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MAPPING AND ANALYSIS

VULNERABLE GROUPS OF WOMEN IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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This report maps the perceived vulnerabilities of women and girls across the country's regions, identifies systemic and socio-economic challenges, and provides recommendations for targeted and inclusive support mechanisms. The findings are drawn from institutional reports, efforts of civil society organizations, and field research.

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of UN Women, the United Nations, or any of its affiliated organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia guarantees equality of all citizens, regardless of gender, ethnic background and social status. The Constitution is implemented through a series of laws and acts that are founded upon the principles of equality and non-discrimination and are enforced in state institutions and local self-government units. National institutions have recognized the importance of gender equality and have made efforts to advance it through the development of an enabling legislative framework, adoption of policies and establishment of institutional mechanisms at central and local levels. However, there remains a clear need to bridge the implementation gap between the law and practice in order to strengthen women's rights. Closing this gap is crucial for the country's commitments to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the EU integration process. This requires respecting the Leave No One Behind principle and enabling equal access to choices and opportunities for all individuals to participate and benefit from development progress. The principle *Leave No One Behind* urges us to address the structural causes of inequality and the marginalization that affects certain groups. Uncovering vulnerabilities is an important tool for this process. The rationale behind this study is to conduct research and generate data to serve as a basis for raising public awareness and sensitising decision-makers regarding existing discrimination while also promoting the needs of vulnerable groups of women.

The UN Women Office in North Macedonia supported the mapping and analysis of vulnerable groups of women in the country. The objective of this analysis is to understand the specific challenges and needs of different groups of women, including those facing economic, social, or health-related vulnerabilities, and also to provide data that can support advocacy efforts aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable women and to raise awareness about their issues.

The recommendations presented in the analysis are based on the results obtained through the research carried out by the research team to gather opinions from different groups of women, non-governmental organisations and public institutions.

Legal framework for gender equality

North Macedonia has made progress regarding gender equality and women's rights. According to the World Economic Forum's 2024 Global Gender Gap Index[1], North Macedonia ranks 58th out of 146 countries, marking an improvement from its 2023 ranking of 73rd and its 2022 ranking of 69th. However, significant gaps continue to persist in almost all areas, including representation, participation and access to resources. The Gender Equality Index[2] score for North Macedonia for 2022 is 64.5 points out of a maximum of 100, showing an increase of 2.5 points compared to the previous measurement in 2019. If progress is achieved at this pace (2.5 points every four years), the country will need approximately 57 years to achieve gender equality in all domains.

The country possesses a highly robust legislative framework related to gender equality. The Government has adopted the **National Development Strategy 2024-2044**, as the most comprehensive strategic document that defines the main goals and measures for the development of the Republic of North Macedonia over the next 20 years, focusing on the proper implementation of projected measures that will significantly impact many processes in the country, as well as raising the quality of people's lives. The document defines the main national development goals, strategic areas and priorities for accelerated, inclusive, balanced, gender-responsive and sustainable development of North Macedonia. The National Development Strategy sets objectives that include, among others, **increased participation of women and vulnerable groups in the economic flows of the state; integrated and activated vulnerable groups in society, according to individual possibilities; and quality and inclusive public services.**

The National Strategy for Gender Equality is the country's key strategic document, outlining a comprehensive framework of actions to promote gender equality and enhance the status of women. The Strategy for the period 2022 to 2027 was adopted on 28 July 2022. It covers a five-year period and is the fourth strategic document in this area. The foundation of the Strategy is rooted in the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, which guarantees that "Citizens of the RNM are equal in their freedoms and rights, regardless of gender, race, skin colour, nationality and social origin and religious belief, property and social position". The vision of the Strategy is to achieve gender equality in a society where women and men, girls and boys, have equal rights, access to resources, opportunities and protection in all spheres of life, as a condition for overall and sustainable economic, demographic, social development and progress of the country, i.e. a society in which women and men will have the same

[1] *https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2024.pdf*

[2] Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia 2022 - Measuring Gender Equality, 2022

privileges and responsibilities that they will exercise in a joint partnership. The Strategy builds on the Strategy for Gender Equality for the period 2013-2020 and focuses on three principal goals: 1. Establish an effective and efficient system for promoting gender equality at both central and local levels (specific objectives focus on the institutional mechanisms at central and local levels); 2. Improve the position of women in all areas of public and private life (specific objectives refer to the areas of labour market, agriculture, political participation, health care, education, peace, culture and sports); and 3. Combat gender stereotypes and build a culture of non-violence and non-discrimination based on sex, gender and gender identity (specific objectives refer to combating gender-based violence and gender stereotypes and sexism).

Following the adoption of the Strategy, a **National Action Plan for Gender Equality 2022-2024 and operational plans** were developed, identifying the following objectives: reduce the gender gap in women's economic participation and in the labour market, applying an intersectional approach; improve the position of women in agriculture through special measures and policies aimed at affirming and properly valuing their work, and improve access to social services and promote a gender perspective in social security.

In 2022, the new National Strategy for Equality and Non-Discrimination 2022- 2026 was adopted, and the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination was established. The Commission plays an important role in protecting the rights of women and marginalized persons, combating discrimination and promoting equality. This followed after the adoption of the new Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, which recognized intersectional discrimination as a more serious form of discrimination, and incorporated gender identity and sexual orientation into the list of basis for discrimination.

The concluding remarks of the GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report for North Macedonia (*https://rm.coe.int/baseline-evaluation-report-on-north-macedonia/1680ac76ab*) recognize the progress made by North Macedonia in adapting its legal and policy framework to the requirements of the Istanbul Convention. In 2018 the ratification of the Istanbul Convention was approved by the Parliament, and the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was adopted in January 2021. In February 2023, the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia approved the draft law amending the Criminal Code, thus further harmonizing the

national criminal legislation with the Istanbul Convention. For the first time various forms of gender-based violence and domestic violence were incriminated, including femicide, female genital mutilation, stalking, and sexual harassment, including through the use of digital technologies, economic and psychological violence. Moreover, an explicit provision for rape is introduced, defined as an act of sexual violence characterized by the absence of consent, not only from the perspective of physical violence.

In 2022, the Parliament adopted the new Organic Budget Law, which for the first time includes gender equality as one of the key budget principles, while the provisions for gender-responsive budgeting are incorporated in the articles related to the financial plans of budget users. The Law envisages the introduction of programme-based budgeting and a new Integrated Financial Management Information System (IFMIS), which will enable better planning, monitoring and tracking of gender budget allocations.

The 2021 Concept for Primary Education made inclusion, gender equality and interculturality core principles in the organization of primary education.

The National Employment Strategy for the period 2021-2027 includes specific measures aimed at enhancing employment of women and their improved access to labour market services.

The Education Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia for the period 2018-2025 serves as the foundation for the activities of institutions in the education sector for the period until 2025. One of the key objectives identified in the Strategy is to ensure high-quality and relevant participation of pupils in regular education, thereby enabling them to realise their potential, and at the same time, preventing situations where pupils coming from marginalized and vulnerable groups are formally enrolled in schools yet fail to attend classes regularly and receive low-quality education. The document also recognizes that "even though university entrance requirements (criteria) remain low, access to higher education for different vulnerable groups is limited, and moreover, there is a lack of comprehensive information about their enrolment at universities". The 2021 Concept for Primary Education established inclusion, gender equality and interculturality as core principles guiding the organization of primary education. The Concept recognizes that education plays a key role in creating opportunities for transformation of detrimental gender norms and patterns of behaviour. In this regard, it contributes to the reduction of the widespread gender stereotypes and gender inequality, discrimination and violence based on those stereotypes, and at the same time, allows children to grow and develop in accordance with their authentic affinities and interests.

The national policy framework addressing the health of mothers and infants encompasses the National Strategy for Safe Motherhood for the period 2010-2015 (unrenewed) and the Strategy for Sexual and Reproductive Health for the period 2011-2020 (unrenewed), alongside the establishment of the National Safe Motherhood Committee in 2010and the National Perinatal Mortality Audit Working Group, which was established by the Ministry of Health in 2019. The Ministry of Health publishes its Programme for active health protection of mothers and children on an annual basis, with the aim of reducing morbidity and mortality rates among mothers and newborns through an integrated approach that promotes the health of mothers and newborns and includes measures related to family planning, prenatal care and health care during childbirth and maternity, as well as access to appropriate health packages for socially vulnerable groups. The Ministry of Health also publishes its Programme for early detection of malignant diseases on an annual basis, continually providing free preventive examinations for screening of breast and cervical cancer to all women.

The overview of the main changes in legislation and policies pertaining to gender equality in the country shows the level of progress in the legal and strategic framework aimed at advancing gender equality in the country. However, it is important to note that despite progress achieved at the normative level, consistent implementation in practice remains a challenge. Among the main reasons for the insufficient level of fulfilment of obligations undertaken with the key strategic documents in the area are the limited financial resources allocated for the implementation of relevant measures and activities (lack of a designated budget for this purpose), and the frequent absence or inadequate assessment of the fiscal implications for implementation of the main strategic programmes and activities. Additional challenges are related to the authority, job classification, and influence of persons responsible for implementation of different activities at institutional level (coordinators for equal opportunities), i.e. their ability to require constant accountability and determine priorities in the implementation of the activities, measures and programmes related to gender equality in the respective institutions. In addition to these challenges, there is also a lack of a comprehensive system for continuous monitoring of progress in achieving the goals set forth by the legal and strategic documents aimed at advancing gender equality.

The situation of women in the country

Gender disparities and inequalities persist across most areas of the country.

Women continue to be politically underrepresented at all levels of government. However, it can be said that the greatest progress has been achieved in the Parliament, due to the Electoral Code which, through its amendments in 2021, establishes that at least 40 percent of candidates for Members of Parliament shall be of the less represented sex. In 2024, North Macedonia also elected its first female President. However, in the newly elected government, a decline in terms of women's representation can be noted. Even though legal requirements for gender diversity on candidate list are fulfilled, women are not occupying leadership positions within both central and local government. Namely, the previous Government comprised 19% women (4 ministers out of 21), whereas the new cabinet has seen a decline to 12.5% women (3 out of 24 ministers in total). In terms of local government, the situation is even more disappointing, with women serving as mayors in only two out of 81 municipalities.

In North Macedonia, significant and enduring disparities persist in labour market outcomes between women and men. The low economic participation among women (43.1% compared to 61.5% among men) in the labour market adversely affects the working skills of Macedonian women.[3] This means that the primary challenge in the labour market of North Macedonia is to enhance the participation rates of women, a path that can be followed with the adoption of expanded and retargeted active employment measures, gender-specific policies, and the support of women's entrepreneurship.

Men are almost equally represented in the labour market across both rural and urban areas of the country, however, the proportion of employed women in rural areas (37%) is significantly lower than the total number of employed women.[4] The largest share of the total number of inactive women in the labour market, that is 46%, have completed only primary education, with 58% of them residing in the rural areas of the country. In 2021, the largest number of unpaid family workers, amounting to 18,634, were women from rural areas.

[3] Measures of the activity of the population by age groups and gender, second quarter of 2024, State Statistical office

[4] Women and Man in North Macedonia, 2023, State Statistical Office

Additionally, 59% of inactive women aged 20-64 are inactive in the labour market due to their own obligations compared to just 2.3% of men.[5]

The largest share of the total number of inactive women on the labour market, that is 46%, have completed only primary education, and 58% of them live in the rural parts of the country.

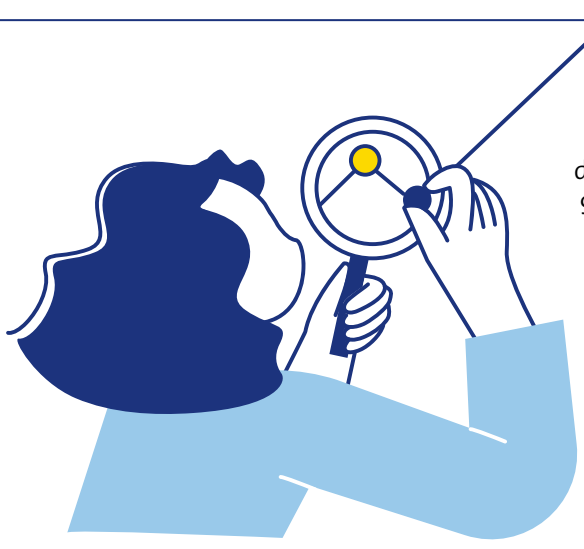
According to the 2021 Census, the number of persons with disabilities in the total resident population stands at 94,412, of which 55.3% are women. The situational analysis concerning the rights of people with disabilities in North Macedonia, conducted by the United Nations Country Team (UNCT) in 2022[6], identifies that women and girls with disabilities face barriers in accessing the existing services for prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) due to inaccessible infrastructure and lack of information. Furthermore, gender policies, as well as policies concerning children, adults and individuals living with HIV, lack provisions for disabilities that align with the intersectional approach of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Women and girls with disabilities experience limited information and access to justice and post-violence assistance. The existing legal framework lacks an intersectional approach. The quota system intended to achieve equal gender representation, as set out in the legislation, does not incorporate the issue of participation of women and girls with disabilities. Additionally, the issue of disability is not incorporated in policies governing gender issues. There is absence of services and measures to assist and support women with disabilities who are victims of domestic or sexual violence. Existing reintegration services and shelters are not accessible to people with disabilities. People with disabilities have limited access to services and information regarding SRH rights and GBV. To respond to these challenges, the Government has adopted the National Strategy for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2023-2030, including an Action Plan 2023-2026. The Strategy recognizes that women and girls with disabilities remain in a disproportionately more vulnerable situation than other people with disabilities in almost all spheres, especially as victims of gender-based and domestic violence and intersectional discrimination.

Despite general health care coverage, women's access to quality healthcare services and sexual and reproductive health, especially among Roma and other marginalized groups, remains an issue.[7] The country's performance in life expectancy and reducing infant mortality is improving; however, systemic changes are needed to sustain a declining mortality trend. Infant mortality rates have significantly decreased over the past two

[5] Women and Man in North Macedonia, 2023, State Statistical Office

[6] *https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/publications/situational-analysis-rights-persons-disabilities-republic-north-macedonia-2021*

[7] UN North Macedonia, Common Country Analysis Update 2021 North Macedonia



decades for both genders, dropping from 9.9 in 2014 to 4.6 in 2021, and further to 1.8 by the end of 2023. The maternal mortality ratio (per 100,000 live births) has declined from 12 in 2000 to 3 in 2020, below the EU average. In 2023 the State Statistical Office reported 14 live births registered to mothers aged under 15. Underage unplanned pregnancy in North Macedonia is still among the highest in Europe.

The World Bank recent surveys show that the antenatal care for pregnant women, as well as the post-natal care for mothers and newborns differ noticeably in rural and urban areas, and among women from different ethnic backgrounds.

According to the cooperative performance audit conducted by the State Audit Offices of the Republic of North Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo*[8] gender inequality is particularly evident in rural areas. Rural women face greater restrictions than men in accessing key production resources, property rights, land, equipment, as well as funding. They experience discrimination in terms of their participation in the labour market and compensation, i.e. salary for their work engagement, unpaid housework, low level of involvement in decision-making in the family, etc. Data from the State Statistical Office concerning the employment situation in the country, disaggregated by economic status and gender, and urban vs. rural areas, show that the number of employees, employers and self-employed women from rural areas is significantly lower compared to the other categories. On the other hand, women from rural areas dominate in the group of unpaid family workers. The overall conclusion of the audit performed is that measures and activities undertaken by the competent state institutions to promote gender equality for women from rural areas through their inclusion in the labour market are insufficiently efficient and effective as they fail to adequately facilitate the inclusion of women from rural areas in the labour market and to retain them in these areas. National Employment Strategies and Action Plans do not include specific goals, indicators, measures and activities adapted to the needs of women from rural areas for their inclusion in the labour market and the employment and training measures implemented during the audited period are general. The Strategy for Gender Equality 2021 – 2027 includes an indicator - construction of homes for the elderly in rural areas, which falls under the objective - improved quality of work for women. However, no

[8] *https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/en-cooperative-performance-audit_web.pdf*

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

activities are foreseen for achieving this objective. The Programme for non-refundable financial support for women who carry out agricultural activity and have the status of insured individual farmer was adopted in 2023. This Programme provides for the right to maternity allowance during the period of incapacity to perform agricultural activities due to childbirth, which contributes to the social security of women who perform agricultural activities. Nonetheless, this measure lacks a systematic approach and is not regulated by law, which undermines its sustainability and equal access.

Roma women continue to be among the most marginalized and vulnerable groups facing human rights violations and social isolation. Roma women encounter higher levels of unmet medical needs, partly due to high costs or lack of insurance. Antenatal care coverage is lower among Roma women compared to national averages, and post-natal care is also less accessible. According to the 2023 report of the Health Education and Research Association[9] on Roma reproductive health and social wellbeing, the coverage of Roma women with healthcare services during their pregnancy is drastically smaller than the prescribed standards. Almost one-tenth of pregnancies within the Roma community (8.3%) have proceeded without any medical check-up, and 41% of Roma women have received less than eight medical check-ups, which is the recommended number of examinations during pregnancy. In 2021 the infant mortality was 4.5% on the national level, yet the Roma population experienced a disproportionately high rate of 11.8%. Barriers to education for Roma include poverty, early marriage, and exclusionary practices, impacting their future economic and social opportunities. Financial constraints and the need to work contribute to education barriers and early dropouts among Roma men, whereas early marriage is a common barrier for Roma women and girls. From a gender perspective, 72% of the unemployed Roma women are long-term unemployed, with 68% without primary education or having completed only primary education, while 3% have either incomplete secondary or completed secondary education.

When it comes to support for women survivors of violence, there is a significant lack of specialized services, as well as lack of human resources engaged as service providers. Additionally, there is a notable lack of support to women survivors of violence in the subsequent period, in terms of economic empowerment and housing. According to the OSCE-led survey on violence against women in North Macedonia,[10] almost half (45 per cent) of women respondents have experienced some form of violence (physical, sexual and/or psychological) by an intimate partner by the age of 15, while almost one in three women (30 per cent) have experienced sexual harassment.

[9] *https://hera.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/2023-eu-enlargement-review-roma-people-n.macedonia.pdf*

[10] OSCE. (2019). Well-being and safety of women, OSCE-led survey on violence against women, North Macedonia, Results Report. OSCE.

Methodology

Several data collecting methods were used during the preparation of this analysis. A total of five researchers participated in the data collection process. The methodology was prepared and submitted to UN Women for approval. The field data collection was carried out in the period October – November 2024.

The mapping and analysis of vulnerable groups of women in North Macedonia were conducted having in mind the following objectives:

1. Identifying who is left behind from the gender perspective in North Macedonia.
2. Identifying needs: Understanding the specific challenges and needs of different groups of women, such as those facing economic, social, or health-related vulnerabilities.
3. Policy development: Informing the creation of targeted policies and programmes that promote gender equality and protect the rights of vulnerable women.
4. Advocacy: Providing data to support advocacy efforts aimed at improving the lives of vulnerable women and raising awareness about their issues.

Data has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. The initial step of collecting secondary data involved desk research (a search of literature and existing databases) The process included gathering, reviewing and analysing pre-existing data, national and local strategies, programmes, policy reports, research papers and documents related to the topic of the study (i.e. previously collected information).

The primary or field data gathering was completed by conducting interviews/online survey, focus groups and consultations with key stakeholders, including women, youth, local stakeholders, community leaders, and local government officers. In total, around 700 participants were included, from all eight statistical regions. The methods used in the analysis are the following: semi-structured interviews with stakeholders; questionnaires; focus groups; analysis of official statistical data; analysis of the content of relevant programmes.

Limitations of the analysis

For this mapping and analysis, a non-random sampling method was used that is not representative of the target population. Participants were included based on availability or willingness to participate.

The focus of this qualitative analysis is on the perceptions about the needs and challenges faced by different groups of women in North Macedonia.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Research findings in the Polog Region

- In the Polog Region, vulnerable groups of women include Roma women, rural women, elderly women living alone, women with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, single mothers, and unemployed women. These groups face numerous challenges including poverty, lack of education, inaccessible infrastructure, cultural barriers, and insufficient institutional support. Adolescent girls from dysfunctional families, women from conservative communities, and female students also face risks linked to socioeconomic and cultural constraints. Ethnicity and societal norms further exacerbate the vulnerabilities of Albanian and Turkish women.
- Women in the Polog Region are predominantly employed under precarious conditions, with many holding fixed-term contracts, working part-time under task-specific agreements, or engaging in informal labour. These employment arrangements often lack job stability and benefits, thereby contributing to financial insecurity.
- One-third of women in the Polog Region are unable to meet their basic living expenses with their monthly income, highlighting a significant financial strain. This indicates that a large portion of women in the region is struggling to cover fundamental necessities such as food, housing, and healthcare, despite having a regular income.
- The majority of women do not own property, which exacerbates their financial dependency, limits their ability to access credit, and leaves them vulnerable in both economic and abusive situations. This highlights the need for policies that address both wage inequality and property rights to enhance women's economic stability and autonomy.
- Nearly half of the women in the Polog Region bear sole responsibility for household chores, spending over 4 hours daily on tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and childcare, with only 2% reporting equal sharing of responsibilities with their partners. This unequal distribution of domestic labour not only reinforces traditional gender roles, but also limits women's personal and professional opportunities, contributing to ongoing cycles of economic dependency and gender inequality.
- A significant gap exists in women's participation in decision-making processes, with 42% of women not being invited to municipal meetings or forums, and only 13% being consulted about their needs. Additionally, the low engagement with civic organizations, where only 15% of women are members, highlights a lack of awareness and accessibility, particularly in rural municipalities, underscoring the need for more inclusive and targeted outreach strategies by both municipalities and civil society organizations (CSO).
- While most respondents do not consider themselves part of vulnerable groups, some women recognize their vulnerabilities related to socioeconomic risks, single motherhood, disabilities, and caregiving responsibilities. Additionally, there is a general concern about the lack of support and resources for vulnerable groups, especially in rural areas.

