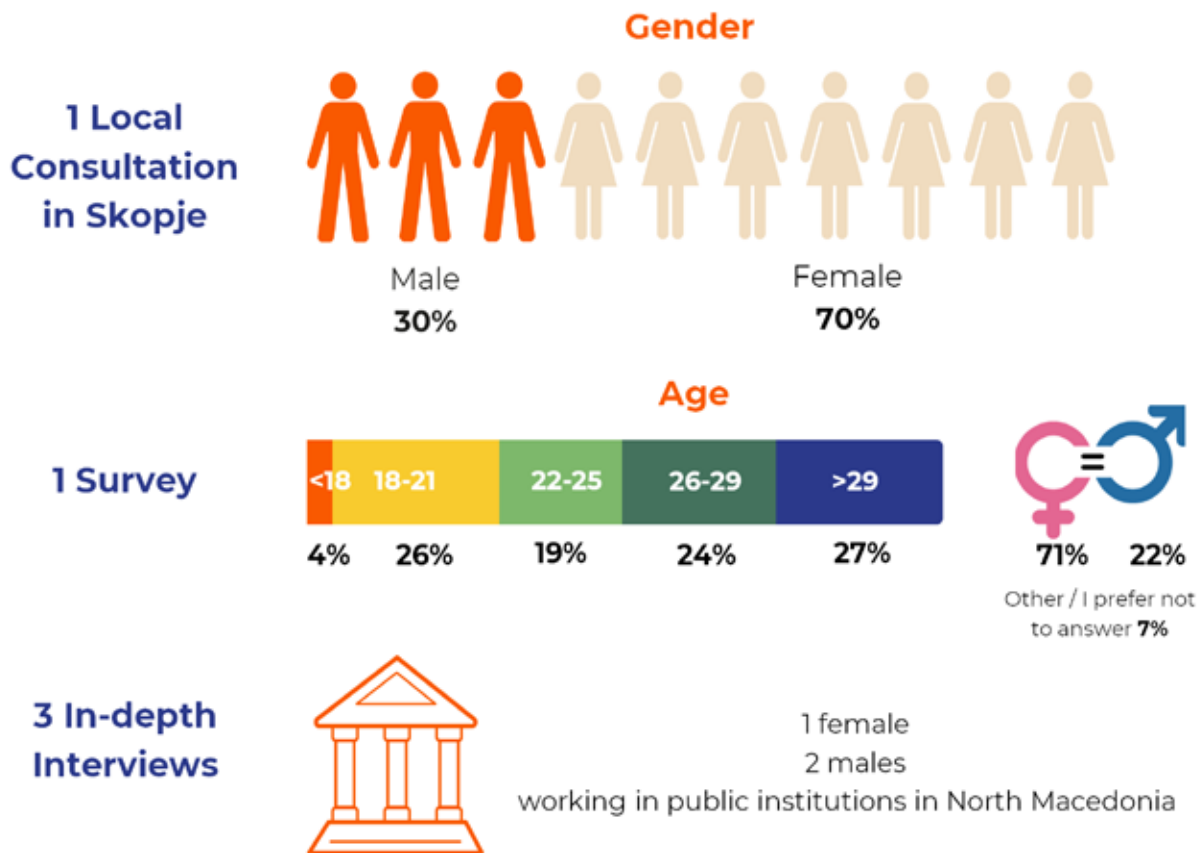
Image 2. Research sample in qualitative and quantitative research

1.2 Observations on Youth Engagement

North Macedonia has a diverse cultural background, therefore the concept of intersectionality as an approach was reflected in conducting the research. To ensure diverse voices, representatives from NGOs and activists, feminist organisations, informal queer groups, and Roma Community Leaders were invited to the local consultation. In particular, some of the participants were working directly in the field of gender equality as activists and had a more knowledgeable approach to the discussed topics. This approach also served as a possibility for participants who were not involved so deeply in the topic to ask questions, clarify perspectives, and get more engaged.

The discussion conducted during the local consultation demonstrated a commendable level of engagement of the participants with respect to gender equality and social cohesion issues, and a deep knowledge of these concepts. The youth shared through the research that there is a discernible absence of an environment wherein young individuals can free-

ly express their viewpoints, fostering interconnections among their peers. This environment would ideally facilitate mutual learning and a collective questioning of traditional gender norms. A few participants did not have an in-depth understanding of the concepts of toxic masculinity and social cohesion, and needed concrete examples, which were promptly provided by the researcher facilitating the discussion as well as other participants in the consultation. Youth addressed sensitive topics in relation to gender equality and social cohesion, such as the 2001-Conflict, interethnic relations, and the lack of solidarity among oppressed groups, demonstrating a critical and solution-oriented perspective. Since North Macedonia has Macedonian as its official language, and Albanian as a co-official language, all participants created an inclusive space by taking the time to translate and reflect on the different viewpoints.

1.3 Literature Review

Cultural diversity in the Republic of Macedonia is embedded in the fundamental provisions of statehood, and its protection and promotion are encouraged by the processes of integrating the country into the European Union and NATO. The respect for the rights of the various ethnic groups is guaranteed by the Constitution and the laws of the Republic of North Macedonia. North Macedonia scored 62 points in 2019, and 64.5 points in 2022 on the Gender Equality Index (2022[5]). According to their analysis, if this dynamic continues, the country will need around 57 years to achieve full gender equality. For young people engaged in the research in North Macedonia, that does not seem like a feasible future. Young people often feel excluded, and as many as 77% of youth are considering leaving the country according to the Gender Analysis report (USAID, 2019). In that relation, youth policy and youth infrastructure are lacking to be functional.

For example, the Youth Law (2020) had a role to strengthen youth participation, to improve the influence of young people on the policies of their interest, and to establish more services at the local and broader levels that will help in their activism and social development. Although an institutional structure to facilitate youth participation on the local level was created, its functionality fell behind.[6]

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[5] *The Gender Equality Index is calculated using a 10-step methodology for composite indicators devised by the Joint Research Centre (JRC) of the European Commission and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The Index operationalises the complex reality of gender equality as a multidimensional construct. It is composed of 31 indicators, divided between 14 sub-domains, which make up the six domains (work, money, knowledge, time, power and health). The Gender Equality Index takes a value on a scale of 1 to 100, where value of 100 stands for complete gender equality, and 1 for full gender inequality. (Gender Statistics)*

[6] Radio Mof, "Three years of Youth law functions but nothing in it functions", 2023, available at: https://www.radiomof.mk/tri-godini-zakon-za-mladi-funkcionira-ama-ne-funkcionira/

The countries and territory of the region have implemented legal and institutional measures to promote gender equality and uphold women's rights. The work of feminist advocacy organisations created space for encompassing the adoption or revision of pertinent laws, including criminal and labour laws, as well as the establishment of institutional frameworks responsible for implementing and overseeing related policies (Kotevska and Spasovska, 2019). However, the change is yet to be seen on both institutional and societal levels (Reactor, 2023).

The Gender Equality Index 2022 survey indicates that the enduring prevalence of traditional gender norms can be observed in the persistent adherence to traditional views regarding gender roles of women both in society and within the household. This shows that in the Macedonian context, gender inequality is present in both private and public sectors. The prevailing social environment characterised by the continued acceptance and normalisation of traditional gender roles is enabling and perpetuating the widespread occurrence of violence (OSCE, 2019; Reactor & HERA, 2022).

The issue of gender-based violence in North Macedonia, as in the rest of the region (The Women's Rights in Western Balkans Report, 2020, 2022; Review of Cases of Femicide in the Western Balkans Region - 2020 Baseline Report, United Women, 2021), often goes unnoticed, underreported, and frequently goes unpunished by relevant institutions. This can be attributed to the persistent influence of traditional gender norms. In the context of North Macedonia, a substantial proportion of women (60%) perceive violence against women as prevalent, yet a significant portion (48%) consider it a private issue (OSCE, 2019). This perception fosters the normalisation of such violence and substantially hampers reporting, with estimates indicating a remarkably low reporting rate of approximately 2% (OSCE, 2019).

Regarding the concepts of gender equality and social cohesion, there is a need for further knowledge production and research to incorporate an intersectional approach. Intersectionality, in relation to gender, sex, class, race (and ethnicity), and religion, will allow the connection and correlation of social cohesion and gender equality to become more explicit and visible to policymakers. More often the approach of policymakers, when they try to focus on youth issues, dwells on the neoliberal perspective of youth development, forgetting about the social, well-being, human potential, safety, and existence of youth outside of the heteronormative expectations. To that end, the rise of anti-gender movements has been noted in North Macedonia in much news[7] ,reports[8] and researches, which warns about the vulnerability of Macedo-

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[7] *Kvinna till Kvinn, "Family First: The Rise of the Anti-Gender Movement in North Macedonia", 2022; "The anti-gender movement—a threat to sexuality education", 2022, available at: https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/2022/06/01/the-anti-gender-movement-a-threat-to-sexuality-education/*

nian societies to institutionalise the regress of women's rights and protection mechanisms.

