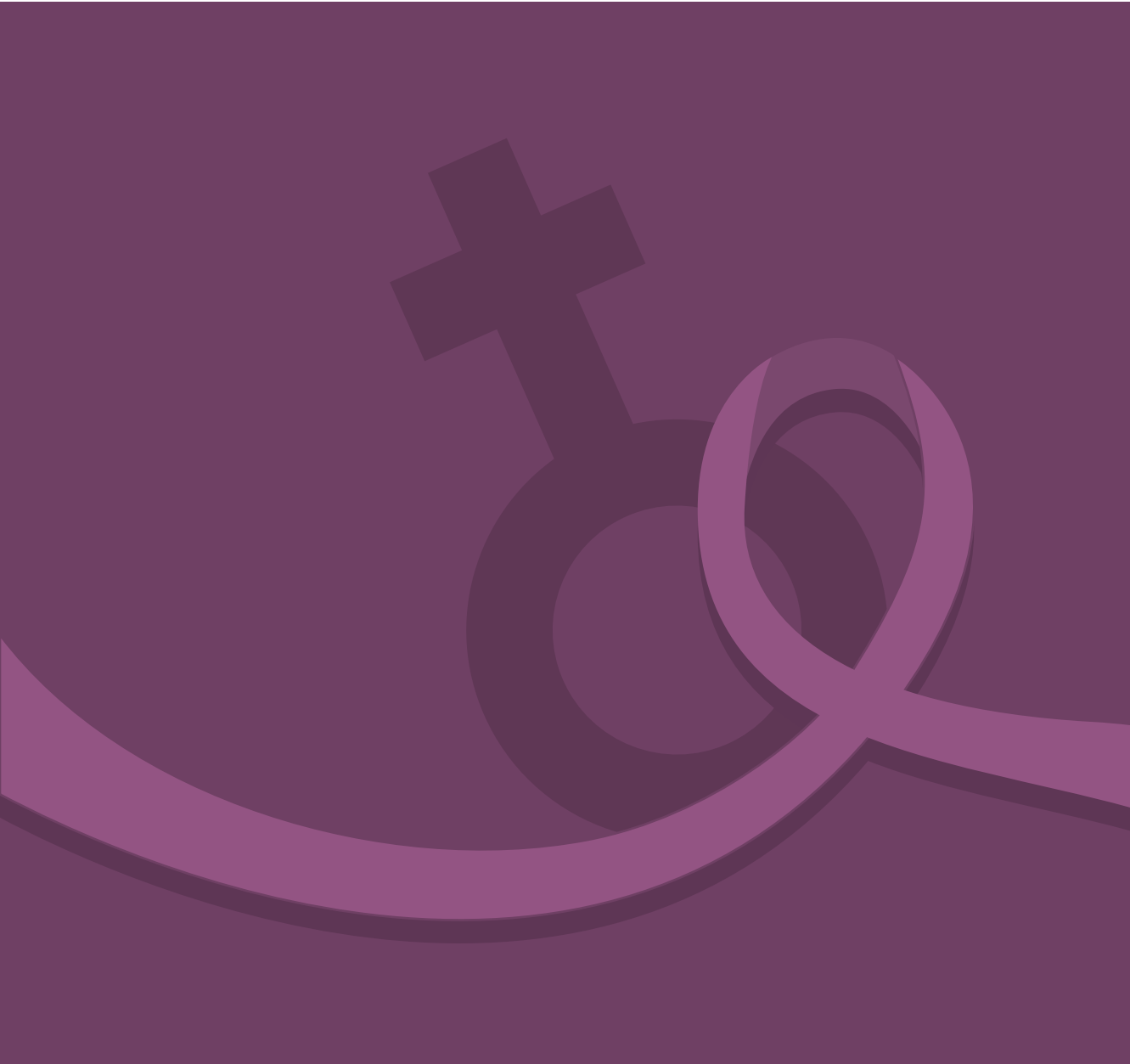




KCSS
Kosovar Centre for Security Studies



CHALLENGES AND INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES TO THE SAFETY OF KOSOVO SERBIAN WOMEN



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ABOUT THE GENDER, PEACE AND SECURITY PROGRAMME

The Gender, Peace and Security Programme has been developed to support Kosovo's progress in achieving objectives outlined in the Women, Peace and Security agenda. In line with UNSCR 1325, KCSS's Gender, Peace and Security Programme aims to support public security institutions in Kosovo in establishing internal and external gender responsive policies. Among others, the programme aims to ensure gender-equal participation across Kosovo's main security institutions such as the Kosovo Security Force (KSF) and the Kosovo Police (KP). Additionally, it seeks to consolidate a breadth of research identifying the main challenges related to gender-responsive security reform in Kosovo. Through providing robust gender analysis on Kosovo's security sector development, the programme aims to promote internal reform in line with the country's gender equality principles enshrined in the Law on Gender Equality. The programme will be further developed through:

- *Central and local advocacy to identify prominent challenges related to women's participation in the security sector;*
- *Baseline, midline and endline monitoring of recruitment within public security institutions in Kosovo*
- *Gender-analysis in line with Kosovo's WPS objectives.*

For more information, contact us:

GenderProgram@qkss.org

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INTRODUCTION

This research analyzes the perspectives of Kosovo Serb women and girls on their safety, the institutional response to gender-based violence, and gender equality within the police and the broader security sector.

