

VOICES OF YOUTH

Gender Equality
and Social Cohesion
in the Western Balkans



YOUTH

Inclusion, Equality & Trust

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Youth 4 Inclusion, Equ



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations initiative ‘Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality and Trust’ aims at empowering young people to engage in constructive narratives, strengthen intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and gender equality, and create mutual understanding and trust in the region. The regional research, implemented by UN Women and co-designed, conducted and developed by five young researchers from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo², North Macedonia, and Serbia, aims at exploring the linkages between youth development, gender equality, and social cohesion challenges in the region³. As the first fully youth-designed and youth-led research in the region, it gave the researchers ownership over the study and opened the space for their input based on their experiences in the field.

The 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 two regional online consultations, one in-person regional consultation, one online survey, five local consultations and 15 individual in-depth interviews.

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

¹ This research project has been funded by the UN Peace Building Fund and implemented by UNDP, UN-FPA, UNESCO, UN Women, and relevant ministries, municipal and youth councils, youth political parties, media, academic and cultural institutions, and civil society organisations.

² All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999)

³ The differences noted between men and women were not considered relevant to the objective of the Regional Paper, which was to give an inclusive representation of young people’s perceptions of the issues under study.

- Social cohesion and gender equality are associated with core values of broader discourse regarding human rights, democracy, social justice, and solidarity.
- Youth participants do not perceive very high levels of social cohesion or gender equality in their communities.
- Negative legacies of the past are identified by youth participants as by far one of the main factors impeding gender equality specifically, and social cohesion more broadly. In particular, such negative legacies take the forms of isolation, fear, intergenerational distrust, as well as hegemonic militarised masculinities connected to the remnants of 'us vs them' mentalities. Furthermore, they are reflected in cultural and patriarchal norms that contribute to societal resistance to improvement and emancipation. The consequence is limited opportunities and stifled progress towards gender equality.
- Analysis of intergroup relations shows some encouraging results, with high reported rates of friendships between different ethnic and/or religious groups. However, the results also indicate increased social distance as the intimacy of the relationships in question increases.
- Along with equal access to education and labour opportunities, gender equality is recognised as an important factor in building stronger and fairer societies. However, the study also revealed some scepticism with regard to gender equality initiatives, as they are in some cases viewed as counterproductive, in the sense that they contribute to further polarisation.
- Positive legal norms formally guarantee equality, but participants recognised a lack of mechanisms in place to truly implement existing legislation meant to ensure gender equality.
- Discrimination and hate speech are fairly frequent occurrences, either directly experienced, witnessed, or both experienced and witnessed by many respondents in the quantitative study. Race and/or ethnicity, social status, gender, and sexuality were the most common bases for hate speech and/or discrimination encountered by respondents. The quantitative analysis showed that women and minority groups were much more likely to encounter discrimination and hate speech in all the aforementioned categories.
- Participants showed awareness of gender-based violence as an issue in their communities that negatively affects social cohesion and youth well-being. The youth emphasised the role of militarised and toxic masculinity in perpetuating the continuation of gender-based violence, the normalisation of certain behaviours and the lack of awareness of what constitutes gender-based violence. The role of media and social media in perpetuating narratives that

normalise and minimise the problem of domestic violence and its devastating consequences was also highlighted.

- Existing systems of support for victims are insufficient, as are institutional responses, leading to a sense of futility when it comes to reporting cases of gender-based violence. Also notable is the stigma and shame attached to speaking out about gender-based violence highlighted by the participants, who themselves were mostly reluctant to share their own specific experiences of gender-based violence.
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on gender-based violence was primarily seen as a mediating factor: the youth perception was that the ensuing exacerbation of issues such as isolation, the spread of disinformation, mental health issues, breakdowns in the functioning of relevant institutional support systems lead to the negative effects of Covid-19 on social cohesion in general, and the corresponding rise in gender-based violence specifically.
- The young participants showed a keen awareness of the rigid patriarchal gender norms deeply rooted in the fabric of society, as well as the limits and obstacles these put on their own generation. Older generations are viewed as keepers and transmitters of these norms, which youth identify as part of family upbringing and primary socialisation.
- Education plays an important part in the continuation and reinforcement of rigid gender norms, as well as a system where gender-based violence may become normalised. This is due to, for example, educators perpetuating traditional gender norms for the behaviour of students, as well as gender-stereotyped future education/career choices, lack of curriculum that would address things such as gender equality, sexual education, and consent; in addition, schools can be places for earliest occurrences of behaviours (such as male students inappropriately touching female students), but there are no systems in place to address such issues.
- There is a lack of appropriate sex education, as well as education of children and youth on topics such as gender and mental health, which contributes to the accumulation of negative effects of rigid patriarchal norms and the normalisation of harmful behaviours.
- Youth also showed awareness of the proliferation of polarising identity speeches in media and social media. Many highlighted that the movements - both local and international - that promoted messages containing ethno-nationalist/populist rhetoric or discrimination against minorities, also carried with them the promotion of gender inequality and discrimination against women and LGBTQIA+ individuals.

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



The insights gained from the research provided valuable information on how youth from across the region would like to see gender equality and social cohesion challenges tackled. Be it through the implementation of public policies, youth campaigns and action plans, civil society actions, or individual youth activist initiatives through the use of digital tools, young participants have enthusiastically made their voices heard.

A more inclusive and equitable society can only be forged through a deeper exploration of the influence of past narratives on contemporary issues, enabling youth to learn from history's lessons and construct a future grounded in fairness and solidarity. Although fully aware of the challenges they face, young people demonstrated great enthusiasm for tackling them and a strong will to be drivers of change in their communities.



INTRODUCTION

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

Participant local consultation, Serbia

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

In light of this, the United Nations initiative ‘Youth 4 Inclusion, Equality and Trust.’ aims at empowering young people to engage in constructive narratives, strengthen intercultural dialogue, inclusion, and gender equality, and create mutual understanding and trust in the region. The regional research, implemented by UN Women and co-designed, conducted and developed by young people from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia, aims at exploring the linkages between youth development, gender equality, and social cohesion challenges in the region. This is unique and the first fully youth-designed and youth-led research in this region.

Heading the study were five young researchers, each responsible for the pertinent country and territory. These are respectively: Liri Kuçi (Albania); Hana Bacaj (Kosovo); Dr Nataša Vučenović (Bosnia and Herzegovina); Sara Milenkovska (North Macedonia); and Dr Rodoljub Jovanović (Serbia), who each authored a dedicated annex, detailing each phase of the study, their observations and conclusions. Their work was conducted under the supervision of the Lead Researcher, Professor Zilka Spahić Šiljak and with the support of a Senior Researcher, Dr Mary Drosopoulos.

Social cohesion debates have a specific development and understanding in each socio-cultural and political context. Although social cohesion can exist in patriarchal societies with hierarchical gender role dynamics, the United Nations and European Union developed inclusive approaches with emphasis on equality, equal opportunities, diversity and welfare for all inhabitants (Astealarra, 2007). They recognised that social, political and economic rights cannot be fully exercised if women and men as well as vulnerable groups of inhabitants do not have the same rights and opportunities. Gender equality thus became one of the crucial components of social cohesion discussion and policies.

Globalisation and postmodern development brought gender equality at the centre of institutional attention, as a cross-cutting goal to be considered in the planning, design, implementation and measurement of public policies, strategies and economic development; however, in many parts of the world, fragmentation, ethnic divisions as well as political and economic polarisation increased.

Some authors (Lopez, 2007; Blagojević, 2002) discuss the “gender paradox of social cohesion”, referring to the social phenomenon characterised by the fact that women who invest so much in care and building relationships and trust in family and society are at the same time excluded and do not have equal opportunities as men. Those who are engaged the most in unpaid work that is beneficial to the foundation of social cohesion do not enjoy all the social welfare benefits.

In the region, social cohesion has been mostly explored in regard to social and political rights and social distance (Majstorović & Turjačanin, 2013; Radovanovic & Stojanovic Gajic, 2013; Avirovic-Bundalevska, 2019;) whilst gender equality studies (Danaj et.al., 2019, Demukaj et.al., 2019; Kuci 2021; Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021, Spahić Šiljak et al., 2022) have focused on the factors that hinder it. However, the intersection of gender equality and social cohesion was rarely examined, therefore this study represents the first youth-led initiative that measures their interconnectedness.

In the research design phase, five young researchers from the countries and territory covered by the project were involved in the development of the methodology, as well as the design of the questions for the data collection tools (survey, in-depth interview questions and group consultation questions).

Whilst giving the young researchers ownership over the research, this opened the space for their input based on their experiences in the field.

The innovative element of this study relies specifically on its fully participatory nature. It adopts a practical-oriented approach by combining academic knowledge with the experiential knowledge and perspectives of the participants. The researchers themselves are young people from the region who are therefore both carrying out the research and participating in the study, providing their first-hand perspectives on the key research questions. Researchers have critically reflected on their own biases and assumptions to recognise the potential impact of their positionality on the research process and outcomes.



METHODOLOGY

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1. METHODOLOGY

The regional youth-led research, whilst contributing to academic discussions on social cohesion and gender equality, aims at supporting with its results the construction of fact-based narratives and informing policy and advocacy efforts in the Western Balkans.

This chapter presents the research goal, main themes, definitions, methods, sample, ethical questions, and limitations of the research.

The innovative part and additional value of this study is the participatory research approach with a mixed research method,

combining desk research, quantitative, and qualitative data collection.

The mixed research method (Berg, 2009, Creswell 2009) is demanding and complex with its philosophical and theoretical background, data collection and analysis and it includes the triangulation of the data and cross-verification, which helps refine the entire research process and validation of the results.

This method also enables researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the main findings and their application in practice.

Goals, target and methodology of the research



Image 1. Research goals and methodology

1.1 Participatory approach

Participatory research entails cooperation in designing and conducting research between researchers and members of the target population affected by the investigated issues, as well as targeted by, or involved in the realisation of potential action plans designed on the basis of conclusions drawn from said research. The emphasis is on a “bottom-up” approach, that takes into account local perspectives, priorities, and needs (Jagosh et al., 2012; Vaughn et.al., 2020).

Participatory research can take shape through a variety of methodological approaches - the focus is on designing a framework appropriate to the aims and context of an investigation that is flexible, and develops key issues and approaches through a process of co-construction with the participants. This methodological approach includes empowerment, collaboration, reflexivity and transformation (Pringle et.al., 2017) that resonates with the feminist research method focused on a collaborative approach aimed at tackling the status quo and bringing changes for women and those who are underprivileged (Westmarland and Bows, 2019; Van Ingen, 2020; Husanović, 2022). One of the key features of participatory approaches to research is extending knowledge production from the centre to the margin. Those excluded from the privileged centre of knowledge production are given space to identify the issues that affect them and to get a say in how research work can be actionable and transformative.

This study is characterised by the dual role of the researchers: they are both participants, as representatives of the target groups, living in and involved with local communities, affected by the issues under investigation, and those writing and conducting the research piece. In this sense, the young researchers serve as a bridge between academic and lived experience. Another benefit of this dual role in study implementation is their ability to effectively communicate with other participants in consultations and group discussions, ensure engagement and openness, as well as interpret and interact with what has been expressed through a nuanced lens aware of contextual specificities. This allows for discussion where participants can feel comfortable expressing themselves within their own “contextual framework,” thus further bridging the gap between scholarship and lived experience. Indeed, the young researchers have reflected that their ability to understand participants’ context, and the specifics of how they communicate, such as the use of language or inside jokes, helped them understand and guide the discussion. Furthermore, it was widely observed that the young people involved in the discussion were overall proactive and motivated, demonstrated they were well-informed and reflected critically on the issues at hand, which points to the importance of creating comfortable and approachable spaces for young people to share their opinions, knowledge and experiences. Besides the dual role of the researchers, the participatory nature of the research is also reflected in the design and implementation process, as explained in section 1.2.2. below.

1.2 Research goal, main themes and questions

The research aims at addressing exclusively young⁵ people's perspective on gender equality and social cohesion challenges in the region. It seeks to empower youth across the region by valuing and incorporating their perspectives, knowledge, and experiences, to generate actionable and sustainable recommendations capable of inspiring concrete measures to meaningfully tackle identified challenges to gender equality and social cohesion and foster positive social change in the region.

Participants in the study were given pertinent definitions whenever necessary during the local consultations in order to facilitate an understanding of the scope and focus of the discussion. Below are the English-language definitions of key research concepts that were used as reference points. In line with early methodological considerations, some concepts may have been explained orally in a simplified manner to facilitate participants' understanding.

Social Cohesion: the extent of trust in institutions and within society – that is (1) the degree of trust in the ability of institutions to ensure equal access to justice for all and effective, accountable and inclusive institutional processes at all levels and (2) the sense of trust among the population across different identities and the willingness to participate collectively toward a shared vision of sustainable peace and common development goals.⁶

Gender Equality: equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities of women and men and girls and boys. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but that women's and men's rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men are taken into consideration, recognising the diversity of different groups of women and men.⁷

⁵ UN definition: "YOUTH is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence. That's why, as a category, youth is more fluid than other fixed age-groups."
Source: <https://www.un.org/esa/socdev/documents/youth/fact-sheets/youth-definition.pdf>

⁶ OECD (2012), "Social Cohesion Indicators", in *Society at a Glance: Asia/Pacific 2011*, OECD Publishing. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264106154-11-en>.

⁷ UN Women, Office of the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and Advancement of Women (OSAGI), *Concepts and Definitions*, available at <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm>

Peacebuilding: a complex, long-term process of creating the necessary conditions for sustainable peace. This involves a range of measures targeted to reduce the risk of lapsing or relapsing into conflict by strengthening local capacities at all levels for conflict management, and transform conflict towards more sustainable, peaceful relationships, including carefully prioritised, sequenced, and therefore relatively narrow set of activities to prevent the outbreak, continuation, escalation and recurrence of conflict, and to promote the sustainability of life and the rebuilding of local communities.⁸

Toxic Masculinity: traditional societal expectations of masculinity that can be harmful to men, women, and society as a whole. These expectations may include behaviours like emotional repression, aggression, and dominance, as well as a disregard for emotional and physical well-being. Toxic masculinity can also manifest as a culture of sexism, homophobia, and violence against women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and marginalised groups. It is important to note that toxic masculinity does not refer to all men or masculinity as a whole, but rather to harmful cultural norms and behaviours associated with traditional masculinity.⁹

Militarised Masculinity: the cultural and behavioural pattern in which the representation of appropriate behaviour for the male gender is associated with “military” models of behaviour.¹⁰

Misogyny: the hatred, dislike, or prejudice against women or girls. It is a term that describes a range of negative attitudes and behaviours towards women, such as sexism, discrimination, objectification, and violence. Misogyny can manifest in different ways, including verbal abuse, physical violence, sexual harassment, and gender-based discrimination.¹¹

⁸ See Peacebuilding Support Office, “UN Peacebuilding: An Orientation”, 2010, p.5., available at: https://www.un.org/peacebuilding/sites/www.un.org.peacebuilding/files/documents/peacebuilding_orientation.pdf

⁹ See the Man Box Study. 2017. <https://www.equimundo.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/TheMan-Box-Full-EN-Final-29.03.2017-POSTPRINT.v3-web.pdf>

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

1.2.1 Literature Review and Theoretical Approaches

The first phase of the research consisted of an in-depth literature review conducted through desk research that led to the identification of key primary and secondary sources to support the design of the research questions, as well as data analysis. The literature review aimed at exploring what has already been done in the region on social cohesion, gender equality, youth and peacebuilding, but also at providing a philosophical rationale for the mixed method research. It encompassed both the revision of relevant background material in existing pertinent research as well as original fact-finding research regarding the gender equality dimensions of social cohesion challenges in the region. In particular, the activity included a comprehensive qualitative examination of available literature and of primary and secondary sources of information based on the identification and analysis of information that is publicly available (data analysis on open data, websites, online material, etc.), from which the team extracted relevant knowledge to support the development of this paper. The literature review was also the basis upon which the research topics were first identified and guided the kick-off regional consultation collecting stakeholders' feedback subsequently incorporated into the key research issues, as detailed in the section 1.2.2 below.

