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## GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN NORTH MACEDONIA: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTION AND PROTECTION

### **Abstract:**

*Gender-based violence (GBV) is a serious social and legal problem that affects all societies, including North Macedonia. This type of violence is deeply rooted in unequal power relations between the sexes and social norms that reinforce those inequalities. Gender-based violence includes physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence directed at a person because of their sex or gender. It not only causes direct harm to the victims, but also affects their well-being, personal development and participation in society.*

*North Macedonia, as a country that strives for European integration and adoption of European values, takes significant steps to deal with this problem through legislation, strategies and programs for prevention and protection of victims. However, numerous challenges remain that hinder these efforts, such as insufficient public awareness, cultural barriers, inadequate implementation of laws, insufficient support for victims, as well as inequality in victims' access to justice.*

*This paper aims to analyze the current situation regarding gender-based violence in North Macedonia, to identify the main challenges the country is facing and to propose specific strategies and measures to overcome them. Through the analysis of existing data, the legislative framework and a case study, we will try to provide a complete overview of the problem and offer recommendations to improve the situation.*

**Keywords:** *gender-based violence, legislative framework, prevention and protection, istanbul convention, legal assistance.*

## Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant social and legal problem that affects all societies, including North Macedonia. This type of violence is deeply rooted in unequal power relations between the sexes and social norms that reinforce those inequalities. GBV includes physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence directed at a person because of their sex or gender. It not only causes direct harm to the victims, but also affects their well-being, personal development and participation in society. North Macedonia, as a country that strives for European integration and adoption of European values, takes significant steps to deal with this problem through legislation, strategies and programs for prevention and protection of victims. However, numerous challenges remain that hinder these efforts, such as insufficient public awareness, cultural barriers, inadequate implementation of laws, insufficient support for victims, as well as inequality in victims' access to justice. This paper aims to analyze the current situation regarding gender-based violence in North Macedonia, to identify the main challenges the country is facing and to propose specific strategies and measures to overcome them. Through the analysis of existing data, the legislative framework and case studies, we will try to provide a complete overview of the problem and offer recommendations to improve the situation.

### 1. Definition and types of gender-based violence

The Republic of North Macedonia was among the first countries to sign the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), which entered into force in July 2018.

Based on that, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was adopted, which entered into force in May 2021 and which is fully compliant with the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and aims to expand the system of prevention and protection of all forms of gender-based and family violence.

In the Law, Article 3 includes and defines: physical violence, psychological violence, stalking, economic violence, sexual violence and rape, sexual harassment, sexual harassment on the Internet, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, forced abortion and forced sterilization, as well as forced control over women.

The key novelties brought by the new Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and domestic violence consist, first of all, in the fact that they include new forms of violence introduced by the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, as well as the definitions of certain terms that have not been covered so far, such as gender-based violence (violence directed at women, because it is a woman or that disproportionately affects her and covers

the causes and results of unequal power relations between women and men ), stalking, genital mutilation, sexual violence, that is, non-consensual sexual acts, etc., as well as defining the vulnerable categories of women, namely: pregnant women, women with children and children with disabilities, single mothers, women with disabilities, women from rural areas, women who use drugs, sex workers, migrant women, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless women, lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, women living with HIV, homeless women, trafficked women, older women, the financially disadvantaged women and others.<sup>1</sup>

Gender-based violence refers to violence directed at a person because of their sex or gender. It includes physical, sexual, psychological and economic violence. Types of RBN include:

- **Physical violence** : attacks that cause bodily harm.
- **Sexual violence** : sexual assaults and harassment.
- **Psychological violence** : verbal attacks, intimidation and control.
- **Economic violence** : financial control and restriction of access to resources.

