TAKING STOCK OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN 14 COUNTRIES

From Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltic States (CEEBBS) and Türkiye

EUROPEAN WOMEN'S
LOBBY
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

TAKING STOCK of WOMEN's RIGHTS

in 14 COUNTRIES

from CENTRAL EASTERN EUROPE, the BALKANS, the BALTIC STATES (CEEBBS) and TURKIYE

This report has been compiled and edited by the Bulgarian Platform - European Women's Lobby. It is based on the country reports prepared by experts from member organisations of the European Women's Lobby in Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Romania, and Türkiye .

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ABSTRACT

This report overviews the status of women's rights in 2025 in 14 countries of Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltic States (CEEBBS), and Türkiye. It is based on the country reports of the members of the EUROPEAN WOMEN'S LOBBY (EWL) in the 'CEEBBS Taskforce', i.e. Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Poland, Serbia, Slovenia, Romania (CEEBBS EWL Taskforce), and Türkiye. These reports have been compiled and submitted by the country representatives in response to a questionnaire and were subsequently consolidated and edited by the BULGARIAN PLATFORM – EWL.

The following subjects are covered in the report: **Institutional Mechanisms, Challenges faced by Civil Society, Violence against Women, Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), Women in Decision Making, Multiple Discrimination and Intersectionality, Gender Pay and Pension Gap, Women's Participation in Peace-making and Peacebuilding.**

The report begins with an executive summary of findings, followed by a more detailed description of the state of affairs in the countries and recommendations per subject.

For further information please refer to the section Bibliography, sources & references (presented by country).

The Template of national overview could be found under Annex 1. The template was developed by the Bulgarian Platform – EWL and outlines the type of information requested and collected within the framework of this initiative.

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Abbreviations

CSE – Comprehensive sexuality education

CSO – Civil society organisation

CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

CEEBBS - Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Baltic States

EU – European Union

EFTA - European Free Trade Association

EWL – European Women's Lobby

GREVIO – Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence

LGBTQI+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and more.

NAP - National Action Plan

NGO – Non-government organisation

SLAPP – Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

SRHR - Sexual and reproductive health and rights

UN – United Nations

US – United States

VAW – Violence against women

Preface

This publication is the result of a collective effort by member organisations of the European Women's Lobby (EWL) partaking in the Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Baltic States (CEEBBS) Taskforce[1]. Since its creation in 2014, the Taskforce has united women's organisations from across the region in sharing knowledge, identifying common threats, and mobilising joint strategies.

From the very beginning, the CEEBBS Taskforce has sounded the alarm about growing hostility towards women's rights. Its 2018 landmark report documented the emergence of a dangerous backlash against women's rights, gender equality and the women's movement. Today, seven years later, this backlash has intensified, turning the region into a testing ground for regressive agendas that directly challenge the values of the European Union and the foundations of democracy itself.

With "*Taking Stock of Women's Rights in Fourteen Countries from Central Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltic States (CEEBBS) and Türkiye"*, we assess the developments during the period 2019 - 2025. For the first time the Republic of Moldova is also included in the investigation. *Together, the 14 countries examined represent half of all EU member states and nearly a third of the entire European continent. What is happening here will not remain confined to national borders*

The evidence, analysis, and testimonies provided by our partners reveal progress but also systemic attacks on gender equality, democratic institutions, and civil society. The backlash against women's rights is not an isolated phenomenon; it is part of a broader regression in democratic values and human rights standards that threatens the European project.

This initiative therefore goes beyond documentation. It aims to evaluate national and regional progress, identify emerging challenges, and equip policymakers and advocates with evidence-based recommendations. But it also makes one thing crystal clear: defending women's rights in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Baltic States is not a regional issue. It is a European imperative. The credibility of the EU as a community built on equality, democracy, and human rights depends on it.

[1] The CEEBBS Taskforce was set up in 2014 to exchange information and push for stronger women's rights and gender equality in the region. In 2019, it published the report "Time for Women's Rights, Time for a United Feminist Europe." Although the Taskforce stopped working formally after that, it continued to share updates and raise concerns about the situation. In 2024, the Bulgarian Platform of the EWL initiated the idea of a second report, which became possible in 2025 thanks to the support provided by the CHANEL Foundation to the EWL.

The report is both a call to action and a roadmap to reinforce regional advocacy, strengthen the resilience of women's rights defenders, and ensure that Europe remains a place where equality and justice are non-negotiable.

The Bulgarian Platform – European Women's Lobby played a central role in consulting, coordinating, and ensuring meaningful engagement with all national partners, in close cooperation with: Czech Women's Lobby, the Women's Network of Croatia, Estonian Women's Associations Roundtable Foundation, Hungarian Women's Lobby, Women's NGOs Cooperation Network Latvia, Lithuanian Women's Lobby, Association for Children and Youth FACLIA – Republic of Moldova, Macedonian Women's Lobby, NEWW-Polska, Romanian Women's Lobby, Women's Studies and Research – Republic of Serbia, Women's Lobby – Slovenia, and the EWL Coordination for Türkiye. Together, this regional partnership brought forward a strong, diverse, and evidence-based perspective that is indispensable for shaping policies and defending women's rights at both the national and European levels.

Methodology

The methodology was developed by the Bulgarian Platform of the European Women's Lobby with a focus on the main objective of this publication: to provide reliable, evidence-based information on the state of gender equality and women's rights across 14 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltic States, and Türkiye, and to assess both progress and setbacks since 2019.

Information was collected between June and September 2025 through a combination of desk research, targeted interviews, and close engagement with women's rights organisations, experts, and activists working in the region. This approach ensured that the study not only reflects formal policies and legislative developments but also captures the lived experiences and perspectives of those directly involved in defending women's rights on the ground.

The desk research covered a wide range of sources, including national legislation, governmental strategies, and policy frameworks, Constitutional Court and other judicial decisions, reports and data from national human rights institutions and equality bodies, analyses, shadow reports, and statements from civil society organisations, women's rights defenders, and feminist scholars, monitoring by independent media and research institutions.

In addition, qualitative insights were gathered through interviews with representatives of national NGOs and advocacy experts. These interviews provided first-hand information on political developments, institutional practices, challenges civil society faces, and emerging trends in gender equality.

The report also builds on the continuous advocacy, expertise, and engagement of the member organisations of the EWL and the CEEBBS Taskforce. Their ongoing dialogue with national authorities, parliaments, and regional and international bodies, combined with their daily work with women and communities, ensured that the findings are deeply rooted in reality.

By combining legislative and policy analysis with activist knowledge and lived experiences, this study offers a comprehensive and multidimensional picture of the state of women's rights. This methodology not only strengthens the reliability of the findings but also highlights the indispensable role of women's organisations and feminist movements as both sources of expertise and drivers of change.

Executive summary

Geopolitical trends are having a profoundly negative impact on democracy and human rights worldwide, with particularly severe consequences for women, LGBTQI+ people, migrant women, Roma women, and other vulnerable groups. The CEEBBS region has historically lacked stable democratic institutions and where democracy exists, it remains fragile and vulnerable. Democracy is a promise of freedom, equality, participation, and justice, yet this promise is never guaranteed. Today this promise is under serious threat. When democracy is under attack, the most vulnerable groups are the first to suffer, and in the CEEBBS region, women are clearly on the frontlines.

The period between 2019 and 2025 was marked by serious challenges and dynamic changes. It encompassed the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2024 EU elections, and the most recent US Presidential elections, alongside ongoing crises such as the war in Ukraine and increasing violence against women in different countries outside Europe. This turbulent period has created a difficult environment, further compounded by the rise of far-right and extremist political movements and the shrinking space for civil society.

Across Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans, and Türkiye, the steps towards gender equality remain uneven and often contradictory. While all countries in the region have formally committed to gender equality through their constitutions, European Union obligations, or international conventions, the implementation of these commitments varies significantly. The overall landscape is characterized by *weak institutions, insufficient funding, uneven political will, and the growing influence of anti-gender movements, all of which shape the lived realities of women and girls.*

Institutional and legal frameworks across the region demonstrate striking divergence between formal commitments and lived realities. Hungary epitomizes institutional demolition, abolishing its Equal Treatment Authority and replacing its gender strategy with a family-focused agenda. Türkiye follows a similar trajectory, subordinating gender equality to “family values” and withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, while excluding civil society from decision-making. By contrast, Moldova and North Macedonia have introduced more structured legal frameworks, integrating quotas and comprehensive gender-based violence legislation, though implementation remains constrained by resources. Most other countries, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Slovenia, Czechia, Latvia, and Estonia, retain institutions largely in symbolic form, reliant on EU funding, fragmented mandates, or weak accountability.

Civil society is under pressure and reveals a shrinking civic space for women's rights organizations, marked by backlash, delegitimization, and chronic underfunding. Political actors, religious groups, and conservative media weaponize "gender ideology" to discredit CSOs as "anti-family" or "foreign agents." Governments increasingly restrict participation, while NGOs aligned with ruling political parties (so called "pocket NGOs" or GONGO-s - government founded NGOs) enjoy preferential treatment. Activists are subject to harassment, SLAPP[2]s, and hate speech, particularly in Poland, Moldova, and Romania. Financial insecurity caused by reduced domestic support and donor dependency threatens sustainability, especially for grassroots groups. Despite these barriers, civil society remains a crucial provider of services and advocacy, filling gaps left by states.