The research team collected academic articles, research, international organisations' reports (e.g., OSCE, UNDP, UN Women, UNFPA), local civil society organisations' reports in each of the countries and territory, as well as institutional policies on the role of youth.

The existing literature in the region portrays youth both as relevant agents of peace and social cohesion (Radoman, 2020; Avirovic-Bundalevska, 2019; Kelmendi, 2023) and as marginalised voices who are also "polluted" with ethno-nationalism, toxic masculinity and intolerance. One of the reasons is that the majority of youth in the region have been socialised in ethnically divided communities, and they do not find different ethnic and religious identities as a valuable multicultural legacy, but as mutually exclusive categories in a constant struggle of overpowering each other (Majstorović and Turjačanin, 2013; Mulalić & Karić, 2017; Prato et al., 2018; Turjačanin et al., 2020).

As gender equality has already been designated as a critical component of social cohesion, the literature discloses that gender stereotypes, sexism and internalised misogyny still shape gender regimes in the five explored countries and territory (Demukaj et. al., 2019; Danaj, 2020; Drosopoulos, 2020; Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021; Spahić Šiljak et.al., 2022; Vučenović, 2022). It means that institutions should adopt gender-sensitive policies

and strategies to include more women and youth in peace processes as it has already been recognised in the region (UNDP, 2020; OSCE, 2020; Ćeriman and Spahić Šiljak, 2020; Kuci, 2023). Furthermore, the literature suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic deepened gender inequalities and increased gender-based violence, which is an additional challenge in fighting discriminatory practices against women and marginalised groups, particularly sexual minorities, persons with disability as well as ethnic minorities. (Kuci and Xhafa 2020; Radoman 2020).

Two theoretical approaches are relevant to this study. The first is the theory of change (Lederach, 2023), which is crucial for social cohesion and peacebuilding because it suggests a holistic approach to changing social connectedness. It includes building networks, strengthening institutions, the inclusion of all stakeholders, socially-led and contextualised initiatives and the interaction of levels of the social pyramid: the highest level of political, social and religious leadership, the mid-level (civil society organisations) and the interpersonal level. The second is the feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 1986; Harding, 2004) that rests on three key principles: a) knowledge production is always socially conditioned and situated; b) marginalised groups are more aware of marginalisation and discrimination than those who are privileged; c) power relation critique ought to start from the lives of the marginalised groups to be able to understand the causal effects of power structures. The feminist standpoint theory, thus, gives voice to those who are marginalised and relatively invisible.

In this study, youth is the target group, and they are not only marginalised from mainstream politics and decision-making, but are also under the strong influence of diverse political and religious actors that misuse the notion of patriotism to normalise artificial ethnic divisions, and toxic and hegemonic masculinity that lead to gender-based violence and discrimination.

Through the feminist standpoint theory and the theory of social change, this research explores the agency of youth in peacebuilding and social cohesion, their positionality as members of respective ethnic and other groups towards ethnic distance, gender equality, gender-based violence, toxic masculinity and patriarchy that affect both women and men.

1.2.2 The regional online consultation

To finalise the proposed methodology and research methods UN Women organised a kick-off online meeting with youth from the five countries and territory to gather their perceptions and views on the main themes identified during the literature review phase:

1. Negative legacies of the past;
2. Nationalistic and anti-gender narratives;
3. Social Acceptance and social distance;
4. Gender equality for social cohesion;
5. Covid-19 pandemic

In light of the views shared by the young participants at the regional online consultation, the key research issues were refined with a focus on the topics illustrated below.

The considerations collected were streamlined into pertinent research questions and sub-questions analysing whether gender equality is perceived by young people as crucial to social cohesion, and how the patriarchal mentality and pre-established gender norms have affected current inequalities.

The final key study questions address the following sub-themes:

- women's participation in peacebuilding;
- impact of negative legacies of the past on gender equality and social cohesion;
- gender-based violence (GBV) and the influence of a militarised masculinity model, including the impact of Covid-19 on the occurrence and/or severity of GBV occurrences/cases as well as on the spread of anti-gender narratives;
- discrimination and hate speech, both in physical and digital environments, including a focus on digital activism;
- recommendations from youth on how to address gender equality and social cohesion challenges in their countries and territory.



1.3 Research sample

The study considers the views of young people from 18 to 30 years old from the five countries and territory of the project region.

In some cases, young people below 18 years old spontaneously offered to participate in the project activities. Specifically, at the local consultations a few participants under 18 years old have asked to engage in the discussions. In these cases, parental or legal guardian consent was obtained.

Quantitative and qualitative approaches to the research

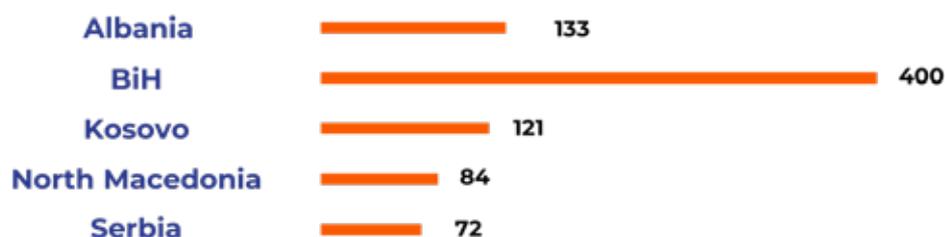
QUANTITATIVE



35 questions translated into local languages

Opened by **1232 young people**

810 respondents indicated where they live:



QUALITATIVE

Local Consultations



5 group consultations

134 young people (<30)

10 questions discussed under the guidance of the young researchers

In-depth Interviews



15 young people affiliated with authorities

3 interviews per country/territory

6 comprehensive questions addressing the key research issues

Image 2. Research sample in qualitative and quantitative research

1.3.1. Quantitative survey and data analysis

Distribution of Survey's respondents

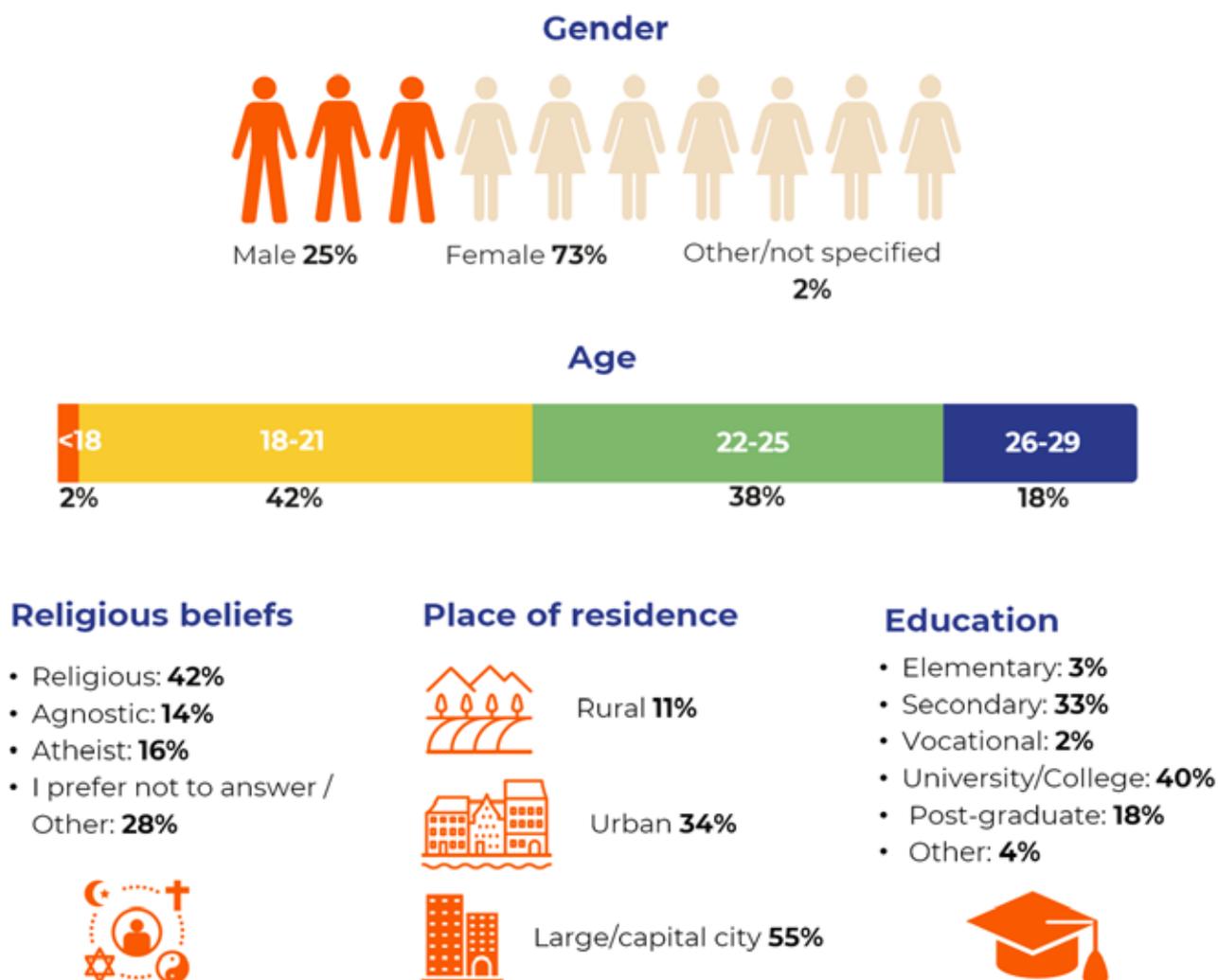


Image 3. Demographic overview of the survey's respondents

The quantitative survey was designed by the research team, with the aim of:

1. Providing a statistical dimension to the study opinions and perceptions, attitudes and experiences of the target towards the object of study;
2. Identifying differences of opinion, perception, attitudes and experiences among sub-targets of young people;
3. Understanding the causal links between opinions and behaviours, as well as between attitudes and experiences.

A final set of 35 questions was agreed with the research team. The aim during the selection of the questions was to encompass the key study issues and relevant measures whilst maintaining a balance with task difficulty and ensuring against respondent fatigue (Marsden & Wright, 2010). Furthermore, the goal was consistency and answers comparability based on a common reference in the data. However, whenever needed, references to specific contexts have been included to account for differences in countries and territory and specifics of certain contexts.

The format of the questionnaire followed the standard of Computer Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI). The questions were translated into all relevant local languages to ensure maximum accessibility to all target demographic groups. The questionnaire was computerised and administered via the digital data collection platform SurveyMonkey. The survey was launched in June 2023. A snowball sampling strategy was employed, with dissemination aided through contacts of the project support network, including the research team.

As the survey contains sensitive data related to gender, country or territory, education level, and age of the respondents, as well as sexual orientation, disabilities status, and religious observance (to facilitate the profiling of answers), particular attention has been dedicated to participants' data protection (see section 1.4. on Ethics).

Ultimately, the online survey was accessed by 1,232 people, of which 810 indicated their place of residence and submitted a valid filled-out survey. Of those 810 participants, 133 indicated residence in Albania, 400 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 84 in Kosovo, 72 in North Macedonia, and 12 in Serbia.

Since this was a self-selected sample, it is not possible to generalise the answers to the population of young people resident in the five countries and territory but it is possible to obtain evidence from a specific perspective of participation and interest in gender equality and social cohesion issues, as well as verify the deviations of perceptions and experiences compared to those detected among an effectively representative sample of young people.

A cross-analysis was conducted by considering disaggregated data according to the following demographic variables: gender, age, educational level, religion, area (i.e., urban, sub-urban, rural).

1.3.2. Qualitative research

Qualitative research included consultations organised with young people as well as interviews with young representatives of institutions whose work focuses on youth and social issues. The qualitative part of the research provided a significant amount of material for deeper analysis but also enabled triangulations and validation of the survey results.

After the desk research conducted by the young researchers to complete the review of pertinent literature on gender equality and social cohesion in the region, as well as the participatory identification of the key research issues at the first online regional consultation, the second phase of the project consisted in the organisation of five consultations that took place in Tirana, Sarajevo, Pristina, Skopje, and Belgrade.

The consultations were organised as a group discussion with a minimum of 20 participants, conducted in the local language and in an informal environment. Overall, there were some minor differences in methodology as the evolving needs of the project have been accounted for in the course of the activities. Specifically, as the project's kick-off in-person event, the consultation in Albania served as a valuable opportunity to test the research methodology and provide necessary adjustments as explained below.

The discussion in Tirana was conducted in two separate focus groups that addressed the key research issues over the course of two hours each. The division in focus groups was aimed at creating a safe space for participants where ideas could be shared freely. In line with this, the facilitator respected the natural flow of spontaneous discussions amongst participants, by introducing broad research topics pertinent to the study and leaving space for young people to decide the priority issues to engage on. As a limited discussion was however observed on hate speech, gender-based violence and militarised masculinity, a stricter approach was followed in the other consultations.

At the consultations in Sarajevo, Pristina, Skopje, and Belgrade, the discussions were conducted as a four-hour exchange with one bigger group of young people who engaged on a specific set of questions.

To ensure that the same research questions are consistently addressed with participants in all countries and territory a follow-up written questionnaire was distributed to the participants in Tirana. This questionnaire integrates the points that could not be addressed in the focus groups, thereby ensuring data comparability between the views collected in Albania and those later gathered in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia.

The young researchers participated in the consultation guidelines design with the aim of creating an engaging set of specific questions allowing the consultations to present a standardised format for data comparability purposes.

Participants were selected on the basis of a comprehensive stakeholders map compiled by the research team, including but not limited to educational institutions, university students as well as scholars and professors, representatives of civil society organisations and youth networks, journalists, activists, representatives of regional organisations, think tanks and other members of non-profit organisations deemed relevant to the themes of the research (such as feminist associations and women-led NGOs). The selection criteria paid due attention to geographical, gender and community representation, in consistency with the set target group age-wise. No political affiliation was sought in this phase, to prioritise the focus on young people's individual perspectives on the research topics.

Invitations were disseminated widely to reach not only youth active on these topics (e.g., members of civil society organisations working on gender equality) but also those who are not following a professional or academic path linked to the themes of the project and do not show specific interest in engaging on these topics. This allowed the team to gather different insights and witness stimulating conversations among participants with different backgrounds, interests as well as opinions and ideas on the themes proposed.

The selection of participants and their engagement have paid special attention to marginalised groups and people in a situation of vulnerability. The LGBTQIA+ community was represented in all five consultations. Whilst some participants affirmed their belonging to the community, others preferred to only state it in the survey. Persons with disabilities were also represented in all consultations. Ethnic minorities were engaged through the involvement of civil society organisations who have facilitated access to their contact base, and disseminated the invitation to the communities of reference; in particular, active participation from representatives from the Roma community was registered.

The groups were reported as very active throughout the whole discussion, generating a safe space for both sharing political and social perspectives, as well as personal stories. The level of participation registered was very high and the participants interacted with each other throughout the discussion. Participants were generally very open-minded, motivated, enthusiastic, and sincere.

