



ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THE WESTERN BALKANS: WHERE IS THE ACCOUNTABILITY?

**CASE STUDIES: ALBANIA, BOSNIA AND
HERZEGOVINA, AND SERBIA**

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ABOUT POLITICS4HER



Politics4Her is a global intersectional feminist platform and youth-led movement advocating for the inclusive participation of young women and girls in politics, civil society, and other decision-making bodies.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The digital landscape in the Western Balkans presents a paradox for women and girls: simultaneously offering unprecedented opportunities, while also exposing them to alarming levels of Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). Despite the strides made in empowering women and narrowing the digital gender gap, outdated patriarchal norms and inadequate legislation leave women vulnerable to exploitation and abuse online. Through in-depth case studies on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, this policy brief examines the pervasive impact of OGBV and proposes a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder approach to address root causes and protect the digital rights and well-being of women and girls in the region.

INTRODUCTION

The online world presents a dual reality for women and girls, serving as both a gateway to previously inaccessible opportunities alongside ever more pervasive dangers. While expanded internet access has narrowed the digital gender gap, enabling avenues for women's and girl's education, activism, and economic empowerment, it has also equipped malicious actors with new tools for perpetrating gender-based violence (GBV). This paradox is particularly pronounced in the Western Balkans, where Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV) has increased through the exploitation of rapidly evolving technology and governments that lag, causing a vacuum of accountability and even greater power imbalance between genders.

Governments in the region, already grappling with challenges in addressing femicide and other forms of GBV, have struggled to protect women and girls both offline and online. As a result, OGBV has surged in the Western Balkans without control, driven by deeply rooted patriarchal norms, insufficient domestic legislations, limited oversight from major tech corporations, and a media landscape that perpetuates misogyny. Consequently, women and girls in the region find themselves inadequately protected by legal frameworks, and increasingly marginalized from public life and the digital economy due to coercion, persistent harassment, and self-censorship.

Addressing the escalating OGBV crisis in the Western Balkans requires concerted efforts from governments, tech companies, civil society, and the international community. It is imperative to bolster protections for women and girls, implement measures to prevent technology-facilitated violence and hold perpetrators accountable. Such interventions not only safeguard the rights and well-being of women and girls but also create an environment where they can thrive both online and offline, recognizing the growing intertwining of these realms.

Humiliation and discrimination, misogyny, sexism, silence, naming and shaming women when they are abused –these are just to name few of the common characteristics of the region.

-Emilija Dimoska, Kvinna till Kvinna programme officer in North Macedonia

This policy brief will delve into the prevalence of OGBV in the Western Balkans, examining its underlying drivers, impacts on women and girls, and the existing legal landscape. Through case studies on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, we aim to shed light on regional and country-specific challenges, spanning cultural, legislative, media, and private sector domains.

This brief will conclude by presenting a series of policy recommendations designed to end OGBV in the Western Balkans using a multistakeholder approach. These recommendations aim to ensure the upholding of human rights for women and girls, liberating them from abuse.

ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women defines violence against women as "**any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.**" According to the UN "Violence against women persists worldwide, occurring across all regions, cultures, and socioeconomic backgrounds, hindering development and impeding women's enjoyment of their human rights and freedoms" (UN Women, 2024). With the progression of technology and the digitalization of society, a new form of violence has emerged: Online Gender-Based Violence (OGBV). It is similar to other forms of gender-based violence, as it violates the fundamental rights and freedoms of women, undermines their dignity and equality, and profoundly impacts their lives across all levels. OGBV encompasses gender-based violence perpetrated via digital platforms, such as the Internet, and directly targets individuals based on their gender, sex, or sexual orientation. This includes various harmful actions such as **hate speech, discrimination, revenge porn, stalking, doxxing, death and/or rape threats, and other forms of harassment.**



According to the UN, an alarming **95%** of aggressive behavior, harassment, abusive language, and denigrating images online are directed at women (The Association for Progressive Communications, 2013). OGBV encompasses actions like hacking for personal information, surveillance and tracking via technology, impersonation to access private data, harassment through continuous communication, recruitment into violent situations, malicious distribution of defamatory materials, intimate photo and video blackmail, manipulation of photographic images, cyberbullying, and hate speech (Iyer, Nyamwire and Nabulega, 2020). OGBV represents a significant challenge in today's digital age for women's rights and safety. This underscores the urgent need for concerted efforts to combat OGBV and create a safer digital environment for women and girls worldwide.

METHODOLOGY

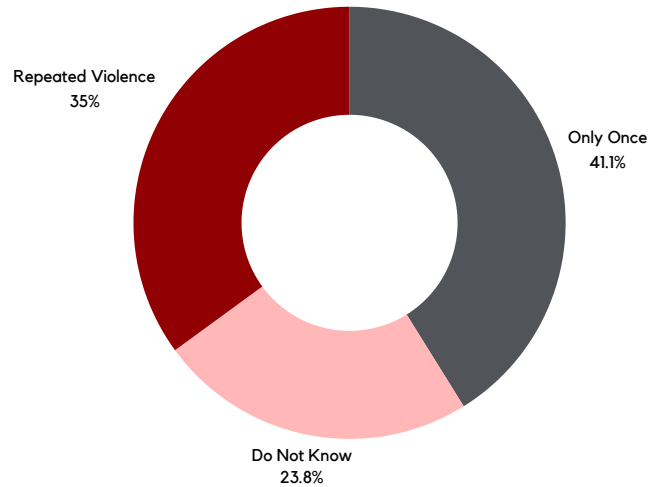
This policy brief employed a qualitative methodological approach to investigate online gender-based violence in the Western Balkan region. An in-depth exploration of existing literature (governmental publications, NGO reports, and academic papers) has been conducted to perform secondary data analysis.

The study incorporated an in-depth examination of three distinct case studies focusing on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia. These case studies facilitated a nuanced exploration of OGBV incidents, legal responses, and policy initiatives within each country, shedding light on the unique challenges and societal attitudes toward online violence against women and marginalized groups.

The findings were synthesized to provide a holistic understanding of the root causes of OGBV and to formulate actionable recommendations to enhance protection mechanisms and address vulnerabilities in the Western Balkan region.