## 2. Legal framework in North Macedonia

### 2.1. National laws and regulations

The legal framework of the Republic of North Macedonia on gender-based violence includes several key laws and regulations. Between them are :

- **Criminal Code** : This law defines and sanctions acts of domestic violence, rape and sexual abuse. According to the Criminal Code, criminal acts related to gender-based violence carry serious sanctions.
- **Domestic Violence Protection Law** : This law covers measures to protect victims, including issuing protection orders and providing temporary housing.
- **Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men** : This law promotes gender equality and prevents discrimination based on sex.
- **Law on free legal aid**: This law aims to ensure equal access of citizens and other persons defined by this law to the institutions of the system, for getting to know, obtaining and enabling effective legal aid, in accordance with the principle of equal access to justice.
- **Law on payment of monetary compensation to victims of violent crimes** : This law aims to provide monetary compensation to victims of violent crimes as assistance from the state, in accordance with the

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<sup>1</sup> Report submitted by North Macedonia in accordance with Article 68, paragraph 1 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

principle of social solidarity and to prevent possible victimization and secondary victimization as additional suffering that victims may suffer from the attitude of the competent authorities.

- **Law on prevention and protection from violence against women and domestic violence** : This law aims to implement the principle of equality, eliminate of gender role stereotypes; prevention of all forms of gender-based violence against women, and domestic violence and determination of measures and activities for the protection of victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence, respect for basic human freedoms and rights guaranteed by the Constitution and ratified international agreements. It also defines the different types of violence, namely:

1) "Violence against women" is a violation of human rights, discrimination against women and refers to all acts of gender-based violence that lead or are likely to lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm, or suffering to women, including and direct and indirect threats and intimidation of such acts, extortion, arbitrary restriction and/or deprivation of liberty, regardless of whether they occur in public or private life;

2) "Gender-based violence against women" is violence directed at women, because it is a woman, or that disproportionately affects women. Gender-based violence against women encompasses the causes and results of unequal power relations between women and men as a result of a societal, not an individual, problem. Gender-based violence against women also refers to violence against women defined in points 1) and 3) of this article;

3) "Domestic violence" is harassment, insult, threat to security, physical injury, sexual or other type of mental, physical or economic violence, which causes a feeling of insecurity, threat or fear, including threats of such types of actions to the spouse, parents or children, or to other persons living in a marital or cohabiting union or in a joint household, as well as to the current or former spouse or common-law partner, or to persons who have a common child or are in close personal contact relationships, regardless of whether the perpetrator shares or shared the same residence with the victim or not.

According to the given definitions, the Law pays particular attention to the protection of the victims, and also specifies the actions and measures that the state should take for prevention and protection, but also for the reintegration of the victims, by providing a support system, including for economic strengthening, which should be achieved by improving institutional support for victims of gender-based violence.

Among other things, this law regulates the actions of institutions with due care when taking measures for the prevention of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, the actions of institutions for the protection of women from gender-based violence and family violence, the mutual coordination of institutions and organizations, services for the protection of victims and the collection of data on gender-based violence against women and

domestic violence. The purpose of the law is prevention and prevention of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence, effective protection of victims from any form of gender-based violence against women, as well as victims of domestic violence, with respect for basic human freedoms and rights, guaranteed by The Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia and the international agreements ratified in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia. The purpose of the Law is based on the principle of equality and elimination of stereotypes about gender roles.<sup>2</sup>

For the coordination of policies in this area, in accordance with Article 12 of the Law on prevention and protection from violence against women and domestic violence, a legal obligation is given for all competent institutions to cooperate with each other in order to protect the victims. For this purpose, a protocol for mutual cooperation is planned.

In this direction, the Ministry of Justice, in 2018, adopts an Operational Plan for the implementation of the activities foreseen in the Action Plan. The plans contain activities within the competence of the Ministry of Justice, with a time frame of one year and a budget for its implementation. The Ministry of Justice of the RSM prepared amendments and additions to the Criminal Code, which incorporate the standards of the Istanbul Convention, and which amendments have already entered into force. Also, the Law on the Payment of Monetary Compensation to Victims of Violent Crimes was adopted, according to which law, victims of gender-based violence and family violence have the right to compensation.

The criminal-legal protection of women victims of violence is carried out in accordance with the provisions of the Criminal Code and the Law on Criminal Procedure.

Thus, with the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code dated February 17, 2023, gender-based violence was defined for the first time.

