

VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality
and Social Cohesion
in the Western Balkans



YOUTH
EQUAL IS MORE

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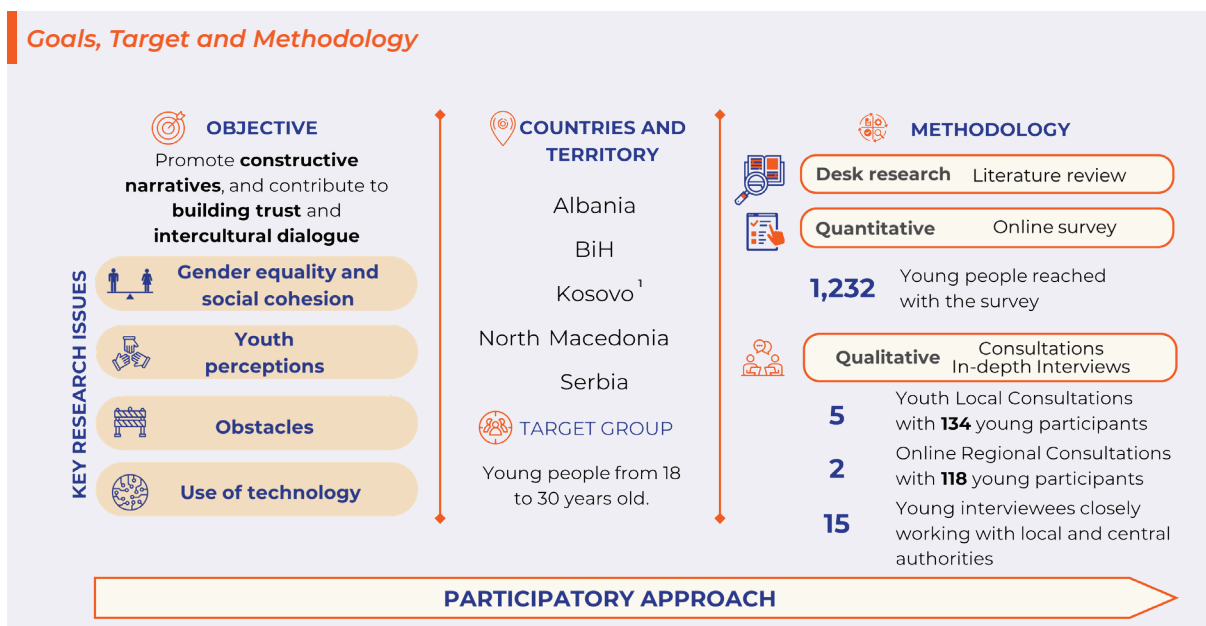
Voices of YOUTH: Gender Equality and Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans

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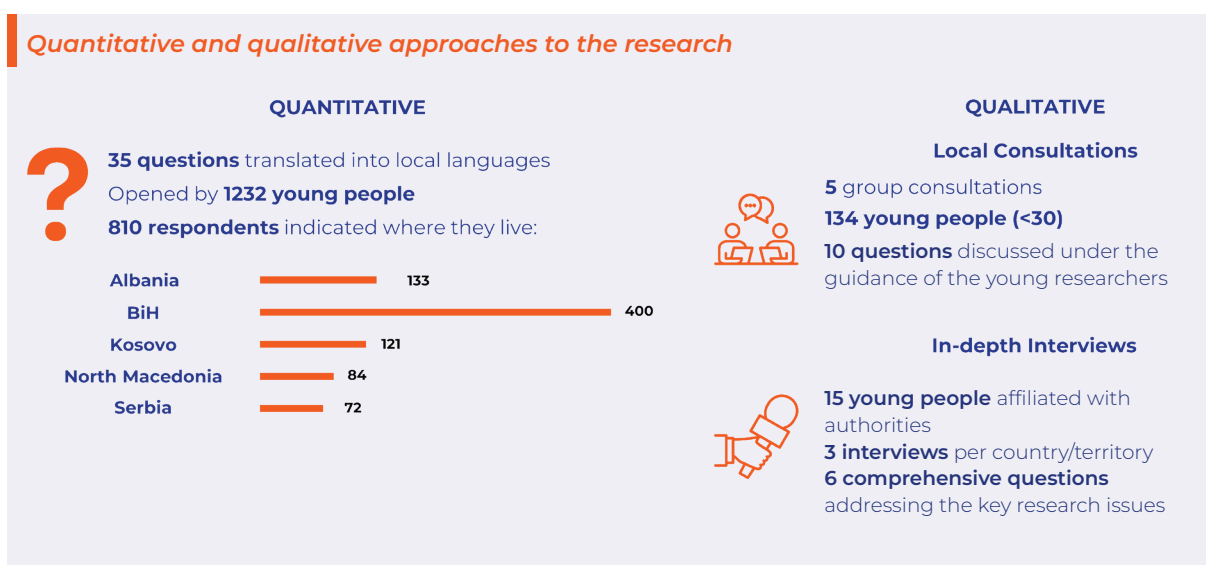


