

VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality and Social
Cohesion in the Western Balkans

Annex V: Serbia

Author: Dr Rodoljub Jovanović



YOUTH

Inclusion, Equality & Trust



This research was supported by UN Women, within the United Nations initiative 'Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality & Trust', financed by the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund, and implemented by UN agencies and offices led by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) in Serbia, in collaboration with UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO and UN Women. The content of this publication, as well as the results presented in it, represent the views of the authors for their respective sections, who worked under the supervision of Lattanzio KIBS, and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UN Secretary-General's Peacebuilding Fund or UN Women.

VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality and Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans

Annex V: Serbia

Author: Dr Rodoljub Jovanović



YOUTH

Inclusion, Equality & Trust

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
Key Findings	5
1. METHODOLOGY	7
1.1 Research design and research sample	7
1.2 Observations on youth engagement	8
1.3 Literature Review	8
2. GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN SERBIA	10
2.1 Gender equality as a key aspect of social cohesion	11
2.2 Youth perceptions of intergroup relations	16
2.3 Impact of negative legacies of the past	18
3. OBSTACLES TO GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION FROM A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE	19
3.1 Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations	22
3.2 Gender-based violence	24
3.3 Discrimination and Hate Speech	25
3.4 Proliferation of polarising identity speeches	26
4. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS	28
5. USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION: RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES	30
6. RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH	32
CONCLUSION	33
BIBLIOGRAPHY	34

LIST OF IMAGES AND FIGURES

<i>Image 1. Key findings in Serbia</i>	6
<i>Image 2. Research sample in qualitative and quantitative research</i>	7
<i>Image 3. Word cloud for social cohesion</i>	11
<i>Image 4. Word cloud for gender equality</i>	13
<i>Figure 1. Youth perceptions of social cohesion</i>	12
<i>Figure 2. Youth perceptions of equal rights for women and men</i>	14
<i>Figure 3: Youth perceptions of the most common contexts of gender inequality</i>	15
<i>Figure 4. Youth perceptions of intergroup relations</i>	17
<i>Figure 5. Youth perceptions of factors that hinder gender equality</i>	19
<i>Figure 6. Youth perceptions on factors that negatively impact youth well-being</i>	20
<i>Figure 7. Youth perceptions of factors hindering the building of stronger and fairer societies</i>	21
<i>Figure 8. Youth perceptions of different expectations for men and women</i>	22
<i>Figure 9. Youth perceptions of stereotyped gender expectations</i>	23
<i>Figure 10. Experiences of discrimination</i>	25
<i>Figure 11. Youth perceptions of equal availability of education</i>	28
<i>Figure 12. Youth perceptions of equal treatment in education</i>	29
<i>Figure 13. Youth perceptions of the level of corruption and gender inequality in the workplace</i>	29
<i>Figure 14. Youth perceptions of the most common contexts of gender inequality</i>	31

INTRODUCTION

Data presented in this research paper are collected as part of the United Nations initiative ‘Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality & Trust’, which focuses on partnering with young people to address divisive narratives and hate speech to promote gender equality and enhance social cohesion in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo¹, financed by the UN Secretary-General’s Peacebuilding Fund, and implemented by UNDP, UNFPA, UNESCO and UN Women.

The research focuses on youth perceptions² of gender equality, social cohesion and the interconnections between the two. Toxic masculinities, misogyny, and homophobic, harmful discourses, as well as violence against women and girls, were examined as the factors undermining the prospect of both young women and men contributing meaningfully to public life and social cohesion in the region.

The present paper focuses on the analysis of the data collected from participants in Serbia, with a brief presentation of the methodology used, the number of participants, and the relevant literature on the topic, followed by an overview of the main research findings related to gender equality and social cohesion in Serbia.

¹ All references to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of the UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

² 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.

Key Findings

- The level of achievement of gender equality and social cohesion in Serbian society is low. Traditionalist and conservative narratives about gender roles are one of the main causes.
- There are actions taken but these are seen as void of substance. There is a lack of actual substantial change that young research participants expect to see.
- Youth engaged with the research process predominantly feel women should hold more positions of power. According to them, this would have a twofold benefit. Women would be able to make decisions about important gender equality policies (among others) and also send a message that women can serve in these roles as well as men.
- Deeply rooted traditional values that are seen as opposing gender equality actions are present in all contexts such as religious environments (33%), media (22%), religion, and family (16%) and youth engaged with the research process feel fighting them is a constant battle.
- Economic issues are extremely important for participants and cannot be uncoupled from gender equality and social cohesion. They perceive unemployment and poverty as very important negative factors hindering the progress of society.
- Youth sees the education system in Serbia as a place of significant discrimination towards minority groups, in particular when it comes to access to equal education for migrant children or migrant youth (20%), children and youth with disabilities (24%), and Roma children and youth (36 %).
- Gender-based violence has been identified by 59% of survey participants as the factor that most impacts youth's well-being in Serbia. Toxic and militarised masculinity has generated an acceptance of a certain model of behaviour for men that often carries sexist and inherently violent gestures and attitudes, which hinders the perception in recognising gender-based violence.
- The dual role of technology was acknowledged by youth, who see social media as a great resource to educate youth and organise social action, whilst also recognising their potential to propagate harmful content, practices and influences.

Key findings in Serbia



Percentage of respondents who believe there is social cohesion in Serbian society



Percentage of respondents who believe there is gender equality in Serbian society



Contexts of gender inequality

- Workplace
- Religious environment
- Media
- Family
- School



Obstacles to gender equality

- Media and social media
- Negative legacies of the past
- Traditional gender norms
- Structural and systemic inequalities



Education is not equitable for:

- Migrants
- Children with disabilities
- Roma children
- LGBTQIA+ youth
- Young women

Enabling factors to gender equality

- Increased awareness on gender equality and discrimination
- Equal representation in decision-making
- Equal access to quality education
- Equal employment opportunities
- Equal participation in peacebuilding processes



Image 1. Key findings in Serbia

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research design and research sample

The research in each of the project countries and territory included a multi-methods data collection strategy to explore youth attitudes about the linkages between youth development, gender equality, and social cohesion challenges. The research, structured as a youth-led participatory study, involved a team of young researchers from the five-project countries and territory in the design and implementation of qualitative and quantitative data collection activities including regional consultations, local consultations, in-depth interviews, and an online survey.

The research sample for the data collected in Serbia is detailed below. There were 121 respondents engaged in the survey, 34 participants in the local consultation, and 3 in the in-depth interviews conducted online with persons working or affiliated with public or local institutions.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches to the research

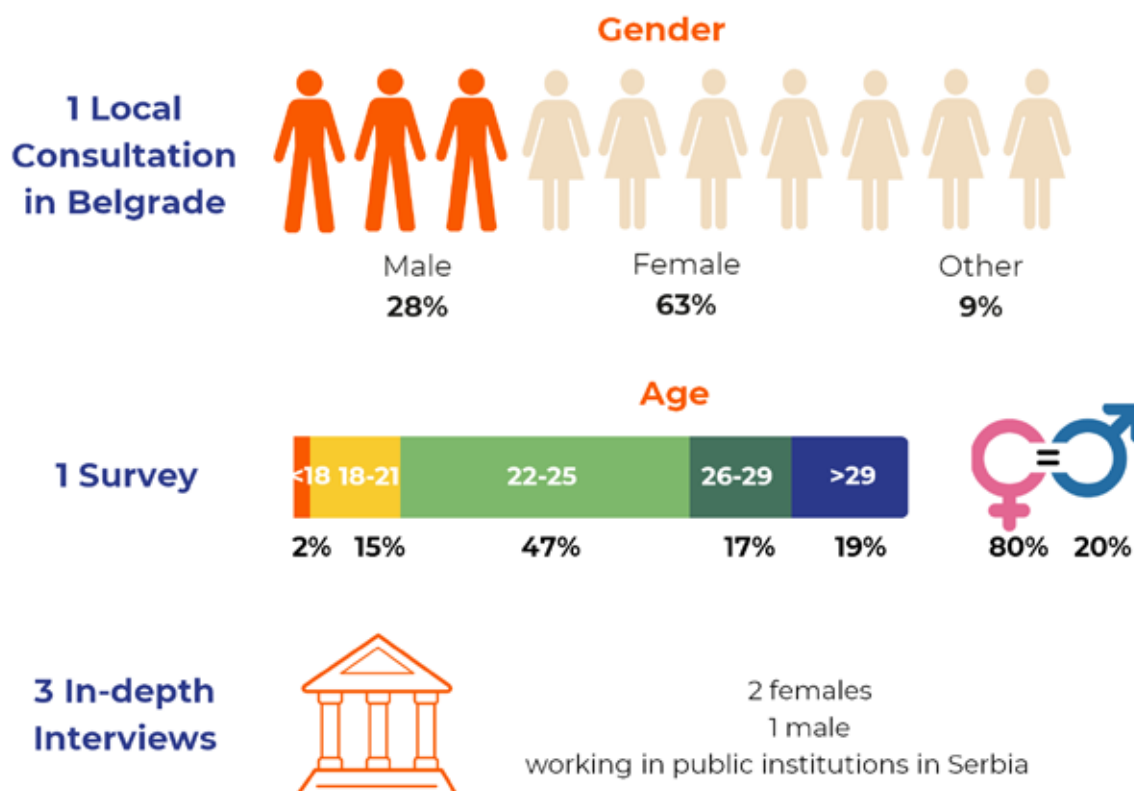


Image 2. Research sample in qualitative and quantitative research

1.2 Observations on youth engagement

The majority of participants in the local consultation and the interviews provided extremely positive feedback about the overall project and were tremendously engaged in the research process. Youth enthusiastically welcomed the opportunity to share their views, recognising that it is not common for them to be asked about their opinions on these matters and that this kind of project could be a great driver for meaningful change. Overall, participants in the local consultation were very active in sharing their opinions and communicated freely about the topics raised. Likewise, interview participants were eager to share their perceptions and there did not seem to be any obstacles. In addition to showing great interest and engagement, these comments point to youth in Serbia possibly not having too many chances to share their opinions in a public forum where they would be able to contribute to the debate in a meaningful way. This represents an important finding and a signal that there is a need for these kinds of research projects and more youth involvement.