On the other hand, a minority was observed as more hesitant to speak and had to be gently encouraged by the facilitator to share their opinions. In some cases, researchers intervened to moderate the discussion more actively, as participants would have strong disagreements among themselves. In some other rare instances, participants seemed to not have a clear or shared understanding of some concepts and definitions that were key to addressing the research issues. The researchers have therefore proceeded to re-introduce the concepts and definitions to ensure that everybody had the same understanding of their meaning.

The five consultations brought together 134 young individuals with diverse backgrounds. The group was overall balanced and representative of different age groups, gender identities, ethnic affiliations, context of residence, socio-economic background, religious faiths and identification with underrepresented groups or vulnerable communities.

Distribution of participants to the Consultations

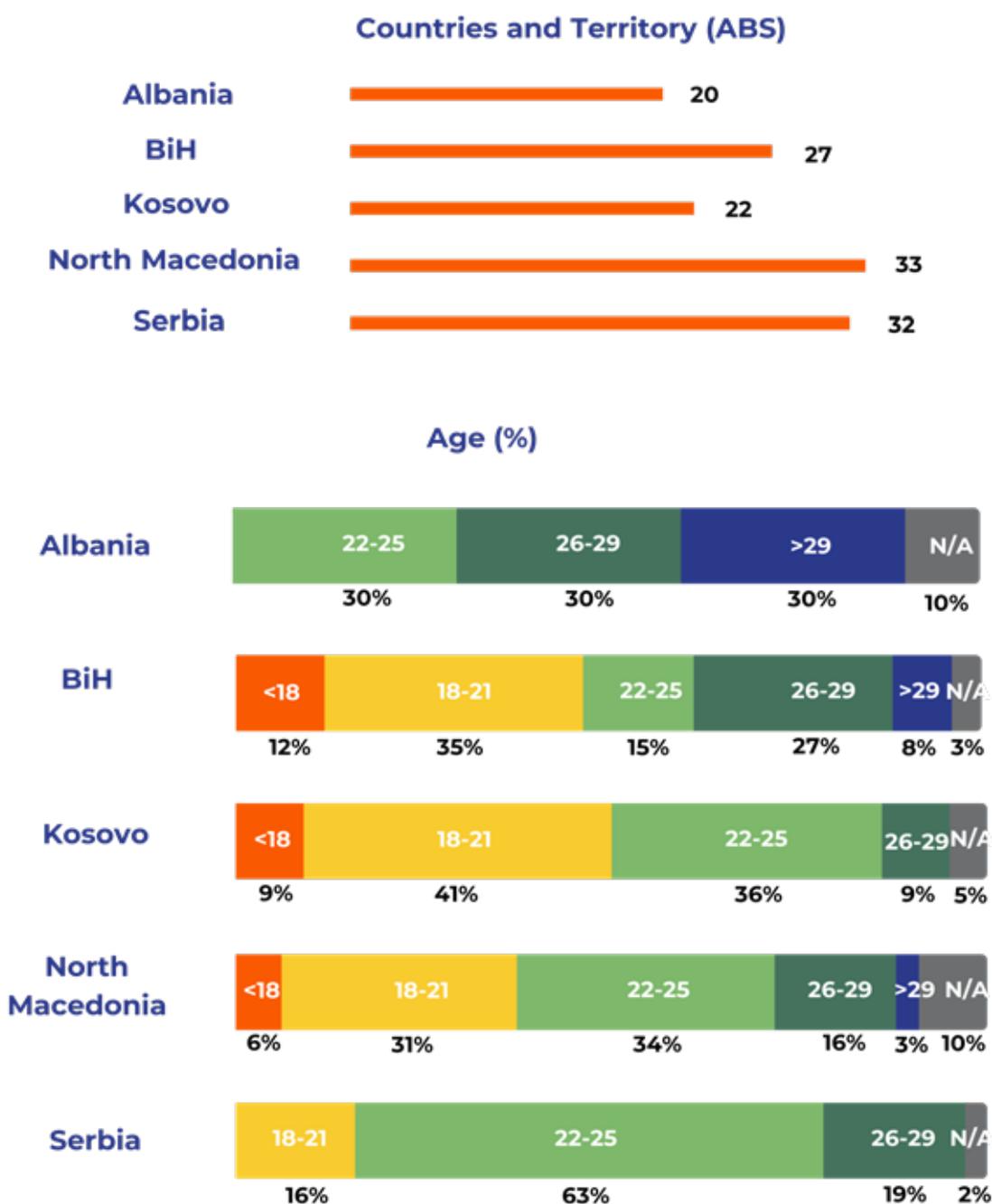


Image 4. Demographic overview of the participants to Consultations

A list of stakeholders was identified, and the selected young people were then engaged to in order to conduct a one-hour online individual interview with the young researcher in the respective local language. The persons identified are a geographically representative sample of young people below 30 years old, affiliated or closely working with local authorities. The views shared by these persons are intended to represent only the individuals' opinions on the key research issues. A peer-review process led by youth from each of the countries and territory helped young researchers to improve their respective reports and papers.

1.4. Ethics

The research is developed in line with the core ethical principle of “do no harm”. It strives to avoid causing harm to individuals contributing to the participatory study by ensuring informed consent/voluntary participation; the right to withdraw at any time; data protection; and confidentiality/anonymity.

Participants in the study have been provided with comprehensive information about how these principles are safeguarded.

The consent form, provided at the local consultations and in-depth interviews, was translated into local languages, and adequate time was provided for participants to read and consider their agreement with its terms. Participants who signed the consent forms agreed to participate in a short survey providing their demographic data for statistical purposes. Participants in the study’s survey were also asked to give explicit consent to data-sharing terms before filling in the questionnaire. Comprehensive information on the context of the research, the aim of the study and the use of the feedback collected from stakeholders was shared with participants to ensure that they fully understood the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study before giving their informed consent.

To ensure voluntary participation, the study recognises that participants should have full control over their involvement, and upholds the right to withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason. Participants’ autonomy was protected as the research team strived to make them feel comfortable and supported in exercising their right to withdraw. Their decisions with regard to information sharing were respected, and no coercive measures or undue influence were applied to discourage withdrawal. Participants were provided with clear and comprehensive information about their right to withdraw without penalty or negative consequences, and a clear and straightforward process for participants to exercise this right was indicated, with a specific focal point to notify by email in case of withdrawal.

The privacy and security of participants' data have been ensured in the research through the provision of secure and confidential data storage and analysis. Access to sensitive data is restricted to the research team and the management team only. The research team maintained a transparent approach to data management, clearly communicating data protection measures to participants, including anonymity and confidentiality, data retention and destruction practices.

The study respects participants' privacy and maintains the confidentiality of their personal information to avoid potential harm, such as unintended disclosure or stigmatisation. Participants are aware that the content of their input is anonymous and that their contribution is confidential. They have been encouraged to express their opinion freely in a safe space, duly informed that their answers will be used for analysis following the highest ethical standards. They were aware that the discussions and interviews had been recorded for note-taking purposes, and that the recordings would be deleted upon completion of the pertinent output. Participants were also informed that their input would be synthesised in the research paper and that the data considered relevant to the research would be used exclusively for statistical purposes and in an aggregated way.

1.5. Limitations

In general, participatory approaches require careful consideration of possible biases of the researchers. The young researchers involved in this project invested a lot of effort in considering their biases, as well as considering how to best approach discussions in order to facilitate a safe and open space for the exchange of perspectives and give equal space to all voices to be heard. Specific methodology limitations are addressed below.

The snowball sampling strategy used for the questionnaire carries the risk of obtaining non-representative or imbalanced samples. This can be seen in practice with regards to the deviations from target per-country and territory sample sizes, to the actual sample sizes obtained, as well as in the significantly higher rate of female respondents compared to male respondents. Whilst efforts were made to reach minority groups, the final samples may not be representative. Since the in-person consultations were held in large urban centres, this may have been an obstacle to the participation of those living outside these areas. Finally, as the samples for all activities were self-selective, they were also thus limited in terms of how representative they are of the overall target population.

Contextual Considerations. The complex and challenging historical and cultural contexts involved in the research scope, as well as the sensitive topics discussed, require a lot of care to navigate. Furthermore, it may be challenging to ensure that participants feel safe speaking up about certain issues or disclosing sensitive information. The time limitations possibly hindered facilitating a completely open discussion space, as well as giving all participants equal time to speak up, and allowing each topic to get sufficient attention.





GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION CHALLENGES IN THE REGION

2



2. GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION CHALLENGES IN THE REGION

The focus of this research is to explore the perceptions and attitudes of youth on gender equality and social cohesion and to identify the main challenges and obstacles in reaching sustainable peace in the region. Each country or territory (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia) has its own specific, political and cultural development and challenges, but the research results disclose many similarities and parallels that are found as key challenges for social cohesion.

The region is characterised by the effects of the social and political transition that followed the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the fall of the Enver Hoxha regime in Albania in the late 1980s. Ethnically based conflicts accompanied by political changes – marketisation and democratisation with neo-liberal capitalism that replaced the socialist welfare system changed the social fabric of these societies and brought many challenges.

The end of the 20th century was marked by mass human catastrophes, crimes against humanity, gender-based violence, economic and cultural destruction, poverty, antagonizing and competitive narratives about the past, broken relationships and trust. The gender dimension of this transition is reflected in increasing hegemonic and militant masculinity, re-patriarchisation and ethnicization of gender roles and gender regimes, the relegation of women to the private sphere of life and a significant decrease of women in public life and politics (Hughson-Blagojević, 2012; Spahić Šiljak, 2012; Berna, 2014; Dauti and Zhllima, 2016).

Hegemonic and militant masculinity. One of the challenges for youth specifically, is the legacy of militant masculinity that sustained through certain formal education, cultural manifestations, media, some religious narratives and divisive conflicts memorialisation. Sometimes children are exposed to the role models of war heroes and war criminals from an early age through education, religion and family as ways to strengthen their national, ethnic and religious identities (Soldo et al., 2017).

As Roberto Belloni concludes: “everything from greetings to soccer shirts is utilised to identify one’s ethnic belonging and religious persuasion” (2013, 284).

The social construction of gender roles assigns masculine and feminine features to men and women and depending on the cultural and political context these features vary. However, “masculinity is not just a social construct. It is also a political weapon” (Dolan, 2011, 135), which was very powerful and destructive during the conflicts in the region. The idealised masculine role model was very often portrayed as a man in uniform - soldier, pilot, police officer, etc. - as well as a tough boy in possession of muscles, money and power. Once war veterans, heroes or war criminals are added to this picture, masculinity remains stuck in the image of violent men who know how to conquer, defend, protect and make their nation proud. Thus, “a model of the idealised manhood is closely connected to guns, violence and power over women” (Božanić, 2016).

Gender-based violence (GBV). GBV is another challenge for all five researched countries and territory, and it is closely connected to hegemonic militant masculinity. The existing body of researches in the region reveals that diverse forms of gender-based violence govern the lives of many women and sexual minorities, but also men. A recent study in the region shows that gender-based violence is prevalent at universities and it “is a result of internalised sexism and acceptance of the gender stereotypes existent in socialisation processes and culture” (Spahić Šiljak et.al., 2022, p. 21.).

Other studies (Susmel, 2019; Popadić et al., 2019; OSCE Survey 2019; Reactor research 2020; Vučenović, 2022) also suggest that gender-based violence is prevalent at work, at home, in dating relationships and in schools, which makes women, youth, sexual and other minorities particularly vulnerable. Institutions in all the countries and territory *de jure* guarantee gender equality and protection from violence, but *de facto*, the legal system does not function and cultural norms of blaming and shaming the victims prevent many from reporting violence. Societies that tolerate gender-based violence and culturally justify hegemonic and toxic masculinity cannot reach substantive social cohesion.

Underrepresentation of women in politics and decision-making positions. Women’s political participation in the region was significantly reduced after the 1990s, and only 2 - 4% of women were represented in parliaments and decision-making positions (compared with 24% guaranteed after the Second World War). Such exclusion from public life required women to reclaim and regain their political rights (Spahić Šiljak, 2012). In the last two decades, legislation - gender equality laws - and Gender equality mechanisms have been established with their own strategies for the advancement of gender equality. However, women remain underrepresented in the executive and legislative power and they often serve as window-dressing or puppets for a certain political ideology or power. (Browne, 2017).

Corruption, hate speech, ethnic and racial discrimination. Another common denominator for the five researched countries and territory is widespread corruption, hate speech and ethnic and racial discrimination. The study confirmed that corruption prevents development and progress and that is one of the main causes of youth brain-drain from the region. In corruptive societies, it is hard to cultivate trust, solidarity and build a welfare system that will take care of those who are less privileged. The corruption perception index in the region is below those of the EU 27 countries (Feruni et.al., 2020), which means that it has detrimental consequences on human development, sustainable peace and social cohesion.

Youth from this region confirm that discrimination on grounds of ethnicity, religion, race, gender and sexuality is pervasive and it is often accompanied by hate speech, xenophobia, racism, sexism and homophobia. Roma people, ethnic and sexual minorities are particularly affected and women from these groups are even more so as they represent a minority within the minority.

Albania. Participants singled out the word engagement for social cohesion accompanied by groups and social interaction. Albanian society faces low levels of social cohesion, as the youth explained during the local consultation. Youth, therefore, suggest building social cohesion through social engagement and volunteerism.

Bosnia and Herzegovina. Participants detected the words understanding and equality as closely related to social cohesion. Since BiH is ethnically divided and its post-conflict recovery brought social cohesion between the three main ethnic groups (Bosniac/ Serb/ Croat) and others (minorities according to the Constitution), youth find that understanding is the key word that should be promoted in BiH.

Kosovo. Together with the words interconnectedness and solidarity, unity is the word that appeared to be relevant for social cohesion. Youth perception is socially conditioned and situated, which can indicate that the long lasting political tensions in the region may have impacted their perceptions, causing unity to emerge as the word that colours the social and political fabric of life.

North Macedonia. Participants were focused on maintaining an intersectional view of concepts, e.g., by considering the context of marginalised groups - therefore solidarity emerged as the keyword for social cohesion. Countering the imposed narratives on ethnic divisions, youth found solidarity as a vehicle for their engagement in social change.

Serbia. Two words that explain social cohesion are cooperation and equality. Since every social and political context shapes the perceptions and attitudes of its population, youth in Serbia are also products of the social and political *milieu*, which is burdened with a lack of cooperation with the countries and territory after the conflicts in the 1990s. With the exception of Albania, all researched countries and territory used to be part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia; after its dissolution, cooperation with other countries and territory became clouded by the unresolved conflict in the region.

Overall, these answers point to the awareness participants have about the concept of gender equality. Young people know what gender equality is and what it should be, therefore they associate some of the crucial notions relevant to their contexts with the concept. The most common keywords refer to principles of fairness, justice, equality of opportunities, and the elimination of hierarchical power structures.

Cross-analysis of these answers already suggests a connection between social cohesion and gender equality in the view of young people in the region. Recurring concepts provided as answers to both questions may indeed be observed.

Specifically:

- Inclusion is considered fundamentally linked with both social cohesion and gender equality;
- Harmony emerged in connection with social cohesion, but also as gender harmony in connection with gender equality;
- Human rights - both social cohesion and gender equality are considered linked with the enjoyment of human rights.

This interconnection between social cohesion and gender equality was the focus of the local consultations' discussions.

2.2. Factors that support gender equality and social cohesion

Overall, discussions combined with quantitative data analysis show that participants recognise the important role of gender equality in contributing to social cohesion and building fairer societies. However, in some countries and territory, youth view gender equality as an agenda that is counterproductive to reaching social cohesion. The figure below summarises the distribution of youth perceptions on the question of what factors help a stronger and fairer society.