“Nobody ever asked me to say anything about this!”

This is a quote from a young person engaged in the youth-led regional research, who commented that youth are rarely consulted or engaged on issues of social cohesion and participation in public life and politics. Youth are excluded from decision-making and policy-making processes in the region and they are rarely involved in the negotiations for sustainable peace. Although they have something meaningful to say, young people feel that their voices are often overlooked.



The participatory study gathered more than 1200 young people from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), North Macedonia, Serbia, and Kosovo¹ aged 18-30, who participated in 2 regional online consultations, 1 in-person regional consultation, 1 online survey, 5 local consultations and 15 individual in-depth interviews.



1. All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)

KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS

Social cohesion and gender equality are associated with core values of broader discourse regarding human rights, democracy, social justice, and solidarity.

Image 1. When you think of “social cohesion”, what words come to mind?

Word cloud based on the perceptions of the participants of the 5 local consultations



Image 2. When you think of “gender equality”, what words come to mind?

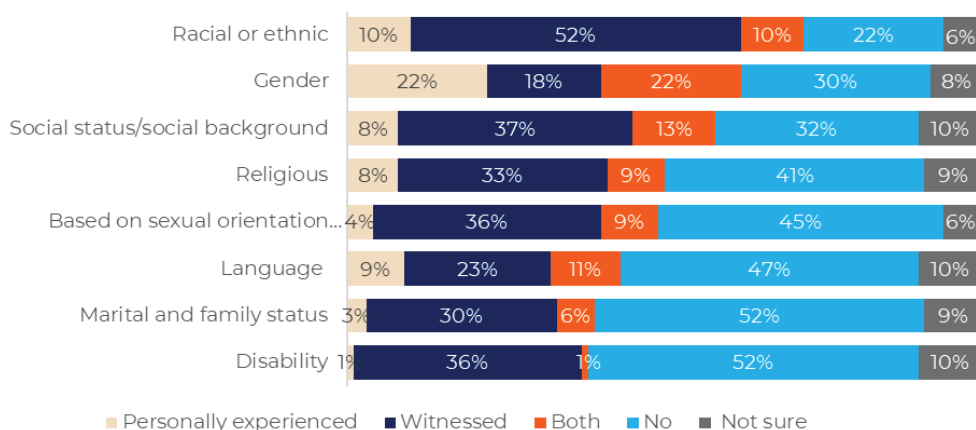
Word cloud based on the perceptions of the participants of the 5 local consultations