1.3 Literature Review

Gender equality does not stand alone as an isolated principle in society, and it is always connected to other values such as democracy. A large cross-loc study, including 179 countries and data covering the period between 1960 and 2004 showed that societies with a long tradition of democracy promote gender equality (Beer, 2009). The data specifically show that “long-term democracy and women’s participation have a significant influence on improving the status of women relative to men” (Beer, 2009, p. 226) and this is equally true for more and less developed countries. In addition to this, some authors view the de-democratisation process, in recent years, as having negative effects on equality. This influence is seen through rising numbers of far-right parties with explicit anti-gender, anti-feminist, anti-migration, and/or homo-/transphobic components (Lombardo et al., 2021). Furthermore, “gender equality is a central facet in the polarisation caused by de-democratisation” (Lombardo et al., 2021, p. 521).

A recent report on the position of women in Serbia concludes that although women have the same rights, their position is worse (Beker & Janjić, 2023). They are discriminated against, have worse position than man in public as well as private spheres, and exposed to violence (Beker & Janjić, 2023). Furthermore, the report states, they are less paid even though they are more educated. Women are more burdened by housework and have less decision power than man (Beker & Janjić, 2023). According to the third Gender Equality Index, based on the 2018 data, the score for the Republic of

Serbia is 58 (out of 100) points and indicates continuous, albeit slow, progress in improving gender equality” (Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021, p. 10). Nevertheless, even though there is an increase compared to previous years, “if progress continues at this pace, it will take 59 years to achieve full gender equality” (Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021, p. 10).

Out of the six domains the report is focusing on, the domain of power and the domain of work are marked with continuous progress, the domain of money and the domain of knowledge are marked by inconsistent changes, whilst the domain of health is marked as stagnant. The domain of time was only measured in 2015 and the domain of violence was only measured in 2018; therefore, no trends can be discussed in relation to these two domains (Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021).

Looking at the region, a recent study focused on gender mainstreaming in higher education institutions brings the results of 133 interviews and a survey filled out by 4754 participants at the Universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022). The study investigated several thematic areas such as access to resources; beliefs and perceptions; practices and participation; institutions, laws, politics; and power.

Results showed that participants overall had very little knowledge of gender equality, with women possessing a bit more knowledge than men. The study also showed that gender-based violence is present at universities and other segments of society however, this is usually kept quiet. Interestingly, it was shown that “gender-based violence is a result of internalised sexism and acceptance of the gender stereotypes existent in socialisation processes and culture” (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022, p. 21). Furthermore, gender-based violence was shown to have many different forms that range from vulgar comments with a sexual connotation to complex benevolent sexism. (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022).

Another report on youth in Serbia showed that as much as one-fifth of participants aged between 14 and 29 years faced some form of discrimination based on gender, economic status, or age. Of this, 31% of females and 16% of males faced gender discrimination (Popadić et al., 2019). The same report concludes that younger respondents show more pronounced ethnic and social distance towards LGBTQIA+, Roma minority and refugees. In addition to this, 43 % of participants would feel very unsafe to travel to Kosovo, 21 % to Croatia, and 8 % to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Popadić et al., 2019). Along the same line, the report on youth value orientations of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Serbia concludes that there is still a significant level of traditionalist values among youth (Radoman, 2020).

2. GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN SERBIA

Whilst social cohesion was rarely an object of research in Serbia, gender equality is more often measured through various research projects. Probably the most important and all-encompassing is the above-mentioned Gender Equality Index (GEI). In the last report, the GEI of Serbia was rated as 58 which is significantly smaller than the EU-27 average of 67,4 (Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021).

When it comes to gender equality and social cohesion, as measured within current research, it could be said that participants in the local consultation in general are dissatisfied with the situation and are calling for changes. Quantitative data indicate that when invited to share their perceptions of gender equality in their community, as many as 60 % of survey participants rated gender equality in their community with a grade three out of five (five being the highest extent to which gender equality is achieved in their community), whilst the additional 17 % rate it with two and 9 % with one. None of the respondents rated gender equality with a five.

Qualitative data also indicate that gender inequality is perceived by youth in many aspects of their everyday lives. When asked about where in Serbian society they see most gender discrimination, participants in the local consultation stated family, school, parliament, and media as the main arenas where women are treated unequally. Participants shared that they see stereotypical gender roles interiorised from the earliest age in the school environment.

They further elaborate on this by explaining that they see some positive changes in the Serbian society however they all see that changes are happening slowly and often only on the formal level instead of dealing with substantial issues. This might be illustrated also in the following quote:

“On paper, you would say there is gender equality, we are a perfect country when it comes to gender equality but then we get to the substance, we see that the form is satisfied and not the substance. We see it from the quotas in the parliament, from the jobs women do, etc.”

Participant, local consultation

2.1 Gender equality as a key aspect of social cohesion

Participants in the local consultation were invited to share their knowledge and understanding of the research key concepts. At the same time, they were provided with the working definition the research team used during the research process. This was of crucial importance since it allowed the participants to reconcile different versions of the concepts and for the whole group to take the same starting points. To do this, participants in the local consultation were asked to provide associations between the two concepts using an interactive tool, “SLI.DO”. The tool allowed participants to answer the question using their mobile phones and instantly created a word cloud that showed the whole group what answers were most prominent. In the word cloud, the relative size of the word depicts the frequency of the word in the answers – the bigger the word, the more participants used it as the association to the concept in question.

The first concept was social cohesion and the original word cloud in Serbian is provided in Image 3.

When you think of “social cohesion”, what words come to your mind?³



Image 3. Word cloud for social cohesion

³ Realization of human rights, elimination of social polarization, inclusion and harmony, trust, poverty reduction, multiculturalism, tolerance, equality, cooperation, peace, solidarity, understanding, co-existence, reciprocity.

The most frequent associations to the concept of social cohesion for the group of participants in the local consultation in Serbia were cooperation (*saradnja* in Serbian) and two words that are synonymous with equality in English, however, emphasising a slightly different meaning of equality. The first one (*jednakost* in Serbian) points to the equity of different groups, whilst the other one (*ravnopravnost* in Serbian) emphasises the equality of rights different groups have. Following these three, participants often mentioned inclusion and harmony. In addition, concepts like trust, multiculturalism, poverty reduction, understanding, co-existence, reciprocity and human rights were mentioned.

When asked in the survey on the extent to which Serbian society has achieved social cohesion, more than one-half of young participants (54 %) rated it as two out of five and only 2 % rated it as five, meaning “very much”.

To what extent would you say the society you live in is marked by social cohesion?

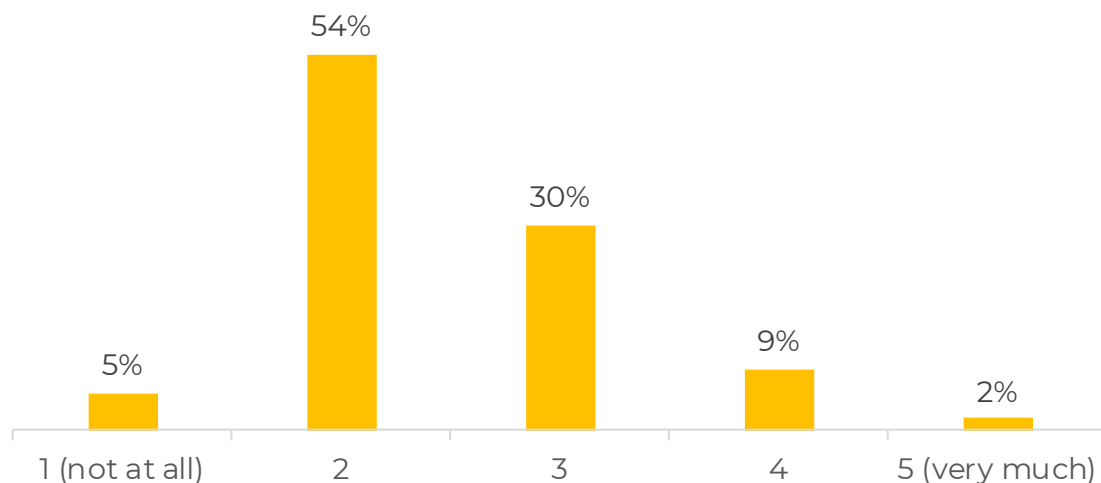


Figure 1. Youth perceptions of social cohesion

The second key concept participants were asked to freely associate with by using the same interactive tool was gender equality. The most frequent association with the concept of gender equality is equity (*jednakost* in Serbian) which is a logical association given it is part of the original concept (Image 4). However, this does indicate that participants considered equality, in general, to be important for gender equality. After this, the terms struggle and respect were the next most frequent answers. These answers point to the awareness participants have about the struggle for gender equality and respect for all people which is the foundation of gender equality.