Violence against Women (VAW) remains one of the most pressing yet inconsistently addressed issue. Most governments have advanced legal reforms but weak implementation undermines impact. EU accession processes have driven ratification of the Istanbul Convention in several Western Balkan and Baltic states, while Central European countries such as Bulgaria, Hungary, Czechia, and Lithuania remain blocked by politicized anti-gender narratives. Türkiye's withdrawal from the Convention in 2021 marked a sharp regression, leaving domestic protections weakened by poor enforcement. Across the region, inadequate service provision, entrenched stigma, and limited access to justice continue to undermine women's safety.

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) present a polarized picture. While some countries, such as Estonia, Slovenia, and Moldova, maintain progressive frameworks, others, including Poland, Hungary, Türkiye, Bulgaria, and Romania, illustrate regressions under growing anti-gender and anti-abortion rhetoric. The gap between legal guarantees and practical access remains striking, particularly for rural women, Roma, migrants, and disadvantaged groups. Lack of comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly services fuels high adolescent pregnancy rates, notably in Romania and Serbia, while stigma and costs prevent effective realization of rights. Sustained political will, EU monitoring, and civil society engagement are essential to safeguard SRHR as fundamental human rights.

Representation of women in political and executive decision-making remains well below parity across the region. Binding quotas have proven most effective: Moldova has achieved near parity in parliament and executive leadership, while Serbia and Slovenia also demonstrate notable gains. By contrast, voluntary quotas or weak enforcement in North Macedonia, Poland, and Lithuania yield uneven progress, and countries without quotas (Bulgaria, Czechia, Hungary,

[2] SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation) are abusive legal actions, often in the form of defamation or libel claims, designed to intimidate, silence, or financially exhaust critics rather than to resolve legitimate legal disputes. SLAPPs are widely recognized as a tactic to suppress dissent and restrict freedom of expression, and the EU has recently proposed measures to curb their abuse.

Türkiye, and Romania) continue to lag behind. Bulgaria exemplifies regression, with women's representation in both national and European politics sharply declining despite broad public support for greater equality. Even in contexts with symbolic milestones, such as Estonia's simultaneous female president and prime minister, structural change has not followed. The evidence is clear: without binding legal measures, strong enforcement, and cultural change within political parties, women's representation stagnates or declines.

Multiple discrimination and intersectionality further exacerbate inequalities across the region. Women facing compounded disadvantages due to ethnicity, disability, migration status, sexual orientation, or socio-economic background remain among the most marginalized. Türkiye and Hungary embody systemic exclusion, where state institutions actively reinforce intersectional discrimination. Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia reflect entrenched barriers, with Roma women exposed to poverty, early marriage, and health risks. At the same time, countries such as Serbia, Moldova, and parts of the Baltics demonstrate early recognition of intersectionality within legal or policy frameworks, though implementation is inconsistent. Civil society remains the key driver of inclusive practices, often compensating for state inaction.

Gender pay and pension gaps remain persistent across the region, reflecting occupational segregation, undervaluation of women's work, and the cumulative impact of unpaid care responsibilities. Romania and Bulgaria stand out for their wide disparities: Romania records one of the EU's highest gender pay gaps at 22.4% and pension gaps over 35%, while in Bulgaria women earn on average 20% less than men and face one of the highest poverty risks in Europe. The Czech Republic, Croatia, and the Baltic states also exhibit entrenched sectoral segregation, leaving older women particularly vulnerable to poverty. North Macedonia and Türkiye demonstrate the long-term economic consequences of low female labor force participation and career interruptions, with pension disparities reaching 30% or more. By contrast, Lithuania and Estonia show gradual progress through pay transparency measures and strong female labor market participation, though significant challenges remain. Addressing these gaps requires recognition of unpaid care in pension systems, stricter enforcement of equal pay laws, and targeted measures to increase women's access to high-paying sectors and leadership positions.

Women's participation in peace-making and peace-building remains limited across the region, despite formal commitments under UN Security Council Resolution 1325. A first group of countries, including Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Slovenia, have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) and demonstrate moderate to strong engagement with the Women, Peace and Security agenda. Slovenia stands out with women's leadership across security and diplomatic institutions, although underrepresentation in formal negotiations persists. A second group, including Poland, Romania and Serbia, has weak or outdated NAPs with limited implementation, leaving civil society to fill critical gaps. Hungary lags

furthest behind, with no National Action Plan (NAP) or structured state-led framework; women's participation is largely limited to community-level initiatives. Türkiye also lacks a National Action Plan and does not participate in any Regional Action Plan for UN Security Council Resolution 1325. As a result, the role of women in Türkiye's peace processes remains unclear, with no national strategy in place to support their involvement. Across all contexts, civil society and particularly women-led organizations play a pivotal role in refugee support, grassroots peace-building, and humanitarian response, as demonstrated during the ongoing war in Ukraine. Yet women remain largely excluded from high-level peace negotiations and decision-making, underscoring the persistent gap between policy rhetoric and practice.

Taken together, these findings reveal a region at a crossroads. Progressive reforms in some countries coexist with severe regressions in others, while the common denominator remains the gap between law and practice. Women, youth, and marginalized groups bear the brunt of these inequalities, whether in accessing healthcare, securing equal pay, or having a seat at the peace table. Moving forward requires sustained political will, the meaningful participation of women's rights organizations, and EU-level engagement to embed gender equality and intersectionality into funding, monitoring, and rule of law mechanisms. Only through coordinated action can the region move toward genuine equality, ensuring that no woman is left behind.

I. Institutional mechanisms and legal framework

"The Orthodox Church has a strong influence on the public opinion on gender equality. It calls the GEL (Gender Equality Law) "one of the most serious issues facing the Serbian people" which implementation would have "lasting and harmful consequences for the expression, communication, and lives of the Serbian people", and represents "the forced implementation of the so-called gender ideology and policy, while that practice is not mandatory in any European Union member state". Resistance to implementation of gender equality legislation and policies is high not only by the Church and conservative political parties, but also by a part of linguistics and academia. A scientific conference held on 14 March 2024 on the legal consequences of the Law on Gender Equality concluded that "it aims violent changes of consciousness and value categories, the disintegration of personality, family, society, education, culture, law, morality and logic."

Story from Women's Studies and Research – Republic of Serbia

In 1995, the United Nations, through the *Beijing Platform for Action*, defined institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women and gender equality as the *"central policy-coordinating unit inside government [whose] main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender equality perspective in all policy areas."* Today, amid a strong backlash against women's rights and a worrying erosion of democratic values and principles, it is more crucial than ever to have robust mechanisms that promote, advocate for, and support gender equality, while ensuring the systematic mainstreaming of gender perspectives across all areas of policy. This is particularly vital for countries with so-called young democracies, such as those in the CEEBB region, where democratic institutions are still fragile and where rising populism and nationalism often exploit gender stereotypes and inequality to weaken democracy and roll back human rights. Across the region, gender equality frameworks exist on paper, but without political will, funding, and civil society engagement, they remain symbolic rather than transformative.

The institutional and legal architecture for gender equality across Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans, and Türkiye reveals a shared paradox: on paper, most states have adopted strategies, action plans, and equality bodies, yet in practice these mechanisms remain fragile, underfunded, or politically constrained. While some countries have strengthened legal protections and institutional frameworks in line with EU and international standards, others have deliberately weakened them by reframing equality into narrow family or demographic policies, or by subordinating equality bodies to political priorities.

Bulgaria has structured but hollow mechanisms and legislation. The institutional set-up includes the National Council for Equality, the Ministry of Labour's Gender Equality Department, and the Commission for Protection against Discrimination. The National Strategy for Promoting Equality (2021 - 2030) sets ambitious goals, but weak accountability, underfunding, and uneven local implementation hinder results. While legal frameworks (Equality Act 2016, Protection against Discrimination Act 2004) are robust, *gender mainstreaming remains symbolic while limited institutional capacity and funding, and populist discourses undermine political commitment.*

Croatia is characterized by symbolic compliance and institutional stagnation. The country has developed a broad institutional and legal framework for gender equality, anchored in constitutional guarantees and a range of sectoral laws covering discrimination, labour, family, media, and political participation. In theory, this framework is supported by dedicated bodies such as the Parliamentary Committee for Gender Equality, the Ombudsperson, and the Government Office for Gender Equality, alongside ministerial coordinators and local commissions. Yet, *in practice, these institutions remain underfunded, politically vulnerable, and often sidelined*. Croatia *lacked a national gender equality strategy for eight years, breaching both domestic and international commitments*. The National Plan for Gender Equality 2023 - 2027, finally introduced, is weak in scope and funding, avoids gender-specific language, neglects intersectional groups, and omits a coherent strategy against gender-based violence. With limited resources and no monitoring mechanisms, its measures are largely symbolic. These shortcomings, combined with *political resistance and institutional marginalization*, point to a wider trend of democratic backsliding. Without stronger political will, adequate funding, and robust enforcement, *Croatia's formal commitments to gender equality risk remaining little more than words on paper.*

Czech Republic is characterized by being underfunded and dependent on EU Funds with the Government Council for Gender Equality serving only an advisory role and the Gender Equality Department sustained by precarious financing. Without stable state funding, reliance on European Union/European Free Trade Association (EU/EFTA) projects undermines sustainability. The Government Commissioner for Human Rights holds a broad portfolio including gender equality. Legal progress includes the 2025 "Lex Anička" *protecting victims of sexual assault and reforms on childcare and forced sterilisation compensation. The Gender Equality Strategy (2021 - 2030) exists but is underfunded*, with only €80,000 annually allocated.