- Youth participants do not perceive very high levels of social cohesion or gender equality in their communities.
- Negative legacies of the past are identified by youth participants as by far one of the main factors impeding gender equality specifically, and social cohesion more broadly. In particular, such negative legacies take the forms of isolation, fear, intergenerational distrust, as well as hegemonic militarized masculinities connected to the remnants of ‘us vs. them’ mentalities. Furthermore, they are reflected in cultural and patriarchal norms that contribute to societal resistance to improvement and emancipation. The consequence is limited opportunities and stifled progress towards gender equality.
- Analysis of intergroup relations shows some encouraging results, with high reported rates of friendships between different ethnic and/or religious groups. However, the results also indicate increased social distance as the intimacy of the relationships in question increases.
- Along with equal access to education and labour opportunities, gender equality is recognized by youth as an important factor in building stronger and fairer societies. However, the study also revealed some scepticism with regard to gender equality initiatives, as they are in some cases viewed as counterproductive, in the sense that they contribute to further polarization.

Figure 1. Experiences of discrimination in marginalized communities

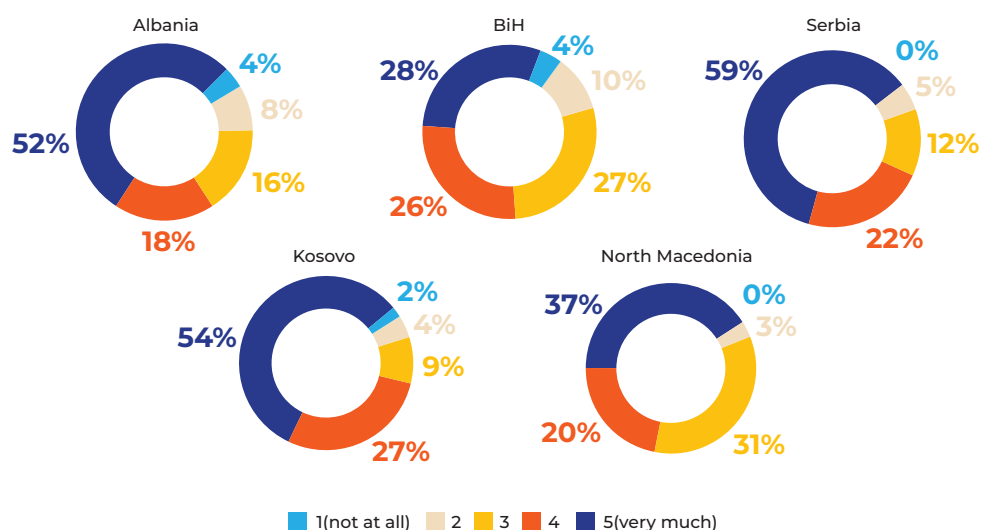
Have you personally experienced or witnessed any instances of discrimination or intolerance based on the following grounds?

(Focus on Marginalised Communities)



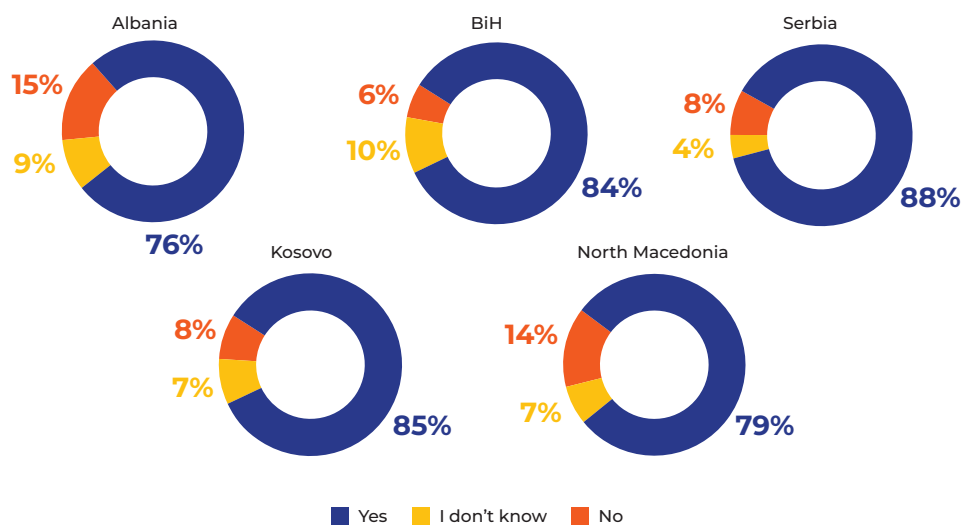
- Positive legal norms formally guarantee equality, but participants recognized a lack of mechanisms in place to truly implement existing legislation meant to ensure gender equality.
- Discrimination and hate speech are fairly frequent occurrences, either directly experienced, witnessed, or both experienced and witnessed by many respondents in the quantitative study. Race and/or ethnicity, social status, gender, and sexuality were the most common bases for hate speech and/or discrimination encountered by respondents. The quantitative analysis showed that women and minority groups were much more likely to encounter discrimination and hate speech in all the aforementioned categories.

