

VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality and Social Cohesion in the Western Balkans **Annex II: Bosnia and Herzegovina**

Author: Dr Nataša Vučenović



YOUTH

Inclusion, Equality & Trust



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INTRODUCTION

There is increasing support to integrate youth perspectives into research directed at improving their future and well-being, to obtain results closely aligned with youth's lived realities and priorities (Liebenburg, 2017). This applies in particular to youth living in conflict and post-conflict contexts which are marked by intergenerational trauma and inequalities (Liebenburg, 2017).

Previous research has already pointed out that the young population in the region is affected by political instability and divisive narratives resulting in intergroup distancing and distrust (Turjačanin et al., 2017, p. 2; Dakash et al., 2017). Another emerging issue raised in previous studies concerns the linkage between the revival of ethno-nationalistic narratives and the re-traditionalisation of gender roles (Spahić Šiljak, 2010; Majstorović, 2011; Selimović et al., 2021).

Considering the key role attributed to young people in building sustainable peace and inclusiveness (United Nations Security Council, 2015), this research was developed as part of a youth-led project aimed at empowering young people from the Western Balkan region and strengthening their role as agents of change in society.

Key Findings

The perceived degree of social cohesion and gender equality is very low: 27% of young people¹ believe BiH society is marked by gender equality, and only 10% believe it to be marked by social cohesion.

Major obstacles to social cohesion are corruption (89%), ethnic divisions and tensions (72%), political tensions and instability (70%), hate-speech (63%), and discrimination (57%).

- A low degree of social cohesion is mainly triggered by distrust in public institutions and the political elite: only 9% of survey respondents reported trusting public institutions, whilst less than 10% indicated trusting politicians. The findings are a call for relevant institutions and political structures to start creating and implementing mechanisms aimed at improving vertical social cohesion, especially in light of the ongoing migration flows of young educated people.
- Traditional gender norms (67%), negative legacies of the past (65%), the representation of rigid gender roles, and stereotypes in media and social media (61%) are perceived as major obstacles to gender equality.
- Gender-based violence is perceived by youth as a prominent structural problem that cannot be addressed independently from the deeply engrained patriarchal culture that perpetuates it, especially toxic masculinity, recognised as one of its main causes.
- Despite the burden of past legacies, young people showed readiness to work on setting new egalitarian social norms which reflects efforts to build a sustainable and functional community based on shared duties and rights.

¹ 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 in BiH



Young participants who believe BiH society is marked by social cohesion



Young participants who believe BiH society is marked by gender equality



Contexts of inequality

- 60% of respondents perceive the workplace as a site of gender inequalities



Obstacles to social cohesion

- Corruption
- Ethnic divisions
- Political tensions and instability



Grounds of discrimination

- Ethnicity
- Religion
- Social status
- Gender

Factors helping gender equality

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



Image 1. Key findings in BiH

1. METHODOLOGY

1.1. Research design and research sample

To ensure an in-depth and first-hand understanding of key social challenges from a youth perspective, the study was designed with a participatory approach, which is used to engage young people as active participants in the research process and to empower them to play an integral role in shaping the research questions, analysis, and dissemination of findings (Freire et al., 2022). The positive feedback received by one young peer-reviewer of the research paper highlights the vital importance perceived by the young community of such participatory approach, representing both an opportunity for youth to learn from each other and speak up about common concerns, and a driver for enhanced gender equality and social cohesion in the region:

“The opportunity not only widened our horizons but also allowed us to gain valuable insights into the challenges faced by women around the world. Exploring the history, struggles, and accomplishments of women’s rights movements has inspired me and my fellow students to become more aware, empathetic, and active advocates for gender equality. As we reflect on the lessons learned and continue to raise awareness about women’s rights, I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have been a part of this transformative experience. I am committed to carrying forward the discussions and insights gained from the opportunity into my daily life and future endeavors.”

Peer-reviewer

The author represents both a young person from BiH experiencing common social problems of youth and the researcher in charge of exploring them, which required exposing and challenging the author’s own biases and preconceived ideas in order to avoid interpreting the data in a way that supports the author’s beliefs and experiences. In line with this, the research was at the same time a process of self-observation and learning that strengthened the author’s awareness of the value of different perspectives and intercultural dialogue.

Mixed quantitative and qualitative methods were used to explore youth perceptions of the following issues: obstacles to gender equality and social cohesion, youth perceptions of public institutions, and risks and opportunities of the use of technology for gender equality and social cohesion. A quantitative survey was used to provide statistical data and offer insights

into patterns and trends, whilst a local consultation and individual interviews offered in-depth contextual information about participants' personal experiences and perspectives. Methods triangulation enabled cross-verifying findings from quantitative and qualitative methods. Combining these two approaches enhanced the validity of the research and enabled researchers to gain a more holistic and richer understanding of the phenomenon under study.²

The survey targeted a young population between 18 and 30; the sample size included a total number of 400 participants. The local consultation brought together 26 young people, whilst in-depth interviews were conducted with three participants. The content of the paper underwent also a peer reviewing process (2 persons).

Quantitative and qualitative approaches to the research

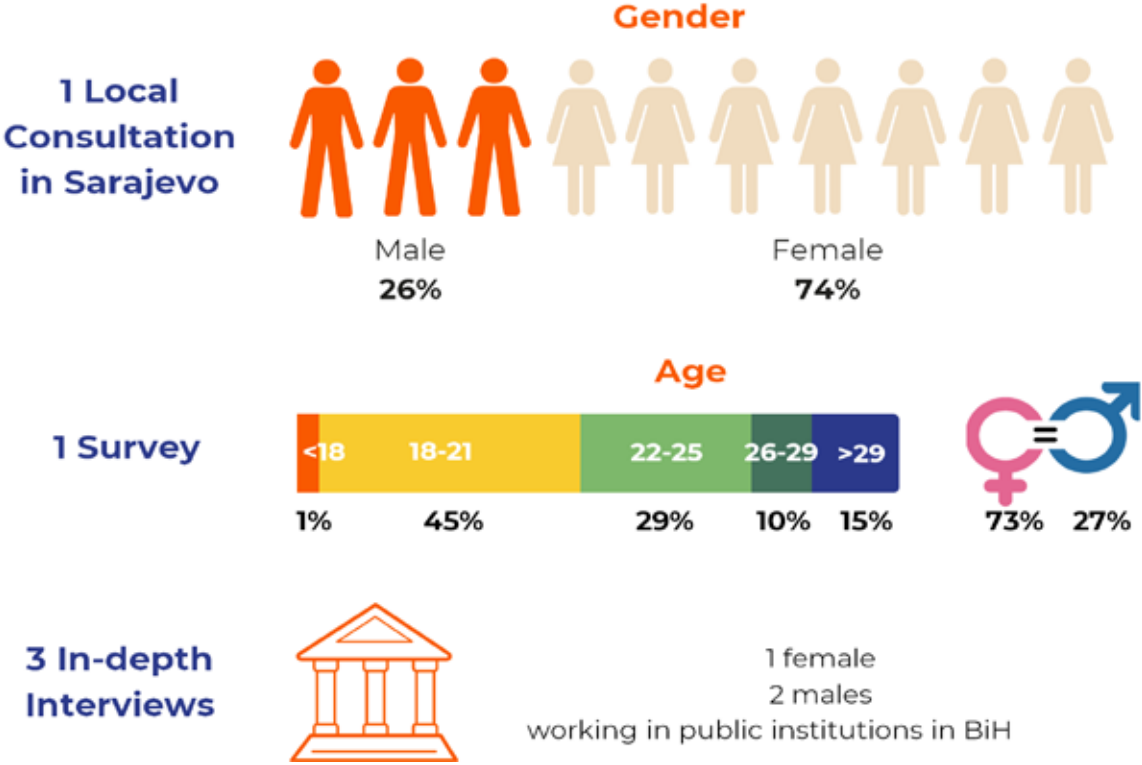


Image 2. Research sample in qualitative and quantitative research

² A more detailed overview of the methodological framework, including sample size and limitations, is presented in the regional paper.

1.2. Observations on Youth Engagement

The level of participation in the group discussion was very high, young people were very engaged and interacted with each other throughout the discussion. They were very well-informed on the discussion topics and provided valuable insights and perspectives, enriched by nuanced and colorful examples from their own experience.

Besides showing awareness about important social issues, they offered ideas on how to overcome them and foster positive changes and proactive solutions.

Participants were generally very open-minded, motivated, enthusiastic, and sincere. Some of them stood out for their enthusiasm to speak, whilst a few seemed more introverted and did not engage as much.

The presence of different religious groups and sexual orientations in the local consultation may have encouraged a more contained and censored approach to sensitive topics in some of the participants. This claim is supported by a peer-reviewer who provided a very insightful and valuable perspective on how negative legacies of the past hinder youth's engagement in building constructive narratives and confronting ideas and perspectives, both in research and informal settings:

“Young people in BiH are afraid to share their personal experiences in public discussions because they fear ‘others’ and people who are different. They have been influenced by older generations to believe that individuals of different religions or nationalities are predominantly malicious and that their shared perspectives would eventually be used against them”.

Peer-reviewer

Emotional reactions to sensitive issues were handled by adopting an empathic and non-judgmental approach, consolidated with a reminder that respectful dialogue was essential for every socially engaged interaction. Emotional reactions can be also interpreted in a positive light, as they may point to the readiness to tackle difficult topics and confront ideas.

