



**Advocacy Center**  
for **Democratic Culture**



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# **Analysis on Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence in Northern Kosovo**



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# ABOUT THE PROJECT

The project " Breaking the Silence: Combating Sexual Harassment and GBV in northern Kosovo " was implemented with the aim of providing empirically-based insight into the prevalence, patterns and institutional responses to sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) in the northern municipalities of Kosovo. The research was carried out in a specific post-conflict and multi-ethnic context, in which issues of security, inter-ethnic relations and trust in institutions directly affect citizens' willingness to report violence and use available protection mechanisms.

The geographical scope of the project includes the municipalities of North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposavić and Zubin Potok, with an additional research focus on South Mitrovica, bearing in mind the frequency of reported inter-ethnic incidents and population mobility between the northern and southern parts of the region. Special attention is paid to the experiences of women and girls from different ethnic communities, as well as to the perceptions of local actors about the functioning of the prevention and protection system against GBV.

The project was conceived as an analytical-research intervention, whose primary goal was to identify key structural and institutional obstacles in recognizing, reporting and processing sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. The research focus included issues of low level of reporting, present stigmatization of victims, limited understanding of the concept of sexual harassment in practice, as well as challenges in inter-institutional cooperation between the police, judiciary and civil society organizations.

The research findings of the project represent the basis for further analysis of the existing legal and institutional framework, as well as for formulating recommendations aimed at improving public policies, strengthening preventive mechanisms and developing contextually adapted responses to sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the northern part of Kosovo.

# INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence (GBV) represent a serious social and security problem in Kosovo, with particularly pronounced challenges in the northern municipalities. In this region, the complex post-crisis and multi-ethnic context, low level of trust in institutions, fragmented institutional practice and the present social stigma further complicate the recognition, reporting and adequate processing of these forms of violence.

Although the legal framework of Kosovo formally recognizes and sanctions sexual harassment and gender-based violence, in practice there is still a significant gap between normative provisions and their implementation, especially in environments with weakened institutional capacities and limited inter-institutional coordination. Cases that have an inter-ethnic dimension are a special challenge, because they additionally affect the feeling of personal security, freedom of movement and social cohesion in local communities.

This public policy document is based on the findings of the research conducted in the northern municipalities of Kosovo within the project "*Breaking the Silence: Combating Sexual Harassment and GBV in northern Kosovo*". The aim of the document is to offer an overview of the key problems and systemic shortcomings in the current response to sexual harassment and GBV, as well as to identify areas where targeted and contextually adapted public policies are needed to improve prevention, victim protection and institutional accountability.





## BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

Gender-based violence (GBV), including sexual harassment, is one of the most widespread and socially harmful forms of human rights violations in Kosovo. Although the public discourse has dealt with this issue more often in recent years, violence against women and girls is still largely present in the private and public sphere, often remaining invisible, unreported or not taken seriously enough.

Sexual harassment is particularly problematic because it is often perceived as a "less serious" form of violence, normalized in everyday life, and rarely recognized as a violation of dignity and safety. In practice, victims face social stigmatization, fear of condemnation, mistrust of institutions and lack of clear information about available protection mechanisms. These factors significantly contribute to low reporting rates and perpetuate the cycle of violence.

In Kosovo, the problem of GBV was further shaped by a period of social renewal, strong patriarchal norms and long-standing social divisions. The legacy of conflict, collective trauma and the normalization of violence in public space have left long-term consequences for the perception of safety, especially for women and girls. In such an environment, violence is often seen as a private matter, while responsibility is shifted to the victims instead of the perpetrators and the system.

Despite the existence of a formal legal and institutional framework to combat gender-based violence, the gap between norms and practice remains

### Northern Kosovo

The situation in the north of Kosovo is additionally complicated due to the multi-ethnic composition of the population, political tensions and weakened trust in institutions. In this region, issues of security, inter-ethnic relations and parallel institutional practices influence that victims are often discouraged from reporting violence, especially in cases that have an inter-ethnic dimension. The fear of additional stigmatization, politicization of cases or lack of adequate institutional reaction leads to the fact that sexual harassment and other forms of GBV remain suppressed and invisible.



pronounced. Prevention, early identification and coordinated institutional response are often underdeveloped, while system accountability is often reduced to individual cases instead of long-term, structural changes.

In this context, understanding gender-based violence and sexual harassment as a wider social and security problem, and not exclusively as an individual incident, is a key prerequisite for the development of effective public policies and sustainable institutional responses.

## METHODOLOGY

This public policy document is based on the findings of qualitative research conducted in the period August-September 2025 as part of the project "*Breaking the Silence: Combating Sexual Harassment and GBV in northern Kosovo*". The research aimed to provide insight into perceptions, experiences and institutional challenges related to sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence in the northern municipalities of Kosovo.

Qualitative methodology was used, which included six semi-structured interviews with relevant actors and four focus groups with citizens. Interviews were conducted with representatives of institutions, civil society organizations and other relevant actors involved in the prevention and response to gender-based violence, while focus groups gathered women and other members of local communities from the northern municipalities of Kosovo.

Focus group discussions enabled a more detailed understanding of personal experiences, attitudes and obstacles faced by victims and potential victims of sexual harassment, as well as perceptions of the availability and effectiveness of institutional protection mechanisms. Interviews were used to look at the institutional perspective, identify existing practices, as well as observed deficiencies in the system's coordination and response.