Figure 2. Youth perceptions of domestic or family violence



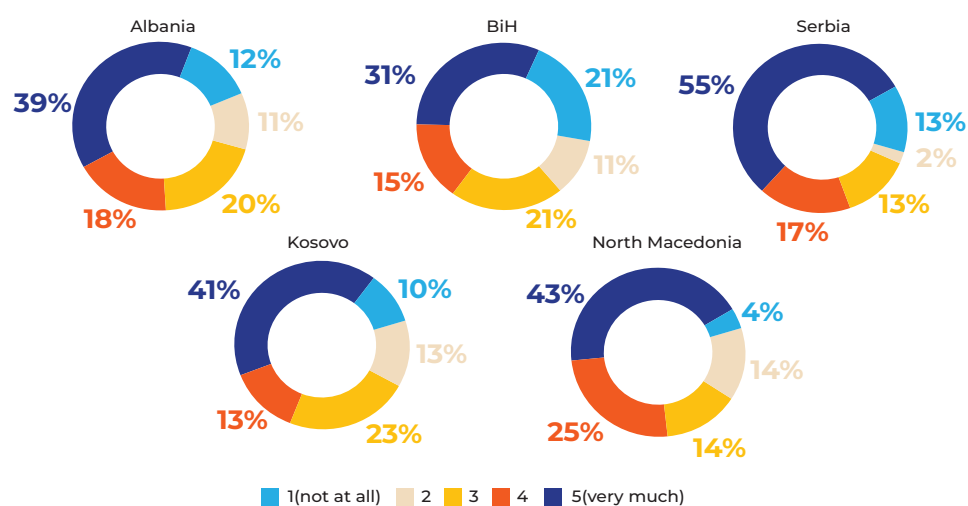
- Participants showed awareness of gender-based violence as an issue in their communities that negatively affects social cohesion and youth well-being. The youth emphasized the role of militarized and toxic masculinity in perpetuating the continuation of gender-based violence, the normalization of certain behaviours and the lack of awareness of what constitutes gender-based violence. The role of media and social media in perpetuating narratives that normalize and minimize the problem of domestic violence and its devastating consequences was also highlighted.