Analysis of combined data for all the countries and territory in the region shows that the most popular options region-wide were equal access to quality education and equal labour opportunities. Gender equality came in third, closely tied with equal access to healthcare. Religious freedom was by far the least popular option, whereas free access to information was the second least popular.

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

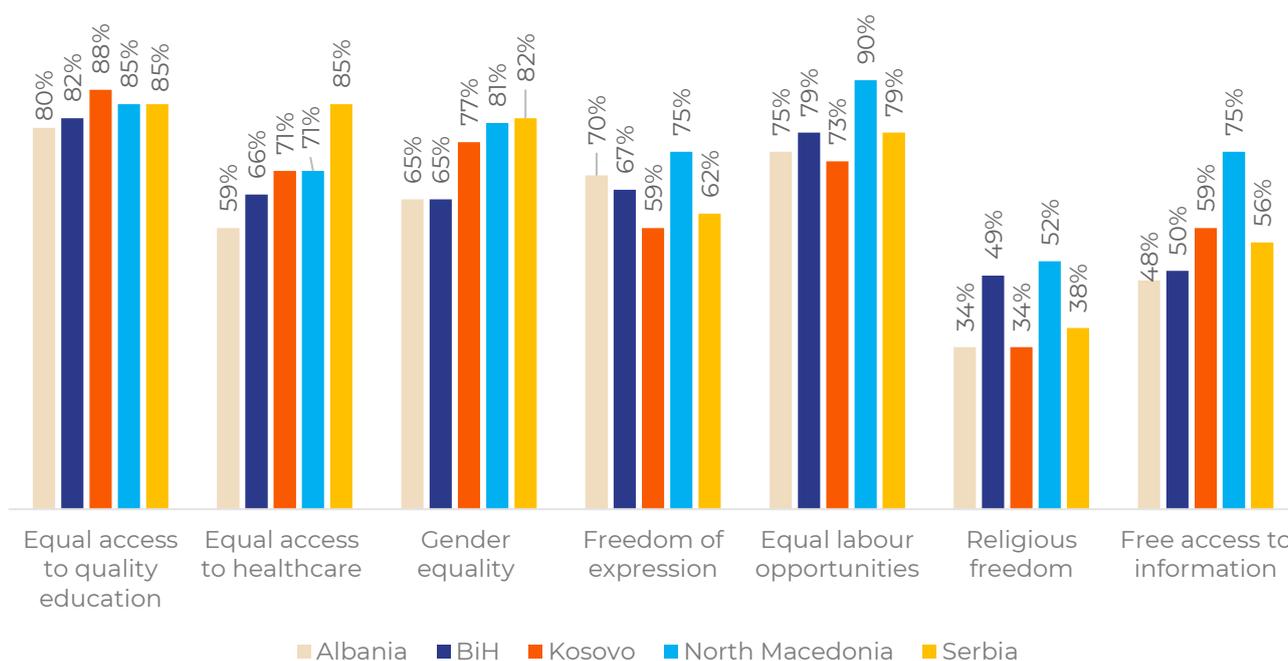


Figure 1. Factors helping stronger and fairer societies

Analysis for disaggregated regional information shows significant statistical differences in preference for the gender equality option when it comes to age and religion: those aged 26-30, specifically, were more likely to emphasise gender equality; in addition, those who identified as religious or agnostic were somewhat less likely to select gender equality as opposed to those who identified as atheist or other.

Figure 1 above shows a breakdown by country and territory of the percentage of participants who selected each option as one of their three choices. Across all countries and territory access to education is recognised as highly important, as is access to equal labour opportunities. There are interesting differences, however, when it comes to gender equality. Respondents residing in Albania and BiH selected this option less frequently than those residing in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. In Albania, the third most popular response was freedom of expression, a relatively less-emphasised option elsewhere.

These discrepancies in results can be tied back to conclusions drawn from the analysis of the local consultations discussions. In the Albanian local consultation, fear frequently came up in discussions about speaking out regarding relevant issues of equality and social cohesion, specifically fear of punishment.

Participants in the local consultation in Albania were hesitant to engage in the discussion and share their opinions for fear of negative consequences, due to the legacy of the totalitarian Albanian regime (Kuci, 2023), which is often neglected by them. Lack of trust, sense of belonging and unity, that young people perceive, are also frequently mentioned in the context of speaking out and taking action regarding equality. This, combined with further quantitative analysis demonstrating a significant lack of intergenerational trust, points to a possible reason why freedom of expression is seen as such an important first step and cornerstone to a fair society compared to the other countries and territory.

In addition, the local consultation discussions brought to light the perception shared by young Albanian participants that whilst other places have discussions about equal pay for equal work and women's representation in leadership roles, in Albania people are still focused on issues such as the right to live safely, without violence and in prosperity. Thus, safety and prosperity may be seen as priorities, or as a necessary first step before gender equality can be considered, which may also be a factor in the relatively lower emphasis on gender equality in the quantitative survey.

The survey results for BiH demonstrate a strong emphasis on education and labour opportunities, with no particularly strong candidate for the third most popular option. Indeed, youth showed a lot of concern regarding socioeconomic issues in the country, particularly the difficulty in finding employment. However, youth also reveal tensions that gender equality provokes in patriarchal societies. Gender equality is sometimes perceived as a subversive mechanism that threatens social cohesion and contributes to further polarisation. Due to this, it is not valued as a unifying mechanism.

“Gender equality can harm social cohesion and lead to the further polarisation of those social actors labelled as conservative and those that are more progressive, so in that sense, speaking in the long term, it can be a factor that strengthens social cohesion, but it can also lead to further stratification within the society”.

Participant local consultation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Furthermore, gender equality was seen as divisive as participants noted that mentioning such topics among people with opposing views leads to hostility, or even aggression, rather than constructive discussion. This is a sign of anti-gender sentiments and backlash that has been growing around the globe.

Finally, in line with concerns about a broader sense of injustice, youth in BiH expressed some scepticism towards the programmes that aim to foster gender equality and social cohesion. They view them as being initiated by the privileged for the privileged, instead of reaching those

who are truly on the margins of society and victimised by the system. One participant specifically brought up NGO initiatives along these lines being viewed as “commercialised agenda.”

It should be noted that overall, participants in local consultation discussions in Albania, as well as in BiH, agreed that equal opportunities among men and women should be addressed.

The local consultation in Serbia showed that participants generally agreed there was a close relationship between gender equality and democracy, though there was no consensus on which comes first, or rather, whether democracy is a prerequisite and first step towards gender equality or vice versa. They felt democracy is a fundamental trait in society that needs to be boosted to achieve gender equality and social cohesion.

This discussion also led to the agreement about the lack of political will to seriously tackle the problems of gender inequality in Serbian society. One of the problems with all these concepts, participants stated, is that they are perceived by the “ordinary people” as something foreign, abstract, and imported from outside, which is an interesting parallel to some of the above observations noted in BiH’s consultation. Moreover, participants in the consultation in Serbia emphasised that the country has many laws meant to ensure gender equality, but these laws are often not implemented or practised.

Discussions in Kosovo and North Macedonia noted gender equality as a cornerstone for social cohesion and democracy. In Kosovo, participants generally emphasised the positive impact of gender equality on inclusiveness, stating that greater equality leads to integration and inclusivity within society. More specifically, most participants acknowledged that whilst progress has been made in establishing the foundations of these concepts, there is still room for further development through awareness-raising activities. In addition, participants believe that among all the discriminatory issues faced in Kosovo, gender inequality and racial discrimination are the main issues against social cohesion. They emphasised the importance of increasing awareness and knowledge regarding these concepts since many inhabitants of Kosovo think that gender equality refers only to women’s rights.



Nonetheless, in the consultations in Kosovo, it was emphasised that there is a great need to open discussion about women's rights and feminism in order to facilitate a greater advancement towards social cohesion overall. There was recognition of the need for a deeper approach beyond simply increasing the number of women in parliament. It was emphasised that attention should be paid to marginalised groups within the LGBTQIA+ community, including lesbians and women from particular ethnic groups. All in all, participants agreed about the great importance of gender equality in promoting social cohesion.

During the consultation in North Macedonia, it was observed that social differences are typically viewed in terms of religion and ethnicity, but gender must be considered systematically to achieve social cohesion. Participants spoke about an intersectional approach, considering factors like structural violence and societal norms, and saw it as a crucial aspect of improving gender equality. The reason why this is specific is that the concept of intersectionality is not usually a common topic in media or among youth activists as a mainstream idea, indicating an improvement in the understanding of gender equality among young people. Notably, the impact of gender equality on social cohesion was observed in areas such as education and access to resources, particularly for marginalised groups like Roma women.

The young participants spoke on how discrimination against Roma women is seen in the workplace, public institutions, and their access to social welfare. They also mentioned the importance of the establishment of local communities in Roma areas. One girl shared that in Radovish (a small town), for the first time, there are Roma women holding positions in the local authorities, traditionally dominated by men. They were able to link the importance of representation with bringing and creating more just policies for marginalised groups and creating platforms for sharing different views on a local level. As a feminist theorist, Judith Lorber noticed a long time ago (1998), there is a different social "map" for men and women of the same racial group that stratified women on the margin within the margin of the minority racial or ethnic group. Although education and wealth correlate with the power positions in public life and politics, women, and particularly women from minority groups, face more challenges than men. (Judis & Teixeira, 2002)



2.3. Intergroup relations and social cohesion

Intergroup relations display an interesting pattern among young participants in the research.

Although most of the youth live in ethnically homogenized societies, a small percentage of them agree that it is easier to live in these communities than in multicultural ones, which is a sign of hope that youth prefer diversity as opposed to a monocultural environment.

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

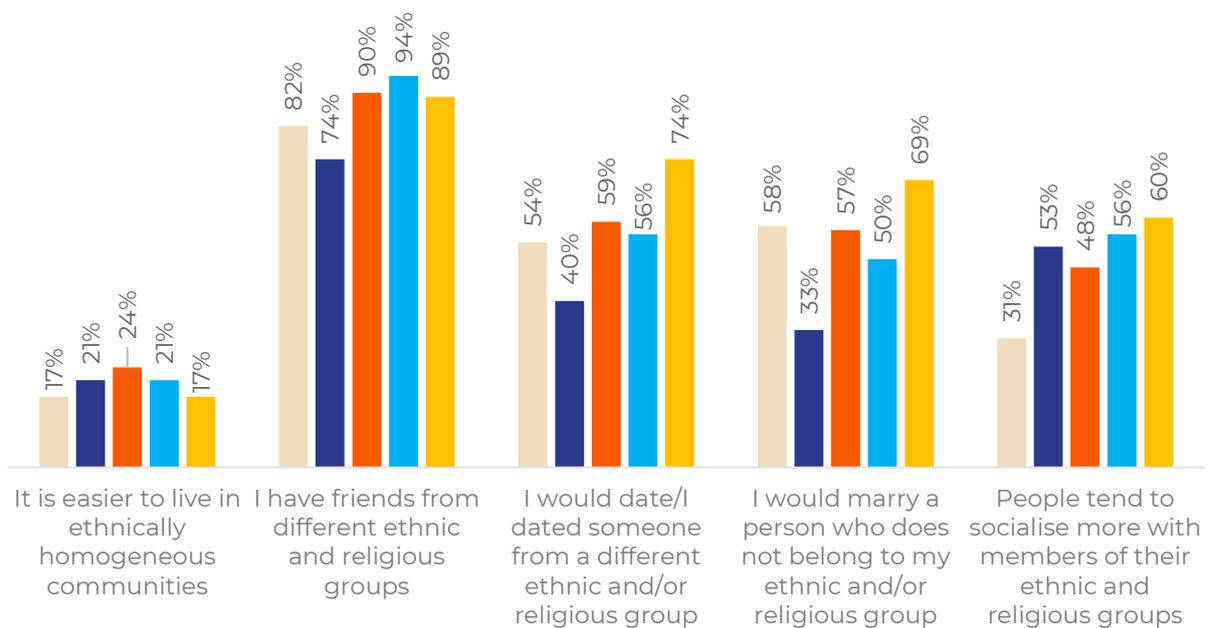


Figure 2. Intergroup trust and approach behaviour (I)

Generally, in all countries and territory, a fairly high percentage of survey respondents stated they had friends from different ethnic and religious groups. However, in all countries and territory except for Albania, there is a clear pattern of increased social distance as the intimacy of the bonds in question increases. Whilst over 80% of young people declared they had friends from different ethnic and religious groups, there is a sharp drop-off when it comes to the question of if they have dated (over 50%) or would be willing to date outside their ethnic and/or religious group. When it comes to marriage, there is another such drop-off.

An example of this is the results from residents of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where 74% of participants have friends from different ethnic and religious groups, but only 40% had, or would consider having, a romantic relationship with someone from a different ethnic and/or religious group. Furthermore, only 33% would be willing to enter a marriage with someone outside their ethnic and/or religious group. Interethnic marriages are often stigmatised and not in line with societal norms. Motivations behind the reluctance of young people to enter intimate relationships outside one's ethnic and/or religious group were not qualitatively explored in this study, but the previous research placed parents' disapproval among the main reasons for the pattern of increased social distance (Turjačanin et.al.2017).

Similar patterns can be observed in responses in Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Serbia. North Macedonian society is not only multiethnic, but also multiconfessional and multilingual, and most recent data shows that ethnically mixed marriages form around 7% of all marriages (Avirovic-Bundalevska, 2021). In this sense, the research results paint a more encouraging picture. However, a significant percentage of respondents also agree that in general, they observe people socialising more with their own ethnic and/or religious groups.

Social distance in Kosovo is similar, according to the recent IPS (Institute for Social Policy) Musine Kokalari survey (2023) that uncovers significant inter-ethnic tension, attributed to historical conflicts, sociopolitical differences, and perpetuated stereotypes. Although there appears to be some openness to collaborating professionally across ethnic boundaries, living close is less well-received. The findings reveal substantial social distance, with 65% of Albanians and 63% of Serbs expressing at least some discomfort with the prospect of residing next to each other.

As seen in the consultation in Serbia and the in-depth interviews, intergroup relationships are closely connected to the negative legacies of the past. One of the interviewees explained it:

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

Participant in-depth interview, Serbia

The same interviewee stated that whilst they are comfortable with forming relationships with different ethnic and/or religious groups, many of their friends are not; they attribute this to young people uncritically accepting narratives provided in the family as we can see from the following quote:

“A lot of young people are disinformed and they are accepting things from the family without a critical lens.”

Participant in-depth interview, Serbia

An evident pattern here is the social distance, and its connection to negative legacies of the past, as perpetuated, among other things, by older generations. Below are the quantitative results of a set of questions regarding information participants of the questionnaire are exposed to in their family environment in connection to past conflicts and inter-ethnic tensions.