The collected qualitative data were analyzed thematically, with a focus on recurring patterns, key obstacles in reporting and processing cases, the level of trust in institutions and specific challenges arising from the multi-ethnic context of northern Kosovo. The research findings represent the empirical basis for the conclusions and recommendations presented in this public policy document.





## LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

Kosovo has established a comprehensive legal and strategic framework to combat gender-based violence (GBV) and sexual harassment. <sup>1</sup>As of 2020, the Constitution of Kosovo directly integrates the standards of the Istanbul Convention (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence), which made international requirements part of the internal legal order. <sup>2</sup>Key laws were adopted, including Law no. 08/L-185 on prevention and protection from domestic violence, violence against women and gender-based violence (2023), which for the first time uniquely regulates this area, in line with the Istanbul Convention. <sup>3</sup>This new law replaced the previous law on protection against domestic violence from 2010 <sup>4</sup> and complements the provisions of the Criminal Code, which from 2019 recognizes sexual harassment and domestic violence as criminal offences. <sup>5</sup>

In addition to the law, there is also the Law on Gender Equality (2015), which prohibits discrimination and harassment based on gender, as well as relevant protocols and standards for the conduct of institutions. <sup>6</sup>Kosovo also adopted the National Strategy for Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women 2022-2026, which, together with the action plan, defines measures for prevention, protection of victims and prosecution of perpetrators. <sup>7</sup>Institutional mechanisms include the Agency for Gender Equality at the Prime Minister's Office and multisectoral coordination mechanisms at the central and local level. <sup>8</sup>For example, municipal coordination mechanisms have been established that bring together the police, centers for social work, prosecutors, health institutions and

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<sup>1</sup>Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, *Legislative framework for the prevention and fight against violence against women and domestic violence*, Prishtina.

<sup>2</sup>Constitution of the Republic of Kosovo (with amendments), Article 22 - direct application of international agreements on human rights, including the Istanbul Convention.

<sup>3</sup>Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Law no. 08/L-185 on prevention and protection from domestic violence, violence against women and gender-based violence, 2023.

<sup>4</sup>Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Law no. 03/L-182 on protection against domestic violence, 2010.

<sup>5</sup>Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo (No. 06/L-074), 2019.

<sup>6</sup>Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Law no. 05/L-020 on gender equality, 2015.

<sup>7</sup>Government of the Republic of Kosovo, National strategy for protection against domestic violence and violence against women 2022-2026, with Action Plan.

<sup>8</sup>Prime Minister's Office - Agency for Gender Equality, Mandate and Institutional Mechanisms for Gender Equality, Prishtina



civil society organizations for a better exchange of information and joint action in cases of violence.<sup>9</sup> Also, special measures for the protection of victims were introduced, such as urgent restraining orders and a system of electronic monitoring of abusers (electronic bracelets) to monitor compliance with court orders.<sup>10</sup>

In the framework of transitional justice, it is important to note that in 2014, by amending the law, the status of civilian victims of war was formally recognized for survivors of sexual violence during the 1998-1999 conflict. year.<sup>11</sup> This made it possible for the first time for victims of war rape to realize their right to monthly reparation and institutional recognition, although full implementation began only in 2018 due to a long period of silence and stigmatization.<sup>12</sup> All these reforms represent a significant progress in the normative sense - today Kosovo nominally has modern laws and strategies against gender-based violence, aligned with international standards and obligations arising from the CEDAW Convention and Resolution 1325 of the United Nations Security Council.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kosovo, Standard Operating Procedures for Handling Cases of Domestic Violence, Pristina.

<sup>10</sup>Ministry of Internal Affairs and Judicial Council of Kosovo, Implementation of electronic monitoring as a measure of protection in cases of domestic violence, 2022.

<sup>11</sup>Assembly of the Republic of Kosovo, Amendments to the Law on the Status and Rights of Civilian Victims of War, 2014.

<sup>12</sup>Commission for the Recognition and Verification of the Status of Survivors of Sexual Violence During War, Annual Work Report, 2018.

<sup>13</sup>United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Concluding Observations on Kosovo, as well as UN Security Council, Resolution 1325 (2000).



## PREVALENCE OF VIOLENCE AND REPORTING

Despite a strong legal framework, research shows that violence against women in Kosovo remains widespread, while reporting is low due to deep-rooted social barriers. According to a major OSCE survey from 2019, more than half of women (about 54%) in Kosovo reported that they had experienced some form of psychological, physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15, and almost 30% had experienced sexual harassment.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, family violence is one of the most common forms of crime in the country - according to police data, over 10,000 cases of family violence were registered in the last four years, which makes this form of violence the second most frequently reported crime (after property theft). However, there are indications that the actual prevalence is significantly higher than the official number of reports.

Worryingly, only about 2% of women reported the most serious incidents of intimate partner violence to the police. The deep-rooted attitude that *"domestic violence is a private matter"* contributes to the silence of victims - almost half of women (48%) believe that domestic violence is a private matter that is not taken outside the home. In addition, a significant part of the population still tolerates or justifies violence: about 21% of respondents think that it is sometimes acceptable for a man to hit his wife.