1.3. Literature review

Previous research focused on obstacles to social cohesion and gender equality in BiH, as well as the opportunities for their growth and enhancement, delved into the country's complex history marked by ethnic and political divisions, stemming from the legacy of the 90s conflict and its implications for social cohesion. The revival of ethno-nationalistic ideologies following the 90s conflict was identified as a significant obstacle to social cohesion and overall well-being. As emphasised by Majstorović and Turjačanin (2013, p. 2), in the post-conflict BiH society nationalism transpired as a dominant political religion, offering a glorious past instead of a promising future. Studies exploring youth perceptions of intergroup relationships in BiH reveal that due to the post-conflict socialisation setting, different ethnic and religious identities are often not perceived by youth as key components of a unique and valuable multicultural heritage, but as mutually exclusive categories in a constant struggle of overpowering each other (see Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Turjačanin et al., 2017; Turjačanin et al., 2020). The inter-ethnic distance perceived by youth is constructed and reinforced through the populist discourse of BiH politicians. Studies focused on the critical analysis of the political and media discourse in BiH show that various religious and political actors often misappropriate the notion of patriotism to normalise artificial ethnic boundaries and to shift focus from real socio-economic problems (Mulalić & Karić, 2017, p. 140; Toal, 2013).

The revival of nationalism reveals itself as a multi-layered socio-political phenomenon with an all-encompassing effect not only on ethnic and religious identities, but also on gender and power relations within the society (Spahić-Šiljak, 2010; Majstorović, 2011). As noted by Spahić-Šiljak (2010, p. 121), in socialist Yugoslavia the state's official politics showed commitment to female emancipation and gender equality, whereas in the post-socialist era, the ethnonationalist and ethnoreligious elites regained a prominent position in the political discourse, instigating the re-traditionalisation of rigid gender roles and the resurgence of patriarchal religious-cultural traditions.

It was further stressed that despite the professed democratic values and legislative framework guaranteeing gender equality, the status and role of women in BiH remain largely influenced by the religious and cultural heritage that confines them to the roles of mothers and nurturers (Spahić-Šiljak, 2010, p. 122).

Following the revival of ethnonationalism, the dominant paradigm of male identity started revolving around the militarised masculinity model that placed men in the role of warriors and protectors of the nation (Haider, 2017, p. 2). The detrimental effects of such masculinity model reached its culmination with the conflict-related sexual violence perpetrated against

women in BiH, which was used as a “weapon”, with the primary purpose of humiliating, dehumanising, and demoralising not only the victim, but the entire targeted population (Skjelsbæk, 2006, pp. 373-374).

The normalisation of toxic masculinity arising as a consequence of entrenched patriarchal value systems is seen as the root cause of domestic and gender-based violence, which remains a pervasive problem in BiH. A study implemented by the Gender Equality Agency of BiH in 2013 shows that one in two women in BiH is a victim of some form of gender-based violence from the age of fifteen (Babović et al., 2013). More recent OSCE-led research concentrated on the WB region, Moldavia, and Ukraine, shows that 75% of women participating in the survey experienced some form of sexual harassment since the age of fifteen (OSCE-led survey on violence against women, 2019). Furthermore, the data showing that as many as 84% of women do not report violence (*ibidem*) reveals the complex layers of the interconnectedness of gender-based violence and a culture of silence that reinforces the normalisation of the gendered systems of domination and subordination. According to the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Banja Luka report, the main reason impeding women from reporting sexual harassment is the distrust in institutions, but also the perceived social tolerance towards such behaviour (e.g., commonly witnessed reactions such as ‘men will be men’, ‘she gave him a reason’) (Gačanica, 2019, p. 27, cit. in Spahić Šiljak, 2021, p. 12).

A study about gender-based violence in the domain of politics shows that 66% of respondents experienced some form of gender-based violence during their political engagement (Susmel, 2019, p. 13). Also, most of the respondents (66%) agreed that different forms of gender-based violence against women are perceived as a normal phenomenon in politics in BiH (*ibidem*).

Studies also show that women in BiH are impacted by gender-based discrimination and violence at work. Although in BiH the legal framework related to gender equality in the workplace is in line with the relevant EU standards (Ramić-Marković, 2022, p. 27), a study from 2021 shows that 46% of women reported experiencing gender-based discrimination at work, whereas 78% of them did not report the cases to the relevant institutions (*ibidem*, p. 33).

Research exploring sexist slurs exposes the verbal component of sexual harassment and shows how the semantic derogation reinforces harmful stereotypes and contributes to the marginalisation and objectification of women, affecting their self-esteem, mental health, and body image. Media and social media in BiH are seen as fertile ground for sexism and hate speech (Fetahović, n.d.).

A recent study on sexist humour and derogatory terms in the university settings in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia reveals that women are the main target group exposed to sexist comments (Ćeriman & Spahić Šiljak, 2021, p. 47). Another important finding emerging from the study tackles the complex nature of the internalisation of sexism that hinders the critical examination of discrimination and gendered power relations underlying language use (Ćeriman & Spahić Šiljak, 2021, p. 46).

The mentioned study is a part of the first regional comprehensive research aimed at exploring gender (in)equality and gender-based violence in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro, and Serbia. The multidisciplinary research that was carried out by the Transcultural Psychosocial Educational (TPO) Foundation in the framework of the UNIGEM project employed quantitative and qualitative methodology to explore the perceptions of students, teaching, and academic staff on instances of gender inequality, discrimination, and violence. The key findings show that the university setting is characterised by a relatively low level of knowledge and understanding of the concepts of gender equality and gender-based violence; gender perspective is incorporated in a small number of courses; gender-based violence is present, but it remains under-reported, mainly due to the mistrust in institutional mechanisms, fear and stigma (Spahić Šiljak et al., 2021, p. 21). The research is characterised by a strong civic engagement component reflected in its action-oriented goal to confront and transform unequal and unjust power relations in the university communities.

Addressing patriarchal influences and raising awareness of gender equality and social justice in the education setting can encourage critical thinking and empower students and teaching staff to challenge and dismantle patriarchal structures within society. Studies show that through educational discourse in BiH, ideologically-shaped forms of knowledge are often legitimised as objective and common-sensical social values. More precisely, a study conducted on textbooks employed for a group of subjects in BiH reveals that the educational discourse is in many aspects biased in terms of its orientation towards the exaltation of local myths, heroism, and privileging of one-sided historical narratives (Soldo et al., 2017).

The imagery of women and men in textbooks was found to be based on outdated gender stereotypes that simplify women's and men's realities and possibilities (ibidem). In line with these findings, some recent studies focused on foreign language education reveal that sexism, gender stereotypes, and inequalities are often a cornerstone of male and female identities presented in foreign language textbooks (Vučenović, 2022a; Vučenović, 2022b; Vučenović, 2023).

2. GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION IN BIH

BiH is labelled as a post-conflict country whose striving towards democracy is hindered by internal structural vulnerabilities associated with the 90s conflict legacy, political instability, corruption, and a lack of trust between central authorities and people (Zamfir, 2020, pp. 6-7).

Another important concern that adds to the complexity of a post-conflict society is the problem of gender-based violence and sexism, whose root causes young participants associated with deeply embedded patriarchal values underlying societal norms. In such an environment, the future is overshadowed by negative legacies of the past, appearing in the form of ethno-nationalistic and anti-gender narratives that convey ethnic divisions, inequalities, and violence. The achievement of social cohesion in youth's opinion requires a meaningful shift in culture and mindset, supported by substantial policy and institutional reforms. Although aware of the complex challenges in BiH, young people expressed shared values and commitment to build trust, solidarity, and peace in their communities.

2.1. Gender equality as a key aspect of social cohesion

The results gathered from the interactive tool "SLI.DO", used during the local consultation in Sarajevo, show that the most frequently associated words with social cohesion are "understanding" (*razumijevanje*) and "parity" (*ravnopravnost*). Similarly, the word "equality" (*jednakost*) is most commonly linked to "gender equality." The triggered mental associations suggest that equality is perceived as a cornerstone of social cohesion. This understanding further implies that the two concepts are associated with core values of broader discourse(s) of human rights, democracy, and social justice (Delpont, 2009).

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

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



Image 3. Word cloud for social cohesion

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



Image 4. Word cloud for gender equality

³ Equality, understanding, solidarity, the inclusion of all citizens in initiatives for a better tomorrow, the process of learning and connecting, community, diversity, culture, progress, gender equality, empathy, one, togetherness, learning, harmonization, future, social stability, attractiveness, connection, more groups, integration, esteem, equitability, cooperation, help and support, acceptance, mutual respect, interaction, rights, altruism.

⁴ Equality, feminism, injustice, the division of household labor, quota, understanding, LGBTQ, discrimination, inequality, utopia, aspiration, modern feminism - with a negative connotation, equal position, possibilities and opportunities, love, equal valorization of sexes, gender, connection, gender equality in language, human rights, esteem, cooperation, respect, patriarchal patterns, norms, freedom, imagined equality, gender-based violence, household chores, lack (of).

Comparison between word clouds reveals that exclusively positively connotated words are associated with social cohesion (e. g. *understanding, equality, togetherness, support* etc.), whilst in the context of gender equality, words indicating awareness of causal factors that produce and contribute to the maintenance of gender inequality are also mentioned (e. g. *injustice, inequality, gender-based violence, patriarchal patterns* etc.).

This difference may point to a lived experience of inequalities and a more empirically-based knowledge of the concept of gender (in)equality in comparison to a more abstract and primarily theoretical understanding of the notion of social cohesion. Moreover, the ability to recognise and define different aspects hindering gender equality can be seen as a key premise of youth-led, awareness-based collective action, aimed at alteration of sociocultural patterns and redistribution of power. Group discussion revealed that among young people gender equality is recognised as a cross-cutting dimension of social cohesion. However, it was also highlighted that in a patriarchal society gender equality is sometimes perceived as a subversive mechanism that threatens social cohesion and contributes to further polarisation rather than being valued as a unifying element within society.