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

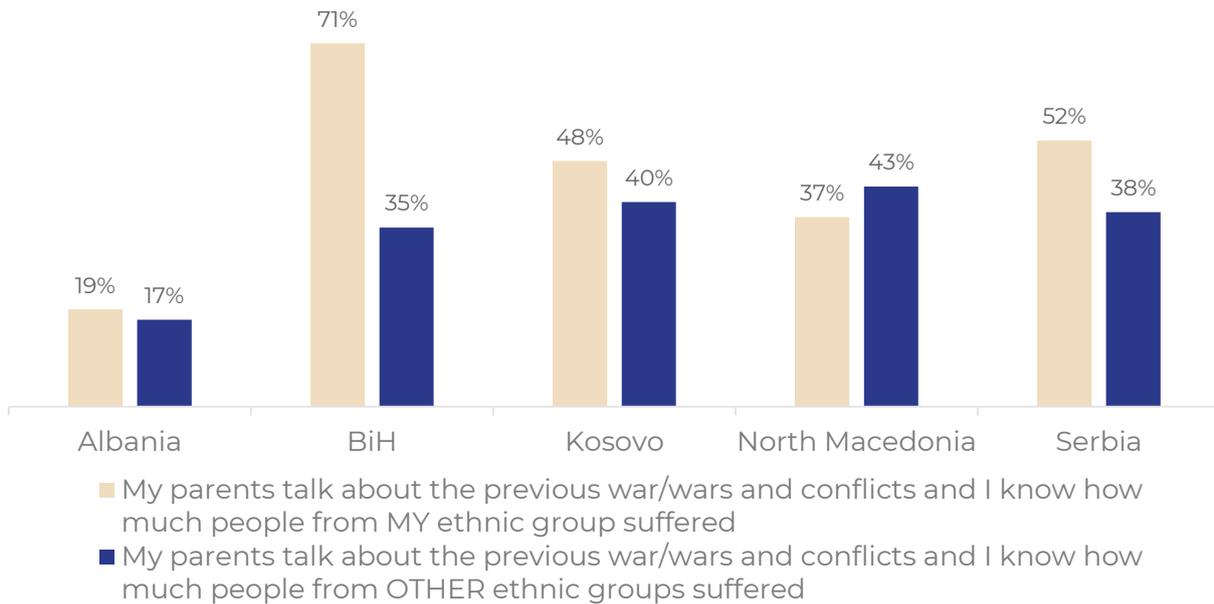


Figure 3. Intergroup trust and approach behaviour (II)

It should be noted that these questions refer to very different historical contexts in each country and territory. For example, whilst according to these results, it would seem older generations in Albania do not discuss the past, a question added specifically for countries and territory with a significant population of Albanians shows that 64% of respondent’s residents in Albania and 10% of those residing in Kosovo stated their parents talk about the persecutions and crimes of the Enver Hoxha regime, which is consistent with the observations from the local consultation discussions. In general, each ethnic group talks more about crimes and violence committed against them and less about crimes that their group committed against others. The culture of remembrance and dealing with the past is exclusively ethnically oriented and there is less willingness to recognise the suffering and pain of others.

Cross-sectional analysis of this segment of the questionnaire shows statistical significance with regard to area of residence (rural vs. urban), age, and religion. Respondents from rural areas are less likely to have friends from different ethnic and/or religious groups and much less likely to agree they would date/have dated or would marry someone from different ethnic and/or religious groups. This is not surprising, as rural areas tend to be more homogenous, or smaller and more insular communities.

With regards to religion, there was no difference concerning interethnic and/or interreligious friendships; however, those who declared themselves as religious were less likely to state that they have dated/would be willing to date, or would marry someone from a different ethnic and/or religious group. This is also consistent with the fact that practising religious people tend to believe that marriage outside one's religious group is not in accordance with what is ordained by their religion. This is also confirmed by earlier researchers (Pratto et al, 2018).

With regards to age, older participants, specifically those in the 26-30 age bracket were more likely to have friendships - but also more willing to and/or more experienced with intimate relationships - outside their ethnic/religious group. This, however, could be affected by the fact that these participants, by virtue of their age and life experience, have been exposed to a wider and more diverse pool of people and more experiences forming intimate relationships.

The next questions reflect social cohesion pertinent to solidarity and support in local communities and neighbourhoods, collaborative actions to discuss and find solutions for the community and freedom to express one's opinion and gain trust.

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

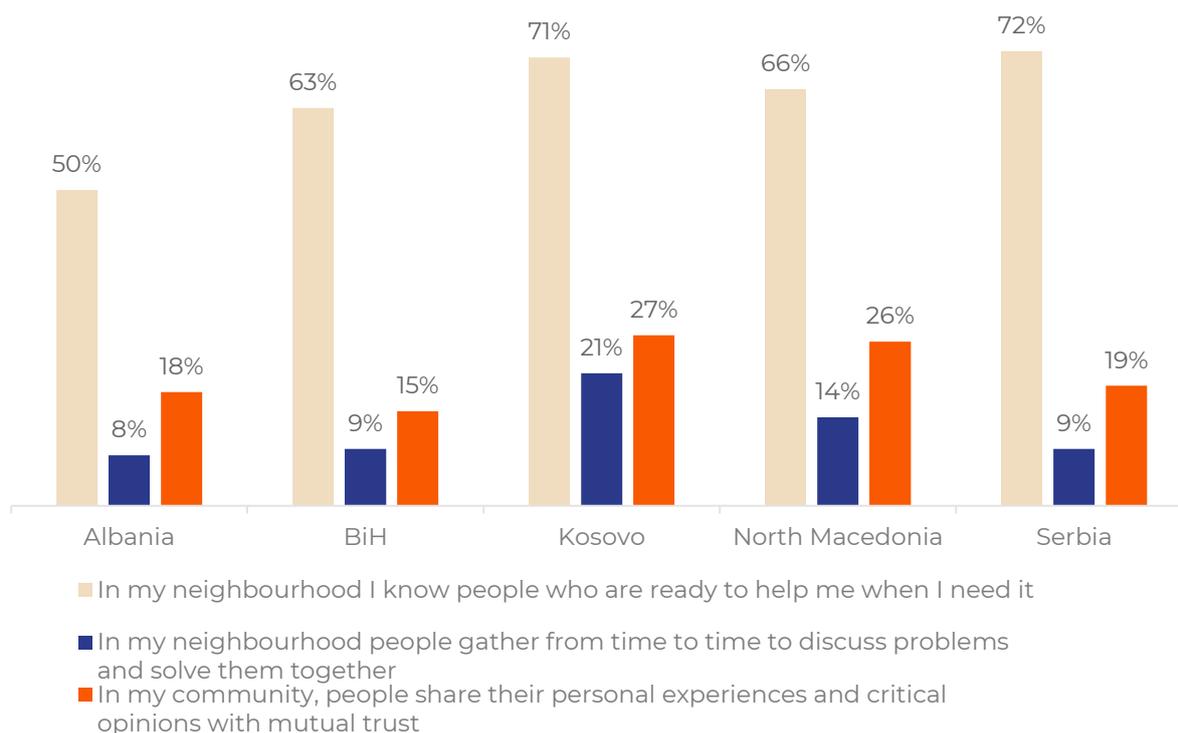


Figure 4. Intergroup trust and approach behaviour (III)

The above figure seems to parallel the emphasis in the consultation in Albania on a high degree of individualism and isolation as major factors in the lack of social cohesion, as respondents residing in Albania are less likely to agree with the statement “In my neighbourhood, I know people who are ready to help me when I need it.” In general, this statement received quite a high level of agreement in other countries and territory. This presents a stark contrast to the other two statements seen in Figure 4 - when it comes to neighbourhoods and communities coming together for problem-solving or sharing their problems and personal experiences, this seems to be a rare occurrence according to the respondents’ perceptions.

This aligns with the views expressed during the regional and local consultations that there is a lack of safe spaces for youth to gather and discuss issues pertinent to them, as well as with the findings from the local consultations suggesting a persistent pattern of young people voicing the need for more people coming together to enact change in their community or society at large. There is more trust expressed by the respondents in the people around them when it comes to individual instances of needing help, than when it comes to unified problem-solving and discussion that may give rise to opposing viewpoints.

This is also evidence that people in the region do not have a developed sense of active and accountable citizenship. They mostly rely on the traditional concepts of komšiluk (neighbourliness) and individual support people would provide for one another (Bringa 1995), but active citizenship awareness is very low, which is an indicator of directions for future policy and human rights initiatives.

2.4. Impact of negative legacies of the past

As noted in the previous section, negative legacies of the past were most frequently attributed as one of the obstacles to achieving gender equality. During the consultation in Albania, participants reported that certain expectations and division of labour between men and women persist, affecting their roles in education and professional fields. The impact of traditional gender roles was discussed considering reminiscences from the past, with examples given of how predefined roles can limit opportunities for both men and women. Whilst deconstructing traditions and legacies from the past, it was articulated that Albanian society is fighting against this past but still exhibits and upholds cultural and patriarchal norms.

Negative legacies of the past are associated with patriarchal culture, which according to participants still significantly resonate with women's and men's realities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Furthermore, participants expressed their belief that social expectations in their country are shaped in conformity with traditional gender roles, perceived as a cornerstone of a healthy society based on family values. Participants agreed that women are in many cases the main guardians of the patriarchy, especially those of previous generations. In this regard, the problem of the reproduction of patriarchy through socialisation and family education has been recognised as a significant obstacle to equality.

“Unfortunately, looking at my mother and my grandmother, it became clear to me that they always valued men way more than women. A girl is told to make coffee and to clean, whilst my brother for example was never told something like that. Our past is obstructing our present”.

Participant local consultation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Whilst reflecting on negative legacies of the past, the participants in the consultation discussion in Serbia asserted that female suffering was focused on the role of women as victims and survivors of conflict and the specific ways it affects women but not the other societal groups. A few participants also said they do not see the conflicts as completely over and believe reconciliation processes are just beginning, as opposed to the popular opinion according to which reconciliation processes are at their end. This paints a very different picture in terms of the legacies of the past and the role women should have in the future. In any case, the legacies of the conflicts are seen as influencing gender equality in negative ways as one participant indicates:

“In the nineties, we turned to the ‘us’ vs. ‘them’ narrative, where it is important that we are superior. I believe that in such an environment, toxic masculinity started being more prominent and it was seen as an ideal model needed in order to defend that kind of view on the nation. In this situation, women surely got a raw deal and I feel this state of things keeps persisting until today”.

Participant local consultation, Serbia

During the discussion on the legacies of the past and their influence on gender equality in society in Kosovo, participants highlighted various aspects that continue to impact gender dynamics. Following the pattern seen from other consultation discussions, they identified traditional gender norms, such as the societal pressure for women to remain within the household and the deprivation of education for girls, in conjunction with legacies of the past. Participants highlighted the deep-rooted societal norms and cultural beliefs prioritising male children over females, perpetuating gender inequalities and limiting women’s opportunities.

The overarching theme that emerged was the enduring presence of patriarchal mentalities and traditional norms, which hinder progress towards gender equality and fail to recognise and appreciate women's achievements. One participant linked these attitudes to historical factors, such as the Industrial Revolution, creating new opportunities for men in the workforce whilst reinforcing the idea of women's unpaid work within the home as their primary role. Additionally, during the discussion, unawareness and lack of education were identified as factors that perpetuate inequalities, with societal resistance to improvement and emancipation seen as originating from the persistence and upholding of patriarchal cultural norms.

“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, Albania

The young participants in North Macedonia also explored issues such as discrimination against women, generational conservatism, the legacy of gender equality policies from the socialist era, the need for representation and inclusion of marginalised groups, the importance of breaking generational traumas, and the influence of recent conflicts on discussions on peace.

“It is easier to talk about the more distant past, and we avoid talking about more recent conflicts and history such as the 2001 conflict in North Macedonia. I think it still deeply affects the discussion of peace in our country. There is a lack of translations of certain important data and feminist news and information. For example, regarding the protests in Kosovo following a sexual attack of a minor¹² there was little support from North Macedonian feminists. We are still too hesitant to talk about these issues that very much affect the present”.

Participant local consultation, North Macedonia

¹² The participant refers to the sexual assault of an 11-year-old girl in Kosovo followed by protests in Pristina, Tirana and Skopje, fuelled by frustration over a perceived lack of action on the part of authorities to combat gender-based violence in the region (for more information see Balkan Insight, “For Women in the Balkans, Digital Space is a Double-Edged Sword”, 2023, available at: <https://balkaninsight.com/2023/06/07/for-women-in-the-balkans-digital-space-is-a-double-edged-sword/>). The participant highlighted the need of a more inclusive media coverage from Macedonian-speaking outlets and called for enhanced involvement of Macedonian feminists in regional gender equality issues ensuring an intersectional approach to their action.

They also highlighted the conservative nature of North Macedonian society, and how the lack of translations of feminist news poses a challenge in creating better social cohesion between Macedonians, Albanians, Roma, Bosnians etc., instead of leading towards understanding, collaboration and solidarity. This is also an example of how disinformation can play a part in hindering gender equality, which over half of the North Macedonian respondents in the quantitative survey selected as a significant factor.

One participant mentioned the discrimination she has faced within women's organisations, as an Albanian and Muslim, to which many participants agreed that young people need to find better mechanisms to work together towards gender equality.

Overall, it is evident that the observations gathered through group discussions in all countries and territory point to a perception that negative legacies of the past are inextricably linked with the persistence of traditional gender norms. The historical context and effects of conflict, particularly the effect on women and their role in society, are seen as a major factor in the persistence of gender inequality. For example, there is a perception that in the former Yugoslavia gender equality was more present and took a step back after the dissolution and subsequent conflicts, which also affected the resurgence of patriarchal norms, as some studies showed (Hughson-Blagojevic 2012).

Interestingly, the young participants also highlighted how this link goes both ways, as they give examples of how addressing issues pertinent to gender equality and patriarchal conservative norms could lead to better social cohesion between different ethnic groups, as can be seen in the excerpt from the discussion in North Macedonia above.



OBSTACLES TO GENDER EQUALITY AND SOCIAL COHESION FROM A YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

3



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

3.1. Rigid gender roles and stereotyped gender expectations

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

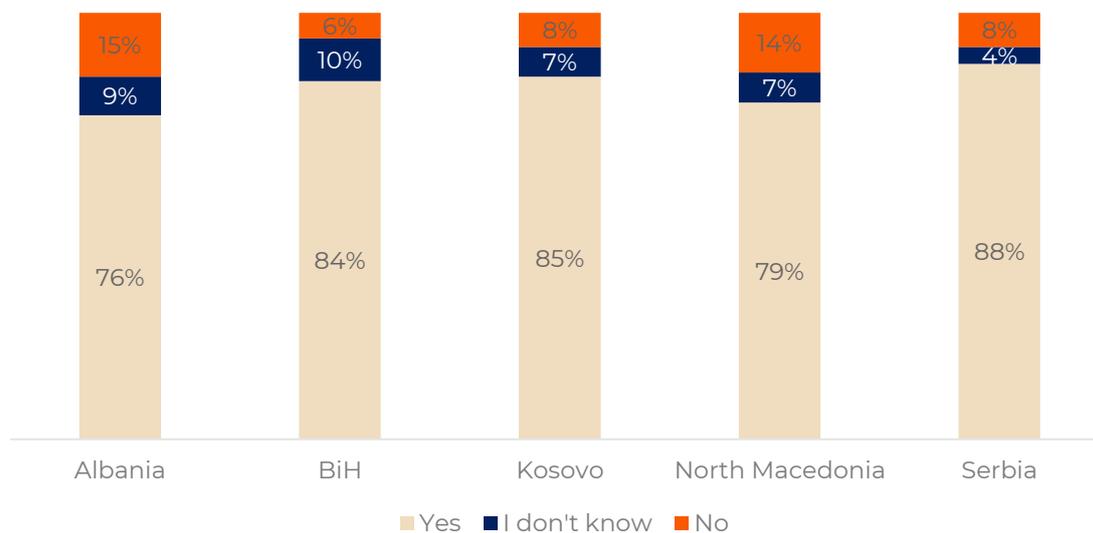


Figure 5. Youth perceptions of different expectations for men and women

Figure 5 shows results from a questionnaire section asking respondents whether they feel cultural and traditional norms set different expectations for men and women in their community. Most participants agreed that this was indeed the case.

