

VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality and Social
Cohesion in the Western Balkans

Annex I: Albania

Author: Liri Kuçi



YOUTH

Inclusion, Equality & Trust



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INTRODUCTION

As part of a regional initiative, this project aims to explore the linkages between youth development, gender equality, and social cohesion challenges in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo¹, North Macedonia, and Serbia. Aligned with the overarching mission of empowering young people, particularly those from marginalised segments, by recognising their perspectives and experiences, the initiative aims to foster fact-based constructive narratives, inter-group dialogue, mutual understanding, and gender inclusiveness.² Importantly, the project deliberately builds upon existing capacities, organisations, and mechanisms, whilst also reaching out to diverse communities to ensure their active involvement.

The significance of Albania's context, characterised by its historical legacy of dictatorship, its young population, the challenges of a transitioning democracy, its developing economy, and its deeply ingrained patriarchal social structure (Dalakoglou, 2012; Vullnetari and King, 2014), makes it a vital component of this regional endeavour. From an intersectional feminist analysis, the significance of agency and the creation of local narratives on gender inclusion and justice becomes evident in addressing the complex challenges of youth and social cohesion in Albania and the region.

The patriarchal social structure and prevailing traditional gender norms contribute to the marginalisation and unequal treatment of women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, marginalised groups and other minorities, particularly in discussions and involvement in peacebuilding processes (Danaj et al, 2019). This approach recognises the interconnected nature of multiple forms of violence by questioning the system and instruments that perpetuate inequalities and maintain traditional gender roles.

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

² The differences noted between men and women were not considered relevant to the objective of the Paper, which was to give an inclusive representation of young people's perceptions of the issues under study.

Key Findings

The regional participatory study adopted a **mixed research method**, combining desk research, quantitative, and qualitative data collection. It gathered **more than 1200 young people** from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, 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.

The following **key research findings** emerged from the analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected in Albania.

- The perception of low social cohesion in Albania (21%) is evident, with its dynamics intricately linked to the level of inclusion and acceptance extended to marginalised groups, women, ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and those with disabilities. Establishing an environment that recognises and involves everyone is of utmost importance in fostering a well-functioning and cohesive society.
- Among consulted participants, 75% noted the absence of gender equality in their community. Youth believes that the advancement of gender equality would not only ensure equitability in rights and prospects across all genders but also enrich the fabric of societies with enhanced harmony and inclusivity. This requires addressing traditional gender roles and instances of gender-based discrimination and violence.
- The imperative of cultivating trust, especially within the younger demographic, becomes apparent as 55% of study participants indicate low levels of trust are impacted by the governing system and institutions. This entails the establishment of a foundation of trust between the youth and governing institutions, coupled with the facilitation of substantial opportunities for active engagement and involvement.
- Corruption emerges as a particularly influential factor (91%)³ impeding societal progress in Albania, and 24% of respondents recognise it disproportionately affects women and marginalised groups.

³ 89% women; 92% men.

- The study reveals that Albania's history and political system significantly shape youth perspectives on gender equality, social cohesion and trust. The lasting effects of historical conflicts, traumas, and the legacy of the totalitarian regime continue to impact the country's general emancipation. Acknowledging and addressing these aspects is crucial for the healing process and progress towards a more harmonious society.
- The proliferation of hate speech (69%) and anti-gender narratives is a prominent perception among young people in Albania. Especially in the context of Covid-19, these narratives have exacerbated divisions and upheld inequalities.
- Recognising the central role of youth in building a sustainable and peaceful society is of utmost significance. The shared traits and optimistic outlook of young individuals regarding their generation's potential to tackle persistent issues showcase their capability and dedication to effecting positive change. Empowering the youth, valuing their perspectives, and offering opportunities for active engagement are essential in promoting peace, social cohesion, and gender equality within the region.

Key findings in Albania



Percentage of respondents who believe that Albanian society is marked by social cohesion



Percentage of respondents who believe that Albanian society is marked by gender equality



The role of education

- Young Albanians believe their education institutions lack gender equality. However, education is also a catalyst for change



Obstacles to social cohesion

- Corruption
- Discrimination
- Hate speech
- Gender inequality



Gender-based violence

- 70% of young Albanians believe their society is characterised by gender-based violence within families

Factors helping gender equality

- Equal employment opportunities
- Equal Access to Quality Education
- Increased awareness on gender equality
- Youth-led social movements, including digital activism



Image 1. Key findings in Albania ⁴

⁴ 25% of respondents answered with both 4 and 5 to the question "To what extent would you say there is gender equality in your community, where 1 is "not at all" and 5 is "very much"?".

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1 Research design and research sample

The project sought to deconstruct the intersecting challenges faced by young people and address the gaps in their understanding of gender issues and social cohesion, by employing a mixed methodology and Participatory Research (PR) approach to empower young individuals (Jagosh, Justin, et al, 2012). This methodology recognises the significance of involving young people as active agents in addressing gender-based challenges and fostering social cohesion within their communities.

The author's employ of standpoint theory (Wood, 2005) ⁵, coupled with her identity as a young Albanian woman, imbues the research by highlighting marginalised perspectives and fostering a comprehensive grasp of societal dynamics. Drawing from her foundation in Gender Studies and discourse analysis, she navigates complexities showcasing the significance of critical introspection within this methodologically informed research.

In Albania, this research was conducted by engaging **156** young individuals in qualitative and quantitative data collection activities, as well as a peer review process conducted by two young persons from Albania. Through such continued engagement, the study aimed to ensure a considerably wide coverage and representation of 18-30-year-olds from different socio-economic backgrounds, urban and rural areas in Albania. They were given the opportunity to share their experiences, perspectives, and ideas in this initiative informed by youth engagement.

⁵ *By acknowledging how different social positions shape perspectives, the theory enhances the research's inclusivity and contributes to a deeper grasp of the examined complexities.*

Quantitative and qualitative approaches to the research

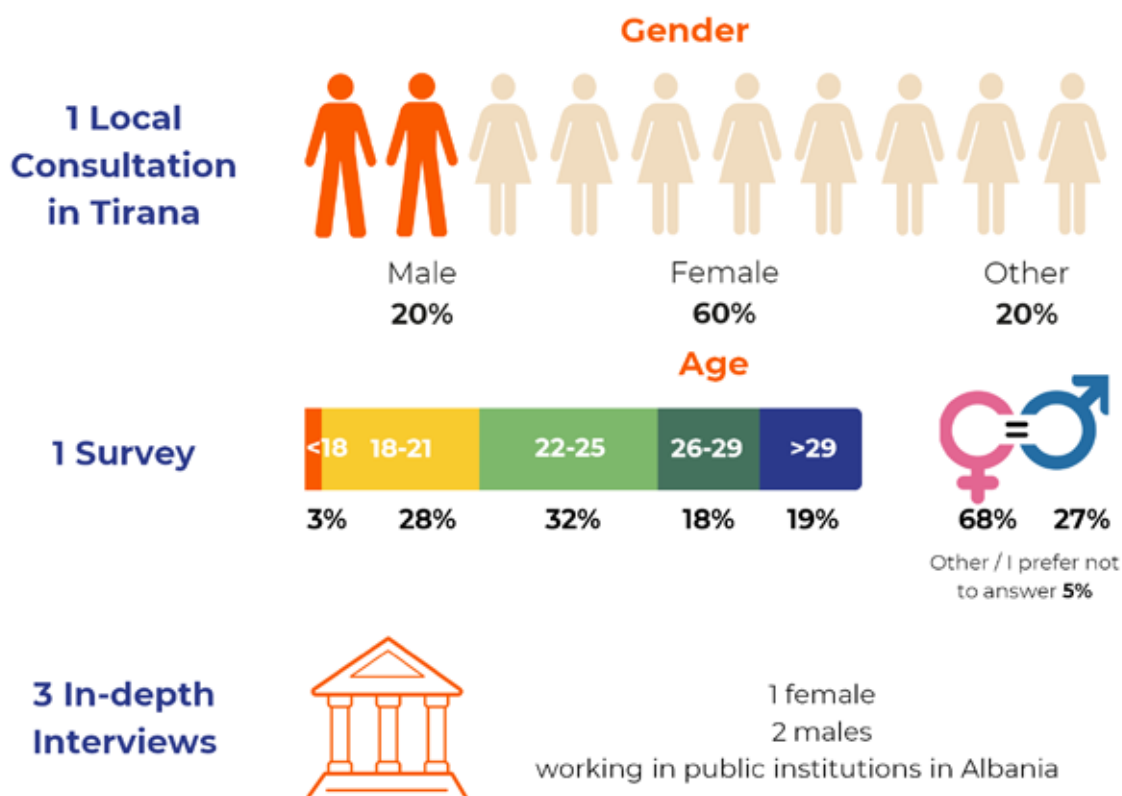


Image 2. Research sample in qualitative and quantitative research

1.2 Observations on Youth Engagement

The participation of young individuals throughout different phases of the research has been notable for their enthusiastic involvement and willingness to engage in discussions encompassing diverse, and often sensitive, topics. Despite encountering challenges associated with certain issues such as military masculinity, toxic masculinity, and nationalism, the young participants demonstrated their readiness to delve into these subjects and engage in open dialogues. The intricacies arising from structural circumstances, including the absence of comprehensive gender education curricula and the enduring influence of traditional norms from the past political system, may have contributed to entrenched effective responses. Addressing these sensitivities called for a nuanced approach that emphasised empathy, active listening, and the establishment of secure spaces conducive to dialogue.