Such attitudes and the stigmatization of victims lead to a massive *"dark number"* of violence that remains unreported. Research has also shown that certain groups of women are particularly affected - for example, women with lower education, without their own income or from rural areas more often report the experience of violence. Furthermore, between 2017 and 2020, at least 74 women were killed by a partner or family member, which

testifies to the deadly outcomes that violence can lead to if adequate protection is not provided in time. These alarming data have triggered numerous protests and public appeals in recent years, especially after a series of femicides and severe cases of sexual violence that shocked the public. Loud dissatisfaction of citizens

<sup>14</sup>Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), Women's Well-being and Security: Research on Violence against Women in Kosovo, OSCE, Vienna/Pristina, 2019, p. 21–25.



increased the pressure on institutions to improve the protection of women and girls in practice.

## SPECIFIC CHALLENGES IN THE NORTHERN KOSOVO

Northern Kosovo, with its specific post-crisis context, multi-ethnic and security dynamics, faces additional challenges in combating gender-based violence. The northern region (four municipalities with a majority Serb population) functioned for a long time in conditions of weaker integration into Kosovo institutions, which was also reflected in the availability of protective mechanisms for victims of violence. In the immediate aftermath of the 1999 war, the institutional vacuum and mistrust between communities meant that many cases of domestic and sexual violence remained unprocessed. Also, inter-ethnic tension further discouraged victims from non-majority communities to seek help outside their community.

The post-conflict stabilization period also affected the nature of violence, particularly when referring to violence that occurred during and after the war, as insecurity, lack of resources, and the reconstruction of social and political structures often led to the escalation of violent behavior and broader social tensions. However, due to social stigma, the issue of wartime rape was taboo for a long time, so it was only a decade after the war that survivors began to receive formal recognition and support. This collective trauma has left deeper consequences in the community: there is a phenomenon

### Limited access to justice and protection

Victims from the Serbian, Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities face multiple obstacles – apart from gender discrimination, there are often language barriers, fear of stigmatization within the community and mistrust of institutions run by members of other ethnic groups. In the North, this problem is pronounced: traditional patriarchal norms and the closedness of the environment lead to the fact that women often remain silent about violence due to fear of condemnation from the environment.



of the normalization of violence due to the legacy of war and the militarization of society, which can lead to more tolerance for violent behavior in the family.

Security challenges in the north further complicate the institutional response to the GBV. Periodic political tensions and security incidents led to the occasional weakening of the presence and capacity of law enforcement in this area. For example, at the end of 2022, there were mass resignations of police officers from the ranks of Kosovo Serbs as a sign of protest, which practically paralyzed the work of the police in the northern municipalities. Consequently, in the first half of 2023, there was a decrease in the reporting of crimes such as theft and domestic violence in the north, which is partly attributed to the reluctance of citizens of the Serbian community to report cases to institutions where their compatriots no longer work. Distrust towards newly hired police officers and judges (often from other parts of Kosovo) led to cases of violence being kept quiet or resolved informally, instead of seeking protection from state authorities. On the other hand, the qualification of sexual harassment as a misdemeanor, instead of a criminal offense as prescribed by the Criminal Code of Kosovo, by the judges and prosecutors, contributed to distrust in judicial institutions and thus led to irregular reporting of this criminal offense.

An aggravating circumstance is the lack of adequate services on the ground: the first safe house (shelter) for victims of violence in the north was opened only in 2020 with the support of the international community.



*Opening of the first regional shelter for victims of gender-based violence in the north of Kosovo ( Zubin Potok municipality, June 2020).@ [UNMIK - United Nations Mission in Kosovo](#) | Facebook*



Local and international officials jointly supported the establishment of the safe house, which closed a multi-year gap in protective services for the four northern municipalities.

Before that, the victims from North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zvečan and Zubina Potok had to take refuge in shelters south of the Ibar or stay in a place where they are exposed to danger. In recent years, local authorities have shown a willingness to get involved: all four northern municipalities have jointly provided space and financial support for a regional shelter, as a sign that they want an "institutional fight against domestic violence". This shelter, along with accompanying empowerment programs (therapeutic workshops, economic empowerment through greenhouses, etc.), provides not only immediate protection but also the opportunity for victims to begin the recovery process in their region.

However, the capacities remain limited - the shelter can accommodate about 20 people, and the sustainability of funding depends on the continued support of central institutions and donors. The security aspect is also reflected in the need to protect the shelter itself: KFOR provided and installed video surveillance to increase the security of the facility, which shows that international structures still play a role in guaranteeing security in the north.

In short, the north of Kosovo represents an environment where *gender-based violence intersects with post-conflict challenges*: the legacy of war and inter-ethnic mistrust create fertile ground for less visibility of this problem. Although the legal framework of Kosovo is equally valid in the north, the challenges in implementation are greater due to weaker integration of the community, language and cultural barriers and a tense security context. This means that women in these municipalities often remain doubly marginalized - as victims of violence and as members of a community that is outside the full institutional protection system.



## DEFICIENCIES IN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL COORDINATION

Despite the existence of advanced laws and strategies, practice shows significant gaps in implementation and coordination that undermine effective protection against gender-based violence. The institutional response often does not follow "zero tolerance" in action, but remains on paper, as independent reports warn. One of the problems is the narrow orientation of the system to the criminal prosecution of perpetrators, with insufficient focus on the needs of the victim. Almost all support is conditional on the victim formally reporting the case to the police, even when they are primarily in need of protection or shelter. Lack of trust in institutions and fear of stigma mean that many victims are reluctant to contact the police – and without a police report, access to safe houses and other forms of assistance is difficult. Those who do come forward often face inadequate treatment: *Amnesty International* recorded the testimonies of women who were met with distrust by the police or even scolded for reporting their partners. Similar obstacles are encountered in centers for social work and prosecutor's offices - victims often lack timely information about their rights, and *systemic deficiencies* (overburdened social workers, limited number of professional psychologists, etc.) reduce the quality of support.