On the other hand, the research by Avirovic-Bundalevska (2019) on youth tolerance trends in North Macedonia revealed that young people in our country exhibit a clear inclination towards collective values. However, according to their survey responses, some level of ethnic intolerance persists among different ethnic groups, particularly in terms of their view on implementation problems of affirmative action in employment processes, enrolment in educational institutions, and even during domestic sports events.

2. GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN NORTH MACEDONIA

As the research "Shared Futures: Youth Perceptions on Peace in the Western Balkans" (UNDP, 2021) highlights, gender equality plays a crucial role in ensuring a society's security and stability. It is considered the most important predictor of peace, surpassing factors such as a country or territory's wealth, level of democracy, or religious identity (p.11, 2021).

As quoted in the same research, The Global Study on UNSCR 1325 confirmed that preventing harm based on gender is directly linked to preventing armed violence. Therefore, strengthening gender equality and women's human rights is not only an obligation but also crucial for fostering peace and social harmony.

The data collected within the present research depicts a contentious picture of perceived gender equality in North Macedonia. It can be seen from the response to the survey question: "In your community, do women and men enjoy the same rights?", that the answers point to a middle ground.

On a scale from 1 to 5, the answers slightly skew towards the opinion that women and men do enjoy somewhat the same rights (M = 3.24). Although the majority (47%) of the answers pointed towards a positive answer (4 or 5), it should be pointed out that 32% of respondents do not think that women and men enjoy the same right, and 21% is neutral about gender equality.

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[8] Irena Cvetkovic, Manja Velickovska, "Who Is Afraid Of Gender? Analysis Of The Key Narratives And Strategies Of The Anti-Gender Movement In The Republic Of North Macedonia", 2022, available at: https://ba.boell.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/who-is-afraid-of-gender-eng.pdf

In your community, do women and men enjoy the same rights?
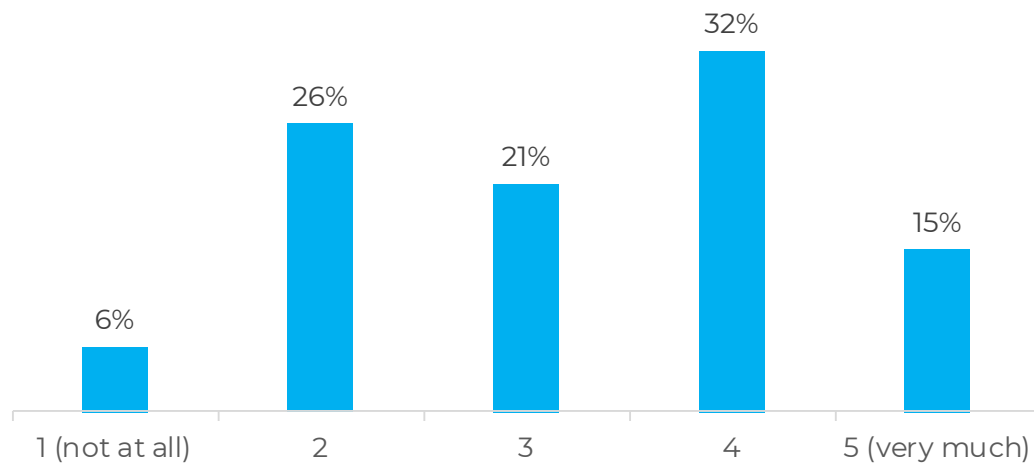
Figure 1. Youth perceptions of equal rights for women and men

In a related question, the participants were prompted to report "in which of the following contexts is most common to find gender inequality" in Macedonian society. On a 5-point Likert scale, 1 – not at all, 5 – very much, with the exception of 'civil society' (M = 2.6), the respondents agreed that there is gender inequality to a smaller or larger degree.

The participants concurred that the religious environment presented the most severe case of gender inequality (M = 3.6), with online media, the family and the workplace being just barely better in this aspect (3.5, 3.4 and 3.3 respectively).

According to youth perception, the role of religion in society presents a limitation to the development of gender equality. More precisely, as mentioned also during the local consultation, forms of gender inequality and imposing gendered norms, start from the family, or the closest parenting circles.

In which of the following contexts is most common to find gender inequality in your community? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is "not at all" and 5 is "very much"

Religious environment	15%	8%	23%	12%	42%	
Family	14%	7%	25%	29%	25%	
Workplace	11%	11%	32%	32%	14%	
Online media channels, especially social media	3%		54%	32%	11%	
School	2%	21%	47%	25%	3%	
Offline media channels (TV, radio, newspapers...)	4%	32%	39%	18%	7%	
Civil society (youth clubs, cultural associations ...)	18%	32%	29%	18%	3%	

■ 1 (not at all)　■ 2　■ 3　■ 4　■ 5 (very much)
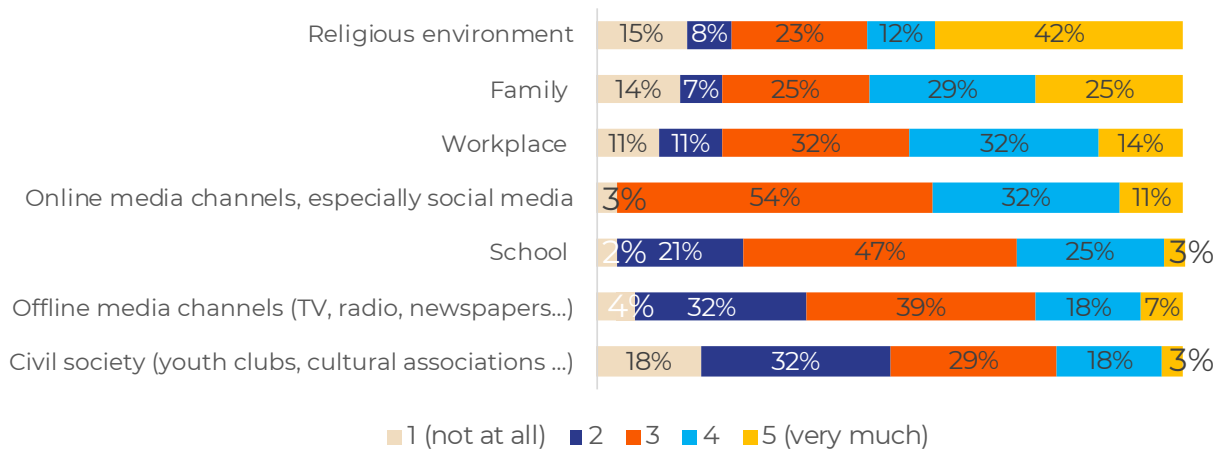
Figure 2. Youth perceptions of the most common contexts of gender inequality [9]

2.1 Gender Equality as a key aspect of Social Cohesion

During the local consultation, the concepts of Social Cohesion and Gender (in)equality were well understood by the participants, as well as their interconnection. When discussing them within the Macedonian context the participants used definitions, on a multi-layered level, incorporating the diversity and the importance of socioeconomic background, rural vs. urban community and the role of young people within those processes.

Images below illustrate participants' replies to two initial ice-breaker questions introducing the key research concepts: "When you think of "social cohesion", what words come to your mind?" and "When you think of "gender equality", what words come to your mind?"

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[9] *4% of participants selected 1- 'not at all'- in relation to the category of online media channels, school, and offline media channels.*
4% of participants selected 5- 'very much'- in relation to the category of school, and civil society.

When you think of "social cohesion", what words come to your mind?[10]

Image 3. Word cloud for social cohesion

The words associated with social cohesion include unity, cooperation, equality, connection, equity, common coexistence, social inequality, well-being, peace, harmony, welfare, understanding, solidarity, activism, solidarity, compromise, and access.

When talking about these concepts, the participants were placing social cohesion and gender equality as key components for societal transformation. Youth believe gender equality to be crucial for social cohesion, both as a value that the State should uphold in law and policy design and as a goal it should pursue in practice, adopting a gender lens in programme implementation on local and broader levels. Macedonian legal framework, including the Constitution, ensures formal equality by acknowledging that all individuals possess equal rights and freedoms, which are protected by law. The Constitution also upholds the principle of equal treatment under the law by State authorities. Additionally, ratified international agreements are considered an integral part of domestic law, and they hold a higher legal force than regular laws and by-laws, thereby guaranteeing their direct application (Boshkova, 2022). In the current National Youth Strategy (2016-2025) for North Macedonia, providing sexual education to youth and framing gender-based violence as an issue are indicated as two prominent aspects directly related to gender equality.

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[10] *Solidarity, Coexistence, Equality, Cooperation, Activism, Common good, Welfare, Cohesion, Peace, Connectivity.*

In the survey, participants shared their opinion regarding the presence or absence of social cohesion in North Macedonia, on a 5-point Likert scale. Although most participants were undecided on the issue, 43% of them reported the perception of a lack of social cohesion (29% reported very little and 14% reported total absence).

Despite efforts to ensure formal equality through the legal framework, North Macedonia faces significant social and economic challenges that obstacle the process. A large portion of its population lacks access to quality healthcare and functional social services. These disparities are evident in the neglect of labour rights, a rise in gender-based violence, and discrimination against marginalised groups across various aspects of social life (Durinova, 2021; Petkovska, 2020). Additionally, gender-based discrimination persists in the labour market, exacerbating the existing inequalities in the country.