2.2. Youth perceptions of intergroup relations

The multiethnic demographic profile of Bosnia and Herzegovina presses for continuous efforts to ensure intergroup understanding, respect, and dialogue. This is especially true in terms of the necessity to overcome ethno-nationalistic and patriarchal narratives that exploded in the aftermath of the 90s Bosnian conflict. In a society with pronounced ethno-nationalistic ideologies, young people can easily become hostages of the past, trapped in the process of the reenactment of their parents' traumas.

A valuable observation "*Hatred is not ours, it was given to us*" that emerged in one of the previous studies on youth perceptions of ethnic identities in BiH (Turjačanin & Majstorović, 2013, p. 93) is in line with general attitudes expressed during the local consultation, throughout which young people expressed a strong sense of agency and willingness to take a critical stance towards divisive narratives and negative legacies of the past. Despite the multi-faceted and often conflicted identities of youth in BiH/Western Balkans, their potential to act as drivers of change in building a tradition of acceptance, solidarity, and respect for others is indisputable. The 90s conflict produced devastating transgenerational consequences resulting in a fear-driven cognition about the fragility of intergroup relations, potentially threatening to develop into another violent conflict. *Ethnic* divisions convey concern among youth and are perceived as one of the destabilising factors that impact the overall well-being of youth in the country. When asked to indicate the factors that negatively

impact youth well-being on a scale of 1-5 (1 - “not at all”; 5 - “very much”), 67% of survey respondents rated ethnic divisions and tensions above 3.

This study intended to explore whether in the family, traditionally seen as the first agent of socialisation, one-sided ethnic narratives are challenged. This was measured by asking the survey participants to indicate whether the two following statements were in their experience true: a) my parents talk about the previous war/wars and conflicts, and I know how much people from *my* ethnic group suffered; b) my parents talk about the previous war/wars and conflicts and I know how much people from *other* ethnic groups suffered. The data related to these two overarching questions are highlighted in lighter blue:

**Which of the following statement(s) is/are true for you?
You can select more than one option**

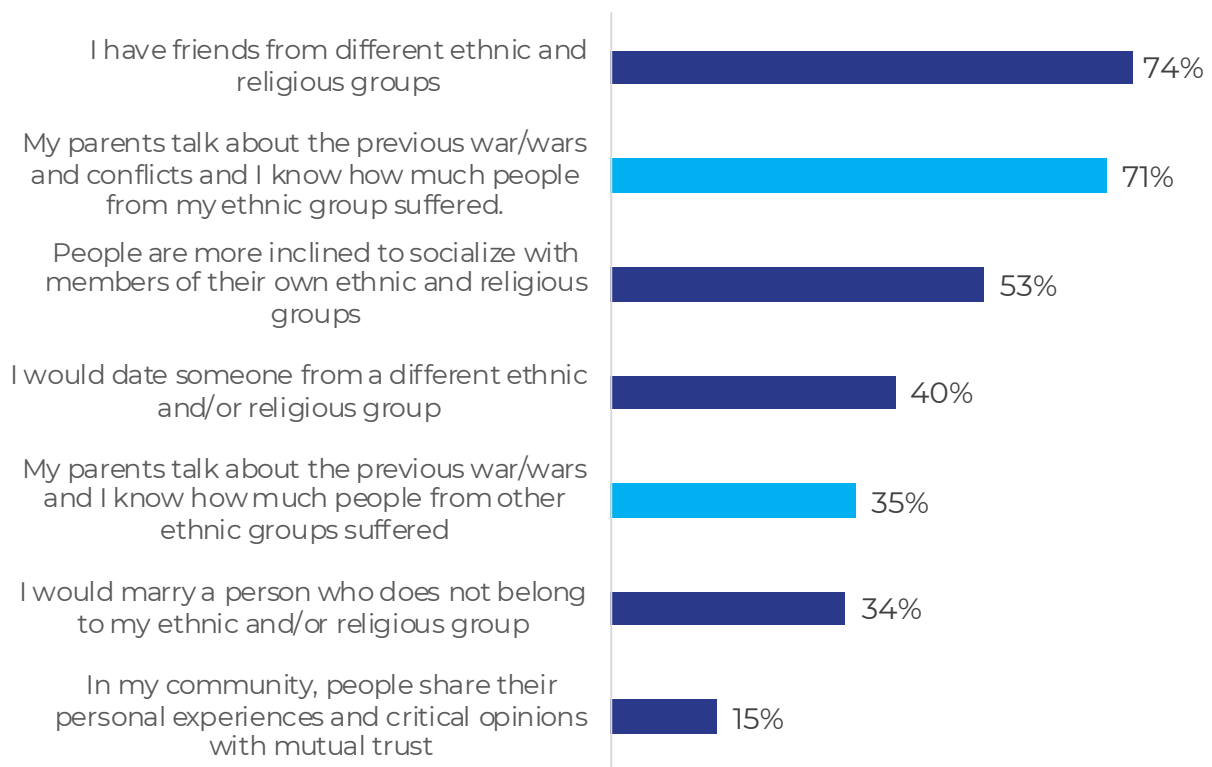


Figure 1. Primary socialisation and approach to the culture of remembrance

What emerged was that 71% of respondents indicated the first one as true, whilst a significantly smaller number indicated the second one as true (35%). This discrepancy indicates that young people in BiH are frequently exposed to a form of remembrance culture that, instead of acting as a cohesive element, may reinforce intergroup boundaries and hostility by censoring tragic experiences of out-group members. For as much as it is

important to connect to the collective past and empathise with the tragedies suffered by the loved ones, the culture of remembrance in BiH is often one-dimensional and ideologically shaped by the *Us vs. Them* dichotomy that translates into a victim/perpetrator narrative. Dynamics of polarisation are a long-standing problem often resulting in the appropriation of trauma by each ethnic group, a process that on a larger scale impedes constructive dialogue, reconciliation, and healing.

To explore youth perceptions of interethnic relations and interactions in BiH, the research observed social distance by focalising on approach behaviour and intergroup trust. To measure social distance a variation of a Bogardus Social Distance Scale⁵ was used. The procedure included asking respondents whether they would accept ethnic outgroup members in particular relationships. The aim was to examine the youth approach behavior, or more precisely the willingness to engage in emotional relationships with outgroup members. Prior to this, respondents were asked to indicate whether they had friends from different ethnic and religious groups. The data related to the relevant aspects of social distance are highlighted in lighter blue.

**Which of the following statement(s) is/are true for you?
You can select more than one option**

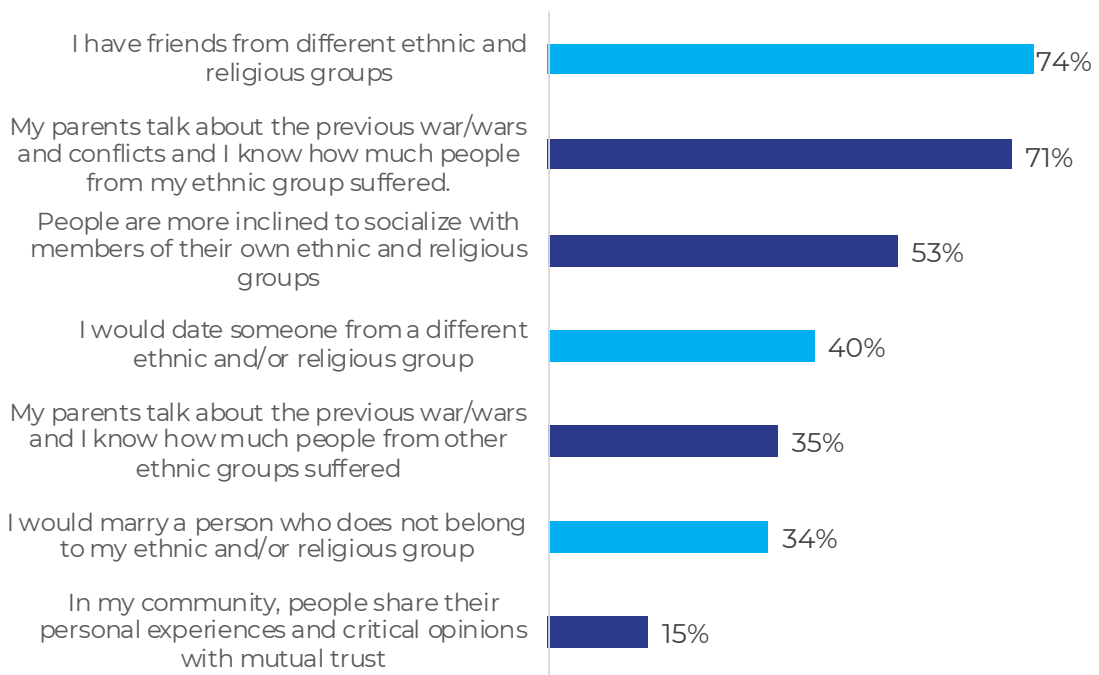


Figure 2. Intergroup trust and approach behaviour

⁵ Bogardus Scale is a tool used in social science research to measure the perceived social distance, prejudice and intergroup relations between members from different ethnic, racial and social groups. It measures respondents' perceived sense of closeness and feelings of acceptance for outgroup members (Mather et al., 2017, p. 1).

The fact that 74% of participants responded affirmatively about having a multiethnic circle of friends gives an overall optimistic outlook on youth intergroup relations. Going deeper into the analysis of potentially more intimate bonds between ingroup and outgroup members resulted in a discovery of a significant degree of social distance expressed through a rather low willingness to date or marry a person from a different ethnic or religious group.

Survey results show that 40% of respondents expressed willingness to date a person with a different ethnic or religious background, whilst the willingness to marry them was expressed by only 34% of respondents. Inter-ethnic marriages in BiH are often stigmatised and seen as a deviation from societal norms (Brkanić, 2015; Bakija, 2021).