A further question in the survey provided a list of expectations and asked respondents whether these mostly applied to women, men, or both. The results indicate that expectations mostly applied to women include:

- Spend more time taking care of the household
- Not have sexual intercourse before marriage
- Get married at a young age
- Have children at a young age
- Spend time, effort and labour taking care of the family

These expectations applied to women are in line with patriarchal norms that set women's primary roles as child bearers who take care of the family and household. Expectations that tended to be more relevant to men were:

- Hide emotions in public
- Be the head of the household
- Earn more than your partner
- Provide financial support for the family

This is also in line with the view of men as heads of the household and primary breadwinners, and with norms that view men who are sensitive and show emotion negatively. These results show that social expectations for women and men are shaped in conformity with traditional norms with a provider/nurturer dichotomy. Moreover, the regulation of male and female sexuality is dictated 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' (which extends not just to the individual but to the family) and the notion of 'purity' that women are required to uphold. This finding was uniformly seen across all countries and territory.

Local consultations provided experiences and perspectives that reinforced these results, showing that these ideas are still prevalent and that youth across the region have grown up with them. Participants in Kosovo and BiH noted the dichotomy of the private and public spheres of life, where the private sphere is seen as belonging to women, whilst the public belongs to men (Hughson-Blagojevic 2012; Spahić Šiljak, 2012; Babovic & Petrovic, 2021).

Participants in consultations emphasised that these values are perpetuated by families, often by other, older women in the family, and throughout primary socialisation. One participant in Serbia specifically voiced the opinion that the process of instilling these values starts essentially from the moment of birth.

In the consultation and in-depth interviews in BiH, the reproduction of patriarchy through family education and socialisation is recognised as a roadblock very much present to gender equality. This reproduction is done under the name of 'true family values.' Young people showed a lot of awareness of how the 'natural order of things' established by patriarchy had detrimental effects in different domains of private and public life. Negative examples of patriarchal upbringing included privileging male over female children, the concept of 'male' and 'female' jobs and requiring children to act within traditional concepts of femininity and masculinity (e. g., girls are encouraged to be sweet and helpful and boys to be strong and not to show their emotions). It also emerged that women from older generations are sometimes perceived by young people as guardians of patriarchal values, as exemplified by the following quote:

“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, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The discussions held in the consultation in Kosovo paint a similar picture, with participants pointing to deep-rooted societal norms prioritising male children over females, perpetuating gender stereotypes and limiting women's opportunities. Youth identified patriarchal traditions, such as the expectation for women to take care of the household, as well as fewer opportunities and less focus on female children's education, as negative influences. They also pointed to the fact that concepts of purity and morality are burdens falling solely on women - which props up systems that continue to enable and justify violence against women, victim-blaming, and punishing women for perceived moral transgressions. Participants also expressed concerns regarding the negative effects of expectations dictated by patriarchal norms for men. They pointed out that the rigid expectations set for

men regarding masculinity can lead to feelings of low self-esteem or depression, and the expectation for men to not show emotion can lead them to be reluctant to seek help for mental health issues.

Participants in North Macedonia perceived these traditional gender norms as something that starts in the family and primary socialisation and then is further systematised in schools. Participants in other countries and territory also emphasised the role schools can play in reinforcing these norms for behaviour and “appropriate interests” for male and female children, as well as through sexist language and stereotypes promoted by caretakers and textbooks. Participants also emphasised the lack and necessity of sexual education, as well as teaching students about issues such as mental health and gender equality.

In the consultation in BiH, it was also pointed out that the first occurrences of gender-based violence or sexism often happen in school, at an early age. As these things are not spoken about, there are no mechanisms for support and sanctioning, and children are not taught about proper behaviour in this regard, or how to identify inappropriate behaviour and react to it. This leads to the normalisation of such actions. As one interviewee stated:

“Already in schools, it happens that girls, whose bodies 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, Bosnia and Herzegovina

With regards to Albania, youth suggested that the education system currently reinforces traditional patriarchal stereotypes. There is also, similar to other countries and territory, a lack of comprehensive sexual education and the absence of feminist curricula at all levels of education. As many as 68% of the respondents indicate that their education institutions lack gender equality advancement. Furthermore, this educational deficiency perpetuates heteronormative concepts and sustains traditional gender roles.

3.2. Gender-based violence

Toxic and militarised masculinities, rigid gender stereotypes, hate speech and media representation of traditional gender roles increase the risk of violence, particularly against women, which is considered to be the most widespread form of violence throughout the region.

The analysis of local consultation discussions and the survey responses show general awareness among youth participants of the issue of gender-based violence. However, questions were formulated with the words “domestic or family violence”, instead of “gender-based”. The rationale for this wording selection was that many are not familiar with the concept of gender-based violence.

An interactive poll question asked was: “In your opinion, to what extent does domestic or family violence negatively impact youth well-being in your community?”. The answers were given in the form of a score from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much.” The figure below shows the results, indicating a general consensus that domestic or family violence at least somewhat impacts youth well-being.

Over half of respondents based in Albania, Kosovo, and Serbia responded that gender-based violence affects youth well-being very much. North Macedonia had more mixed results, with 37% choosing “very much.” Concerning the responses from BiH, of the 81% of respondents who responded with 3 or above, there was about an even distribution among levels.

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”

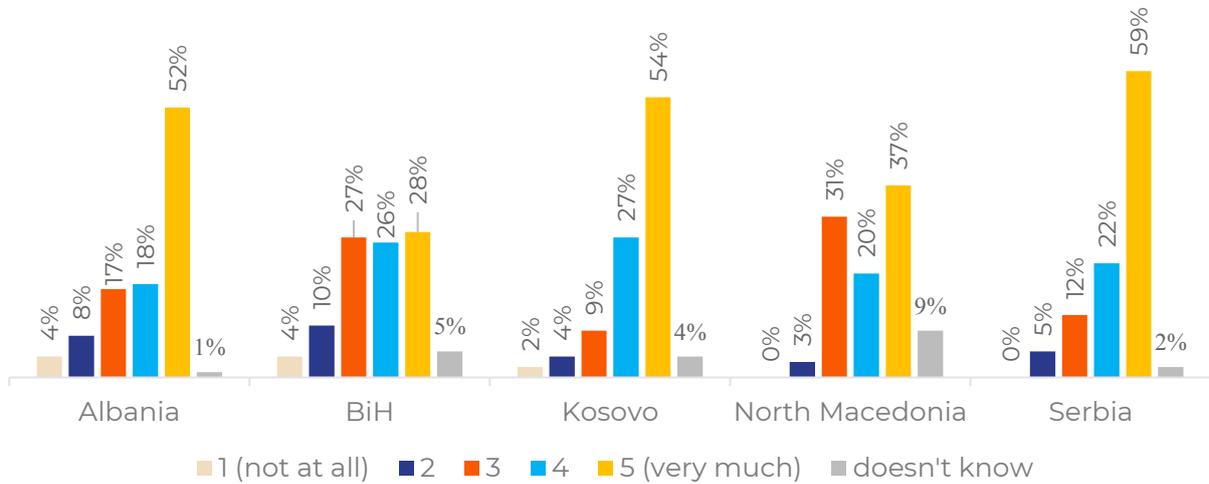


Figure 6. Youth perceptions of domestic or family violence

Cross-analysis by demographic factors showed that respondents who identified as female were much more likely to strongly agree with this statement, with over 53% responding 5 in the female category, versus 27% in the male category. Furthermore, there was a statistical significance concerning respondents' level of education: those with university-level education were more likely to strongly agree with this statement, as opposed to those with elementary/secondary/vocational education. This is also connected to the factors that support gender equality and social cohesion (i.e., education, employment) mentioned before in this chapter.

Many parallels can be observed in the perspectives and concerns expressed by the participants of the local consultation discussions in all five countries and territory. Specifically, common throughlines include:

- lack of trust in institutions to enforce laws against domestic violence and adequately protect and support victims;
- concerns about the normalisation of violence through gendered societal norms, as well as minimisation and victim-blaming narratives in media and social media;
- impact of militarised and toxic masculinity on the level of violence against women.

Furthermore, all of these parallel ideas are intertwined, in the participants' view, through a systemic framework enforced by traditional patriarchal gender norms, and militarised and toxic masculinities.

3.2.1 Impact of militarised masculinities on the level of violence against women

Social glorification of war and war criminals remains a serious threat to social cohesion in the view of young people in the region. The fact that men who exhibit toxic masculinity traits are valued more than those who contribute to their communities with peacebuilding efforts is seen as one of the main causes of gender-based violence in the researched countries and territory. The systemic nature of toxic masculinity is perceived as stemming from patterns created in the upbringing, reinforced by societal norms, and maintained through oppression.

Participants in the consultation in Serbia connected negative legacies of the past, toxic masculinities, and gender violence, as well as other forms of gender equality. One participant is quoted as stating:

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

Participant local consultation, Serbia

Participants also agreed that the prevalent ideas ingrained in society regarding masculinity lead to most people not recognising sexual violence when they see it or hear about it. “Everyone will know that gender-based violence is when a man beats up a woman” stated one participant, “but when he grabs her behind, not everyone will see it as gender-based violence, and that is the problem”.

In BiH, toxic masculinity was identified 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 the “alpha male” model is often supported and idealised. As one female participant stated:

“I have many (female) 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, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Kosovo, the concept of toxic masculinity was mentioned during the consultation, with instances where being a man is used to justify harmful behaviour. Specifically, there was discussion around the division of public and private spaces and how that has contributed to gender-based violence. It was noted that the public domain has historically been seen as a space belonging to men; the private domain is typically seen as a space for women. Consequently, a power dynamic has been established fostering a sense of ownership over women, characterised by control over women’s actions and behaviours. It was noted that this dynamic can, in some cases, contribute to the perpetration of violence against women, as it reinforces a mindset that justifies control and dominance. This mindset sometimes leads to acts of aggression as they may be seen as a way to reinforce said control and dominance.



Participants in North Macedonia further emphasised the systemic nature of toxic masculinity and its roots in upbringing, societal norms, and oppression. Furthermore, one of the participants in the in-depth interviews linked intergenerational trauma in post-conflict society and gender-based violence:

“As a feminist working towards a pacifist understanding of how we organise the way, I believe in antimilitarism as a key principle. Conflicts impact not only the physical pain and victims, but also the psychological impact is often overlooked, and how it gives long-term damage to both individuals and societies. This impacts families, kids, interpersonal relations, and with that the future of all of us, and how we position ourselves towards others. Unfortunately, the negative legacies of the past impact femicides, and sexual violence, which contribute to the transgenerational trauma. However, what we do not understand as a society is that we hold the power to change that.”

Participant in-depth interview, North Macedonia

Participants in the local consultation in Serbia pointed out that gender-based violence is often romanticized by media discourses and in society in general. They referred to seeing headlines that refer to severe cases of gender-based violence framing them as “love troubles” or “tragic romantic end” in reference to murder. The participants connected this media representation as intertwined with the position of women in a society which in turn is partly dependent on the model of militarised and toxic masculinity that was predominant during the conflicts.

Participants in BiH reported coming across numerous examples of victim-blaming in social media comments. Statements such as “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 in social media and public fora. Expressed concerns confirm that gender-based violence in the region is structured as a discourse of denial and silence – the denial/scepticism component produces and reinforces the silence component.



Youth 4 Inclusion, E...

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3.2.2 Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the occurrence or severity of gender-based violence cases

Respondents in the consultations referred to the Covid-19 pandemic as one of the factors that had a severe impact on women and children who experienced more violence in isolation at home.

Respondents in BiH noted that the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the operation of shelters for victims of gender-based violence, leaving victims with no way out and forcing them to stay with the perpetrators. Lack of institutional and professional support forced victims of gender-based violence to stay in violent families and partnerships.

In Kosovo and North Macedonia, results indicate that cases of domestic violence increased during the Covid-19 pandemic. In Kosovo, the first seven months of the pandemic saw an 11% increase, whilst the period from March 2020 through the end of 2021 was marked by a 28% increase in domestic violence cases. The prevalence of domestic violence was already high even before the pandemic, and with Covid-19 it increased. Participants critically examined and connected the toxic masculinity presentation in the work of Jordan Peterson and Andrew Tate¹³ with the rise of violence and anti-gender sentiments. Both men are highly influential public figures who are proponents of the re-patriarchisation and hegemonic masculinity that goes against gender equality.

Covid-19 also had an impact on social distance and the increase of individualism as some participants from Serbia reported:

“The pandemic stopped and reversed the little positive change that started happening. People became more disconnected from others and turned to their self-interest.”

Participant in-depth interview, Serbia

With all the negative consequences that Covid-19 brought, some positive impacts happened with female digital activism that started flourishing, such as “Nisam tražila” (I did not ask for it) a movement in BiH started by a group of actresses that paralleled the #metoo movement. The movement mobilized women to report gender-based violence and get psycho-social support, but also to break the “conspiracy of silence” that keeps women imprisoned in social and cultural norms. Similar movements taking place on various platforms and campaigns were also formed in Serbia, Croatia, and North Macedonia such as *NisiSama* (You Are Not Alone), *Meduza* (Medusa) and *Verujem Ti* (I Trust You) where women were empowered to come forward, provided support and encouraged to seek justice. Hashtags #*СераКажувам* in Macedonian and #*TaniTregoj* (#ISpeakUpNow) in Albanian gained traction in North Macedonia. The movement had a spill-over effect in the region in one form or another; in Albania for example there were several anti-sexual violence campaigns implemented, whilst Kosovo had an ongoing digital campaign against rape and sexual violence under the hashtag #*siguripervajzat* (security for girls).

¹³ Jordan Peterson is a Canadian psychologist who is mourning for the decline of religious and traditional family values, blaming gender ideology and LGBTQIA+ agenda for alienation of white young men and destruction of the western civilization. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2018/feb/07/how-dangerous-is-jordan-b-peterson-the-rightwing-professor-who-hit-a-hornets-nest> (accessed on August 08, 2023); Andrew Tate is a British-American youtuber and influencer who is also a self-proclaimed misogynist. See: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-64125045>, (Accessed on August 06, 2023).

3.2.3 Experiences of violence and discrimination

It is easier to speak about violence that happens to others rather than personal experiences involving violence. Most people are not comfortable with sharing personal stories of violence, because of the shadow of blaming and shaming the victim as many previous studies revealed (Hughson-Blagojevic 2012; Spahić Šiljak, 2012; Babovic, & Petrovic, 2021). The study confirmed this trend.

In North Macedonia, participants were reluctant to share personal experiences of violence and discrimination. However, an interviewee who is a member of a ministry working on issues of gender equality, described an occasion where, right before the start of a meeting, a male politician openly turned to all the members of this ministry and said: “I am glad that I will have the chance to work with the most beautiful ministry, as you are all women”.

This statement is one of the examples of benevolent sexism (Ćeriman and Spahić Šiljak 2022) that is a culturally acceptable way of communication and very often women do not recognise these sophisticated forms of sexism, because they internalised it to such extent that they do not see the harm in these kinds of statements (Demukaj et.al. 2019; Danaj 2020; Spahić Šiljak et.al. 2022).

In Kosovo, participants shared examples of witnessing or experiencing discriminatory behaviours and hate speech within educational institutions, particularly targeting individuals with disabilities or those from marginalised groups like the LGBTQIA+ community. One female participant shared the following:

“As a woman with mobility difficulties, I have not faced discrimination in the family or, in school but in politics when I was placed in the ambassador’s role. Every time I walked, I noticed a change in their facial expressions and the conversation. I tried to share my experiences and achievements, but the only thing that mattered to them was that I had mobility difficulties.”