It is particularly concerning that *the courts do not use all available protection and sanctioning mechanisms. Although the law allows victims to be awarded compensation in criminal proceedings, an analysis of court rulings showed that courts have never ordered perpetrators to pay compensation to victims. Also, it has been established that perpetrators of domestic violence are often given punishments that are not proportionate to the severity of the crime – for example, suspended sentences or fines for repeat offenders, which do not deter enough from repeating the violence. This leniency of the judiciary was the reason for harsh criticism from the public and women's organizations, especially after several tragic outcomes where reported abusers remained at large and committed femicide. The Constitutional Court of Kosovo found in 2021 that the state authorities failed to protect one victim (Sebahate Morin) who was killed by her husband despite previous reports, which violated her basic right to life. Such cases have exposed cracks in the protection system - from ineffective risk assessment to non-compliance with restraining orders, to poor communication between the police, the prosecution and centers for social work.*



Problems of coordination between institutions represent a permanent challenge. Although there are *multidisciplinary teams* and defined procedures, there is often shifting of responsibilities. In the field, this means that the victim can remain "*in the gap*" between the systems - the police arrest the abuser, but the center for social work does not provide timely accommodation for the victim, or the health institution does not report the injuries as violence, etc. Positive progress can be seen in certain municipalities that are introducing local coordination mechanisms with the support of OSCE. The aim of these mechanisms is for all relevant services to exchange information more quickly and monitor each case of violence together. However, at the level of the entire country, there is still no uniform application of such an approach. The financial sustainability of specialized services is an additional problem: shelters for victims are mostly run by non-governmental organizations and rely on donations, while government funds arrive late or in insufficient amounts. Safe houses (eight of them throughout Kosovo, plus one counseling center in the north) provide *crucial protection* to hundreds of women and children annually, but without systemic budget funding, their survival is uncertain. A coalition of organizations gathered in the *Security and Gender Group* (SSG), led by UN Women, repeatedly appealed to the Assembly of Kosovo to allocate sufficient funds for the operation of shelters, stressing that this is a legal and constitutional obligation of the state.

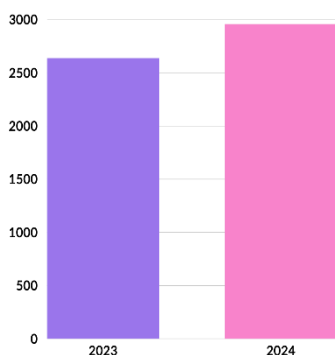
WHERE THE LAW AND STRATEGIES ARE IMPLEMENTED CONSISTENTLY, PROGRESS CAN BE OBSERVED - THE NUMBER OF REPORTS OF VIOLENCE HAS BEEN INCREASING IN RECENT YEARS, WHICH MAY ALSO MEAN GREATER TRUST OF VICTIMS IN INSTITUTIONS.

Nevertheless, key shortcomings are still present: insufficient prevention (eg work with perpetrators to prevent recurrence of violence is just beginning), slow response of institutions and uneven quality of services from region to region. In the northern part of Kosovo, the aforementioned institutional gap additionally slows down the implementation of the law in practice. Therefore, experts emphasize that sustainable efforts to educate and change awareness, continuous training of all professionals (police, judges, prosecutors, social workers, health workers) on gender-based violence, as well as zero tolerance, which is reflected in daily work - from the first police response to the final court verdict, are necessary to combat GBV. Only through such a comprehensive approach can the gap between written regulations and the reality faced by women victims of violence be bridged.





## SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS IN NORTHERN KOSOVO



Official data indicate a continuous increase in reported cases of violence against women throughout Kosovo in recent years. In 2023, 2,639 cases of domestic violence were reported, while in 2024, that number increased to 2,959 cases.<sup>15</sup> This growth suggests that the problem of gender-based violence (GBV) is deepening or that more victims are choosing to report the violence. However, in majority-Serbian areas in the north, a large under-reporting of cases is evident,

partly due to distrust in institutions and social stigmas, which is confirmed by the findings of the qualitative research conducted for the purposes of this policy summary document.

In the municipalities of North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Leposavić and Zubin Potok, available statistics are limited. According to one analysis, the municipality of North Mitrovica had by far the highest frequency of reported domestic violence in the entire country for the period July 2023 - June 2024. 66 cases of domestic violence were recorded in North Mitrovica, which in relation to its small population of about 2,346 inhabitants<sup>16</sup> represents an incidence of 281 cases per 10,000 inhabitants, the highest compared to any other region of Kosovo. This figure reflects a drastic jump in applications in North Mitrovica, although it can partly be explained by the small portion of registered population due to an incomplete census in the north.