Most survivors of gender-based violence, especially women and girls experiencing domestic violence from different ethnic groups, face a lack of sustainable support at the institutional level. This lack of institutional support, coupled with a patriarchal and criticized institutional approach and treatment of these cases, has drawn condemnation from human rights organizations and activists in Kosovo. In recent years, organized protests have taken place throughout Kosovo in response to gender-based violence and femicide, with particular reference to the alarming number of femicides.¹

While the number of reports of domestic violence demonstrates the growing awareness of gender equality in Kosovo, the lack of institutional capacity to prevent gender-based violence is evident. In addition, reported cases are often accompanied by a victim-blaming approach, deeply rooted in the patriarchal fabric of society. The severity of this situation is intensified when one considers the low employment rate of women and their limited financial independence.²

1 “ Women’s Security Concerns in Kosovo”, Kosovar Center for Security Studies, <https://qkss.org/en/publikimet/shqetesimet-lidhur-me-sigurine-e-grave-ne-kosove> (accessed 25.6.2024.)

2 Ibid.

CURRENT SITUATION OF REPORTING IN SERBIAN MUNICIPALITIES

In general, the number of reports of gender-based violence in Kosovo has slightly increased or remained the same over the last years. There are several reasons for this. Many girls and women do not know where to turn for protection, understanding, and finally help. Secondly, many women don't trust institutions because domestic violence trials take years, and perpetrators often receive very short sentences, if any.

The representative of the Women's Inclusive Center stated the recidivism rate of complaints is high. Many women from Serbian community reconcile with their husbands shortly after the first complaint, before it reaches court. This happens mainly under pressure from the family, but the women themselves are also aware of their abusers' familiarity with local police officers, social workers, etc.³

For the most part, women are aware of their rights, but they do not know who to turn to in case of need. Today there are so many debates and events dedicated to women's rights and human rights in general that it seems almost impossible to be completely unaware of one's rights in the community.⁴ Nevertheless, women's rights education is crucial in combating gender-based violence. Women and girls in Serbian majority municipalities are not aware of what gender-based violence encompasses.⁵ They tend to report only some cases of physical domestic violence.

During last year's 16 Days of Activism campaign (November–December 2023) the representative from the Minority Community Center in Gracanica had a discussion with high school girls. Most of them said that gender-based violence happens at school. Still, when they try to report it and talk about it with the school principal or psychologist, they discourage them and tell them that they "misunderstood the situation," which creates a narrative of victim blaming. The girls start to think that they are the ones doing something wrong. MCC has pointed out that this is why we need to educate girls more about their rights. If someone physically approaches you and touches you without your consent, you should be aware that you did not "request it" or "misinterpret that action," and school employees should have more respect and understanding for girls. They are the ones who need more training and education in this area as well. Even some female employees were able to recognize cases of bullying against them, but they did not get the protection they were asking for.⁶

THE AVAILABILITY OF WOMEN'S SHELTERS: There is a women's shelter for Serbian women in Novo Brdo, opened in 2020, which offers shelter and help to all women who seek protection for gender-based violence. After 24 hours, an adjustment period, the women sign an agreement with the shelter to share information, but also to abide by the rules of the safe house.⁷ Women

3 Interview with the representative of Women's Inclusive Center, May, 2024

4 Interview with the representative of the Novo Brdo safe house, May, 2024

5 Interview with the representative of the Minority Community Center in Gracanica, May, 2024

6 Ibid.

7 Interview with the representative of Women's Inclusive Center, May, 2024

from Gracanica, Strpce, and Ranilug typically seek help from a women's shelter in Novo Brdo. However, most residents of this shelter are still Albanian women. In these patriarchal communities, women are often hesitant to report psychological and physical violence due to fear of judgment and stigma from the local community. Additionally, high school girls in these areas were unaware that their schools have guidelines for preventing gender-based violence.⁸

In the northern region of Kosovo, there was a regional women's shelter in Zupce, within the Zubin Potok municipality, which operated until the resignation of the mayors, in November 2022. Initially, this women's shelter was merely a project, employing officials close to the authorities at the time (before the resignation of mayors) and involving the expropriation of the building by the Zubin Potok Assembly. With the resignation of the mayor and these officials on November 7, 2022, the Safe House ceased operations. Currently, efforts are underway to find a new facility in a different location. Although there has been little recent education on their rights or the availability of Safe Houses, women still reach out independently. They know that in emergencies, they can call the police, who will take them to the safe houses in southern Mitrovica or Novo Brdo.⁹