In navigating these challenges, the research team adopted a language-sensitive approach, fostering an environment of respect and constructive discourse. This approach recognised the array of perspectives and experiences linked to these themes. Moreover, through the lens of intersectional feminism, the exploration extended to the intersections between sexism, gender-based violence, and masculinity traits, which collectively perpetuate violence and impede the cohesion of society.

Furthermore, the inclusion of participants from marginalised backgrounds, such as the Roma minority, persons living with disabilities, and transgender individuals, added a vital dimension to the research. These participants made their contributions particularly meaningful in amplifying their voices and addressing their experiences and specific needs with others. Furthermore, this comprehensive framework facilitated an exploration of how gender interacts with other social factors including mindset, socio-economic class, and additional forms of discrimination. These interactions mould the vulnerabilities and experiences of marginalised groups and are going to be further explored in the subsequent sections.

1.3 Literature Review

The examination of gender dynamics, social cohesion, and women's rights within the Albanian context reveals a significant gap in comprehensively unravelling patriarchal systemic manifestations underlying these concepts and processes. This gap can be traced back to the historical absence of a robust feminist movement and a dearth of studies investigating the intricate interplay between traditional gender roles, masculinity, nationalism, and inequalities. Substantial discussions informed by critical gender perspectives in Albania have been lacking in the structural examination of how these intersections might influence the societal framework across various processes.

However, strides are becoming more consequent in the past decade emerging as accounts coming to the forefront and contributing to enriching the landscape of gender-related discourses through various social processes that we will explore in the following sections. Within this paradigm, the works of Danaj et al. (2019) and Kuçi (2021, 2022) shed light on the advancements, challenges, and lack of consistency within the realm of gender and Albanian feminist scholarships.

Through the selection of relevant works, this paper aims to shed light on various aspects of these topics, including the impact of infrastructures on post-socialist Albania, the influence of tradition and patriarchy on vio-

lence against women, the National Strategy for Gender Equality and youth engagement in Albania (UN Women Albania, 2020), the role of women in peace and security, Covid-19 and Gender Based Violence (UN Women Albania, 2020b; Shared Futures, 2021), and the restoration of gender justice and cohesion in post-socialist Albania.

Therefore, in the context of the country's history and sociocultural dynamics, it becomes imperative to address the interplay between gender equality as propaganda and women's situated agency in the emancipatory processes. This analysis seeks to enable a deeper grasp of how particularly women (individually and collectively), navigate and resist patriarchal norms within their specific contexts.

By examining the discourses of shame, social networks, and women's agency within post-socialist Albania, Nixon's (2009) analysis delves into the role of social networks in shaping women's experiences of gender injustices. This legacy, as Nixon put it, stems as a remnant from the past political totalitarian regime of Enver Hoxha (1944-1985), which purported to promote women's emancipation whilst the enduring imprints of entrenched gender roles persisted beneath the surface of state socialism. In this light, as aptly termed by Vullnetari and King (2014), recognising the intricate interplay among tradition, patriarchy, and gender dynamics, gains greater relevance within the context of Albania's evolving political transitions.

The influence of tradition and patriarchy on violence against women within the region, including Albania, is further elaborated by Danaj (2020). The analysis probes into cultural norms, practices, and social structures that perpetuate gender-based violence, emphasising the necessity for comprehensive efforts to address these issues and safeguard women's rights.

These contributions highlight the complexity of societal factors with gender dynamics and the pressing need for nuanced analyses addressing the challenges posed by tradition, patriarchy, and contemporary social structures. The recognition of gender's intricate ties to various social dimensions forms the basis for comprehending the inequality underlayers and social harmony more comprehensively (Stanko, 2021), by highlighting the roles of agency and context in shaping the narratives under examination.

Here, Piro Rexhepi's (2023) perspective reframes the understanding of Albanian history, challenging perceptions of the Balkans as colourblind and raceless. Rexhepi's insights provide a significant understanding of how historical trajectories intersect with past and present patriarchal binary social constructions. Such a perspective transcends through the realm of Socialist modernity and reemerges within the context of post-socialist Euro-Atlantic

integration. Jusufi et al.'s (2022) study provides valuable insights into the impact of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on women's participation in peace and security efforts in Albania.

This research explores the practical implementation of the resolution, the challenges women encounter in these processes, and the potential for gender-sensitive policies to foster sustainable peace and security. In this realm, the significance of women's contributions is evident in Radovanovic & Stojanovic Gajic's (2013) study. It underscores the crucial roles women play in conflict resolution, peace-building, and post-conflict reconstruction in the Western Balkans, including Albania, emphasising that gender equality and women's empowerment are foundational to achieving lasting peace and security in the region.

The amplification of identity narratives became conspicuous both during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, as evidenced by the rise in instances of gender-based violence online and offline (Shared Futures, 2021). Furthermore, Xhafa and Kuçi (2020) delved into the consequences of the pandemic, specifically for women, shedding light on the heightened difficulties experienced during the crisis. These accounts examine how the pandemic magnifies existing structural inequalities, underscoring the necessity for a nuanced approach to comprehend the intricate complexities that arise.

These works, altogether, form a mosaic of insights into gender dynamics and social processes in Albania. They illuminate the impact of tradition, patriarchy, and structural inequalities whilst advocating for an inclusive framework that recognises the agency and diverse perspectives of individuals, particularly marginalised voices. By weaving these studies jointly, we can achieve a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the complexities that underlie the key concepts driving gender equality, social cohesion, and women's rights within this research's framework.

2. GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN ALBANIA

While Albania has witnessed several democratic reforms and governmental initiatives in the past three decades, the journey toward achieving gender equality in the country remains fraught with challenges, revealing a multifaceted narrative deeply intertwined with social cohesion. Undoubtedly, Albania has experienced a cultural transformation driven by factors such as migration, expanded borders, heightened cultural exchange, technological advancements, and greater access to information. These forces have ushered in a new era of societal awareness and interconnectedness. However, this evolving cultural landscape has not been matched by equally substantial advancements in addressing gender disparities. Despite the outward appearances of progress, significant structural gaps persist across key sectors like education, the economy, and politics, posing formidable obstacles to genuine gender equality (Danaj et al, 2019). Although there has been an increase in the presence of women in positions of power within Albania, these gains have primarily translated into individual achievements, rather than yielding widespread societal benefits.

Moreover, efforts aimed at providing gender education and empowering women structurally have not yielded transformative outcomes, further underscoring the complexities of achieving social cohesion in the context of gender equality. The continued existence of these structural disparities suggests that a more nuanced approach is needed—one that goes beyond superficial measures and populist narratives, focusing on comprehensive reforms that address the deeply ingrained societal norms and structures perpetuating gender inequities. In this pursuit, fostering genuine social cohesion becomes not only an aspiration but also a crucial catalyst for sustainable change.

2.1 Gender equality as a key aspect of social cohesion

Through SLI.DO, a software platform encouraging active participation (*Image.7*) youth engaged in the local consultation revealed gender equality as an essential component of social cohesion, with some even considering it its cornerstone. The most frequently mentioned words were “engagement,” “interaction,” “group interaction,” and “social interaction within communities.”

When you think of “social cohesion”, what words come to your mind?⁶

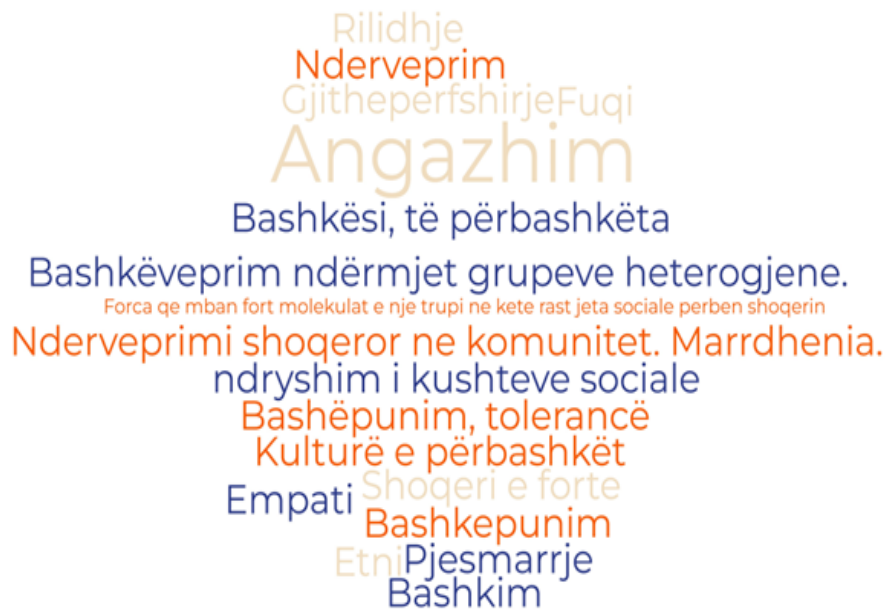


Image 3. Word cloud for social cohesion

Participants highlighted the importance of active involvement and meaningful connections within social groups, indicating aspirations for positive transformation and resilience. By deconstructing the multifaceted and interconnected nature of social cohesion as perceived by the present youths, they underlined the complexities and aspirations within their communities.