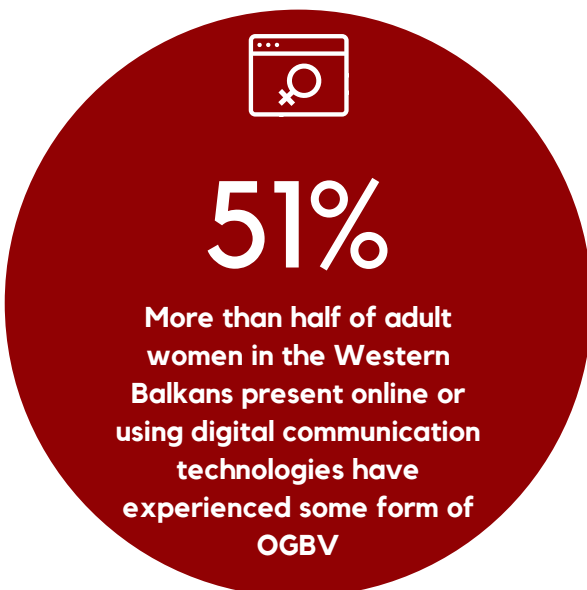
REGIONAL BACKGROUND

The Western Balkans are situated in the heart of Europe, made up of **Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia**. Striving to stay on the path to EU accession, countries in the Western Balkans have taken steps through legislation and action plans to embody the common value of gender equality and to get rid of GBV (Lilyonova, 2018). Yet, these efforts to empower women and create an equal society have not proven to be enough (Karic and Ristic, 2022). The Western Balkan countries still struggle to prevent severe forms of GBV and do not see OGBV as a priority. Often, women facing domestic abuse online and offline are neglected until it is too late. With the recent rise of OGBV in the region, states have been wholly unprepared and unresponsive. As a result, women and girls face psychological trauma and limited participation in public life, with many cases leading to public humiliation, physical violence, and even femicide.



Source: UN Women, October 2023

Intersecting identities exacerbate the abuse inflicted, from women and girls active in public life such as politicians, journalists and, human rights activists, to members of the LGBTQIA+ community for their sexuality and gender identities, and racist targeting of already vulnerable Roma, and Egyptian women (UN Women, 2022). OGBV has also been linked to other severe crimes in the region such as human trafficking where sex-trade victims are often female and underage. Traffickers use OGBV as a form of coercion to “blackmail, threaten, belittle the victims, unauthorisedly record, or distribute pornographic material involving children as well” (Dorokhova et al., 2021). Hence, we know that OGBV does not exist independently; it is caused by existing patriarchal and misogynistic norms and abuses which create a vicious cycle of further abuse.



Source: UN Women, October 2023

Four main factors driving and enabling the growth of OGBV in the Western Balkans



Societal Deep-rooted Patriarchal Norms

The root cause of all forms of GBV is entrenched misogynistic norms that legitimize and normalize violence and discrimination against women and girls across the Western Balkans. Attitudes toward social media and a pervasive victim-blaming culture have reduced OGBV as 'unserious' in public perception, giving perpetrators the space to inflict abuse on their victims shamelessly and without socio-legal consequences (Karic and Ristic, 2022).



Domestic Legislation and Implementation

While all countries in the Western Balkans have laws against gender-based violence and are broadly compliant with international standards, they are often not enforced and do little to prevent escalation. In terms of GBV, most have ratified the 2011 Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women, but implementation is inconsistent (Liyonova, 2018). Moreover, as states do not prioritize tackling OGBV, anti-feminist movements have been given space to grow freely online, inflicting abuse with impunity and influencing the political landscape in a regressive manner (Milenkovska, 2023).



Inadequate 'Big Tech' Community Guidelines

Protections against OGBV from 'Big Tech' online platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and X (Twitter) are ineffective and often backfire on victims (Bogdani, 2023). Reliance on artificial intelligence and non-native moderators leaves a significant "blind spot" of protection, cultural context is missed and language is not accurately translated, showing that safeguarding women in the region is not a priority (Milenkovska, 2023; Jeremic and Stojanovic, 2021).



Misogyny in the Media

Women and girls face sexism on both sides of the media, as journalists and as part of the stories reported. When cases of GBV are reported, sensationalization and victim blaming often take precedence over educational awareness raising. Despite making up the majority of journalists, women face rampant discrimination and abuse, without the means to report such actions (ROLF, 2020). Media organizations routinely fail to punish violations of professional ethical guidelines, leaving victims with no one to turn to (Karic and Ristic, 2022).

Overall, the prevalence of OGBV in the Western Balkans is not merely a statistic; it is a glaring indictment of systemic failures and entrenched societal attitudes. The insidious nature of OGBV, coupled with inadequate responses from authorities, fuels a vicious cycle of violence and impunity in the region, disproportionately affecting girls and women. Therefore, addressing these issues demands a multistakeholder approach encompassing **legal enforcement, shifting societal attitudes, and strong accountability measures for both traditional media and online platforms**. The following sections will provide in-depth insight into OGBV in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Serbia, which currently have the highest rates of recorded GBV in the region and have all seen rapid growth in OGBV cases (Buur et al, 2022).

We cannot turn a blind eye to this crisis. Due to the prevalence of OGBV, the safety and well-being of girls and women exposed to the virtual world are at stake in the region. At this juncture, it is not enough to pass laws and hope for the best; we need robust enforcement mechanisms and accountability measures. Holistic efforts are needed to dismantle the toxic patriarchal structures that enable and normalize violence against women and girls, both in the offline and online spheres. This means challenging ingrained attitudes and beliefs, fostering empathy and respect, and promoting gender equality in all spheres of life.



CASE STUDY 1: ALBANIA



Albania is a middle-income country in the Western Balkans, with a population of 2.8 million people and over 1 million overseas (World Bank, 2022a; UN Women ECA, 2024). Recent strides made towards gender equality are evidenced by notable achievements such as female students outperforming their male counterparts, 12 of 17 cabinet members being women, increasing female participation in the labor force, and gender-conscious budgeting in public sectors. However, these advancements have remained largely surface-level, failing to deeply permeate Albanian society in a sustainable way (AP, 2021; UN Women Albania, 2023a).

Political underrepresentation of women at local levels, persistent wage gaps, occupational reinforcement of traditional gender roles, and pervasive gender-based discrimination and violence paint a stark reality.

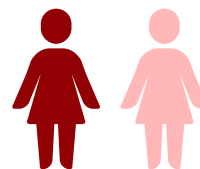
Misogyny, entrenched across all facets of life, constrains women's liberties and opportunities for advancement. Alarming, instead of fostering a more equitable digital sphere that surpasses restrictions in the physical world. Online platforms have been used to reinforce existing patriarchal norms in increasingly invasive ways, further inhibiting women's empowerment and agency.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

In Albania, women and girls face significant challenges within a **deeply patriarchal social environment** characterized by stringent gender norms and an **"honor and shame"** paradigm (Amnesty International, 2006). Consequently, gender-based discrimination and domestic violence toward women pervade the societal landscape, often going **unreported** due to negative **stigma, victim-blaming** attitudes, and **inadequate law** enforcement resources (Freedom House, 2023; Amnesty International, 2022).