In contrast, for the other three northern municipalities (Zvečan, Leposavić, Zubin Potok) there is no publicly available disaggregated data on the number of reported cases of GBV in the observed period. Indicatively, in police reports, the northern region is often not singled out or records a minimal number of reports. This does

<sup>15</sup> <https://radiokontaktplus.org/vesti/skoro-3-000-slucajeva-porodicnog-nasilja-za-devet-meseci/113558/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/GLPS-JR-Annual-Report-2024-Eng.pdf>



not mean that there was no violence, but that many victims in these areas do not report the violence to official authorities. Findings from the focus groups indicate that there are cases where survivors state that they have suffered domestic violence for years or decades without ever reporting it, indicating the scale of the "numbers in the dark" and deep-rooted barriers to reporting. Similar findings show that at the level of Kosovo, as many as 54% of women have experienced some form of psychological, physical or sexual violence since the age of 15, but only 14% in total reported physical/sexual violence;<sup>17</sup> in particular, it was noted that women from the Serbian community more often report the experience of physical or sexual violence than women from the Albanian community, which may indicate a potentially greater prevalence of violence in communities in the north, but also specific reporting patterns and availability of support. These data highlight the large gap between the actual extent of violence and the number of reports to the authorities.



*More than 54% of women in Kosovo experienced some sort of violence during life, while only 14 % of them reported violence to the institutions*

In this context, the findings presented in this policy brief are based on qualitative research conducted in the period from August to September 2025 in the northern municipalities of Kosovo, as well as on the analysis of available data, reports of institutions, civil society organizations and media sources from the period 2022-2025. year. This combined approach made it possible to see the problem of sexual harassment and gender-based violence (GBV) simultaneously from the

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.rolplatform.org/osce-survey-on-violence-against-women-in-kosovo/>



perspective of local communities and through a broader institutional and security context.

One of the most pronounced findings of the research concerns the deep gap between the prevalence of sexual harassment and the number of formally reported cases. Focus group participants and interlocutors in the interviews agree that sexual harassment, especially in the public space, has recently been noticed more often and talked about more than before, but that this is not accompanied by a corresponding increase in reports to institutions. This perception is also confirmed by desk research findings, which indicate that in the last two to three years, numerous media reports and public reactions regarding the harassment of women have been recorded in northern Mitrovica, while official statistics and judicial practice remain limited and fragmented. This indicates that increased visibility of the problem does not necessarily mean greater trust in institutional protection mechanisms.

The reasons for non-reporting, as revealed by interviews and focus groups, are multi-layered and deep-rooted. Stigma, fear of condemnation in the community, fear of additional victimization and mistrust of the police and judiciary are cited as key obstacles. Many participants point out that they often do not perceive sexual harassment as something that institutions will take seriously, especially when there is no physical violence or visible consequences. Desk research findings further confirm this perception, indicating that cases of sexual harassment in practice are often prosecuted as minor offenses or not prosecuted at all, which sends a message of impunity and further discourages victims from contacting institutions.

INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITIES FOR PROSECUTING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN THE NORTH HAVE BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY WEAKENED SINCE NOVEMBER 2022.

Then, due to political tensions, ethnic Serb civil servants left Kosovo's institutions in the north in large numbers - including police officers, judges and prosecutors. The mass departure of staff led to a significant drop in the capacity of the Basic Court in Mitrovica and

the Prosecutor's Office to administer justice in a timely manner. Cases of domestic violence and other crimes remained at a standstill or were transferred to already overburdened institutions south of the Ibar. According to available reports, in order to maintain basic functionality, judges from other regions temporarily took over cases from Mitrovica, focusing primarily on detention cases, cases of domestic violence and those before the expiration of legal terms.



However, the long-term consequences of the lack of local staff include delays, a backlog of cases and reduced access to justice for victims of GBV in the north.

On the police front, the coverage of northern municipalities by police forces was significantly reduced after the withdrawal of Serbian police officers in 2022. During 2023, efforts were made to fill the vacant positions by sending policemen from other parts of Kosovo, but the local communities in the north met those forces with mistrust and resistance. Research findings indicate that mistrust of the police in Serbian communities has increased during this period, with women from northern Mitrovica citing the feeling that the police do not provide security equally for all citizens and that reports of harassment are often not treated seriously enough. It is also pointed out that there were cases where citizens did not receive an adequate response when they tried to file a report, or they got the impression that the focus was on discouraging witnesses, instead of identifying and sanctioning the perpetrators. Such experiences contribute to feelings of insecurity and further reduce the likelihood of formal reporting.

Regarding prosecution, available data suggest that the northern part of Kosovo had significantly fewer court proceedings for domestic violence compared to other parts of the country. For example, in the period July 2022 - June 2023, the Basic Court in Mitrovica decided the least number of domestic violence cases compared to other basic courts in Kosovo.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, it is indicated that the criminal policy for violence remains mild: the analysis of judgments showed that courts at the level of Kosovo rarely imposed prison sentences on perpetrators of domestic violence, while in most cases conditional sentences were imposed. This outcome can undermine victims' trust that perpetrators will face consequences and further strengthen the belief that reporting does not bring protection.

At the same time, the positive news is that at the end of 2020, all four northern municipalities, with the support of UNMIK and other partners, institutionally started to strengthen the response to domestic violence by establishing the first regional shelter (safe house).<sup>19</sup> At that time, it was pointed out that local institutions will jointly provide protection to victims and improve the coordination of the police, centers for social work, prosecutor's office and courts. However, the findings of the desk research and field research confirm that this coordination has weakened in practice after 2022 precisely because of institutional gaps and reduced capacities. Overall, the limited capacities of institutions, staffing

<sup>18</sup> <https://legalpoliticalstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/GLPS-Just-React-Annual-Report-Domestic-and-Gender-based-Violence-in-Kosovo.pdf>

<sup>19</sup>



shortages and insufficient training of staff represent serious obstacles to an effective response to GBV in the North.