To what extent would you say the society you live in is marked by social cohesion? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is "not at all" and 5 is "very much"
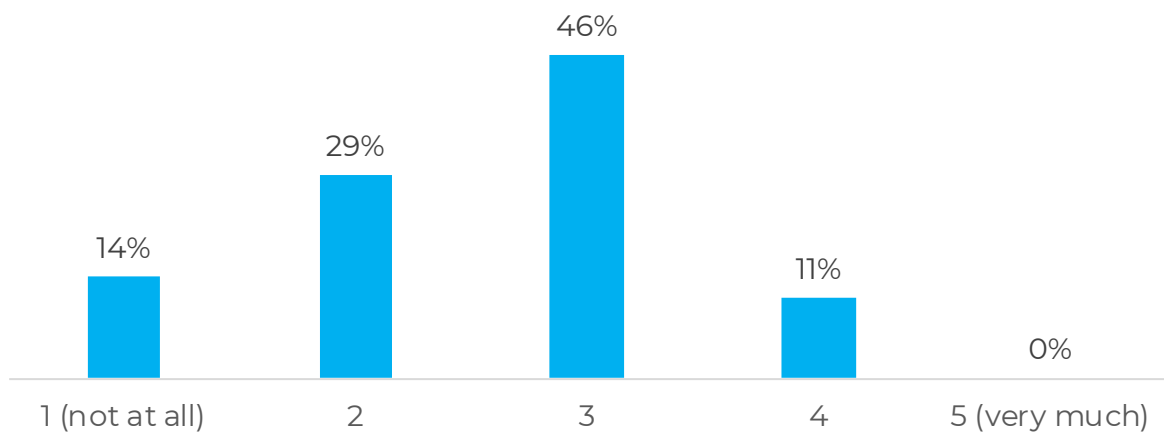
Figure 3. Youth perceptions of social cohesion

The answers in the survey on the extent to which North Macedonia as a society is marked by gender equality follow a similar response trend. Most answers were "neutral" (35% selected number 3 on the 5-point scale), and the other responses were distributed around a low perceived level of gender equality (29%) and a good level of gender equality (32%).

To what extent would you say there is gender equality in your community? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is "not at all" and 5 is "very much"

0%	29%	35%	32%	4%
1 (not at all)	2	3	4	5 (very much)
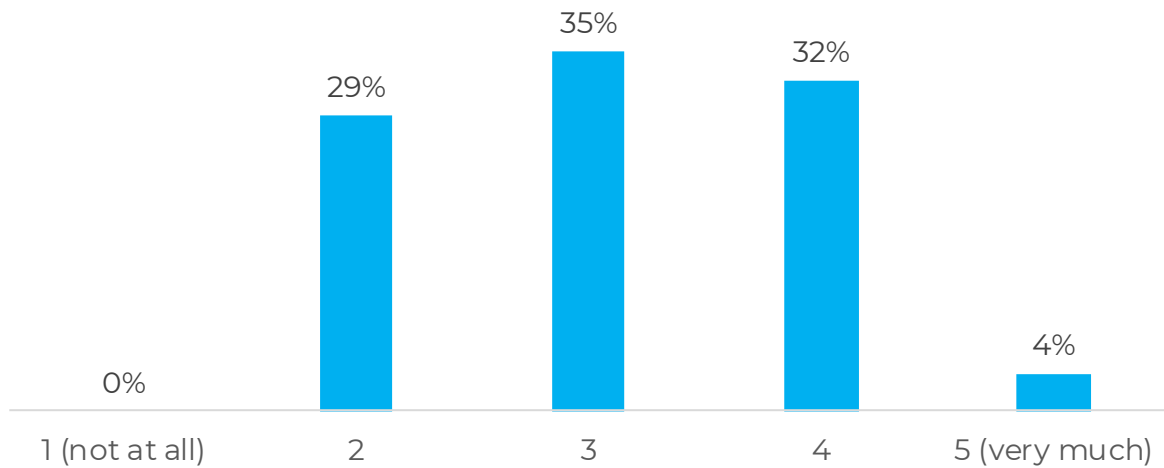
Figure 4. Youth perceptions of gender equality

When you think of "gender equality", what words come to your mind? [11]
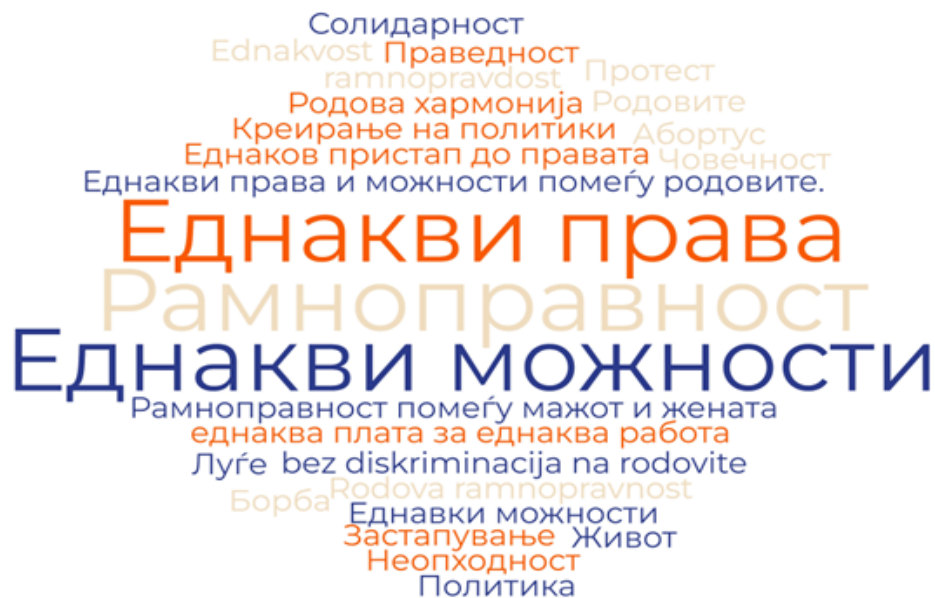
Image 4. Word cloud for gender equality

[11] *Equality between men and women; Equal opportunities; People creating policies; Gender harmony; Necessity; Equal rights; Humanity, Struggle; Abortion.*

During the local consultation, the words associated with gender equality included abortion, equality between men and women, equal opportunities, people creating policies, gender harmony, necessity, equal rights, humanity, and struggle.

These words reflect the diverse perceptions and associations that people in North Macedonia have with the concept of gender equality. For instance, words like "harmony" and "humanity" suggest an association of gender equality with fundamental values in a cohesive society, where compassion is highly regarded, and the diversity of its members is embraced.

However, youth has also associated gender equality with words urging action ("necessity", "people creating policies"), highlighting the need of an institutional response to the lack of "equal opportunities" and "equal rights", including reproductive rights ("abortion"), in order to support their ongoing "struggle" for gender equality.

2.2 Youth perceptions of intergroup relations

The discourse around social cohesion in North Macedonia is mostly placed in the context of inter-ethnic relations in connection with the conflict between the Albanian National Liberation Army (NLA) para-militant group, and Macedonian security forces at the beginning of February 2001.

The conflict created divisions between the two largest ethnic communities, Macedonian and Albanian, ending with the Ohrid Framework Agreement in 2001, and changes in the constitutional arrangement and legislation regarding the rights of non-majority communities in the State.

However, the research outlined in the literature review presents the case of social cohesion's importance to human development and the improvement of human rights. Quantitative data gathered on youth perceptions of intergroup relations in North Macedonia can be found in the following graph.

Which of these statements are true for you?
You can select more than one option

Statement	Percentage
I have friends from different ethnic and religious groups	89%
I would date/I dated someone from a different ethnic and/or religious group	74%
I would marry a person who does not belong to my ethnic and/or religious group	69%
In my neighbourhood I know people who are ready to help me when I need it	66%
People tend to socialise more with members of their ethnic and religious groups	60%
My parents talk about the previous war/wars and conflicts and I know how much people from other ethnic groups suffered	43%
My parents talk about the previous war/wars and conflicts and I know how much people from my ethnic group suffered	37%
In my community, people share their personal experiences and critical opinions with mutual trust	26%
It is easier to live in ethnically homogeneous communities	17%
In my neighbourhood people gather from time to time to discuss problems and solve them together	14%

Figure 5. Youth perceptions of intragroup relationships

Macedonian society can be defined not only as multi-ethnic but also as multi-confessional and multilingual society (Galeva, J., 2022). Young respondents stressed how the lack of communication and information in Macedonian society poses a challenge in creating better social cohesion between Macedonians, Albanians, Roma, Bosnians etc. Whilst the data from the National Office for Statistics shows that around 7% of marriages are ethnically mixed ones (Avirovic-Bundalevska), the participants expressed that

they would or have already dated someone from a different ethnic and/or religious group (74%), and would marry a person who does not belong to their ethnic and/or religious group (69%). On the other hand, they reported that people tend to socialise more with members of their ethnic group (60%). Additionally, young people from North Macedonia reported that in their neighbourhood they know people who are ready to help them (66%). These results might be perceived as positive due to the impact of the Conflict in 2001, as well as the currently segregated public schools and political divisions. But still, overall, the survey results present a reality where there is a need for greater social cohesion on a practical level. For example, as mentioned, the public schools in North Macedonia are still divided ethnically, and that impacts the possibility of first interaction, and then social collaboration between ethnicities. Social differences in North Macedonia typically involve religion and ethnicity, but gender must be considered systematically to achieve social cohesion.