The motivations behind the participants' responses were not qualitatively explored; however, it is worth noting that some previous research placed parents' disapproval among the main reasons for expressed distance.⁶

Respondents' reluctance to form intimate bonds outside their ethnic group suggests that, in BiH, ethnic identity is an important social category that shapes peoples' beliefs and affects significantly their life choices and actions, in terms of *rejection vs. acceptance* behavioural patterns.

Contrary to this, an attitude shared during the group discussion suggests that interethnic marriage can serve as a cohesive force unifying contrasting cultural elements:

"I am happy that I come from a mixed marriage. It helped me embrace cultural diversity and become a person without prejudices, who approaches others with understanding and empathy".

Participant, local consultation

⁶ Parents' disapproval is often linked to the BiH conflict legacy. In one of the previous studies the issue of the Historical burden is explained through a view of a student who elaborated more closely on the reasons of his parents' disapproval to marry or date an outgroup member by quoting their words: "Son, they slaughtered us in the war" (Brkanić, 2015).

2.3. Impact of negative legacies of the past

In the group discussion, the syntagma “negative legacies of the past” triggered associations with patriarchal heritage and traditional gender roles. Although ethnic divisions and tensions were ranked among the top factors hindering social cohesion, they were not discussed in detail or in reference to personal experiences during the local consultation. This could be for multiple reasons, one of which might be related to the ethnically mixed composition of the group due to which particularly sensitive topics perceived as possible conflict drivers were avoided. It could be also seen in a positive light, as a sign of readiness to overcome fixation on the conflict-related past and to move towards a shared future. During the local consultation, peacebuilding was recognised as a proactive response to divisive narratives and nationalistic ideologies. In BiH NGOs and other organisations involved in peacebuilding are almost exclusively women-led (Helms, 2010; Spahić-Šiljak, 2014).

Despite the vital role attributed to BiH women in preventing and mitigating conflict, the participants highlighted that women were omitted from high-level institutional peace negotiations, such as the Dayton Peace Agreement⁷ that shaped the country’s future. The marginalised position of women was attributed to essentialist beliefs about their inherent sensitivity prevailing over rationality, but in a broader sense it serves as an indicator of unequal power relations and patriarchal social hierarchies.

It was suggested that female agency in the peace processes could result in more lasting and more sustainable forms of peace; however, it was also emphasised that arguments in favour of their engagement should not rely on stereotypical beliefs about women’s natural inclination to peace, but rather on the necessity to implement laws and regulations that guarantee equal participation of both women and men in public life, especially in social processes with significant impact on the country’s stability.

⁷ *The Dayton Peace Agreement, signed in December 1995, ended the Bosnian War (1990-1995) and established peace in the region. It brought together the conflicting factions in Bosnia and Herzegovina, including Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs, to create a single sovereign state with two autonomous entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, as well as a self-governing administrative unit Distrikt Brčko. The agreement also established provisions for political, economic, and military structures, as well as international oversight to ensure stability.*

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

To understand the youth’s perception of factors hindering gender equality and social cohesion from a first-hand experience, the first step consisted of assessing the perceived level of cohesiveness and equality. As many as 27% of participants responded that gender equality was very much or somewhat present in their community, 43% were neutral, whilst 30% indicated that it was not much or at all present.

The observations in local consultation highlighted the gap between the legislative framework guaranteeing gender equality and its effective realisation in practice. The perceived degree of social cohesion is even lower: only 10% of participants believe BiH society to be marked by social cohesion, the majority is neutral (49%), whilst 41% indicated that social cohesion was not much or at all present. The figure below highlights the factors which according to survey respondents hinder building stronger and fairer societies:

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

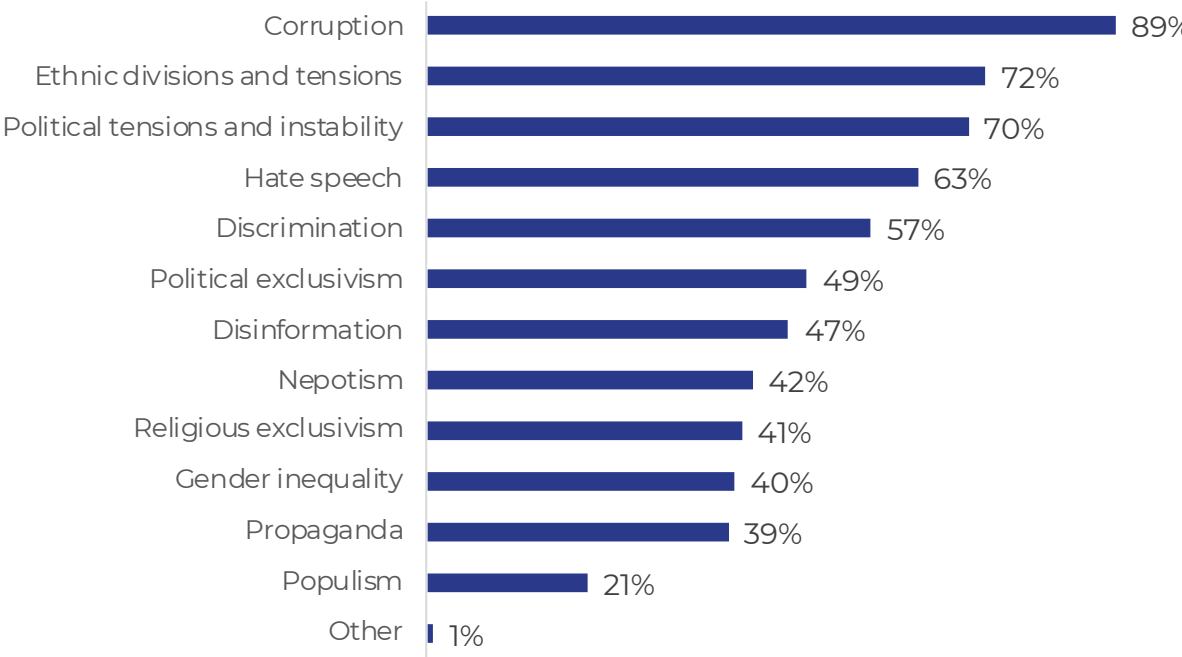


Figure 3. Youth perceptions of factors hindering the building of stronger and fairer societies

Corruption is considered to be the major obstacle to fairer and more equal societies (89%), followed by ethnic divisions (72%) and political tensions and instability (70%). The importance attributed to corruption suggests that the engagement of political and institutional actors in BiH should aim to ensure the well-being and equal treatment of all its inhabitants, instead of emphasising the ethnic and religious differences among them.

Gender equality is not indicated among the top five hindering factors. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that studies focused on the relationship between gender and corruption show that higher levels of enjoyment of women's rights and participation in public life are associated with lower levels of corruption in many countries of the world (Rheinbay & Chêne, 2016, p. 5). In addition, all the top-five hindering factors, especially the one related to ethnic divisions and tensions, can be to some extent associated with the culture of toxic militarised masculinities and the underrepresentation of women in decision-making positions (Spahić-Šiljak, 2010; Mlinarević & Kosović, 2011). In line with this, it could be argued that gender inequality is at the very core of the above-indicated social issues. However, the possible linkage between these factors and youth's perception needs to be further explored.

The figure below summarises youth perceptions of the level of corruption and gender inequality in the workplace.

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

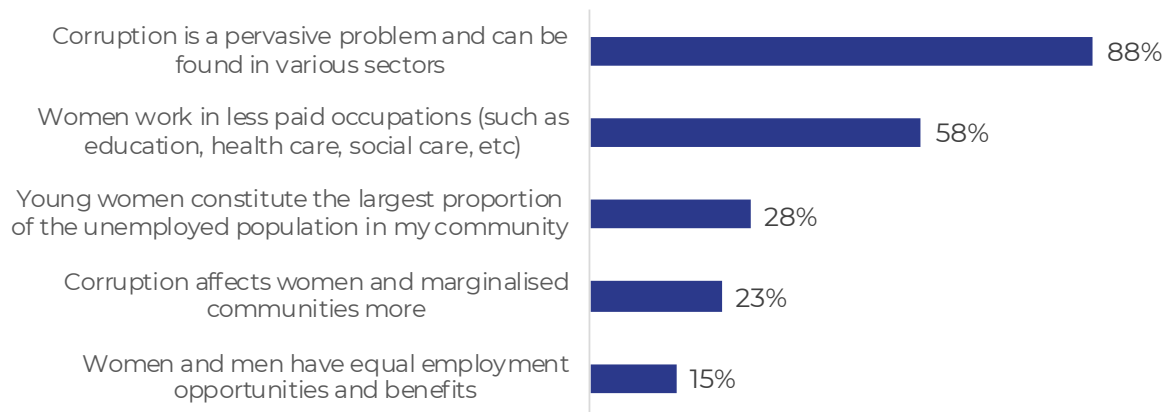


Figure 4. Youth perceptions of the level of corruption and gender inequality in the workplace

As previously mentioned, corruption is perceived as a pervasive social problem that permeates various sectors; however, the majority of young people believe it to be equally detrimental for both women and men. The highest perceived degree of gender inequality is found in the category of employment. Only 15% of respondents believe that women and men have equal employment opportunities and benefits⁸, whilst almost 60% perceive the workplace as a site of gender inequalities that relegates women into lower-paid and lower-status jobs, associated with traditional female roles.