Figure 3. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations



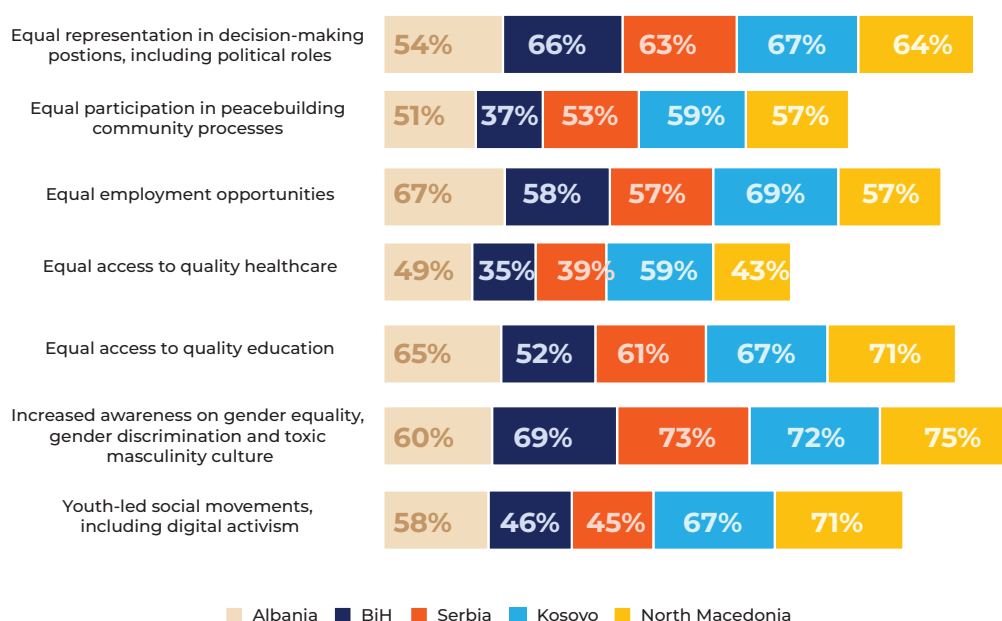
- Existing systems of support for victims are insufficient, as are institutional responses, leading to a sense of futility when it comes to reporting cases of gender-based violence. Also notable is the stigma and shame attached to speaking out about gender-based violence highlighted by the participants, who themselves were mostly reluctant to share their own specific experiences of gender-based violence.
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on gender-based-violence was primarily seen as a mediating factor: the youth perception was that the ensuing exacerbation of issues such as isolation, the spread of disinformation, mental health issues, breakdowns in the functioning of relevant institutional support systems led to the negative effects of Covid-19 on social cohesion in general, and the corresponding rise in gender-based violence specifically.
- The young participants showed a keen awareness of the rigid patriarchal gender norms deeply rooted in the fabric of society, as well as the limits and obstacles that these put on their own generation. Older generations are viewed as keepers and transmitters of these norms, which youth identify as part of family upbringing and primary socialization.

Figure 4. Youth perceptions on movements against gender equality and discrimination



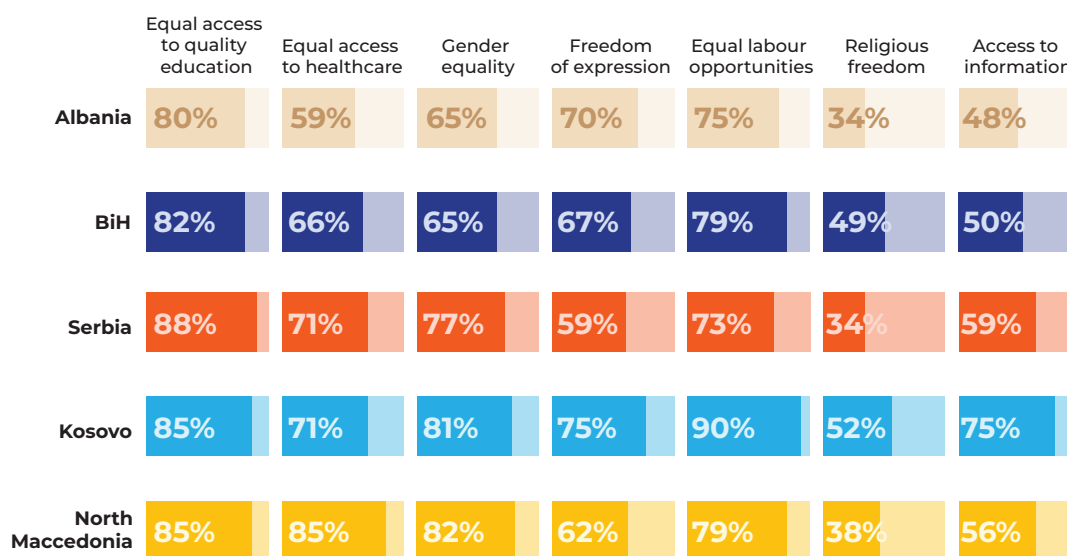
- Education also plays a part in the continuation and reinforcement of rigid gender norms, as well as a system where gender-based violence may become normalized. This is due to, for example, educators perpetuating traditional gender norms for the behaviour of students, as well as gender-stereotyped future education/career choices, lack of curriculum that would address things such as gender equality, sexual education, and consent; in addition, schools can be places for earliest occurrences of behaviours (such as male students inappropriately touching female students), but there are no systems in place to address such issues.
- There is a lack of appropriate sex education, as well as education of children and youth on topics such as gender and mental health, which contributes to the accumulation of negative effects of rigid patriarchal norms and the normalization of harmful behaviours.
- Youth also showed awareness of the proliferation of polarizing identity speeches in media and social media. Many highlighted that the movements - both local and international - that promoted messages containing ethno-nationalist/populist rhetoric or discrimination against minorities, also carried with them the promotion of gender inequality and discrimination against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.
- Youth show a low degree of trust in public institutions, politicians, and religious institutions.
- Youth perceive that there is extreme inequality when it comes to access to education and employment opportunities with regard to women and girls as well as to other minority groups, such as migrants, persons with disabilities, and Roma people.