2.3 Impact of negative legacies of the past

The data collected revealed a discernible comprehension of the intricate interplay between the gendered nature of conflict and peace. The participants in the local consultation specifically underscored the vital role of peacebuilding, emphasising the active engagement of marginalised groups, especially women, in the reconciliation process and the reconstruction of post-conflict societies.

Youth engaged in the research in North Macedonia associate gender discrimination with generational conservationism, revealing a gap between young people and the older generation when approaching changes to gender norms. Qualitative data indicate that, in some instances, this is perceived by youth as strictly connected with the impact of conservative policy-making, specifically the 2006-2017 ruling, resulting in limitations on gender and sexuality rights, reproductive rights and health, discrimination, homophobia, and hate speech (Kajevska, 2018).

On the contrary, gender equality policies and values from the Socialist era are acknowledged by youth as positive legacies of the past. Still the need for reconciliation, along with representation and inclusion of marginalised groups, as well as the importance of breaking generational traumas is perceived as a prominent challenge affecting recent discussions of peace.

The shared examples during the group discussion and the individual interviews illustrate how historical legacies of discrimination and exclusion continue to influence contemporary politics and the representation of

marginalised groups. They emphasise the importance of recognising these legacies and actively working towards more inclusive, equitable, and progressive policies in order to address the enduring impact of the past on marginalised communities. A participant representing the Roma community highlighted the criticality of representation and how marginalised individuals possess unique insights into their own experiences.

"On the topic of incrementalism, I think that perspective can come from a certain level of privilege. Every moment we wait for things to change, marginalised groups continue suffering. Whilst it is of course impossible to expect to change everything at once, we can still make big changes."

Participant, local consultation

This perspective accentuated the urgent need for diverse representation in policymaking processes, as it allows for a more nuanced consideration of the rights and needs of different societal groups. According to youth, by recognising the diverse perspectives and experiences of marginalised communities, policymakers can formulate more equitable and effective peace-building strategies.

"As a feminist working towards a pacifist understanding of how we organise the way, I believe in antimilitarism as a key principle. Conflicts impact not only the physical pain and victims, but also the psychological impact is often overlooked, and how it causes long-term damage to both individuals and societies. This impacts families, kids, interpersonal relations, and with that the future of all of us, and how we position ourselves towards others. Unfortunately, the negative legacies of the past impact the femicides, and sexual violence, which contribute to the transgenerational trauma. However, what we do not understand as a society is that we hold the power to change that."

Participant, In-depth interview

Inclusivity was a recurring theme among youth consulted in North Macedonia, with a strong consensus on the necessity of giving voice to all affected parties during reconciliation efforts to ensure the formulation of comprehensive and inclusive solutions.

3. OBSTACLES TO GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION FROM A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

When it comes to factors that hinder building a stronger and fairer society, most of the Macedonian respondents noted that corruption is the biggest obstacle (94%). Next, ethnic division and tensions are seen as the subsequent most influential factor (74%), an aspect also highlighted by 43% of responders when asked about obstacles to gender equality (see Figure 7).

Political tensions and instability and nepotism (both 68%) were indicated as further factors hindering social cohesion, followed by discrimination (65%) and hate speech (59%). Disinformation was reported as a factor perceived by a considerable proportion of youth as hindering both social cohesion (65%) and gender equality (54% as shown in Figure 7).

The answers collected show Macedonian young respondents' deep understanding of the multi-layered issues that call for a systemic tackling of the key barriers to a more robust and equitable society.

Which of the following factors hinder building stronger and fairer societies? Please, select the four most significant

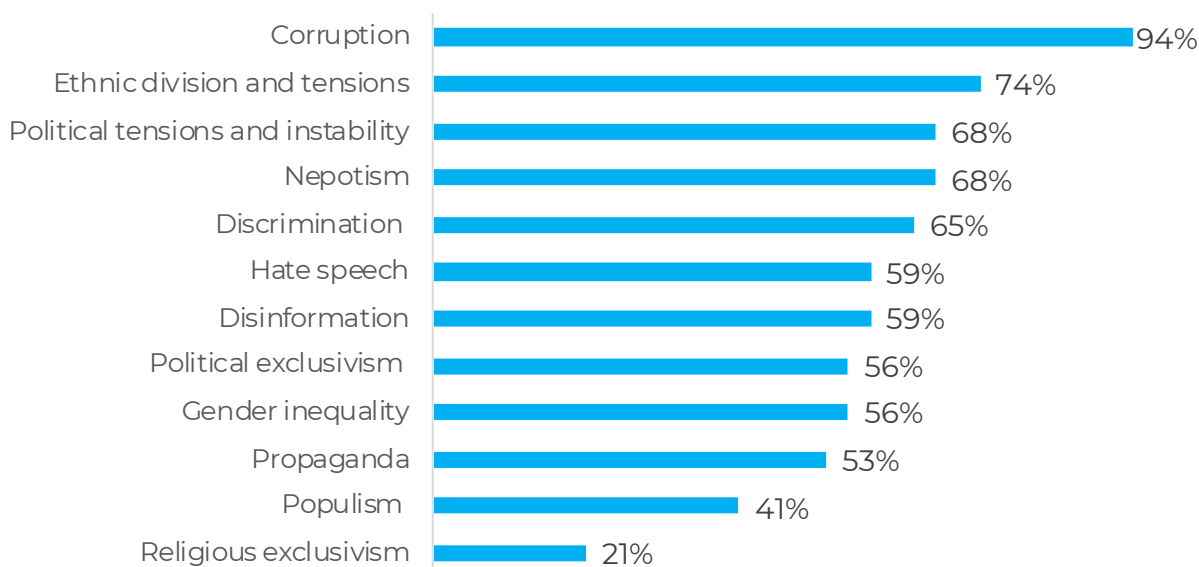| Factor	Percentage
Corruption	94%
Ethnic division and tensions	74%
Political tensions and instability	68%
Nepotism	68%
Discrimination	65%
Hate speech	59%
Disinformation	59%
Political exclusivism	56%
Gender inequality	56%
Propaganda	53%
Populism	41%
Religious exclusivism	21%

Figure 6. Youth perceptions of factors hindering the building of stronger and fairer societies

The obstacles to the achievement of gender equality (Figure 7) which, as illustrated above, overlap to some degree with the perceived barrier to a more cohesive society, show the prevalence of traditional gender norms and negative legacies of the past as the two most impactful factors hindering progress (82% and 71% respectively). Qualitative data confirmed these perceptions, as patriarchal hierarchies and gendered roles in families, communities, and society emerged as perceived prominent factors limiting the potential of women and girls. Structural and systemic inequalities are also perceived by 46% of survey respondents as constituting an obstacle to gender equality, followed by a stereotyped representation of rigid gender roles in media and social media, reported as an issue by 43% of youth.

In your opinion, which of the following factors hinder achieving gender equality in your community? Please, select the three most significant

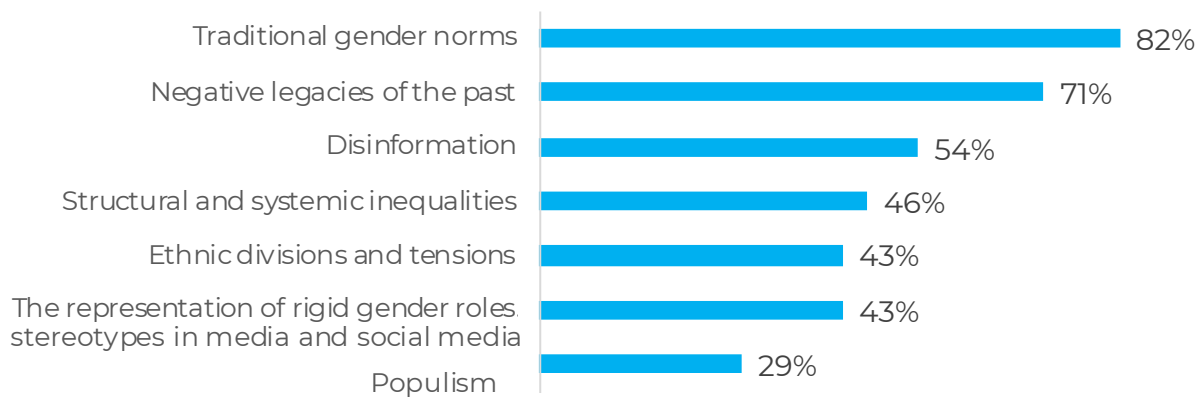|	
Traditional gender norms	82%
Negative legacies of the past	71%
Disinformation	54%
Structural and systemic inequalities	46%
Ethnic divisions and tensions	43%
The representation of rigid gender roles stereotypes in media and social media	43%
Populism	29%

Figure 7. Youth perceptions of factors that hinder gender equality

Exploring the factors impacting youth well-being in North Macedonia is an important aspect of the research, as these factors are associated with the overall progress in gender equality and social cohesion. When society addresses gender disparities and promotes equality, it creates an environment where young people, regardless of their gender, can thrive, participate actively in their communities, and contribute to a more harmonious and cohesive society.