In Estonia we see sleeping legal reform and fragmented responsibility. Estonia's Gender Equality Act (2004) and Equal Treatment Act (2009) remain core documents. The Equality Policy Department, recently moved under the Ministry of Economic Affairs, now splits responsibility with the Ministry of Social Affairs, which creates fragmentation. Its tangible impact on policy-making remains limited. The Gender Equality Council has currently lapsed. The 2023 - 2030

Welfare Development Plan includes gender equality goals, but *weak evaluation and poor women's organisations oversight reduce effectiveness.*

Hungary is characterized by institutional demolition, exemplified by the 2021 abolition of the Equal Treatment Authority and its merger into the Ombudsperson, which significantly downgraded institutional independence. The expired Gender Equality Strategy (2010 - 2021) was replaced by a family-centered plan (2021 - 2030), *excluding violence and equality issues*. Women's rights are now subordinated under the Ministry of Culture and Innovation's State Secretariat for Families, with limited staff and fragmented responsibilities. Civil society is excluded from consultations, and equality mainstreaming has effectively disappeared.

Latvia passed new legal protections but the training for civil servants is not comprehensive. Latvia's Ministry of Welfare coordinates equality policy, supported by an Ombudsman and a Gender Equality Committee. Recent progress includes the 2024 - 2029 *Violence Against Women plan* and 2023 legal reforms *enhancing protection against stalking and threats*. *The 2024 Partnership Law marked a breakthrough for same-sex couples.* Yet, *lack of systematic civil servant training* undermines mainstreaming, and strategies remain constrained by limited budgets.

Lithuania is marked by regression in gender equality data and strategy. Lithuania aligns with EU frameworks but *faces setbacks, notably the liquidation of its long-term National Programme on Equal Opportunities and the loss of its comprehensive annual gender statistics report* ("Women and Men in Lithuania"). Gender equality mechanisms exist but are increasingly merged with other policy areas, diluting focus.

Moldova has consolidated a structured system: a Government Commission on Gender Equality, gender focal points across ministries, and the Equality Council. Since 2022, a dedicated National Agency for Preventing and Combating VAW coordinates responses. The legislative backbone remains the Equal Opportunities Law (2006), strengthened by successive strategies including the 2023 - 2027 Programme on VAW and Domestic Violence. Gender equality has also been integrated into EU accession agendas. Yet, *limited budgets and weak ministerial influence* mean *implementation is uneven*, though Moldova stands out as one of the few countries with visible institutional strengthening.

There is a progressive framework, but fragile implementation in *North Macedonia*. The country has made *notable progress in recent years* by aligning its legal and institutional frameworks with EU standards. The Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2018) established a comprehensive foundation, supported by the creation of the Agency for Gender Equality (2019) and the adoption of the National Strategy for Gender Equality (2018 - 2023). The Antidiscrimination Law (2020) and the Law for Preventing Gender-Based Violence (2021) further strengthened protections, while the new Abortion Law (2019) liberalized access to reproductive

rights, placing the country ahead of many regional peers. Electoral reforms in 2018 introduced *gender quotas*, significantly improving women's political participation and representation. Yet, despite this robust framework, *implementation remains inconsistent*. Institutional mechanisms face *underfunding, staff shortages, and fluctuating political support*. Civil society plays a critical role in monitoring progress, but women's organizations often operate with limited access to policymaking spaces. *North Macedonia illustrates how legal and policy advances can be ambitious, but without sustained investment, cross-ministerial coordination, and accountability, they risk remaining largely aspirational*.

Poland has expanded its frameworks but continues to struggle with limited resources. Poland's equality framework includes the Minister for Equality (since 2023), the Department for Equality, and the Ombudsperson. The Equal Treatment Act (2010) remains the backbone, supported by the National Action Plan for Equal Treatment (2022 - 2030), though it *lacks a dedicated budget*. Recent reforms include 2025 Labour Code amendments aligning with the EU *Equal Pay Directive*, *anti-discrimination legislation* (2024 - 2025), and a *Supreme Court ruling on transgender rights* (2025). While institutional visibility has improved, resource constraints and political ambivalence limit impact. *In July 2025, the post of the Minister for Gender Equality was downgraded*, reducing its political weight and raising concerns among civil society about the government's long-term commitment to equality policies.

Romania is characterized by structured but underfunded mechanism. The framework is anchored in the National Agency for Equal Opportunities (ANES), currently under the Prime Minister's authority, with discussions to move it back under the Ministry of Labor. Civil society has raised concerns about a controversial proposal to merge it with two other agencies, warning that this would weaken the gender equality focus and hinder coordination with international and EU bodies. The National Strategy on Equal Opportunities (2021 - 2027) aligns with EU standards but suffers from *underfunding, weak interministerial coordination, and reliance on external donors*. Recent legal steps include workplace harassment protections and updates to the Labour Code. Institutional instability, staff turnover, and insufficient budgets continue to undermine implementation.

Serbia presents an ambitious law but a constitutional setback. The progressive Gender Equality Law (2021) introduced gender-responsive budgeting, gender impact assessments, and equality plans across all sectors. However, its implementation has been undermined by the Constitutional Court, which struck down several key provisions, weakening the law's transformative potential. Furthermore, in 2024 the Constitutional Court suspended its enforcement, citing objections to the use of "gender" rather than "sex." This setback, exacerbated by the Ombudsperson's role in challenging the law, has raised alarms among women's rights defenders. Other legal frameworks, such as the Budget System Law and the Law on Planning System, still advance gender

mainstreaming. Strategies on gender equality (2021–2030) and anti-discrimination exist, though implementation has slowed. National mechanisms include a Minister without portfolio for gender equality, a Gender Equality Council, and oversight bodies like the Ombudsperson and Commissioner for Equality, but *the suspension of the Gender Equality Law highlights the fragility of institutional progress under political pressure.*

Slovenia has symbolic advances, but institutional weakness. Slovenia has *no independent gender equality office or ombudsperson*. Legislative advances include a 2021 *rape law reform aligned with the Istanbul Convention*, a *feminist foreign policy decision* (2022), and the *adoption of the Equal Opportunities Resolution* (2023 - 2030). More recently, *quotas for company boards* (2024) and *same-sex adoption rights* (2025) marked symbolic gains. However, the 2019 amendments to the Equal Opportunities Act weakened party obligations, and a comprehensive equality law has stalled for eight years. *Institutional gaps remain acute, as gender equality is fragmented and underprioritized within government.*

In *Türkiye,* we see symbolic frameworks but substantive regression. While formal structures such as the Human Rights and Equality Institution (TIHEK), the Ombudsman, and the Parliamentary Commission on Equality (KEFEK) exist, they lack autonomy and effectiveness. Their narrow mandates, coupled with the Ministry of Family and Social Services' framing of equality primarily within 'family policy,' undermine genuine progress on gender equality. The government has adopted a range of strategies - the 12th Development Plan, the Women's Empowerment Strategy, and the Family Vision Plan, but these function largely as symbolic showcases, setting low targets (e.g. 36% women's employment, 25% women in parliament by 2028). Legal Achievements, such as the 2023 Constitutional Court ruling on women's surnames, are overshadowed by the lack of implementation, which has deepened since the *2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention.* Civil society remains excluded from national action plan consultations, though some Local Equality Action Plans (LEAPs) exist at the municipal level. Although it has been stated that mediation will be introduced for divorce cases at the ministerial level, no legislative proposal has been submitted yet.

The institutional and legal landscape for gender equality in the region presents a picture of divergence between formal frameworks and lived realities. Some countries have moved toward institutional demolition or symbolic compliance, while others demonstrate fragile progress tempered by weak implementation and resource constraints.

Hungary represents the most dramatic case of institutional dismantling, having abolished its Equal Treatment Authority in 2021 and replaced a gender equality strategy with a family-centered plan. *Türkiye* follows a similar trajectory of regression, maintaining formal structures but subordinating women's rights to family policy and withdrawing from the Istanbul Convention, while civil society remains excluded from decision-making. *Serbia* stands out for its ambitious

Gender Equality Law of 2021, but its suspension by the Constitutional Court illustrates how political and judicial pushback can quickly erode advances.

Bulgaria, Croatia, and Slovenia retain structured frameworks but largely in *symbolic form*. *Croatia's eight-year gap without a national strategy*, followed by a weak and underfunded plan, mirrors *Bulgaria's hollowed-out system of ambitious goals without accountability*, and *Slovenia's patchwork of reforms* without a strong institutional anchor.

In *the Czech Republic, Latvia, and Estonia* institutions survive but *depend on EU funding* or are *fragmented across ministries*, with *limited staff* and *declining NGO engagement*. *Lithuania's regression in statistical monitoring and strategy* signals how institutional erosion can occur quietly through the removal of key tools and data.

North Macedonia and Moldova show *more progressive alignment with EU standards*. *North Macedonia* has introduced a robust legal framework, including quotas and laws on gender-based violence, but *struggles with implementation due to underfunding and weak cross-ministerial coordination. Moldova* has consolidated a structured system with dedicated agencies and integration into the EU accession process, though *financial and political limitations remain obstacles*.

Poland, meanwhile, is in flux: it has expanded its equality structures and updated its legal framework in line with EU directives, but downgrading the Minister for Gender Equality in 2025 raises doubts about the durability of this progress.

Taken together, the region reveals a shared tension between formal compliance and substantive equality. Institutional fragility, political resistance, and chronic underfunding undermine progress while populist and nationalist narratives continue to shape policy directions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Reinforce Institutional Independence and Capacity: Guarantee the autonomy, adequate staffing, and long-term financing of gender equality bodies and Ombudsperson institutions, ensuring they cannot be dismantled or politically subordinated.