Vulnerable groups of women and girls living in the Polog Region

In the Polog Region, several categories of women and girls are identified as vulnerable based on the responses of coordinators for equal opportunities and social issues from the nine municipalities in the Polog Region. These groups include:

- **Girls without parents and from socially vulnerable families**: These girls often face severe difficulties, including physical and mental health challenges, and come from impoverished backgrounds. The support systems for these girls are insufficient in many municipalities, characterized by limited institutional efforts to address their specific needs.
- **Women from rural areas**: This group includes both ethnic Macedonian and Muslim women who, due to their socio-religious background, often face barriers to education and societal participation. Despite their needs, there is a lack of appropriate access to resources, not necessarily due to discrimination but because of their low educational levels. The municipal institutions do not effectively cater to the needs of women in rural settings, where their socio-economic status hinders progress.
- **Roma women**: As a vulnerable subgroup, these women often experience low levels of education, poverty, and poor living conditions. While there has been a reduction in reported cases of child marriages, challenges persist due to cultural norms and stereotypes. The municipality has made efforts to prevent child marriages, but these issues continue in certain areas. Education remains a challenge, especially for young girls in this community, who are often denied opportunities due to their parents' lack of education and socio-economic status.
- **Women and girls with disabilities**: Urban infrastructure in the region is poorly developed, and the lack of accessible streets and public spaces exacerbates the difficulties faced by women and girls with disabilities. Additionally, societal attitudes towards people with disabilities remain weak, and there is still a belief that they need special treatment, which can lead to their marginalization. Children with disabilities, such as those with mild autism, often face discrimination and are prevented from attending school due to outdated teaching practices and stereotypes.
- **Victims of domestic violence**: Women who are victims of violence are recognized as a vulnerable group, and two women's organizations, including one named *Ethics*, provide vital support. These organizations offer counselling services, but the absence of a comprehensive database or formal registry limits the ability to track and support these women effectively.

In the Polog region, several categories of women and girls are identified as vulnerable based on responses from coordinators for equal opportunities and social issues from the nine municipalities.

- **Single mothers**: Single mothers often face financial hardships and lack significant support from municipal institutions. While there are efforts to assist them, particularly through financial assistance, there are no long-term solutions or structures to support their independence or improve their circumstances.
- **Long-term unemployed women**: Women who have been unemployed for extended periods and actively seek work are highly vulnerable, particularly in rural areas. These women often come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and lack access to programs or resources that could help them find stable employment. A common issue in the municipalities is the lack of timely data and human resources to address these concerns effectively.
- **Elderly women in rural areas**: The majority of elderly women live with their families, particularly with younger generations, while few live independently. In some cases, particularly among the Albanian population, elderly women's children may live abroad, but these women are financially dependent on state assistance. Although the number of elderly women living independently is small, their needs often go unmet, as they are not seen as a priority group.

Additionally, representatives of the Polog Centres for Social Work (CSW) identified several vulnerable categories of women and girls, highlighting complex challenges related to their social and economic circumstances. **Adolescent girls from dysfunctional families** are among the most at risk, often coming from backgrounds with divorced or absent parents, or families with foreign citizenship aspirations that disrupt stability. **Roma women and girls** face additional challenges, such as early or informal marriages, lack of education, and unregistered births, which often leave them without identity documents or access to basic rights. Vulnerability is further compounded by poverty, exclusion, and societal discrimination. Additionally, rural women, particularly older women living alone, are financially supported through social security reforms but face difficulties accessing personal assistance due to restrictive eligibility criteria.

Victims of domestic violence are another critical group, with an increasing number of cases reported, partly due to the influence of social media and public awareness campaigns. However, systemic issues, such as fear of stigmatization and ineffective institutional responses, make it challenging for women to report abuse and find support. **Girls who engage in begging**, particularly adolescents aged 14-19, are at high risk of sexual violence and trafficking. Furthermore, women with disabilities, especially those with mild to moderate impairments, are highly vulnerable to sexual exploitation and abuse due to inadequate protection and societal prejudices. Cases of psychological abuse and bullying, particularly among young women, were also cited as leading to severe mental health issues, including suicide in extreme cases. **Single mothers** and women with low or unstable incomes struggle with limited access to social benefits and psychological support. Those who do not meet specific legal criteria often face significant challenges in securing child allowances or other financial assistance, particularly if fathers fail to pay alimony. Finally, societal and systemic neglect of women's psychological needs, combined with persistent inequalities in education and employment opportunities, further marginalize these vulnerable groups, leaving many without adequate support or pathways for improvement.

Cases of psychological abuse and bullying, particularly among young women, were also cited as leading to severe mental health issues, including suicide in extreme cases.

Civil society organizations in the Polog Region have identified several vulnerable groups of women, including Roma women, who often rely solely on social support; women from rural areas, who face economic and transportation barriers and are often left isolated and unsupported; elderly women, particularly those living alone due to youth migration; and women with disabilities, who encounter significant challenges due to inaccessible infrastructure and institutional shortcomings. Women and girls who are victims of gender-based and domestic violence are also highly vulnerable, requiring support to escape abusive environments and integrate into society. Single mothers, particularly divorced women, and young girls from rural or conservative communities face additional vulnerabilities linked to socioeconomic and cultural constraints. Ethnicity plays a role in vulnerability, with Roma women more likely to report violence, while Albanian and Turkish women are often constrained by cultural and familial pressures. CSOs have also noted that women students coming from other regions and countries are emerging as a vulnerable group due to limited resources and support systems.

Policies and measures for vulnerable categories of women and girls in the Polog Region

The municipalities implement limited and inconsistent measures to support vulnerable groups due to lack of resources, structured programmes, and political continuity. Measures include providing one-time financial assistance, assistants for people with disabilities, and occasional donations (e.g., food, clothing, or climate equipment for vulnerable groups). Infrastructure improvements, such as accessible sidewalks and inclusive urban projects, have been implemented with external donor support. Assistance for elderly individuals includes meal distribution in collaboration with NGOs and basic support services, however these efforts are inconsistent. Programmes for socio-economically disadvantaged families and survivors of violence are minimal, with past initiatives, like intervention groups for survivors, failing to sustain due to resource constraints. The municipal administration also supports temporary employment through local utility work and caregiving programmes, though these are short-term and limited in scope. Social protection programmes are largely absent, and local councils struggle with low participation and interest, especially among women and youth, limiting the effectiveness of gender equality and social inclusion efforts.

The municipal administration also supports temporary employment through local utility work and caregiving programs, though these are short-term and limited in scope.

The Centre for Social Work offers various measures in accordance with the law, including one-time or regular financial assistance, provided legal conditions are met (such as having a personal identification card, being registered in the municipality, and registered in the Employment Agency (AVRM)). Additional services include psychosocial support, counselling, referrals to other institutions, and placement in shelter centres. However, the measures are neutral and not specifically targeted at diverse vulnerable groups of women. The measures are provided based on the individual's request or report, without gender-specific considerations or tailored interventions for women in particular.

When it comes to women with disabilities who use the day centres under the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, a representative of the CSW Tetovo stated: *"In 16 years, I have not heard of the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy collaborating to organize breast cancer screenings for these women at the day centre. In Tetovo, there are many gynaecological clinics, including a renovated state dispensary. However, even an annual PAP test is not organized".*

The civil society organizations in the Polog Region play a critical role in providing services and support for vulnerable women, particularly those who have experienced gender-based violence (GBV). Their measures include:

- Protection and specialized support: CSOs offer legal assistance, career counselling, and reintegration programmes for women who are victims of violence. They focus on addressing the consequences of violence and provide education and awareness regarding available services.
- Shelter and psychosocial support: the CSO Etika Gostivar operates a shelter for women victims of violence, while the Female Centre for Support Tetovo offers psychosocial support and legal assistance, as well as accompanying victims to relevant institutions.
- Economic empowerment and employment: A significant focus is placed on the economic empowerment of women, especially those who are unemployed or have lower educational qualifications. CSOs run workshops to enhance skills and knowledge, making women more competitive in the labour market. They connect women to employment opportunities, including those offered through the Employment Agency.
- Support for rural women: CSOs work on including rural women in decision-making processes at the local level. They raise awareness about local problems and encourage women to advocate for solutions, including engaging with municipal budgets.
- Awareness and education: CSOs organize workshops and provide information on various topics, such as the legal rights of women, violence prevention, and entrepreneurial skills. They also engage in health education and organize workshops for women in rural areas, empowering them to advocate for their needs within their communities.

Inclusion of vulnerable categories of women and girls in needs - assessment and planning processes

The responses by the institutions in the Polog Region (municipalities and CSW) indicate that the inclusion of vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls in needs assessment and planning processes are sporadic and often limited. In some cases, municipalities rely on community forums, such as budget preparation meetings, to gather input, but attendance is often low due to factors like mistrust in the system, inconvenient scheduling, and socioeconomic barriers. Women, especially those from marginalized backgrounds like textile workers or from rural areas rarely participate due to time constraints or lack of access. When women do attend, they are often hesitant to actively engage, partly due to cultural and patriarchal norms that discourage their involvement.

Civil society organizations play a more active role in facilitating the inclusion of vulnerable groups. In Tetovo, for example, CSOs frequently organize meetings and projects targeting specific needs, such as the emancipation of Roma women. However, collaboration between local government and these organizations is not consistent, and efforts to address systemic issues like housing, education, and financial support remain inadequate. Municipalities sometimes collaborate with local community leaders or informal networks, but direct engagement with citizens is minimal. Although there are mechanisms like the Commission for Social Protection and Equal Opportunities, their roles are often described as formal and disconnected from real community needs.

Social workers on the ground attempt to assess and address needs through direct outreach, such as home visits and responding to reports. However, their capacity is limited, and there is a lack of targeted gender-sensitive approaches. Vulnerable individuals are typically grouped under broad risk categories without disaggregation by gender or age, leading to inadequate responses to their specific needs. While annual programmes exist for risk groups, they are general and fail to consider the nuanced challenges faced by women and girls, such as gender-based violence, cultural barriers, and limited access to education and resources.

Civil society organizations utilize various methods to assess and address the needs of vulnerable groups of women. Shelters employ multidisciplinary teams, including social workers, psychologists, and pedagogues, to create individualized plans and monitor progress while beneficiaries are under their care. These plans are adapted based on evolving needs, in collaboration with the Centres for Social Work, which continue to support individuals following their stay in the shelter. CSOs also conduct consultations with vulnerable groups, often through informal focus groups or direct community engagement, to identify priorities. For youth, formal focus groups are used to better understand their needs, while meetings with women and the elderly are held on a

monthly basis. In rural areas, CSOs organize consultations, sometimes through project-supported initiatives, gathering insights via informal gatherings resembling traditional community forums. These efforts emphasize fieldwork and direct interaction, allowing beneficiaries to openly share their needs, thereby fostering trust and inclusivity.

Shelters employ multidisciplinary teams, including social workers, psychologists, and pedagogues, to create individualized plans and monitor progress while beneficiaries are under their care.

Assessment of effectiveness of programmes and policies in meeting the needs

The municipalities generally do not conduct formal evaluations or monitoring of the effectiveness of their programmes and policies in meeting the needs of vulnerable categories. Most responses indicate a lack of reports, systematic assessments, or structured processes, with actions being described as ad hoc and reactive. Some municipalities mentioned attempts to allocate budgets for equality initiatives, but these funds often remain unspent. Limited resources and insufficient funding were cited as barriers, along with the absence of formalized systems or consistent collaboration between departments. Any evaluations that do take place are usually informal or anecdotal, based on individual cases or community feedback.

The Centre for Social Work follows a structured approach for evaluating its programmes, based on the Law on Social Work and related regulations. This includes an initial assessment, individual plans, and periodic re-evaluations. While formal evaluations are conducted, the process is hindered by excessive paperwork, which limits fieldwork. The CSW suggests that two social workers are needed for each service - one for fieldwork and the other for administrative tasks. They also highlight that the state budget needs to be adjusted to support these activities.

The CSOs in the Polog Region lack a formal, systematic approach to evaluating their measures. However, they implement several informal methods to assess effectiveness:

Team discussions - The team discusses challenges on a weekly or monthly basis, and makes improvements to services based on internal feedback.

Evaluation and surveys - They conduct evaluations to assess the effectiveness of their approaches and the satisfaction of beneficiaries. Clients fill out questionnaires, and external evaluations are done every six months to assess the success of the services provided.

Internal meetings - Monthly internal meetings are held to discuss the effectiveness of services, including feedback from caregivers and visits to elderly clients to evaluate their satisfaction.

Feedback and informal assessments - Feedback is received directly from women and victims of violence, with many referring others to the service. However, there is no formal system for summarizing or tracking this feedback at the organizational level.

Financial and human resources

Municipalities in the Polog Region report significant challenges in allocating sufficient financial resources to support vulnerable groups, including women. Many are struggling with limited budgets, with some even facing debts and insufficient funds for basic operations. While small allocations for one-time financial assistance are available in some cases (e.g. for women with children with disabilities), these funds are generally inadequate to address the broader needs of vulnerable categories. Additionally, municipalities often rely on informal solutions or self-funded initiatives to provide support, as state-level assistance is perceived to be insufficient. Some municipalities have seen gradual increases in funds over time, but the available financial resources remain far from sufficient to meet all the needs of vulnerable populations. Human resources are another significant challenge, with many municipalities reporting insufficient personnel to effectively support vulnerable groups. Social work departments often lack adequate personnel, and in some cases, the positions of social workers are not even filled. This shortage is compounded by the fact that the workload is often overwhelming for the few available employees.

CSWs report insufficient financial resources for supporting vulnerable groups, particularly victims of domestic violence. There is no dedicated budget for different categories of support, and the one-time financial assistance provided (e.g. 4000-5000 MKD every three months) is inadequate for addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals. The lack of proper funding limits their ability to provide comprehensive services and meet the needs of those in crisis. There is a significant shortage of qualified personnel, with many CSWs working with minimal or no support. For example, some employees handle entire domains, such as family violence, alone without an adequate team. The employees are often underpaid and overburdened, leading to frustration and a negative impact on service quality. Despite having well-equipped centres, the lack of trained and properly compensated personnel hinders effective support. Additionally, the absence of a registry for at-risk individuals complicates efforts to address their specific needs.

CSOs face significant challenges in staffing, particularly in rural areas where there is a lack of qualified personnel.

CSOs report that financial resources are often insufficient, and that they rely on a combination of local municipalities and donors for operational funding. While they secure some financial support for specific projects, this is not always guaranteed or sustainable. Local municipalities, such as in the Polog Region, have been slow to provide consistent funding, and many organizations face challenges in obtaining long-term financial support. Despite some interest from religious communities and local citizens, the funds raised are often minimal and only sufficient for survival, rather than long-term sustainability. Moreover, funding from government sources, like the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy (MTSP), is limited and typically covers only direct costs per victim, rather than supporting the operational needs of the organizations.

CSOs face significant challenges in recruitment, particularly in rural areas where there is a lack of qualified personnel. While some organizations are fortunate to have motivated and qualified professionals, the sustainability of these positions is a concern. The high turnover rate, especially in more intellectual or administrative roles, makes it difficult to maintain consistent personnel. Young professionals often lack interest in these positions, focusing more on salaries than the mission of the organization. The shortage of human resources is further exacerbated by the inability to offer competitive salaries, leading to frustration and lack of commitment. Organizations also face difficulty retaining skilled personnel due to financial constraints, especially in regions outside of Skopje where migration to larger cities for better opportunities is common.

Awareness of vulnerable categories of women and girls about existing measures and programmes

Municipalities ensure that vulnerable women are informed about policies and available services primarily through local community leaders, such as heads of urban and rural communities, and by collaborating with NGOs that implement projects. They also use social media and websites to disseminate information, though printed materials are rarely provided. In some areas, information is shared informally, often through word of mouth, community gatherings, or phone calls, and in some cases, through flyers in public places like cafes and mosques. Despite these efforts, there are challenges, such as lack of formal information distribution channels, limited access to online resources in remote areas, and fears of political repercussions that deter some women from seeking help or participating in forums.

At the Centres for Social Work, half of the women become aware of their rights through other social protection services, such as child and educational allowances, during their initial intake process. They are informed about available rights in brief consultations, though some categories oppose receiving these benefits, particularly when it involves payments to mothers. The CSW also reaches out to rural areas to ensure access to services. Women typically come to the Centre when facing issues, often referred by friends, family, or the police in urgent situations. Many are primarily interested in financial support due to the ongoing economic crisis. Despite the presence of some advertisements, financial constraints hinder broader outreach and employee incentives. Vulnerable groups remain largely neglected, receiving minimal assistance.

CSOs demonstrate a strong gender-sensitive approach and apply an intersectional framework by tailoring their outreach and services to the specific needs of diverse groups, such as women, young people, and individuals with disabilities. They recognize the importance of reaching vulnerable populations through individualized interventions, including intake interviews to assess needs and provide targeted support for both victims and their children. CSOs prioritize the use of local community structures, such as influential women in rural areas, and ensure communication in multiple languages (Macedonian, Albanian, and Roma), reflecting their commitment to inclusivity and addressing the needs of marginalized groups of women. This individualized, community-based approach highlights the CSOs' commitment to gender equality and intersectionality, ensuring that services are accessible to those who might otherwise be overlooked by mainstream systems.

In contrast, state institutions, while collaborating with CSOs and the Centre for Social Work, appear to have less direct engagement with these marginalized groups and may struggle with reaching all vulnerable populations effectively. The state institutions'

outreach efforts, such as media campaigns and referrals, often rely on broader, less personalized methods that may not address the specific intersectional challenges faced by individuals. For example, while CSOs work closely with young people, women, and individuals with disabilities, state institutions face challenges in reaching older women, single mothers, and economically dependent women, particularly in rural areas. CSOs' focus on direct, person-centred engagement contrasts with the more generalized, institutional approach of the state, underscoring the gender-sensitive and intersectional strategies employed by CSOs compared to the state's broader efforts..

Institutional and community collaboration

The coordination between civil society organizations and the state actors in the region involves various forms of collaboration, although the effectiveness and depth of these partnerships vary. CSOs, such as those in Tetovo, Gostivar, and other local areas, work with shelters, humanitarian organizations, and other local entities, often establishing memorandums of cooperation. Some organizations, like Cortex and Forum of Women Tetovo, have established strong partnerships, especially in supporting victims of violence and providing psychosocial services. However, while CSOs have been able to establish collaborations with local and national institutions, some challenges remain in achieving sustained cooperation, particularly with municipal authorities who often view CSOs support more as a tool for personal gain rather than a genuine acknowledgment of the issues at hand.

CSOs play a critical role in providing direct support, including shelter and psychosocial help for victims of violence, especially through collaborations with shelters like the shelter in Gostivar. These organizations, including Etika, offer essential services like referrals for victims to receive necessary care. However, coordination with municipal and state institutions can sometimes be hindered by bureaucratic delays or a lack of commitment. The lack of formal agreements, such as signed memorandums, can limit the potential for consistent, long-term collaboration. This is further complicated by local government focus on scoring political points rather than recognizing and addressing the root causes of issues like domestic violence.

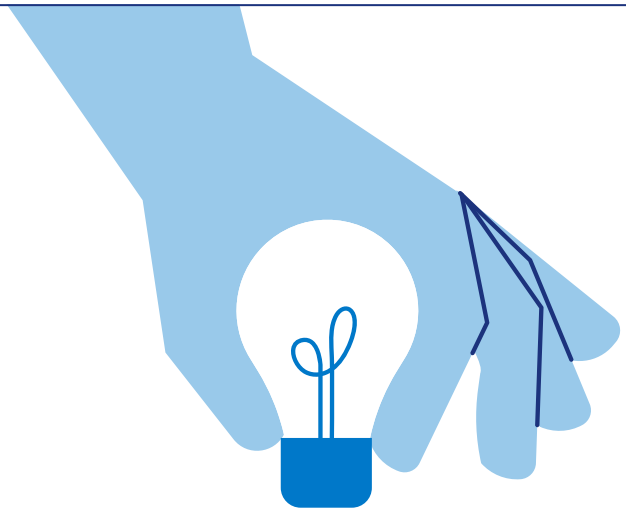
Despite these challenges, CSOs remain an important source of support in both urban and rural communities. They work closely with other local organizations, such as the Sonce Roma organization, and engage in various initiatives aimed at providing resources and services for vulnerable groups, particularly women, youth, and the elderly. While the overall collaboration between CSOs and government institutions is not always ideal, there are ongoing efforts to create a stronger network. CSOs continue to provide vital services and maintain their role as critical partners in local development, even if full institutional support remains elusive.