Participant local consultation, Kosovo



In BiH, youth focused on discriminatory practices in the workplace. Specifically, many women shared experiences of being asked during job interviews about whether they were in a romantic relationship, and whether they planned to have children soon. Participants shared their experiences that positive answers to such questions significantly decreased chances of being hired and that women were passed over for jobs and promotions due to the view that they would be too distracted with family and child-rearing duties. Further experiences focused on the fragmented implementation of laws regarding maternity leave. Finally, some participants shared experiences of gender-based hate speech - these incidents were reported to follow the pattern of violation of traditional gender norms being seen as a moral transgression, resulting in a personal attack. One female participant shared her experience when she decided to not take her husband's last name when getting married:

“My mother told me that it was a big disgrace, that I was offending my husband [...] When 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, Bosnia and Herzegovina

The consultation and in-depth interviews in Serbia acknowledged discrimination and violence as frequent occurrences in their society but did not wish to discuss any personal experiences or encounters.



3.3 Discrimination and hate speech

The study aimed to assess how much discrimination and hate speech participants had experienced, and on what basis. The questionnaire asked respondents, for each of the categories that can be seen in the figure below, if they have a) personally experienced, b) witnessed, c) both experienced and witnessed discrimination and hate speech. Other options were d) no and e) not sure. Overall, both aggregated regional data and data per individual country and territory show some concerning statistics.

This is visualised in Figure 7 below where data analysed for marginalised communities shows how a much larger proportion of respondents reported some form of encounter with discrimination or hate speech compared to the overall results.

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

(Focus on Marginalised Communities)

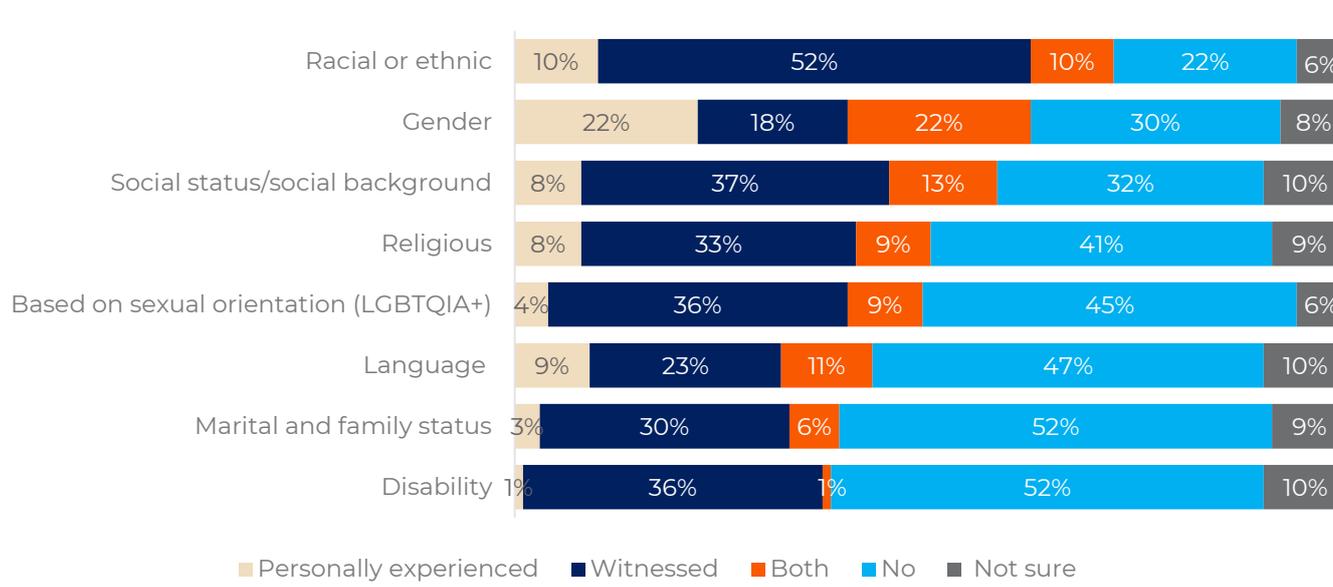


Figure 7. Experiences of discrimination in marginalised communities

Overall, over 70% of respondents had some form of encounter (experienced, witnessed, or both) with racial and/or ethnic discrimination or hate speech. Over 60% had some form of encounter with gender-related discrimination or hate speech. Nearly 60% also responded they had encountered discrimination or hate speech based on social status. Just under half had some form of encounter with discrimination or hate speech directed at LGBTQIA+ community, around half when it comes to religion.

Most recently, in social media, discrimination and hate speech build on misogyny and homophobic discourses. The representation of gender roles in media and social media has a powerful impact on youth's views on gender today as it perpetuates harmful gender stereotypes, particularly regarding marriage, divorce, and gender-based crimes. Rigid gender roles and stereotypes represented in the media have a disproportionate effect on marginalised communities and underrepresented groups, who are the most vulnerable to being victims of hate speech, including online hate speech.

The analysis further segmented by demographic factors shows that women and minority groups tend to have direct experience or to have generally encountered hate speech and discrimination in some or all of the above categories. Most significantly, women tend to encounter gender-based hate speech discrimination far more than men - and respondents who gave their gender

as "other" overwhelmingly responded that they have encountered gender-based hate speech and/or discrimination, thus indicating discrimination and hate speech directed at women, but also the presence of hate speech and discrimination on the basis of gender identity. Women were also more likely to encounter discrimination based on race or ethnicity, as well as social status.

Hate speech can manifest through online channels, as online hate speech perpetrated through the use of offensive, derogatory or discriminatory language on media and social media that contributes to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes, reinforcing biases and negative perceptions.

The influence of the media on gender equality and social cohesion is perceived by young people as predominantly negative, as media and social media are often seen as a propagator of discriminatory gender practices and divisive narratives.

Participants of the study criticized the media for perpetuating stereotypes and presenting biased narratives, particularly regarding marriage, divorce, and crimes against women, and called for more responsible/ethical reporting on these subjects. Furthermore, participants identified social media as one of the factors affecting the increase of individualism, isolation, and disinformation, which further contribute to exacerbating the problems identified and the lack of discussion regarding the issues relevant to social cohesion.

3.4 Proliferation of polarising identity speeches

Gender discrimination, as well as violence against women and girls, are both fuelled by misogyny and homophobic, harmful discourses. The prevalent polarisation of discussions hindering constructive dialogue and perpetuating destructive extremism is heavily criticized by young people in the region, who urge the promotion of open discussions and critical thinking and highlight the need to steer away from a focus on “winning” or “being right”.

Toxic masculinity is seen by young people as spreading through ‘logical sounding’ propaganda that attacks women and promotes the idea of alpha males. These harmful discourses sow the seeds for the so-called “gender ideology”¹⁴ to grow on the fertile ground created by the fear originated in some men towards women’s empowerment and give rise to more rigid gender stereotypes that young men and women are expected to fulfil.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: “The movements against gender equality promote discrimination and intolerance towards women, girls, LGBTQIA+ persons”? Please indicate your answer on a level from 1 to 5, where 1 is “not at all” and 5 is “very much”

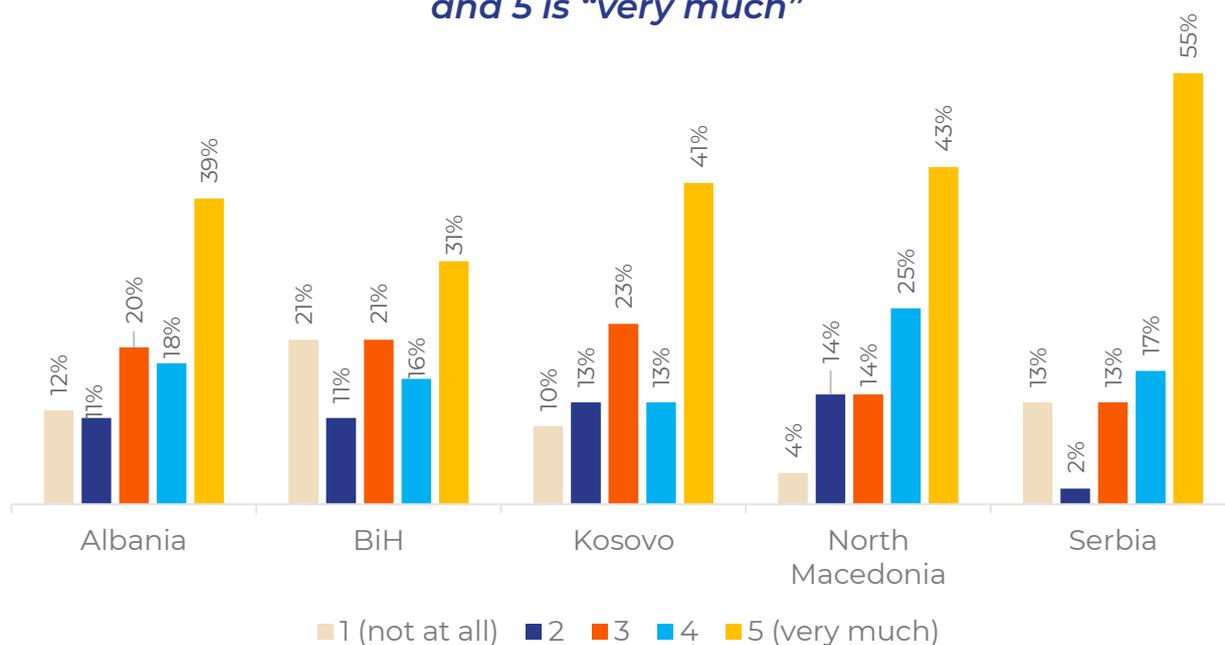


Figure 8. Youth perceptions of movements against gender equality

Figure 8 above, showing results from the quantitative survey, indicates some mixed sentiments among respondents when linking discrimination and intolerance towards women, girls and LGBTQIA+ persons with movements against gender equality. This is especially prominent in responses from residents in Albania and BiH.

¹⁴ The term “gender ideology” is here used to refer to a range of beliefs, theories, or perspectives criticizing and opposing what is perceived as the erosion of traditional gender roles and norms. It is important to note also that, “(i)n its original sense, the term, coined in the 1970s and utilised in the work of, among others, political scientist Rule Krauss refers precisely to the binary system of preconceptions and predetermined gender-based power asymmetries that must be challenged if all humankind is to fully enjoy human rights. In its alternative and recent iteration, however, it is being used as part of an anti-rights discour-

In Serbia, young people participating in discussions and interviews linked nationalism and anti-gender ideology as “coming from the same place.” As one interviewee stated:

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

Participant in-depth interview, Serbia

Another interviewee made a connection between nationalist narratives and women in politics. First, he stated that the situation with nationalist narratives in Serbia is getting worse:

“People in high power positions are constantly creating negative narratives about neighbours in the region and they are making this a new normal in a way.”

Participant in-depth interview, Serbia

And in the context of who is responsible for this narrative, the interviewee added:

“Nationalism is connected to gender, yes. It is most often men who promote nationalist narratives.”

Participant in-depth interview, Serbia

During the consultation in Serbia, participants discussed positive discriminatory practices when it comes to increased representation of women in politics. Whilst participants expressed scepticism as to how much these practices could lead to a genuine increase of women in leadership and decision-making positions, they emphasised the importance of encouraging the participation of women in politics and suggested that greater effectiveness in practice could be achieved by pushing for more representation of women in politics on a local level.

se by political and religious leaders seeking to limit the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender-diverse persons, under the assertion that the work to promote the human rights of these persons constitutes countercultural or antisocial behaviour.” [See UN General Assembly, Report of the Independent Expert on protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, A/73/152, 12th July 2018, para.27].



In North Macedonia, participants mentioned the issue of Comprehensive Sexual Education, which was identified as a key component in the education of youth and to address potential issues regarding gender equality and social cohesion. However, participants also pointed out that such programmes were often misused and attacked by anti-gender movements in order to further their goals. This is supported by recent research conducted in the region by Cvetkovic & Velickovska (2022), which found that anti-gender movements often targeted education initiatives focusing on sexual education and gender equality as part of their strategy. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the spread of anti-gender narratives was viewed by participants in local consultations as part of the impact of social media and increased disinformation. Specifically, when talking about toxic masculinity, the influence of global figures promoting patriarchal and toxic masculinity narratives was highlighted.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, it was emphasised that political elites 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.” This concept is connected to that of militarised masculinity described in section 2.4.2. on gender-based violence. The interviewees indeed linked the concept of ‘nation protector’ with toxic masculinity and populism but also stated that female politicians sometimes reproduce anti-gender and nationalistic narratives in order to achieve the party’s political goals. The small number of female politicians advocating for women’s rights was primarily associated with their marginal position in political parties’ decision-making bodies, although it was also the interviewees’ opinion that this lack of support is partly the product of internalised misogyny perpetuated by patriarchal social norms.





YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

4



4. YOUTH PERCEPTIONS OF PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

In all countries and territory, quantitative results show very low rates of trust in public institutions, as well as political and religious institutions. Although the study adopts a conceptualisation of social cohesion going deeper into the peer-to-peer relationships (horizontal dimension of social cohesion), some questions partially explored the degree of trust in institutional processes (vertical dimension of social cohesion)¹⁵, because gender roles are shaped both through family, school and media socialisation.

¹⁵ *The vertical social cohesion is reflected in the ability of institutions to ensure effective service delivery, promote inclusive political processes and public policies, and the trust, legitimacy and confidence that the population ascribes to institutions and political processes.*

4.1. Equality in education and employment

The quantitative survey asked respondents to assess whether education opportunities, as well as equal treatment by educational institutions, are available to different groups - specifically male and female children/youth; Roma children/youth; children/youth with disabilities; migrant children/youth. Very low percentages of respondents in all countries and territory agreed that equal education opportunities are provided for minorities and youth with disabilities. Furthermore, confidence is not very high for equal education opportunities for male and female children/youth. When it comes to equal treatment by educational institutions, the responses paint an even starker picture of inequality. This is supported by some existing research, e.g. a UNICEF study in North Macedonia showed that only 39% of Roma youth were enrolled in secondary education, as opposed to 81% who attended primary education.

Furthermore, as respective reports point out, existing policies and resources for persons with disabilities, including education for children/youth with special needs are lacking.

Even though all countries and territory have policies and laws regarding gender equality in educational institutions and the workplace, this does not guarantee gender equality in practice. With regards to education, participants in local discussions highlighted that male and female students were treated differently in the classroom, as well as that traditional patriarchal norms regarding “male” and “female” occupations and interests were still perpetuated by parents, the community, and sometimes even educators, and influenced education and career trajectories of women. Furthermore, studies indicating high rates of gender-based violence, discrimination and sexual harassment in academic institutions (Spahić Šiljak et.al., 2022) suggest that this is another way in which inequality in education is perpetuated.

When it comes to the workplace, besides the experiences shared in the consultations addressed in the above sections of this paper, there is a general lack of implementation of pertinent laws and policies regulating discrimination against women in the context of job interviews and promotion opportunities. Even when such policies are implemented, this does not necessarily mean they lead to equality, similar to the case of women in politics and decision-making positions observed by consultation participants in Serbia. For example, statements from in-depth interviews with participants working in the public sector show that public institutions lack the mechanisms to implement equality acts, and mostly men are placed into executive positions or those with decision-making power.