Studies by UN Women Albania (2019) show Albanian women **internalize harmful misogynistic beliefs:**

- **Half** view domestic violence as a private matter
- **46.5%** say women should tolerate violence to maintain family unity
- **26.1%** believe women should feel ashamed to report rape

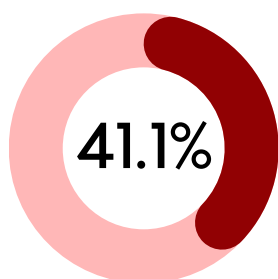


52.9%

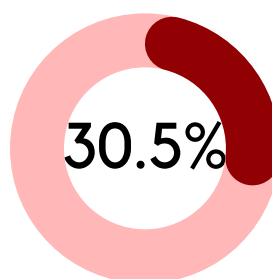
52.9% of Albanian women have endured violence at some point in their lives, encompassing domestic violence, dating violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment, and stalking.

The roots of misogyny extend even before birth. Patriarchal traditions and misogynistic ideologies devalue daughters and elevate sons, fuelling a culture of sex-selective abortions through coercion and violence. Consequently, Albania ranks fourth globally in gender birth disparities (AFP, 2024a), exploiting the legal right to bodily autonomy to perpetuate further misogyny. Women and girls with intersecting identities such as politicians, journalists, activists, LGBTQIA+, Roma, and Egyptian women face compounded challenges due to their sexuality, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (UN Women, 2022). Notably, the LGBTQIA+ community endures pervasive discrimination, exclusion, hate speech, and violence, with 80% considering fleeing due to fear and societal hostility (IAGCI, 2022; Bogdani et al., 2021; Sekularac et al., 2021).

OGBV in Albania is an alarming extension of GBV, persistently on the rise yet overlooked by the public. A survey by UN Women ECA (2023b) revealed:



41.1% of Albanian women have encountered forms of technology-facilitated violence



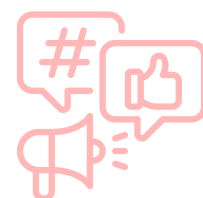
30.5% of Albanian women said this violence was repeated

While there have been some advancements for women and girls in digital equality, these successes often mask deeper complexities. The digital gender gap has narrowed from 5.2% in 2019 to 2% in 2020, however, what the statistics don't show is that it is common for women's and girls' mobile phones to be controlled or monitored by male family members, limiting their freedom to utilize the online space to its full potential (UN Albania, 2022: 21). Additionally, a significant 17% of the population remains completely without internet access, which also means a significant portion of mostly rural women are not able to access these online tools at all (World Bank, 2022b).

Despite these challenges, Albanian feminists persevere in combating these injustices both in the digital and offline realms. Their outspokenness on taboo topics subjects them to a barrage of online abuses, ranging from cyberstalking and sexual harassment to threats of rape, disinformation, and doxing (Bogdani, 2023).



Pictured: Feminist activist Liri Kuci, holds sign "Home is not safe for all girls, ALARM!". She is Editor In Chief and Co-Founder of Albanian Intersectional Feminist Magazine 'SHOTA' and the feminist social center "Shtëpia Publike" (2021).



'BIG TECH' PLATFORMS

The Albanian Feminist movement uses online platforms in positive ways, to raise awareness, and organize campaigns and protests on women's rights issues, and apps like 'Bright Sky' have helped women report abusers (Bogdani, 2023; UN Women ECA, 2023a). However, social media itself is a key platform facilitating online gender-based violence, most often **Instagram** and **Facebook** (UN Women Albania 2023b). Among 1.6 million active social media users in Albania, there exists a gender disparity, with a gap of 5.4 % fewer female users than males (Kemp, 2023). This divide can be attributed to factors such as limited access to digital devices and societal pressures for women to censor themselves. Women also have less time for online engagement due to disproportionate unpaid labor at home, with women spending 18.2% more time on unpaid work compared to men (UN Women, 2024).

Following a rise in OGBV, cases of femicide have increased. In 2024, a **woman was driven to suicide** after her partner posted intimate photos of her on **TikTok**, prompting calls for a national awareness campaign and preventative measures (Sinoruka, 2024). While "causing of suicide" is punishable in Albania, revenge porn and online harassment is not specifically illegal. In response, Albania's prime minister **Edi Rama** called for TikTok to increase vigilance toward online dangers, somewhat shifting blame and avoiding the **blind spot** that domestic laws leave for abusers to escape accountability online, which lead to tragic and preventable deaths (Krasteva, 2024).

The severity of revenge porn is evident through the recent popularity of the telegram group 'AlbKings', which used to exchange revenge porn of women and girls, often their wives and girlfriends (Krasteva, 2024). Male users made a hobby of doxxing and humiliating women publicly and without their knowledge. Telegram responded by shutting down the first account after it had already accumulated 200,000 followers and soon after a backup account was set up, gathering 66,000 followers in just a few days. Even though the page was shut down, it's not enough. We see thousands of men escape accountability for partaking in revenge porn and online sexual harassment, while their victims are left to be further victimized with no support.

Big Tech's limited cultural and local language proficiency results in inconsistent enforcement of community guidelines, creating blind spots and impeding freedom of expression, exemplified by **Zhaklin Lekatari's** case, a feminist journalist and activist (Bogdani, 2023; Laci and Vale, 2021). Zhaklin, who challenges societal norms through her online platform, **Tabu**, encountered hurdles such as the suspension of her Facebook page after condemning a homophobic and misogynistic website, due to an unjust mass reporting campaign against her, thereby placing the burden of proof on her to justify the ban.

MEDIA

In Albania, women journalists encounter widespread challenges, whether they're the subject or the reporter. Despite being the majority, women face gender-based discrimination, unequal pay, and excessive online abuse (RSF, 2023; Taylor, 2021). Women journalists often find themselves relegated to reporting "soft news" or cultural and social topics, reinforcing gender roles. Those who break into male-dominated news areas may gain respect, yet face obstacles in navigating the male-dominated hierarchy, self-censorship, and pressures to avoid controversy from both family and editorial supervisors (Godole, 2023). This dynamic underscores the complex challenges women encounter in the media industry, where conformity to societal expectations and the adoption of gender stereotypes are often seen as necessary strategies to exert influence and navigate the professional landscape.