In Article 5 of the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code, it has been replaced by clause (21) which reads: "Domestic violence means harassment, insult, threat to safety, physical injury, sexual or other psychological, physical or economic violence. which causes a feeling of insecurity, endangerment or fear, including threats of such actions against a spouse, parents or children or other persons living in a marital or common-law union or joint household, as well as against a current or former spouse, common-law partner or persons who have a common child or are in a close personal relationship, regardless of whether or not the perpetrator shares or has shared the same residence with the victim."

In paragraph (22) after the second sentence, a new, third sentence has been added, which reads: "Victim of gender-based violence means every wom-

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<sup>2</sup> Law on prevention and protection against violence against women and family violence of 29.01.2021.

an and girl up to the age of 18 against whom the crime was committed under those circumstances.”

After paragraph (42), a new paragraph (43) was added, which reads: “Gender-based violence against women means violence directed against a woman due to her belonging to the female gender, which leads or may lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic injury.” or suffering of women, including direct and indirect threats and intimidation of such acts, extortion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”

In Article 6 of the same Law, in Article 123, paragraph (2) after point 2) a new point 2-a) is added, which reads: “Another will take the life of a woman or girl up to 18 years of age, while committing gender-based violence. “

Then, in Article 8 of the Law, after Article 129, a new title and a new Article 129a are added, which read: “Mutilation of female genital organs”. Article 129a (1) He who fully or partially performs cutting, infibulation or any other mutilation of the external genital organ of a woman, will be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years. (2) With the penalty from paragraph (1) of this article, whoever forces a woman to undergo the actions covered in paragraph (1) of this article will be punished. (3) Whoever incites a woman or helps her undergo the actions referred to in paragraph (1) of this article, will be punished with a fine or imprisonment from six months to three years. (4) If the crime referred to in paragraphs (1), (2) and (3) of this article was committed out of hatred, or against a girl, or serious physical injury to the woman was premeditated, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment from one to eight years. (5) If the death of the woman or the girl occurred due to the crime from paragraphs (1), (2), (3) and (4) of this article, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment from one to ten years.

Article 130 paragraph (2) was also amended, which reads: “Whoever commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article while committing gender-based violence, violence against women or family violence or out of hatred or against a person who is special vulnerable due to his age, severe physical or mental disabilities or pregnancy, will be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years.”, and in the same direction there is an amendment to Article 131 paragraph (2), which reads: “Whoever commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article while committing gender-based violence, violence against women or domestic violence or out of hatred or against a person who is particularly vulnerable due to his age, severe physical or mental disabilities or pregnancy, will be punished with imprisonment from one to five years.”

With Article 11 of the Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code, Article 139 was amended, which reads: “(1) He who by force or by serious threat forces another to do or not to do or to suffer something, shall be punished with a fine or imprisonment for up to one year. (2) If the offense referred to in paragraph (1) of this article was committed while committing gender-based violence against women, domestic or hate violence or against a person who is particularly vulnerable due to his age, disability or pregnancy,

the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment from six months to three years. (3) With the penalty from paragraph (2) of this article, whoever commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article against a lawyer, doctor or other health worker, journalist or other media worker or other person performing work of public interest during the performance of professional tasks or in connection with the performance of professional tasks that he undertakes within the framework of his powers. (4) If the offense referred to in paragraph (1) of this article is committed by an official in the performance of his duties, he shall be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years. (5) The prosecution for the crime from paragraph (1) of this article is undertaken by a private lawsuit. (6) The attempt of the acts from paragraphs (2) and (3) of this article is punishable.”