Additionally, participants engaged in a discussion on whether gender equality is a characteristic of Albanian society. It was expressed that gender equality is not prevalent in their setting.

⁶ Interaction; Cooperation; Reconnection; Engagement; Intercommunity; Common; Interconnection among heterogeneous groups; Social Interaction in the community; Relations; Change in Social Conditions; Collaboration; Tolerance; Common culture; Unity; Inclusion; Participation; Empathy.

When you think of “gender equality”, what words come to your mind?⁷



Image 4. World cloud for gender equality

Youths’ responses reflect a diverse understanding of key concepts related to gender equality. Equal rights, inclusion, and participation emerge as crucial themes, emphasising the importance of ensuring everyone’s voice is heard and valued. The mention of violence and human rights underscores the recognition of existing challenges and the urgency to address them. Individual progress, opportunities, and cooperation indicate the aspiration for personal growth and a collaborative approach to societal advancement.

“I think that such discussions are very valuable not only for us young people, but for the whole community as it is important to start a dialogue to deal with topics such as gender equality, but also social cohesion and how gender equality helps in creating this cohesion. I am very grateful that I was part of this consultation where I could hear different perspectives from different community groups, which helps the sustainability of this project”.

Participant, local consultation

⁷ Support; Human Rights; Inclusion; Value; Cooperation; Equal Rights; Equal, Fair and needs based responses, Treatment and Conditions; Crossing the barriers of patriarchal traditions; Individual Progress; Participation; Violence.

A noteworthy contribution was made when the issue of transgender individuals' exclusion from social cohesion was addressed in the group discussion.

The importance of providing appropriate services and ensuring legal recognition for LGBTIQ+ individuals to fully integrate them into the fabric of society was strongly emphasised. This highlighted the need to address the specific challenges faced by transgender individuals in order to promote a more inclusive and cohesive society for all genders. Members of the Roma community and persons living with disabilities actively contributed to the consultation by exemplifying their struggles with societal integration.

Overall, the participants expressed concerns about the lack of cohesion in Albanian society, underlining factors such as isolation, individualism, fear, economic inequalities, gender injustices and a lack of trust and empathy.

Furthermore, the quantitative data collected reveal a clear perceived connection by youth between the high level of social cohesion deficit and gender-based violence.

Social cohesion is acknowledged as vital for achieving gender equality and significant efforts are strongly encouraged by youth to foster social cohesion and robust bonds within the population, promote dialogue and understanding, and create a sense of belonging and unity among diverse groups within the society.

“Albania faces a significant deficit in social cohesion, with a noticeable lack of unity and cooperation among its people. This deficiency is attributed to a perceived absence of freedom, possibly rooted in a fear of punishment, which hampers collective efforts and collaborative endeavours. Improving social cohesion in such a context poses a huge challenge. However, one potential avenue for enhancing cohesion lies in the promotion of increased volunteerism.”

Participant, local consultation

The youth perceives Albanian society as characterised by a high prevalence of gender-based violence within families (as shown in Figure 9, Par. 3.2) and low levels of social cohesion (as shown in Figure below).

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

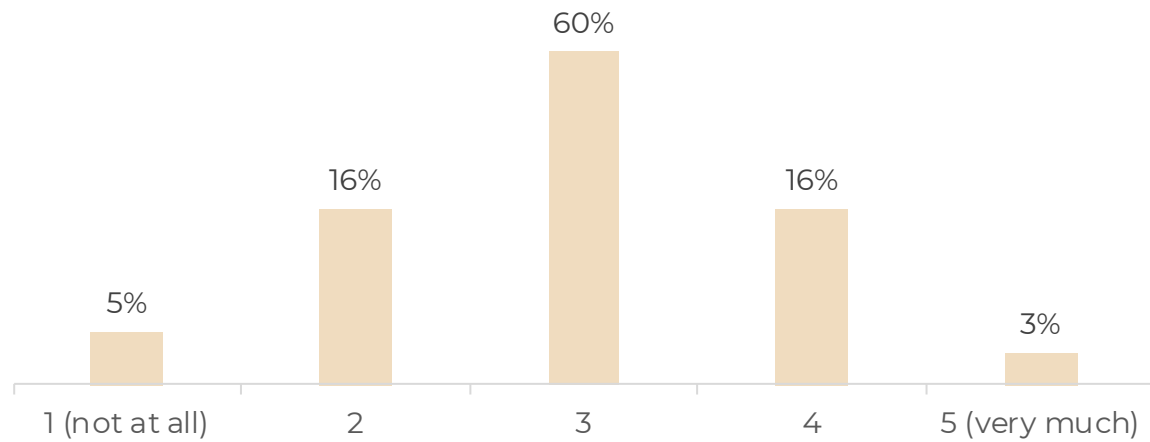


Figure 1. Youth perceptions of social cohesion

These quantitative findings are complemented by the qualitative data collected, which not only confirmed the same observations, but also facilitated the exploration of the interplay between these two phenomena. Recognising the interconnection of these two data sets becomes a prerequisite for societal progress.

The youth’s awareness and understanding of the correlation between gender-based violence and social cohesion provide valuable insights that can guide efforts to address these intertwined challenges and foster social advancement.

2.2. Youth perceptions of intergroup relations

As elucidated through exchanges with youth participants, despite the existence of virtual interactions between social groups, there seems to be limited genuine human connection and interaction. The absence of mutual trust emerges as a significant concern, which can be traced back to the eroded legacy of the totalitarian regime in Albania (Kuci, 2023). The past historical system has cast a pervasive shadow over contemporary socio-political dynamics, permeating the collective consciousness and influencing the intricacies of interpersonal and intergroup relationships. This influence can be linked to the erosion of interpersonal trust, reflected in old sayings such as “Even the walls can hear” or “in the same bed with the enemy,” re-

flecting instances of familial distrust, paranoia and state surveillance during the regime. These perceptions seem to be travelling through past historical narratives to the present day and still inform societal attitudes.

Moreover, the research findings reveal a significant level of intergenerational mistrust. This trend raises legitimate questions about whether the past can truly heal by attempting to forget it or by seeking to recognize, communicate, and learn from it.

Do you trust older generations? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much”

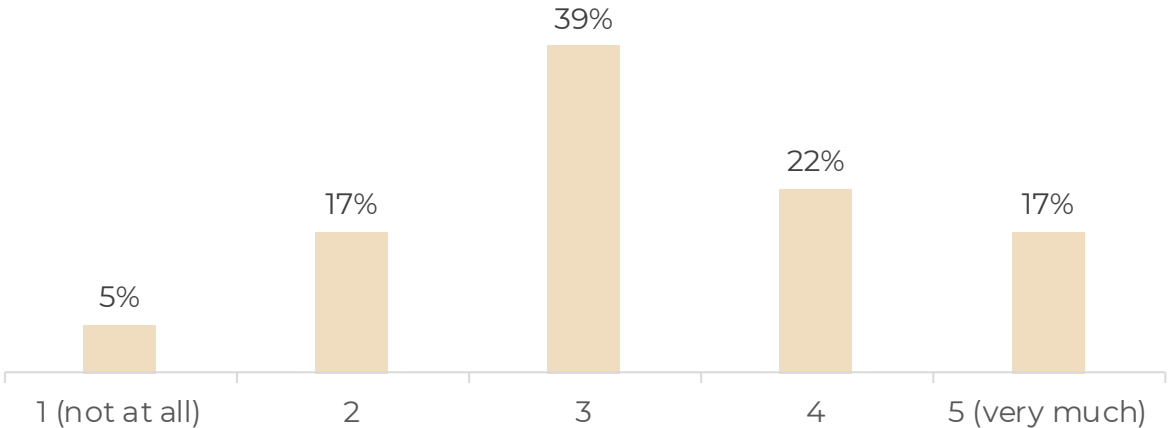


Figure 2. Youth perceptions of intergenerational trust

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that, despite the prevailing lack of intergenerational trust, the younger generation demonstrates comparable levels of trust among peers with only one value changing in favour of slightly increased trust in the younger generation (*Figure 3, value 4*). This small shift in trust dynamics might present an opportunity for positive change, indicating that younger individuals have a greater belief in their contemporaries.