When you think of “gender equality”, what words come to your mind?⁴



Image 4. Word cloud for gender equality

Apart from these, participants also thought important associations were democracy, feminism, patriarchy, and equal opportunities. All of these create the mosaic of the gender equality challenges in Serbian society – democracy should allow for all persons' rights to be respected, feminism is the embodiment of the struggle, patriarchy is what is often seen as standing in the way of gender equality in Serbian society, and equal opportunities undoubtedly make one of the preconditions for gender equality. In addition to these, participants named the right to choose, courage, inclusion, visibility, female struggle, queer, basic human right, solidarity, female empowerment, abuse of the concept/term (of gender equality), understanding, etc.

A general attitude of the youth towards the issue of gender equality can be also deduced from the survey responses to the question: “In your community, do women and men enjoy the same rights?”, which shows that most participants do not have a clear position. Less than 15% of participants chose options 1 – “not at all”-, or 5 – “very much”-, and all the rest is distributed around 3, which can be interpreted as undecided. This could mean they see some positive change but not enough which is in line with what interviewees also shared and with previous research (Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021), confirming that young people in Serbia are aware of the changes but feel there is a lot of work to be done.

⁴ Equality, struggle and respect, democracy, feminism, patriarchy, and equal opportunities, the right to choose, courage, inclusion, visibility, female struggle, queer, basic human right, solidarity, democracy, feminism, female empowerment, abuse of the concept (of gender equality), understanding.

In your community, do women and men enjoy the same rights?

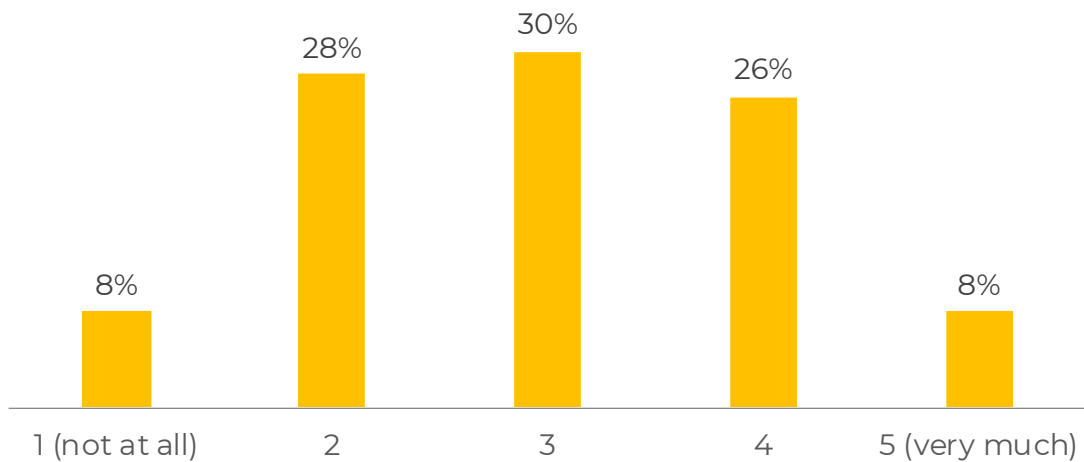


Figure 2. Youth perceptions of equal rights for women and men

Understanding where exactly youth see gender inequality provides further insight into the current situation in Serbian society. As we can see from the responses to the question: “In which of the following contexts is most common to find gender inequality in your community?”, young people see inequality the most in religious environments (33% of participants responded 5 – “very much”). This is not surprising since the more traditional gender roles are often connected to traditional institutions such as religious institutions.

This context is followed by online media channels (22% of participants responded 5 – “very much”) and offline media channels (20% of participants responded 5 – “very much”). What follows is family with 16% of participants responding 5 – “very much”. This is in line with some of the comments made in interviews and the local consultation, referring to gender inequality as being deeply rooted in the elder members of society such as parents or grandparents.

Civil society is rated the highest, meaning that civil society organisations are seen as actors that can be effective in bringing forward the change towards gender equality.

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”

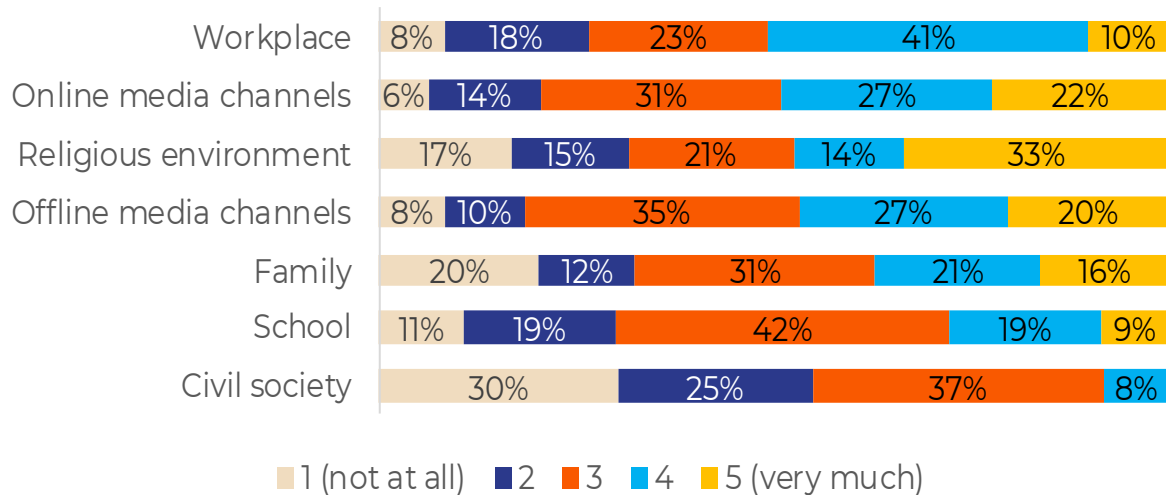


Figure 3: Youth perceptions of the most common contexts of gender inequality

When asked about the importance of gender equality in promoting social cohesion, respect for diversity and building constructive narratives, most participants agreed gender equality is extremely important for social cohesion and some even see it as a cornerstone of social cohesion.

One important concept that emerged in the local consultation was democracy.

“Gender equality and social cohesion are primarily important for democracy because democracy means the majority of citizens and women make one-half of citizens, without them, there is simply no democracy”.

Participant, local consultation

Quite a few participants agreed on the importance of connecting the two key concepts to the notion of democracy, however, some were not on the same page about what comes first. They felt democracy is a fundamental trait in society that needs to be boosted to achieve gender equality and social cohesion. This discussion also led to the agreement about the lack of political will to seriously tackle the problems of gender inequality in Serbian society. One of the problems with all these concepts, participants stated, is that they are perceived by the “ordinary people” as something foreign, abstract, and imposed from outside. This was emphasised as ironic by some participants, considering the feminist tradition and female struggle

in the last 70 years. This struggle is perceived as somehow forgotten and they feel as “starting again from zero”. The presence in Serbia of robust laws regulating gender equality was underlined, but a perceived dissatisfaction with the degree of their meaningful implementation emerged. An additional perceived element of frustration highlighted the tendency of conversations around gender equality to turn into conversations about differences between men and women instead of discussions around inclusivity. It was further emphasised that in order to build democracy, foster social cohesion, and promote gender equality, society must begin with the family and the upbringing of its members. Gender roles are perceived to develop and become internalised at a very early stage in life, and this is the point at which efforts towards equality need to commence. This aligns with previous research and theoretical work emphasising the interconnectedness of democracy and gender equality (Beer, 2009; Lombardo et al., 2021).

2.2 Youth perceptions of intergroup relations

Previous research shows that young people in Serbia sometimes have a complicated relationship towards other ethnic groups, especially the ones involved in the recent conflicts. A large percentage of Serbian young people do not feel very safe travelling to Kosovo or Croatia, whilst the situation with Bosnia is different. In addition, there is a pronounced social distance towards LGBTQIA+, Roma minority, and refugees (Popadić et al., 2019).

The following graph represents the attitudes towards other ethnic groups. As it is observed, highest number of respondents (90%) state that they have friends from other ethnic and religious groups, whereas 59% would date, and 57% would marry a person from another group. The data is somewhat contradictory and reveals a complex picture of the relationship towards other ethnic groups. This could mean that, whilst young people are open to other ethnic groups, there is a societal expectation to marry someone from one's own group. Simultaneously, only one-fifth says it is easier to live in an ethnically homogeneous community which again demonstrates their openness.

Moreover, only 9% have experienced people in their neighbourhood joining to address and solve problems, whilst 19% live in a community where people share their personal experiences and critical opinions with mutual trust. This data points to the lack of understanding and the culture of open and free discussion on the micro level. However, this can be seen as an opportunity for opening the dialogue at the micro level, bringing changes locally which feed into macro level.

Based on the observations of the research participants, it appears that young people in Serbia tend to be more open-minded compared to the broader society and recognise the existing “gaps” in social cohesion that could be further improved. Youth participating in the research believe that exchange programmes allowing them to learn about others and meet more people from other ethnic groups would contribute to progress on these issues.

Which of these statements are true for you?