Figure 5. Youth perceptions on factors that would help achieving gender equality



- Increased involvement of women in politics and key decision-making positions can foster progress and bring more attention to the perspectives and needs of marginalized groups. However, measures promoting the participation of women in politics must aim towards real change, rather than tokenistic gestures or filling of quotas, which do not provide a platform for voices speaking out and fighting for women's rights.
- Technology was identified as having the potential for both positive and negative impacts on social cohesion and gender equality. On the one hand, youth experience with social media underlines its potential for spreading disinformation, cyberbullying, promotion of harmful narratives, unregulated/underregulated and consequence-free harassment and hate speech. On the other hand, there are instances where social media has had a positive impact in combating gender-based violence and supporting the victims; the potential of social media as a place for youth to organize grassroots movements, share experiences, and give voices and support to marginalized groups was emphasized.
- Empowering young people to become community leaders who would eventually be able to push for systemic change, as well as become more involved with the media and public institutions is recommended.
- Fostering dialogue, discussion and critical reflection on the key issues related to equality and social cohesion were highlighted by youth as an important first step. Participants shared that the discussions that were part of this initiative provided one such opportunity and emphasized the value of creating spaces for conversation and problem-solving.

Figure 6. Factors that can support gender equality and social cohesion



RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH

Throughout the entire research process, youth emphasized their capacity to bring transformative change, improve their own futures, and function as catalysts for societal unity. However, the following recommendations primarily refer to state institutions and their potential role in enhancing young individuals' lives across the region. These recommendations fall into the subsequent categories which tackle issues of gender equality and social cohesion in the region:

Education: Youth emphasized the need for education on issues such as discrimination, gender equality, gender-based violence, mental health, negative legacies of the past, and intergroup dialogue.

Social Media for Good: Young people highlighted the importance of social media literacy to battle disinformation, foster critical thinking about content that promotes hate and discrimination online, and gender-based violence as well as encouraging more responsible use of social media. In addition, they suggested utilizing influencers with large platforms to promote positive and empowering messages that deconstruct oppressive social norms.

Encouraging Active Civic Mindset: The research demonstrated the need to foster citizenship accountability and collective mobilization for social cohesion.

Active Dialogue and Intercultural Competences: Youth call for more opportunities to foster inclusive dialogue and allow people from different backgrounds and possibly different opinions to engage in civil debate and discourse, connect and share common goals. Specifically, young people hope for civil society organisations to create safe spaces for youth to share their experiences and address issues of their interests (launching youth exchange forums, web or other media platforms).





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