Do you trust your peers? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much”

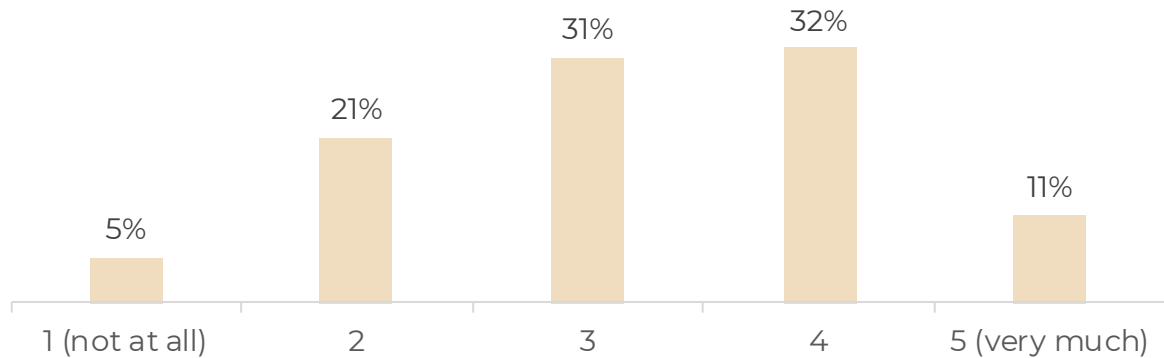


Figure 3. Youth perceptions of peers' trust

This trend prompts us to critically reflect on the most appropriate approach to address the wounds of the past. Should we simply try to bury it and move forward, or should we actively engage with it, fostering open dialogue and extracting valuable lessons? These questions invite us to consider the complexities of historical healing (Hübl and Avritt, 2020), and the significance of acknowledging and embracing our collective history for a more inclusive and cohesive future.

2.3. Impact of negative legacies of the past

Negative legacies of the past are acknowledged as persistent barriers to progress in gender equality and social cohesion (67%), followed by traditional gender norms (63%), where the patriarchal expectations for women to be virgins and responsible for households, and for men to be breadwinners and earn more than women (Danaj, 2020) are still significantly present among Albanian youth.

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

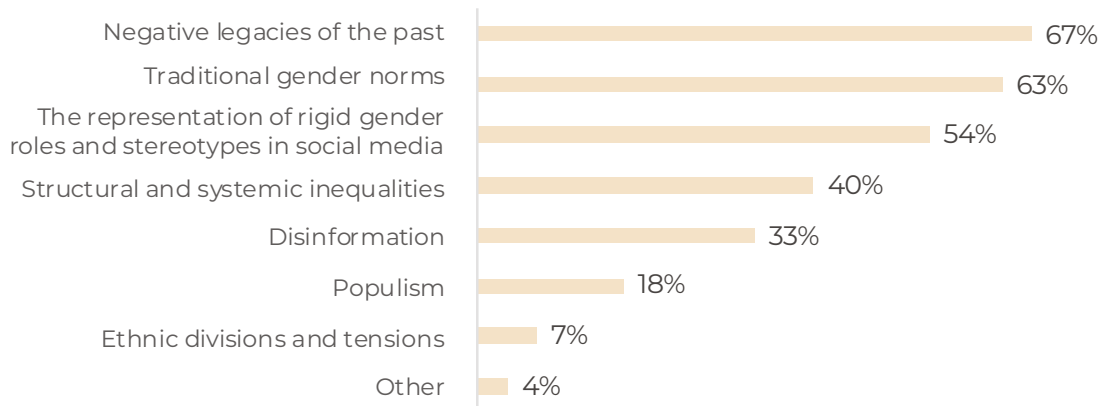


Figure 4. Youth perceptions of factors that hinder gender equality

The past historical context further exacerbates these challenges. The legacy of the totalitarian regime under Enver Hoxha upheld clear gender divisions, banned religion and criminalised homosexuality, which has left an enduring impact on societal attitudes (Vullnetari and King, 2014). The absence of a sexual revolution has hindered progress in addressing gender and sexuality-related issues contributing to the limited progress in challenging traditional norms.

The pervasive issue of domestic violence, including femicide, further underscores the deeply rooted nature of patriarchal structures (Kuci, 2022). Qualitative data indicated a strong denial tendency of the past regime's social consequences, regarded as a past challenge that has already been overcome. There appears to be a certain resistance to acknowledging and confronting the challenges and intergenerational history, as one interviewee expressed:

"It has been 32 years since then, I am now 28, and I have neither experienced it nor do I want to believe in the consequences that continue. Moreover, my family hasn't discussed it much."

Participant, In-depth Interview

This sentiment highlights resistance to acknowledging the enduring impact of historical events and a reticence towards confronting its complexities.

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

The study findings provide a comprehensive look into the factors perceived as impediments to the construction of a stronger and more equal society. The resounding acknowledgement of corruption by a substantial 91% of respondents underlines the deeply rooted recognition of its corrosive influence on societal integrity by mostly affecting marginalised groups, women and people from weak economic backgrounds. Corruption, in various forms, weakens institutions, fosters inequality, and erodes public trust, ultimately hindering the establishment of a robust social framework.

Gender inequality emerges as a significant barrier as recognised by 56% of respondents. This finding reflects an increasing awareness of the persistent disparities that limit the potential of individuals, particularly women, and thwart the collective advancement of society. It highlights the urgent need to challenge and transform societal norms and structures that perpetuate gender-based inequities.

In your opinion, which of the following factors hinder building stronger and fairer societies? Please, select the four most significant

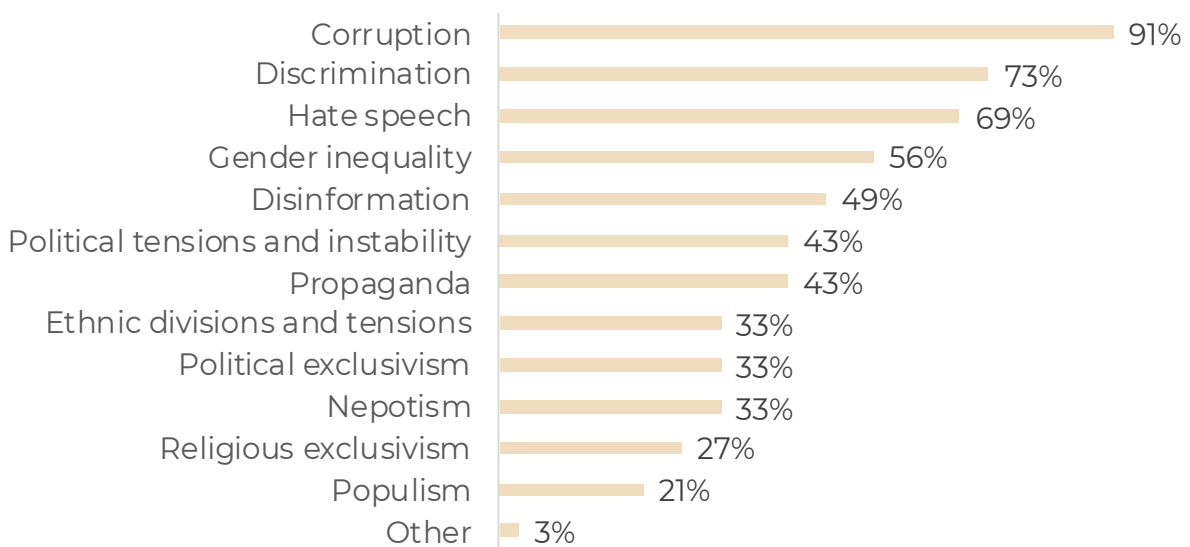


Figure 5. Youth perceptions of factors hindering the building of stronger and fairer societies

Discrimination, as identified by 73% of respondents, signifies the awareness of the insidious ways in which bias and prejudice undermine social progress. Discrimination not only infringes upon individual rights but also fosters exclusion and perpetuates systemic inequalities. Addressing discrimination necessitates comprehensive strategies that challenge biases at various levels and promote inclusivity.

In addition to the exploration of toxic masculinity and militarised norms, the study's participants have underscored the crucial role of women in peacebuilding initiatives. Recognising the historical underrepresentation of women in such processes, consulted youth emphasised the need to involve and empower women in decision-making and conflict resolution. By enhancing their participation, women can contribute valuable perspectives, skills, and insights that can lead to more inclusive and sustainable peacebuilding outcomes. The engagement of women in peacebuilding not only challenges traditional gender roles, but also fosters social cohesion and promotes gender equality (UN Women Albania, 2020b). These insights align with broader academic research on gender and conflict, which has demonstrated the transformative potential of gender-inclusive approaches to peacebuilding. Consequently, integrating women's voices and agency into peacebuilding initiatives becomes imperative for building more resilient and inclusive societies (Jusufi, Shehi, & Zeka, 2022).