RESPONSE OF THE AUTHORITIES AND JUDICIAL SYSTEM: According to interviewees, over the past two years, the authorities' response to gender-based violence has generally been adequate, with police interventions being timely and appropriate. However, Judicial Procedures have been notably slow. A representative from the Women's Inclusive Center highlighted the importance of having psychologists and social workers present when victims report violence, especially when children are involved. Their presence helps prevent re-victimization by minimizing the need for victims to repeatedly recount their traumatic experiences. However, she pointed out a significant concern: some social workers' initial approach is often to attempt reconciliation between the victim and the abuser, which is frequently successful. Although the court system generally functions efficiently, it is often the victims themselves who choose not to continue legal proceedings against the abuser.¹⁰

THE MAIN BARRIERS TO REPORTING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: Based on the conducted interviews, economic dependence on a partner is identified as the biggest barrier for women, according to all the representatives of Serbian municipalities. Many women chose to become housewives after high school, making it difficult for them to escape abusive relationships unless they have support from parents or other relatives, which is rare in Gracanica and neighboring villages.¹¹

Mentality, prejudice and tradition are among the main barriers, especially in smaller communities. There are cases when women are even afraid to go to events and conferences dedicated to the topic of gender-based violence, thinking that their surroundings would immediately assume that they too are victims, since prevention and awareness work is nil. There are also cases when women believe that domestic violence is a private matter and should be resolved within the family.¹²

8 Interview with the representative of the Minority Community Center in Gracanica, May, 2024

9 Interview with the representative of the municipality of North Mitrovica, May, 2024

10 Interview with the representative of Women's Inclusive Center, May, 2024

11 Interview with the representative of the Minority Community Center in Gracanica, May, 2024

12 Ibid.

THE PRACTICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF HAVING MORE WOMEN IN THE SECURITY SECTOR

It is believed that increasing the presence of women in the security sector could boost women's confidence in seeking solutions to their problems. A greater number of female police officers might lead to more reports of incidents; however, since most reports are made over the phone, there is no guarantee who will respond. Police station coordinators, who are typically men, make the decisions on how to handle each case. While women are employed within the police force, their numbers should be higher. Although quotas are respected, women do not always serve as officers specializing in domestic violence cases.¹³ Women instinctively feel that female police officers understand them better and are more empathetic. Victims with bruises on certain body parts often feel more comfortable speaking with a woman. However, based on an interview with representative of Women's Inclusive Center there are still female officers who judge victims for returning to their abuser when they come to report the same man for the second or third time.¹⁴

GIRL'S INTEREST IN ATTENDING THE POLICE ACADEMY

There is significant interest from girls in Serbian municipalities in applying to the Police Academy. Although there are far fewer girls than boys, many still manage to attend the academy and work in the police force.¹⁵ The primary issue is the limited number of places available for girls, so not all who apply are accepted. However, every generation includes some girls from Serbian communities.

In smaller communities, girls are more inclined to pursue studies in teaching or medicine after high school, and rarely in police and security, unless they have strong family support. Even when they choose careers in police and security, they often prefer office work over fieldwork.

¹³ Interview with the representative of Women's Inclusive Center, May, 2024

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Interview with the representative of the Municipality of Strpce, May, 2024

RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1.** Continue efforts to identify and prevent gender-based violence while securing resources for the economic empowerment of women who are about to leave safe houses after a certain period.

- 2.** Ensure sufficient funding for shelters and qualified workers who speak Serbian.

- 3.** Organize campaigns to educate women and girls from rural communities about types of violence and available services in their native language, either within their community or in the nearest larger city.

- 4.** Raise the quota for the number of girls who can enroll in the Police Academy when there is higher interest.

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About KCSS

Established in April 2008, the Kosovar Centre for Security Studies (KCSS) is a specialized, independent, and non-governmental organization. The primary goal of KCSS is to promote the democratization of the security sector in Kosovo and to improve research and advocacy work related to security, the rule of law, and regional and international cooperation in the field of security.

KCSS aims to enhance the effectiveness of the Security Sector Reform (SSR) by supporting SSR programs through its research, events, training, advocacy, and direct policy advice.

Advancing new ideas and social science methods are also core values of the centre. Every year, KCSS publishes numerous reports, policy analysis and policy briefs on security-related issues. It also runs more than 200 public events including conferences, roundtables, and debates, lectures – in Kosovo, also in collaboration with regional and international partners.

A wide-range of activities includes research, capacity-building, awareness raising and advocacy. KCSS's work covers a wide range of topics, including but not limited to security sector reform and development, identifying and analyzing security risks related to extremism, radicalism, and organized crime, foreign policy and regional cooperation, and evaluating the rule of law in Kosovo.

This year, KCSS celebrated its 16th Anniversary. For more about KCSS, please visit and follow our social media accounts:



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