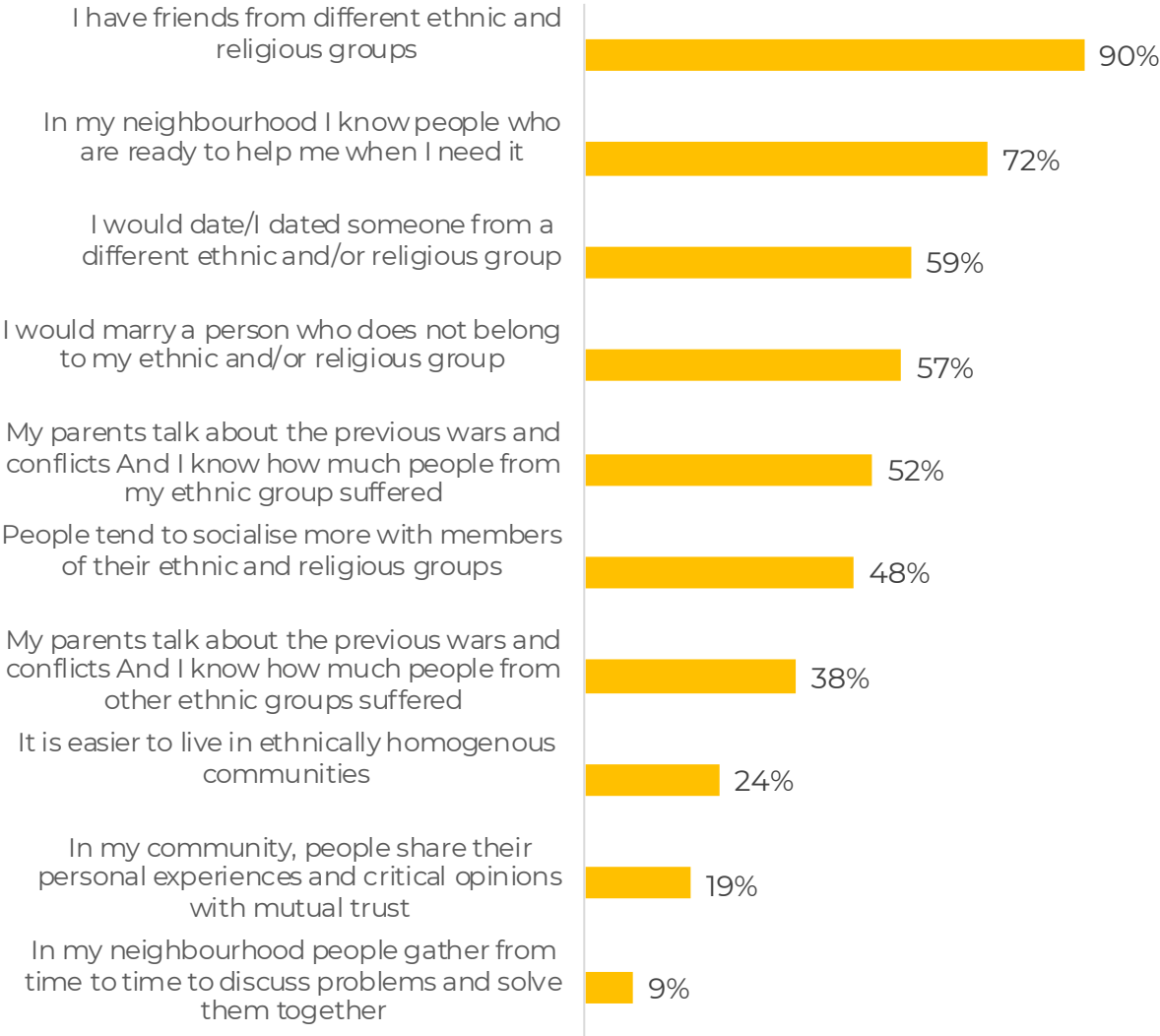


Figure 4. Youth perceptions of intergroup relations

2.3 Impact of negative legacies of the past

As revealed by the research participants, the way in which young people in Serbia relate to the negative legacies of the past is notably complex. Whilst some research shows they are ready to move on, leave the complexities behind, and turn towards the future (Pavasović Trošt, 2013), others point to young people expressing nationalist attitudes (Radoman, 2020) and easily adopting the one-sided dominant narratives about the conflicts (Jovanović & Bermudez, 2020).

The relationships between ethnic groups in the countries and territory included in this research project are closely connected to the negative legacies of the past and the way these are weighing on the youth in Serbia. Young people are aware of the weight of history on today's society and see themselves as the “new generation” that should build new bridges.

“We are still affected by the conflicts, especially the older generations. It seems they are a bit trapped in that hate but luckily this is changing with younger generations.”

Participant, In-depth Interview

Other consulted youths resonate with this perspective and demonstrated awareness of the influence of the family beliefs and education in creating trust in their community. They also indicated that disinformation and family beliefs and convictions are influencing many young people who tend to accept such perspectives without critical lenses. For instance, whilst they would feel comfortable travelling to neighbouring countries and territory, some of their young friends would not.

Overall, young people believe that the members of the “new generations” can help overcome the negative legacies of the past. However, youth also recognise the need for education and changes in attitudes, particularly among older members of society.

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

There are many challenges to gender equality and social cohesion in Serbian society. Most of them are elaborated in different parts of this report supported with the viewpoints of the young people who participated in the different stages of the research. One of the primary observations made by young respondents in Serbia is their perception that all affirmative action measures are seen as superficial, lacking the intention to improve the position of women. In addition, this kind of attitude, as mentioned before, is connected to, and builds on conservative politics and legacies of the past, including militarised and toxic masculinities. Some specific obstacles are outlined below.

Quantitative data collected indicate that the representation of rigid gender roles and stereotypes in media and social media is seen as the most important factor hindering gender equality (65%) and it is closely followed by negative legacies of the past (63%), traditional gender norms (53%) and structural and systemic inequalities (53%). These are followed by disinformation (37%), ethnic divisions and tensions (25%), and finally populism as the least important factor (20%).

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

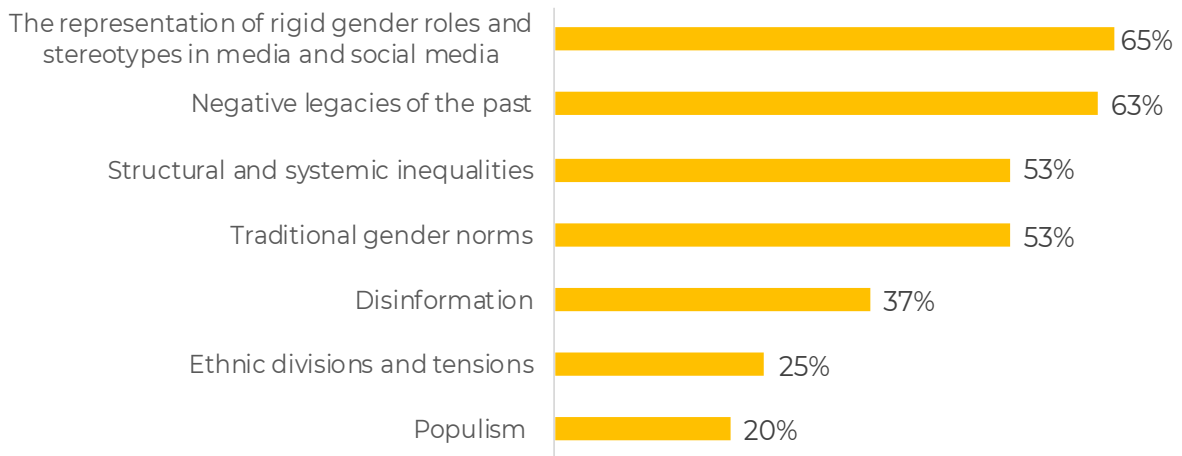


Figure 5. Youth perceptions of factors that hinder gender equality

It is also important to look at the factors impacting youth well-being in Serbia since these reveal an important part of the picture when it comes to gender equality and social cohesion. Domestic/family violence (59% of participants chose response 5 – “very much”) and other forms of violence (58% of participants chose response 5 – “very much”) are extremely high in young respondents’ perceptions of negative factors impacting youth well-being in Serbia. It is noteworthy that consulted youth mark lack of employment opportunities (56% of participants chose response 5 – “very much”) and poverty (55% of participants chose response 5 – “very much”) as one of the most important factors negatively impacting youth wellbeing in Serbia which shows the constant presence of economic issues as a high concern for young people.

To what extent do the following factors negatively impact youth well-being in your community?