Gender sensitivity of public institutions and CSOs - service providers

The institutions mentioned have had some sporadic efforts in organizing gender sensitivity or gender integration training for employees working on gender issues or those interacting with women in their daily work. However, these initiatives often lack follow-up, such as surveys or evaluations, to assess their impact. Although gender issues are generally included in projects, the formal recognition and targeted training for employees responsible for gender measures have been limited, with no specific actions since 2018 in some cases. Some municipalities' representatives have participated in external training organized by NGOs or international entities, such as training on gender-responsive budgeting provided by UN Women and UNDP. While there has been some engagement with these training opportunities, a consistent internal approach to training employees within municipal institutions is lacking. There seems to be a disconnect between the importance of gender equality and how it is perceived or acted upon in practice, with some employees not fully grasping the gravity of gender equality issues. This is particularly evident when it comes to resistance faced by certain groups, such as the LGBTI community, and confusion around gender equality and related topics. Despite these challenges, there is a recognized need for more comprehensive and consistent gender sensitivity training. It is suggested that civil society organizations or external stakeholders should take the initiative in organizing such training, as local authorities and institutions have yet to develop a systematic approach to this issue.

...the formal recognition and targeted training for employees responsible for gender measures have been limited, with no specific actions.

CSW Tetovo has conducted gender equality training, particularly for those working on family violence, with support from NGOs and the Ministry. However, most of the employees of the CSW Gostivar who attended these seminars have since retired, and the new employees, hired based on the framework, lack relevant expertise and need further training to effectively address gender-related issues.



CSOs have organized training for all service providers, with focus on gender-sensitive approaches, and continue to hold regular workshops on various types of gender-based violence. These organizations prioritize gender issues and gender integration, offering training for both the community and specific groups, such as high school students, while also working to enhance mental health awareness. Additionally, CSOs provide training on gender equality and have developed protocols to address sexual harassment in the workplace, with a code of conduct that incorporates gender-based elements to ensure a supportive and inclusive environment.

Conclusion

In the Polog Region, several groups of women and girls face significant vulnerabilities due to systemic neglect, socio-economic barriers, and societal discrimination. These include girls without parental care, rural women, Roma women, women and girls with disabilities, victims of domestic violence, single mothers, long-term unemployed women, elderly women, and adolescent girls from dysfunctional families. Common challenges include limited access to education, employment, healthcare, and social services, compounded by cultural norms, poverty, and inadequate institutional support. Specific issues such as early marriages, unregistered births, inaccessible infrastructure, and lack of psychological and legal assistance further exacerbate their marginalization. Despite some efforts by CSOs and municipalities, the absence of systematic, long-term interventions leaves these groups without the necessary resources to overcome their vulnerabilities, highlighting an urgent need for targeted, inclusive, and sustainable support mechanisms. The Polog Region faces significant challenges in addressing the needs of these vulnerable groups. Municipalities lack the necessary resources and institutional capacity to adequately support them. The data collection systems

are underdeveloped, and there is a general shortage of human resources dedicated to social services. Furthermore, outdated social attitudes, particularly in rural areas, hinder the full inclusion of these vulnerable groups in education, employment, and social services. The absence of a comprehensive support network for women and girls in these categories, coupled with insufficient governmental response, continues to perpetuate their vulnerability.

Moreover, the inclusion of vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls, in needs assessment and planning processes in the Polog Region remains inconsistent and inadequate. While CSOs play an active role in facilitating community engagement and addressing specific needs, municipal institutions often rely on sporadic and limited mechanisms that fail to reach marginalized groups effectively. Cultural norms, socioeconomic barriers, and low trust in the system further hinder participation, particularly among women from rural areas or marginalized backgrounds. Despite some outreach efforts by social workers and CSOs, a lack of gender-sensitive approaches and disaggregated data prevents tailored responses to the unique challenges faced by women and girls, highlighting the need for more inclusive, systematic, and collaborative strategies. Despite sporadic efforts by institutions to organize gender sensitivity training, these initiatives often lack consistency, follow-up, and internal capacity-building, leaving many employees underprepared to address gender-related issues effectively. While CSOs and international entities have stepped in to provide targeted training on gender-sensitive approaches, gender-responsive budgeting, and addressing gender-based violence, a systematic approach from local authorities remains absent. To ensure meaningful progress, a more coordinated and comprehensive effort, involving both institutions and CSOs, is needed to develop consistent training, build expertise, and institutionalize gender equality practices across all levels.

Overall, the CSOs serve as crucial actors in the social service and support system, providing a range of services, from legal support and shelter to economic empowerment and community advocacy. Their efforts are geared towards improving the lives of vulnerable women, especially those impacted by violence and living in rural areas.

Research findings in the Pelagonija Region

Municipal coordinators for equal opportunities from the Pelagonija Region identified various categories of vulnerable women and girls in their municipalities. These groups face numerous challenges due to systemic barriers, cultural norms, and inadequate institutional support.

- Women and girls with disabilities - Women and girls with disabilities face significant challenges due to inaccessible infrastructure, lack of specialized support, and limited opportunities for social and economic inclusion. They struggle with access to education, employment, and basic services, which results in their further marginalization.
- Single mothers - Single mothers are often provided one-time financial assistance or priority in employment projects. However, they face difficulties attending training programmes or vocational education due to a lack of childcare support, which limits their ability to gain new skills or secure stable employment.
- Elderly women - Elderly women require daily assistance, often provided through home care programs or social services. However, their social inclusion remains limited, with occasional support through pensioners' associations, with very few targeted programmes addressing their specific needs.
- Women victims of domestic violence - Domestic violence remains a persistent issue, with many cases going unreported due to fear, stigma, or lack of alternative housing options. Municipalities and civil society organizations provide limited support, such as shelters and psychological assistance, but the resources and outreach remain insufficient.
- Rural women and girls - Women and girls from rural areas face restricted access to education, healthcare, employment, and other social services. Many are pressured to work at a young age or face traditional norms that restrict their freedom. Albanian women in rural areas experience additional vulnerabilities due to cultural and religious constraints, limiting their ability to work or participate freely in society.
- Roma women and girls - Roma women and girls experience intersecting layers of discrimination, including poverty, early marriages, and domestic violence. Many are reluctant to report abuse due to fear or lack of alternative options, making them particularly vulnerable to continued cycles of marginalization.
- Socially vulnerable women and girls - Women from low-income families, long-term unemployed women, and those with low qualifications struggle to access adequate support systems. They remain excluded from many municipal and state programmes, making them dependent on limited social assistance.
- Women farmers - Women working in agriculture, particularly in rural areas, often work informally and without social or financial security. Many are excluded from vocational training opportunities due to administrative barriers or personal responsibilities, further perpetuating their vulnerability.

Vulnerable groups of women and girls living in the Pelagonija Region

According to the five Centres for Social Work in the Pelagonija Region, several groups of women and girls are particularly vulnerable due to economic dependency, lack of access to services, and cultural barriers. One such group is women victims of domestic violence, who often lack financial independence and stable housing, making it difficult for them to leave abusive environments. Some women, particularly those with higher social status, avoid reporting due to shame, but the majority remain trapped due to systemic and societal barriers. Roma women and girls face additional challenges, such as living in substandard conditions without electricity or water and relying on insufficient social assistance. Many are forced into early marriages, which are seen as a tradition in their community. Additionally, girls from Roma communities often drop out of school, leaving them excluded from the labour market and perpetuating cycles of poverty.

Another vulnerable group includes elderly women, especially widows or those who have endured long-term domestic violence but only report it in their later years. Many elderly women require home care services, but there is an insufficient number of caregivers to meet the demand. Women and girls with disabilities also face difficulties in accessing healthcare, education, and transportation due to inadequate infrastructure and limited resources for personal assistance. Women from rural areas encounter challenges in accessing institutions, healthcare, and employment opportunities. In regions such as Dolneni, rural women often work in agriculture, but their earnings are typically controlled by their husbands. Additionally, single mothers are considered vulnerable, although those in Pelagonija often achieve economic independence and are supported by policies such as higher child allowances and fee exemptions for kindergartens. Overall, these groups face systemic barriers that limit their social inclusion, economic opportunities, and ability to live free from violence and discrimination.

Women and girls with disabilities also face difficulties in accessing healthcare, education, and transportation due to inadequate infrastructure and limited resources for personal assistance.

According to the civil society organizations in the Pelagonija Region, vulnerable groups of women include elderly women, particularly those in rural areas who are isolated, experience limited mobility, and struggle to access healthcare, food, and social opportunities. Rural women face challenges in accessing cultural, social, and medical services due to limited transportation and infrastructure. Other vulnerable groups include girls with disabilities, mothers of children with disabilities who lack specialized centres and struggle

with financial barriers to access services, and women from rural areas who must forgo work to care for their children. Victims of domestic violence are also highly vulnerable, with a lack of shelter services in some areas and insufficient financial support for accommodation. Long-term unemployed women, especially those with higher education but unable to enter the labour market, are also at risk, along with women from lower socio-economic backgrounds, including those reliant on social assistance. Women who are victims of human trafficking, bullying, and educational disadvantages - particularly in rural areas - face compounded challenges in this region.

Policies and measures for vulnerable categories of women and girls in the Pelagonija Region

The municipalities in the Pelagonija Region provide several measures to support vulnerable groups of women, although these services are often general rather than specific to each category. For elderly women, there are caregivers available and home renovation assistance provided for vulnerable groups. The Municipality of Bitola, as the most populated municipality, has implemented various measures to support vulnerable groups, including women, through its social protection programme. These measures include a centre for victims of domestic violence, caregivers for the elderly, and infrastructure support to help vulnerable groups renovate their homes. The municipality also provides assistance for individuals with rare diseases, including coverage for transportation costs to the hospital, and educational support such as sign language teachers in kindergartens. Additionally, the municipality runs a public works project that employs primarily women from vulnerable categories. One-time financial assistance totalling 4 million denars is provided for various needs. The municipality also supports an inclusive centre in schools for vulnerable children, where they receive treatment and care. Furthermore, women from vulnerable categories, such as a mother of a child with Down syndrome, are provided with employment opportunities, with some working part-time to balance their caregiving responsibilities.

However, in the other municipalities many services, such as social support, are not free and often require financial contributions. Rural municipalities often face challenges in providing services to vulnerable groups due to limited financial resources. As a result, the range of services available is more restricted compared to urban areas. For women with disabilities, the municipality of Prilep provides space for civil society organizations to offer services, and transportation is available for those attending schools for children with special needs. Although there are certain support mechanisms for victims of domestic violence, including collaboration with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, there remains a lack of shelter specifically for these women. Additionally, municipalities offer one-time financial assistance, though there are no specific programmes targeting this group. There are social protection and equality programmes in place, but their effectiveness depends on local government awareness and funding.

Through the Centres for Social Work in the Pelagonija Region various services and measures are implemented to support vulnerable groups, particularly women.

- Victims of violence - Services include information about available support, health-care, temporary protection measures, and shelter placement. Victims can receive counselling services, and the municipality collaborates with the Women's Support Centre. Continuous monitoring and support are provided, and if the victim is unemployed, they are referred to the Employment Agency for job placement and financial assistance.
- Elderly women - Care services are provided in collaboration with CSOs, including home care for elderly women, often through social welfare programmes.
- Women with disabilities - Women with disabilities are entitled to additional financial support, personal assistance, and specialized care services.
- Women from rural areas - These women often benefit from financial assistance programmes and psycho-social support. The municipality provides specific support for rural women, including family counselling and social benefits.

- Roma women - Support provided through advisory services, counselling, and intervention in cases of early marriage or relocation to other municipalities. However, the effectiveness of these interventions is often limited due to cultural and traditional barriers.
- Women and girls with disabilities - The CSWs supports women and girls with disabilities, ensuring they receive their entitled benefits and services. Two daily centres are available for individuals with disabilities, including a centre for individuals with cerebral palsy in the municipality of Prilep.

Roma women, in particular, face normalized violence and restricted access to education and employment, and CSOs are working to raise awareness and improve their situation.

In the Pelagonija Region, several CSOs provide a range of services aimed at supporting vulnerable groups, including women, children, and marginalized communities. For elderly individuals, particularly elderly women, CSOs collaborate with licensed service providers to offer in-home care and support. They also assist long-term unemployed and uneducated individuals by providing financial assistance to help them complete basic education and connect them to municipal services. CSOs help persons receiving Guaranteed Minimum Assistance (GMA) by linking them with the business community to enhance their economic opportunities and assist children with disabilities in accessing their rights and completing necessary documentation.

Additionally, CSOs implement programmes that address issues such as the prevention of child marriages and the promotion of healthy relationships through mentorship. Older students are encouraged to share their experiences with their younger peers, while youth programmes focus on entrepreneurship for young people aged 14-30 and the prevention of peer violence. For victims of domestic violence, CSOs provide psychological support, legal counselling, career advice, and help connect them with necessary institutions, offering critical support for women, particularly Roma women, who often face significant stigma and limited opportunities.

CSOs also focus on education and empowerment through workshops that cover a range of topics, such as legal rights, economic empowerment, and personal development. Informal education and skills training are offered to enhance employability, particularly for vulnerable women. Roma women, in particular, face normalized violence and restricted access to education and employment, and CSOs are working to raise awareness and improve their situation. For women in rural areas, challenges such as limited access to transportation, services, and information persist. Despite these barriers, CSOs strive to reach rural women with targeted programmes, though access remains limited. These efforts demonstrate the commitment of CSOs in the region to support vulnerable populations, though challenges such as limited resources and awareness continue to hinder full participation and support.

Inclusion of vulnerable categories of women and girls in needs assessment and planning processes

The municipalities in Pelagonija include vulnerable women in the processes of needs assessment and planning through a variety of methods, although engagement remains limited. They organize meetings, citizen forums, and Social Protection Councils that are open to all, with some holding quarterly sessions and others organizing forums at the end of the year. However, participation from vulnerable women is often low, as many are hesitant due to fear of stigma and judgment, as seen in projects for single parents and parents of children with disabilities. Some municipalities offer legal advice and financial assistance on an as-needed basis, encouraging citizens to seek help. However, reaching out to vulnerable women can be a challenge. Smaller municipalities with tight-knit communities tend to have more personal interactions, and information spreads quickly, ensuring that no one in need is left uninformed. Additionally, some municipalities use data from civil society organizations and social protection plans to map needs, but the frequency of such assessments varies, and forums for consultation have become less common in recent years. Despite these efforts, many municipalities still face challenges in fully integrating vulnerable women into decision-making processes and ensuring that their voices are heard and addressed effectively.

Though they primarily address those facing social risks, the CSW also emphasizes the need for further involvement from other institutions like the Employment Agency (AVRM), especially in targeting youth for requalification and education.

The Centres for Social Work conduct a thorough, ongoing process of assessing and supporting vulnerable families through individualized action plans. Upon first contact, an initial assessment is made to evaluate risks and the family's situation. Each worker is assigned specific cases, and they continuously monitor and revise the plan based on its effectiveness. The CSW provides assistance in areas such as parental benefits, child support, and social welfare, and takes action based on reports, such as irregular school attendance. Though they primarily address those facing social risks, the CSW also emphasize the need for further involvement from other institutions like the Employment Agency, especially in targeting youth for requalification and education. Additionally, they work closely with families, offering support and assessing employment opportunities based on their skills and education, though employment outcomes are limited. Despite these efforts, there is recognition that more initiatives and measures are needed to address the challenges these vulnerable communities face.

CSOs also maintain ongoing communication with local social councils and collaborate with government bodies, sharing information to shape annual programs and support women's access to social services.

The CSOs in Pelagonija engage vulnerable women in assessing their needs through various methods, including direct fieldwork, telephone surveys, and focus groups. These organizations work closely with women from marginalized groups, such as those receiving social services or welfare benefits, by conducting personal visits and gathering feedback on their needs. They collect data through interviews, surveys, and interactions at community centres, ensuring privacy and confidentiality. CSOs also maintain ongoing communication with local Social Councils and collaborate with government bodies, sharing information to shape annual programmes and support women's access to social services. Additionally, they involve mediators and provide continuous support for women to access services and rights. While direct outreach has decreased in recent years, these organizations still actively engage with beneficiaries and adapt plans based on their evolving needs.

Assessment of the effectiveness of programmes and policies in meeting the needs

The assessment of the effectiveness of programmes and policies targeting vulnerable groups in the municipalities of Pelagonija is primarily conducted through informal analysis and discussions at the meetings of the Social Protection Council. While there are no specific questionnaires for evaluation, the effectiveness is monitored by tracking the implementation of programmes and the extent to which the allocated budget is utilized. If the budget is fully utilized, it is considered a positive outcome, and any surplus funds are often redirected to other sectors. Annual reports are prepared at the end of the year, outlining the funds distributed, but there are no formal evaluations or specific indicators in place to assess the impact of the programmes or policies on the needs of these groups.

In the Pelagonija region, Centres for Social Work conduct monitoring and evaluation of their individual plans for beneficiaries once they enter the social protection system. After creating an individual plan, they track the effectiveness of the measures and assess whether they have achieved the desired outcomes. This evaluation is primarily done for specific cases, such as young individuals at risk and elderly women in care homes, with reviews conducted every six months. Annually, the Centres prepare a report on their activities and develop a work plan for the following year, typically using approximate figures. However, broader assessments for all other cases are not regularly performed.

Civil society organizations assess the effectiveness of their programmes through annual surveys that measure user satisfaction and track the progress of municipalities in areas where they advocate for change. They use feedback from communities and partners, conducting interviews and surveys to gather insights on satisfaction levels. For multi-day workshops, they conduct anonymous evaluations to identify areas for improvement. Additionally, CSOs periodically review case files to monitor progress and determine how to provide further assistance to beneficiaries. These evaluations are aimed at ensuring continuous improvement and adapting services to better meet the needs of the community.

Financial and human resources

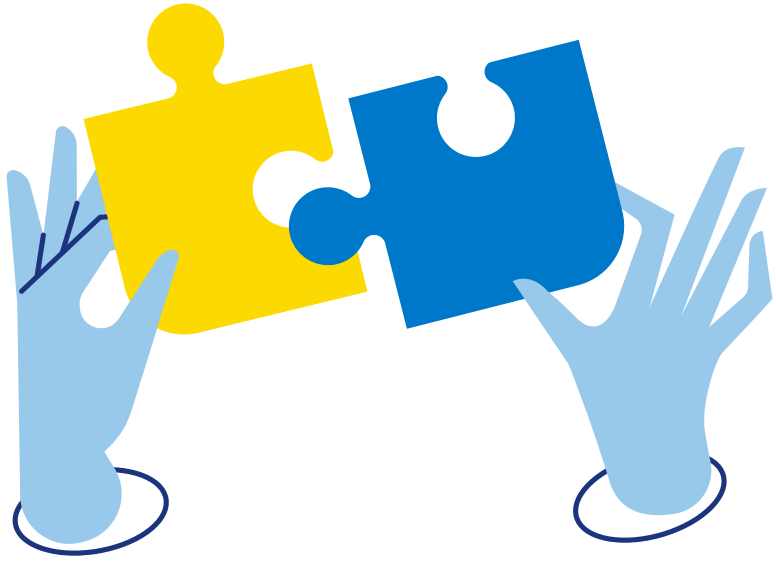
Regarding financial resources, the municipalities generally report that although funds are often insufficient, they strive to meet the needs within their available budget. Some mention that they can adjust the budget through reallocations when necessary, but still face challenges in securing adequate financial support, especially for gender equality programmes, which are often deprioritized compared to infrastructure projects. Human resources are similarly limited, with organizations typically operating with minimal personnel. For instance, some have only one social protection advisor handling multiple responsibilities, while others struggle with insufficient personnel for handling gender equality or social protection issues. Despite these limitations, certain municipalities and CSOs report that they manage to address the needs of vulnerable groups, though they acknowledge the need for more specialized personnel and adequate funding to enhance their capacity and impact.

Centres for Social Work report that while financial resources are primarily determined by the Ministry, they often face limitations in both funding and personnel. There is a significant shortage of specialized human resources, with only a small number of social workers, psychologists, and other personnel handling a large caseload. The Centres emphasize the need for more resources, particularly shelters, intervention care families, and facilities for individuals with moderate disabilities. Financially, they rely on one-time financial assistance and collaboration with other institutions, such as the Red Cross, for basic needs like transportation, clothing, and food. The lack of dedicated shelters and advisory centres remains a major challenge, and there is a strong call for more targeted financial support to address these gaps. Despite these challenges, the Centres do their best to manage with limited human resources, often stretching their personnel across multiple responsibilities.

CSOs report significant challenges in both financial and human resources. Financially, they rely heavily on projects and external funding, with limited local government support, particularly in larger municipalities like Prilep, where social workers are absent. Some municipalities, like Krivogaštani, provide human resources but have limited financial backing. The funding received from local authorities is insufficient, with amounts as low as 20,000 MKD, which is deemed inadequate for meaningful action. The CSOs also struggle with human resources, as trained personnel often leave, and younger people are not eager to join. Despite these limitations, they try to cooperate with schools and other community organizations on a volunteer basis to fill the gaps. The overall situation reflects a reliance on external donors and project-based funding, with challenges in maintaining sustainable services due to fluctuating financial support.

Awareness of vulnerable categories of women and girls about existing measures and programmes

In the municipalities of Pelagonija, information about policies and services for vulnerable women is primarily disseminated through community-based efforts. This includes the use of social media, websites, and direct outreach, such as word-of-mouth communication. Many municipalities work closely with local associations and community leaders to ensure that services reach those in need, including offering benefits like free public transport passes. In rural areas, however, the reach is more limited, with older populations often seeking help independently, and younger people migrating away. Communication efforts are focused on engaging local community leaders, such as heads of local communities, and conducting workshops, like those for female farmers. While these methods ensure that many are informed, the effectiveness in rural areas, where access to digital information might be lower, remains uncertain. Direct, person-to-person communication and the role of local councils are key to keeping residents informed.