Adopt and Implement Comprehensive Gender Equality Strategies: All governments should adopt updated, evidence-based strategies aligned with CEDAW, GREVIO, and EU standards. These strategies must include clear timelines, budgets, and accountability mechanisms to prevent "symbolic compliance."

Close the Implementation Gap: Strengthen cross-ministerial coordination and provide dedicated resources for enforcement, monitoring, and sanctions where laws and policies are not applied in practice.

Safeguard Civil Society Space: Institutionalise meaningful participation of women's rights NGOs in policymaking, monitoring, and evaluation. Governments should guarantee consultation processes and protect activists from harassment, as well as donors provide stable, flexible, and long-term funding to NGOs.

Counter Populist and Nationalist Backlash: Develop public education campaigns to reinforce gender equality as a constitutional and democratic value, and counter misinformation and extremist narratives that frame equality as a threat to family or national identity.

Strengthen Regional and EU-Level Oversight: The EU, Council of Europe, and other regional actors should enhance monitoring, provide conditionality-linked funding, and apply political pressure to ensure governments uphold their equality commitments. Transnational solidarity networks should be expanded to buffer against anti-gender movements.

Invest in Data, Research, and Accountability Tools: Rebuild and sustain robust gender-disaggregated statistics, monitoring indicators, and research capacities to track real progress, identify gaps, and hold governments accountable.

II. Challenges faced by civil society

"In March 2021, at least seven women's rights groups, including Feminoteka, Women's Rights Centre, and Women's Strike received bomb and death threats for supporting abortion rights. After change of government in 2023, there were no such incidents."

Story from NEWW - Polska

"The leading officials of the right-wing parties openly spoke about "decadent", unnatural Istanbul Convention, endangering "the only normal wedlock, the one of a man and a woman", and traditional family values, accusing sexuality education in public schools, as insufficient as it is, as "gender ideology, luring our vulnerable, innocent children into decadent, sick LGBT+ and transgender lifestyles". The leader of the best organized women's NGO, 8th of March, Miss Nika Kovač was blatantly smeared as foreign agent and promotor of "cultural Marxism and harmful gender ideology", social media were sending her unanimous rape and death threats, and she was twice physically attacked in the streets of Ljubljana. The most visible feminist trade union activist, Tea Jarc, who publicly in person criticized the autocratic leadership style of the right-wing prime minister, was labeled as a hysterical woman mental patient."

Story from Women's Lobby - Slovenia

Civil society organizations across Central Eastern Europe, the Baltics, the Balkans, and Türkiye have long been at the forefront of advancing gender equality, protecting women's rights, and safeguarding democratic values. Over the past decade, however, they have encountered a tightening environment that increasingly undermines their sustainability, legitimacy, and influence. *Although national contexts differ, a set of cross-cutting challenges consistently shape the conditions under which CSOs operate.*

One of the most visible trends is the rise of the anti-gender backlash. Political actors, religious institutions, and conservative media outlets increasingly weaponize the concept of "gender ideology," presenting it as a threat to national identity and so-called "traditional values."

Women's rights and feminist organizations are frequently depicted as "foreign agents" or "anti-family," which erodes their public legitimacy and polarises social debate. This backlash has been particularly pronounced around discussions of the Istanbul Convention, LGBTQI+ rights, and sexuality education.

At the same time, *civic space has been shrinking across the region.* Governments have adopted measures that restrict CSOs activity, ranging from administrative burdens and exclusion from policymaking processes to more repressive tools such as intimidation, arrests, and bans on peaceful assembly, especially visible in countries such as *Türkiye, Serbia, and Romania*. In many places, civic dialogue platforms have been captured by state interests, leaving independent NGOs marginalized, while so-called "pocket NGOs" or GONGO-s (government founded NGOs) aligned with ruling parties enjoy privileged access and resources. In *North Macedonia*, women's organizations also report government restrictions, with almost half experiencing delayed permits or local opposition when organizing equality-focused events. In *Croatia*, civil society, particularly women's rights organizations, faces systemic barriers that limit their effectiveness.

Financial insecurity represents another structural barrier to effective civil society action. *Women's rights and feminist organizations often struggle with chronic underfunding***,** relying heavily on project-based support and facing sharp reductions in national subsidy schemes, as observed in *Croatia, Czechia, Estonia, and Latvia*. International donor dependency remains high, but global funding shifts (particularly the reduction of US aid) have exacerbated sustainability concerns. Grassroots organizations are especially affected, often unable to retain staff or maintain long-term advocacy capacity. This problem is particularly acute in *North Macedonia*, where more than 70% of women's rights CSOs depend on international donors and have faced notable funding cuts since 2018.

In parallel, *activists themselves face increasing hostility.* Women human rights defenders across the region are subject to smear campaigns, online harassment, Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), and even physical intimidation. Gendered hate speech and disinformation, particularly targeting women politicians and activists in *Moldova, Poland, and Romania,* contribute to the silencing of voices and discourage political participation.

Peaceful feminist mobilizations are frequently met with excessive policing, while arbitrary arrests have been documented in countries such as *Serbia and Türkiye*. In *North Macedonia*, media hostility and cultural backlash reinforce this environment, with traditional norms limiting support for women's groups and discouraging survivors of violence from reporting abuse.

Legal frameworks also create uncertainty for CSOs. In *Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Türkiye*, laws have been proposed or enacted that risk stigmatizing or even criminalizing NGOs under the guise of countering "foreign influence" or "terrorism." Elsewhere, seemingly neutral legislation,

such as public procurement rules, places disproportionate administrative burdens on smaller organizations, as seen in *Lithuania*.

Moreover, state engagement with civil society is often selective. While certain governments provide rhetorical support for gender equality (*Slovenia and Estonia*), such commitments rarely translate into consistent funding or inclusive policymaking processes. Instead, *funding and visibility are frequently directed towards family-oriented, religious, or politically aligned organizations, leaving feminist groups sidelined.*

Yet, despite these challenges, *civil society has demonstrated resilience and achieved important advocacy victories.* In *Moldova*, CSOs contributed to the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, the introduction of a 40% gender quota, and the legal recognition of femicide. In *Bulgaria* women's organisations pressure led to positive changes in legislation for prevention and protection against domestic violence. In *Czechia*, feminist mobilization supported a Constitutional Court decision abolishing forced sterilization as a condition for legal gender recognition. *Latvian* activists successfully campaigned for the introduction of free menstrual products in schools and the renewal of breast reconstruction funding. In *Poland,* despite a hostile environment, civil society pressure helped secure a 2025 Supreme Court ruling that eased gender recognition procedures. These examples highlight the adaptability and persistence of CSOs in the face of growing adversity.

To sustain this role, coordinated action is required at multiple levels. The European Union has a responsibility to safeguard civic space by linking EU funds and accession processes to respect for fundamental rights and NGO participation. Direct funding streams should be expanded for independent women's rights and feminist organizations, bypassing state-controlled mechanisms that often discriminate against them. The EU should also invest in countering anti-gender disinformation and strengthen monitoring of harassment, SLAPPs, and violations of the right to assembly.

National governments, meanwhile, must establish transparent consultation mechanisms that ensure inclusive policymaking. They should guarantee equal access to sustainable funding for women's rights organizations and adopt effective protections against gender-based harassment and violence directed at activists. Importantly, governments should refrain from stigmatizing NGOs in laws or official discourse, abandoning harmful labels such as "foreign agents" or "anti-family."

Donors, both international and private, also have a key role to play. Moving beyond short-term project support, they should prioritize core, multi-annual funding that enables organizational stability and development. Greater attention should be given to grassroots and regional NGOs, not only to large, professionalized organizations. Donors should also support advocacy and

watchdog functions, which are essential for democratic accountability but often underfunded, and encourage cross-border cooperation that strengthens solidarity and knowledge-sharing among movements.

Finally, civil society itself must continue to innovate. Stronger alliances between feminist, LGBTQI+, environmental, and democracy movements are needed to resist anti-gender backlash. Diversifying funding through community-based fundraising and ethical partnerships can reduce dependency on volatile external support. Building digital resilience is increasingly essential, both to withstand online harassment and to counter coordinated disinformation campaigns. At the same time, documenting impact—through evidence, storytelling, and visible success stories—remains critical to strengthening legitimacy and countering efforts to delegitimize their work.

Civil society in CEEBBS and Türkiye stands at a crossroads. On the one hand, it faces shrinking civic space, financial precarity, and hostile narratives that threaten to silence independent voices. On the other, it continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience, securing significant victories for gender equality and democratic rights. The future of the sector—and indeed of democracy itself—will depend on ensuring that these organizations are protected, resourced, and recognised as indispensable actors in building more just and equal societies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Protect Civic Space: Ensure legal and political safeguards for NGOs, defend the right to assembly and participation, and prevent harassment, SLAPPs, and stigmatization of women's rights organizations.

Secure Sustainable Funding: Provide multi-year, core funding for feminist, women's rights, and grassroots organizations, reducing dependence on short-term or politically aligned support.

Strengthen Inclusion and Policy Influence: Institutionalise transparent consultation mechanisms at national and local levels, integrating CSOs into policymaking, monitoring, and evaluation of gender equality initiatives.

Counter Backlash and Build Resilience: Support measures against anti-gender disinformation, online harassment, and smear campaigns; invest in capacity-building, digital security, and cross-sector alliances.