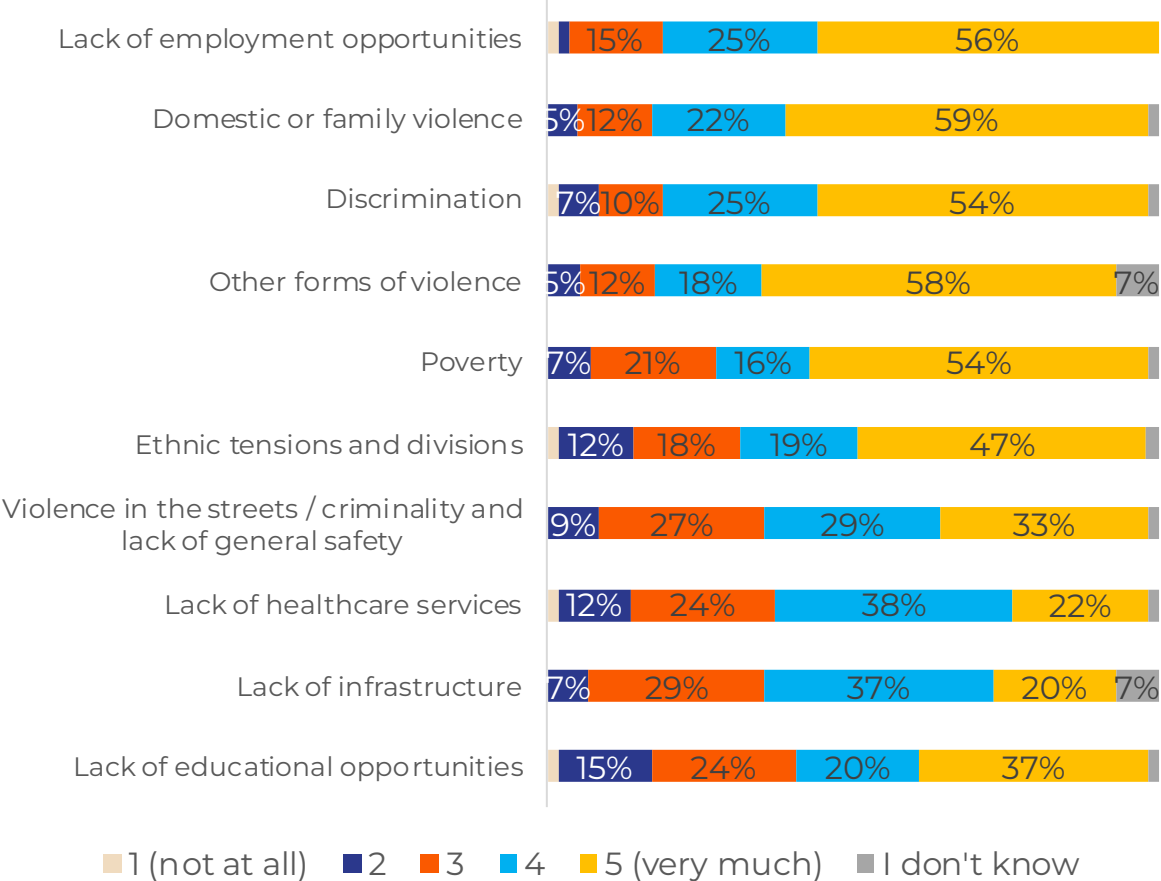


Figure 6. Youth perceptions on factors that negatively impact youth well-being⁵

⁵ 2% of participants reported selecting 1- 'not at all'- in relation to the influence of lack of employment opportunities, discrimination, ethnic tensions and divisions, lack of healthcare services, and lack of educational opportunities on the well-being of youth within their community. 2% of participants reported selecting 2 in relation to the influence of lack of employment opportunities on the well-being of youth within their community.

Ethnic tensions and divisions (47% of participants chose response 5 – “very much”) and discrimination (54% of participants chose response 5 – “very much”) are rated as high factors as well, which signals a lack of social cohesion.

When asked in general about the factors that hinder building a stronger and fairer society, most of the respondents indicated corruption (81%). This is followed by ethnic divisions and tensions (61%), hate speech (58%), propaganda and discrimination (56% each), disinformation (53%) and, most relevant to the research topic gender inequality (49%).

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

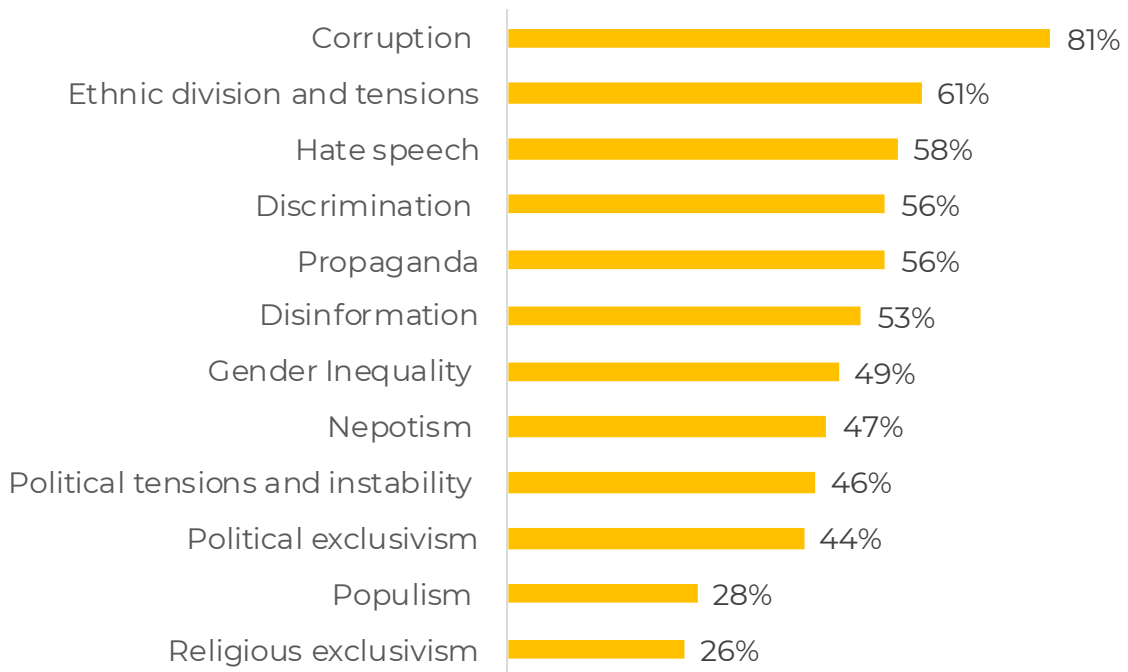


Figure 7. Youth perceptions of factors hindering the building of stronger and fairer societies

3.1 Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations

Participants overwhelmingly (88%) see Serbian society as one where cultural and traditional norms set different expectations for men and women. Drastic differences are further seen in specific expectations for men and women.

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

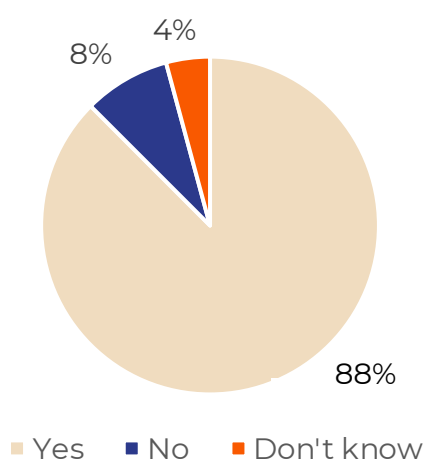


Figure 8. Youth perceptions of different expectations for men and women

According to the observations and responses of the respondents, Serbian society is perceived as expecting women, and not men, to 1) get married at a young age, 2) not have sexual intercourse before marriage, 3) spend more time taking care of the household, 4) spend time and effort taking care of the family, 5) have children at a young age, and 6) provide emotional support to family members. Simultaneously, respondents believe that Serbian society is perceived as expecting men, and not women to 1) provide security and financial support for the family, 2) be the head of the household, 3) earn more than their partner, and 4) hide emotions in public. The data paints a picture of societal norms, values and unequal expectations young people feel are put on them as they are growing up and taking on more and more responsibilities.

In your community, who is expected to...

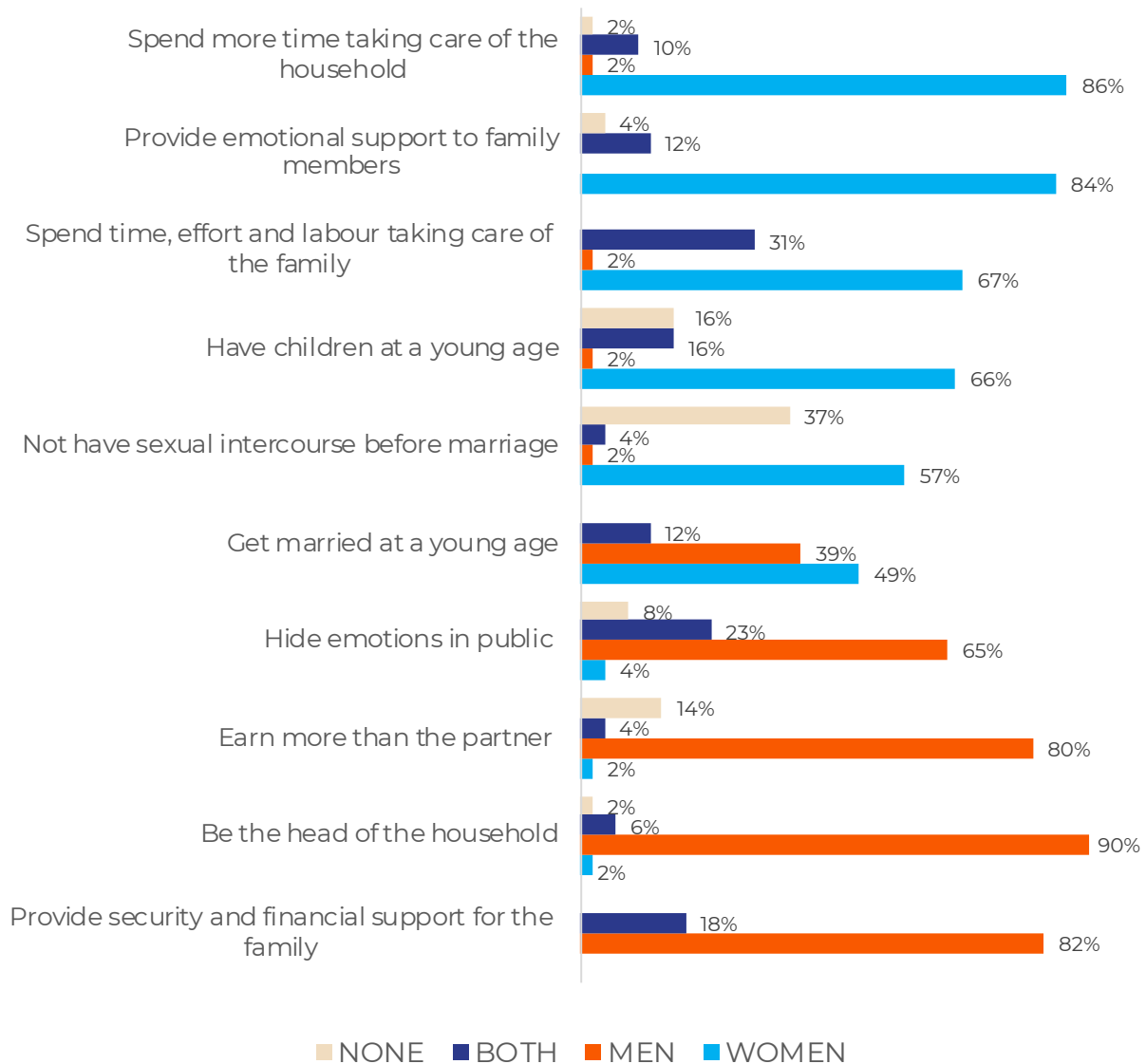


Figure 9. Youth perceptions of stereotyped gender expectations

The qualitative data collected indicates strong awareness among youth of the presence of rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations in Serbia. Gender expectations are seen as starting during pregnancy with the parents' projection of future gender roles based on sex, which affects all aspects of children throughout their growth. Measures of positive discrimination (e.g., quotas for female Parliament members) generate mixed feelings, with some participants being critical of their power to bring real equality, and the majority determining their importance to open the door for changing the narrative and reaching gender equality. These measures are seen as needed not only at the country level, where they usually exist, but also in local-level institutions. Another important issue raised by youth