3.1. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations

The data exposes a stark reality where an overwhelming majority of respondents (76%) recognise the influence of cultural norms in delineating distinct roles for men and women. These rigid gender roles fortify a deeply entrenched patriarchal system, confining women to traditional domestic duties and disempowering their involvement in broader societal progress. Such conspicuous gender disparities not only erode social unity but also reinforce detrimental stereotypes and uneven power dynamics within society. The dataset discloses that Albanian society upholds customary expectations for young women, as 71% perceive getting married at a young age as a norm for females.

This practice not only curtails educational and economic prospects for young women but also exposes them to health risks and deprives them of autonomy in life-altering decisions. Additionally, the mandate of abstinence from pre-marital sexual relations for women (78%) perpetuates a dual standard, subjecting women's sexuality to moral judgment whilst affording men more leniency. These conventions bolster adverse gender stereotypes, compromising communal trust and respect.

In your community, who is expected to:

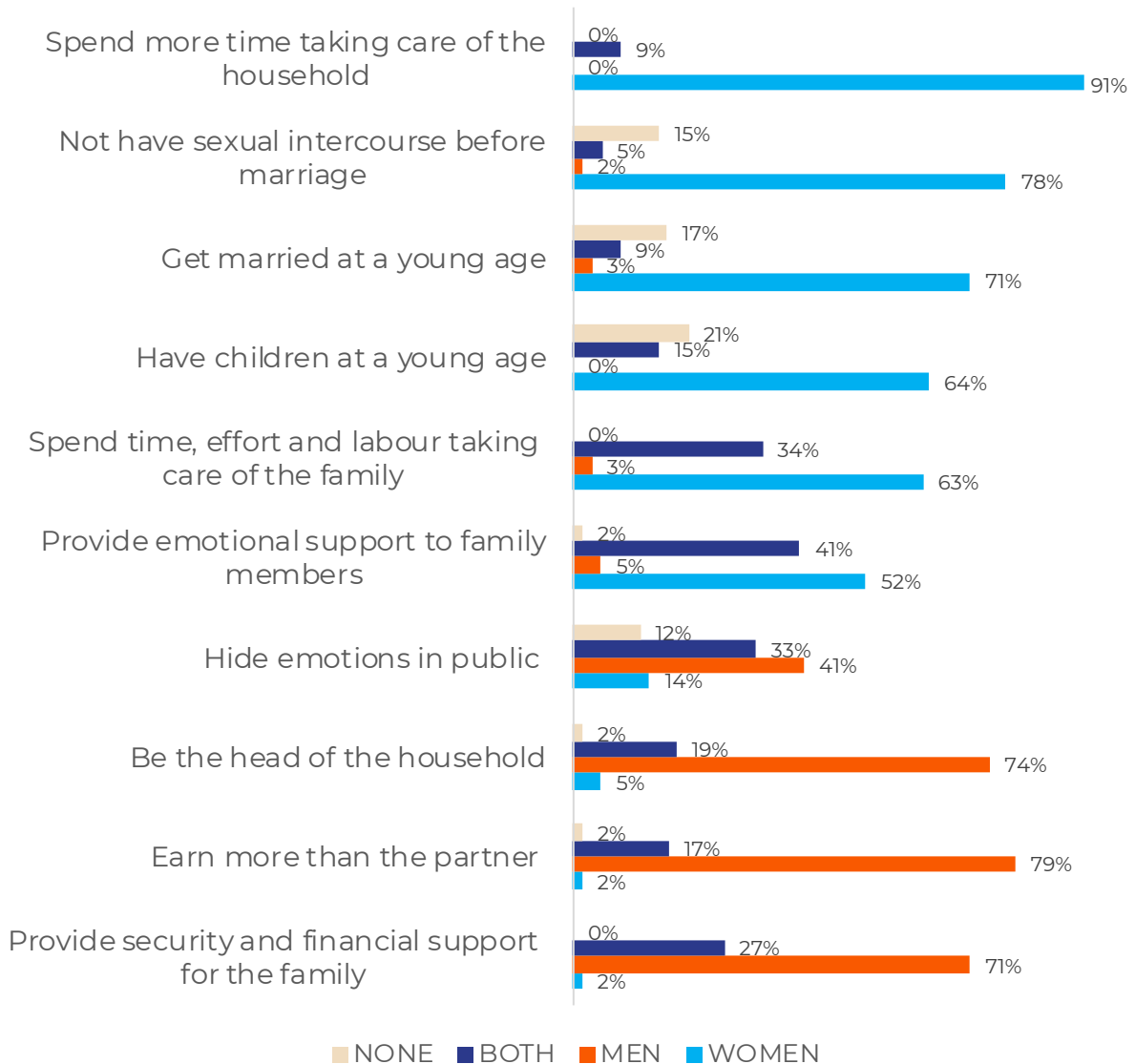


Figure 6. Youth perceptions of stereotyped gender expectations

Financial obligations and the division of household labour manifest distinct gender expectations, with 71% of the data indicating that men are expected to bear the financial burden and ensure family security, reflecting a traditional male-centric provider model.

This unequal responsibility on men burdens them and restricts women’s economic autonomy and decision-making within the household. Moreover, the skewed allocation of household chores exacerbates gender inequality, devaluing women’s contributions beyond conventional domestic realms, and aligning with feminist critiques of unpaid labour.

Notably, the data underscores the perception that women (53%) are primarily tasked with providing emotional support to family members, and (91%) spend time performing household chores. This anticipation can lead to an undue emotional burden on women, potentially resulting in emotional exhaustion and limiting avenues for self-fulfilment. Furthermore, men (41%) are expected to suppress their emotions in public, reinforcing toxic masculinity and impeding emotional expression, with potential repercussions on mental health and interpersonal connections.

The challenge of rigid gender roles and outdated norms in Albania presents a multifaceted issue that intersects with various historical, cultural, political and societal factors. Education emerges as a crucial tool in confronting and reshaping these dynamics, primarily due to its potential to challenge prevailing stereotypes and foster a more inclusive and informed perspective.

Participants noted that the Albanian education system currently reinforces traditional patriarchal stereotypes, compounded by the lack of comprehensive sexual education and the absence of feminist curricula at all levels of education, perpetuating a lack of discourse and understanding regarding feminist perspectives. A very high number of respondents (68%) indicated that their education institutions lack gender equality advancement. Furthermore, the educational deficiency perpetuates heteronormative concepts and sustains traditional gender roles. The gender gap in the labour market, the overrepresentation of women in vulnerable sectors, and the lack of infrastructure for social care are identified as impeding the progression of gender equality.

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

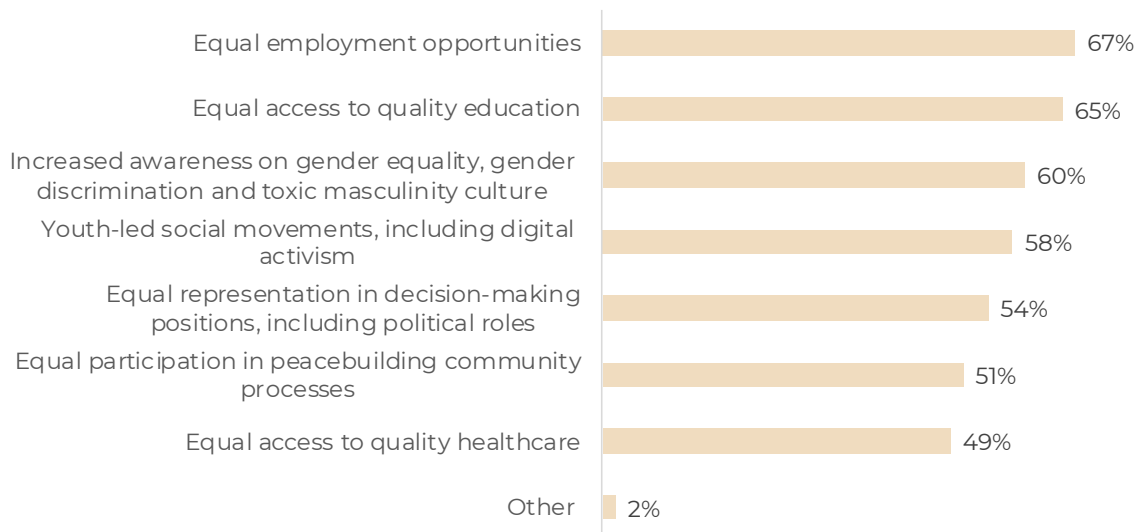


Figure 7. Youth perceptions of factors contributing to gender equality

However, education emerges as a catalyst for change and this study indicates the necessity to enhance access to critical knowledge production within universities. As the participants have been emphasising in different premises through these research steps:

“Education plays a vital role in fostering critical thinking, raising awareness about gender discrimination, and promoting gender-sensitive curricula can help to better and critically inform other social processes for the profit of the many.”