That is why the well-being of youth and the progress in gender equality and social cohesion are mutually reinforcing, which in turn leads to a more equitable and inclusive society.

The paramount importance attributed by youth to well-being emerged in relation to healing and reconciliation, as a foundational element for the peacebuilding endeavour. High significance is attributed by youth to cultivating inner peace as a fundamental starting point. This serves as a step-

ping stone to foster peace incrementally, beginning within families and lo-
cal communities, and eventually extending to broader societal levels.

The quantitative data collected show that factors perceived as having the
largest negative impact on youth's well-being are poverty (55% of the par-
ticipants rated it as "very much" influential), lack of education opportunities,
lack of healthcare services, lack of employment opportunities (for each of
these factors, 49% of the participants rated them as "very much" influential),
domestic or family violence, and lack of infrastructure (37%, as shown in Fig-
ure 8). Those limitations lead to young people being disengaged from their
surroundings, especially in light of the perceived slow societal progress.[12]

To want extent do the following factors negatively impact youth well-being in your community?
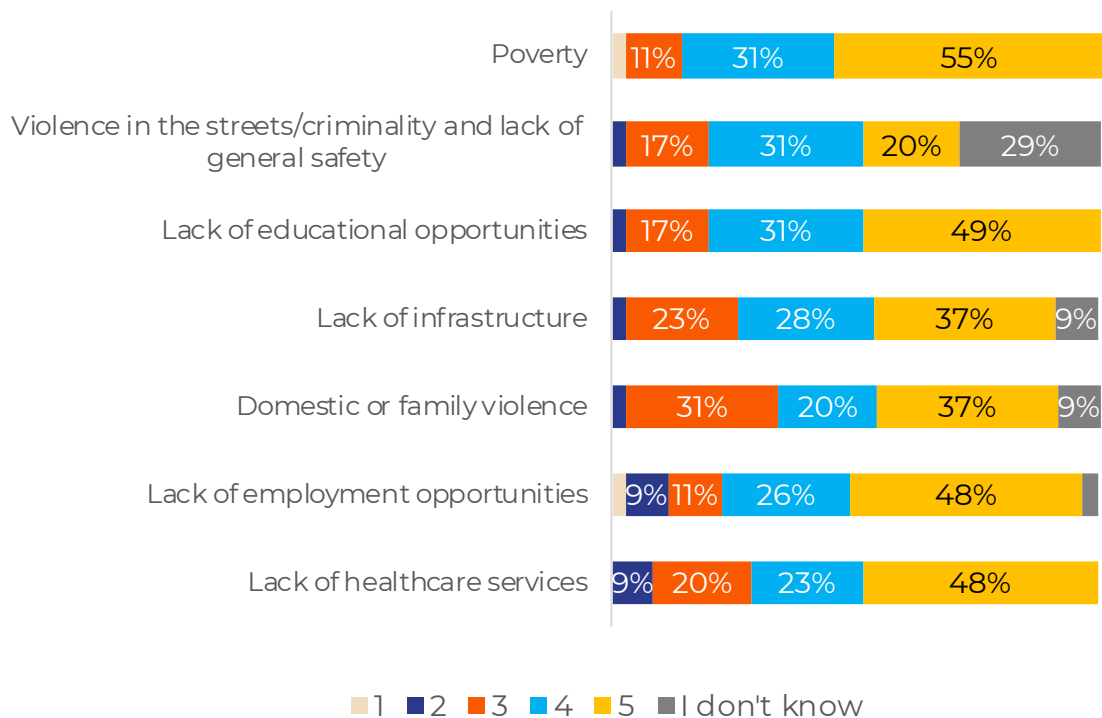
Figure 8. Youth perceptions of factors that negatively impact youth well-being [13]

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[12] North Macedonia will take 57 years to achieve full gender equality (Gender Equality Index, 2022).
[13] 3% of participants selected 1- 'not at all'- in relation to the influence of poverty on the well-being of
youth within their community.
3% of participants selected 2 in relation to the influence of violence in the streets/criminality and lack of
general safety, lack of educational opportunities, lack of infrastructure, and domestic or family violen-
ce on the well-being of youth within their community.
3% of participants selected 'I don't know' in relation to the influence of the lack of employment oppor-
tunities on the well-being of youth within their community.

Consequently, the imperative of establishing a conducive environment that concurrently addresses systemic inequalities within society, whilst fostering the empowerment of young individuals as agents of change, reflects the aspirational visions harboured by the youth for the future. This multifaceted approach not only acknowledges the interwoven nature of societal challenges but also harnesses the potential of the younger generation in forging a path towards lasting transformative change.

3.1. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations

Hegemonic masculinities, whilst subject to diverse interpretations in modern contexts (Cohen, 2020), frequently encompass notions of power, particularly in terms of men being expected to fulfil traditional roles such as the breadwinners in families, being perceived as risk-takers, entrepreneurs, and decision-makers, and being attributed the label of 'the stronger gender'(Cohen, 2020). These attributes align with socially accepted stereotypes of gender roles (Reactor, 2022). The role of the family and school in developing gender roles and associated stereotyped expectations was mentioned during the local consultation and interviews. Specifically, the young people interviewed underscored that even within spaces (like the public ones) that are expected to advocate for gender equality, instances of sexism and gender-based discrimination can still occur. This suggests that the culture and practices within public spaces may not always align with the principles of gender equality, despite the overarching goals or mandates of those spaces.

Participants in the research recognised that factors enhancing gender norms come first from the family and then are systemised in schools.

In the local consultation, a cultural perspective on discrimination and gender roles was mentioned through the gendered language used to refer to teachers and caretakers, as in Macedonian the default grammatical gender used for the nouns is feminine. This linguistic convention contributes to the perception that teaching and caregiving roles are primarily fulfilled by women. Consequently, young people develop a biased perception, trusting men less for assistance and viewing women as predominantly responsible for caregiving. To address this concern, an entrance exam to assess the values of prospective educators was suggested by the group.

The survey's results confirm the perceptions expressed in the consultation: most of the respondents (79%) agree that the Macedonian society, culture and traditions set different expectations for women and men. These expectations draw on the established patriarchal norms, for which the young people in the local consultation and during the interviews were critical yet conscious of the impact.

In your opinion, do cultural and traditional norms set different expectations for men and women in your community?
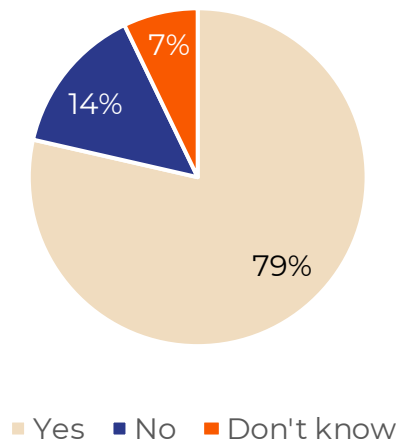

Yes ▪ No ▪ Don't know

Figure 9. Youth perceptions of different expectations for men and women

Sharp differences can be seen in what is expected from each gender: overwhelmingly, women are expected to 1) Spend more time taking care of the household (82%), 2) Provide emotional support to family members and Spend time, effort and labour taking care of the family (both 68%), 3) Have children at a young age whilst at the same time not having sexual intercourse before marriage (both 54 %). On the other hand, according to the participants, men are expected to 1) Earn more than their partner and be the head of the household (both 75%), 2) Provide security and financial support for the family (64%), as well as 3) Hide their emotions in public (46%).

3.2. Gender-based violence

The Women's Rights in Western Balkans Report (2022) indicates that the implementation of the institutional framework mandated by the Istanbul Convention[14] and the United Nations Essential Package of Services[15] is still incomplete in North Macedonia. This legal and policy framework aims to protect women against all forms of violence and prevent, prosecute, and eliminate violence against women (including domestic violence), as well as provide better access to some essential services (such as healthcare, social services, and services related to police and justice) for all women and girls who have experienced gen-

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[14] *Entered into force on 1 August 2014, signed by 46 member states of the Council of Europe (EU and non-EU countries) and ratified by 33 of them, the Istanbul Convention is the first international treaty specifically addressing violence and abuse against women and girls.*

[15] *Launched by the UN and implemented through collaboration among UN Women, UNFPA, WHO, UNDP and UNODC, United Nation Essential Services Package (ESP) is a global joint programme on essential services for women and girls subject to violence.*

der-based violence. According to the report (Women's Rights in Western Balkans Report, 2022), no country or territory in the region has achieved international requirements regarding shelters for victims/survivors of gender-based violence, including the required number of beds in shelters. Specifically, the OSCE-led and EU-funded survey titled "Safety and Wellbeing of Women" (2019), conducted on a domestically representative sample, has revealed concerning data regarding violence against women in North Macedonia. The research findings of the above-mentioned study indicate that 54% of the women surveyed reported having experienced some form of violence at some point in their lives; among the respondents, approximately 30% reported experiencing sexual harassment, whilst 14% disclosed incidents of physical and/or sexual violence (OSCE, 2019). An increase in violence and discrimination was registered during the period of restrictions imposed to contain the spread of Covid-19, which was already a social and political issue even before the pandemic (Durinova, 2021).