regards the fact that real estate in Serbia accounts for only 25 % of female owners (Women Own Only a Quarter of Real Estate in Serbia, 2021). Many participants shared that their mothers gave up the inheritance of their parents in favour of their brothers: *“When I asked my mother why you did it, she didn’t know how to explain. This is just the way things work”*. The improvements that occurred in the last 70 years (women getting an education, working, having a bank account, etc.) were acknowledged; however, unpaid care and household work is still perceived as a prominent issue affecting gender equality.

Overall, youth consulted perceive a lack of systemic support for initiatives that would foster overcoming rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations whilst making women feel safe and heard.

3.2 Gender-based violence

Participants agree that gender-based violence in Serbian society is a prominent issue and they are aware of the worrying number of femicide cases in Serbia – at least 19 in the first seven months of 2023. They shared their shock, worry, and a call for action:

“There is way too much gender-based violence and there is action to combat it, but it reads as fake and not really achieving anything. We need more action.”

Participant, local consultation

Youth participating in the research, however, noticed that publicly calling the gender-motivated killing of a woman a femicide is a small but important first step on a long and difficult road to protecting women from this kind of violence.

Toxic and militarised masculinities, referring to the cultural and behavioural pattern in which the representation of appropriate behaviour for the male gender is associated with “military” models of behaviour, celebrate strong, powerful and overpowering men - which according to youth leads to most people not recognising sexual violence. Participants spontaneously made a connection between the negative legacies of the past, toxic masculinities, and gender inequalities in today’s society.

“During and especially after the conflict, there is a militant culture being created where that kind of masculinity is seen as a desired quality. The man is the one who presents as the defender of the nation and the defender of all that is good”.

Participant, local consultation

A wide societal acceptance of this kind of attitude is perceived by consulted youth in Serbia. In particular, youth highlighted that sexist and inherently violent gestures and attitudes (like touching a woman without her consent), are often not recognised as such. In addition to being normalised, gender-based violence and violence against women is perceived as being often romanticised by media discourses and in society in general (e.g., headlines speaking about “love troubles” or “tragic romantic end” instead of, what young people feel they should say – murder). All of this is seen as connected to the role of women in a society which in turn is partly dependent on the model of militarised and toxic masculinity that was predominant during the conflicts.

3.3 Discrimination and Hate Speech

Youth engaged in the research are aware of the occurrence of instances of discrimination in Serbia but often avoid talking about personal experiences. This is why the survey question regarding participants’ experiencing or witnessing different forms of discrimination and intolerance is revealing.

Have you personally experienced or witnessed any instances of discrimination or intolerance based on the following grounds?

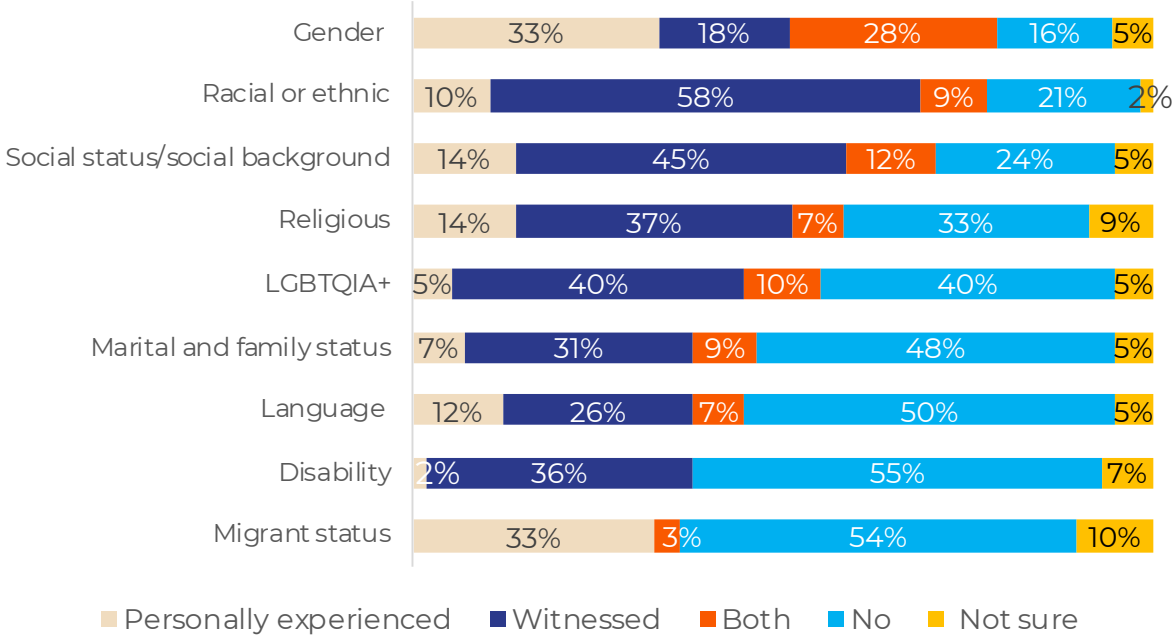


Figure 10. Experiences of discrimination ⁶

⁶ 2% of participants indicated ‘personally experienced’ in relation to the category of disability. 2% of participants indicated ‘not sure’ in relation to the category of racial or ethnic.

When it comes to personal experiences, it is evident that many participants personally experienced gender-based discrimination or intolerance (33%), as well as discrimination or intolerance based on social status (14%), religion (14%), language (12%), and racial or ethnic membership (10%).

The number of participants who witnessed these forms of discrimination or intolerance shows a steep increase, as more than one-half of participants witnessed racial or ethnic discrimination or intolerance (58%), almost one-half witnessed discrimination or intolerance based on social status (45%), and a considerable percentage of youth witnessed discrimination or intolerance based on sexuality or religion (37%).

These numbers are very high and telling of the types of experiences youth have. The number of young people who personally experienced discrimination among the ones consulted is not very high; however, the amount of youth in Serbia who witnessed these forms of discrimination is concerning. This might also indicate that potentially discriminatory situations have in some cases not been identified as such because young people may not always be fully aware of all the personal characteristics that could serve as grounds for discrimination.

3.4 Proliferation of polarising identity speeches

Interviewees see the challenges to gender equality in many factors in society; however, they perceive traditional values, religion, and nationalism to be combined in one big attitude orientation that prevents full gender equality. These types of attitudes are often ascribed by youth to the older generation, but also to people subscribing to the right-wing ideology. They see them as connected and interrelated in a way that one is feeding the other. The subsequent quotes underscore this viewpoint:

“I think it is a circle of toxic masculinities, nationalism, anti-gender narratives, a vicious circle of that narrative.”

“Religion is another thing that influences gender inequality. The church is powerful, and they promote inequality.”

Participants, local consultation

Interviewees perceive society as changing but are simultaneously aware of the challenges ahead and the strength of the traditional, patriarchal understanding of the female role that is difficult to change. This is apparent from the following quote of a participant highlighting *“this idea in the Bal-*

kans that a woman should be at home, that men feel endangered when it is not so. Like conservative, traditional gender roles.” These views are perceived as being often promoted by religious values which, according to consulted youth, powerfully influence gender equality in Serbian society.

Nationalism and anti-gender ideology are seen as “coming from the same place”. According to the respondents, the connections between conservative politics, traditional attitudes, traditional gender roles, and anti-gender ideology are clear and self-explanatory. They see them as one large complex of attitudes that is, fairly popular and dominant in the political discourse. As an interviewee highlighted:

“When politicians speak about abortion, organising protests, saying women should have 4 children, etc. you see the connection between nationalism and gender inequality. It is all coming from the same place.”

Participant, In-depth Interview

Most also add nationalism and the negative image of the other ethnic groups as fitting this large attitude complex. It is interesting how another interviewee makes this connection between nationalist narratives and women in politics. He states that the situation with nationalist narratives in Serbia is getting worse and identifies the ones he deems responsible:

“People in high power positions are constantly creating negative narratives about neighbouring countries and territory and they are making this a new normal in a way. (...) Nationalism is connected to gender, yes. It is most often men who promote nationalist narratives.”

Participant, In-depth Interview

This quote may be understood as anticipating that engaging more women in politics is the way to change the narratives and, in the long run, build just and peaceful societies. Since young people see the connections between these attitudes, gender equality needs to come together with other societal changes. It needs to be supported and followed by social cohesion but also with a turn away from nationalist narratives and discriminatory politics.

4. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Youth consulted in the study are aware of the presence of women in public institutions and political bodies but, following what was previously mentioned, they express doubt this corresponds with women being heard and participating in a meaningful way.

Even though quotas and other affirmative action measures are implemented, the actual power given to these women and their treatment in the media is perceived as an obstacle to equal treatment.

“In the first parliament session, there are always news headlines about which women MP wore what and you never hear that about a man. This is so very present in the political discourse and also in the way male political representatives talk about women.”

Participant, local consultation

When it comes to equal access to education and equal treatment within the education system, youth see almost no gender discrimination as opposed to more discrimination towards various minority groups. Only 20% of participants think education is equally available to migrant children or migrant youth, 24% think education is equally available to children and youth with disabilities, and 36% think education is equally available to Roma children and youth. More than half of participants think education is equally available to LGBTQIA+ children and youth (58%).

Education is equally available to...

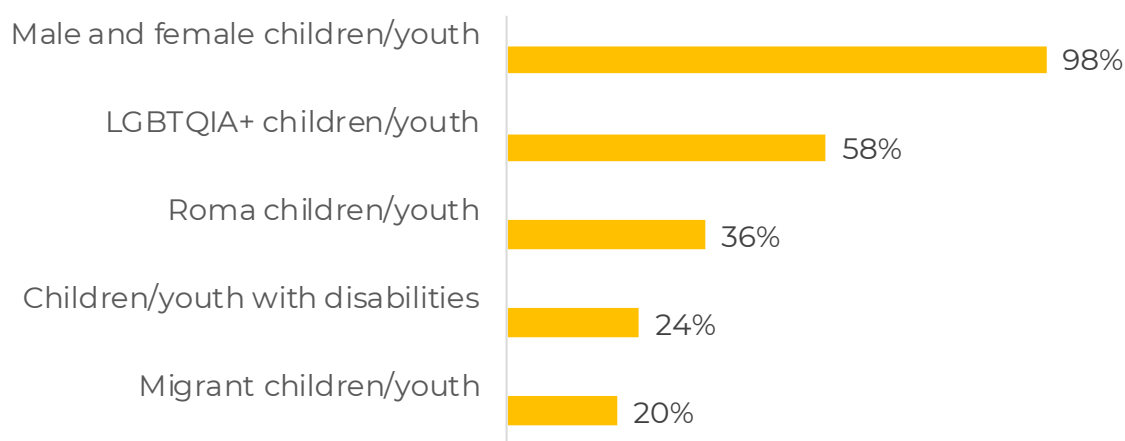


Figure 11. Youth perceptions of equal availability of education

The situation with treatment within the educational institutions is seen as similar, however, a smaller number of young people believe children/youth with disabilities, migrant youth/children, and Roma youth/children are equally treated. Only 18% believe children/youth with disabilities, and migrants are treated equally, whilst the situation improves for LGBTQIA+ youth and children (34% think they are treated equally). As much as 95% believe male and female youth and children are treated equally by educational institutions.

Educational institutions treat equally...

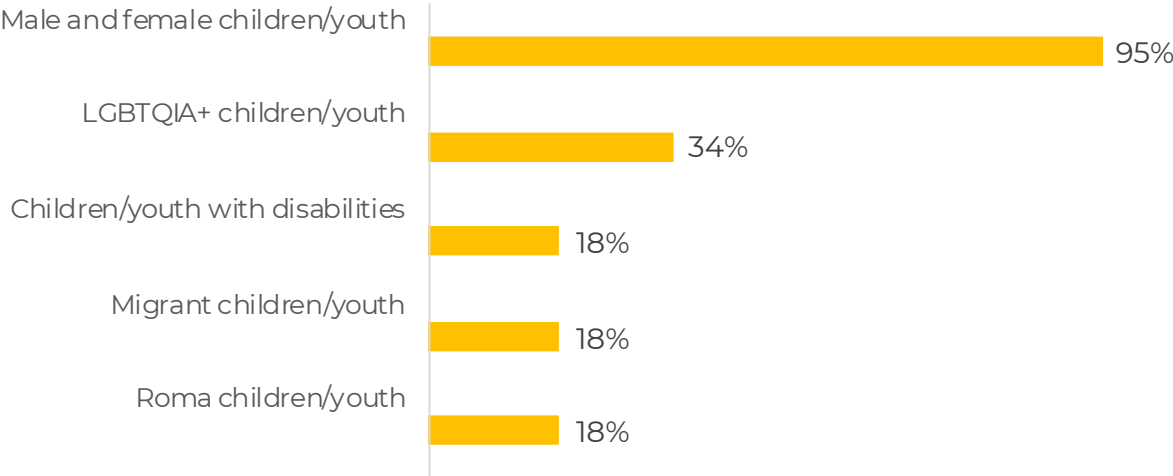


Figure 12. Youth perceptions of equal treatment in education

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

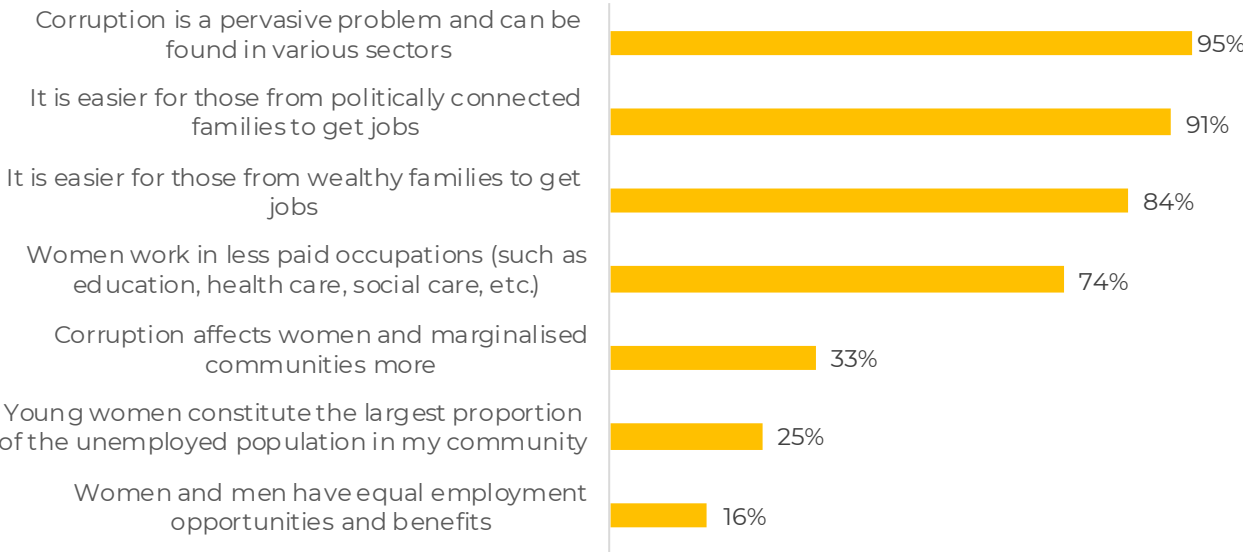


Figure 13. Youth perceptions of the level of corruption and gender inequality in the workplace

There are various societal problems interrelated with the advancement of gender equality and social cohesion. In a shocking contrast to the majority of participants seeing the access to education and treatment by educational institutions as equal, only 16% of participants see women and men as having equal employment opportunities and benefits (Figure 13). Another concerning finding is youth perception of corruption and the effects of political connections when it comes to securing employment. There is almost a complete consensus about these issues which points to their prevalence within society. Whilst these do not directly refer to gender equality, they are connected to what young people pointed out in the local consultation – democracy and consequently social cohesion. Democratic procedures and the rule of law were seen by many young people in the local consultation as necessary prerequisites for the improvement of gender equality and social cohesion. The consensus about these problems signals that the research respondents see a lack of foundations for building social cohesion and gender equality in Serbian society. This connection is clear from as many as one-third of youth perceiving women to be more affected by corruption.

Addressing systemic discrimination in the labor market, the majority of young respondents (74%) perceive that women are employed in lower-paying professions. Taken together, the public institutions such as the educational system and public offices in Serbia are perceived by youth to be discriminatory towards women and to an even larger extent towards various minority groups such as Roma, migrants and LGBTQIA+.

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

Many young people use news applications to get more concrete news content nevertheless, the majority of youth in Serbia use Instagram and TikTok every day (Stojanović & Ivković, 2022). This means that most of the information they consume comes from these sources. Given this, it is crucial to understand the effects these media can have on gender equality and social cohesion.

The youth consulted provided a balanced view by pointing out the good and bad sides of the use of technology. The risks identified include the anonymity of social media perceived as often allowing for the “*worst kind of comments*” to emerge online from people who would not stand by them in

person, and the negative impact of anti-gender influencers on equality and social cohesion. On the other hand, opportunities acknowledged include social media as a powerful tool for quickly spreading a message or a campaign to a great number of people and a great resource to promote gender equality initiatives and programmes as well as educate young people. Additionally, social media are seen by the youth consulted as a great tool to organise social action, and an especially important one to foster young people's participation in the political life of the community.

Quantitative data collected reveal that participants from Serbia perceive a high level of gender inequality in social media. As many as 22 % say the extent of gender inequality in social media is “very much”. When compared to other contexts, they assess social media as the context with the most gender inequality, right after religious environments (33% say there is very much gender inequality in these).