In the Centres for Social Work in Pelagonija, information about services and rights is disseminated through various channels, including posters, panel discussions organized by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, and participation in Social Protection Councils where all relevant institutions share information. There is good cooperation with schools and civil society organizations that help inform the public. While some communities rely on word-of-mouth communication, especially in rural areas, the CSWs also use social media and other media platforms to reach a broader audience. Despite these efforts, some vulnerable groups remain less informed, particularly regarding services for victims of domestic violence and home care assistance. Regular field visits, annual checks on cash benefits recipients, and referrals from healthcare professionals and law enforcement also contribute to information dissemination, however, greater awareness is needed in certain areas.

The CSOs in Pelagonija employ a sensitive, human rights-based approach to their work by focusing on direct outreach and ensuring accessibility for vulnerable populations, particularly in rural areas. Their fieldwork includes visiting villages and remote locations, where they provide information and support to individuals who may not have access to digital platforms. This hands-on, community-based approach ensures that people who are less tech-savvy, such as older individuals, are still informed about services and rights. CSOs maintain close cooperation with local institutions like kindergartens, schools, and the Centres for Social Work, and they actively go to local stores and homes to inform citizens of upcoming events or available services.

They also organize information sessions in collaboration with other organizations, including workshops for rural communities, and distribute flyers to raise awareness. Through partnerships with local businesses, such as the Kromberg and Schubert factory, they reach women workers with tailored workshops. This proactive engagement ensures that even the most marginalized groups, including those with limited access to technology, are kept informed about their rights and available services. Their approach underscores the importance of on-the-ground outreach and making human rights and social services accessible to all, particularly those in rural or underserved communities.

Institutional and community collaboration

The collaboration between civil society organizations and public institutions in the Pelagonija Region involves both formal and informal partnerships, with a focus on vulnerable groups. CSOs, such as the Red Cross and LAG Agro Leader, work closely with institutions like the Centres for Social Work, schools, and local authorities to provide services and support to marginalized populations. These organizations regularly exchange information, hold joint activities, and engage in collaborative efforts to address social issues, particularly in rural areas. They play a crucial role in filling gaps, such as providing assistance in home care for the elderly and facilitating communication with hard-to-reach populations.

However, challenges remain in terms of coordination and the recognition of CSOs' contributions, particularly in smaller municipalities. Some public institutions express scepticism about funding CSOs, arguing that the municipal budget should not be a primary source of support for non-governmental initiatives. Despite this, CSOs continue to be active in advocacy, holding workshops, distributing flyers, and engaging directly with communities. The relationships with local authorities, such as the municipalities of Bitola, Prilep, and others, are variable, with some expressing satisfaction with the collaboration, especially regarding social protection and disaster response, while others report difficulties in communication and cooperation.

While there is good cooperation with certain CSOs, especially in the areas of humanitarian aid and youth programmes, the relationship with some public institutions, such as CSWs, remains strained, particularly when it comes to the treatment of vulnerable populations, such as women survivors of violence. These institutions are often perceived as lacking empathy, which affects their ability to provide adequate support to those in need. Despite these challenges, CSOs continue to work tirelessly on the ground, ensuring that marginalized groups receive the services and rights they deserve, often overcoming institutional barriers and logistical challenges through their grassroots efforts.

Gender sensitivity of public institutions and CSOs - service providers

The gender sensitivity of local institutions in the Pelagonija Region varies, with some institutions being more proactive than others in integrating gender-sensitive practices. Several local institutions have participated in gender equality training organized by civil society organizations and international bodies like UN Women. These trainings are often mandatory for employees working directly with women or those responsible for implementing gender-related measures. For example, some institutions regularly receive training from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, the Ombudsman's office, and NGOs working on gender issues. However, there is also a recognition that training alone is insufficient without tangible results. One institution noted that while 80% of its personnel are women and many hold leadership positions, more focused efforts are needed to ensure that gender sensitivity translates into practice.

While some institutions have had access to training opportunities, the frequency and scope of these initiatives vary. Some reported that gender sensitivity training has not been offered in recent years or that invitations to such events were not received. In one case, a planned training session was delayed due to change of personnel, but future training is expected as part of a collaboration agreement with UN Women. Other institutions noted that they had participated in ad-hoc training on gender equality, but it was not always compulsory for all employees.

In the Pelagonija Region, several civil society organizations are actively involved in promoting gender sensitivity, particularly through training and collaboration with institutions. One key area of focus is training of caregivers and employees to recognize and address gender-based violence. These CSOs engage in monthly communication with their teams to ensure continuous learning on various topics, including how to identify and prevent gender-based violence. They also work closely with other organizations and institutions to raise awareness and share resources on gender-sensitive practices. Despite these efforts, there are still challenges. Some CSOs report limited access to joint training sessions on gender sensitivity, although individual employees have participated in training organized by external organizations. For example, some employees have received training from the National Network to end VAW and DV and the Social Services Institute, but there have been no specific gender sensitivity training sessions provided by these bodies. Additionally, one organization noted that it is currently in the process of obtaining a license, which may open up further opportunities for gender-related training in the future.

Research findings in the Skopje Region

Based on the data collected, several groups of women were identified as particularly vulnerable in the Skopje Region:

- Single parents, who often struggle with economic challenges, precarious employment and limited support systems.
- Older women, with health conditions and women who face difficulties with mobility and transportation in accessing healthcare and managing daily living needs.
- Long-term unemployed women, who face barriers in accessing stable employment and economic security.
- Women with disabilities, who require specialized services, including home care and improved access to healthcare.
- Victims of gender-based violence, who require protection and support services.
- Roma women, particularly those in rural areas, who face compounded challenges of poverty, discrimination and lack of access to employment and social services.

Across the sample, including the input from the local stakeholders, most frequently expressed needs of the vulnerable categories of women living in the Skopje Region included:

- Improved transport services, particularly for accessing health institutions, a need frequently emphasized for older women and rural residents.
- Access to home care services for older women and women with disabilities.
- Financial support to address basic needs, especially for women in precarious economic situations.
- Assistance with documentation required for accessing social protection rights.
- Opportunities for socialization and community engagement, essential to reducing isolation, particularly for older women, women with disabilities, and victims of violence.
- Psychological support to address mental health challenges.

Analysis of programmes

Municipal programmes across the Skopje Region generally focus on addressing the needs of vulnerable groups through initiatives integrated into broader social protection frameworks. Common targets include long-term unemployed women, victims of domestic violence, single mothers, Roma women, older women, women with disabilities and women at social risk. Many programmes aim to provide basic services such as financial assistance, home care, and transport for children with disabilities. However, the programmes often lack a gender-sensitive approach and specific targeting, with most activities designed for the general population rather than addressing the unique needs of vulnerable women.

A recurring theme in municipal efforts is the reliance on awareness-raising activities, such as campaigns on gender equality and anti-violence measures, which are broad and not tailored to specific groups. Some municipalities collaborate with CSOs to deliver critical services, such as shelters for victims of violence, counselling, and community support for elderly women, but these collaborations are often project-dependent and lack long-term sustainability. While larger municipalities are more likely to initiate targeted projects and partnerships, smaller ones face significant resource constraints, resulting in minimal and generalized programming. The common focus remains on improving access to social services, health care, and economic opportunities,but the effectiveness of these programmes is often undermined by limited budgets and institutional capacity.

Analysis of findings from interviews with relevant stakeholders

The interviews with representatives of relevant local stakeholders provided valuable insights into the challenges and practices surrounding support for vulnerable women in the Skopje Region. These findings complement the questionnaire data, highlighting recurring themes and gaps in addressing the needs of these groups.

CSOs working in the field primarily target vulnerable categories such as older women, Roma women, long-term unemployed women, women from rural areas and women with disabilities. Some of them operate at the grassroots level, identifying needs and measuring the impact of interventions. However, most CSOs report having only formal cooperation with municipalities, which limits the effectiveness of joint actions. This aligns with questionnaire findings, where most of respondents stated that they were not consulted by local authorities about their needs. Additionally, CSOs feel that the voices of their target groups are not adequately heard by higher institutions, reflecting systemic gaps in inclusion.

One of the most critical issues highlighted by CSOs is transportation, especially for older and rural women. This aligns with the questionnaire findings, where access to transportation was identified as one of the most frequently mentioned needs. Some organizations also focus on the economic empowerment of women and breaking gender stereotypes in employment, although their efforts are heavily project-dependent, making long-term sustainability fragile.

From the municipalities' perspective, many struggle to allocate relevant budgets for the programmes for equal opportunities, often integrating activities for vulnerable women into broader programmes, such as those for social protection. Additionally, municipal employees in general often display lack of interest, and the resources available are insufficient, leading to the implementation of basic and general activities that fail to address specific gendered needs.

Municipalities struggle to identify and address the specific needs of vulnerable women. Needs assessments are generally broad and do not consider gender-specific challenges. While some municipalities organize public forums and meetings to engage with the population, these are often attended more by men than women, further marginalizing women's voices in the planning process.

CSOs working in the field primarily target vulnerable categories such as older women, Roma women, long-term unemployed women, women from rural areas and women with disabilities.

Larger and urban municipalities, which have public calls for projects targeting vulnerable women, tend to work more closely with CSOs. These collaborations often provide essential services, such as shelters for victims of violence and home care for elderly women, but the scope of these initiatives remains limited.

The findings highlight that vulnerable groups, including long-term unemployed women, victims of domestic violence, single mothers, women at social risk and women with disabilities, are included in municipal programmes but not adequately targeted. The absence of clear indicators and mechanisms for evaluating programme effectiveness only adds to these challenges. Although some municipalities demonstrate promising collaborations with CSOs and provide services like transport for children with disabilities and financial assistance for families at social risk, these initiatives are sporadic and lack consistency across the region.

CSWs primarily focus on financial assistance and rely on municipalities and CSOs to detect and support vulnerable populations. However, CSWs have limited options for proactively informing the population about available measures and rights, leaving gaps in outreach and awareness. They noted that vulnerable groups often come directly to request help rather than being identified through systematic outreach efforts.

Municipalities use various methods to engage their populations, including mayoral meetings in the field and public forums. Larger urban municipalities more often issue public calls for projects targeting vulnerable women and collaborate with local CSOs to provide support, such as services for victims of violence or assistance for elderly women in their homes. However, smaller municipalities with fewer resources struggle to replicate such initiatives.

Municipal coordinators for equal opportunities are typically overburdened, as this role is added to their existing responsibilities. Many coordinators expressed frustration with the lack of a dedicated position and limited capacity to implement meaningful changes. This structural challenge impacts the ability of municipalities to create gender-sensitive programmes, as highlighted by both the interviews and the questionnaire data.

Conclusions

- Economic insecurity - despite high educational attainment, many women face economic precarity, due to limited financial resources, precarious employment conditions, and insufficient access to economic empowerment programmes. Single mothers, rural women, and Roma women are particularly affected.
- Underutilized social protection - a significant gap exists between the availability of social protection services and their utilization by women, especially those in vulnerable categories. Lack of awareness, complex administrative procedures and insufficient outreach intensify this issue.
- Limited municipal capacity - municipalities face significant challenges, including small budgets, overburdened personnel and a lack of dedicated resources for gender equality programmes. This limits their ability to implement targeted and effective initiatives.
- Low engagement and participation - municipalities often fail to engage women effectively in consultations and decision-making processes, as reflected in the minimal participation of women in community forums and policy design. This perpetuates their exclusion and limits the effectiveness of municipal programmes.
- Persistent gender inequality - gendered labour roles and low ownership of property among women reflect ongoing systemic inequality, even in highly urbanized areas such as the Skopje Region. Traditional gender roles further marginalize women, particularly in rural and disadvantaged communities.
- Barriers to healthcare and social services - gaps in health care access and inadequate outreach to rural and marginalized populations exacerbate the vulnerabilities of certain groups, such as older women, women with disabilities and victims of gender-based violence. Limited transportation services further restrict access to health institutions.
- Sustainability challenges that any CSO-driven initiatives face, which provide crucial support to vulnerable women, are project-dependent and lack long-term sustainability, leaving key services at risk when funding ends.

Recommendations

- Strengthen outreach efforts - municipalities should proactively engage women through consultations, community forums, and surveys to ensure their needs are reflected in policies. Improve communication channels with rural women, Roma women and older women, ensuring accessible formats and direct outreach.
- Improve social protection access, including simplified access to social assistance and increased awareness of available programmes among vulnerable women.
- Address transportation barriers - invest in transport infrastructure and subsidized services to connect rural and old women to essential services, including healthcare and education.
- Enhance economic opportunities by creating targeted employment and training programmes for women, particularly single mothers and those in precarious employment.
- Promote gender equality by developing initiatives to promote property ownership among women and address gender disparities in household roles.
- Implement gender-sensitive budgeting in municipal programmes to ensure women's needs are adequately addressed.
- Expand healthcare services in order to improve access to healthcare, particularly for rural and marginalized women, through improved transportation services.
- Support CSO sustainability, by providing long-term funding opportunities for CSOs working with vulnerable women to ensure the continuity of essential services, and strengthen collaboration between municipalities and CSOs to expand outreach and service delivery, especially in more remote areas.
- Institutional capacity building will include provision of continuous gender sensitivity training for municipal employees and address structural challenges by ensuring that coordinators for equal opportunities have dedicated roles and sufficient resources to implement programmes effectively.

Research findings in the Southeast Region

The fieldwork in the Southeast Region involved a diverse group of participants, gathered through a combination of online and direct engagement methods. 34 women from different vulnerable categories have been reached through online questionnaires, telephone and live interviews. These women were identified with the help of local women's organizations, ensuring the inclusion of individuals with specific challenges and needs, especially women from the rural areas.

Regarding relevant local stakeholders, eight representatives from the municipalities, including coordinators and deputy coordinators for equal opportunities, two representatives from local CSOs and two representatives from the Centres for Social Work were engaged through semi-structured interviews. Their input provided insights into the institutional mechanisms and challenges in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups.

From the collected data, several groups of women were identified as particularly vulnerable in the Southeast Region:

- Single parents - women who face significant economic challenges and often struggle with financial independence, with many relying on extended family support or minimal social support systems. The closure of industries, such as textile factories, has further exacerbated their vulnerabilities.
- Women from rural areas, as a large portion of women in rural areas are disproportionately affected by limited access to transportation, health care, education and economic opportunities. Barriers such as inadequate transport and poor infrastructure isolate them further, while cultural norms often limit their participation in decision-making and public life.
- Older women - aging women, particularly those without family support, face challenges in accessing healthcare and social services, with few institutional care options available in the region. They often rely on home-based care services that are limited in scope and sustainability.
- Victims of gender-based violence - services for these women are limited and mainly rely on cooperation with CSOs, leaving gaps in prevention, protection and support mechanisms.
- Women with disabilities are marginalized by inadequate services, infrastructure, and limited access to employment and healthcare.
- Women experiencing poverty, including those in seasonal or informal work, face economic insecurity and lack access to comprehensive social protection.

Based on the responses gathered through questionnaires and stakeholder interviews, the most frequently expressed needs include:

- Improved transportation - particularly in rural areas, the importance of better transport services to access healthcare, education and employment opportunities, particularly for rural women and those with disabilities.
- Economic empowerment initiatives - programmes aimed at improving access to job opportunities, vocational training and entrepreneurship support are in high demand, especially among single parents and rural women.
- Accessible healthcare services, especially reproductive health care and preventive screenings and improved access to personal gynaecologists in rural areas.
- Social protection and financial support - access to social protection allowances and better municipal support, including subsidies for childcare, and home care services.
- Community engagement - such as women's circles and local forums, to reduce isolation and promote participation in decision-making.
- Gender-sensitive programmes - many women and stakeholders noted the need for better-targeted initiatives, as existing programmes are often designed for the general population and do not address specific gender-based vulnerabilities.
- Expanded services for victims of gender-based violence, including better resourced shelters, counselling and legal aid.

Analysis of findings from interviews with relevant stakeholders

The interviews with stakeholders in the region highlighted several challenges and practices in addressing the needs of vulnerable groups of women. Most municipalities reported that budgets for equal opportunities programmes are minimal and often the first to be cut in times of financial constraints. As a result, many activities focusing on vulnerable women are included under broader social protection programmes, rather than being part of standalone gender-focused initiatives. Only one municipality stated that it had sufficient budgetary resources

and was able to meet its programme objectives. This municipality also funds a shelter centre and counselling services and is working on economic empowerment initiatives for women.

Rural women were frequently highlighted as a particularly hard-to-reach group. Many municipalities struggle to engage with them effectively, although CSOs have facilitated the formation of women's circles in rural areas. These circles provide support networks, knowledge-sharing opportunities and possibilities for women to advocate for their needs with local authorities. Despite these efforts, rural women face significant challenges, including poor access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities.

The majority of municipal activities and measures are focused on raising awareness. While these initiatives aim to increase public understanding, they are often designed for the general population rather than being specifically targeted toward vulnerable groups of women. This lack of targeted measures limits their effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges faced by women in need.

Most stakeholders also noted that coordinators for equal opportunities are overburdened, as their responsibilities are often combined with other municipal roles. This lack of capacity prevents meaningful progress in implementing gender-sensitive programmes.

Municipalities typically identify the needs of their populations through open days, fieldwork, and engagement with local organizations, but the presence of women in these consultations is limited, as men are often more active participants. While some municipalities provide specific services such as transport for children with disabilities to daycare centres or financial assistance for single parents and families at social risk, these measures are often one-time solutions and lack long-term sustainability.

Victims of gender-based violence are supported through limited services, often in cooperation with CSOs. However, these services are insufficient to address the full scope of the problem, leaving many women without the necessary protection and support. Healthcare access remains another critical issue, with some women in rural areas lacking personal gynaecologists or access to basic medical services. Subventions for transport for medical exams and kindergarten fees are available in some municipalities.

One positive finding was the growing organization and activism of rural women, who are increasingly participating in local initiatives and advocacy efforts. CSOs play a crucial role in supporting these efforts, including providing home care services where 88% of caretakers and 78% of users are women. However, the sustainability of such services remains at risk without consistent financial and institutional support from municipalities or the state.

Conclusions

- Economic and social vulnerabilities - women in the Southeast Region, particularly single parents and those in rural areas, face ongoing economic challenges. Limited access to stable employment and tailored empowerment initiatives leaves these women in precarious conditions, making economic security a critical concern.
- Social and healthcare services for vulnerable groups – while some municipalities provide services such as home care, transport for children with disabilities and counselling for victims of gender-based violence, these efforts are fragmented and insufficient. Rural women face significant barriers in accessing healthcare, including reproductive health services. Services for victims of domestic violence remain limited. Overall, the availability of healthcare and social services does not meet the region's needs, leaving many vulnerable women without adequate support.
- Gender stereotypes - traditional gender roles and cultural practices remain pervasive, particularly in rural areas. These stereotypes limit women's participation in the workforce, education and decision-making processes. Rural women are often expected to prioritize domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which reinforces their economic and social marginalization.
- Barriers to access - lack of adequate transportation infrastructure creates major obstacles for women in rural areas and older women, preventing them from accessing healthcare, education and economic opportunities. This intensifies the exclusion of already marginalized groups.
- Generalized programming - municipal programmes often lack specificity and fail to address the unique needs of vulnerable women. Instead, most initiatives are designed for the general population, reducing their impact on those most in need.
- Lack of institutional resources - municipalities are constrained by small budgets and overburdened personnel, particularly coordinators for equal opportunities. This limits their ability to effectively implement gender-sensitive programmes.
- Limited participation and voice - women from rural and marginalized communities are often excluded from decision-making processes. Minimal efforts by municipalities to engage these women in planning and policy-making mean their needs remain underrepresented.

Recommendations

- Targeted economic empowerment initiatives - tailored vocational training and entrepreneurship programmes should be developed for vulnerable groups, such as single mothers, rural women, victims of gender-based violence and women with disabilities. These initiatives should address the specific economic and social challenges identified in the region, including job losses from industry closures.

Collaboration with local businesses, women's circles and CSOs can help create sustainable employment opportunities and promote financial independence.

- Expand and improve social and healthcare services - social and healthcare services must be made more accessible to vulnerable groups, particularly in rural areas. This includes establishing more shelters, expanding counselling and legal aid for victims of gender-based violence and increasing access to reproductive health services such as gynaecological exams. Mobile clinics and improved home care services for older women and those with disabilities should also be prioritized, ensuring long-term sustainability through municipal or state funding.
- Address transportation barriers - improved transport infrastructure is essential to connect rural areas to critical services such as healthcare, education, and employment. Subsidized or municipal-supported transportation programmes should be introduced for vulnerable women, particularly those needing access to medical facilities and social services.
- Strengthen municipal capacities - municipalities should allocate larger budgets to equal opportunity programmes and hire dedicated personnel to manage gender-sensitive initiatives. Training municipal employees on gender mainstreaming can enhance their ability to address specific needs.
- Promote gender-sensitive programming - municipal programmes and policies should be designed with a gender-sensitive approach, using disaggregated data to address women's specific needs. Incorporating measurable gender indicators will help track progress and ensure accountability.
- Increase community engagement and representation - community forums and participatory planning processes can help ensure the voices of vulnerable women are heard. Supporting women's circles and other grassroots initiatives can empower women to participate in governance and influence decision-making processes.
- Strengthen partnerships with CSOs - municipalities should collaborate more closely with CSOs to leverage their expertise and resources. Long-term funding opportunities for CSOs will ensure the sustainability of programmes aimed at supporting vulnerable women.
- Foster rural women's initiatives - rural women's circles and similar groups should be further supported to promote collective action, knowledge-sharing and advocacy. Municipalities and CSOs can collaborate to provide resources, training, and platforms for these groups to effectively represent their needs and priorities to local authorities.
- Support education and capacity building - municipalities should work to address educational disparities in the region, particularly for girls in secondary education. Programmes that support the professional aspirations of young women and align with local labour market needs are essential for fostering long-term empowerment. Initiatives should also focus on leadership development and mentorship to encourage women's active participation in public and political life.