Participant, local consultation

This recognition highlights that equal access to quality education is perceived by youth as fundamental for empowering individuals, challenging gender stereotypes, and dismantling systemic barriers.

Respondents with a university education, who are generally more aware of social issues, showed a higher degree of acknowledgement that cultural norms create distinct expectations for men and women. This awareness among educated respondents may indicate that they have a deeper understanding of the prevailing patriarchal legacy and its impact on gender inequality.

On the other hand, respondents with secondary/elementary education generally exhibited a lower degree of awareness of cultural norms' influence on gender roles. This finding may be attributed to their relatively younger age and possibly less exposure to higher education and critical awareness of social issues. However, this may suggest the possibility that cultural norms related to gender roles among youth might be undergoing a shift.

In your community, women are expected to...

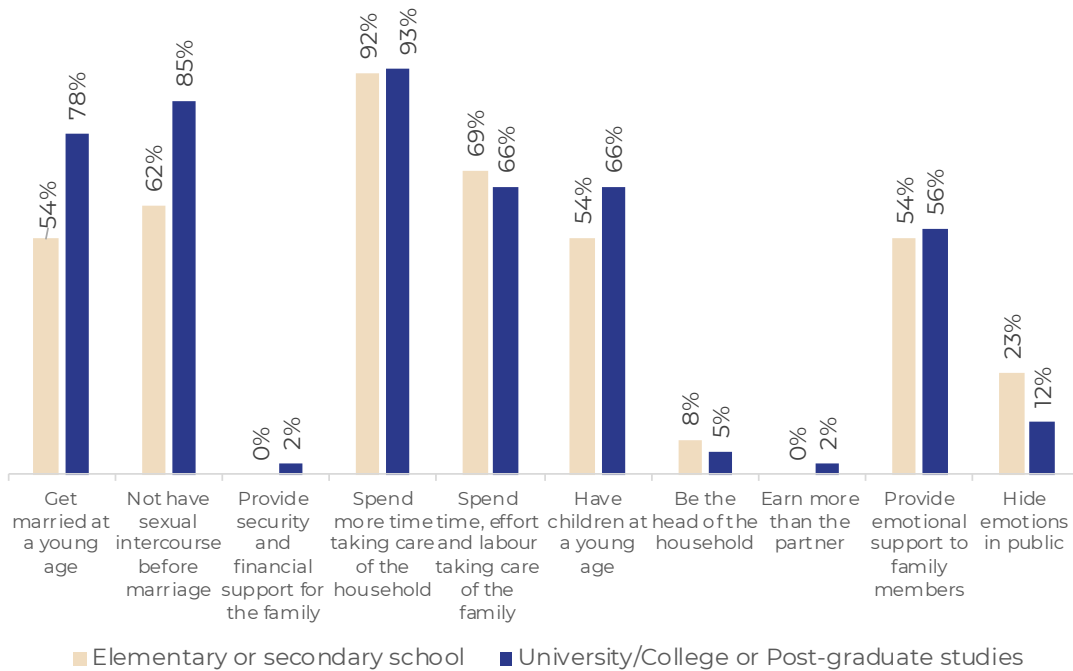


Figure 8. Rigid gender norms segmented by education

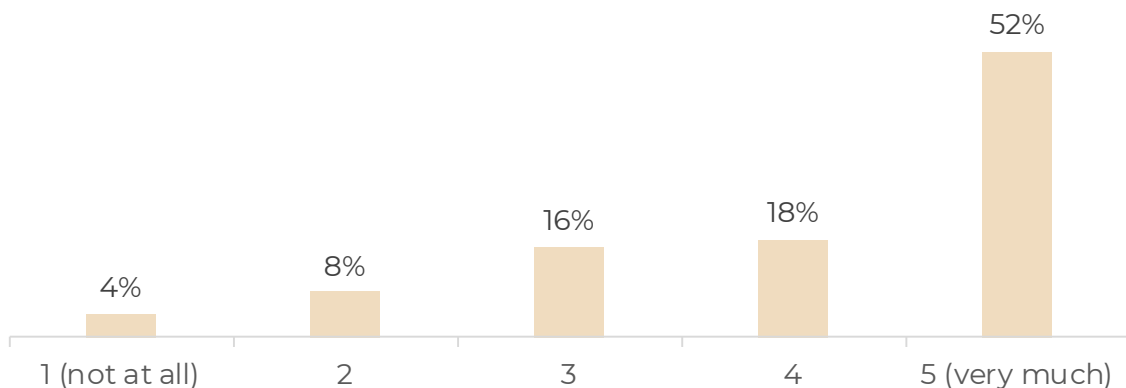
The observed difference in percentages between respondents with university education and those with secondary/elementary education highlights the influential role of education in fostering awareness and understanding of societal constructs linked to gender expectations. Such findings accentuate the potential of education to contribute positively to challenging and transforming patriarchal norms and promoting social cohesion in the context of Albania.

3.2. Gender-based violence

It is evident (*Figure 9, values 4 and 5*) that the youth participants perceive our society as characterised by a high prevalence (70%) of gender-based violence within families.

Studies show that 1 in 2 women consider violence between men and women to be a private issue, and 47% believe that women should endure violence for the sake of family unity, which underscores the urgency of rectifying these attitudes (Anastasi *et al.*, 2023). These beliefs contribute to a culture of acceptance, impeding efforts to address and eliminate gender-based violence. This pervasive form of violence, affecting numerous women, necessitates collective recognition and intervention, reframing it as a societal concern that calls for comprehensive responses, legal protection, and a resolute commitment to cultivating a safer environment for all.

In your opinion, to what extent do domestic or family violence negatively impact youth well-being in your community? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much”



*Figure 9. Youth perceptions of domestic or family violence*⁸

Particularly crucial to acknowledge that this discussion gains even more gravity in light of the persistently high levels of femicide⁹ in Albania. The sombre reality of frequent cases of femicide paints a dire picture of the vulnerability and jeopardy that women face. The issue of femicide further underscores the urgency of taking decisive action to counter the deeply embedded gen-

⁸ The remaining 2% of respondents answered “I don’t know”.

⁹ *Citizens Channel*, “Counting Dead Women Albania”; Një Nismë Përkujtimoreje Për Viktimat E Femicidit.”, 29 May 2023, citizens-channel.com/2023/05/29/humerojme-grate-e-vrara-nje-nisme-perkujtimoreje-per-viktimat-e-femicidit/, Accessed 24 Aug. 2023.

der-based violence within our society, not only swift responses to alleviate immediate hardships, but also a comprehensive strategy that targets the underlying causes and systemic factors contributing to this violence.

Moreover, through exchanges with youth participants, the research has uncovered a distressing surge in gender-based violence amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, shedding light on a complex array of factors that have exacerbated the situation. The intersection of heightened domestic responsibilities, obligations associated with frontline work (Xhafa and Kuci, 2020), and the confinement of individuals with potential abusers within shared living spaces has created an environment conducive to the escalation of violence.

The comprehensive report¹⁰ by UN Women Albania (2022) underscores this disconcerting reality, revealing that 53% of women have encountered some form of violence, with an overwhelming 79% attesting to a deterioration of this issue due to the pandemic's effects. The disquieting phenomenon of violence perpetrated against women, particularly during the pandemic and its aftermath, has emerged as an impediment to the advancement of women's rights.

What adds depth to the discussion is the youth cohort's awareness and nuanced understanding of the intricate connection between gender-based violence and the broader concept of social cohesion, as elaborated in section 2.1 of the paper. Their acknowledgement of how violence erodes the fabric of society holds the promise of instigating a generational shift in attitudes and behaviours. This offers a valuable opportunity to channel their awareness towards effective interventions and strategies.

3.3. Discrimination and Hate Speech

Embedded within the fabric of Albanian society, the patriarchal social structure, coupled with prevailing traditional gender norms, serves as a fertile ground for the further marginalisation of certain groups, perpetuating discrimination and reinforcing pre-existing inequalities. This complex interplay contributes to the emergence of hate speech and the propagation of harmful narratives, manifesting a deeply rooted challenge that reverberates throughout various strata of society.

A notable reflection of this intricate dynamic emerges from the voices of Albanian youth participants in the study. As evidenced in Figure 5 (Section 3), a striking 73% of the respondents acknowledge the presence of discrim-

¹⁰. UN Women Albania, Measuring the Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women during Covid-19, Country Report: Albania, 2022. Accessed 24 Aug. 2023

ination, whilst a significant 69% identify hate speech as an active agent hindering the establishment of harmonious societal relations. This recognition highlights a growing awareness among the younger generation regarding the existence of these damaging elements within their society, reinforcing the urgent need for concerted action.