When asked to reflect upon the factors that hinder achieving gender equality in their community, more than half of respondents selected the following: traditional gender norms (67%), negative legacies of the past (65%), the representation of rigid gender roles and stereotypes in media and social media (61%). The graph below shows the frequency distribution of factors hindering gender equality:

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

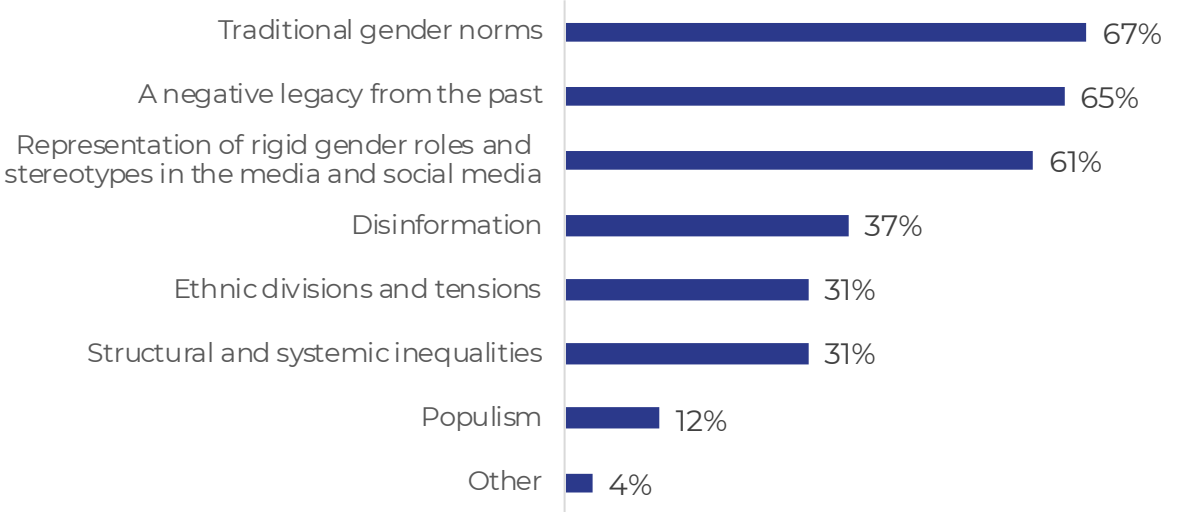


Figure 5. Youth perceptions of factors that hinder gender equality

⁸ The issue of gender-based discrimination in the workplace and hiring practices is explored more in-depth in the section “Discrimination and hate speech”.

3.1. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations

As many as 84% of survey participants believe that cultural and traditional norms set different expectations for women and men in their community. The Figure below summarises perceptions of social expectations in relation to gender.

In your community, who is expected to:

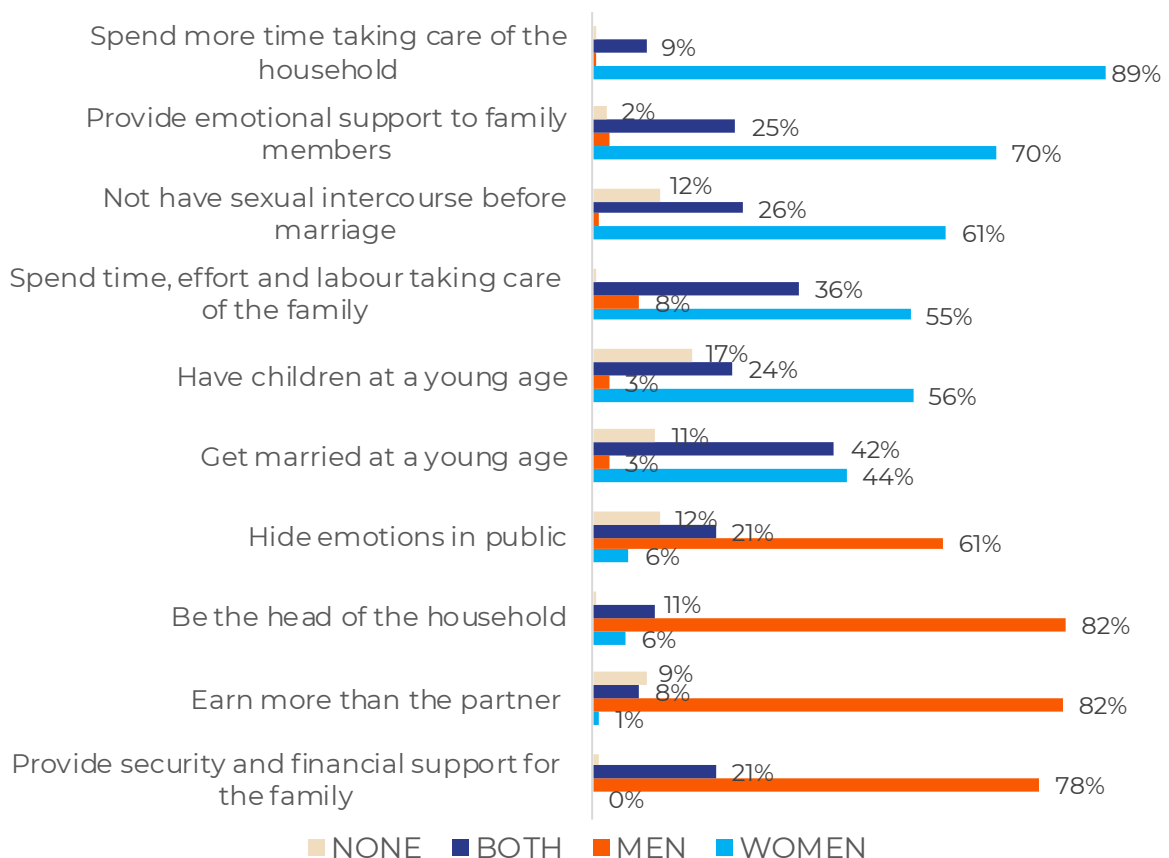


Figure 6. Youth perceptions of stereotyped gender expectations⁹

⁹ 1% of participants selected 'none' in relation to the categories "spend more time taking care of the household", "spend time, effort, and labour taking care of the family", "be the head of the household", and "provide security and financial support for the family".
 1% of participants selected 'men' in relation to the categories "spend more time taking care of the household", "not have sexual intercourse before marriage".
 3% of participants selected 'men' in relation to the category "provide emotional support to family members".

Survey results are in line with ideas expressed during the local consultation and in-depth interviews, and show that social expectations for women and men are shaped in conformity with traditional gender hierarchy reflected in a provider/nurturer dichotomy. Moreover, societal norms influencing perceptions of male and female sexuality result to be highly influenced by the patriarchal concept of virginity, traditionally perceived as a main asset that determines the worth of a woman. The virginity requirement of female members of the family is associated with the concept of 'honour', whose achievement is directly linked to the control of the female body and sexuality (Gorar, 2021).

It was also highlighted that deeply ingrained traditional conceptions of what is honourable can still be a prevailing factor in encouraging women to renounce inherited goods in favour of the male members of the family. This view shows that despite the presence of laws and regulations guaranteeing the implementation of equal rights, tradition in BiH often prevails over the law. The importance attributed to these archaic social norms, together with other gendered expectations, show that patriarchal values still significantly resonate with women's and men's realities in BiH.

The statement that gender inequality is commonly found in families was ranked above 3 (1-not at all, 5-very much) by only 31% of respondents¹⁰. On the other hand, ideas expressed during the local consultation and the in-depth interviews revealed that the reproduction of patriarchy through family education and socialisation is seen as a significant obstacle to gender equality. The root causes of persisting patriarchy are linked to the concept of 'true family values' that this system is traditionally associated with. However, the hidden inequalities underlying the 'natural order of things' established by patriarchy seem to be very evident to young people, who reported their detrimental effects in different domains of private and public life. Negative examples of patriarchal upbringing included privileging male over female children, making a neat distinction between 'male' and 'female' jobs, teaching children to act in compliance with their 'natural' roles of femininity and masculinity (e.g., girls are encouraged to be sweet and emotional and boys to be strong and not to show their emotions).

Regarding the persistence of traditional gender roles, it emerged that women from older generations are sometimes perceived by young people as guardians of patriarchal values:

¹⁰Values above 3 for other indicated categories: workplace (42%), online media channels, especially social media (41%), religious environment (37%), school (31%), offline media channels (30%), civil society (youth clubs, cultural associations) (17%).

“My grandmother is surprised to see that I don’t get up when a man enters a room [...]. Through education and upbringing, women are encouraged to show their emotions - it is ok if they cry and get sad or angry, whilst men are taught to suppress their feelings, otherwise, they would be seen as sissies and wimps. I believe that women unfortunately foster patriarchy by raising male children not to do anything in the house, not even for themselves, whilst girls on the other hand are encouraged to do so, so that once they are married, they can serve their husbands”.

Participant, local consultation

Previous research suggests that the attachment of BiH women to patriarchal values is caused by the traditional distribution of power due to which the family environment remained for women the only space that recognises them as speaking subjects (Spahić-Šiljak, 2010; Majstorović, 2011; Mlinarević & Kosović, 2011; Selimović et al., 2021). The popular ‘queen of the house’ myth that justifies women’s multiple burdens is based upon the ‘self-sacrificing micro-matriarchy’ that many women still see as a core component of their identity (Majstorović, 2011, p. 288).

It was also highlighted that the double burden women experience due to the asymmetrical emancipation that occurred in public and private environments often generates frustration and triggers women’s scepticism about the concept of emancipation itself.

As previously mentioned, findings from a study on textbooks employed for the group of subjects in BiH reveal that gender and ethnic stereotypes play a prominent role in the construction of desirable social values and norms (Soldo et al., 2017). Given that children and youth lack critical instruments to see through the hidden curriculum, the divisive and discriminatory narratives that it reproduces become internalised as the cornerstone of country values.

The effects of ideological mechanisms in education were recognised by young people, who reported their dissatisfaction not only with gender stereotypes and sexist language in textbooks, but also with stereotypical and discriminatory discourse uncritically perpetuated by teachers and pedagogists. During the in-depth interviews, the “two schools under one roof”

¹¹ “Two schools under one roof” was established after the 1990s conflict as a temporary measure in ethnically divided cantons of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The system is characterised by different programmes and curriculums created for each ethnicity, resulting in segregation of children by means of physical or non-physical distance, including the use of separate entrances and opposite shifts determined on the basis of ethnicity. Even though it was established as a temporary measure, it became a permanent schooling model, recognised with time as a detrimental system that over-emphasises cultural and linguistic differences and reinforces ethnically-based segregation (Two Schools Under One Roof, 2017).