4.2. Promotion of gender equality and social cohesion

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

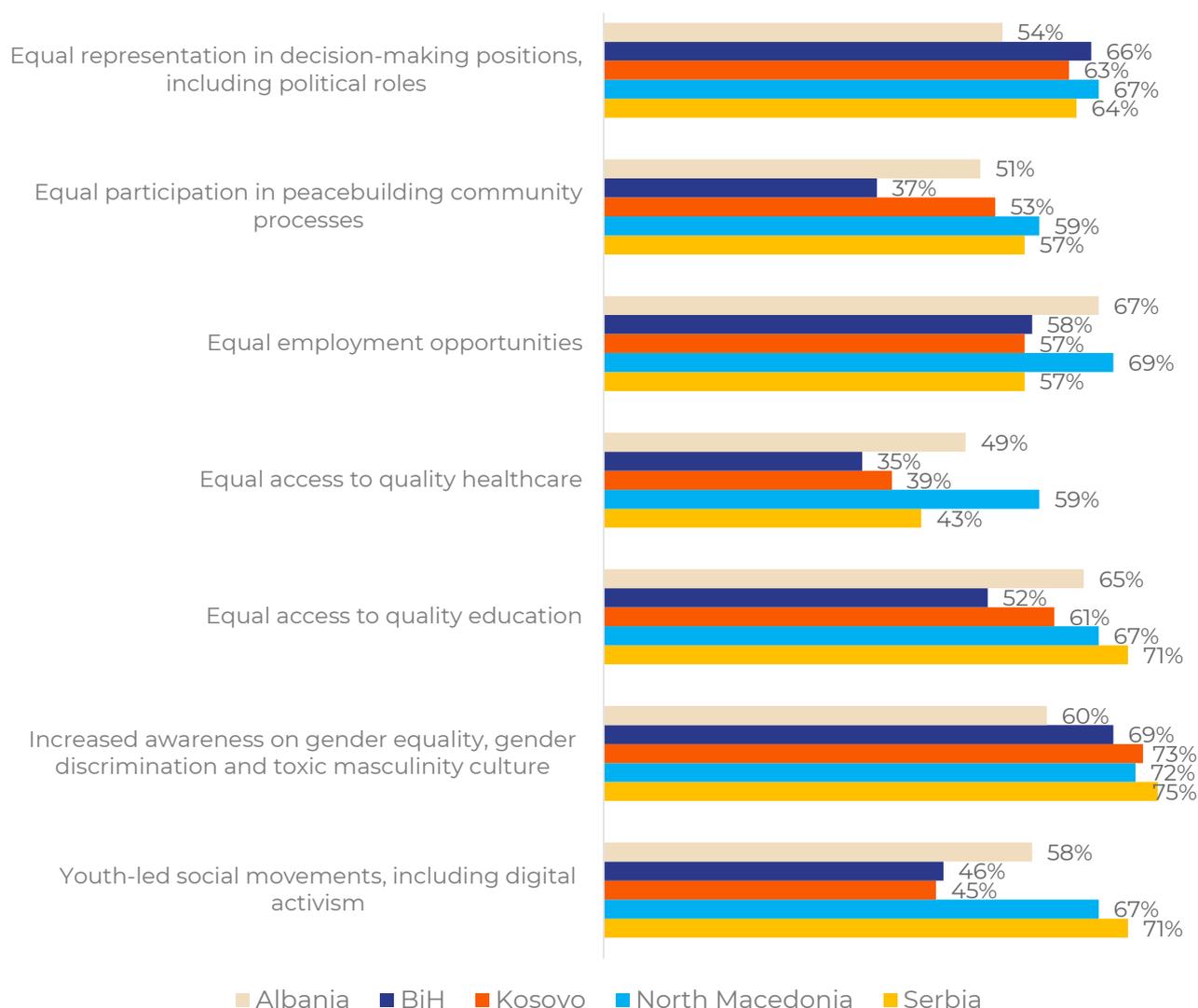


Figure 9. Youth perceptions of factors that would help achieving gender equality

Figure 9 above shows the results of the quantitative survey question that asked respondents to select the three most significant factors that would help achieve gender equality and fight sexism, misogyny, and gender-based violence in their community. Overall, gender equality, discrimination and toxic masculinity were the most popular responses across all countries and territory. Kosovo and North Macedonia respondents tended to favour the options of youth-led social movements, including digital activism, as well as equal access to quality education. Respondents from BiH and Serbia particularly emphasised equal representation in decision-making positions. Among respondents from Albania, equal employment opportunities were the most popular choice.



4.3. Female representation in the political arena

Quantitative survey results indicate general support for equal opportunity in decision-making positions as an important factor in achieving gender equality. Female representation in the political arena was seen in local consultations and interviews generally positively, and as a first step towards increasing social cohesion, and tackling not only gender equality but other issues.

All countries and territory of the project region remain below equal representation and participation levels in decision-making positions and parliaments¹⁶, although some improvements were made with the imposed quota on the political party lists (Browne, 2017).

For example, in North Macedonia, participants noted that the absence or underrepresentation of women in politics was related to social issues that go beyond the rise of nationalistic and anti-gender narratives. In the interviews, it was noted that male-dominated policymaking does not reflect the needs of all the diverse groups represented in the demography of North Macedonia. Lack of representation, both institutional and visible to the public in the media, contributes to reinforcing traditional gender norms which impose discrimination based on gender and sex.

During the consultation in Serbia, a shared consensus emerged on the importance of promoting the engagement of women in political life as a first step towards equality. In Kosovo, perspectives from in-depth interviews show emphasis on the connection between the increased presence of women in politics, the challenging of cultural norms and the introduction of fresh perspectives.

¹⁶ For specific data see UN Women, "Women in Politics", 2023, available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/03/women-in-politics-map-2023>

In Bosnia and Herzegovina youth referred to fear of losing power and the impact of traditional values and opposition to changes in male roles and identity as factors that maintain the status quo and unequal distribution of power in politics.

In Albania, the Survey demonstrated that the majority recognise the interconnectedness between gender equality and redistribution of political power. Some politicians strategically resist gender equality in order to consolidate their political influence, particularly among the conservative part of society.

To advance women's leadership and participation it is crucial to provide more specialized education and training programmes for women who are running for election but also offer promotional programmes to motivate women to engage in politics, especially at the local level. The asymmetrical emancipation that occurred in public and private environments, where the increased access of women to the labour market was not adequately matched with an increased commitment of men in undertaking household and care-related responsibilities, has resulted in a double burden for women. This often generated frustration and triggered women's scepticism about the concept of emancipation itself. With a double or triple burden, many women are not interested in politics, as they are expected to juggle multiple responsibilities deriving from the private (family) and the public sphere (career), whilst men do not face the same dilemma. The social expectations and the traditional gender norms that permeate each aspect of life have an enormous impact on women's representation in politics.



THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR GENDER EQUALITY

5

AND SOCIAL
COHESION: RISKS AND
OPPORTUNITIES

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

The overall views gathered from the consultations and interviews indicate that participants are aware that social media can have two sides when it comes to gender equality and social cohesion. On one hand, it can contribute to spreading disinformation, harmful narratives and stereotypes, and be a platform for anti-gender movements. On the other hand, social media also presents an opportunity for youth to communicate, organise, and reach out to those outside their immediate circle.

Technology can be and/or is used as a tool to spread divisive and polarising narratives. The anonymity provided by the internet allows for consequence-free harassment, boycotting, stigmatisation and hate speech. The shield of anonymity online may encourage people to say things they would otherwise not say in public. Furthermore, modern media outlets have been identified by participants as sources of potential misinformation, divisive rhetoric and harmful narratives, as examples regarding gender-based violence illustrate. Participants also expressed concerns regarding algorithms used by social media platforms creating 'echo chambers' that prevent people from being exposed to different viewpoints.

Furthermore, social media can frequently be a source of organised cyberbullying, which is a powerful discursive strategy that uses sexist language and justification of rape and violence (Vochocová, 2020).

An interesting example of this was provided by a participant in the local discussion in BiH:

"I was a victim of cyber-bullying after a video showing a Bayram 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 containing death threats, wishes for us to be raped, and comments such as 'Our Bosnian girls are going after the stinky-ones'. We received around 700 hate comments and did not feel safe walking the streets of our own city. It was surprising to me why they targeted us, five women who were there, but not men who also interacted with them (migrants). How much internalised misogyny we have to hate a woman

because we believe that she goes to work (with migrants) not because she wants to help, but to have intercourse.”

Participant local consultation, Bosnia and Herzegovina

In line with other observations gathered in the present study, this example shows how discrimination and hate speech against the migrant population are intertwined with discrimination and hate speech based on gender, indicating the presence of an intersectional component in the obstacles to social cohesion.

Participants also pointed out the possibility of the positive impact of social media.

“Social media can serve as a valuable tool to amplify the voices of marginalized 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, Albania

The success of past and existing initiatives, such as local versions of the #metoo movement, or a Skopje-based Facebook group that allows for a safe space for victims of sexual harassment, show that social media can be a place of solidarity and support for victims and the oppressed. Furthermore, it was pointed out that social media can be a place for marginalised voices to be heard.

Opportunities for youth to reach out to a wider circle of people, hear different perspectives, as well as organise activist initiatives targeting issues concerning gender equality and social cohesion were also pointed out. It was highlighted that the large young audiences that social media influencers have can be used to promote positive messages and activist initiatives with an especially wide reach. Technology, therefore, can also be used to break down barriers, share stories, empower and inspire others, raise awareness, and encourage more activism.



RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUTH

6



6. RECOMMENDATIONS FROM YOUTH

The research activities in all countries and territory showed that youth strongly see themselves as actors of change. Young people feel ready to take responsibility and actions to change their future. They call for opportunities to make their voices heard and be empowered to act as leaders of change. They also urge institutions and policy-makers to target the following categories to meaningfully tackle issues of gender equality and social cohesion in the region:

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

- Local and central institutions to include gender equality in formal education from kindergartens to universities. Current curricula reform is a momentum to integrate gender equality as one of the main goals in education;
- Local and central institutions to offer new textbooks without gender stereotypes, hegemonic masculinity models and glorification of the violent past, divisive narratives about the past and offensive content;
- CSOs to continue pursuing informal gender equality education programmes (gender studies, women's studies and mobile feminist caravans that include youth from small communities and minorities);
- Youth-led social movements to advocate with local authorities for the adoption of gender-responsive policies in education;
- Local and central institutions to work with CSOs to empower youth through mentorship programmes on gender equality in their schools and communities;
- CSOs to empower youth through informal educational programmes to become community leaders.

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

- Local and central institutions to increase the digital literacy of youth to use social media responsibly in schools and universities (empowerment programmes in formal and informal education in collaboration with CSOs and media experts);
- Educational institutions with the support of CSOs to launch campaigns against hate speech and discrimination, particularly gender-based discrimination (16 days of activism is one of the venues);
- Educational institutions and CSOs to use social media influencers who are popular and who are willing to support anti-discrimination campaigns and advocate against gender-based violence;
- Local and central institutions with the support of CSOs to create networks of safe cyber spaces for gender-based violence victims;
- Local and central institutions with the support of CSOs to empower youth to protect themselves in cyberspace through targeted training.

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

- Educational institutions to increase youth interest in volunteering in schools and local communities through campaigns and targeted programmes of CSOs;
- CSOs to launch public fora for youth to discuss social and political themes relevant to their community, such as youth employment and their representation in politics;
- Local and central institutions with the support of CSOs to connect current civic education in schools with local community needs and enable youth to exercise civic skills;
- Educational institutions and CSOs to organise solidarity programmes to help those who are disadvantaged;
- Local and central institutions with the support of CSOs to sponsor youth internships in public institutions, judiciary and local businesses to apply the civic skills they acquired in schools;
- Local and central institutions with the support of CSOs to launch media educational programmes to foster active citizenship;
- Policy institutions to adopt gender-sensitive policies and strategies to include more women and youth in peace processes.

Active Dialogue and Intercultural Competences. Participants hope for more opportunities to foster inclusive dialogue and allow people from different backgrounds and possibly different opinions to engage in civil debate and discourse, connect and share common goals. Research results demonstrate the need to give more voice to marginalised groups. Young people recommended:

- Educational institutions with the support of CSOs to strengthen peace and intercultural pedagogies in formal and informal education with adequate pedagogical tools;
- Educational institutions with the support of CSOs to empower youth to strengthen constructive dialogical skills in discussing opposing and divisive narratives from the past that hinder social cohesion;
- Political institutions with the support of CSOs to organise public debates with youth to discuss pressing issues in their communities and advocate for minority rights, particularly sexual minority and ethnic minority rights;
- Educational institutions with the support of CSOs to launch negotiation skills programmes that are crucial for diplomacy as well as conflict resolution in daily situations (peace and executive leadership programmes);
- CSOs to create safe spaces for youth to share their experiences and address issues of their interests (launching youth exchange fora, web or other media platforms).





CONCLUSION

The youth-led research with a mixed method and participatory approach produced comprehensive material from the survey, local consultations and in-depth interviews with youth in the five countries and territory of the region within the research scope. This innovative research approach confirmed that substantive social cohesion cannot be achieved without gender equality and inclusion of all voices, particularly the voices of those who are marginalised and who identify as belonging to minorities or underrepresented groups.

Youth are aware of gender discrimination, and they associate gender equality with equal rights and opportunities, fairness and democracy, and social cohesion with solidarity, understanding, unity and cooperation, which portray the social and political landscape of their communities. Young people not only demonstrated awareness of the multifaceted challenges hindering gender equality but also underscored the fundamental factors contributing to current gender inequality. It became increasingly apparent that recalibrating the education system and redefining societal narratives are indispensable steps toward fostering greater equality and justice.

Detailed analysis of the data shows that the biggest obstacles and challenges to gender equality and social cohesion are negative legacies of the past, traditional gender roles, social expectations from women and men, hegemonic and toxic masculinity, gender-based violence, hate speech and corruption. Undoubtedly, patriarchal norms emerged as a prominent force shaping societal dynamics across the region. Women and persons from marginalised communities continue to encounter formidable obstacles in various domains, including the realm of politics, owing to the predominance of a male-oriented approach. The pervasive influence of patriarchal norms and entrenched gender expectations within the community became palpably evident throughout the course of the study, which shed light on the issue of gender-based stereotypes being normalised and legitimised through socialisation and formal education.

Gender equality is acknowledged as key to achieving social cohesion in the region, still hindered by a culture prominently based on a toxic and militarised masculinity model stemming from negative legacies of the past.

The study revealed the importance of creating physical spaces for young people to connect, emphasising the need for systemic changes that involve young individuals as leaders and policymakers. Despite a sense of discouragement emerging from the acknowledgement of a persistent presence of pervasive mainstream narratives that have perpetuated anti-gender, misogynistic, and sexist values, participants found inspiration in one another and recognised the potential for future connections and collaborations.

The insights gained from the research provided valuable information on how youth from across the region would like to see gender equality and social cohesion challenges tackled. Be it through the implementation of public policies, youth campaigns and action plans, civil society actions, or individual youth activist initiatives through the use of digital tools, young participants have enthusiastically made their voices heard. Among the remedies that can reduce discrimination and inequalities are education, particularly gender-sensitive education, equal access to labour and youth-led activism that can build more equal and more cohesive

societies. Important tools and vehicles for social change are digital literacy and digital and media activism which can use the power of various forms of media to connect and deconstruct gender stereotypes.

This research is a valuable asset to the existing studies and offers new insights about youth from youth that can advance theoretical and practical approaches to these kinds of research. Although fully aware of the challenges they face, young people demonstrated great enthusiasm for tackling them and a strong will to be drivers of change in their communities. A more inclusive and equitable society can only be forged through a deeper exploration of the influence of past narratives on contemporary issues, enabling youth to learn from history's lessons and construct a future grounded in fairness and solidarity.



LOCAL RESEARCH PAPERS

This regional research paper is complemented by five annexes, which enclose the data collected in all countries and territory of the project region:

- Albania
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Kosovo
- North Macedonia
- Serbia

These annexes are authored by the five young researchers who have led and participated in the study. They reflect on the perceptions and first-hand experience of youth as observed throughout the research activities in each location.

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