These results are in line with the data collected in the research, indicating that youth consider domestic or family violence as a concerning factor harming their well-being (37% of survey respondents, Figure 8). These findings underscore the urgency of addressing the issue of violence against women in North Macedonia, necessitating comprehensive efforts to ensure the safety and well-being of women in the country.

In your opinion, which of the following factors would help achieving gender equality and fight sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence in your community? Please, select the three most significant

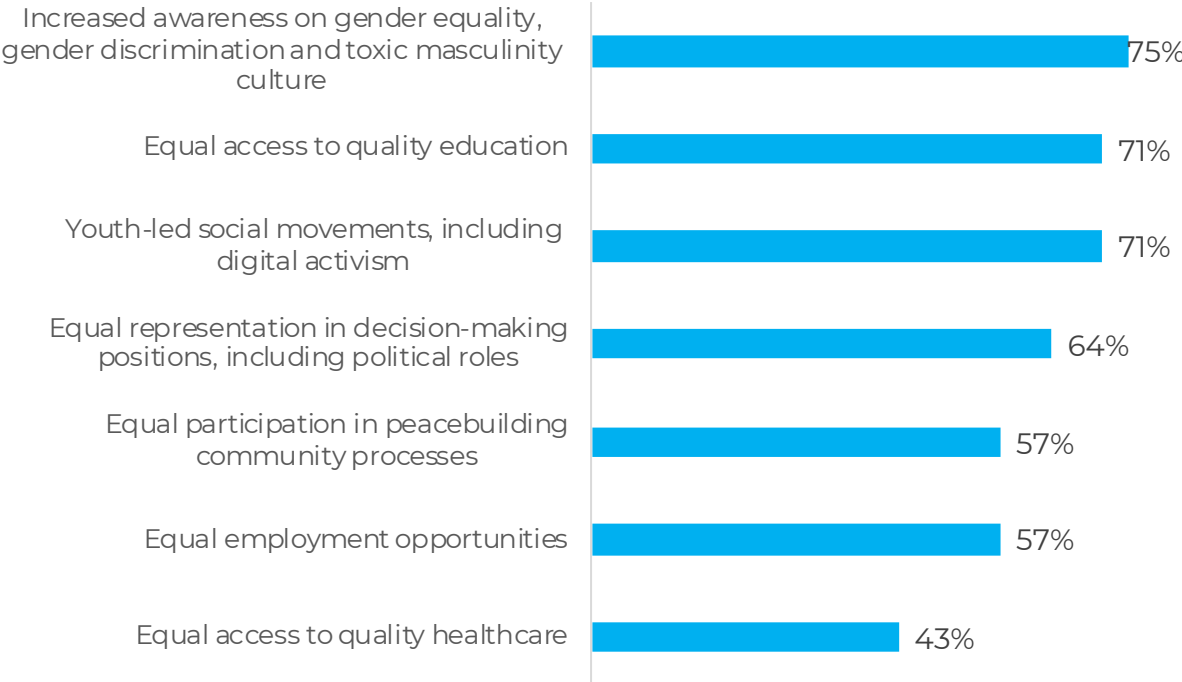| Factor	Percentage
Increased awareness on gender equality, gender discrimination and toxic masculinity culture	75%
Equal access to quality education	71%
Youth-led social movements, including digital activism	71%
Equal representation in decision-making positions, including political roles	64%
Equal participation in peacebuilding community processes	57%
Equal employment opportunities	57%
Equal access to quality healthcare	43%

Figure 10. Youth perceptions of factors that would help fight discrimination

The research investigated the factors that youth perceive as helpful to achieving gender equality and fighting sexism, misogyny and gender-based violence in the community (Figure 10). Increased awareness of gender equality, gender discrimination, and toxic masculinity culture emerged as the most prominent aspect (75%), fostered by equal access to quality education (71%,) and in line with the result indicating that only 14% of the respondents have learned about violence against women/girls at school/university. The relevance attributed to the potential of youth-led social movements (71%) also indicates a high level of trust in civil society action and youth leadership to address institutional violence.

The social and institutional aspect of gender-based violence was presented as an issue by youth engaged in the local consultation and the interviews. During the group discussion, participants shared findings from studies conducted on the functionality[16] of systems supporting victims of gender-based violence, including "Gender-Based Violence in North Macedonia – a Status Quo Report" (Reactor, 2022), and "Analysis of Barriers Faced By Roma Women And Guaranteed Minimum Assistance Beneficiaries In Accessing The Labour Market" (HERA, 2023). These studies revealed a lack of trust among victims in the institutions, with many perceiving reporting as futile.

"In 2021, we conducted a study on the access and functionality of the system and how it supports victims of gender-based violence. 200 women were interviewed: 78% were victims of domestic violence, 37% of whom were victims of physical abuse. The lack of trust in the institutions also plays a huge role here. Most women thought 'so what if I report him? I reported him once and nothing happened.' The culture and tradition, speaking about the Roma community, our mothers taught us 'one slap doesn't mean anything.' We, as young Roma women, should stop normalising this. Our kids can especially learn from us if we stop normalising this."

Participant, local consultation

All of the participants in the consultation emphasised the need to challenge the normalisation of violence, particularly within their own community, and called for a shift away from accepting such behaviour. The systemic nature of toxic masculinity and its roots in upbringing, societal norms, and oppression was also underlined. The polarisation of discussions and the lack of middle ground were criticised as hindering constructive dialogue and perpetuating extremism. In light of these considerations, youth highlighted the need for open discussions and critical thinking, urging a departure from the emphasis on winning or being right.

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[16] *See Balkan Insight, "In North Macedonia, Old Thinking Dictates Justice for Gender-based Violence", 2022, available at: https://balkaninsight.com/2022/09/15/in-north-macedonia-old-thinking-dictates-justice-for-gender-based-violence/*

3.3 Discrimination and Hate Speech

In 2022, the Helsinki Committee[17] documented a total of 36 cases of hate speech specifically targeting the LGBTQIA+ community, accounting for approximately 22% of all the recorded incidents of hate speech during that period in North Macedonia. The youth group during the local consultation showed deep awareness of the various facets of discrimination, the spaces where this phenomenon is reproduced and its influence on individuals and communities. By presenting a diverse range of perspectives, their discussion offered a multifaceted exploration of discrimination, addressing components of gender, sexuality, religion, and cultural practices, and unveiling its manifestations and implications in various domains of society.

Quantitative data (presented in Figure 6) indicate that discrimination is the fifth main factor hindering a stronger and fairer society in North Macedonia according to youth. Qualitative data gathered offered a unique perspective on the issue of discrimination within educational settings. Many of the young people highlighted the significant role of schools in shaping young minds and expressed concern about the biases held by teachers and caretakers, which can perpetuate systemic discrimination. The participants asserted that discrimination is often addressed in curricula at a later stage, missing the opportunity to tackle biases that teachers and caregivers inadvertently impart to their students.

In a youth-led research study conducted by Nacevski (2018), it was found that higher education in North Macedonia is particularly vulnerable to instances of discrimination, as students in the country often become victims of discrimination primarily at the hands of professors and teaching assistants who directly engage in the educational process.

Quantitative data gathered are in line with previous research findings conducted in North Macedonia as they confirm a concerning high percentage of youth both witnessing and experiencing instances of discrimination or intolerance on different grounds. As shown in Figure 13, a general trend indicates that cases of discrimination witnessed are considerably higher than those personally experienced by youth. The greatest gap in this sense is found in the data pertaining to discrimination on racial or ethnic grounds, which has been witnessed by 76% of survey respondents, but personally experienced only by 3%. This trend is confirmed in all grounds of discrimination except for gender, where the percentage of youth who has experienced discrimination (18%) is higher than those who have only witnessed it (9%).

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[17] *The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights is a volunteer, non-profit organisation devoted to the protection of human rights.*

Considering the data of young people who have answered positively to the survey question (indicating that they have either "personally experienced", "witnessed" or "both"), the most common grounds of discrimination in North Macedonia can be observed as follows: racial or ethnic (85%), sexuality (66%), gender (64%), social status (61%), language (57%), religious (55%) as well as marital and family status (33%), disability (31%), migration (30%).

It is worth mentioning that a portion of respondents is either unsure or has not personally experienced any form of discrimination, possibly indicating the need for further awareness and education on these issues.