Article 140, paragraph (2) has been amended and reads: “If the offense referred to in paragraph (1) of this article was committed while committing gender-based violence, violence against women or domestic violence or out of hatred or against a person who is particularly vulnerable because of his age, disability or pregnancy, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment from six months to three years.”, and a complete amendment was made to Article 144, which reads: “(1) He who seriously threatens another to attack his life or body or the life or body of a person close to him with the intention of disturbing or intimidating him, shall be punished by a fine or by imprisonment for up to six months. (2) If the crime from paragraph (1) of this article causes a feeling of insecurity, threat or fear to the victim, the perpetrator will be punished with a fine or imprisonment for up to one year. (3) Whoever commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article while committing gender-based violence, violence against women or family violence or out of hatred or against a person who is particularly vulnerable due to his age, severe physical or mental disabilities or pregnancy, will be punished with imprisonment from three months to three years. (4) With the penalty from paragraph (3) of this article, whoever commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article against an official in the performance of his duties, a lawyer, a doctor or another health worker, a journalist or another media person an employee or other person who performs works of public interest during the performance of professional tasks or in connection with the performance of professional tasks that he undertakes within the framework of his powers or towards several persons. (5) He who publicly, or through an information system, threatens to commit a crime for which a prison sentence of five years or a heavier sentence is prescribed against a person because of his belonging to a certain race, skin color, origin, national or ethnic origin, sex, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, belonging to a marginalized group, language, citizenship, social origin, education, religion or religious belief, political belief, other belief, disability, age, family or marital status, property status, state of health, personal quality and social status or any other basis provided by law or an international agreement ratified in accordance with the Constitution of the Republic of North Macedonia, shall be punished with a prison sentence of one



to five years. (6) The prosecution for the crime from paragraph (1) of this article is undertaken by a private lawsuit."

According to Article 16 of the Law, a new title and a new Article 144-a are added after Article 144, which read: "Stalking" and Article 144-a "(1) He who repeatedly follows, persecutes or otherwise interferes with the personal life of another or establishes or tries to establish unwanted contact with him by moving in the space where that person is, by misuse of personal data, by using means of public information or other means of communication, or to another psychologically abuses, disturbs or intimidates him in a way that will cause a feeling of insecurity, anxiety or fear for his safety or the safety of a person close to him, shall be punished with a fine or imprisonment for up to three years. (2) If the crime referred to in paragraph (1) of this article is committed against a person with whom the perpetrator is or was in an intimate relationship or against a child, he will be punished with imprisonment from six months to five years. (3) Prosecution for the offense from paragraph (1) of this article is undertaken upon motion."

Also, the title of article 186 and article 186 are changed and read: "Sexual assault and rape" and "(1) He who, contrary to the clearly expressed will of another, assessed in the context of the circumstances of the case, commits sexual intercourse on him or other sexual act equivalent to it, which consists in vaginal, anal or oral penetration with any part of the body or object, or will induce another person without his consent to perform sexual intercourse or other sexual act with a third person, or perform sexual act on oneself, will be punished with imprisonment from one to eight years. (2) If the crime referred to in paragraph (1) of this article is committed with a child who has reached the age of 15, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment of at least three years. (3) If the crime referred to in paragraph (1) of this article is committed by using force or threatening another person to immediately attack his life or body or the life or body of a person close to him, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment of three up to ten years. (4) With the penalty from paragraph (3) of this article, the person who commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article against another with a serious threat that he or a person close to him will reveal something that would harmed his honor and reputation or that he would cause other serious harm. (5) If the crime from paragraphs (3) and (4) of this article is committed against a child who has reached the age of 15, the perpetrator will be punished with imprisonment for at least eight years. (6) If due to the crime from paragraphs (1) to (5) of this article, serious bodily injury, death or other serious consequences occurred or the crime was committed by several persons or in a particularly cruel or humiliating manner or out of hatred, the perpetrator shall be punished by imprisonment for at least ten years or by life imprisonment. (7) Whoever, in the cases from paragraphs (1) to (5) of this article, performs only another sexual act that does not consist of vaginal, anal or oral penetration, will be punished for the crime from paragraph (1) of this article article with imprisonment from six months to three years, for the crime from



paragraph (2) of this article with a prison sentence of one to three years, for the crime from paragraphs (3) and (4) of this article with a prison sentence from one to five years, and for the crime from paragraph (5) of this article with a prison sentence of one to ten years. (8) If the offense referred to in paragraph (1) of this article is committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner, it shall be punished with imprisonment of at least three years. (9) If the offense referred to in paragraph (3) of this article is committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner, it shall be punished by imprisonment of at least five years.”