Alice Taylor (2021) recounts her story as a woman journalist in Albania facing discrimination and constant online attacks to silence her, all because of her critical reporting on the government. Internet trolls called her names like "bitch, whore, slut, enemy of the state," and spread false information accusing her of being a Russian spy. This led Alice to deactivate her social media. Even during pregnancy, she dealt with more challenges as the police leaked her details and the government revoked her residency, claiming she was a security threat. Alice also points out the issue of 'mansplaining,' where men disregard the research behind her articles, insisting they know better. This highlights broader unfair views of women as less capable and knowledgeable, leading to more harassment when they assert themselves.

Media coverage of GBV often worsens survivors' trauma and normalizes violence against women (Sinoruka, 2024). Many victims are deterred from reporting sexual harassment and assault due to the fear of media exposure and potential public scrutiny (Sulo, 2028). Media narratives often prioritize misogynistic justifications for gender-based violence, portraying victims as guilty and justifying perpetrators' actions (Sulo, 2028). Activists argue that online media platforms enable trolls to target feminists and GBV victims for engagement, profiting from their victimization (Bogdani, 2023).

Overall, OGBV in Albania perpetuates systemic oppression against women and girls, extending from deeply entrenched patriarchal norms and gender roles. Despite advancements in gender parity and legal frameworks, such violence remains prevalent and normalized, fuelling femicide and exacerbating societal disparities. Furthermore, inadequate enforcement of existing laws and blind spots in digital platforms perpetuate this cycle of abuse, demanding urgent attention and systemic reform to safeguard the rights and dignity of Albanian women and girls.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Albania has taken steps to enhance legal protections for women and girls but lacks specific laws to safeguard them from online gender-based violence, resulting in ambiguity and continued vulnerability (UN Women ECA, 2023: 35). Regarding international commitments related to GBV, Albania ratified the 1979 Convention on the **Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** in 1994 and the **Istanbul Convention in 2013** (Council of Europe, 2011), underscoring the imperative of addressing such violence for genuine gender equality.

Albania possesses a national legal framework to address domestic and other forms of violence against women. **Law no. 9669, "On Measures against Violence in Family Relations,"** originated in 2006 and underwent amendments in 2010 and 2018. This law aims to prevent and reduce domestic violence in all its forms, providing victims with rapid, accessible, and uncomplicated legal recourse. The amendments bolstered protective measures and procedures, facilitating a more efficient response to domestic violence cases, including the issuance of Precautionary Emergency Protection Orders. Additionally, the criminal code was amended in 2020 to recognise dating violence as a form of domestic violence offense, extending protection to women and girls in intimate relationships without formal ties to the perpetrators, such as marriage or cohabitation.

Domestic laws in Albania address sexual violence through **Article 108/a**, which criminalises actions infringing on a person's dignity through sexual means, creating a "threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment" and is punishable by imprisonment of 1 to 5 years (Republic of Albania, 2017).

Moreover, recent amendments to **Law 221 "On Protection from Discrimination"** included sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, defining it as unwanted conduct of a sexual nature aiming to violate a person's dignity and create a hostile environment (Republic of Albania The Assembly, 2021). Despite the recognition of online dangers through child safety in Law 18/2017 "On the Rights and Protection of the Child," there is an absence of specific measures addressing online safety specifically for girls and women, who are disproportionately vulnerable.

Notably, the **National Strategy for Gender Equality** in Albania 2021 - 2030 also overlooks the issue of online harassment, highlighting the urgent need for prioritising and addressing this issue to ensure comprehensive legal protections for women. Lack of adequate financing is notably a significant hurdle, as local governments are unable to adequately deliver their existing obligations to help women escape violence and have often left survivors homeless (Sinoruka, 2024; Azizolli, 2024).



CASE STUDY 2: BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA



Bosnia and Herzegovina is an upper middle-income country located in southeastern Europe in the Western Balkan region. With a population of 3.3 million people, it faces socioeconomic challenges alongside its rich historical and geographical significance (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2024). Following the 1992-1995 genocide, Bosnia and Herzegovina embarked on a transition journey toward reconstruction and socio-economic recovery. Despite the implementation of comprehensive legal and institutional frameworks aimed at advancing gender equality, women in Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to encounter numerous challenges

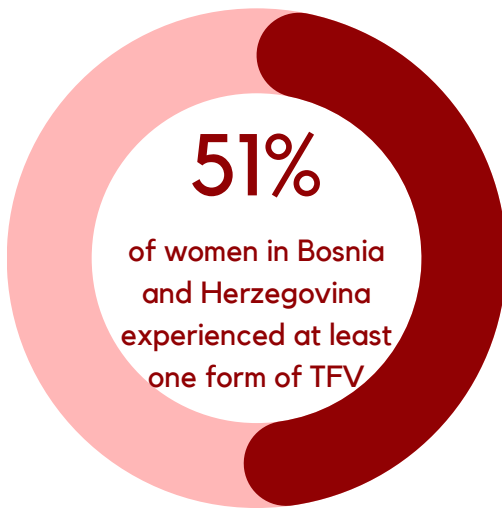
and barriers to achieving full equality. These obstacles are exacerbated by inefficient mechanisms and responses to violence against women. While efforts to align Criminal Codes with the Istanbul Convention are underway in the Western Balkan countries, **only Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks active gender equality strategies**. GBV remains a persistent issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a 2023 survey by Islamic Relief indicating that over one in three women have experienced violence. With over **70%** of the population using the Internet, OGBV persists as well.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Bosnia and Herzegovina, emerging from a turbulent period of conflict, confront a distinctive socio-political milieu characterized by ethnic divides and transitional hurdles. Within this context, OGBV intersects with broader issues of gender inequality, discrimination, and cultural norms, influencing the experiences of women and girls in digital realms. The advent of digital platforms has facilitated novel forms of violence against women, exacerbating existing gender disparities and posing intricate socio-legal dilemmas.

While individuals of all genders fall victim to digital violence, it predominantly targets women and girls, exemplified by the UN Women ECA regional survey of 2023 which found that **51% of women in Bosnia** had experienced at least one form of technology-facilitated violence. Digital communication technologies have revolutionized contemporary societies and daily routines, including criminal activities.