(*dvije škole pod jednim krovom*) educational model was described as the embodiment of segregation that imposes division upon children and encourages ethnic mistrust. It was pointed out that in such schools' democratic values are overshadowed by detrimental political and ideological dynamics that encourage polarisation. Along the same lines, it is important to point out that the dominant model of mono-religious education in BiH, which requires pupils to be separated along religious/ethnic lines (Abrahamsdotter, 2009), may reinforce religious and cultural homogeneity by limiting exposure to different beliefs and perspectives. Furthermore, the lack of diversity may hinder the development of tolerance and understanding among students from different religious backgrounds and increase social distance among them.¹²

Formal education was also criticised for its conservatism in regard to sexual education and mental health issues. It was pointed out that school is very often the starting point of the very first instances of gender-based violence, sexism and discrimination. Not being sanctioned as inappropriate, such actions become normalised and commonly accepted patterns of behaviour:

“Already in schools girls whose body generally develops sooner in comparison to that of boys become targets of inappropriate comments and touches that nobody reacts to properly. Even a perfectly natural thing like period is something girls are encouraged to be ashamed of and hide”.

Participant, in-depth interview

According to survey data, 37% of respondents had courses focusing on or including gender equality at schools or universities, 45% reported that violence against women and girls was one of the topics they learned about at school or university, whilst 50% reported heroes celebrated at their schools and universities were predominantly men. In addition to this, it is relevant to highlight that during the local consultation, participants expressed their concern with implicit and explicit sexism and gender stereotypes perpetuated through education. The findings suggest that BiH is in need of a curricular reform that would include gender-responsive education policies aimed at developing programmes and teaching methods for critical rethinking of gender hierarchies and power relations that shape them.

¹² Findings from a study focused on students' knowledge and understanding of religions in BiH point to a low level of both interreligious and interreligious knowledge (Milanović, 2020).

3.2. Gender-based violence

Participants reported coming across numerous social media comments containing victim-blaming patterns that imply a victim somehow provoked the violence. “She was asking for it” or “Why did she even find herself in that situation in the first place?” are identified as widespread reactions to violence. Expressed concerns confirm that gender-based violence in the region is structured through a discourse of denial and silence, within which these two components mutually reinforce each other. It was also highlighted that silence is often encouraged by distrust in the institutions, which furthermore suggests that traditional views on gender impact the implementation of legislation and policies aimed at preventing and sanctioning perpetrators. This confirms that gender-based violence is a structural problem that cannot be addressed independently from the deeply engrained patriarchal culture that perpetuates it.

Among the detrimental results of patriarchal culture arises toxic masculinity, which has been recognised by several group discussion participants as one of the main causes of sexual and gender-based violence. It was also highlighted that, among young women, men who conform to toxic masculinity standards are often supported and idealised.

“I have many acquaintances who like dominant men a lot, even when they humiliate other people or show aggressive behaviour. They want to feel safe and protected, but very often those women end up being victims of those exact men”.

Participant local, consultation.

The highlighted example can be observed within the framework of *ambivalent sexism* that implies the existence of two conflicting but complementary ideologies in relation to women – hostile and benevolent sexism (see Glick & Fiske, 1996). Whereas the first type is more explicit and based largely upon misogyny, the second one is more subtle and seemingly favourable to women, but it implies that women are “the weaker sex” naturally in need of men’s protection (Glick & Fiske, 1996).

The naturalness attributed to the male-protector archetype can be further interpreted as a form of symbolic violence, a notion introduced by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (2001) to illustrate how acceptance and internalisation of ideas that support traditional hierarchies mask the conditions of oppression by presenting them as the natural order of things.

The notion is a useful tool to illustrate how the causes of gender-related social problems, including gender-based violence, are often rooted in socially shaped cognitive biases that affect our processing and understanding of gender. This further implies that youth agency should include discussions exposing the arbitrary nature of gendered cultural norms and beliefs.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, an increase in gender-based violence was perceived. The attention was brought to the fact that in this period safe shelters for women were closed, leaving victims with no other option but to share space with their perpetrators again. This particular problem implies that young people are aware that crisis response did not incorporate mechanisms of protection of vulnerable groups such as women victims of domestic violence, which consequently increased their fragility and made them even more susceptible to abuse.

The youth perspectives are in line with the results of a UNDP study on the impact of Covid-19 on women, which revealed that the crisis negatively and disproportionately affected women from vulnerable groups, including victims of domestic violence (Monir Divan & Grau Contreras, 2023, p. 4). This furthermore implies that the authorities failed women by not providing alternatives.

The UNDP study mentioned earlier also recorded a low level of satisfaction with how the central authorities handled the pandemic response and associated social measures. Specifically, less than half of the respondents (49%) expressed contentment with their management (Monir Divan & Grau Contreras, 2023, p. 5).

3.3. Discrimination and Hate Speech

Discrimination was recognised as a factor that has harmful effects on the well-being of young people by 66% of respondents. Survey results show that altogether more than half of the respondents reported witnessing, experiencing or both witnessing and experiencing instances of discrimination based on ethnicity (59%), religion (58%), social status (54%), and gender (51%).

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

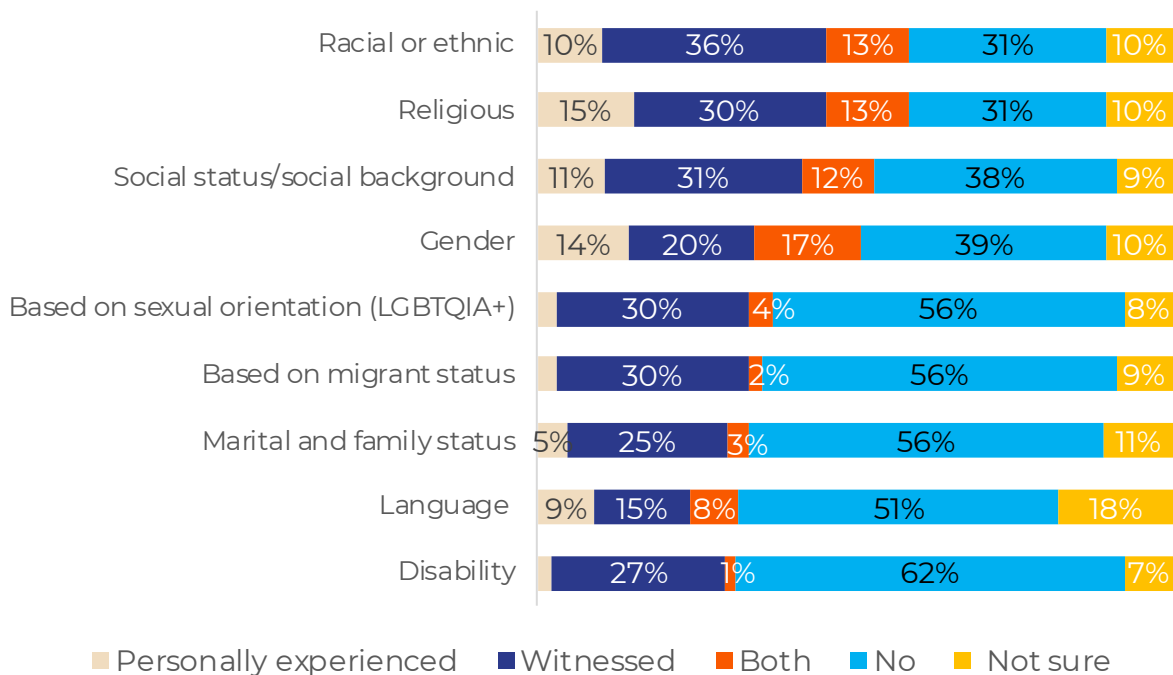


Figure 7. Experiences of discrimination ¹³

The data highlight the vulnerability of social identities among the youth in BiH and point to the need to promote respectful communication that embraces diversity.

During the local consultation, participants identified workplace gender discrimination as one of the most pervasive forms of discrimination that continue to persist although gender equality in this domain is regulated by the Law on Gender Equality in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Article 7 of the above-mentioned Law, in the section “Employment, labour and access to

¹³ 3% of participants indicated ‘personally experienced’ in relation to the category of sexual orientation (LGBTQIA+), and migrant status.
2% of participants indicated ‘personally experienced’ in relation to the category of disability.

all forms of resources” states that “men and women shall have equal employment opportunities” (Law on Gender Equality in BiH, 2010); Article 8 furthermore states that “prohibited gender discrimination in labour and employment includes different treatment due to pregnancy, childbirth or maternity leave, including failure to provide the same or equally paid employment of the same level, upon return from maternity leave, as well as different treatment of men and women in relation to leaving following childbirth”. The discussion sparked examples that confirmed cases of violation of the above-mentioned Article 8. In this regard, cases of employees asking female candidates during job interviews whether they plan to have children were indicated as a discriminatory practice many women are exposed to. Moreover, it was highlighted that employees’ further rejection is directly linked to the affirmative response to this question.