These findings not only underscore the discrete manifestations of discrimination and hate speech, but also emphasise their interconnected nature. Acknowledging the intersectionality of multiple forms of discrimination, this perspective elucidates how these phenomena are not isolated occurrences, but rather are deeply entwined within systems that perpetuate inequalities across various axes of identity. The symbiotic relationship of patriarchal norms, traditional gender constructs, and structural disparities, perpetuates a cycle of marginalisation, discrimination, and hate speech.

The examination of the complex interplay of discrimination and hate speech in the digital age, delving not only into their manifestations in physical spaces but also within the digital realm, underscores the use of digital activism as a potent avenue for tackling these pressing concerns. As indicated by the research data in Figure 8 and further elaborated in Section 5, the modern media landscape's capacity to magnify hate speech, propagate misinformation, and disseminate divisive narratives raises alarms.

3.4. Proliferation of polarising identity speeches

The proliferation of identity-based narratives, harmful discourse, and anti-gender initiatives signifies a multifaceted resistance to gender equality, particularly within political contexts. These trends reveal a complex interplay of factors, ranging from deep-rooted traditional values and resistance to changing gender roles, to fears of economic shifts and power redistribution.

The presented data offers valuable insights into the multifaceted reasons underpinning opposition to gender equality, particularly within the framework of distinct groups like political entities. The proliferation of identity narratives, anti-gender movements, and hate speech can be expounded upon to illuminate the intricate dynamics that contribute to resistance against gender equality initiatives.

The prominence of concerns rooted in traditional values and beliefs (62%) underscores the enduring influence of cultural norms and societal conventions that reinforce traditional gender roles. This high prevalence suggests a resistance to altering established norms, as changes in gender dynamics can be perceived as encroaching upon cultural identity and stability. The

resistance to transformations in male roles and identities (55%) points to the intricate interplay between gender constructs and societal paradigms. This facet unveils a layered landscape where shifts in prevailing perceptions of masculinity and male identity can trigger resistance, particularly among those invested in maintaining conventional hierarchies.

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

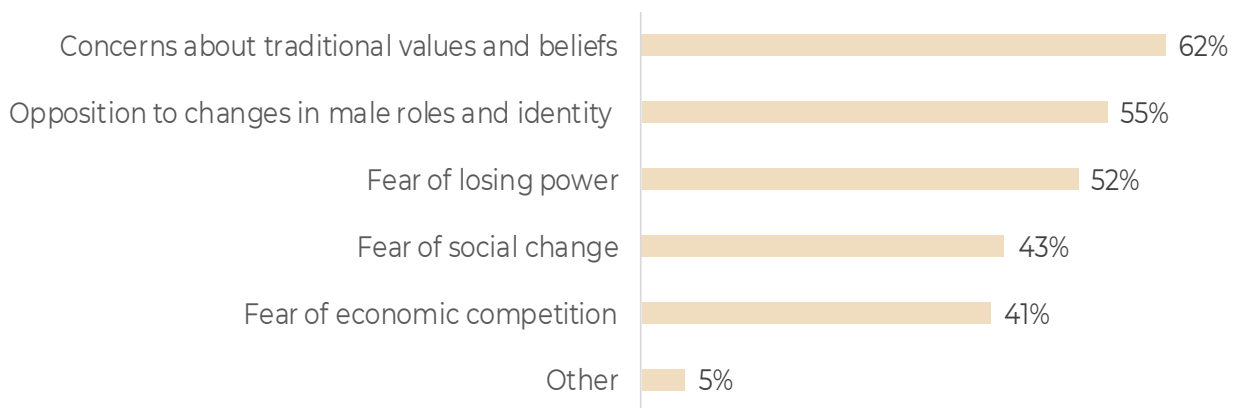


Figure 10. Youth perceptions of the main reasons for the existence of political and other groups opposed to gender equality

The fear of economic competition (41%) and apprehension about social changes (43%) delve into the intricate interplay between gender equity and broader socio-economic structures. These apprehensions are indicative of concerns over resource allocation, potential disruptions in established social orders, and uncertainties surrounding recalibrations in power dynamics that may emerge as a consequence of gender equality initiatives.

Of particular significance is the apprehension surrounding the loss of power (52%), underscoring the nexus between gender equality and the redistribution of political power. This aspect is palpable within the context of Albanian politics, where certain parties might strategically employ resistance to gender equality measures as a means to consolidate their political influence. This utilisation of conservative ideologies as a unifying platform to mobilise specific segments of the population serves to perpetuate resistance and accentuate existing societal schisms.

Special attention was given to various influential factors in fostering discrimination and reproducing gendered stereotypes, particularly in politics, education, and social media.

Cultural norms, media representation, and societal expectations were identified as elements perpetuating gender inequality. Youth consulted criticised the media for perpetuating stereotypes and presenting biased narratives (55%), particularly regarding marriage, divorce, and crimes against women. They emphasised the importance of responsible media reporting and the need to challenge negative stereotypes.

4. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTION

The perception of public institutions by the youth in the Albanian context underscores a prevailing lack of trust and confidence in their effectiveness. As illustrated in Figure 11, a significant majority of young individuals exhibit scepticism, with 55% indicating a lack of belief (values 1 & 2) in the capabilities of these institutions. This lack of trust among the youth holds broader implications for societal governance and cohesion.

The prevailing lack of trust among the youth regarding public institutions can be examined in light of its potential consequences for both governance and societal dynamics. Firstly, it could erode the legitimacy of public institutions, contributing to a sense of disconnection between the governing bodies and the population. Such a detachment can hinder effective policy implementation and collaborative decision-making, thereby weakening the overall governance framework.

Do you trust public institutions? Please answer by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much”

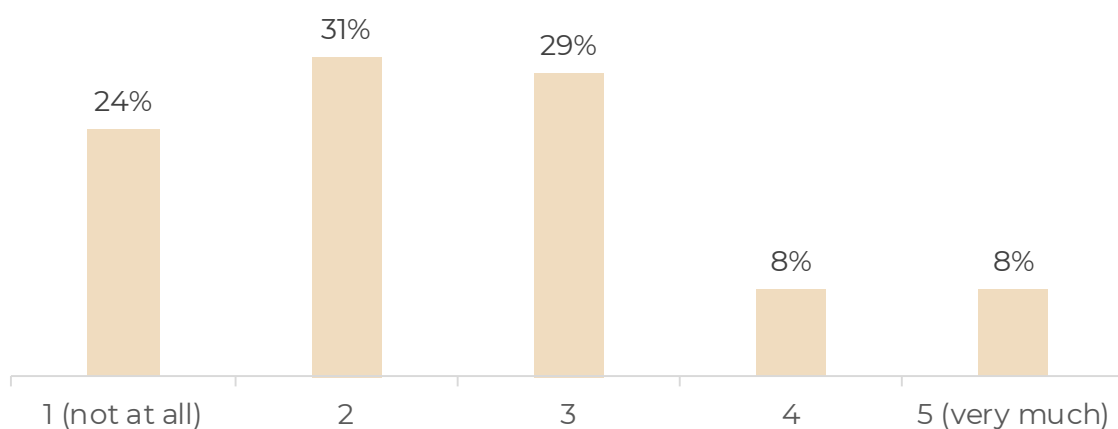


Figure 11. Level of trust in public institutions

Furthermore, the youth's disbelief towards public institutions might also hinder their active engagement in the civic and political spheres. A lack of belief in the efficacy of these institutions can lead to disengagement from social involvement, limiting their participation and contributions to public discourse. This disengagement, in turn, can impede the vitality of a pluralistic and inclusive democracy.

The underlying reasons for this lack of trust warrant exploration. Factors such as past experiences of corruption, bureaucracy, or a perceived lack of responsiveness could contribute to this sentiment. Addressing these root causes requires comprehensive strategies that emphasise transparency, accountability, and active efforts to bridge the gap between institutions and the youth.

Nevertheless, despite their uncertainty, the youth exhibit a consistent belief in the significance of equal education access (65%) and employment opportunities (67%) as pivotal components for achieving gender equality and social cohesion (more on Figure below).