Until 2020, there was no safe house in northern Kosovo, which meant that survivors of the violence had to seek refuge in shelters south of the Ibar or return to their abusers. The absence of a functional shelter was a major obstacle to providing adequate assistance to victims in the four northern municipalities. This gap was filled at the end of June 2020 with the opening of the first regional shelter for victims of gender-based violence in the municipality of Zubin Potok. The shelter is in an adapted building, it can accommodate about 20 users with children, and its establishment was realized with the support of international partners and local governments. All four northern municipalities have committed to jointly finance the work of the shelter and thereby make it sustainable as part of the institutional response to violence.

The opening of this safe house has significantly improved the availability of protection for women from the north. In 2021, protection was provided for 15 women and children from the northern region, while in the first three months of 2022, the number of beneficiaries increased to 55, which exceeded the shelter's capacity. These data indicate that the establishment of a local shelter has encouraged more victims to seek help and that the need for protection is greater than expected, with additional emergency capacity being used in certain periods.

In addition to shelters, centers for social work and the Victim Advocacy and Assistance Office operate in the north, providing legal and psychosocial support. Kosovo has a network of regional offices of victims' representatives that cover the entire territory, including the region of Mitrovica. These advocates help victims with reporting, follow them through the investigation and court process, and refer them to other services. However, in northern municipalities, the capacities of these services are limited by staffing and resources. Civil society organizations also play an important role in providing support and advocacy; in the region of Mitrovica, there are organizations that provide assistance to victims and that in the past two years have intensified activities on raising awareness and advocating for better services, especially considering the new challenges of inter-ethnic harassment.

In short, the support infrastructure for victims in the North now includes functional safe accommodation and basic institutional services, but they operate in difficult circumstances. The financial viability of the shelter relies on municipal allocations and donations, and the political crisis and changes in local authorities during 2023 have introduced additional uncertainty into the stability of funding. Also, there is a limited number of professional staff, so the capacities for



rehabilitation and reintegration of victims are modest. Nevertheless, the very existence of these services represents a significant shift compared to the period before 2020.

A special challenge in the northern Kosovo in the last two to three years is the appearance of inter-ethnically colored sexual harassment in public places, which was not common before to the extent that it is recognized today through public narratives and experiences of women. According to civil society assessments and media reports, there has been an increase in incidents in which women and girls, especially from the Serbian community in the northern part of Mitrovica, are the targets of sexual harassment by individuals coming from other parts of the city. Such incidents include making sexual comments, insults, approaching, touching, taking unauthorized photographs or following women on the street.

Public testimony and research findings indicate that women's sense of safety in the city has worsened, that women increasingly avoid walking alone in the evening and change their daily routines to reduce the risk of harassment. At the same time, it is emphasized that the north was previously considered an environment where public harassment was not common, but that since approximately 2023, the situation has visibly worsened.

From the victims' point of view, inter-ethnic harassment further complicates the problem of reporting. The findings of the research show that women who suffer from being teased or touched by unknown men usually do not want to come forward publicly, nor formally report the incidents, due to fear of stigmatization, retaliation and the belief that institutions will not take effective measures. In the focus groups, the perception that some perpetrators are socially protected, that there are informal connections that discourage sanctioning, and that reporting is therefore "unfavourable" or even risky, is mentioned in the focus groups. The result is the withdrawal of women from public space, the avoidance of certain locations and the feeling that freedom of movement and basic security are violated.

In response to the deterioration of the sense of security, it was recorded that women and citizens turned to international missions asking for additional



protection measures and the preservation of security arrangements, which in local perception are associated with the reduction of risks in public space. Civil society organizations have repeatedly pointed to the insufficient reaction of institutions to such incidents and demanded more urgent and visible police action, as well as increased monitoring of international security and judicial actors, with an emphasis on the need for omissions to be sanctioned and to restore public trust in institutions through concrete results. It is also emphasized that minor victims were among the identified cases, which further increases the urgency of the response.

Almost all the listed problems point to a central obstacle: victims' deep distrust of the protection system and fear of social consequences. In the North Kosovo context, this mistrust is multi-layered. On the one hand, women do not believe that the police, the prosecutor's office or the courts will react efficiently and fairly, both because of previous bad experiences and because of the ethnic-political dimension. In publicly available analyzes and in the findings of field research, the assessment that the institutions have not taken enough concrete measures to improve the safety of women in the north and that some women refrain from reporting precisely because of the belief that the report will be trivialized, ignored or that the responsibility will be transferred to the victim, is emphasized. In the focus groups, the experience that violence is sometimes treated as a "private matter" is mentioned, which discourages victims from the first contact with the system.

On the other hand, there is strong social pressure and stigma in the traditional environment. Research findings indicate that stigma and fear of consequences are among the main reasons why violence is not reported. Women fear judgment from the environment, labeling and blaming, and the fear that family reactions could lead to additional problems or escalation is also mentioned. In the wider social context, there are entrenched attitudes that domestic violence is a private matter to be dealt with within the family, which limits the willingness to seek help outside the family circle. Until such attitudes change, women will be reluctant to seek institutional protection even when mechanisms are formally available.