Promote Evidence-Based Advocacy: Support research, monitoring, and impact documentation to enhance legitimacy, highlight intersectional inequalities, and strengthen advocacy at national and EU levels.

III. Preventing and combating violence against women

"On 26 June 2023, after receiving several death threats from a man described as her ex-boyfriend, Débora Mihaylova, a 26-year-old woman from Stara Zagora (Bulgaria), was beaten and raped with a dummy knife on her legs, arms, and chest before she was able to notify her family. Four hundred stitches were needed to close her wounds. The perpetrator was arrested but released on July 5th after 72 hours in police custody; he was prosecuted only for inflicting "minor injuries" on the young woman, a legal description that offended the victim and her family."

Story from Bulgarian Platform – EWL

"On 20 January 2022, the Saeima (Parliament) adopted amendments to the Law "On Police," introducing a crucial safeguard in domestic violence cases. Under the new provisions, when there is an immediate threat that a person in or near the home may endanger the life, freedom, or health of a protected person, the police can issue a separation order without requiring a written application from the victim. Previously, even when officers identified an imminent risk, they could not act if the protected person refused to submit a formal request. The separation order is based on a risk assessment, which includes information confirming the immediacy and severity of the threat. In 2023, the State Police issued 894 separation orders - the highest number recorded so far. Additionally, in 2022, the State Police established a dedicated Cybercrime Investigation Department, further strengthening institutional capacity to address emerging forms of violence."

Story from Women's NGOs Cooperation Network Latvia

Across the region, efforts to prevent and combat violence against women (VAW) reveal a complex picture of progress, setbacks, and persistent gaps. While many governments have advanced legal reforms in recent years, systemic weaknesses in enforcement, service provision, and societal attitudes continue to undermine women's safety and access to justice.

The CEEBBS region is fragmented, with some countries moving forward under EU leverage, others blocking progress under nationalist/conservative agendas. *Türkiye*, once a leader, has regressed sharply, standing out as the only state to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. Most countries have ratified the Istanbul Convention, often as part of EU integration processes (e.g., the Western Balkans, Baltics). In Central Europe (Bulgaria, Slovakia, Hungary, Czech Republic, Lithuania), ratification is blocked or politicized due to strong anti-gender narratives and influence of conservative/religious actors. Türkiye, initially the first signatory and host of the Istanbul Convention (2011), withdrew in 2021. Domestic law (Law No. 6284) remains on paper but is weakened by poor enforcement and rollback of protections. *Withdrawal marked a symbolic and practical departure from international gender equality standards.*

Bulgaria illustrates the stark contradictions between legislative progress and social resistance. The 2018 Constitutional Court decision against the Istanbul Convention signaled a major setback, leaving survivors without alignment to key international standards. Public outrage resurfaced in 2023 following the brutal assault of 18-year-old Débora Mihaylova, whose case exposed institutional neglect and spurred protests under the slogan "Not a single woman more." Reforms since then have strengthened the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, introduced a National Council for prevention, and expanded the Criminal Code to cover domestic violence offences. Risk assessment protocols for police were introduced in 2024. Yet, legal gaps remain, protection is limited to intimate relationships of over 60 days, LGBTQI+ survivors are excluded, and shelters are under-resourced. Deep-rooted cultural attitudes, with nearly half of the population seeing domestic violence as a "private matter," compound the barriers.

In *North Macedonia*, violence against women remains a persistent issue despite legislative efforts. The country ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2018, prompting updates to the Criminal Code and the introduction of a new Law for the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence. Prevalence remains high, with one in three women reporting experiences of gender-based violence, predominantly domestic. Underreporting is a significant problem, as only one in four survivors comes forward, primarily due to fear of stigma and retaliation. Shelter shortages, especially in rural areas, limit access to support, and national funding for prevention programs remains below 3% of the budget. Cultural barriers, rooted in patriarchal norms, continue to hinder reporting and access to services. While the government has introduced reforms, implementation is slow, and accountability for perpetrators remains limited.

The Czech Republic faced its own turning point in 2024, when the Senate rejected ratification of the Istanbul Convention in a debate marred by disinformation. However, the same year saw a landmark reform: rape was redefined based on the absence of consent, aligning law with survivor-centered standards. Despite this breakthrough, victim support services remain

chronically underfunded, with only one specialized center nationwide, while judges continue to issue lenient sentences in sexual violence cases.

Estonia, by contrast, ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2017 and developed a relatively robust victim support network. Sixteen government-funded support centers and five crisis centers operate nationwide, offering comprehensive services including 24/7 crisis response. Yet, frozen funding since 2019 has weakened capacity, and civil society-run hotlines operate without state support, highlighting the fragility of gains.

In Hungary, the rejection of the Istanbul Convention in 2020 was framed around opposition to "gender ideology" and migration. Although Victim Help Centers were introduced, services fall far below European standards, with shelter provision at less than 10% of Council of Europe recommendations. Specialist women's services are marginalized, often replaced by faith-based family shelters. Online violence remains unregulated, and NGOs face systemic delegitimization and funding restrictions, leaving survivors without adequate protection.

Latvia ratified the Istanbul Convention in 2023, with entry into force in May 2024. Its 2024–2029 Action Plan aims to expand protection and support measures, including crisis apartments, electronic surveillance for offenders, and mandatory rehabilitation programs. Yet, gaps remain in transposing the new EU Directive on VAW, and implementation risks being uneven across regions.

Lithuania has signed but not ratified the Istanbul Convention, and service provision remains weak and politically dependent. Specialized support is scarce, often excluding women with disabilities or migrants, and protection orders are inconsistently enforced. Civil society notes that local political will largely determines whether survivors can access real protection.

Moldova, after ratifying the Istanbul Convention in 2021, has advanced reforms including criminalising femicide, stalking, and economic violence. A national 24/7 helpline and expanding multidisciplinary teams mark important progress, yet services in rural areas remain limited and donor-dependent. Civil society campaigns such as "No to Femicide" have raised awareness, but enforcement and societal attitudes continue to lag.

Poland has recently reversed course after years of threats to withdraw from the Istanbul Convention. The new government withdrew the constitutional challenge in 2024, while broadening the Domestic Violence Act to include economic and cyber violence. Harsher penalties for rape and expanded police powers to evict perpetrators represent strong steps forward. Yet, accessibility of services remains poor due to lack of funding, and high-profile cases - such as the

prosecution of activist Justyna Wydrzyńska[3] - highlight the ongoing intersection of restrictive abortion laws with women's rights and protection from violence.

Romania, despite ratifying the Convention in 2016, still struggles with underfunded services, fragmented enforcement, and weak coordination. Femicide is not legally defined, and GREVIO has repeatedly flagged the lack of sustainable funding for shelters and prevention. Multiple forms of violence—from stalking to workplace harassment—remain insufficiently addressed, while civil society carries much of the burden in service provision without public support.

In Serbia, ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2013 has not translated into consistent implementation. The legislative framework includes emergency barring and restraining orders, but shelters are insufficient, femicide is not criminalized, and specialist services for victims remain scarce. Most shelters and crisis centers depend on local governments with limited capacity, leaving many survivors without access. Despite adoption of new protocols, systemic underfunding and lack of data collection undermine progress.

Slovenia shows both achievements and persistent gaps. Legal reforms include a consent-based definition of rape and new workplace protections for survivors. Budget allocations for combating violence have grown, and a national 24/7 SOS helpline operates since 2020. However, implementation lags due to understaffing and high turnover in social work and police, leaving many victims inadequately supported.

Türkiye presents the sharpest reversal, having withdrawn from the Istanbul Convention in 2021. While honor killings in Turkey constitute aggravating circumstances under the Turkish Penal Code, the interpretation of unjust provocation provisions as contrary to gender equality may result in reduced sentences during trials. Shelters are under-resourced, restrictive, and exclude many women, including migrants, older women, and LGBTQI+ individuals. Feminist activists face prosecution for exposing violence. Calls from civil society demand annulment of the withdrawal, re-ratification of the Convention, and expansion of specialized, feminist support services.

Across the region, the Istanbul Convention remains a dividing line. Countries like Estonia, Latvia, Poland, Moldova, and North Macedonia are strengthening their legal and policy frameworks, while Hungary, Bulgaria, Lithuania, and Türkiye either rejected or stalled ratification, citing "traditional values" or "gender ideology". In many states, civil society has driven key breakthroughs, such as the Czech Republic's rape law reform or Moldova's

[3] In Poland, activist Justyna Wydrzyńska, co-founder of the Abortion Dream Team, was convicted in 2023 for abetting an abortion after helping a woman obtain pills. Her case, emblematic of the criminalization of abortion support and a broader attack on reproductive rights, took a new turn in February 2025 when a court ruled she had not received a fair trial due to judicial irregularities.

criminalisation of femicide, yet services remain underfunded, donor-dependent, or politically vulnerable.

Common challenges cut across borders: insufficient shelters and crisis centers, weak enforcement of protection orders, lack of training for police and judiciary, and harmful social norms that normalise violence, limited shelter capacity, low reporting rates, and persistent cultural barriers highlight that legal reforms alone are insufficient without proper implementation and societal change. The forthcoming transposition of the EU Directive 2024/1385 on combating violence against women will provide both a benchmark and a test of political will. Sustained funding, survivor-centered services, and strong partnerships with civil society are indispensable if countries in the region are to move from legislative promises to meaningful protection and justice for all women and girls.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Full Ratification and Implementation of International Standards: All countries should ratify and fully implement the Istanbul Convention and relevant EU directives (e.g., Directive 2024/1385), ensuring domestic legislation aligns with survivor-centered definitions, including femicide, economic violence, and consent-based sexual offenses.