These platforms serve as conduits for sexual and gender-based violence, with a rise in digital sex crimes such as sextortion, revenge pornography, online sexual harassment, and gender-based hate speech. OGBV in Bosnia and Herzegovina manifests in patriarchal norms and misogyny, evidenced by instances like the dissemination of manipulated nude images of a woman artist alongside sexist insults. This reflects a broader pattern of objectification and degradation of women online. Additionally, "sextortion" tactics are

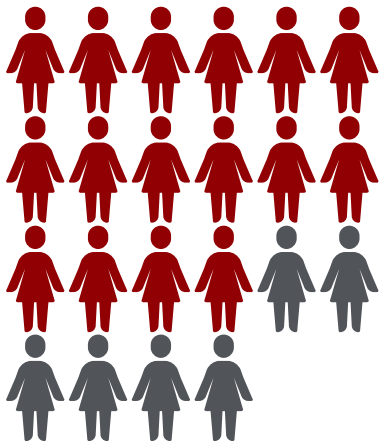
prevalent, with perpetrators coercing victims into sexual acts or providing explicit content under the threat of releasing intimate material online. For example, a man harassed a woman, sending offensive messages and threatening to publish explicit images unless she entered a relationship with him, highlighting the power dynamics and sexism inherent in OGBV. Women subjected to technology-facilitated violence report feeling less secure online, adopting precautionary measures such as disabling webcams and location sharing and limiting communication to known individuals. Experiences of violence deter women from online expression and may lead to increased tolerance for violence. Tragically, instances like a woman's suicide following online abuse underscore the grave consequences of OGBV. In Bosnia, laws regarding OGBV lack clarity and protection for victims. Both Republika Srpska and the Federation entities fail to differentiate between unauthorized recording and distribution of intimate material, leaving victims vulnerable. Prosecution is limited to cases where recordings are made without consent and shared without evidence of extortion. Josip Anicic, a country prosecutor, highlights the legal loophole where victims have no protection if they voluntarily send recordings. Limited enforcement and narrow interpretations of "premises" further exacerbate the challenges in addressing OGBV in Bosnia.

According to a policy study conducted in 2022 by Ana Radičević, Resident Program Director for the National Democratic Institute's Regional Political Integrity Programme for Southeastern Europe, Bosnia exhibits a higher level of exposure to OGBV.

"When they have nothing else to say in the discussion, they start to attack you as a woman to discredit your work or ideas."

Bosnia and Herzegovina, woman interviewee, Policy Study 2022

Women in public positions, including government officials, are disproportionately targeted by Internet violence. The most prevalent forms of violence include attacks on privacy, harassment, stalking, insults, dissemination of violent and offensive comments, publication of private images, editing of inappropriate images, and threats.



16 out of 22

women politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina experienced OGBV

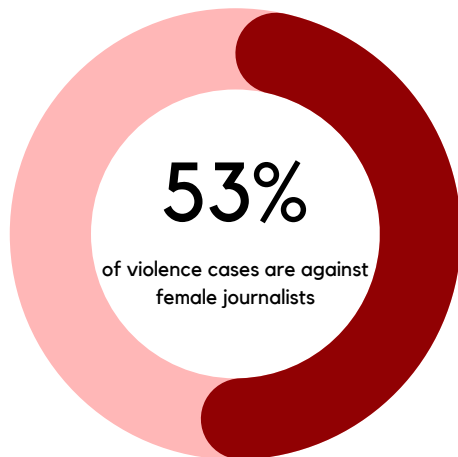
These findings are supported by a survey conducted by BIRN, which underscores the routine nature of online abuse against female politicians in Bosnia. Out of 22 women politicians surveyed, 16 reported encountering problems due to their involvement in politics, with issues ranging from online remarks to discrimination, threats, harassment, insults, and rumor-mongering. Notably, all but two respondents reported knowing other women politicians affected by GBV, with thirteen specifically citing online remarks as a form of abuse.

'BIG TECH' PLATFORMS

Instances of misogynistic, sexist, and violent content proliferating in media and spreading virally on social platforms are unfortunately widespread. Big tech companies have consistently failed to adequately monitor and address this harmful content, enabling the propagation of OGBV. Their lack of proactive measures and accountability exacerbates the problem, as hateful comments and abusive material continue to thrive unchecked. For example, prominent Bosnian Salafi preacher **Elvedin Pezic**, with over 325,000 followers on Facebook, recently posted a misogynistic statement asserting that Western society collapsed when women left their traditional roles as mothers. This post, along with similar rhetoric, has contributed to Pezic's significant increase with 20,000 new followers, highlighting the concerning normalization of such views. Furthermore, in 2014, an Islamic web page in Bosnia published an article mandating that women are obligated to engage in sexual relations with their husbands, perpetuating harmful gender stereotypes and contributing to a culture of marital coercion and abuse. In 2023, in a chilling act of GBV, a man in Bosnia live-streamed himself shooting his ex-wife on Instagram, declaring, "You will see what a live murder looks like." The horrifying incident, which unfolded in Gradacac, resulted in the deaths of three individuals and injuries to several others. Despite the perpetrator's account and the video being removed three hours later, the livestream garnered significant attention, with the number of likes increasing rapidly and 15,000 people watching at one point.



MEDIA



Cyber violence against journalists and the proliferation of hate speech via social networks have become predominant in Bosnia and Herzegovina's society in recent years. Despite having strong legislative instruments, the judicial system in Bosnia-Herzegovina remains highly flawed in protecting journalists. Journalists, particularly women, face heightened vulnerability due to the patriarchal society's influence, where being a 'feminist' is often viewed negatively,

carrying derogatory connotations. **In 2021, BH Novinari recorded 72 instances of violence against journalists, with 53% of cases targeting women journalists, underscoring the gendered nature of the violence.**

"The media lacks gender awareness and sensitivity. Bosnia and Herzegovina media often encourages and affirms a brave, combative, and 'macho' male persona."

Bosnia and Herzegovina, woman interviewees, Policy Study 2022

Dalija Hasanbegović-Konaković, a prominent TV personality and journalist for Al Jazeera Balkans, shared her distressing experience with the Association of Journalists of Kosovo, recounting brutal sexist attacks she endured online. Such instances highlight the systemic challenges and heightened risks faced by women journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina, perpetuated by a culture that undermines their status and safety.

Another case is where **Martina Mlinarević Sopta**, a renowned writer and human rights activist in Bosnia and Herzegovina, faced relentless OGBV for challenging patriarchy and nationalism. Her advocacy against hate and her public appearances triggered vicious attacks questioning

her womanhood, intelligence, and even wishing for her death. Despite support from national and international organizations, the threats escalated offline, culminating in a doll resembling her being burnt during a festival. This case underscores the pervasive danger of OGBV, which not only targets individuals but also perpetuates a culture of fear and intimidation, hindering women's participation in public life.