The issue of maternity leave furthermore raised important questions¹⁴ that revealed the fragility of the social protection system in BiH, stemming not only from insufficient investments on a state level, but also from the divided organisational structures separated across entity lines. The fragmentation results in ineffective coordination mechanisms and various inequalities based on the place of residence (Issues in Social Protection in BiH, 2022). Following this trajectory, it was suggested that the battle for gender equality in the domain of health care and social protection is at the same time a battle against ineffective institutional policies and mechanisms.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods revealed the intersectional nature of discriminatory practices in the workplace. The local consultation mainly exposed instances of gender-based violence, whilst the survey findings pointed to the multifaceted nature of discrimination marked by interconnectedness between social class, status, and unequal distribution of power within society. Youth dissatisfaction with corruption and discriminatory practices in the workplace is best captured in their perception of employment dynamics in BiH: 85% of survey respondents believe that it is easier for those from wealthy families to find jobs, whilst as many as 96% of respondents believe that it is easier for those from politically connected families to find jobs. More than half of the respondents (63%) indicated hate speech as one of the factors that hinder building social cohesion. The examples of hate speech mentioned during the group consultation fall within the category of sexist hate speech, acknowledged as a part of the continuum of violence against women. Sexist hate speech is defined as a form

¹⁴ During the group discussion the issue of unequal access to maternity leave was observed as a reflection of structural discrepancies between public and private sector. It was implied that women working in the public agencies have better access to social protection. The outlined difference shows that participants are well aware of the intersection between gender and other social categories such as social class, ethnicity etc., that converge in complex and nuanced identities shaped by different experiences.

of social shaming that aims to “humiliate and objectify women, to destroy their reputation and to make them vulnerable and fearful”. (Background note on sexist hate speech, 2016, p. 4). Participants’ experiences revealed that sexist hate speech can be triggered in situations involving women who refuse to conform to patriarchal norms, given that this act is perceived as a form of moral transgression. One such example is the widespread tradition of women taking their husband’s last name upon marriage. This tradition has its roots in historical patriarchal societies since in many cultures women were considered the property of their fathers until they were married, at which point they became the property of their husbands.

Regardless of its roots and social implications, this norm is still perpetuated without reflection on the underlying power relations. Consequently, the refusal to conform to the traditional gender hierarchy can lead to stigmatisation and social shaming, as witnessed by one of the participants in the local consultation:

“My mother told me that it was a big disgrace, that I was offending my husband [...]. Eventually, I managed to convince her that keeping my last name was perfectly normal. However, once I went to the city hall to set the wedding date, a man working there gave himself the right to tell me: ‘Shame on you, you are the only bride who didn’t take her husband’s last name’ He attacked me, a person who sees me for the first time in his life”.

Participant, local consultation

3.4. Proliferation of polarising identity speeches

During the in-depth interviews, it was emphasised that political elites in BiH fuel ethnic divisions by creating the discourse of “internal enemy” to divert attention from social and economic problems and present themselves as protectors of the nation. Although the concept of ‘nation protector’ was associated with toxic masculinity and populism, it was also highlighted that female politicians sometimes reproduce anti-gender and nationalistic narratives to achieve the party’s political goals.

The lack of female politicians’ advocacy for women’s rights was primarily associated with their marginal position in political parties’ decision-making bodies. It was also pointed out that aside from gendered power dynamics in politics, some female politicians may have internalised societal norms and biases against women, leading them to downplay or deny the significance of women’s rights issues.

On the other hand, a young female politician who took part in the in-depth interview shared her experience about stepping out publicly to support the International Criminal Court's verdict for war crimes and crimes against humanity in a case against a close family member who was convicted of war crimes. This example suggests that a more substantial engagement of young women in the political arena could foster social cohesion by shifting focus from nationalistic aspirations to core values of justice, peace and equality.

Another important issue that emerged was the concern with unreliable and biased media reporting characterised by a lack of diversity and pluralism. It was also highlighted that media discourse reproduces and encourages a stereotypical and sexist image of female politicians, for example by focusing on their physical appearance rather than on their work.

Political discourse in youth's opinion characterised by both nationalistic and anti-gender narratives. The main reasons for the existence of political groups opposing gender equality are summarised in the figure below:

***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***

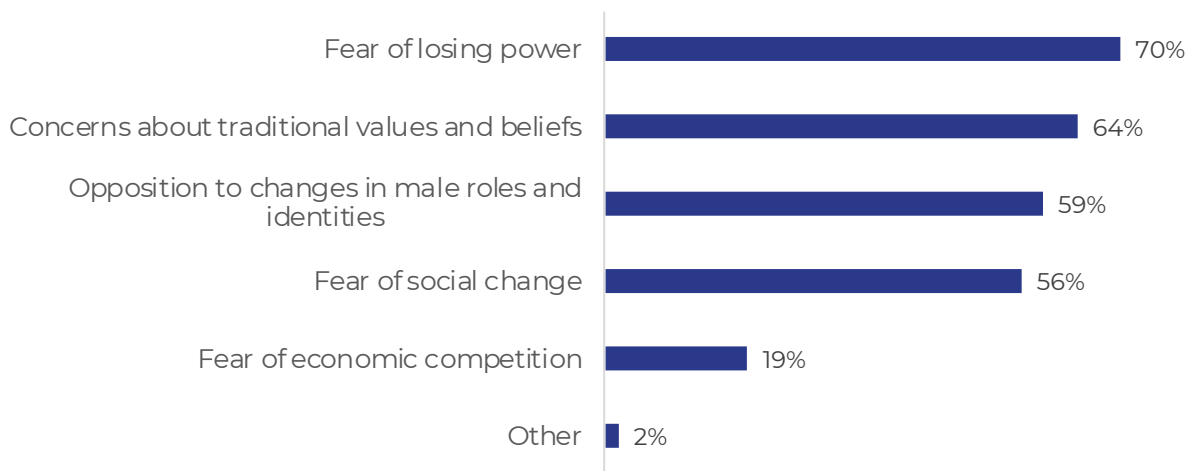


Figure 8. Youth perceptions of the main reasons for the existence of political and other groups opposed to gender equality

Fear of losing power, concerns about traditional values, and opposition to changes in male roles and identity are interlinked factors: the political discourse in BiH often instrumentalises concerns about the preservation of traditional roles and beliefs for the purposes of maintaining the *status quo* and the unequal distribution of power (Puljek-Shank & Fritsch, 2019; Mlinarević & Kosović, 2011; Spahić Šiljak, 2010).

4. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

Survey data reveal a high level of youth dissatisfaction with public institutions, especially with politicians. There is also a high level of skepticism regarding religious institutions: even though the majority of survey participants identified as religious, only 29% ranked their level of trust in religious institutions above 3. In one of the in-depth interviews, a male participant indicated that religious leaders often play an important role in the dissemination and legitimisation of divisive ethno-nationalistic narratives, which may be one of the reasons for youth mistrust in religious institutions. The shared perspective aligns with findings from previous research, according to which official representatives of religious institutions in BiH often depict their own group as the main victims of conflict, and neglect to question the culpability of responsible parties from their group, which has been detrimental to peace and reconciliation in the region (Oddie, 2012, p. 41). The data showing the level of trust in public institutions are highlighted in the graph below:

Please answer the following questions by indicating your opinion on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much”?

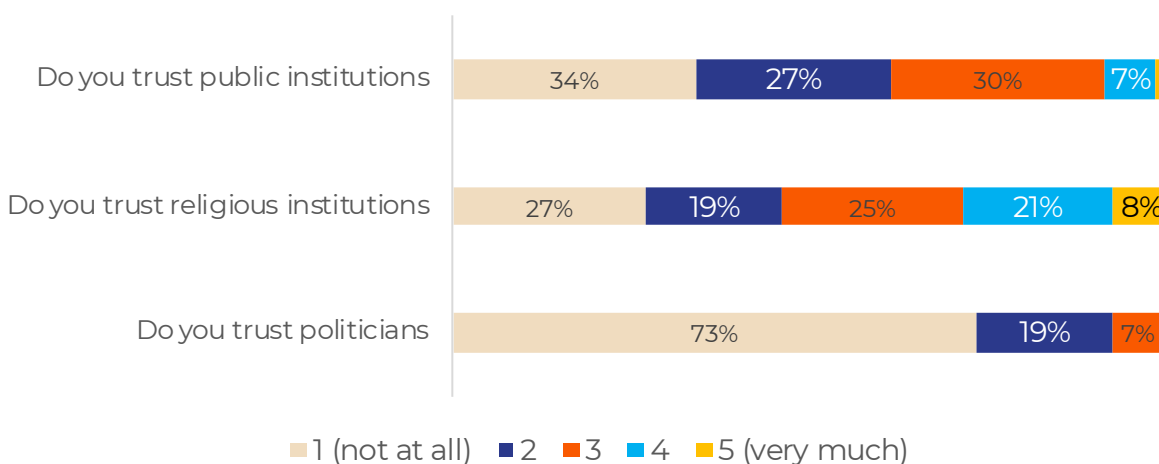


Figure 9. Level of trust in public institutions¹⁵

The findings are a call for institutions and political structures to start creating and implementing mechanisms aimed at improving both vertical and horizontal social cohesion, especially in light of the ongoing migration flows that involve mainly young educated people leaving the country due to high unemployment rates, institutional insufficiencies and political

¹⁵ 2% of participants selected 5- 'very much'- in relation to their degree of trust in religious institutions. 1% of participants selected 4 in relation to their degree of trust in politicians.

tensions (IOM UN Migration BiH, n.d.). The survey contained questions exploring youths' perceptions of actions contributing to the achievement of a higher degree of gender equality and social cohesion. The figures listed below highlight the obtained data:

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 10. Youth perceptions of factors contributing to gender equality