Strengthen Victim Support Services: Expand and adequately fund shelters, crisis centers, 24/7 helplines, and multidisciplinary teams, with particular attention to rural areas, marginalised groups, and intersectional vulnerabilities (older women, migrants, LGBTQI+, women with disabilities).

Ensure Sustainable Funding: National budgets must guarantee long-term, stable financing for VAW prevention, protection, and awareness programmes, reducing reliance on donor-dependent or politically selective funding.

Capacity-Building and Professionalisation: Train police, judiciary, social workers, and healthcare professionals to provide survivor-centered responses, enforce protection orders, and improve reporting and investigation procedures.

Engage Civil Society as Partners: Institutionalise consultation mechanisms with NGOs, support feminist and women's rights organisations, and recognise their role in monitoring, advocacy, and service provision.

Counter Harmful Social Norms: Launch public awareness campaigns addressing patriarchal attitudes, victim-blaming, and cultural resistance to gender equality, fostering societal support for survivors.

Monitor and Evaluate Progress: Establish robust data collection, research, and monitoring systems to track enforcement, service accessibility, and prevalence, ensuring accountability and evidence-based policymaking.

Promote Regional Solidarity: Encourage cross-border knowledge-sharing and advocacy, leveraging EU mechanisms and regional networks to support countries lagging in implementation or facing political pushback.

IV. Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)

"Leading officials of right-wing parties publicly named visible activists of the Women's Lobby of Slovenia, even disclosing their home addresses, while branding them as the "abortionists' lobby." Legal abortion was denounced as the "legal murder of unborn children." The climate was further intensified through public marches for the "unborn," prayer vigils in front of gynecological hospitals aimed at preventing abortions, and mass gatherings in public squares where participants prayed to God and St. Mary to "restore men as the moral leaders of their families."

Story from Women's Lobby – Slovenia

"While women and LGBTQI+s in Türkiye face multi-faceted attacks, they never settle for what is given to them and never give up the fight. On the one hand, everything from abortion rights to women's and LGBTQI+s counselling centres in municipalities is being taken away from us, but on the other hand, women and LGBTQI+ are gathering even in the smallest local units, organising film screenings and forming awareness-raising groups. Not letting go of each other's hands is our greatest achievement."

Story from EWL Coordination for Türkiye

Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are core components of human rights, gender equality, and public health. Across Central and Eastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics, and Türkiye, SRHR remains contested, with progressive legal frameworks often undermined by poor implementation, conservative pushback, or systemic barriers. This chapter compares key

developments in abortion, contraception, sexuality education, and access to services across selected countries, highlighting cross-cutting trends and priority actions.

- **Access to abortion**

Some countries demonstrate a liberal access to abortion. *In Slovenia, Estonia, Moldova, North Macedonia, and Bulgaria* abortion on request in the first trimester is legal, with generally supportive frameworks. In *North Macedonia*, however, there is a significant social stigma surrounding it, especially in rural areas.

Estonia maintains a progressive framework, with recent efforts focusing on digital health tools and wider contraceptive availability rather than major reforms or restrictions.

In *Czech Republic***,** abortion is legal but costly and limited for foreign women; outdated legislation creates inconsistencies.

In *Romania, Serbia, and Lithuania* where abortion is legal, access is obstructed by refusal of services, misinformation, or medical neglect.

In *Croatia,* abortion is also legal, yet in practice often inaccessible because many doctors invoke their right to refuse the procedure, effectively denying women their legal rights.

There are countries with strongly restrictive contexts. While abortion is legal up to 10 weeks in *Türkiye*, there are problems with its implementation and access. Married women require spousal consent, while women under the age of 18 require parental or court consent. Although spousal consent and a prescription are not required to access birth control methods, spousal consent is required for voluntary sterilization. *Hungary and Latvia* are countries where abortion is legal but increasingly restricted through mandatory waiting periods, “heartbeat law,” or stigma. The law on abortion in Hungary was modified in 2022. The “heartbeat decree” requires women seeking an abortion to listen to the fetal heartbeat. Civil society denounced this as stigmatising and medically unnecessary.

Abortion is only legal in *Poland* if the pregnancy threatens the woman’s life or health, or the pregnancy is the result of a criminal act (rape or incest). Abortion due to fetal impairment is banned, resulting in a near-total ban and making Poland one of the most restrictive countries in Europe. The Constitutional Tribunal’s January 2023 ruling removed the legal ground for abortion due to fetal defects. As a result, many women are forced to seek services abroad or through informal networks.

- **Contraception Access**

Moldova and Estonia demonstrate good practices. In Moldova there are subsidised programmes for vulnerable groups, free youth-friendly services, and emergency contraception without prescription. In Estonia contraceptives are widely accessible and affordable.

However, in most of the countries access to contraceptives is limited or costly. *Poland, Hungary, Lithuania, Romania* have poor reimbursement, high costs, and limited access in rural areas. *Poland* ranks last in Europe for contraception access, with a score of just 33.2% in 2025 (most contraceptives require a prescription and are not fully reimbursed by the public health system). Parental consent is required for minors under 18 to access contraception or visit a gynecologist. Female sterilization is illegal, forcing women to travel abroad for the procedure.

In Latvia and Bulgaria the state commitment is minimal and there is only sporadic or pilot NGO-based support. *In North Macedonia* contraceptive use is low, with only 37% of women using modern contraceptives, contributing to higher rates of unintended pregnancies.

- **Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE)**

In countries with liberal access to abortion *(Estonia, Moldova)* the comprehensive sexuality education is integrated into school curricula. In *Estonia* comprehensive sexuality education is included in the national school curriculum from an early age, though implementation quality may slightly vary. In *Slovenia and Lithuania* school programmes exist but focus on biology, lacking gender, rights, and consent dimensions.

Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, North Macedonia, Serbia, and Türkiye are countries where sexuality education is either absent or regressive. In these countries there is no mandatory CSE, and in some of them (Bulgaria and Hungary for ex) there is even explicit restrictions or anti-LGBTQI+ “propaganda” laws prevent accurate SRHR education.

Bulgaria is among just a few EU member states without mandatory, comprehensive sexuality education, situating it below the EU norm on preventive and inclusive SRHR education. August 2024 amendments to the Pre-school and School Education Act banned any “promotion, propaganda or incitement” of “non-traditional sexual orientation” or gender identity different from “biological” in educational settings. According to the amendments teachers who publicly supported LGBTQI+ students have reportedly faced fines or sanctions for simply acknowledging same-sex attraction as “normal” and educators opposing the law have been publicly listed and threatened by pro-government groups. The propaganda law aligns with analogous anti-LGBTQI+ legislation in Hungary and Russia, prompting warnings from EU institutions about potential violations of EU rights charters. In April 2025, instead of a proposal of comprehensive sexuality education the Minister of Education and Sciences announced that Bulgaria’s government is working with the Orthodox Church on a plan to teach Orthodox Christianity in schools to make children "good people”.

In Hungary comprehensive sexuality education is absent, civil society organisations are not allowed into schools, and teachers are afraid to talk about sexuality education. The 2021 "Child Protection Law" prohibits the presentation of arbitrary depiction of sexual acts and LGBTQI+ content to minors, further restricting access to SRHR information. Despite the new provisions, pornography remains widely available - Hungary is even considered a hub of the industry, with Budapest a popular stag party destination, and digital grooming is increasingly prevalent. The lack of prevention and education means growing harm for children.

- **Healthcare Quality and Obstetric Rights**

Estonia is a world-leader in maternal and neonatal care with one of the best obstetrical care systems. The rates of premature births as well as maternal and neonatal mortality are among the lowest in Europe. Women's sexual health services in Estonia are overall met with high satisfaction.

Apart from Estonia, the entire region is characterised by serious gaps. The public health systems in *Serbia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia* are underfunded and characterised by widespread obstetric violence, lack of accountability, and structural discrimination against Roma and rural women for whom it is also difficult to access maternal healthcare. Additionally, in North Macedonia, rural women were not entitled to maternity leave until 2022, highlighting persistent gaps in protection and social support for women outside urban centers.

Despite strong constitutional guarantees, *Slovenia* has a shortage of gynecologists, which threatens access.

Women's organisations from *Türkiye* report systematic barriers for minors and marginalised groups, with additional restrictions on gender transition care.

Overall, many countries uphold SRHR in law but fail in practice due to lack of services, costs, or stigma. There is backlash and conservative pushback: anti-gender and anti-abortion rhetoric fuels new restrictions (*Türkiye, Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, Romania*). Access is significantly harder for rural women, Roma, migrants, and disadvantaged groups. Lack of comprehensive sexuality education and youth-friendly services leads to high adolescent pregnancies *(Romania, Serbia)* and misinformation across the region.

SRHR across CEEBBS and Türkiye illustrate a divided picture: the progressive frameworks in Estonia, Slovenia, and Moldova contrast sharply with regressions in Poland, Hungary, and Türkiye. The common denominator remains the gap between law and practice, disproportionately harming women, youth, and marginalised groups. Sustained political will,

EU monitoring, and strong civil society engagement are essential to safeguard and advance SRHR as fundamental human rights.

The role of civil society organisations is crucial. In all countries involved in the research NGOs play a critical role in filling gaps, yet face delegitimisation, underfunding, or outright repression.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Ensure Legal and Policy Protections Are Enforced: Countries should ratify international instruments and uphold constitutional guarantees but also close gaps between legislation and practice. This includes removing restrictive provisions, ensuring access to abortion and contraception, and guaranteeing obstetric rights.