"She who dares to challenge patriarchal structures shall face never-ending cyber-abuse."

-Martina Mlinarević Sopta

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

National Level

Bosnia and Herzegovina has indeed made strides in aligning with international standards regarding women's rights and digital rights. However, while these legal frameworks may seem comprehensive on the surface, they often lack the specificity and enforcement mechanisms necessary to adequately protect women, particularly in digital spaces where GBV proliferates dangerously. For instance, laws such as **Article 239 of the Criminal Code**, which criminalizes cyber intrusion, and **Article 253**, which prohibits the interception of private communications, provide some level of protection. Still, they fail to address the nuanced forms of online abuse and harassment that women commonly face.

Similarly, gender-related laws such as **Article 14 of the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence** and **Article 4 of the Gender Equality Law** establish broad principles aimed at safeguarding women's rights. However, these laws often fall short of addressing the specific challenges of OGBV, leaving girls and women in Bosnia and Herzegovina vulnerable to various forms of digital abuse, including cyberstalking, harassment, and revenge porn.

Global Level

Despite Bosnia and Herzegovina's ratification of international treaties like the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)** and the signing of the **Istanbul Convention**, which explicitly addresses OGBV, enforcement remains inadequate. While the **Budapest Convention on Cybercrime** offers a framework for combating cyber offenses, its effectiveness in addressing the unique challenges of OGBV requires more robust implementation.

In light of these gaps, it is evident that simply enacting laws and ratifying treaties is not sufficient to combat OGBV effectively. There is a pressing need for more proactive measures that specifically target online violence against women and girls. This includes strengthening legal frameworks to explicitly address OGBV, enhancing law enforcement capabilities to investigate and prosecute digital perpetrators, and providing support services for victims of online abuse. Moreover, greater collaboration between government agencies, civil society organizations, and tech companies is essential to develop comprehensive strategies to protect women's digital rights and ensure their safety in the online sphere in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

CASE STUDY 3: SERBIA



The Republic of Serbia is a middle-income land-locked country located in the Western Balkans of southeast Europe with a population of 7 million (USAID, 2020). Enacted in 2006, the Constitution of Serbia upholds the principle of equality between women and men, emphasizing the promotion of equal opportunities and the prohibition of both direct and indirect discrimination. This includes safeguards against discrimination based on various factors such as sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, and marital and family status (The Government of the Republic of Serbia, n.d.). However, Serbian girls and women continue to be disproportionately affected by GBV, with an alarmingly high number of **23 registered femicides in the first seven months of 2023** (GTGS, 2023).

Patriarch Porfirije, the leader of the Serbian Orthodox Church, criticized the use of gender-sensitive language and denounced the labeling of women as "miserable." His remarks came in response to the implementation of the Law on Gender Equality in 2021, which mandated the use of gender-sensitive language in official communication. Conservative politicians, along with right-wing groups and organizations, rallied behind the Patriarch and the Serbian Orthodox Church. Additionally, the Serbian right-wing political party Dveri, part of the "Patriotic Block", presented a proposal to the National Assembly seeking to repeal the Law on Gender Equality (Danaj et. al., 2023). The clash over gender-sensitive language in Serbia reflects broader societal tensions surrounding traditional norms, gender equality, and the influence of religious and conservative ideologies in shaping public discourse and gender equality-related laws and policies.



CULTURAL CONTEXT

Serbia's conservative religious and political discourses support traditional gender norms, leading to the normalization of patriarchal gender roles and GBV (Drezgic, 2010). Gender-unequal norms and beliefs prevail in Serbian society, extending to various aspects such as the division of household labor, participation in public life, employment opportunities, control over economic resources at all levels, and access to public services (USAID, 2020). It is concerning that although Serbia implemented a strategy for gender equality focused on reducing harmful cultural norms, gender stereotypes, and GBV sensibilization, there is no national helpline. Shelter shortages persist, leading to sluggish emergency responses, while law enforcement frequently perceives domestic violence as solely a domestic issue, delaying intervention.

In 2022, Serbia's first national survey on the prevalence of violence against women and girls in public spaces revealed some alarming trends- while **45%** of women claimed to be afraid of rape, **9.2%** of women have been victims of rape or attempted rape (GTGS, 2022). Marginalized groups, such as, women with different abilities, women from Roma minority communities, migrant and refugee women, LGBTQIA+ individuals, etc., confront compounded GBV challenges due to their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. According to the Astraea Lesbian Foundation, **20%** of individuals in Serbia justify violence against same-sex couples. Negative public perceptions and hate speech against LGBTQIA+ people are also widespread in the media and on the Internet.

Furthermore, in Serbia, OGBV is a pervasive occurrence against women journalists, activists, human rights defenders, politicians, and other public figures who are women. Lately, there has been an alarming increase in GBV against women journalists, both online and offline. The situation is worse for women journalists working for independent media outlets, for their critical reporting on the Serbian government (Tech Policy Design Lab, 2023).

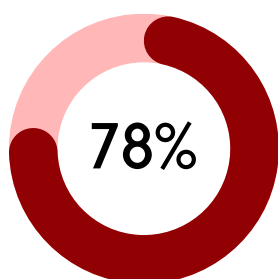


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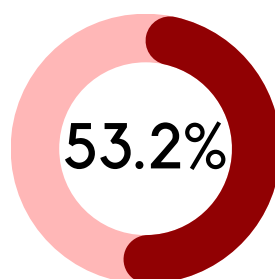
In Serbian traditional androcentric culture, there exists a deeply ingrained pattern of using symbolically violent language against women, serving as a means to perpetuate patriarchy (Miletić-Stepanović, 2006). The Serbian language is replete with expressions and idioms portraying women as "incessant talkers lacking in critical thinking", thereby reinforcing the notion of women's need for male control.

In Serbia, nationalists, populists, conservative intellectuals, and right-wing parties have formed anti-gender social movements by presenting 'gender ideology' as a threat to the Serbian national identity in the name of protecting traditional Serbian values. Emerging in 2017, after an educational package on preventing sexual violence was introduced into the curricula of Serbia's kindergartens and primary schools, these anti-gender campaigners have significantly dominated Serbia's online spaces, promoting the anti-gender discourse through misinformation. The anti-gender rhetoric often leans on deep-rooted discriminatory stereotypes and biases about women and the LGBTQIA+ community within Serbian society. Unfortunately, the absence of an institutional response to these narratives amplifies their influence and perpetuates their harmful effects.