With article 23, a new title and a new article was introduced after article 190, namely article 190-a, which read: Sexual harassment Article 190-a (1) Anyone who by verbal, non-verbal or physical action, as well as through the use of electronic means for communication that has a direct or indirect, real or symbolic meaning of incitement, indecent offer, luring, expression of sexual passion or other action that clearly reminds of sexual intercourse or other sexual acts equated to it, and thereby will injure his dignity, causing feeling discomfort, insult, humiliation or fear, shall be punished by a fine or by imprisonment for up to one year. (2) He who commits the crime from paragraph (1) of this article against a person who is subordinate to him or against him is in a relationship of dependence, another person at work or in a public place or a person who is vulnerable due to age, illness, disability, drug addiction, pregnancy or severe physical or mental disabilities shall be punished by imprisonment from six months to three years.

Article 191, paragraph (3), has also been amended, which reads: “Whoever organizes the commission of the acts from paragraphs (1) and (2) of this article, or will commit the acts while committing family or gender-based violence against women, shall be punished by imprisonment for at least ten years.”<sup>3</sup>

## 2.2. *International conventions*

North Macedonia is a signatory to several international agreements and conventions related to gender-based violence, including:

- **The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)** : This convention obliges the state to take all necessary measures to eliminate discrimination against women.
- **The Istanbul Convention** : This Council of Europe convention deals with preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. North Macedonia ratified this convention and committed to its implementation.

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<sup>3</sup> Law on Amendments and Supplements to the Criminal Code of February 17, 2023.

### **3. Case study: Gender-based violence in North Macedonia**

The “NN” case is one of the most famous cases of gender-based violence in North Macedonia, which attracted the attention of the public and the media. “NN” was a victim of stalking and physical violence by her ex-partner, who continued to stalk and intimidate her several months after the breakup.

After “NN” reported the case, the police immediately reacted and the perpetrator was arrested. According to the Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia, stalking and threats are punishable offenses that carry prison sentences. In this case, the perpetrator was sentenced to six months in prison and was banned from approaching the victim.

“NN” was subjected to serious psychological trauma due to constant stalking and threats. She received psychological support from specialized services that helped her deal with the anxiety and stress caused by the violence. Specialized services to support victims of violence played a key role in her rehabilitation.

Social workers from the Center for Social Work helped “NN” to move to a safe place and start a new life without threats. Social services also provided her with financial assistance and support for her children.

### **4. Challenges and shortcomings in the system**

#### ***4.1. Insufficient awareness and education***

One of the main challenges is insufficient awareness and education about gender-based violence among the population. Many victims do not know where to turn or what rights they have.

#### ***4.2. Cultural barriers***

Cultural barriers and traditional gender roles often make reporting violence and seeking help difficult. In rural areas, this is especially pronounced.

#### ***4.3. Inadequate implementation of laws***

Although legislation exists, implementation is often problematic. There are cases where the law is not enforced consistently, and the punishments for the perpetrators are not adequate.

## 5. Recommendations for improving the system

### 5.1. Raising awareness and education

*One of the most important steps is increasing awareness and education about* gender-based violence through campaigns, seminars and workshops. The involvement of the education system is crucial.

### 5.2. Ensuring adequate support for victims

Adequate support should be provided to victims, including psychological and legal assistance, as well as safe shelters.

### 5.3. Improving the implementation of laws

Laws should be enforced consistently and effectively. This includes training of police and judges, as well as continuous monitoring of cases of violence.

### 5.4. Introducing severe punishments for perpetrators

Stricter penalties for perpetrators of gender-based violence should be introduced to ensure justice and deter potential perpetrators.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of the legal provisions of the national legislation shows that a difference is made between gender-based violence (GBN) and violence against women (GBV), and international legislation makes the same distinction.