*However, there are indications of a slight shift towards greater reporting and greater visibility of the topic. In the public space, in recent years, there has been an increase in media coverage of cases of violence, the organization of protests and campaigns against violence against women, as well as an increase in public discussion about femicide and institutional responsibility.*

This development of events partially empowered women to recognize violence more often and to consider reporting it, while certain initiatives and public reactions were also recorded in the north, albeit on a smaller scale. Yet despite increased visibility, the key problem remains the same: without visible

institutional results, trust is hard to rebuild, and without trust, reporting remains low.

In conclusion, sexual harassment and gender-based violence in the northern Kosovo remain a serious but insufficiently visible problem. Statistics on reported cases are low and misleading, as they often reflect difficulties in reporting rather than the actual situation on the ground. Qualitative findings indicate that many women suffer violence in silence, either in the family or on the street, facing a double challenge: ineffective institutions and social stigma. Existing support mechanisms provide important assistance, but their reach and capacity are limited, especially in conditions of institutional gaps and security tensions. In addition, new inter-ethnic tensions have contributed to emergent forms of harassment that complicate the security context in the North and further affect women's sense of insecurity in public space. All these points to the need for a comprehensive approach that includes strengthening trust in the police and the judiciary through concrete results, investment in local support services and systematic work to break the stigma and normalize harassment and violence. Only through a combination of these measures can victims of violence speak out and receive the protection they deserve, and public space and institutions be equally accessible and safe for all women, regardless of ethnicity or place of residence.





## THE VICTIMS' PERSPECTIVE: WHY THE INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSE IS NOT ENOUGH

The findings of qualitative research indicate that victims of gender-based violence and sexual harassment perceive the institutional response as insufficient, unpredictable and often discouraging. Although formal protection mechanisms exist, the way they function in practice does not meet the needs of victims, especially in the sensitive context of northern Kosovo. The police, courts and centers for social work are often perceived as distant, ineffective or insufficiently sensitized to the specifics of gender-based violence, which affects the low level of trust and willingness of victims to turn to institutions.

From the perspective of the victims, courts and prosecutions are perceived as slow and difficult to access, with long deadlines and uncertain outcomes. Proceedings that last for months or even years further discourage women from entering the legal process, especially when considering the emotional costs of retelling the trauma and going public. The mild punishment policy and frequent imposition of suspended sentences further undermine trust in the system, because victims do not see a clear message that violence is unacceptable and will be adequately sanctioned. In this sense, trust in the justice system is further undermined by the fact that most cases of sexual harassment in the north are qualified as a misdemeanor, instead of a criminal offense, as prescribed by the Criminal Code of Kosovo.

From the perspective of the victims, the first contact with the institutions is a key moment in which it is decided whether the violence will be reported and further processed. However, the research shows that experiences with the police are often marked by slow response, lack of clear information about procedures and uneven approach of individual officers. In cases of sexual harassment, especially when there is no physical violence, victims often have the impression that their report will not be taken seriously or will not lead to concrete consequences for the perpetrators. This perception contributes to the belief that reporting carries more risks than benefits.



Centers for social work and other support services formally represent an important part of the protection system, but research indicates that their roles are often insufficiently clear and visible to victims. Lack of staff, limited resources and overworked employees affect the quality and continuity of support. Victims are often not sure what kind of help they can get, how long support lasts and how different institutions coordinate with each other. This lack of clarity further contributes to feelings of insecurity and a loss of confidence in the system as a whole.

According to research findings, trust is "lost" at the moment when victims get the impression that the system does not understand their situation, does not protect them enough, or indirectly exposes them to additional stigmatization. The fear of secondary victimization, of inadequate treatment by officials or of leaking information in small communities further discourages women from contacting the institutions. As a result, formal protection mechanisms remain underutilized, while violence is often dealt with informally or goes completely unreported.

## THE SPECIAL VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN IN A MULTI-ETHNIC AND POST-CONFLICT ENVIRONMENT

Women in the northern Kosovo face additional layers of vulnerability arising from the multi-ethnic and post-conflict context in which they live. Gender-based violence and sexual harassment in this environment cannot be seen exclusively as a gender problem, but also as a matter of security, social relations and political sensitivity. Research shows that the inter-ethnic dimension of violence and harassment significantly influences risk perception and the decision to report.

There is concern that reporting violence may be misused in the broader political or security discourse, which further exposes victims to pressure and potential consequences for their safety and position in the community. Such a context influences the fact that violence is not only perceived as a personal experience, but as an event with possible collective implications.



Women from non-majority communities carry a special burden, as they often feel institutionally invisible or marginalized. Research indicates that they have a lower level of trust in institutions, both because of previous experiences and because of the perception that institutions do not function equally for all communities. In such an environment, reporting violence may be experienced as an additional risk rather than a path to protection. The fear that the case will not be adequately prosecuted or that the responsibility will be transferred to the victim further increases the feeling of insecurity.

The unstable political context also affects the limited space for mutual solidarity between women from different communities. Although experiences of gender-based violence are often similar regardless of ethnicity, research shows that there are barriers to joint action and public speaking. Lack of trust, fear of misinterpretation and general polarization of society make it difficult to develop joint initiatives that could contribute to strengthening the protection of women and visibility of the problem.