Expand Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health Services: Governments must increase availability, affordability, and quality of services, especially for rural, marginalised, and vulnerable groups such as Roma, migrants, adolescents, and women with disabilities. Services should include comprehensive family planning, youth-friendly contraceptive provision, and gender-affirming care where relevant.

Introduce and Strengthen Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE): Mandatory, rights-based, inclusive sexuality education should be implemented in schools, covering consent, reproductive rights and sexual orientation. Teachers should be trained and protected to deliver CSE, and civil society should be allowed to contribute.

Address Regional Disparities and Stigma: Policymakers should actively counter misinformation, social stigma, and conservative backlash that restrict SRHR. Public campaigns should promote sexual and reproductive health, emphasise informed choice, and normalize access to services for all.

Strengthen Civil Society Participation: NGOs and women's rights organisations must be fully integrated into policymaking, service provision, and monitoring. Governments should ensure sustainable multi-year funding and safeguard against delegitimisation, harassment, or restrictions.

Monitor and Evaluate Implementation: Regular, transparent monitoring of SRHR policies and services is critical, with data disaggregated by age, geography, and social status. Independent oversight and accountability mechanisms can ensure that reforms translate into real access and protection.

Promote EU and International Oversight: The European Union and other international actors should link funding, accession processes, and technical assistance to respect for SRHR

standards. They should also support regional knowledge-sharing, research, and advocacy networks to strengthen resilience against anti-gender backlash.

V. Women in decision-making

"The Starea Democrației 2025 report documents misogynistic political discourse, smear campaigns against feminists, and stigmatisation of survivors in the media. Regulatory bodies fail to respond. Online harassment of activists has intensified. The report includes several concrete examples of misogynistic discourse in the public space. For instance, a sitting senator stated in a televised interview that "a woman's place is in the kitchen, not in Parliament," while another mayoral candidate publicly claimed that women are "too emotional and unfit for positions of leadership." Social media posts by elected officials have mocked victims of domestic violence or dismissed feminism as a "Western import." Such rhetoric goes largely unpunished and is rarely condemned by political parties or regulatory bodies."

Story from Romanian Women's Lobby

Across Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltics, and Türkiye, the participation of women in political and executive decision-making remains far from gender parity. While progress has been made in some contexts through quotas and institutional reforms, others continue to lag due to entrenched patriarchal structures, weak political will, and resistance to structural change.

In Bulgaria, women's representation has been steadily declining. Despite making up 51% of the population, women have never held even 30% of the seats in the National Assembly, and as of 2024, their share fell to 22.5%, five percentage points lower than in the previous legislature. Local politics reflect the same imbalance, with only 28% of municipal councillors being women. Particularly alarming is the sharp drop in Bulgaria's representation of women in the European Parliament: from 41% in 2014–2019, to just 23% after the 2024 elections - the lowest since Bulgaria's EU accession. Public opinion, however, seems to support change. A survey conducted by the Bulgarian Platform of the European Women's Lobby in 2024 revealed overwhelming support for more women in politics, coupled with dissatisfaction at political parties' failure to prioritise gender balance.

The Czech Republic performs similarly poorly, ranking 113th globally in women's political participation with women holding only 25.5% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies, 21% in the Senate, and just two women ministers in government. The country has never seen a woman president or prime minister. What distinguishes the Czech case is not only the numbers but also the political climate: the persistent refusal to adopt quotas, combined with the normalisation of

harassment. Studies show that a vast majority of women MPs have faced psychological or sexualised violence, which directly undermines their political engagement.

Estonia presents a paradox. While women occupy around 30% of parliamentary and local council seats and the country briefly had both a female president and a prime minister simultaneously (2021), this symbolic equality has not translated into gender-sensitive policymaking. The Estonian experience highlights that women in top roles do not automatically shift political priorities. Gender impact assessments of new legislation are routinely ignored, and recent budgetary decisions disproportionately harm women, especially older women and single mothers.

In North Macedonia, women's representation in decision-making has seen a gradual improvement, though challenges remain. By 2024, women occupy 40% of parliamentary seats, matching the country's gender quota, but hold only 13% of ministerial positions. Local governance shows 35% female representation among councillors, yet leadership roles such as mayors remain overwhelmingly male, reflecting deep-rooted cultural barriers. Notably, North Macedonia elected its first female president in May 2024. Women in politics are organised within party women's organisations, the Women Parliamentarian Club, and the Commission for Equal Opportunities between Women and Men. Despite these advances, women's influence in economic and political decision-making remains limited, particularly in executive leadership positions.

At the opposite end of the spectrum lies *Moldova,* where a 40% gender quota and placement rules have transformed women's political participation. By 2021, women held nearly 40% of parliamentary seats, while the presidency, the prime minister's office, and the speakership of parliament were all occupied by women. Moldova's trajectory, from marginal representation to near parity, demonstrates *the effectiveness of binding quotas when coupled with strong enforcement mechanisms and party incentives*. However, even in this progressive environment, women continue to face sexism, harassment, and exclusion from powerful party structures, suggesting that representation alone does not guarantee equality of influence.

Serbia provides another example of quota-driven change. Legislative reforms introduced in the early 2000s gradually increased women's share in parliament to 38% by 2025. Yet, this success is limited to the legislative branch. Women remain underrepresented in government (29%), among mayors (13.3%), and in economic decision-making bodies. Here too, the glass ceiling persists in party leadership and trade unions, where quotas are not applied.

In Hungary and Türkiye, women's representation remains among the lowest in Europe. *Hungary's* parliament includes just 14.1% women, and as of 2025, there are no female ministers in government. The few high-profile women promoted by the ruling party have been largely symbolic, their careers cut short without structural reform. Gender-based harassment, especially

online, continues to deter women from political engagement. *Türkiye's* picture is similarly bleak: women hold just under 20% of parliamentary seats, while local and executive representation remains dismal—only 5.1% of mayors are women, and the current cabinet has only one female minister. Structural barriers are compounded by authoritarian practices, such as the dismissal of elected women officials and their replacement by government trustees.

The Baltic states show mixed but *relatively higher levels of representation compared to Central and Eastern Europe*. In *Latvia*, women account for 30% of parliamentarians and nearly 29% of local council members, though their presence in mayoral offices is negligible. Interestingly, *Latvia leads the EU in women in management positions* (56.1%), yet this has not translated into political parity. In *Lithuania,* women's representation in the Seimas remains below 30%, but women have repeatedly held top offices, including the presidency, the premiership, and the speakership of parliament. Still, women are underrepresented at the municipal level (10% of mayors) and on corporate boards.

Slovenia, meanwhile, succeeded in institutionalising quotas for parliamentary elections in the mid-2000s, raising women's share above 30%. By 2025, gender quotas were extended to corporate boards, despite fierce opposition. *Yet, the effectiveness of these measures remains dependent on male-dominated party structures and the mixed electoral system.*

Poland and Romania sit in the middle of this spectrum. *Poland's* mandatory quota system ensures that at least 35% of candidates on party lists are women, resulting in *a significant increase in candidacies but less progress in actual representation*. Women remain only 19% of senators, and men dominate party leadership and ministerial posts. *Romania* fares even worse, with just 18.7% of women in parliament and fewer than 10% of mayors. Voluntary quotas exist but lack enforcement, and repeated attempts to legislate binding measures have failed.

Taken together, these cases illustrate **three patterns.** First, *binding and enforced quotas (Moldova, Serbia, Slovenia) significantly increase women's representation***,** even if qualitative challenges remain. Second**,** *voluntary quotas or weak enforcement (Poland, Lithuania, North Macedonia) produce uneven progress***,** where candidacies may outpace actual election. Third, *contexts with no quotas and entrenched resistance (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Hungary, Türkiye, Romania) see low and declining representation***,** and *women face structural and cultural barriers to meaningful participation.*

The comparative picture makes one point clear: women's equal representation in decision-making is not self-generating. Without binding legal measures, strong enforcement, and active safeguards against harassment and discrimination, women's participation stagnates or even regresses. Moldova's and Serbia's experiences show that quotas can work, but to translate numbers into influence, political cultures must change. By contrast, countries like Bulgaria and

the Czech Republic highlight the consequences of inaction - persistent democratic deficits and declining women's presence in politics despite public support for greater equality.

In short, the region presents both cautionary tales of stagnation and inspiring examples of transformation. Where legal measures are resisted, women remain sidelined; where quotas are implemented with enforcement, women make rapid gains. The next step is to ensure not only more women in politics but also more politics for women, where their presence leads to substantive change in priorities, policy, and governance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Adopt Binding Gender Quotas in parliaments, local councils, governments, and party structures. *In proportional systems*: apply quotas to party lists with placement rules (e.g., zipper systems). *In majoritarian or mixed systems*: require parties to nominate women in a minimum share of constituencies (e.g., 40%) or introduce reserved seats for women.

Ensure Parity Extends beyond Legislatures. Apply gender balance rules to cabinets, mayoral offices, corporate boards, trade unions, and universities to avoid "parliament-only" equality.

Strengthen Safeguards against Harassment and Violence against Women in Politics. Enforce legal and institutional mechanisms, including responses to online abuse, to protect women's participation in all political systems.

Increase Party Accountability. Tie public funding to compliance with gender balance rules. *In proportional systems:* reward parties for balanced candidate lists. *In majoritarian systems:* reward/penalize parties based on the gender composition of their nominated candidates.