Research findings in the Northeast Region

In the Northeast Region, discussions were conducted with three groups of women from vulnerable backgrounds: retired women over the age of 62, women with disabilities or women living with persons with disabilities, and women from rural areas. Depending on the specific needs and circumstances of these groups, focus groups were organized for retired women and rural women, while individual interviews were conducted with women with disabilities or women caring for individuals with disabilities.

The first focus group involved retired women aged 62 and older. A call for participation issued by the Pensioners' Association brought together 21 women. While all participants were ethnic Macedonians, it was noted that the association fosters inclusion and regularly involves women from other ethnic backgrounds in collective activities, including celebrations of holidays, sports events, and excursions.

The second focus group brought together women from rural areas whose children are enrolled in primary schools within those communities. Five women participated in the discussions. Four of them were aged between 30 and 44, while one was between 18 and 21. Of these, four identified as Macedonian, and one as Albanian.

Women with disabilities and women living with or caring for persons with disabilities were engaged through individual interviews to accommodate their unique situations. Participants included women with physical disabilities from both rural and urban areas, as well as caregivers. Among them were a woman living alone in an urban area with a physical disability, a mother of a child with a disability, and a woman supporting her brother, who has an intellectual disability.

While the methods of engagement varied, the same set of prepared questions was used in all discussions. This ensured consistency in the issues explored and provided a strong foundation for comparative analysis.

Economic (in)dependency of women

The respondents in this phase included retired women, unemployed women with disabilities (both those with and without prior work experience), a woman with a disability who takes on occasional jobs but cannot secure formal employment due to a lack of formal education, a mother of a child with a disability who cannot work because of caregiving responsibilities but earns an income as a licensed caregiver, women on fixed-term contracts, and female farmers who are not formally employed.

Among these groups, retired women receiving pensions are the only ones with regular income sufficient to cover basic living expenses. Women with disabilities and those caring for individuals with disabilities face ongoing challenges in securing a stable livelihood, compounded by the costs of transportation and necessary therapies. Their lack of formal employment or engagement in low-paying jobs limits their capacity to improve their financial situation, constrained by their own circumstances or those of the individuals they care for.

Female farmers are considered unemployed because they are unregistered, even though they produce and trade agricultural and livestock products. Registered farmers in their households are typically men, such as husbands or fathers-in-law, despite the majority of the labor falling on the women.

Female farmers are considered unemployed because they are unregistered, even though they produce and trade agricultural and livestock products. Registered farmers in their households are typically men, such as husbands or fathers-in-law, despite the majority of the labour falling on the women. These women believe they earn more from farming than they would from alternative employment options, such as factory work, and appreciate the greater flexibility it provides. However, they also recognize that their earnings are not sufficient to live independently.

Access to social and health services

Access to social and healthcare services poses challenges for all respondents, though these vary depending on their circumstances. Retired women noted that reaching hospitals and general practitioners is not an issue for them, but significant delays arise when scheduling treatments or surgeries. Appointments for such procedures often exceed six months, forcing them to seek private healthcare options.

For women with disabilities, access to institutions is hindered both by physical barriers to entering the facilities and by a lack of internal infrastructure adapted to the needs of individuals with physical or sensory disabilities. An additional challenge is the lack of coordination between institutions, requiring women with disabilities to make multiple trips between different offices to complete necessary processes.

In some rural areas, even basic medical facilities such as clinics are absent, necessitating travel to urban centres for appointments with general practitioners. The shortage of medical personnel exacerbates the issue, often resulting in patients being referred to other cities, especially Skopje, for treatment.

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Female farmers rely on their husbands' health insurance as they are not formally registered as farmers themselves. Many are unaware of the option to register as unemployed with the Employment Agency, or of other available support mechanisms.

Women with disabilities and women living with persons with disabilities are generally aware of the social protection benefits available to them, which serve as a primary source of financial support. Only one of these women works as a caregiver, a role made possible by the support of her family, as they help care for her son while she works a few hours each day.

Participation of women in decision-making

The women involved in this process highlighted significant barriers to participating in decision-making processes, primarily due to household responsibilities or the remoteness of their locations. Retired women mentioned that while some were previously active in politics, they no longer find it interesting and now focus on enjoying their retirement. However, they noted that topics of interest to retirees, including pensioners' issues, were occasionally discussed in the political parties they were once affiliated with. They expressed frustration that the only time their opinions are sought is during election campaigns, where the sole question directed at pensioners is, "Are you satisfied with the pension increases?"- ignoring other potential concerns or needs they might have.

Female farmers shared that they had once been part of an association, but it ceased operations, leaving them without a source of information about subsidies or other potential benefits. They feel disconnected from institutional support and believe that, even if opportunities exist, they cannot access them unless someone within the institution informs them directly.

Women with disabilities and women living with individuals with disabilities stated that they lack access to information and have never been included in discussions or debates. They rely on organizations providing aid and support for updates on certain types of allowances or benefits and use these platforms to voice their needs and concerns.

Women from rural areas also noted that they often resort to informal communication channels to express their opinions and requests. For them, reaching the municipality or other institutions is challenging, and informal networks are a more practical means of raising their issues.

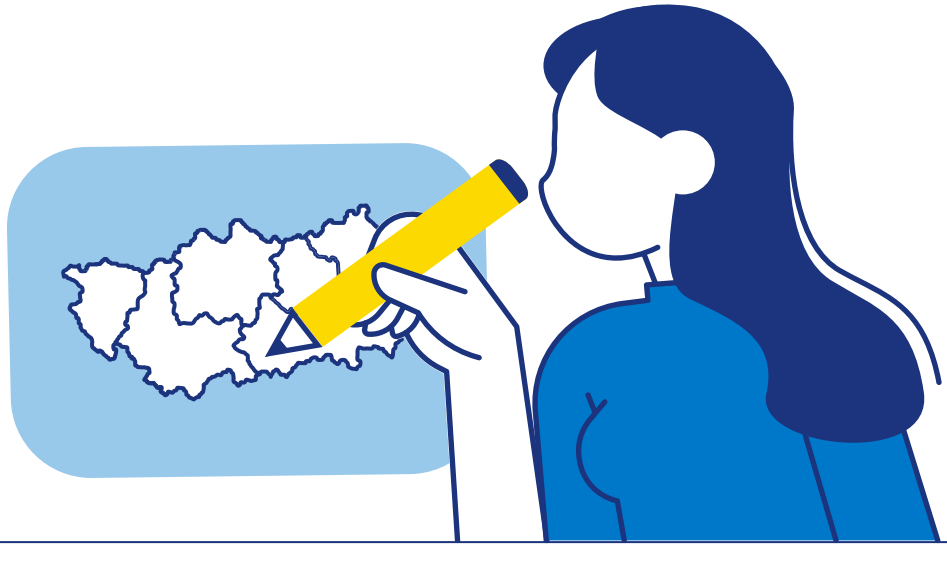
Access to basic infrastructure

In the Northeast Region, a connection exists between urban and rural areas; however, this connectivity is not uniform and not equally accessible to all. The Municipality of Kumanovo, as part of its programme, provides free transportation within its territory, but buses do not operate on Sundays. Additionally, some rural areas are insufficiently covered, forcing residents to rely on private transportation or on their own vehicles.

Inter-municipal connectivity is inadequate, and participants noted that they sometimes need to use private transportation to fulfil their obligations or meet their needs on time. Transportation is a particularly problematic issue for women with disabilities or women living with persons with disabilities, as they are often compelled to use private vehicles or taxis, which can be very costly. This situation further exacerbates the financial strain on these women, as their primary sources of income are usually social protection benefits or inherited pensions due to their inability to work.

Certain rural areas can become inaccessible during the winter due to snow, requiring students from these areas to stay in dormitories. Some municipalities organize free transportation for students from rural areas to attend primary and secondary schools. However, the lack of such measures in the past was cited as a primary reason one participant was unable to complete formal education. Her disability made it impossible to travel to school, and she could not leave her family to live in a dormitory.

In terms of physical accessibility, most institutions are not adequately accessible. However, employees often make an effort to assist individuals in exercising their rights.



Recommendations/needs

Efforts to address economic dependency among women should focus on creating sustainable and inclusive employment opportunities. This includes offering targeted vocational training for women with disabilities and emphasizing remote or flexible job options that can accommodate their specific needs. Additionally, formalizing the role of women in agriculture through registration and providing access to subsidies and market integration would enable female farmers to secure greater financial independence. Awareness campaigns and direct outreach can ensure that women are informed about available resources, such as the option to register as unemployed with the Employment Agency, which would expand their access to social benefits and job opportunities.

Healthcare and social services accessibility must be improved through infrastructure investments and operational reforms. Mobile health clinics could bridge the gap in underserved rural areas, reducing the need for long-distance travel. Streamlining inter-institutional coordination and creating centralized service points would particularly benefit women with disabilities by minimizing the logistical burdens they face. These efforts should be complemented by adapting institutional facilities to meet accessibility standards, ensuring all individuals can navigate and utilize services independently.

To increase women's participation in decision-making, initiatives should focus on empowering rural women and women with disabilities to engage in local governance. Establishing forums or councils specifically for these groups would create formal platforms for them to voice concerns and influence community decisions. Simultaneously, political parties and institutions should extend consistent engagement with these women beyond election campaigns, incorporating their perspectives into policymaking processes year-round. This will ensure that their unique challenges and needs are not only heard, but also addressed in a meaningful way.

Research findings in the Southwest Region

Interviews were conducted with women over 62 years old and women residing in rural areas in the Southwest Region. Due to the nature of the locations and the habits of women, focus groups were organized differently: an in-person focus group was held with women over 62. At the same time, telephone interviews were conducted with women from rural areas.

The first focus group targeted women aged 62 and above, with nine participants residing in urban areas. Among them, one woman owns property in a rural area and frequently travels there. All participants identified as ethnic Macedonians and were retired, receiving regular pensions. The in-person format allowed for a detailed exploration of their perspectives, aligned with the group's preferences and accessibility.

The second group comprised women from rural settings, engaging seven participants through individual telephone interviews. This approach was chosen due to logistical challenges in convening all participants simultaneously for a group session. The participants included six women aged 30-44 and one aged 18-29. All participants identified as ethnic Macedonians. Among them, two were unemployed, and one worked in a family business but did not actively attend work.

Despite the differences in engagement methods, the discussions for both groups followed the same pre-prepared questionnaire. This ensured uniformity in exploring their experiences and insights, providing a coherent basis for comparative analysis.

Economic (in)dependency of women

The respondents over 62 rely entirely on their pensions to manage their monthly expenses, including food, heating, medications, and various other bills. Since transportation is rarely used, it is not considered a regular expense, but they emphasize that even without this cost, their monthly expenses remain high. This is particularly true given the inadequacies of the healthcare system in smaller towns, often requiring trips to larger cities or Skopje for medical interventions, check-ups, and health monitoring.

The respondents noted that there are currently many job opportunities in nearby factories, primarily employing women from rural areas. While the respondents reside in rural areas, agriculture is not the dominant activity; instead, residents mainly produce for personal use. Respondents are particularly mindful of choosing jobs that allow them to fulfil family responsibilities, such as childcare, taking children to kindergarten or school, extracurricular activities, and housework. Some respondents even opt for lower-paying jobs or refrain from working altogether to prioritize caregiving responsibilities.

Although the respondents are aware of their social protection rights, only one individual actively utilizes these benefits. Despite being obligated to engage with the Employment Agency as part of receiving guaranteed minimum assistance, the respondent reported not being contacted for job opportunities or training. She believes employment is not feasible due to the lack of childcare support.

The lack of adequate childcare services was highlighted as a critical barrier to employment and career advancement. Respondents identified kindergartens as a potential solution, but noted that they would need to operate year-round and align with work shifts. Even when children attend kindergarten, their hours do not accommodate an entire work shift, forcing parents to rely on older family members for childcare. When such support is unavailable, the burden typically falls on the mother. This issue is particularly acute for single mothers who lack family support.

The situation is incredibly challenging for parents, particularly mothers, of children with disabilities. Although educational and personal assistants provide some relief, their support is insufficient for both parents to work. In such cases, the mother often remains at home to provide care.

In agricultural rural areas, property is typically registered in the names of male family members, who are also listed as individual farmers, while women remain unregistered. However, in communities where women's groups are organized by NGOs, female farmers gain access to information and skills for marketing their products. These initiatives enable women to generate additional income, contributing to their economic independence.

Access to social and health services

A vital issue to highlight is that most social and healthcare services are concentrated in urban centres and larger cities. In rural areas, only primary medical clinics are typically available. At the same time, social services operate on an as-needed basis, such as when a family or individual claims social protection rights or in cases of reported domestic violence.

The shortage of medical personnel significantly hampers access to healthcare services. Even in urban areas with hospitals and healthcare facilities, certain departments are entirely closed or operate with severely reduced capacities. As a result, patients are often referred to neighbouring centres for treatment.

This situation imposes an additional financial burden on individuals, as it involves transportation costs and results in lost income due to time spent traveling for medical care. These challenges exacerbate the inequalities in accessing essential health and social services, particularly for those in rural and underserved areas.

Participation of women in decision-making

The respondents report that they are not included in activities organized by local institutions where they could voice their suggestions and opinions.

Most respondents are not involved in organizations, political parties, or other forms of social organization, except for participation in professional associations and parent councils at their children's schools.

In rural areas where NGOs operate, women are organized into local groups, and these groups serve as platforms for women to express their views and opinions. Additionally, these groups facilitate the preparation of formal requests, which are subsequently submitted to municipalities.

Access to basic infrastructure

In the Southwest Region, most state institutions and companies, such as banks, hospitals, and secondary schools, are in urban centres. For these reasons residents of rural areas have to travel to access essential services.

In urban areas, respondents indicated that, given their small size, they predominantly travel on foot or occasionally use taxis. For individuals with mobility challenges or disabilities, taxis remain the only viable mode of transportation. Due to these limitations, nearly all respondents own private vehicles to manage their daily activities.

In rural areas, accessing bus stops presents an additional challenge. The roads leading to bus stops are unmarked and unsafe, lacking sidewalks, which further complicates transportation and mobility for rural residents. These factors highlight significant gaps in infrastructure and accessibility for people living outside urban centres.

Recommendations/needs

One of the main barriers to career progression identified by the respondents is the lack of adequate childcare options. Factors such as incompatible kindergarten hours, the considerable distance to facilities, and unsafe access to bus stops force many families to designate one parent - usually the mother - to stay home and care for the children, thereby limiting her opportunities for employment and advancement.

Investing in childcare infrastructure and community support is essential to address this issue. Developing well-equipped local childcare centres with programmes tailored to full-day care and after-school activities would significantly ease this burden. These facilities should align with standard working hours and provide safe and convenient access within the community, reducing the need for long commutes to neighbouring municipalities.

Additionally, enhancing infrastructure, such as safe pedestrian pathways and clear road markings to and around childcare centres, is critical. Creating community-based childcare initiatives could also offer families flexible and locally anchored options for engaging their children while enabling parents to remain active in the workforce.

Research findings in the Vardar Region

Perceptions of vulnerable groups of women and institutional engagement in the Vardar Region

The Vardar Region of North Macedonia, situated at the heart of the country, represents a dynamic intersection of societal and institutional challenges, particularly in addressing the needs of its vulnerable populations. Among these, women, especially those from marginalized groups, face significant hardships shaped by societal perceptions, economic conditions, and institutional responses.

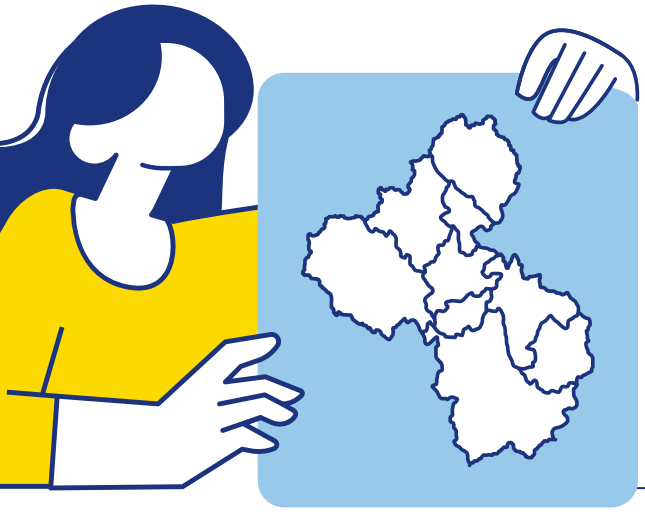
Women with disabilities stand out as one of the most vulnerable demographics in the region. Their struggles are amplified by limited accessibility, deeply ingrained societal stigma, and insufficient institutional support. This group is frequently regarded as unsafe due to the barriers they face in integrating fully into the society, which range from inadequate infrastructure to systemic neglect. Similarly, unaccompanied women, whether in urban or rural areas, face heightened risks. The absence of robust social networks and the pervasive concerns about their safety contribute to their vulnerability, leaving them more susceptible to isolation and insecurity. Additionally, young girls and elderly women represent age-specific vulnerabilities within the region. Young girls often encounter systemic challenges, including restricted access to education and risks of early marriage, while older women are frequently subjected to economic instability and health-related concerns that further marginalize them.

Institutions in the Vardar Region play a pivotal role in shaping the experiences of its residents, yet their engagement often falls short in addressing the needs of the most vulnerable. Despite reports indicating that over 60% of respondents have been invited to municipal meetings, such opportunities rarely result in tangible benefits for marginalized groups, particularly women. Furthermore, the absence of comprehensive needs assessments is striking, with 70% of respondents reporting that they have never been directly consulted by institutions about their concerns or priorities. This disconnect underscores a significant gap in proactive measures and highlights the need for more inclusive institutional practices. Information dissemination is another area of concern. Although digital platforms like municipal websites and social media serve as primary sources of information for nearly 90% of respondents, the reliance on such tools creates a divide for those without regular internet access, leaving segments of the population uninformed and excluded from critical updates.

Economic and social vulnerabilities further exacerbate the challenges faced by women in the Vardar Region. A significant proportion of residents struggle to meet essential expenses such as food, housing, and healthcare. For women in marginalized groups, these economic hardships are even more pronounced, intensifying their dependence on limited social safety nets. Social benefits, although available, are underutilized; nearly 90% of respondents reported not accessing these programmes, which points to potential barriers in outreach, awareness, or eligibility. Property ownership remains another critical issue. With less than half of the population owning property in their name, many women, particularly in patriarchal societal structures, lack the financial independence and security that ownership could provide.

Amidst these challenges, opportunities for improvement and growth are evident. Addressing the specific needs of vulnerable groups such as women with disabilities, unaccompanied women, and those at risk of economic exploitation or violence is imperative. Tailored programmes that focus on their empowerment and protection could create pathways for more equitable social participation. Enhancing institutional trust through transparent, proactive engagement with residents is another essential step. By actively involving communities in decision-making processes and ensuring follow-through on commitments, institutions can bridge existing gaps in trust and efficacy. Promoting gender equity through economic empowerment, educational initiatives, and support for property ownership is a further avenue for fostering resilience and reducing marginalization among women.

The Vardar Region embodies the complexities of societal and institutional interplay in addressing vulnerabilities. While there is a clear awareness within the community of the challenges faced by groups such as women with disabilities and young girls, the region's institutions must strive to adopt a more inclusive, responsive, and supportive framework. Only through sustained efforts, innovative approaches, and a commitment to equity can the safety, empowerment, and well-being of all its residents, particularly its most vulnerable, be ensured. This narrative underscores the need for an ongoing dialogue and actionable interventions to address the socio-political and economic disparities that persist within the region..



Vulnerabilities and coverage across the Vardar Region

Efforts to address vulnerabilities in the Vardar Region vary widely, with some municipalities adopting relatively progressive approaches while others remain gender-blind or minimally inclusive. Across the region, women with disabilities, victims of violence, rural women, single mothers, elderly women, and long-term unemployed women are the primary vulnerable groups requiring targeted attention.

In general, the region's programmes tend to identify a narrow set of vulnerabilities without consistently adopting intersectional approaches. For instance, while some municipalities like Kavadarci and Sveti Nikole explicitly address multiple vulnerabilities - such as rural women, victims of violence, and women with disabilities - other municipalities, such as Rosoman and Demir Kapija, lack tailored measures for marginalized women. Instead, these municipalities rely on broad mentions of "vulnerable groups," without detailing the specific challenges faced by women.

Women with disabilities are among the most overlooked groups, despite their significant needs. Only a few municipalities, such as Kavadarci and Gradsko, explicitly include measures for this group. Even where recognition exists, the lack of detailed implementation plans and indicators undermines the effectiveness of proposed interventions. Victims of gender-based violence receive slightly more attention, as most municipalities include measures for their support, although these measures are often general and lack specificity regarding implementation.