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

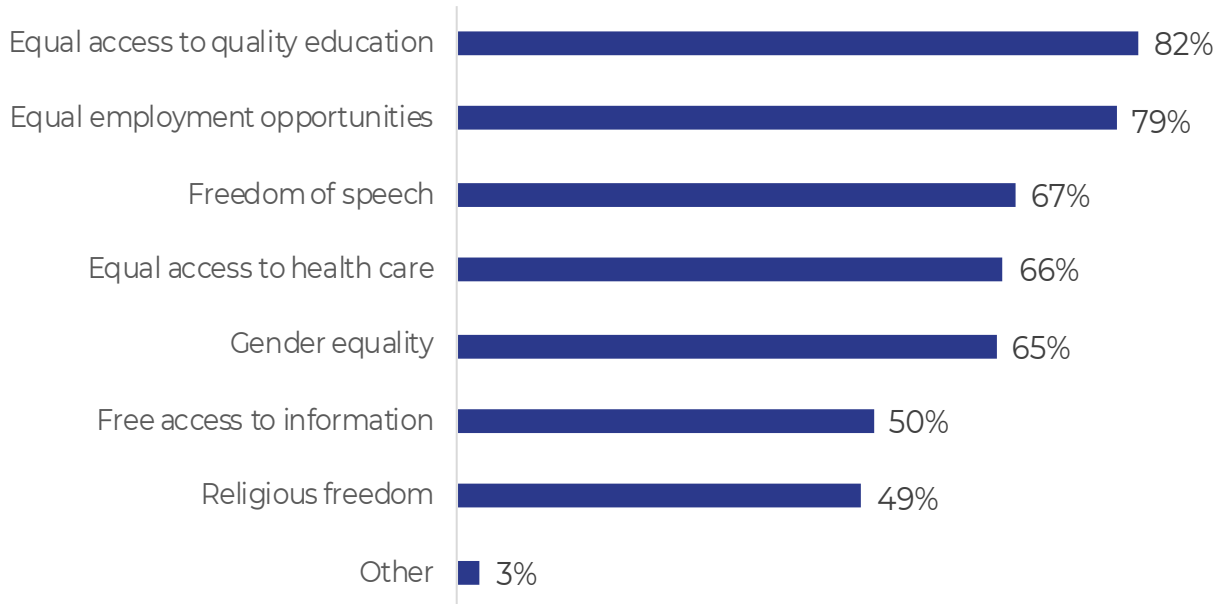


Figure 11. Youth perceptions of factors contributing to social cohesion

Factors contributing to gender equality and social cohesion are interconnected, especially the increased awareness of gender equality, gender discrimination and toxic masculinity, and equal access to quality education, given that societies that prioritise gender equality are more likely to advocate for policy changes that ensure equitable educational opportunities (Relevance of gender in the policy area, 2017).

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

Technology can be a vehicle for empowerment and social change; however, in BiH its use often reinforces the perpetuation of sexism, gender stereotypes, and divisive ethno-nationalistic narratives (Sokol & Čalović, 2022, p. 5). For youth and young adults in BiH social networks and web portals are the main source of information (Sokol & Alibegović, 2021, pp. 9-10). Consequently, it is important for the digital space to include youth-led initiatives that provide an alternative to oppressive narratives that incite stereotyping, hatred, and discrimination. The group of local consultation participants focused mainly on the negative sides of social media content, but also emphasised several positive examples of digital activism in the domain of gender equality that will be highlighted in the following sections.

The increasing use of social platforms has made sexist hate speech expand even more rapidly (Background note on sexist hate-speech, 2016, pp. 4-5). UN Human Rights Council calls attention to the fact that the Internet has become a site of diverse forms of violence against women, often expressed through threats and insults of a sexual character (*ibidem*). According to 41% of survey participants, online and social media are a space where it is common to find gender inequalities.¹⁶ During the local consultation, it was further elaborated that female journalists and politicians are particularly exposed to online hate speech due to their visibility as public figures. It was highlighted that sexist hate speech sometimes appears in the form of organised systematic cyberbullying¹⁷ aimed to intimidate, dehumanise, and humiliate women targeted as political or ideological opponents.

Important questions were raised regarding the role played by social media in intensifying sexist stereotypes against women involved in humanitarian work with migrants:

"I was a victim of cyber-bullying after a video showing a Bairam party we organised for migrants at the Reception centre was downloaded from our TikTok and shared on a FB group 'Stop the migrant invasion'. Afterwards, group members located us and started sharing hateful comments

¹⁶ As many as 35% of participants expressed neutral attitude and 24% did not find online media to be a space of gender inequalities.

¹⁷ One female participant shared her knowledge about the case of organised bullying of a female journalist that included insults and curses directed to her unborn child. Social media in this case served as a tool that facilitated the intragroup development of strategies for intimidation and humiliation.

containing death threats, wishes for us to be raped, and comments such as 'Our Bosnian girls are going after the stinky-ones'. We had around 700 hate comments and did not feel safe walking the streets of our own city [...] And for the record, we had male colleagues working with us too, but they never faced negative comments, just us women, as we were assumed to be there not to help or because it was our job, but simply to have intercourse".

Participant, local consultation

The fact that female activists are recurring targets of sexist hate-speech expressed by anti-immigrant groups reveals the gendered nature of anti-immigrant movements. The above-mentioned experience shows that sexism and xenophobia are underlying elements of the 'treason narrative' within which women are reduced to 'good' and 'bad' objects – in contrast to those behaving in line with the traditional expectations, women who cross the ethnically marked boundaries of intergroup contact are subject to othering and exclusion. Moreover, the shared experience confirms that sexist cyberbullying often involves discursive strategies containing sexist language and justification of rape, promoted as a possible corrective measure on 'indocile bodies' (see Vochocová, 2020).

Digital activism in BiH and across the region reached its culmination with the #metoo movement (BiH: *#nisam tražila*) that provided an avenue for women and girls to join forces, share their experiences, and raise voices against violence.

The movement fully exploited the potential of social media, transforming it into a platform for exposing the sexist foundations of society and a battleground in the fight for social justice and a violence-free society. It was highlighted that the movement was a success in terms of encouraging women to speak up about issues generally considered taboo in the region, however, it was also pointed out that solidarity and empathy were reached for the most part in close circles, between women who shared similar experiences, whereas the solidarity from the wider community resulted to be very limited.

During the local consultation, influencer culture was recognised as another powerful tool for female empowerment, especially in terms of initiatives that criticise the oppressive beauty standards and stereotypical portrayals of femininity and masculinity, that were identified as a dominant social media narrative. It was also highlighted that Covid-19 had a beneficial impact on female digital activism given that the condition of isolation inspired some women to reach out to a wider community via female-led podcasts and blogs that tackle different aspects of the female experience.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUTH

Changes in mindset are seen as crucial for further structural changes in society. Among concrete suggestions on how to foster positive social change, the participants recommended:

- **Promote the culture of peace** through formal and informal education;
- **Organise workshops and discussions** focused on gender equality and peacebuilding;
- **Involve more men as gender equality advocates** by directing education initiatives to the engagement of boys and young men on gender equality. These may include seminars, workshops and guided discussions about the impact of gender disparities on society, with an emphasis of the improvement that gender equality brings to opportunities and treatment for both women and men;
- **Promote gender-responsive education policies** aimed at designing programmes and teaching methods for a critical rethinking of gender hierarchies and the power relations that shape them;
- **Enact school curricula reforms**, resulting in new interdisciplinary courses on social media and media literacy that would foster a more informed and responsible use of digital platforms and equip young people to critically analyse and navigate media messages;
- **Harness the potential of social media** to promote a healthier online environment and strengthen social bonds:
 - o **Combat unrealistic beauty standards**, often perpetuated by social media, by e.g. implementing a Photoshop disclaimer policy to raise awareness and help young women to feel less pressured about their body image;
 - o **Create blogs/podcasts committed to female empowerment** and the deconstruction of oppressive societal norms, including by sharing experiences of gender-based violence and sexism;
 - o **Create social media content** that challenge and deconstruct toxic masculinity and its harmful effects on women and men (e. g. by sharing personal stories of men embracing diverse expressions of masculinity, marked by empathy and compassion);
 - o **Encourage digital citizenship among youth**, which includes promoting ethical online behaviour and respectful engagement.

- **Empower youth to foster positive changes** in their communities through:
 - o **Initiatives aimed at skills development**, entrepreneurship training, and mentorship programmes;
 - o **Projects in collaboration with institutions** (e. g. UN and UNICEF, public agencies and NGOs') to leverage youth's talents to influence decision-making and shape policies;
 - o **Leadership programmes** aimed at encouraging young women to work on projects that address social and political issues and become more actively involved in the political arena.

CONCLUSION

The distrust in public institutions and the political elite expressed by youth shows a very low degree of vertical social cohesion. In addition to this, the fact that corruption was prioritised as a primary factor hindering social cohesion reveals a perceived lack of democratic principles and calls for institutional reforms aimed at establishing a culture of respect for the rule of law and human rights. This is especially important in terms of the massive migration flows of BiH youth, caused mainly by the lack of employment opportunities, corruption and political instability. With regard to the political instability, it was pointed out that political elites in BiH fuel ethnic divisions by creating the discourse of “internal enemy” to divert attention from social and economic problems and present themselves as guardians of the nation. Given that the instrumentalisation of nationalism can be linked to toxic masculinity and the under-representation of women in politics and decision-making positions (Spahić-Šiljak, 2010; Mlinarević & Kosović, 2011), a more substantial engagement of young women in the political arena could foster social cohesion by shifting focus from nationalistic aspirations to core values of justice, peace, and equality.

The example of a young BiH female politician actively involved in peace-building and dismantling nationalistic ideologies that emerged from the study supports this idea. Factors hindering the achievement of a more meaningful form of gender equality are associated with the patriarchal system of values, which is uncritically presented to young people as the ‘natural order of things’ through various instances of formal and informal education. The uncritical reproduction of patriarchal values not only reinforces harmful stereotypes about masculinity and femininity but may influence legal and societal responses to gender-based violence. Given that education is recognised as a main tool for emancipation (Fairclough, 1989), a curricular reform aimed at reinforcing critical thinking is one of the prerequisites for empowering youth to build a fairer and stronger society. This idea aligns with conclusions and recommendations developed in a regional study about gender dimensions in higher education (Spahić-Šiljak et al., 2021).

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