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”

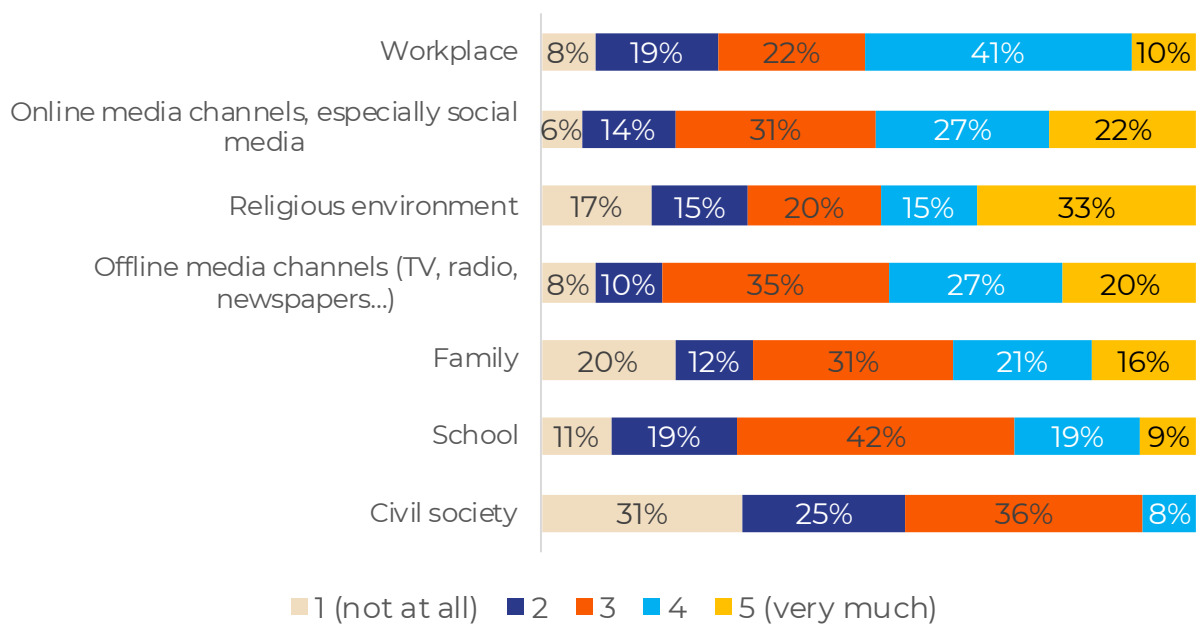


Figure 14. Youth perceptions of the most common contexts of gender inequality

The quantitative data indicate that media and social media are often perceived by youth as negatively impacting gender equality, as indicated by 20% of participants who chose the representation of rigid gender roles and stereotypes in media and social media as a factor that hinders achieving gender equality in Serbia.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH

Youth consulted in the study shared their ideas of what actions could be taken to combat gender inequality and foster social cohesion in Serbia. Recommendations include:

- **Enhance the protection mechanisms for the survivors of gender-based violence** and violence against women, and implement preventive measures to avoid the occurrence of violence.
- **Create spaces for youth engagement**, where youth can harness their potential to be leaders of change.
- **Prioritise the inclusion of women in decision-making positions.**
- **Support projects for smaller and rural communities** on the promotion of gender equality and social cohesion. Whilst in Belgrade equal rights are perceived to be enjoyed to a certain extent, the situation is seen as dramatically worsening outside of the capital.
- **Enhance education on gender equality:**
 - Strengthen formal and informal early education programmes on gender equality;
 - Introduce programmes regarding gender equality in schools' curricula at all levels of education institutions.
- **Evaluate positively volunteer and activist experience in university admission processes**, to motivate young people to get involved in activist work and enhance awareness of gender equality and social cohesion issues in Serbia.

CONCLUSION

This mixed methods research project yielded multiple insights that could be used to improve the general state of gender equality and social cohesion in Serbia. Across three different forms of data collection (interviews, local consultation, and the survey) participants expressed some common attitudes.

Young people participating in the research see social cohesion as a crucial prerequisite for gender equality. However, they understand social cohesion as part of the wider complex of values that includes democracy, human rights, inclusion, poverty reduction, understanding, etc.

In the Serbian context, gender inequality is perceived as part of a traditional, patriarchal set of values that are often unspoken and solidified in societal practices across the board. On this aspect, young people see the representation of rigid gender roles and stereotypes in media and social media as the most important factor hindering gender equality; this is closely followed by negative legacies of the past, traditional gender norms, and structural and systemic inequalities. Youth are also very concerned by the rising numbers of cases of gender-based violence which they also see as a result of traditional value systems. Youth sees nationalism, toxic masculinity, militarised masculinity, anti-gender narratives, and right-wing politics as closely connected and as “coming from the same place”, and, despite not seeing themselves as significantly affected by the negative legacies of the past, they perceive that older members of Serbian society are still burdened by it. Efforts to reach social cohesion and gender equality (by public or non-public actors) are seen as working against the previously mentioned traditional set of values and are perceived as insufficient, inefficient, and sometimes as something done “just for show” – “insincere activities” that are all about the form and not about the substantial change. In this regard, young people feel like they are not invited to engage enough and are often excluded from discussions about these issues and other matters that concern them.

They also seem extremely conscious of the fact that achieving gender equality is an uphill battle but demonstrated the willingness to actively participate in fighting for a better future, for which one of the key drivers of change they identified would be fostering formal, informal, and non-formal education in promoting values and beliefs, as well as fighting stereotypical gender roles.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Babovic, M., & Petrovic, M. (2021). *Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia 2021: Digitalization, future of work and gender equality* (p. 104). Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/gender_equality_index_for_serbia_2021.pdf

Beer, C. (2009). Democracy and Gender Equality. *Studies in Comparative International Development*, 44(3), 212–227. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-009-9043-2>

Girard, F. (2007). United Nations—Negotiating Sexual Rights and Sexual Orientation at the UN. In R. Parker, R. Petchesky, & R. Sember (Eds.), *SexPolitics—Reports from the Front Lines*. https://www.sxpolitics.org/frontlines/book/pdf/capitulo9_united_nations.pdf

Jagosh, J., Macaulay, A. C., Pluye, P., Salsberg, J., Bush, P. L., Henderson, J., Sirett, E., Wong, G., Cargo, M., Herbert, C. P., Seifer, S. D., Green, L. W., & Greenhalgh, T. (2012). Uncovering the Benefits of Participatory Research: Implications of a Realist Review for Health Research and Practice: A Realist Review for Health Research and Practice. *Milbank Quarterly*, 90(2), 311–346. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0009.2012.00665.x>

Jovanović, R., & Bermúdez, A. (2021). The next generation: Nationalism and violence in the narratives of Serbian students on the break-up of Yugoslavia. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 21(1), 2–25. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sena.12339>

Kisić, I., & Stanojlović, S. (2018). *Mladi u Eri Postistine: Evropski Identitet i Obrazovanje* (37; Biblioteka Helsinške Sveske, p. 120). Helsinški Odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji. <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/sveske37.pdf>

Lombardo, E., Kantola, J., & Rubio-Marin, R. (2021). De-Democratization and Opposition to Gender Equality Politics in Europe. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 28(3), 521–531. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxab030>

Pavasović Trošt, T. (2013). Dealing with the Past: History and Identity in Serbia and Croatia. <https://dash.harvard.edu/handle/1/10288616>

Petronijević, M. (2020). *Country Sheet on Youth Policy in the Republic of Serbia* (p. 20). EU-Council of Europe youth partnership. https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/63134234/Serbia_Country-sheet_April2020.pdf/b42a919f-fba4-fd73-12fb-49060fc3fd85

Popadić, D., Pavlović, Z., & Mihailović, S. (2019). *Mladi u Srbiji 2018/2019*. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/belgrad/15295-20190411.pdf>

Protest protiv nasilja nad ženama i u Novom Sadu. (2023, August). Radio Slobodna Evropa.

<https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/novi-sad-protest-protiv-nasilja-nad-zenama-solidarnost-32557469.html>

Radoman, M. (n.d.). *Vrednosne orijentacije srednjoškolaca u Srbiji – Istraživanje 2019*.

Radoman, M. (2020). *Vrednosne orijentacije srednjoškolaca u Srbiji – Istraživanje 2019*. (38; Biblioteka Helsinške Sveske, p. 105). Helsinški odbor za ljudska prava u Srbiji. <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/sveske38.pdf>

Spahić Šiljak, Z., Kovačević, J., & Husanović, J. (Eds.). (2022). *Izazovi integriranja rodne ravnopravnosti u univerzitetskoj zajednici: Protiv rodno zasnovanog nasilja* (Prvo izdanje). TPO Fondacija.

Stepanov, B. (2022). *Nasilje u Porodici – Šta Govore Podaci: Pregled Dostupnih Podataka o Nasilju u Porodici i Zloupotrebi Vatrenog Oružja za Nasilje* (p. 102). Program Ujedinjenih nacija za razvoj. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/rs/undp_rs_Nasilje_u_porodici_Sta_govore_podaci.pdf

Stojanović, B., & Ivković, A. (2022). *Alternative Report on The Position and Needs of Youth in the Republic of Serbia—2022* (p. 110). National Youth Council of Serbia – KOMS. <https://koms.rs/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Alternative-report-2022.pdf>

Women own only a quarter of real estate in Serbia. (2021). Serbia-Business.Eu/. <https://serbia-business.eu/women-own-only-a-quarter-of-real-estate-in-serbia/#:~:text=Women%20own%20only%20a%20quarter%20of%20real%20estate,and%20the%20SeConS%20Development%20Initiative%20Group%20announced%20today>



**United
Nations**



**PEACEBUILDING
FUND** ▶ ▶ ▶ ▶

UN WOMEN 