Rural women, a significant demographic in the region's agricultural economy, receive varying levels of attention. Programmes in municipalities such as Kavadarci, Negotino, and Sveti Nikole highlight the challenges faced by rural women, particularly women farmers, but fail to propose comprehensive actions to improve their socio-economic conditions. Similarly, elderly women, who represent a growing proportion of the population due to aging trends in the region, are mentioned sporadically, with little focus on the intersection of gender and age in shaping their vulnerabilities.

Only a few municipalities, such as Kavadarci and Gradsko, explicitly include measures for this group.

Single mothers and long-term unemployed women are among the most neglected groups within the programmes of the Vardar Region. Only Sveti Nikole and Kavadarci include measures targeting these groups, while other municipalities either overlook them entirely or fail to recognize their unique challenges, such as balancing caregiving responsibilities with employment opportunities.

Regional trends and challenges

Despite the variations in municipal approaches, certain trends emerge that highlight regional strengths and weaknesses. For instance, the use of gender-disaggregated statistics is a positive step toward understanding the unique challenges faced by men and women in the region. However, the failure to translate this data into actionable, intersectional strategies remains a critical gap.

Many municipalities rely on broad strategies that mention marginalized groups without clearly defining or addressing their specific vulnerabilities. This limits the capacity to tailor interventions to the diverse needs of women across urban and rural settings. Additionally, while some municipalities, such as Kavadarci, take an intersectional approach by addressing overlapping vulnerabilities (e.g., rural women who are also victims of violence), most programmes lack this depth.

Economic challenges in the region compound the difficulties faced by vulnerable groups. High unemployment, particularly among women and youth, intersects with social vulnerabilities to exacerbate marginalization. Programmes addressing economic development, such as those in Čaška and Demir Kapija, often fail to incorporate gender-sensitive measures, overlooking how economic disparities affect women differently.

Overall, the Vardar Region displays a patchy landscape in addressing the needs of its vulnerable women. Municipalities such as Kavadarci and Sveti Nikole demonstrate relatively comprehensive approaches, incorporating measures for women with disabilities, victims of violence, rural women, and unemployed women. In contrast, municipalities like Čaška, Rosoman, and Demir Kapija offer limited recognition of gendered vulnerabilities, focusing instead on general socio-economic challenges.

The absence of cohesive regional strategies and the reliance on municipal-level initiatives lead to inconsistencies in support for vulnerable groups. This fragmented approach highlights the need for a unified framework that ensures all municipalities adopt gender-sensitive, intersectional policies with clear implementation mechanisms and measurable outcomes.

Conclusion

The Vardar Region faces substantial challenges in addressing the needs of vulnerable women. While there are pockets of progress, such as in Kavadarci and Sveti Nikole, the region as a whole suffers from a lack of consistency and depth in its policies. Women with disabilities, victims of violence, and rural women receive some attention, but other groups, such as single mothers, elderly women, and women from ethnic minorities, are frequently overlooked. A coordinated regional effort is essential to bridge these gaps, ensuring that all vulnerable groups are recognized and supported through comprehensive, intersectional approaches that address their unique needs.

Research findings in the East Region

Perceptions of vulnerable groups of women and institutional engagement in the East Planning Region

The East Planning Region of North Macedonia is a significant geographical and socio-economic area, marked by challenges that disproportionately affect vulnerable groups of women. Despite comprising 13.8% of the country's landmass, the region faces demographic and institutional gaps that exacerbate the hardships of marginalized women. With a population density of 49.1 inhabitants per square kilometre - much lower than the national average - the sparse distribution intensifies isolation and restricts access to essential services.

Young girls stand out as one of the most vulnerable demographics in the East Planning Region. Survey findings reveal that 50% of respondents consider young girls the least safe group in their municipalities. Their vulnerability is compounded by inadequate public safety infrastructure, restricted educational opportunities, and societal expectations. Women with disabilities are another at-risk group, with 27.5% of respondents identifying them as facing significant barriers to social inclusion. These challenges stem from limited access to healthcare, employment, and public services, alongside persistent societal stigma.

Economic vulnerability affects a substantial portion of the region's female population, with nearly 39.02% of respondents identifying financial insecurity as a primary concern.

Unaccompanied women, including widows and single women, face unique hardships, with 22.5% of survey participants noting their heightened risks of economic instability and social isolation. Furthermore, economic vulnerability affects a substantial portion of the region's female population, with nearly 39.02% of respondents identifying financial insecurity as a primary concern. Single mothers, elderly women, and economically marginalized individuals lack sufficient support, often struggling to cover basic expenses such as food, housing, and childcare.

Despite the urgent needs of these groups, institutional engagement remains inconsistent. While nearly 79.07% of respondents reported being invited to municipal meetings, only 34.88% indicated that their specific needs had been assessed. This gap highlights a lack of proactive institutional outreach and insufficient representation of women's voices in policymaking.

Vulnerabilities and coverage across the East Planning Region

Municipal approaches to addressing vulnerabilities in the East Planning Region vary widely. Some municipalities have implemented gender-sensitive strategies, while others lack detailed plans to address women's unique needs. Berovo, for instance, has introduced an action plan targeting single women, elderly women, and rural women. However, this plan neglects the specific needs of women with disabilities, a group that faces considerable systemic barriers.

In Kočani, the inclusion of Roma women in economic development initiatives demonstrates progress toward intersectionality. The municipality's approach reflects an understanding of overlapping vulnerabilities, such as ethnicity and gender. Similarly, Vinica's Climate Change Strategy highlights the challenges faced by women farmers, offering tailored solutions to support their participation in sustainable agriculture.

Despite these examples, many municipalities in the East Planning Region lack comprehensive, gender-sensitive frameworks. The absence of accessible childcare and healthcare facilities in rural areas, along with limited employment opportunities, exacerbates the challenges faced by marginalized women. Property ownership, a key indicator of economic independence, remains a significant issue, with over 51.16% of respondents reporting that they do not own property in their name. This disparity highlights the systemic inequalities in resource distribution and financial empowerment.

Access to social services is another area where vulnerabilities persist. While 60.47% of respondents have access to basic services such as health centres and kindergartens, a substantial 39.53% face barriers to these resources. These gaps disproportionately affect women with caregiving responsibilities, limiting their ability to achieve economic and social mobility.

Regional trends and challenges

The East Planning Region reflects broader demographic and socio-economic trends that compound the challenges faced by women. The region's population is aging rapidly, with an increasing proportion of elderly women requiring healthcare and social support. However, the region's limited infrastructure fails to meet these growing needs, particularly in rural areas where healthcare and eldercare facilities are scarce.

Economic vulnerability intersects with gender to create additional hardships. Nearly 20.93% of respondents reported being unable to meet essential expenses, underscoring the region's financial insecurity. Single mothers and elderly women are among the most affected groups, as they often lack access to stable income sources and social safety nets.

Safety concerns also emerge as a significant challenge. While 76.74% of respondents reported feeling safe in their residences, the remaining 23.26% expressed concerns about safety. These issues are particularly pronounced for young girls and unaccompanied women, who face heightened risks due to insufficient public lighting and transportation infrastructure.

Institutional efforts to address these challenges are often fragmented. Municipalities rely heavily on digital platforms to disseminate information, which excludes rural populations with limited internet access. Additionally, the lack of gender-disaggregated data in policy development limits the effectiveness of interventions, as they fail to address the specific needs of diverse groups of women.

Conclusions

The East Planning Region exemplifies the interplay between demographic trends, socioeconomic vulnerabilities, and institutional engagement. While some municipalities have made progress in addressing the needs of marginalized women, significant gaps remain. Young girls, women with disabilities, and economically vulnerable women continue to face systemic barriers, compounded by inconsistent institutional support and a lack of comprehensive, intersectional policies.

To bridge these gaps, the East Planning Region must prioritize inclusive and gender-sensitive approaches. Comprehensive needs assessments, increased investment in rural infrastructure, and tailored economic empowerment programs are critical steps toward addressing the region's disparities. Additionally, fostering greater community participation through strengthened women's networks and NGOs can amplify marginalized voices and ensure that policies reflect their lived experiences.

By adopting a unified framework that incorporates intersectional perspectives, the East Planning Region can create a more equitable and supportive environment for its residents. This commitment to inclusivity and equity is essential for the region's sustainable development and the well-being of its most vulnerable populations..

General findings across regions

Efforts to address vulnerabilities across the regions vary widely, with some municipalities adopting relatively progressive approaches while others remain gender-blind or minimally inclusive. Across the regions, women with disabilities, victims of violence, rural women, Roma women, single mothers, elderly women, and long-term unemployed women are the primary vulnerable groups requiring targeted attention. While there is awareness within the community represented by the civil society organizations and the local institutions of the challenges faced by these vulnerable groups of women, the institutions must strive to adopt a more inclusive, responsive, and supportive framework. Most municipal activities and measures are focused on raising awareness. While these initiatives aim to increase public understanding, they are often designed for the general population, rather than being specifically targeted toward vulnerable groups of women. Many activities focusing on vulnerable women are included under broader social protection programmes, and are not part of standalone gender-focused initiatives. This lack of targeted measures limits their effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges faced by women in need.

The detailed information provided identifies several vulnerable groups of women and girls across different regions in North Macedonia, from the collected data, highlighting systemic, cultural, and economic challenges. Below is a consolidated summary of the key vulnerable groups and their unique challenges:

Women from rural areas

Rural women were frequently highlighted as a particularly hard-to-reach group. Many municipalities struggle to engage with them effectively, although CSOs have facilitated the formation of women's circles in rural areas. These circles provide support networks, knowledge-sharing opportunities and possibilities for women to advocate for their needs with local authorities.

Main challenges identified are: lack of access to education, healthcare, employment, and social services; cultural and traditional norms restricting societal participation; and economic isolation due to poor infrastructure and limited resources.

This includes women from all ethnic groups as they often share the same barriers to education and societal participation. Despite their needs, there is a lack of appropriate access to resources, not necessarily due to discrimination but because of their low educational levels. Many are pressured to work at a young age or face traditional norms that restrict their freedom. Ethnic minority women in rural areas experience additional vulnerabilities due to cultural and religious constraints, limiting their ability to work or participate in society freely. Even in regions where rural women are a significant demographic in the region's agricultural economy and they are recognized in the municipal strategies and documents, particularly women farmers, there is a lack of comprehensive actions proposed to improve their socio-economic conditions.

The municipal institutions do not effectively cater to the needs of women in rural settings, where their socio-economic status hinders progress.

Girls who engage in begging, are at high risk of sexual violence and trafficking.

Roma women and girls experience intersecting layers of poverty, discrimination, and cultural barriers. Often experience low levels of education, poverty, and poor living conditions. While there has been a reduction in reported cases of child marriages, challenges persist due to cultural norms and stereotypes. Education remains a challenge, especially for young girls in this community, who are often denied opportunities due to their parents' lack of education and socio-economic status. Many of these girls drop out of school, which results in their exclusion from the labour market and perpetuation of cycles of poverty. Girls who engage in begging, particularly adolescents aged 14-19, are at high risk of sexual violence and trafficking. Many are reluctant to report abuse due to fear or lack of alternative options, making them particularly vulnerable to continued cycles of marginalization. Roma women and girls face additional challenges, such as living in substandard conditions without electricity or water and relying on insufficient social assistance. Many are forced into

early marriages, which are seen as a tradition in their community.

Victims of domestic violence and gender-based violence are another group recognized by the institutions and civil society organizations as vulnerable, with an increasing number of cases reported, partly due to the influence of social media and public awareness campaigns. Municipalities and civil society organizations provide limited support, such as shelters and psychological assistance, but the resources and outreach remain insufficient. Services for these women are limited and mainly rely on cooperation with CSOs, leaving gaps in prevention, protection and support mechanisms.

Women and girls with disabilities are among the most overlooked groups, despite their significant needs. They are marginalized due to inaccessible infrastructure and societal attitudes, struggle with access to education, healthcare, and employment on one side and on the other side, there are inadequate protections against exploitation and abuse. Institutions are aware of the accessibility barriers these women encounter and often accommodate them by meeting at locations that are accessible for them. Daycare centres for individuals with disabilities and personal assistants are viewed as valuable support mechanisms for this group. Interviewed representatives noted that some families still exclude individuals with disabilities from everyday life. This is a case particularly in the rural areas.

Single mothers, particularly divorced women, and young girls from rural or conservative communities face additional vulnerabilities linked to socioeconomic and cultural constraints. On the side of the institutions, they are considered vulnerable due to limited opportunities for earning income and covering daily expenses. The most common form of support provided to them consists of one-time financial assistance, prioritization in employment projects, or, in some municipalities, subsidies for children's enrolment in kindergarten. However, many of them face difficulties attending training programmes or vocational education due to a lack of childcare support, which limits their ability to gain new skills or secure stable employment. In many rural communities they rely solely on humanitarian aid provided during holidays. Many of them report facing barriers to accessing child allowances and financial assistance.

Socially vulnerable women and girls, **women experiencing poverty,** including long-term unemployed women, struggle to access adequate support systems. They remain excluded from many municipal and state programmes, making them dependent on limited social assistance. They are particularly vulnerable in rural areas due to lack of vocational training and job opportunities.

Elderly women, although representing a growing proportion of the population due to aging trends in the region, are only mentioned sporadically, with little focus on the intersection of gender, age, and place of living in shaping their vulnerabilities. The most frequent support from the municipalities is the provision of caregivers for the elderly. Care services are provided in collaboration with CSOs, including home care for elderly

women, often through social welfare programmes. In some regions elderly women are not generally perceived as vulnerable. This is attributed to their regular income and the availability of services such as personal assistants and caregivers for the elderly. In some municipalities, the only way of supporting elderly women is through the pensioners associations. All regions have very limited care homes for the elderly, leaving elderly individuals who cannot care for themselves or live independently without adequate support. In some communities, the majority of elderly women live with their families, particularly with younger generations, while few live independently. In some cases, particularly among the Albanian population, elderly women's children may live abroad, but these women are financially dependent on state assistance. Their needs often go unmet, as they are not seen as a priority group.

Vulnerabilities of older women in North Macedonia

- Many older women rely on minimal pension, often insufficient to cover their basic needs.
- Lifelong gender pay gaps reduce savings and pension benefits.
- Rural women who often worked in unpaid agriculture roles are particularly disadvantaged, lacking formal pension rights.
- Access to healthcare is uneven, particularly in rural areas where healthcare facilities are scarce.
- Many older women face challenges in affording medications or treatments due to limited financial resources.
- Traditional family structures are changing, leading to a decline in multigenerational living arrangements, which leads to social isolation of the elderly.
- Migration of younger family members for work often leaves older women without support.
- Social isolation and limited mobility lead to loneliness and mental health issues.
- Older women are more vulnerable to neglect, abuse and exploitation.
- Women without formal property ownership may face displacement, particularly after the death of a spouse.
- Poor housing conditions, especially in rural areas, compound their vulnerability to weather and safety risks.

Support strategies

- Expand mobile healthcare services, particularly in rural areas.
- Train healthcare workers to address the unique needs of aging women, including their mental health.
- Develop community centres offering social, recreational, and educational activities tailored for older women.
- Encourage volunteer programmes and intergenerational initiatives to foster connections between youth and the elderly.
- Raise awareness about the rights and contributions of older women through public campaigns.
- Invest in affordable, age-friendly housing with accessible designs.
- Improve rural infrastructure to ensure safe living conditions and mobility for older women.

Women farmers, women working in agriculture, particularly in rural areas, often work informally and without social or financial security. Many are excluded from vocational training opportunities due to administrative barriers or personal responsibilities, further perpetuating their vulnerability. Some of the municipalities recognize them as a vulnerable group of women but fail to propose comprehensive actions to improve their socio-economic conditions. Many of them still report being excluded from agricultural support programmes due to administrative barriers.

WOMEN'S AND GIRLS' PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES

FOCUS GROUPS RESULTS

Economic (in)dependency of women

The responses from the focus groups reveal persistent barriers to the economic empowerment and independence of women, including systemic inequalities and limited access to upskilling and employment integration programmes. Women, particularly from rural areas and vulnerable groups, face compounded disadvantages that hinder economic self-sufficiency. None of the participants reported involvement in training or initiatives for economic empowerment, reflecting systemic gaps where governmental and local institutions fail to address the needs of vulnerable women. Political partisanship emerged as a significant factor, with women excluded from jobs due to the lack of political affiliations, perpetuating a culture of nepotism over merit-based employment.

Older women face economic exclusion, often regarded as irrelevant in the job market and limited to low-paying roles despite their willingness to work. Intersectional discrimination further marginalizes single mothers, widows, and rural women, who lack awareness and access to economic empowerment programmes. The systemic inaction and limited support from institutions like the Employment Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia exacerbate these issues, as participants described dismissive attitudes and vague promises from such agencies.

A lack of trust in economic programmes is evident, as women often perceive initiatives as inaccessible or believe funds do not reach the intended beneficiaries. Unstable job opportunities disproportionately affect women, with many highly educated individuals struggling to find employment or being subjected to temporary contracts that disrupt financial stability and commitments. Groups like women with disabilities and informal female farmers face unique challenges. Retired women rely solely on pensions, which are often insufficient, while women with disabilities and caregivers deal with compounded economic difficulties and limited formal employment opportunities.

Unstable job opportunities disproportionately affect women, with many highly educated individuals struggling to find employment or being subjected to temporary contracts that disrupt financial stability and commitments.

Female farmers remain unregistered and excluded from formal economic systems despite contributing significantly to agriculture, often producing for personal use. These women appreciate the flexibility farming offers but recognize its inadequacy for financial independence. Job opportunities in factories provide alternatives, but they are often constrained by family responsibilities, particularly for women prioritizing caregiving.

The lack of childcare services poses a critical barrier, with inadequate support forcing many mothers to prioritize caregiving over employment. Single mothers, in particular, face acute challenges due to the absence of family support. Parents of children with disabilities experience even greater difficulties, as insufficient educational or personal assistance often requires the mother to remain at home. In agricultural communities, property and formal recognition of farmers are predominantly granted to men, limiting women's access to resources and financial independence.

Access to social and healthcare services

The focus groups highlight the disparities between urban and rural areas, noting that most healthcare services are concentrated in cities, which leaves rural areas with limited facilities and primary care only. The shortage of medical personnel exacerbates these issues, resulting in patients often traveling long distances at significant cost. Women in rural regions face pronounced obstacles, including inadequate resources, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and delays, all of which are further worsened by economic dependencies and the reliance on male family members for health insurance.

Access to social services is equally challenging, with inefficiencies, delays, and a lack of transparency in the distribution of assistance. Many rural women are unaware of available resources, and the system often overlooks the most vulnerable, such as single mothers and those experiencing domestic violence. While some participants shared positive interactions with social workers, others cited significant institutional failings, including long wait times for financial assistance and neglect in urgent caregiving situations. These experiences point to a need for improved communication, equity in resource allocation, and more responsive support systems.

Women caring for children with disabilities face acute financial and social pressures due to insufficient allowances and limited support services. This lack of institutional backing forces many to shoulder the burden of care alone, further isolating them socially and economically. Similarly, elderly women and women with disabilities encounter barriers such as inaccessible healthcare facilities, dismissive attitudes from providers, and exclusion from necessary medical care. These systemic issues reinforce gender and economic inequalities, especially for women in precarious or informal employment.

The findings underscore the urgent need for gender-responsive reforms, including expanding healthcare and social services to rural areas, addressing infrastructural and personnel shortages, and ensuring equitable access to both medical care and social protection systems.

Participation of women in decision making

The vast majority of participants in the focus groups reported a clear lack of invitation to forums or meetings organized by local authorities to address their needs, challenges, or express their opinions. In many rural areas women report being excluded from consultations and meetings organized by local authorities, with engagement opportunities often tied to specific events rather than sustained efforts. This lack of representation extends to marginalized groups, such as mothers of children with disabilities and elderly women, who rely on informal communication channels or aid organizations to voice their concerns. Women feel that local governance structures are unresponsive, inaccessible, and driven by personal connections rather than inclusivity.

Participants highlighted that bureaucratic processes and a lack of direct communication from authorities exacerbate these issues. Women working as caregivers or elderly women without pensions face additional challenges, with calls for in-home care and increased job opportunities. Despite some women being part of organizations like the Red Cross or expressing interest in creating women's networks, a sense of exclusion persists, particularly within politically affiliated groups, where more privileged women dominate decision-making spaces.

Female farmers and women with disabilities also expressed frustration over the absence of institutional support and the cessation of associations that once provided information about subsidies and benefits. While there are rural CSOs that organize women into local groups to facilitate communication with municipalities, many respondents rely on social media or informal networks to stay informed, as official channels fail to include them. Retired women, although previously active in public life, now feel disengaged, with no channel to voice their opinions and needs.

This highlights the need for greater inclusivity in local governance, where women from all backgrounds have equal opportunities to participate and ensure that their needs are adequately addressed in policy and decision-making.

Access to basic infrastructure

Access to basic infrastructure is vital, particularly gender-sensitive infrastructure, which ensures women, especially in rural areas, can access essential services and opportunities for safe and fulfilling lives. In many communities, there is a severe lack of basic infrastructure, including public transport, healthcare facilities, and safe housing. For example, many municipalities suffer from unreliable public transport, limiting mobility, particularly for women. Poor infrastructure, such as lack of kindergartens and insufficient public transport for students, increases the burden on women who are often responsible for transporting children to school. Further, inadequate sewage systems in some villages add to the daily responsibilities of women who also manage household and caregiving tasks.