IN CASES WHERE SEXUAL  
HARASSMENT OR OTHER  
FORMS OF VIOLENCE ARE  
PERCEIVED AS INTER-ETHNIC  
INCIDENTS, WOMEN FACE THE  
ADDITIONAL FEAR OF  
POLITICIZATION OF THE CASES

All of the above makes women in the northern Kosovo a particularly vulnerable group when it comes to gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Their experiences are shaped not only by gender inequalities, but also by complex political, ethnic and security circumstances. Precisely because of this, policies and measures aimed at preventing and responding to violence must be contextually adapted and based on an

understanding of the specific challenges of a multi-ethnic environment. Without such an approach, there is a risk that universal solutions remain insufficiently effective and do not respond to the real needs of women in this part of Kosovo.





## CONCLUSION

The analysis of gender-based violence and sexual harassment in the northern Kosovo indicates a deep-rooted and multi-layered problem that goes beyond the scope of individual incidents. Available statistical data, combined with the findings of qualitative research, confirm the existence of a significant gap between the actual extent of violence and the number of formally reported cases. This gap does not arise from the absence of institutional mechanisms, but from their limited functionality in practice and the low level of trust that victims have in the protection system.

Research shows that formal institutional responses fail to provide the sense of security, predictability and support that victims need to decide to report violence. The slowness of procedures, uneven practice and the perception of lenient penal policies undermine the belief that reporting will lead to real protection or change. Of particular concern is that sexual harassment remains under-recognized and under-addressed, despite its strong impact on women's freedom of movement, daily life and participation in the public sphere.

The specificities of the northern Kosovo further complicate this picture. The multi-ethnic and post-conflict context, institutional discontinuities and general security tensions create an environment in which violence is often perceived as too risky to report. Women from non-majority communities face the additional burden of fear of politicization of cases, social stigmatization and institutional invisibility, which further distances them from formal protection mechanisms.

In such circumstances, gender-based violence and sexual harassment do not leave consequences only for individual victims but have wider social implications - they limit freedom of movement, deepen distrust in institutions and affect social cohesion. The analysis clearly shows that universal and formal approaches are not enough if they are not adapted to the local context and real experiences of women.

The conclusions of this analysis point to the need for a comprehensive and contextually sensitive approach, which entails strengthening institutional responsibility, improving the quality of first contact with victims, greater visibility and availability of support, as well as systematic work on changing social norms that normalize violence. Without this approach, gender-based violence and sexual harassment will continue to remain insufficiently visible and insufficiently addressed, with long-term consequences for the safety of women and the stability of communities in northern Kosovo.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the research and analysis of the institutional and security context in northern Kosovo, it is necessary to undertake targeted and coordinated measures that correspond to the specific challenges of this region. The following recommendations are aimed at improving prevention, protecting victims and strengthening institutional responsibility.

### **1. Strengthening trust in the police through a visible and consistent response to sexual harassment and GBV**

It is necessary to improve the quality of the first institutional contact with victims, especially with the police. This implies mandatory, continuous training of police officers on handling cases of sexual harassment and gender-based violence, with special emphasis on work in multi-ethnic and post-conflict environments. The police response must be quick, predictable and clear; in order to send the message that even "lighter" forms of violence are taken seriously and that reporting makes sense.

### **2. Improvement of institutional coordination at the local level**

Existing mechanisms of inter-institutional cooperation (police, centers for social work, prosecutor's office, courts and NGOs) must be strengthened and consistently applied in practice. In the northern Kosovo, it is necessary to restore and stabilize local coordination mechanisms, with a clear division of responsibilities and regular exchange of information, in order to prevent victims from "falling out of the system" due to institutional gaps.

### **3. Special focus on sexual harassment as a form of gender-based violence**

Sexual harassment must be more clearly recognized as a serious security and social problem, and not as a marginal or "less important" behavior. It is necessary to improve the practice of recording and processing these cases, including clear protocols of action, adequate legal qualification and proportional sanctions. In this regard, it is very important to qualify sexual harassment as a criminal act, in accordance with the Criminal Code, and not as a misdemeanor. This is especially important in public spaces, where harassment directly affects women's freedom of movement. This recommendation implies continuous education of police officers, prosecutors and judges, as well as better coordination in the work of these institutions.



#### **4. Strengthening the availability and sustainability of support services in the northern Kosovo**

Existing support services, including the regional shelter, social work centers and Victim Advocacy and Assistance Office, must have stable and long-term funding. It is necessary to invest in strengthening professional capacities (psychological, legal and social support), as well as in greater visibility of these services in local communities, so that women know who they can turn to and what they can expect.

#### **5. A contextually adapted approach to women from non-majority communities**

Public policies and institutional measures must consider the additional risks faced by women from non-majority communities, including the fear of politicization of cases, stigmatization and institutional invisibility. This includes linguistically and culturally adapted services, as well as measures to ensure that reporting violence does not lead to additional marginalization or safety risks.

#### **6. More active role of international actors in monitoring and capacity building**

In light of weakened institutional capacities in the North, international missions and organizations should continue and strengthen their role in monitoring the actions of institutions in cases of GBV as well as in providing technical and professional support. Their presence can contribute to increasing public trust and improving standards of conduct.

#### **7. Long-term preventive measures and work to change social norms**

In addition to institutional interventions, it is necessary to invest in long-term preventive activities that deal with social norms, gender stereotypes and the normalization of violence. Awareness campaigns, youth work and the involvement of local actors and the media are key to creating an environment where sexual harassment and gender-based violence are recognised, condemned and reported.