Gender-based violence is a broader term and refers to “attempted or threatened physical, mental or social abuse (including sexual violence), with a specific type of force (such as violence, threats, coercion, manipulation, deception, cultural expectations, weapons or economic circumstances) and is directed at the person because of his/her gender roles and expectations in society or culture. The most common forms of gender-based violence target women and girls, but men and boys can also be victims of gender-based violence. All forms of violence directed at women are not gender-based.

While, on the other hand, violence against women is a form of gender-based violence. Violence against women violates human rights and discriminates against women. It refers to “all forms of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such treatment, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether in public or private life”. Domestic violence is one of the most common forms of violence against women.

## 7. Gender gaps in access to justice

- Legal and institutional barriers

Some of the obstacles women face relate to the laws themselves, such as legal provisions that are explicitly discriminatory. Others refer to the interpretation of the law in a blind and even biased way.

Discriminatory legal frameworks – in some countries, women are excluded by law from certain jobs, based on stereotypes that the jobs require physical strength or the handling of weapons, or that jobs that are harmful to reproductive health are not suitable for women. Defining certain crimes can also be problematic, such as the crime of rape where an element of force rather than consent is involved. Although one of the ways to overcome this problem is through changing the laws, the judiciary can also contribute to overcoming those barriers.

Ineffective or problematic laws or procedures – even when laws are not discriminatory, they cannot simply fail to respond to certain forms of rights violations that disproportionately affect women. For example, some jurisdictions do not have laws on sexual harassment in the workplace, and not all jurisdictions have rules in place to reduce trauma and protect the privacy of victims of gender-based violence.

Gender-insensitive interpretation and implementation of law – when legal professionals do not apply a gender perspective, they may apply neutral laws in a discriminatory manner. For example, it may be difficult for a woman who has killed an abusive partner to meet the legal requirements of proportionality and urgency in self-defense. However, a gender-sensitive interpretation of the law allows to take into account the fact that the woman faced violence many years ago and was psychologically abused at the time she committed the crime.

Gender stereotypes and gender bias in the legal system – gender stereotypes not only affect the enjoyment of women's rights, but stereotypes and prejudices hinder women's access to justice in all areas of law. Gender stereotypes have particularly harmful consequences for victims of gender-based violence.

- Socio-economic and cultural barriers

Socio-economic and cultural barriers that may prevent women from accessing justice stem from the unequal distribution of power and resources between women and men. Therefore challenges surrounding access to justice, such as courts located only in urban centers, can have a major impact on women who have fewer resources at their disposal. For example, rural women are much more likely to lack the financial resources and time necessary to travel to a court in the city. The lower socio-economic position of women is often exacerbated by court proceedings rather than challenged by law.

To ensure easier and simpler access to justice, not only for victims of gender-based violence, but also for all vulnerable categories and persons with disabilities, North Macedonia takes over measures for alignment on the laws

with who everything asks from the courts yes them relieved the judicial ones procedures and the procedural ones conditions for the faces with disability and yes bring measures for yes everything insure that all victims and persons with disabilities have access to justice and that information and communications are available in accessible formats. In this sense, the CEDAW Committee recognized the progress achieved by North Macedonia in relation to the legislation on free legal aid, by adopting the Law on Free Legal Aid and the Law on the Payment of Monetary Compensation to Victims of Violent Crimes, but is nevertheless concerned, inter alia, because of obstacles for women to claim their rights and obtain compensation, which in turn is due to eligibility requirements and the existence of gender stereotypes among law enforcement officials, including the police. The committee recommended that North Macedonia ensure that courts adequately address intersecting forms of discrimination, including through awareness-raising activities and training for judges and lawyers on the importance of addressing violations of women's rights. In order to ensure effective access to justice, the processes must allow participation, and must be transparent, which also means providing information in an accessible and understandable way; recognizing and enabling different ways of communication; physical accessibility throughout all stages of the process; and financial support in case of legal aid.

### **Conclusion**

Gender-based violence is a serious problem that requires an interdisciplinary approach and commitment from all social sectors. North Macedonia has a significant legal and institutional basis for combating this problem, but further efforts are needed to improve awareness, education and implementation of laws. With the right approach and cooperation, we can build a society that is safe and equal for all.

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