People with disabilities face additional challenges, particularly in urban areas where the infrastructure fails to meet their needs. Issues such as poorly constructed sidewalks, lack of ramps, and unpaved streets create barriers to independence and accessibility. A mother with a disabled child highlighted difficulties in navigating unpaved streets and the lack of ramps in public buildings. This underscores the need for public spaces and transport systems to incorporate gender-sensitive designs to accommodate all women, including those with disabilities.

Rural areas face unique challenges. Inadequate infrastructure and services disproportionately impact women.

Safety concerns are another critical aspect of gender-sensitive infrastructure. Women often feel unsafe using public transport, especially at night, in larger towns. The absence of reliable and secure transportation limits their freedom and independence. Furthermore, the lack of childcare and elderly care facilities confines women to unsafe or unsatisfactory conditions. For instance, in municipalities lacking vehicles equipped to transport people with disabilities, women struggle to access essential services. These deficiencies illustrate the need for local governments to address the infrastructure gaps and ensure inclusivity.

Rural areas face unique challenges. Inadequate infrastructure and services disproportionately impact women. Water shortages are prevalent, and the responsibility of managing water-related household tasks often falls on women. Electricity outages further complicate daily routines, as women typically manage household responsibilities. The lack of public transportation in rural areas isolates elderly women, who must depend on family members for mobility. Women are also burdened with unpaid labour such as cleaning streets and managing garbage disposal, reinforcing gender norms that undervalue their contributions.

The absence of essential services, such as daycare centres, and the relocation of utility payment centres to urban areas exacerbate challenges for women. These logistical barriers, combined with poor urban infrastructure, disproportionately affect women managing household errands. Poorly maintained sidewalks, blocked pedestrian paths, and unsafe roads create hazardous environments, particularly for women with strollers or people with disabilities. Public transportation remains unreliable, with few intercity buses and limited local options, forcing women to rely on expensive private transportation.

Although some municipalities provide free transportation, rural areas still remain underserved. Inadequate inter-municipal connectivity compels women, especially those with disabilities or caregiving responsibilities, to rely on costly private vehicles. Harsh winters further isolate rural residents, with some areas becoming inaccessible, forcing students to reside in dormitories. Physical accessibility in institutions is minimal, although employees sometimes assist individuals in exercising their rights.

Other essential services such as healthcare, banking, and secondary schools are concentrated in urban centres, necessitating travel for rural residents. Limited options for transportation force most individuals to own private vehicles to meet their daily needs. For those in rural areas, even reaching bus stops is challenging due to unmarked, unsafe roads without sidewalks. This highlights significant disparities in infrastructure and accessibility for rural communities compared to urban areas.

Perceptions of safety and gender-based violence among women

The findings reveal a complex picture of how women and girls perceive safety. On one hand, many women feel generally safe in their daily lives due to the close-knit nature of their communities, which fosters mutual respect and a sense of security. This sentiment is particularly strong in smaller towns, where the environment is perceived as safer compared to larger cities like the capital. However, this sense of security is often undermined by persistent experiences of street harassment, such as catcalling and whistling, which raise concerns, particularly regarding the safety of their children. Women express heightened fears about allowing their daughters to walk freely, reflecting the tension between perceived safety and actual threats.

In regions with mixed ethnic communities, women highlight a relatively peaceful coexistence among ethnic groups, including Albanians, Macedonians, and Roma, which contributes to a sense of communal respect. However, they also acknowledge ongoing issues, including domestic violence, which remains a significant concern. Many women know victims of domestic abuse or have experienced it themselves. Distrust in the police exacerbates their fears, as women perceive law enforcement as untrained, unprofessional, and insufficiently responsive to violence, especially at night. The increased presence of diaspora residents during summer months and perceived lawlessness in public spaces further heighten their concerns about safety.

A notable generational shift is evident, with younger women demonstrating less tolerance for domestic violence compared to older generations. They are more likely to seek help, leave abusive relationships, and advocate for their rights, signalling changing attitudes toward gender-based violence.

While women feel secure during the day, particularly in the presence of family, night-time safety remains a significant concern, especially in poorly lit areas. Specific incidents, such as robberies and reports of abuse in care homes, amplify fears. Women and girls with disabilities face unique vulnerabilities, with families expressing deep concern about their exposure to sexual violence and limited safe options for care or supervision.

Overall, while there are pockets of positive experiences, the overarching sentiment reflects an environment where women's safety is consistently challenged. All regions reveal common threads of fear, distrust in institutional support, and the need for systemic changes to address harassment, domestic violence, and public safety, particularly for vulnerable groups. These findings highlight the importance of targeted interventions to ensure a safer and more inclusive environment for women and girls.

Women's and girls' perceptions and attitudes

Results of questionnaires

A total of 608 women and girls from all 8 statistical regions responded to the online questionnaire.

Most of the respondents, 50,7%, are in the age group 30-44, followed by the women aged 45-54 (20,9%), 16,1% are elderly women aged above 55 years and young women (12,3%) aged 18-29. The majority of respondents are Macedonian (61.3%), followed by Albanian women (29.9%), Roma women (1.8%), and women from other ethnicities (6.9%).

A total of 26% of the respondents live in rural areas, while 74% live in urban areas.

CHART 1.
Age group distribution

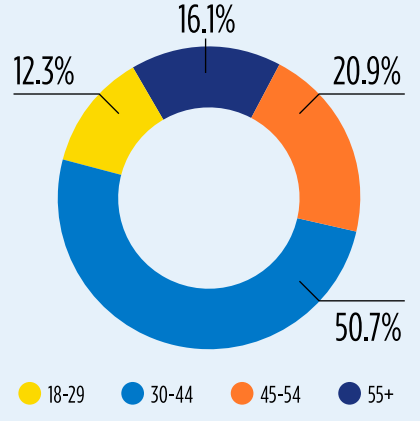
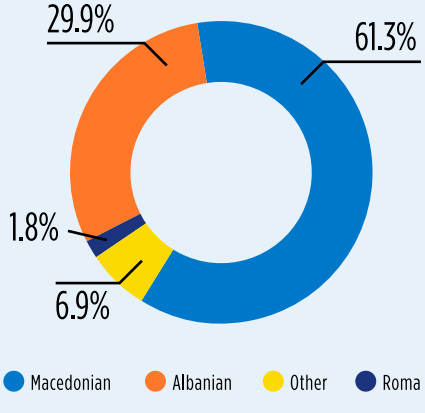


CHART 2.
Ethnicity distribution



Economic position of women

A significant majority of the respondents are working, though there's a notable presence of informal employment "Informal employment" accounts for about 11% of the total. A significant portion of the women workforce wok under informal or unregistered arrangements, indicating areas where formalization efforts could improve workforce stability and social protections.

This suggests that a considerable portion of women are employed outside of formal sectors, which could have implications for job security and benefits currently, but also in long term aspects and that deprives them of essential labour rights and protections, such as access to health insurance, paid maternity leave, and pension benefits.

"Unemployed, Seeking Job" and "Unemployed, Not Seeking Job" together represent around 15% of the total. This highlights the need for economic empowerment programmes that address the challenges faced by women outside the labour market.

CHART 3.
Work status distribution

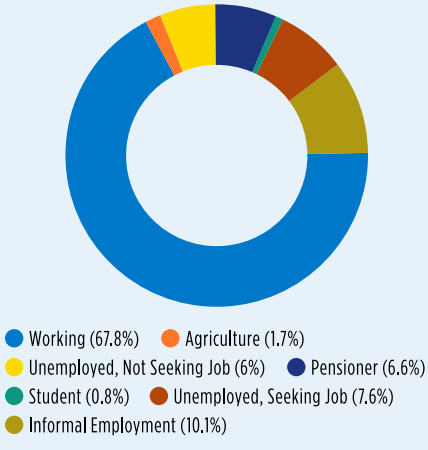
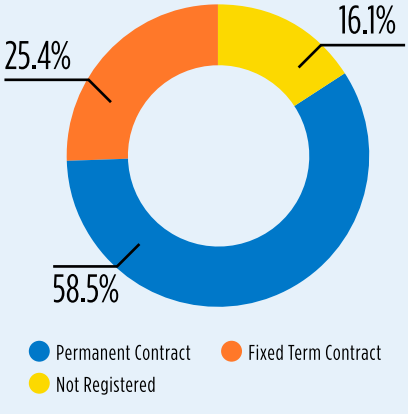


CHART 4.
Employment types distribution



Do women earn enough to cover their basic needs?

Women who earn a monthly income were asked whether their earnings are sufficient to cover their basic needs, including food, clothing, hygiene products, utility bills, rent, transportation, childcare, and other essential expenses. A large portion of respondents in the "Not at All" and "Not Every Month" categories suggest that economic insecurity is prevalent among women. The small percentage of "Yes" responses underscores that relatively few women perceive themselves as fully economically empowered. Only 10% of respondents reported that their income is fully sufficient to meet these needs, while 30% stated that their earnings partially cover their basic requirements.

Instead, a significant proportion of women feel economically marginalized or perceive no improvement in their economic position. This underscores the significant financial struggles faced by many women, with a large portion of them struggling to make ends meet despite having a regular income. Additionally, women in part-time or temporary positions, or those on fixed-term contracts, often lack the stability and benefits that come with permanent employment. This limited job security, combined with the unequal distribution of household responsibilities, particularly childcare, places a disproportionate financial burden on women.

The majority of women (62.5%) do not own property, highlighting economic vulnerability and dependency. This limits their ability to access credit, build wealth, or achieve long-term financial security.

In North Macedonia, property ownership is legally accessible to both men and women. However, significant gender disparities persist in actual ownership rates. Administrative data indicate that men hold approximately 70% of property ownership records, leaving women with only about 30%. Recent study conducted by Reactor - Research in Action, "*No women's land - gender analysis on property ownership*"[11] suggests that while women possess the legal entitlement to property ownership, there are significant hurdles that impede their ability to acquire it, perpetuating existing disparities. Factors such as lower employment rates, high levels of inactivity, diminished wages, and disproportionate representation among unpaid family workers represent multifaceted barriers to property ownership for women. On the other hand, ownership of assets, particularly property, is a cornerstone of women's empowerment because it directly contributes to their economic independence, social status, and decision-making opportunities.

[11] Leshoska, V., Bojchevska Mitrevska, A., & Jolevska, I. (2024). No women's land Gender analysis on property ownership. Skopje: Reactor-Research in Action.

CHART 5.
Do women earn enough to cover their basic needs?

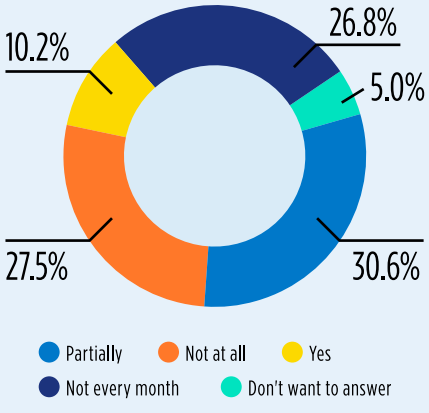
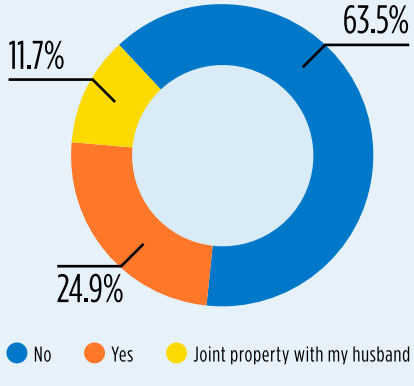
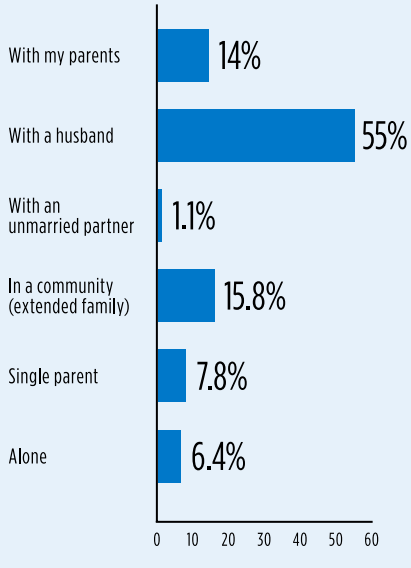


CHART 6.
Do you own any property in your name?



The majority (55%) of respondents live with a husband and living in an extended family or community is the second most common choice (15.8%). Smaller groups include those living alone (6.4%), as single parents (7.8%), or with an unmarried partner (1.1%). A combined 29.8% live with either their parents (14%) or in a community with extended family (15.8%), highlighting the importance of family or communal living for a significant portion of women.

CHART 7.
Living arrangements (%)



Who does the work at home?

The largest category (302 responses) is "Mostly I," which likely reflects a significant burden of unpaid work falling on a single individual, that is the women and this aligns with trends everywhere for women to disproportionately bear the responsibility for household labour. Globally, women spend more time on unpaid household labour than men, often at the expense of their career advancement, leisure time, and mental health. The structure of responses reinforces the societal expectation of women as primary caregivers and are responsible for household chores in North Macedonia. The official statistics for North Macedonia produced with Time-use Surveys, which analyse how people use their time on a daily basis, confirm the stereotypical pattern of gendered division, showing that on average men spend more time on paid work (employment), while women devote more time on unpaid care work. On average, women in North Macedonia perform 72.5% of the total unpaid care work, while men's contribution barely exceeds one fourth of the total workload.

CHART 8.
Distribution of unpaid work at home

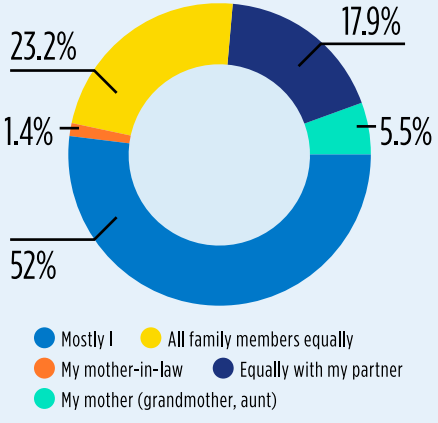
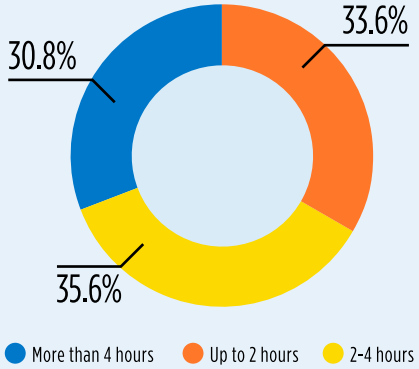


CHART 9.
Daily time spent on household chores



The relatively lower proportion of "Equally with my partner" responses highlights persistent gender disparities in domestic partnerships, with many women likely taking on a disproportionate share of household duties. This dynamic often forces women to balance unpaid household labour with paid work, leading to the "double burden" phenomenon, which can limit their professional opportunities and economic independence. This unequal distribution of unpaid labour limits women's opportunities for paid employment, education, and personal development, reinforcing traditional gender roles and perpetuating economic inequalities. Addressing this issue requires policies that promote shared domestic responsibilities and support for care services to alleviate the burden on women.

Moreover, when asked how much time they spend on household chores, 30% of women reported dedicating more than 4 hours daily, 35.6% spend between 2 and 4 hours, while 33.6% allocate up to 2 hours.

Prolonged time spent on housework limits opportunities for paid employment, education, and leisure, disproportionately affecting women. Spending extensive hours on household chores may hinder overall economic productivity, particularly if women are unable to engage in other activities, such as career or skill development.

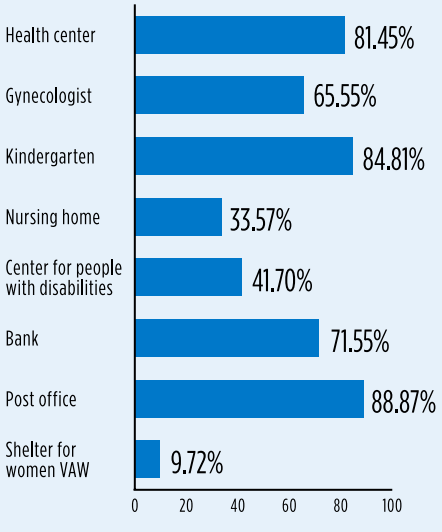
Access to public services

The public services with the lowest access (based on the percentage of responses) are:

1. Shelter for women victims of VAW: 9.72%
2. Nursing home: 33.57%
3. Centre for people with disabilities: 41.69%

This indicates a lack of a support system for women victims of violence, elderly women and people with disabilities. The limited availability of services for the elderly and people with disabilities in a patriarchal society where traditional gender roles still prevail severely restricts women's ability to engage in the workforce. This creates significant barriers to their economic participation and overall well-being.

CHART 10.
Access to public services



A vast majority of respondents (96%) have some form of health insurance. This is in line with the country operating a compulsory, insurance-based health system aiming for universal coverage. While many services are covered by law, in practice according to the World Health Organization estimates, out-of-pocket payments represent 40.4% of total health spending, one of the highest shares in South-Eastern Europe.[12] These out-of-pocket expenses, particularly for medications, can lead to financial hardship for many women, particularly those in precarious or informal work situations. Financial barriers and access disparities remain areas needing attention to ensure equitable and comprehensive care for all women.

Although only 10% of respondents reported that their income is fully sufficient to meet these needs, around 70% of the respondents do not utilize any form of social protection right/financial allowance. Only 9% of all respondents have received some kind of financial assistance from the municipality where they live. This highlights a critical gap in social safety nets, which could significantly alleviate the economic pressures faced by women.

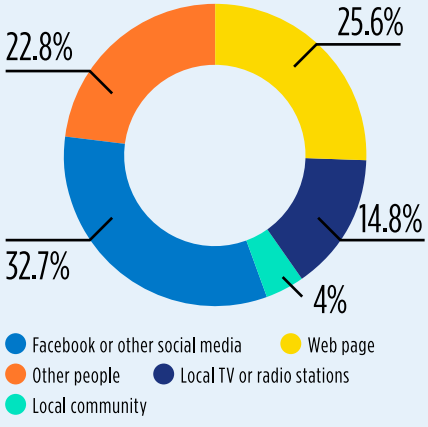
[12] World Health Organization (2022). Health Systems in Action: North Macedonia, 2022 edition. WHO Regional Office for Europe.

Participation in decision-making processes

Public participation is crucial for women because it ensures their voices, needs, and perspectives are represented in decision-making processes. Women's participation challenges traditional gender roles and promotes equality in governance and public life. It ensures equitable distribution of resources, policies, and opportunitiesWhen it comes to women's participation in decision-making processes, the data reveals a concerning trend. While 46.19% of women have been invited by the municipality to attend meetings or community forums, a significant 53.8% have never been invited or informed about such opportunities. Moreover, only 15.14% of respondents reported being asked directly about their needs by the municipality or other institutions, highlighting a significant gap in inclusive consultation practices.

In terms of staying informed about municipal activities, the majority rely on digital channels, with 32.7% turning to social media platforms such as Facebook. Word of mouth remains a notable source of information for 22.8% of women. Traditional media, such as local TV and radio stations, is used by only 14.8% of respondents, indicating its diminishing role in communication. Interestingly, local community offices, often cited by municipal representatives as key communication channels, are the least utilized source, with minimal engagement among women.

CHART 11.
How respondents stay informed about municipal activities



The findings highlight the importance of maintaining active and engaging municipal social media channels to reach the largest audience.

Word-of-mouth still matters: municipalities might consider leveraging local influencers or community leaders to amplify messages.

To address the evident disconnect between municipal outreach strategies and women's participation in governance, municipalities need to adopt more inclusive and effective outreach strategies. By improving outreach and ensuring diverse, accessible communication channels, municipalities can foster greater inclusion and responsiveness to the needs of women and bridge the gap in communication.

A significant majority of respondents (401, approximately 68%) indicated that they are not part of any civil society organization or forum. Over half (51.3%) of the respondents indicated they did not need to contact a civil society organization for support. A significant proportion (20.7%, or 123 respondents) mentioned they did not contact a CSO, but needed support. This indicates a gap in accessibility or awareness of these organizations. 18.1% (106 respondents) said they had contacted or reached out to a CSO for support. This shows some level of engagement but leaves room for improvement. 9.9% (58 respondents) indicated there are no such organizations available to them, which may reflect regional or systemic limitations in CSO availability. There is an opportunity to increase awareness, availability, and outreach efforts by CSOs to address the unmet needs of women.

Women in the survey highlighted a range of needs and expectations from civil society organizations, spanning various areas of support and engagement. Key points include:

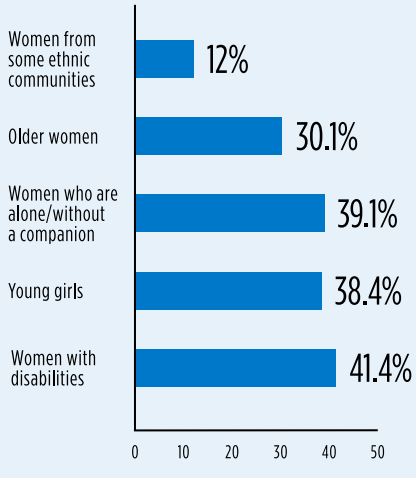
- **Legal assistance:** Respondents highlighted the need for legal aid to secure personal rights (e.g., rights of children with disabilities, single mothers, and addressing cases of domestic violence) and to advocate for legislative changes in specific areas.
- **Societal change:** There is a demand for programmes that support cultural development, empathy-building, mental health initiatives, and a shift in societal mentality.
- **Environmental protection:** Assistance is needed to address issues such as illegal waste disposal and water supply challenges.
- **Youth support:** Respondents emphasized the importance of increasing opportunities for non-formal education, providing support for project implementation, and fostering collaboration among youth.