Have you personally experienced or witnessed any instances of discrimination or intolerance based on the following grounds?
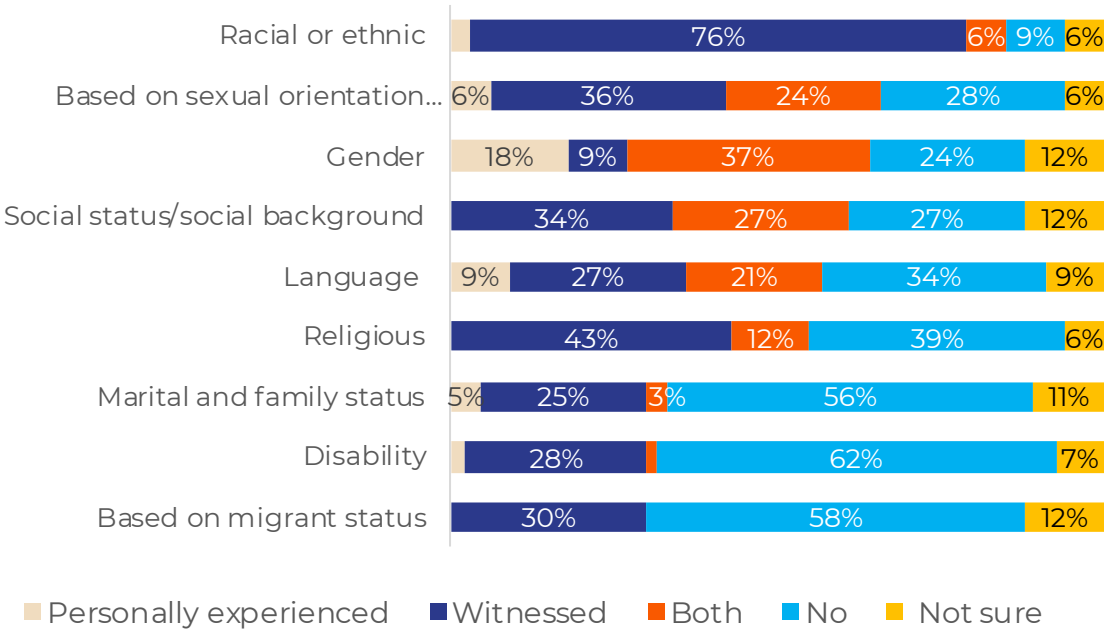
Ground	Personally experienced	Witnessed	Both	No	Not sure
Racial or ethnic		76%	6%	9%	6%
Based on sexual orientation...	6%	36%	24%	28%	6%
Gender	18%	9%	37%	24%	12%
Social status/social background		34%	27%	27%	12%
Language	9%	27%	21%	34%	9%
Religious		43%	12%	39%	6%
Marital and family status	5%	25%	3%	56%	11%
Disability		28%		62%	7%
Based on migrant status		30%		58%	12%

■ Personally experienced ■ Witnessed ■ Both ■ No ■ Not sure

Figure 11. Experiences of discrimination [18]

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[18] *3% of participants indicated 'personally experienced' in relation to the category of racial or ethnic.*
2% of participants indicated 'personally experienced' in relation to the category of disability.
1% of participants indicated 'both' in relation to the category of disability.

3.4 Proliferation of polarising identity speeches

In your opinion, what are the main reasons for the existence of political or other groups who are against gender equality? You can select more than one option
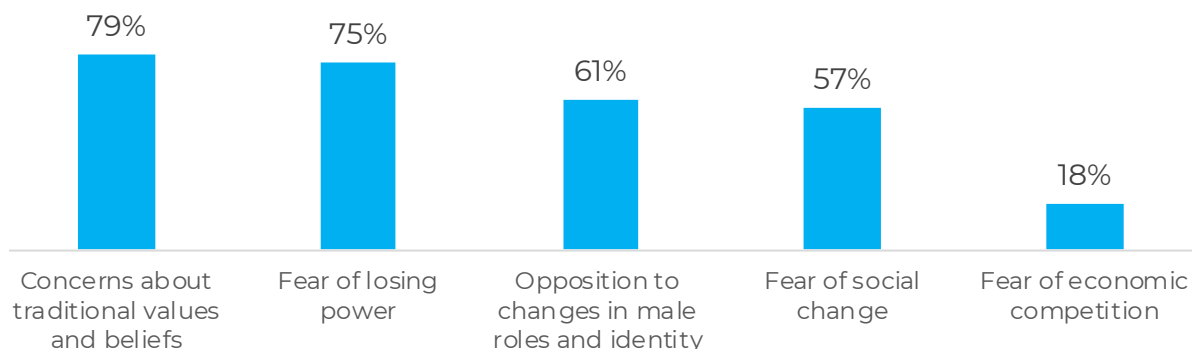

| Concerns about traditional values and beliefs | Fear of losing power | Opposition to changes in male roles and identity | Fear of social change | Fear of economic competition |
| 79% | 75% | 61% | 57% | 18% |

Figure 12. Youth perceptions of the main reasons for the existence of political and other groups opposed to gender equality

Qualitative data gathered show that the conservative values in Macedonian society are seen by youth to play a crucial role in hindering gender equality, as they are perceived to amplify misogynistic voices over feminist perspectives.

The influence of toxic masculinity culture through nationalistic and anti-gender narratives in political discourse is reflected in the quantitative data gathered. Young people believe that concerns about traditional values and beliefs and opposition to changes in male roles and identity are key aspects underlying the existence of anti-gender movements and their influence on polarisation. As further support of the findings, during the group discussion and interviews, the role of Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)[19] was mentioned as a key component of the education of youth. However, CSE was also identified as a burdening issue for which the anti-gender movements continue to misinform the public. The discourse analysis conducted by Cvetkovic & Velickovska (2022) further corroborates these observations, particularly concerning the realm of education. According to their findings, anti-gender movements employ a strategic approach, primarily

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[19] *Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) gives young people accurate, age-appropriate information about sexuality and their sexual and reproductive health, which is critical for their health and survival. For more information see the "International technical guidance on sexuality education" developed by UNESCO, UNFPA, UNICEF, UN Women, UNAIDS and WHO, 2018, available at: https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/9789231002595*

focusing on targeting specific aspects of the educational system. Notably, these movements direct their efforts towards opposing the inclusion of Comprehensive Sexual Education as an optional subject, the implementation of Gender-sensitive Education, modifications in teaching materials, and the incorporation of digitalisation in the educational process (Cvetkovic & Velickovska, 2022, p. 77).

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the spread of anti-gender narratives[20] was not mentioned as a separate issue. Rather, it was part of the impact of social media and disinformation which was noted during the local consultation. Specifically, when talking about toxic masculinity, the influence of figures such as Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate[21] was mentioned as having a negative impact on young men and boys, who are often more vulnerable to these narratives. Participants critically connected the influence of their dehumanising narratives towards marginalised groups with the rise of violence and antagonisation of feminism.

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[20] *See RFE/RL's Balkan Service, "Thousands Protest In North Macedonia Against Proposed Gender-Equality, Identity Laws", 2023, available at:* https://www.rferl.org/a/macedonia-gender-protest-religions/32482704.html
[21] *Jordan Peterson is a Canadian psychologist who is mourning for the decline of religious and traditional family values, blaming gender ideology and LGBTQIA+ agenda for the alienation of white young men and the destruction of the Western civilisation. See:* https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/how-dangerous-is-jordan-b-peterson-the-rightwing-professor-who-hit-a-hornets-nest *(Accessed on August 08, 2023); Andrew Tate is a British-American youtuber and influencer who is also a self-proclaimed misogynist. See:* https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64125045 *(Accessed on August 06, 2023).*

4. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

The quantitative data indicate a widespread lack of trust in public institutions (76% of survey respondents, Figure 13) among youth in North Macedonia.

Please answer the following questions by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is "not at all" and 5 is "very much"
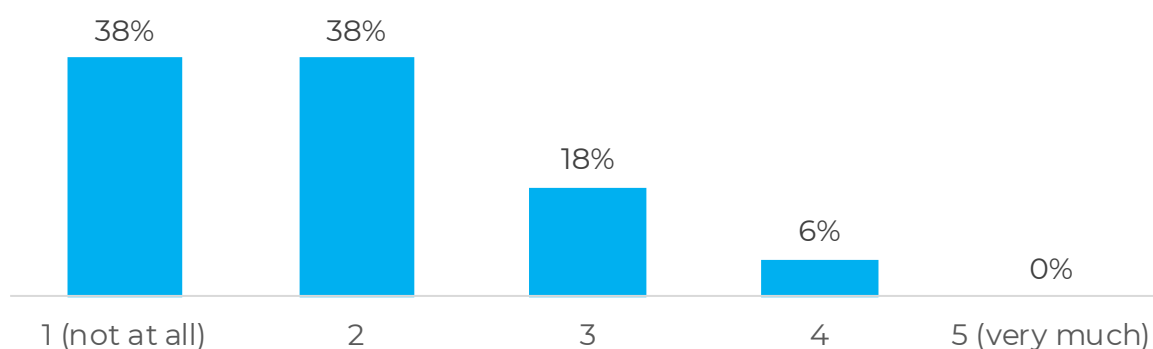*Do you trust public institutions*

Figure 13. Level of trust in public institution

Representation, inclusiveness and equality in education institutions are at the basis of youth perception of their trustworthiness. According to UNICEF[22] primary (98%) and secondary education (91%) attendance rates are high among the general population; however, the results are concerning for Roma children, with 81% attending primary, but only 39% attending secondary education. When analysing inequality, for children and youth, and specifically marginalised communities, schools are the first public institution in which they spend most of their time. Therefore, not being able to access or experience discrimination within those institutions creates space for distrust later in life.