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

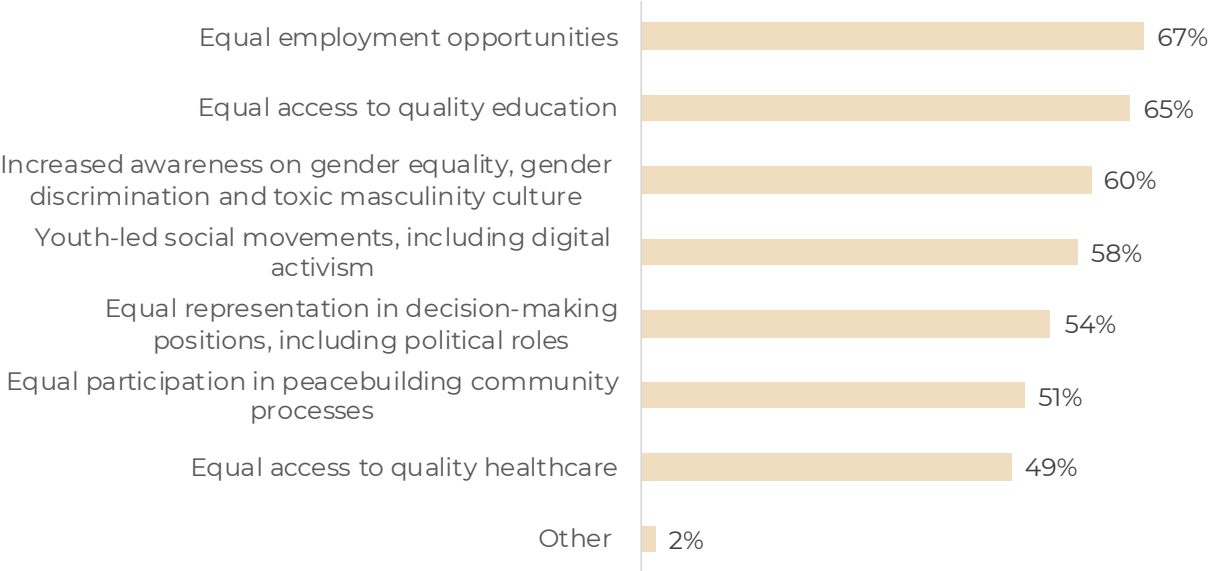


Figure 12. Youth perceptions of factors contributing to gender equality

This aligns with the project's findings, demonstrating that young individuals acknowledge the transformational potential of qualitative education and equitable employment in dismantling structural injustices.

Their recognition of the importance of levelling the playing field through equal chances and fair processes for advancement and social justice underscores their aspirations for a just and inclusive society where opportunities are distributed equitably, resonating with the broader goals of challenging inequalities and fostering social cohesion.

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

The discourse surrounding the utilisation of technology to advance gender equality and foster social cohesion emerges as a nuanced interplay of opportunities and risks, a sentiment echoed by the perspectives of young participants. Conversations during consultations illuminated the erosion of empathy and the surge of individualism, attributes partly ascribed to the influence of social media platforms, thus adding complexity to the pursuit of social cohesion within Albanian society - an observation in alignment with the survey findings.

Additionally, the research meticulously delved into instances of discrimination and hate speech, spanning not only physical realms but also digital spaces. The youth participants underscored the paramount significance of digital activism as a potential avenue to address the looming challenges posed by online harassment, thereby advocating for robust measures to ensure a secure and inclusive online environment.

The realm of social media is noted for its potential to be harnessed as a platform for anonymous targeting and stigmatisation, particularly directed towards vulnerable individuals and marginalised communities, including women, migrants, refugees, and groups such as Roma, Egyptian, and LGBTQIA+ members. The amplification of hate speech, dissemination of misinformation, and propagation of divisive narratives through contemporary media platforms is an apprehension raised by the youth, emphasising the necessity for vigilant oversight and concerted efforts to counteract the adverse impacts of social media on marginalised and vulnerable segments (Stanko, 2021).

Nonetheless, the youth participants recognised the capacity of digital platforms to amplify voices that are often relegated to the margins, promoting narratives of inclusivity. They acknowledged the potency of digital

activism and cross-regional exchange experiences as tools to combat challenges stemming from discrimination and hate speech.

“Social media can serve as a valuable tool to amplify the voices of marginalised groups when traditional media falls short in its representation. Moreover, technological advancements possess the potential to creatively engage a broader audience, thereby fostering heightened awareness about a spectrum of critical issues.”

Participant, local consultation

Furthermore, the participants acknowledged that through strategic utilisation of digital platforms and online advocacy, young individuals can actively confront the multifarious obstacles posed by discrimination and hate speech, engendering an environment that fosters inclusivity and respect, both offline and in virtual spaces. This observation underscores how technology and virtual interactivity have also contributed positively by fostering like-minded communities, facilitating dynamic communication, and enabling the advancement of shared perspectives among individuals with common concerns.

This dual impact of technology, serving as both a tool for amplification of harmful practices and as a platform for community-building, underscores its transformative potential in the pursuit of a more inclusive and enlightened societal landscape. Harnessing the potential of technology and social media to instigate affirmative transformation, can contribute to the creation of a secure, and more understanding society.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS OF YOUTH

Youth participants shared their recommendations on addressing gender equality and social cohesion challenges, drawing on their lived experiences and perspectives. The recommendations provided by the participants to the research advocate for a substantial reconfiguration of societal paradigms. To achieve meaningful and lasting change for women collectively - in terms of Arruzza et al., (2017), Feminism for 99% - there is a pressing need for substantial transformations in policies, institutions, and societal attitudes. Such an endeavor necessitates a visionary stance, and strong support from civil society and institutions, alongside the forging of potent coalitions to advocate for social justice and women's rights.

Youth recommendations highlight the multifaceted nature of promoting gender equality and combating gender-based violence, as well as accentuate the interconnectedness of various factors, ranging from economic opportunities and education to awareness-raising, activism, representation, and access to healthcare:

- **Promote Equal Employment Opportunities**, considered the most significant factor to achieve gender equality and social cohesion in Albania. By ensuring that individuals have equal opportunities to access quality education, and succeed in the labour market, societies can address gender disparities and promote economic empowerment.
- **Raise awareness** on gender equality, gender discrimination, and toxic masculinity in institutional and extra-curricular activities and outreach. This reflects a recognition that challenging societal norms and promoting cultural change requires a collective effort to educate and sensitise individuals about gender-related issues.
- **Support youth-led social movements as a catalyst for social change.** Recognising the agency and youth activism, promote youth mobilisation to challenge existing power structures, advocate for gender equality, and combat sexism and misogyny in public discourse.
- **Foster inclusive participation in peacebuilding processes.** Sustainable peace and social cohesion require the active involvement and contribution of diverse groups, including women and marginalised groups.
- **Enact legal reforms to address gender-based violence**, advocating for stringent penalties against perpetrators and streamlined pathways for survivors seeking legal recourse. Youth in Albania call for legal reform to amplify the safeguarding of women's rights by expediting legal proceed-

ings, facilitating reporting mechanisms, and establishing secure havens for those impacted by abuse.

- **Enhance social care provisions**, and accessible and affordable childcare services that can significantly alleviate the pressures on working female parents, enabling their professional participation despite familial responsibilities. This perspective extends to institutional policies that promote gender-neutral parental leave and implement measures ensuring equitable remuneration and professional progression, actively dismantling structural barriers that impede women's economic empowerment.
- **Foster more comprehensive sexual education curricula** designed to counter entrenched gender stereotypes. Such curricula would equip young individuals with insights into consent, respect, and healthy relationship dynamics, nurturing a culture of empathy and challenging the roots of gender-based norms. The research amplifies the call for robust education initiatives, including public campaigns targeting (toxic) masculinity and harmful gender roles, confronting discriminatory attitudes, and cultivating gender sensitivity across societal domains.
- **Strengthen accessibility to free mental health support** by public institutions tailored to women's needs. This involves destigmatising mental health concerns, establishing counselling services that specifically address gender-related trauma, and ensuring comprehensive healthcare coverage encompassing mental well-being.

CONCLUSION

The study uncovers challenges related to youth engagement in various socio-political processes highlighting the complexities of addressing divisive narratives and fostering social change through an intersectional critical lens. The analysis of the data gathered suggests that progress is influenced by a multitude of factors, including historical agents, economic disparities, and political shift events that are vital in advancing gender equality, social cohesion, and peacebuilding. Inclusive processes towards the betterment of societies, necessitate addressing these overlapping forms of oppression and structural inequalities.

Engaging youth in the analysis of gender equality, social cohesion, and peacebuilding is of great importance in shaping the present and the future of Albanian society. The perspectives and experiences of marginalised people, as well as Albanian youth from various backgrounds, offer valuable insights into the challenges they encounter and the potential societal and state-oriented solutions they envision.

This analysis intends to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the gender dynamics and social fabric of Albania. Understanding the country's specificities, including the diverse realities within the wider region, is critical in developing contextually relevant policies and interventions that not only promote but even ensure the suitable implementation of tailored mechanisms tackling gender equality and social cohesion.

This study further advances the realm of gender and feminist studies in Albanian literature, a facet that has been notably absent in earlier literary works within the region. By addressing these entwined issues, the disentanglement seeks to inform the development of inclusive policies, challenge existing power structures, and promote the active participation of youth in envisioning a multidimensional prospering society. It further underscores the need for transformative action, emphasising the need to address gender disparities and social divisions to foster justice, inclusivity and development in Albania.

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