- **Economic empowerment and employment:** A significant focus is placed on economically empowering women, especially those who are unemployed or have lower educational qualifications. CSOs run workshops to enhance skills and knowledge, making women more competitive in the labour market. They connect women to employment opportunities, including those offered through the Employment Agency.
- **Protection and specialized support:** CSOs offer legal assistance, career counselling, and reintegration programs for women who are victims of violence. They focus on addressing the consequences of violence and provide education and awareness regarding available services.
- **Shelter and psychosocial support:** as well as accompanying victims to relevant institutions.
- **Support for rural women:** CSOs work on including rural women in decision-making processes at the local level. They raise awareness about local problems and encourage women to advocate for solutions, including engaging with municipal budgets.
- **Awareness and education:** CSOs to organize workshops and provide information on various topics, such as the legal rights of women, violence prevention, and entrepreneurial skills. They also engage in health education and organize workshops for women in rural areas, empowering them to advocate for their needs within their communities.

Public safety and vulnerability

1 in 5
women reports feeling unsafe.

CHART 12.
Perception of the least safe groups of women and girls in the municipality



Factors contributing to women's safety can vary depending on cultural, social, and environmental contexts, but they generally are related to physical infrastructure (well-lit public spaces, safe public transportation and pedestrian friendly design) and the perception of the inclusiveness of the community (minimization of discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic background).

The least safe groups are:

- Women with disabilities (231 responses or 41.4% of the total respondents): The most vulnerable group, likely due to physical and systemic barriers, inaccessible facilities that increase their risk.
- Women alone/without companions (218 responses or 39.1%): Highlights a need for public safety measures in areas where women may travel or live alone.
- Young girls (214 responses or 38.4%): Suggests concern about the safety of younger, possibly less self-reliant individuals.
- Older women (168 responses or 30.1%): Reflects safety concerns related to physical vulnerability or lack of mobility.
- Women from some ethnic communities (67 responses or 12%): Indicates that ethnic discrimination and related safety issues are perceived as less widespread but still present.

Based on these perceptions, targeted safety measures to enhance the safety feeling of women could be increased accessibility for women with disabilities in public spaces, focus on young girls and older women to build confidence and provide them with resources like self-defence training or access to help services, address safety concerns for ethnic minority groups through awareness campaigns and anti-discrimination policies and invest in better lighting, surveillance, and accessible infrastructure in public spaces

Institutional perspectives of vulnerable groups of women

Policies and measures for vulnerable categories of women and girls

Municipal programmes across the regions generally focus on addressing the needs of vulnerable groups through initiatives integrated into broader social protection frameworks. A recurring theme in municipal efforts is the reliance on awareness-raising activities, such as campaigns on gender equality and anti-violence measures, which are broad and not tailored to specific groups. Measures also include providing one-time financial assistance, assistants for people with disabilities, and occasional donations (e.g., food, clothing, or climate equipment for vulnerable groups). Infrastructure improvements, such as accessible sidewalks and inclusive urban projects, have been implemented with external donor support. Assistance for elderly individuals includes meal distribution in collaboration with CSOs and basic support services, though these efforts are inconsistent. Programmes for socio-economically disadvantaged families and survivors of violence are minimal, with past initiatives, like intervention groups for survivors, failing to sustain due to resource constraints. The municipal administration also supports temporary employment through local utility work and caregiving programmes, though these are short-term and limited in scope. Some municipalities also support an inclusive centre in schools for vulnerable children, where they receive treatment and care. Furthermore, there are examples of women from vulnerable categories, such as a mother of a child with disabilities, who are provided with employment opportunities, with some working part-time to balance their caregiving responsibilities. Several municipalities prioritize preventive healthcare, including reproductive health awareness, gynaecological exams, and screenings for malignant diseases. However, limited access to healthcare facilities, particularly in rural areas, remains a significant challenge.

A recurring theme in municipal efforts is the reliance on awareness-raising activities, such as campaigns on gender equality and anti-violence measures, which are broad and not tailored to specific groups.

While larger municipalities are more likely to initiate targeted projects and partnerships, smaller ones face significant resource constraints, resulting in minimal and generalized programming. The common focus remains on improving access to social services, health care, and economic opportunities, but the effectiveness of these programmes is often un-

dermined by limited budgets and institutional capacity. Rural municipalities often face challenges in providing services to vulnerable groups due to limited financial resources. As a result, the range of services available is more restricted compared to urban areas.

Overall, the municipalities implement limited and inconsistent measures to support vulnerable groups of women due to lack of resources, structured programs, and political continuity.

The role of civil society organizations in providing services and support for vulnerable women

Civil society organizations play a pivotal role in addressing the needs of vulnerable women and in many municipalities they are an essential tool in addressing the needs of vulnerable women, particularly those affected by gender-based violence These organizations provide a wide range of services aimed at protecting and empowering women while fostering social inclusion. Their efforts encompass legal assistance, career counselling, and reintegration programmes tailored to women who have experienced violence. By raising awareness about available resources and educating women about their rights, CSOs work to mitigate the impact of GBV and offer pathways to recovery and independence.

In addition to these specialized services, CSOs operate shelters and provide psychosocial support. These services are designed to provide comprehensive care, addressing both immediate safety and long-term recovery.

Economic empowerment is another cornerstone of the CSOs' work in the regions. Recognizing the challenges faced by unemployed women and those with limited educational opportunities, they organize workshops to build skills and knowledge, enhancing women's competitiveness in the labour market. By fostering connections with employers and the Employment Agency, they help create pathways to sustainable employment, empowering women to achieve financial independence.

For women living in rural areas, CSOs play a pivotal role in fostering inclusion and participation in decision-making processes. Through awareness-raising initiatives and community workshops, these organizations encourage rural women to advocate for solutions to local problems, including municipal budget allocations. This outreach is particularly important for ensuring that the voices of rural women, often excluded from formal governance structures, are heard and considered.

CSOs also place significant emphasis on education and awareness. They organize workshops on a variety of topics, including women's legal rights, violence prevention, entrepreneurial skills, and health education. These programmes empower women to take active roles in their communities and advocate for their needs, with a particular focus on supporting women in rural and marginalized communities.

Despite their proactive efforts, CSOs face challenges in collaborating with local governments. While these organizations frequently engage with marginalized groups through direct outreach and tailored programmes, local government support often remains inconsistent. Issues such as housing, education, and financial support are inadequately addressed, and mechanisms like the Commission for Social Protection and Equal Opportunities are often perceived as formal structures disconnected from community realities.

Many CSOs have a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach to their work, tailoring interventions to the specific needs of diverse groups, including women, young girls, and women with disabilities. This inclusive strategy is evident in their use of multilingual communication in Macedonian, Albanian, and Roma, ensuring that services are accessible to all. They also employ multidisciplinary teams to create individualized care plans, which are adjusted based on the evolving needs of their beneficiaries, fostering trust and ensuring meaningful support.

CSOs tend to use personalized engagement strategies, while state institutions have broader, less targeted approaches. While CSOs emphasize direct, community-based outreach and individualized care, state institutions often rely on generalized campaigns and institutional methods that fail to address the specific challenges of marginalized groups effectively.

CSOs continue to expand their reach by addressing the needs of a wide range of vulnerable populations, including women, children, and marginalized communities. They collaborate with licensed service providers to offer in-home care for elderly women and connect long-term unemployed individuals with economic opportunities. Programmes addressing child marriage prevention, youth mentorship, and entrepreneurship further demonstrate their commitment to fostering social equity and opportunity.

Trust plays a fundamental role in the effectiveness of CSOs. By building strong relationships within the communities they serve, these organizations ensure that their beneficiaries feel supported and empowered. Personal interactions between CSO representatives and community members create a network of trust and information-sharing, amplifying the impact of their work.

CSOs work could and should support in overcoming these obstacles through field visits, grassroots outreach, and partnerships with local institutions. These efforts could ensure that even the most isolated communities are informed about their rights and have access to vital services.

However, there is still a gap and room to increase awareness, availability, and outreach efforts by CSOs to address the unmet needs of women. The survey among women has shown that a significant majority of respondents (401, approximately 68%) indicated that they are not part of any civil society organization or forum. More than half (51.3%) of the respondents indicated they did not need to contact a civil society organization for support. A significant proportion (20.7%, or 123 respondents) mentioned they did not contact a CSO but needed support. This indicates a gap in accessibility or awareness of these organizations. 18.1% (106 respondents) said they had contacted or reached out to a CSO for support. This shows some level of engagement, but leaves room for improvement.

This is particularly important for women in rural areas that face barriers such as limited transportation, restricted access to services, and a lack of information. CSOs work could and should support in overcoming these obstacles through field visits, grassroots outreach, and partnerships with local institutions. These efforts could ensure that even the most isolated communities are informed about their rights and have access to vital services.

Conclusions and recommendations

The conclusions highlight systemic challenges related to gender inequality and the socio-economic inclusion of women, particularly those from vulnerable groups, across North Macedonia. Key challenges include:

ECONOMIC INSECURITY

Despite high levels of educational attainment, many women experience economic precarity due to limited access to stable financial resources, precarious employment conditions, and insufficient economic empowerment programs. Groups such as single mothers, rural women, and Roma women are disproportionately affected, highlighting the need for targeted economic interventions.

UNDERUTILIZED SOCIAL PROTECTION

There is a significant disconnect between the availability of social protection services and their effective utilization by women, particularly those from vulnerable demographics. Factors such as limited awareness, cumbersome administrative procedures, and inadequate outreach exacerbate this gap, leaving many women without essential support.

LIMITED MUNICIPAL CAPACITY AND RESOURCES

Municipalities face resource constraints, including insufficient budgets, overburdened personnel, and a lack of targeted resources for gender equality initiatives. These limitations undermine the development and implementation of effective, gender-sensitive programmes. Many municipal programmes lack specificity and fail to address the unique needs of vulnerable women. This generic approach diminishes the impact of initiatives intended to foster gender equality. Municipalities struggle with limited budgets and overburdened personnel, particularly among coordinators for equal opportunities, hindering the implementation of effective gender-sensitive policies.

LOW ENGAGEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Women's participation in municipal consultations and decision-making processes remains minimal. This exclusion is reflected in low engagement in community forums and policy design, perpetuating systemic inequalities and limiting the impact of municipal programmes. Women from rural and marginalized communities are often excluded from decision-making processes. Municipalities' minimal efforts to engage these groups result in the underrepresentation of their needs in planning and policy development.

PERSISTENT GENDER INEQUALITY

Gendered labour roles and limited property ownership among women highlight entrenched structural inequalities, even in urbanized regions such as Skopje. In rural and disadvantaged areas, traditional gender norms further marginalize women, restricting their socio-economic mobility.

BARRIERS TO HEALTH AND SOCIAL SERVICES

Vulnerable groups, including older women, women with disabilities, and survivors of gender-based violence, face significant obstacles in accessing healthcare and social services. Contributing factors include inadequate outreach, limited rural healthcare infrastructure, and restricted transportation options. Municipalities provide fragmented services, such as home care, transportation for children with disabilities, and counselling for survivors of gender-based violence. However, these efforts fall short of addressing the region's needs, especially in rural areas, where women encounter substantial barriers to healthcare access, including reproductive health services.

GENDER STEREOTYPES

Traditional gender roles and cultural norms remain entrenched, particularly in rural areas. These stereotypes hinder women's participation in education, the workforce, and decision-making processes, reinforcing their socio-economic marginalization.

BARRIERS TO ACCESS

Inadequate transportation infrastructure creates significant obstacles for rural and older women, restricting access to healthcare, education, and economic opportunities. This intensifies the exclusion of marginalized populations.

Common themes across regions

- **Economic insecurity:** Women face precarious employment, unequal wages, and limited financial independence.
- **Social and cultural barriers:** Traditional gender roles and societal norms limit women's participation in decision-making and economic activities.
- **Limited access to public services:** Especially in rural areas, inadequate healthcare, childcare, and social services restrict women's opportunities.
- **CSO efforts:** While CSOs address critical needs through support programmes and advocacy, they face challenges in funding and collaboration with state institutions.
- **Policy and institutional gaps:** Municipalities often lack resources, targeted programmes, and effective evaluation mechanisms to address women's vulnerabilities.

Recommendations

To establish a robust and sustainable support system for vulnerable groups of women, it is crucial to empower all stakeholders involved. It is vital to equip them to identify and respond to the diverse needs and challenges these women face.

Equally important is fostering a shift in the mindset of those responsible for appointing individuals to manage these programmes and policies. A clear and systematic mechanism should be implemented to ensure that appointments are made with a thorough understanding of gender dynamics, vulnerability concepts, and the unique needs of girls and women in the specific municipality they will serve.

- **Institutional capacity building**: To ensure sustained capacity building, the ability to identify these needs and challenges should be evaluated at least annually through follow-up training sessions, quizzes, or other engaging activities. Additionally, intersectionality training is crucial for all personnel working directly with clients. An intersectional approach enables institutions to design programmes, activities, and services that address the unique struggles and needs of each woman, fostering more inclusive and effective solutions.
- It is essential to develop a mechanism to measure the effectiveness of equal opportunities and gender equality frameworks at the local level, focusing on:
  - The interest and engagement of the equal opportunities coordinator;
  - The collaboration between the Equal Opportunities Commission and the coordinator at the local level;
  - Preparedness for a replacement coordinator in cases of inability to perform duties;
  - Ensuring that the coordinator is financially incentivized and has sufficient time and capacity within their workload to fully commit to the activities of this programme;
  - Ensuring that there is always a designated individual in the institution familiar with the activities and measures implemented within the institution they represent.

  In addition, mechanisms should be established to evaluate the efficiency of implemented measures and activities, ensuring they can be adjusted to align with changing circumstances.
- **Gender-sensitive budgeting** is envisioned as the most effective measure to integrate gender perspectives into the planning of every activity and programme implemented by a given institution. By identifying the needs of different vulnerable groups of women and allocating resources to ensure their access to specific measures or rights, a significant step can be taken toward achieving gender equality at the local level.

- **All institutions must be accessible to all individuals**, regardless of the type or degree of their disability. To achieve this, each institution should assess its accessibility and implement appropriate measures. These measures should include ensuring physical access and providing materials and documents tailored to the needs of individuals, such as simplified forms, large-font documents, Braille materials, and assistance with form completion.
- Improved communication with women from rural areas is essential to address their specific needs and challenges.
  - **Local contact points** – persons familiar with or members of the community can serve as direct communication points between women and municipal services. This approach has already proven efficient through the work of the CSOs that are recognized and accepted in the communities they work in.
  - **Regular meetings with the inhabitants in their areas** – with the regular presence of representatives of the institutions in the rural areas, they will get familiar with the obstacles they face, but it would also serve as an immediate invitation for the inhabitants to attend meetings and share their issues.
  - **Provide possibilities for online applications and information –** this would make the services at the local level more accessible in the rural areas. These tools should also include leaving feedback or proposing an initiative.
- **Establishing mechanisms that encourage women to participate** in forums, express their views, and advocate for fulfilling their demands is necessary. These mechanisms should aim to create a supportive environment where women feel empowered to voice their needs and contribute to developing solutions that address their specific challenges.
- **Strengthen outreach efforts** - municipalities should proactively engage women through consultations, community forums, and surveys to ensure their needs are reflected in policies. Improve communication channels with rural women, Roma women and older women, ensuring accessible formats and direct outreach.
- **Support CSO sustainability**, by providing long-term funding opportunities for CSOs working with vulnerable women to ensure the continuity of essential services and strengthen collaboration between municipalities and CSOs to expand outreach and service delivery, especially in more remote areas. Civil society organizations have proven to be a vital link in facilitating communication between vulnerable groups of women and institutions. For this reason, institutions must consider how to effectively engage these organizations to bridge the gap with vulnerable women. Involving civil society organizations requires adequate resources to support their operations, including appropriate facilities to meet with vulnerable women within their communities. Furthermore, these organizations need direct access to decision-makers and active participation in decision-making processes at the local and regional levels. This will ensure that the needs of vulnerable groups of women are considered and integrated into policies and measures designed to address their

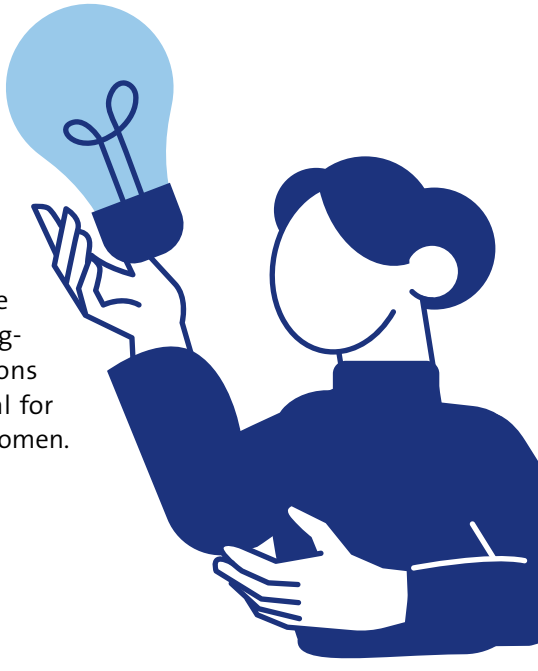
challenges. Among the organizations engaged in collaboration, special attention must be given to those founded by women and those that specifically work with women in rural areas, women affected by domestic and gender-based violence, and women with disabilities or those living with individuals with disabilities. These organizations play a critical role in addressing the unique challenges faced by these groups and ensuring their voices are represented in institutional efforts and decision-making processes.

Recommendations for addressing vulnerabilities

- Provide tailor-made employment opportunities for women:

  In addition to the active measures provided by the Employment Agency, it is essential to establish a system that identifies learning and work opportunities for vulnerable groups of women, offering a tailored approach to skill acquisition and professional development. Examples could include online work training, craft-making workshops, and similar initiatives. Activities to bring services closer to these women could involve mentorship programmes and specialized grants for starting small businesses. These grants should have flexible conditions and be adapted to the capacities and needs of vulnerable women.

  Municipalities should introduce specific measures to create flexible jobs tailored to the needs of single mothers or women caring for individuals with disabilities. While caregiving and personal assistant roles for people with disabilities or elderly individuals are currently seen as a successful option for these groups, it should not remain the only opportunity. Moreover, such roles often come with service contracts rather than stable employment, which fails to provide long-term economic security. Expanding options for flexible, secure employment is critical for improving the financial stability of these women.



- Creating conditions for women to work: Municipalities need to conduct a thorough analysis to identify why women cannot work or commit to full-time employment. Based on the findings, municipalities should implement measures to ease women's access to suitable jobs. Such measures could include establishing kindergartens with shift-based working hours or schedules that align with parents' work shifts, allowing them to conveniently drop off and pick up their children. Additionally, municipalities could create day centres or training centres adapted to the needs of individuals with disabilities, ensuring accessible infrastructure and tailored programmes. Furthermore, providing adequate facilities and services for the care of elderly or dependent individuals would reduce the caregiving burden on women, enabling them to join the workforce and participate in sustainable employment.
- Offer vocational training and childcare support for single mothers and unemployed women.
- Ensure equal access to agricultural and employment resources for rural women.
- Address transportation barriers - invest in transport infrastructure and subsidized services to connect rural and old women to essential services, including healthcare and education.
- Enhance economic opportunities, by creating targeted employment and training programmes for women, particularly single mothers and those in precarious employment.
- Promote gender equality by developing initiatives to promote property ownership among women and address gender disparities in household roles. Implement gender-sensitive budgeting in municipal programmes to ensure women's needs are adequately addressed.
- Expand healthcare services in order to improve access to healthcare, particularly for rural and marginalized women, through improved transportation services.
- Expand and improve social and healthcare services - social and healthcare services must be made more accessible to vulnerable groups, particularly in rural areas. This includes establishing more shelters, expanding counselling and legal aid for victims of gender-based violence and increasing access to reproductive healthcare services such as gynaecological exams. Mobile clinics and improved home care services for older women and those with disabilities should also be prioritized, ensuring long-term sustainability through municipal or state funding.
- Address transportation barriers - improved transport infrastructure is essential to connect rural areas to critical services such as healthcare, education, and employment. Subsidized or municipal-supported transportation programmes should be introduced for vulnerable women, particularly those needing access to medical facilities and social services.

- Foster rural women's initiatives - rural women's circles and similar groups should be further supported to promote collective action, knowledge-sharing and advocacy. Municipalities and CSOs can collaborate to provide resources, training, and platforms for these groups to effectively represent their needs and priorities to local authorities.
- Strengthen protections against violence: expand shelters and psychological support services and improve public awareness and reduce stigma around reporting abuse.
- Address cultural barriers: engage community leaders in challenging harmful norms, particularly among ethnic minority women, provide education programmes for girls to prevent early marriages, and promote independence.
- Foster intersectional approaches: design programmes that consider overlapping vulnerabilities such as age, disability, and ethnicity; implement comprehensive data-collection to better understand and address specific needs.
- Improve coordination among donors and the international community on activities related to gender equality.

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