Youth perception about 'Education being equally available' to specific groups, and 'Educational institutions treating equally' said groups, shows that young people recognise the disparities different marginalised groups experience. Specifically, the respondents are almost equally split when it comes to gender differences in terms of availability (46%) and equal treatment (58%). On the other hand, the majority of respondents concur in their perceptions that LGBTQIA+, Roma, migrants and children/youth with disabilities face the most difficulties in both the availability of education and equal treatment in educational institutions.

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[22] *UNICEF, "Children and women in numbers Key findings of the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey in North Macedonia 2018-2019", available at: www.unicef.org/northmacedonia/media/9196/file/mkd-report-mics-2018-19-en.pdf.*

Equality in educational institutions

Male and female children/youth: Education is equally available to 46%, Educational institutions treat equally 58%
LGBTQIA+ children/youth: Education is equally available to 21%, Educational institutions treat equally 16%
Roma children/youth: Education is equally available to 13%, Educational institutions treat equally 9%
Migrant children/youth: Education is equally available to 7%, Educational institutions treat equally 5%
Children/youth with disabilities: Education is equally available to 12%, Educational institutions treat equally 12%

Legend: ■ Education is equally available to ■ Educational institutions treat equally
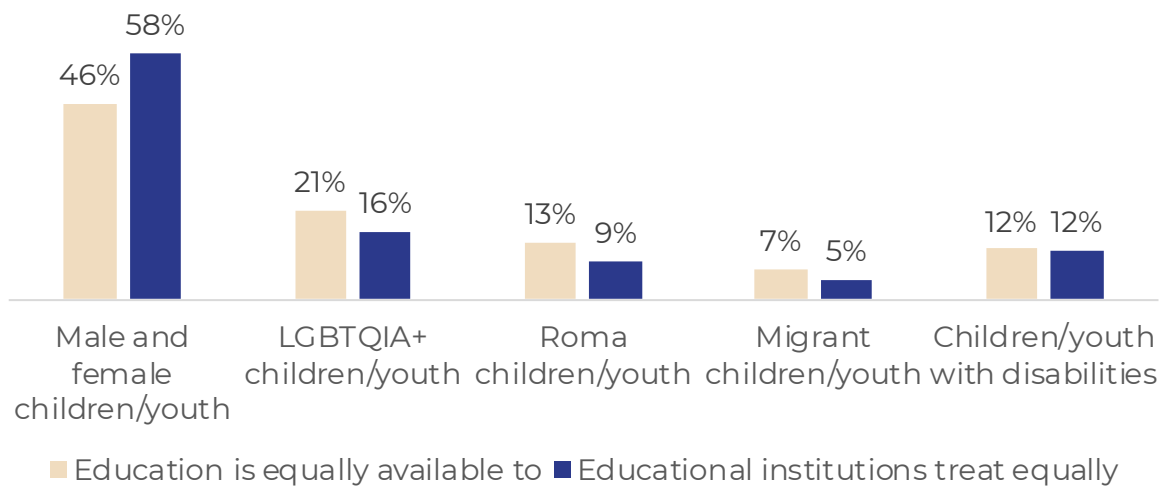
Figure 14. Youth perceptions of equality in education

The question of trust in institutions is inextricably linked with the issue of gender representation in political and public life. When institutions fail to ensure equitable representation, it erodes trust in their commitment to inclusivity and fairness. The lack of representation, both institutional and in the media, is perceived as a practice safeguarding traditional gender norms leading to discrimination based on gender and sex.

The topic of women's participation in political and public life was crucially addressed in both quantitative and qualitative research as an obstacle to the achievement of gender equality. Whilst acknowledging the role some women take in maintaining the status quo and the patriarchal norms, youth advocated for the importance of visibility and representation of women not just from a perspective of improved policymaking, but from a motivational perspective.

Current male-dominated policymaking that does not adequately re-flect the needs of all diverse groups was highlighted by youth as one of the aspects contributing to the lower participation of women in politics, who even when included are seen as often experiencing discrimination on the grounds of ethnicity, religion and physical appearance. Inappropriate comments about women's appearance are still widespread within institutions signalled as still heavily marked by sexism.

Nevertheless, the promotion of women's participation, and more importantly the support of women and girls entering the public space was highlighted as an important factor in achieving gender equality and social cohesion in North Macedonia. Inclusive representation not only enriches

decision-making processes but also sends a powerful signal that the institutions are genuinely invested in addressing gender disparities. Fostering trust in institutions means actively dismantling barriers that limit women's participation, ensuring that politics and public life reflect the diverse voices and experiences of Macedonian society.

5. USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION: RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES

The role of the media in the public sector was shared during the interview and supported by the survey, as a key place where toxic masculinity is being built. However, young people recognise the potential of technological tools to promote gender equality, address issues of discrimination and create safe spaces for young people. Examples as the #MeToo movement, local platforms like "*Сега Кажувам*" (Now I'm Speaking Out), and "*Каде Не Одам*" (Where I Don't Go/Walk), where shared as good local initiatives which changed narratives around gender-based violence and solidarity. These platforms serve as important spaces within the digital realm where individuals can share their experiences and establish supportive environments. Also, private groups on Facebook dedicated to reporting and discussing incidents of sexual harassment in Skopje were highlighted as positive examples of the use of technology. The creation of such constructive digital tools requires a collective sense of care and responsibility to cultivate spaces of unity and support, particularly in challenging times.

An example of a virtuous use of technology was shared by participants, who mentioned "*Studentarija*," an Instagram account with a substantial following of over 25,000 people, serving as a digital platform for students to voice their grievances. Interestingly, this Instagram profile has proven to be more influential in raising awareness and addressing student concerns compared to the official student ombudsman. However, whilst influential individuals, including influencers, role models, and micro-influencers, exist in North Macedonia advocating for important issues like gender-based violence, effective systemic resolutions to underlying problems are still lacking.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH

The recommendations shared by youth throughout the research can be summarised as follows:

- **Increase physical spaces for youth engagement**, which serve as platforms for dialogue and exchange, allowing young individuals to come together to share their experiences and stories and foster a sense of solidarity, connect and support one another. Their creation can help nurturing the relationship between youth and public institutions, and, when created inside public spaces, they can allow the perspective of young employees to be heard;

- **Involve young people in the decision-making process,** increasing opportunities for youth to act as leaders of change and future policymakers. This inclusion ensures that their perspectives and voices are considered when shaping systemic changes.

- **Address harmful discourses publicly and collectively**, to help challenge the mainstream narratives that perpetuate anti-gender, misogynistic, and sexist values. By focusing on eradicating discriminatory ideologies and fostering tolerance within society, youth can take a participatory role in achieving true social cohesion.

- **Address discrimination**, by:

  o Implementing a comprehensive sexual education programme at both formal and local levels;

  o Improving legal and social remedies for addressing injustice;

  o Promoting media and social media literacy across all age groups;

  o Promoting accessible therapy options for mental health support and generational healing.

- **Strengthen education on gender equality and social cohesion**, by:

  o Supporting youth development through informal education, a space perceived as the most appropriate to freely address social concerns. Youth recommends increased State funding for education and a more structured connection between formal and informal education, as complementary elements.

o   Implementing the digitisation of educational processes, addressing the risk of disinformation, digital violence, and the negative impact of social media. Specifically, youth suggested increasing the funding dedicated to education, improving school accessibility for youth with disabilities, and ensuring advanced and up-to date school books and educational approaches.

o   Rethinking parenthood, and incorporating forms of training to better prepare families or communities for breaking gender norms.

- **Harness the potential of youth influential individuals.** Social media influencers, role models, and micro-influencers should be supported and empowered to amplify their potential for raising awareness among youth on issues of gender equality and social cohesion and be drivers of positive change.

- **Build upon existing youth recommendations.** Youth suggests a more comprehensive implementation of the existing recommendations shared during the parliamentary discussion on youth policies in March 2023, related to the implementation and shortcomings of the Law on Youth Participation (Youth Law) which was adopted at the beginning of 2020. Some of those recommendations were digitisation of the process of registering youth organisations in the register maintained by the Agency for Youth and Sports, focus on greater promotion of the Law for Youth and an increase in the budget of municipalities.

CONCLUSION

The research, driven by young people and their active participation, provided a space for a wide range of ideas aimed at promoting social cohesion through the advancement of gender equality. The findings from this research can serve as valuable insights to guide future projects, initiatives, and strategic planning conducted by civil society, institutions, and international communities in the region. The research recognises the transnational potential of a collaborative approach to improving social cohesion and gender equality. When regional collaboration is impeded by political challenges, prioritising youth development can showcase the potential for regional cooperation and the discovery of shared solutions. In this sense, this study aims to contribute to the understanding of youth perspectives on social cohesion and gender equality and calls for meaningful action to address the identified challenges and prioritise the rights and well-being of youth in shaping a more equitable and inclusive society.

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