Therefore, similar to GBV inflicted upon girls and women in offline spaces, OGBV is yet another precarious extension of GBV in Serbia. Surveys have revealed that **78%** of respondents (girls and women) express feelings of insecurity while using the Internet, despite dedicating only around three hours daily to online activities. Additionally, a staggering **53.2%** of Serbian girls and women have survived OGBV and also know a peer who has been an OGBV victim-survivor (UNFPA Serbia, 2022).



78% of Serbian girls and women feel unsafe in digital spaces



53.2% of Serbian girls and women have been a victim of OGBV and also know a peer who has been subjected to OGBV

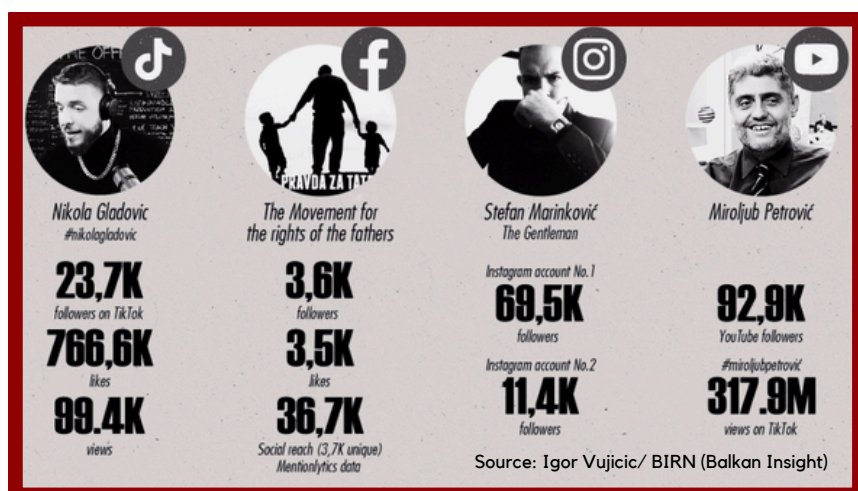
It is imperative to acknowledge that despite the concerning patterns, the data on GBV in Serbia lack standardization and comparability with data obtained from prosecution and police sources. Furthermore, there exists a significant dearth of information concerning the prevalence of various forms of OGBV experienced by Serbian women, especially those with intersecting identities and those from historically marginalized and disenfranchised communities. This scarcity primarily stems from the underreporting of OGBV incidents. Within the Serbian cultural context, characterized by entrenched patriarchal and sexist norms, OGBV is not universally recognized as a grievous form of GBV equivalent to physical violence occurring in tangible spaces. This underscores the urgent need for comprehensive data collection and a cultural shift to acknowledge and address all forms of GBV against Serbian girls and women in an effective manner.

'BIG TECH' PLATFORMS

'Big tech' platforms such as Facebook, X (Twitter), YouTube, and others have been critical tools to encourage and express solidarity in Serbia for victims/ survivors of GBV. For instance, in 2021, **#NisamTrazila [I Didn't Ask]** gained prominence in Serbia following the courageous actions of Milena Radulovic and another actress, who came forward with allegations of sexual abuse against the renowned acting teacher Miroslav Aleksic (Milenkovska, 2023).

On the other hand, the same 'big tech' platforms are enabling OGBV by failing to redesign their algorithms which promote misogynistic content. For instance, the emergence of a **Serbian 'manosphere'** on the 'big tech' platforms mirrors the toxic ideologies perpetuated by American 'incels' and Western influencers like Andrew Tate, who espouse toxic masculinity and objectification of women (Kovacevic and Neskovic, 2023). **Nikola Gladovic** is one of the most prominent faces of the anti-feminist Serbian manosphere, where he uses graphic misogyny through his 'Sygma Academy' on Discord and his TikTok profile. The **Justice for Dads- The Movement for the Rights of the Fathers** is a prominent Facebook group that promotes domestic violence and is against anti-violence legislation. Another prominent pseudoscientist, **Miroљub Petrovic**, uses YouTube to promote misogyny stating, "The worst thing a man can do to a woman is not to beat her, but to walk away from her".

It is concerning that these tech giants are failing to acknowledge their role in perpetuating harm and to take proactive steps to dismantle systems of oppression embedded within their algorithms and policies. Take, for example, the case of Serbian journalist, **Jovana Gligorjević**, who experienced doxxing via YouTube comments in 2019.



Shockingly, despite the severity of the security breach, the company only took action to remove her personal information after it was reported more than 30 times (Singh, 2022). This failure of the 'big tech' platforms to effectively

address harmful content is a deliberate neglect of their responsibility to safeguard women and girls from OGBV as it only perpetuates a cycle of violence and injustice.

MEDIA

Women journalists in Serbia have been subjected to sexual violence and abuse both in the offline and online realms over their critical reporting for years. Furthermore, the Serbian media has always disrespected ethical and language codes when reporting on GBV against women and girls, which further plays a key role in perpetuating misogynistic and sexist social norms. The plight of women journalists enduring OGBV is deeply troubling, as they are often compelled to shoulder the responsibility of collecting and flagging threats themselves, exacerbating their trauma, particularly in severe cases. What's more alarming is the conspicuous absence of condemnation from government officials who have brazenly encouraged attacks on journalists without facing any repercussions (IJAS, n.d.). By **early March 2024**, the escalation of threats and violence against journalists, especially women journalists, in northern Serbia, had reached an alarming peak. **Within a mere span of 10 days, at least seven journalists in the city of Novi Sad alone have been subjected to threats, OGBV, and physical assaults** (AFP, 2024b).

It is also concerning how pro-democracy journalists critical of the government are being **targeted with spyware employed by the Serbian government**. This raises urgent concerns about the erosion of civil liberties and the need for transparent regulation and oversight of surveillance systems (Bjelos, 2023). Overall, the ongoing prevalence of OGBV against women journalists in Serbia underscores a glaring lack of action from both the government and tech companies to effectively address this critical issue. Without concerted efforts to implement robust measures for protection and accountability, the safety and freedom of female journalists remain compromised, endangering not only their well-being but also the fundamental principles of press freedom and democratic society. The following page sheds light on some harrowing cases of OGBV targeting women journalists in Serbia.



- "I was publicly called many things... an old hag, a sterile, cheap Soros' prostitute, a hooker, not f***ed enough, in need of a good prick, and destroyer of the Serbian Orthodox Church", shared [Tatjana Vojtehovski](#), a popular Serbian television journalist, recounting being trolled on social media (Šajkaš, 2017).
- In another case, independent journalist, [Antonela Riha](#), became the target of a smear campaign in September 2017, due to her reporting on the presidential elections (NDNV, 2017).
- Several Serbian investigative journalists, including [Marija Vucic](#), have reported minimal outcomes after filing complaints about OGBV. Vucic received death threats via a fake Facebook profile in June 2017 and reported the case to the Special Prosecution Office for Hi-Tech Crime, but it remains unresolved. She subsequently received further threats but chose not to report them due to the lack of response to her initial complaint (Šajkaš, 2017).
- In March 2024, [Ana Lalić Hegediš](#), faced alarming online death threats, some of which were of a sexual nature. These threats stemmed from comments she made about nationalism while participating as a panelist at the Rebedu festival in Dubrovnik (Article 19, 2024).



LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Serbia has also adopted several long-term plans/ strategies to prevent and combat violence against women, such as the **Strategy for Preventing and Combating Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence for the Period 2021-2025**. However, the absence of human resources, budget, monitoring, and evaluation plans, and adopted Action plans means that strategies like this are rarely implemented. The Autonomous Women's Center's contribution for the Committee of the Parties to the Istanbul Convention regarding the 2020 Recommendations for



Serbia is a signatory to important binding international documents that guarantee gender equality and prohibit gender-based discrimination

Serbia revealed a high level of corruption as **1.3 out of 3 million euros allocated in 2022 for the support for women and prevention of domestic violence was allocated to fake CSOs** (Ignjatović and Macanović, 2023). Therefore, although the Istanbul Convention is of great importance when it comes to addressing various forms of violence against women, including OGBV, it is not adequately implemented in Serbia. Moreover, data on GBV are not gender-sensitive and most of the GBV data refer only to domestic violence with inconsistency in definition between different institutions (Ignjatović, 2023). According to **Article 11 of the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination**, hate speech, one of the most common manifestations of OGBV, is defined as a form of discrimination. However, it is also crucial to note that because only a limited number of domestic laws explicitly reference cyberspace, there is a prevailing sense that OGBV is either unregulated or inadequately regulated (Mahmutovic and Vale, 2021).

The new **Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence (Lex specialis)** was introduced in 2017 after a series of femicides and the May 2015 mass murder in a family. Intimate Partner Violence is addressed by two other legislations, namely, the **Family Law (Article 197)** and the **Criminal Code (Article 194)**. The Serbian Criminal Code criminalizes sexual violence, however, it is not aligned with the Istanbul Convention since it requires the use of force for an act to constitute rape and not the absence of consent (Petronijevic, n.d.).

Therefore, while Serbia has ratified key international treaties aimed at safeguarding women against GBV, the national legal framework has yet to be adequately amended to align with these commitments. Furthermore, we can see a noticeable absence of specific legislation tailored to address and prevent OGBV against women and girls. Addressing this lacuna requires urgent attention and comprehensive legislative reform to provide robust legal protections against OGBV.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Actions for Governments

- Introduce legislation that specifically defines and criminalizes OGBV in all its forms, leaving no room for ambiguity. Enforce the implementation of this legislation by ensuring law enforcement agencies receive specialized training and resources to investigate and prosecute OGBV cases effectively. Women and girls need laws that are clear, and specific and keep up with the dangers of the online world. Merely relying on existing GBV laws to indirectly address OGBV falls short of adequate protection.
- Prioritize the integration of gender equality education into primary school curricula as a proactive measure to prevent GBV and cultivate a culture of respect and equality from an early age. This will empower young minds with the knowledge and values necessary to challenge harmful gender stereotypes.
- Implement robust accountability measures to hold perpetrators of OGBV accountable for their actions. This includes implementing and strengthening legal frameworks to ensure swift and decisive prosecution of OGBV offenses, as well as providing adequate support and protection for survivors. Additionally, governments should establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the effectiveness of OGBV prevention and response efforts, with transparent reporting mechanisms to track progress and identify areas for improvement.
- Governments must develop effective strategies for combatting OGBV in collaboration with big tech platforms, media outlets, and civil society organizations, such as the implementation of content moderation policies, and educational initiatives aimed at promoting online safety and digital literacy.

Actions for 'Big Tech' platforms

- Ensure the recruitment of moderators from the Western Balkans who possess a deep understanding of local languages and cultural contexts. 'Big Tech' platforms must recognize that relying solely on foreign moderators and artificial intelligence compromises the effective enforcement of community guidelines, thereby failing to adequately protect women and girls in the region. Sacrificing quality for cost-cutting measures is unacceptable when the safety and well-being of women and girls are at stake.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Actions for Media

- Promote greater representation of women in leadership roles within the media industry to mitigate biased reporting and the perpetuation of traditional gender roles. Additionally, when covering cases of GBV, it is imperative to ensure journalists refrain from exacerbating harm to victims and their families by implying or directly blaming them for the abuse they suffered. This reprehensible practice perpetuates victim blaming and contributes to the cycle of abuse, exploiting victims' pain for profit. There can be no justification for GBV or OGBV.

Actions for Civil Society

- Provide shelter and mental health support for women and girls who have been neglected by the state for whatever reason. No one should be left to fend for themselves when dealing with OGBV.
- Launch comprehensive awareness campaigns aimed at educating men and boys throughout the Western Balkans on appropriate behavior both online and offline. It is crucial to convey the reality and severity of OGBV, emphasizing its profound consequences for individuals and society as a whole.
- Implement training programs for police officers on how to effectively respond to situations of violence against women and girls (VAWG) and OGBV. It is imperative that law enforcement personnel are equipped with the necessary skills and sensitivity to handle such cases with professionalism and empathy, ensuring survivors receive the respect, support and protection they deserve.



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CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this policy brief underscores the urgent need for a multi-stakeholder approach to address OGBV in the Western Balkans. Despite legislative efforts, deeply rooted patriarchal norms, inadequate legal frameworks, and ineffective responses from traditional media and online platforms have exacerbated the OGBV crisis. To combat this pervasive issue, governments must prioritize the enactment and enforcement of domestic legislation targeting OGBV, while collaboration between governments, tech companies, civil society, and the international community is crucial.

Additionally, efforts to challenge patriarchal norms, enhance media reporting practices, and strengthen online platform regulations are imperative. By addressing the root causes of OGBV and implementing targeted interventions, we can create a safer digital environment where women and girls can exercise their rights and participate fully in public life and the digital economy, ultimately advancing gender equality and human rights in the region.

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