Apply International Standards. The more recent CEDAW General Recommendation No. 40 (2024) calls for 50:50 parity as a universal norm in all decision-making systems, emphasizing quotas and complementary measures to achieve this for women in all spheres of life.

Bridge Descriptive and Substantive Representation. More women in politics must result in policy change. Mandate gender impact assessments of fiscal and legislative decisions, to prevent disproportionate harm to women.

Promote Leadership Pipelines and Mentoring. Challenge party gatekeeping by introducing leadership programs, training, and dedicated resources for women candidates across all electoral systems.

Address Stereotypes and Cultural barriers. Public campaigns, education, and media responsibility are necessary to dismantle gendered assumptions about political leadership and normalize women's equal participation.

Continuous Advocacy for Legally Binding Parity of elected men and women in all socially significant decision-making bodies, regardless of electoral system, should be strengthened within the European Women's Lobby and in all EU member states.

VI. Multiple discrimination and intersectionality

"Multiple discrimination and intersectionality are not visible and recognisable in the society, in public space, in politics, no deeper discussion on this phenomenon. Data, broken down by sex and other characteristics (age, health status, origin etc.) is very limited."

Story from Lithuanian Women's Lobby

Across Central and Eastern Europe, women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination remain among the most marginalised groups in society. While the specific dynamics vary by country, patterns of exclusion consistently overlap around ethnicity, disability, migration status, sexual orientation, and socio-economic background. This analysis moves from the most restrictive environments toward examples of progress, highlighting both structural barriers and emerging pathways forward.

In Türkiye, the situation is particularly severe. Women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women, as well as lesbian, bisexual, and trans feminists face compounded discrimination across all spheres of life. Nearly 40% of women with disabilities experience violence, yet very few report it, and exclusion from employment, education, and public spaces remains pervasive. Syrian refugee women are especially vulnerable, navigating overlapping inequalities of gender, displacement, ethnicity, and class, while often excluded from services. Instead of strengthening protections, state institutions have deepened exclusion: Türkiye lacks comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, and its Human Rights and Equality Institution not only fails to meet international standards but has actively contributed to anti-gender campaigns, including opposition to the Istanbul Convention. The government's framing of "family values" as a tool to restrict gender rights, criminalise LGBTIQ+ people, and limit freedoms reinforces systemic discrimination.

A similarly troubling picture emerges in *Hungary,* where intersectional approaches are almost absent from government policy. Roma women are confined to the low-paid "public works trap," structurally segregated into poverty with no opportunity for mobility. Migrant and refugee women are left without meaningful protection, particularly after the withdrawal of housing subsidies for Ukrainian Roma refugees. Girls in state care suffer multiple layers of discrimination in chronically underfunded child protection systems. Despite years of advocacy, civil society

proposals to address these compounded disadvantages continue to be ignored, reflecting the government's hostility to inclusive policy design.

Bulgaria also demonstrates entrenched structural barriers. Roma women and girls are disproportionately exposed to early marriage, trafficking, and forced evictions, with demolitions of Roma homes leaving families homeless and vulnerable. At the same time, Bulgaria's failure to ratify the Istanbul Convention and the adoption of a 2024 law banning so-called "LGBTQ+ propaganda" further entrench exclusion. These developments place Bulgaria among the weakest performers in the EU on LGBTQ+ rights, while harmful traditional practices within Roma communities remain largely unaddressed. Yet, isolated steps—such as the sanctioning of a far-right party for anti-Roma hate speech—indicate that accountability mechanisms, though fragile, can be activated.

In *Poland and Romania,* systemic discrimination against Roma women remains one of the starkest forms of intersectional inequality. Roma women in *Poland* face alarming maternal mortality rates, fifteen times higher than the national average, while suffering forced evictions and inadequate housing. LGBTQ+ people continue to face stigma despite the repeal of "LGBT-free zones," and migrant women are systematically excluded from services. In *Romania*, Roma women are overrepresented in precarious jobs and underrepresented in decision-making, while women with disabilities and rural women face enduring barriers to education, healthcare, and digital access. In both contexts, fragmented programs and the lack of a comprehensive intersectional strategy hinder progress.

Slovenia illustrates how even relatively progressive settings can backslide. Despite earlier commitments to integration, the state has succumbed to populist pressures, enacting exclusionary measures against migrants and Roma. The building of border fences, selective labor agreements privileging white Christian migrants, and harsher policing approaches reveal a shift toward assimilationist and punitive policies. Nonetheless, the recognition of same-sex couples' right to adoption marks a positive, if limited, step forward**.**

The Czech Republic presents a mixed picture. Roma women continue to live with the trauma of forced sterilisations and discriminatory healthcare practices, while transgender people until recently faced sterilisation as a precondition for legal gender recognition. Migrant women remain trapped in precarious, low-paid work with little protection from violence. Yet, legal reforms have brought partial progress: the compensation scheme for Roma women who were sterilised, though flawed, signals recognition of past abuses, and the abolition of mandatory sterilisation for transgender people represents a major breakthrough for bodily autonomy.

In *Serbia,* formal recognition of intersectionality exists within law and policy frameworks, including the Gender Equality Law and the national strategy. Measures to address the needs of

Roma women, women with disabilities, and internally displaced persons have been adopted. However, implementation remains inconsistent, and systemic inequalities—exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic—persist. Rural women and Roma women remain excluded from basic services, while women with disabilities face barriers in reproductive healthcare. Still, the legal obligation for ministries to assess gender impact of policies provides a potential lever for stronger future accountability.

Moldova demonstrates a growing awareness of intersectionality, even if structural solutions are still limited. Roma women continue to face entrenched poverty, early marriage, and systemic discrimination, while LGBTQI+ women experience widespread stigma and lack legal recognition. Yet, the country has taken proactive steps in responding to the influx of Ukrainian refugees, with women at the centre of humanitarian efforts. Civil society organisations, particularly GenderDoc-M and disability rights groups, play a crucial role in piloting inclusive programs and amplifying marginalised voices, laying the groundwork for more systemic change.

In the Baltic states, the visibility of intersectionality is uneven. In *Lithuania,* awareness remains minimal, with little data collection or public debate. Yet, initiatives by civil society, such as publications adapted for women with intellectual disabilities, begin to fill the gap. *Latvia* continues to neglect the needs of Roma women and women with disabilities, despite clear evidence of exclusion in employment and services. Meanwhile, in *Estonia,* intersectionality only entered public policy discourse in recent years. While its integration remains partial, strategic documents now explicitly acknowledge rural, minority, and older women's compounded disadvantages - a significant conceptual step forward**.**

Across the Balkans, *North Macedonia* shares many of the region's patterns while showing some specific dynamics. Roma women face compounded ethnic and gender discrimination, with higher rates of poverty, limited access to education, restricted healthcare, early marriage, and gender-based violence. Women with disabilities experience barriers to employment, education, and healthcare despite the National Strategy for Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (2018–2025). Ethnic Albanian women in some rural areas are similarly disadvantaged due to traditional gender roles that limit access to economic and educational opportunities. While reforms have increased women's political representation in parliament, marginalised women remain underrepresented in decision-making, and intersectional inequalities continue to hinder access to services and justice. Civil society organisations play a key role in advocating for these groups, providing services, and promoting inclusive policies, highlighting the importance of embedding intersectionality fully into national strategies, funding mechanisms, and monitoring frameworks.

Overall, the comparative picture reveals stark contrasts. Türkiye and Hungary epitomize systemic exclusion, where state institutions actively reinforce intersectional discrimination. Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Slovenia reflect environments where structural inequalities persist but coexist with isolated advances. Serbia, Moldova, and the Baltic states show signs of progress, with institutional recognition of intersectionality or growing civil society leadership beginning to shift the narrative. The challenge now is to transform these emerging openings into sustained, well-funded, and inclusive policies that ensure no woman is left behind. This requires political will, comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, consistent monitoring, meaningful participation of civil society, and EU-level engagement to embed intersectionality as a guiding principle across all funding, monitoring, and rule of law mechanisms.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Embed Intersectionality in Policy and Legislation: Countries should adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination laws that explicitly address intersecting forms of inequality, including gender, ethnicity, disability, migration status, sexual orientation, old age, place of residence and socio-economic background. Policies must account for compounded disadvantages and ensure that marginalised groups are prioritised in social protection, education, and healthcare programmes.

Strengthen Data Collection and Monitoring: Governments should systematically collect disaggregated data on gender, disability, ethnicity, migration status, and other relevant factors to inform policy decisions, track progress, and identify gaps in service provision. Transparent monitoring and reporting mechanisms are critical to hold institutions accountable.

Promote Inclusive Service Provision: Public services, incl. healthcare, education, housing, and social protection, should be accessible and responsive to the needs of marginalised women, Roma communities, refugees, and LGBTQ+ groups. Funding should prioritize rural and underserved areas, ensuring equitable access to support systems.

Empower Civil Society and Community Actors: NGOs and community-based organisations play a crucial role in addressing intersectional discrimination, providing services, advocacy, and awareness-raising. Governments should integrate civil society into policymaking, provide sustainable multi-year funding, and protect organizations from delegitimisation, harassment, or restrictive legislation.

Address Cultural and Social Barriers: Public campaigns and education initiatives should challenge discriminatory norms, stigmas, and stereotypes that reinforce intersectional

inequalities. Awareness programs must focus on dismantling structural barriers faced by marginalised women and girls, promoting social inclusion and equity.

EU and International Engagement: The European Union and other international actors should link funding, accession processes, and technical support to demonstrable efforts in reducing intersectional discrimination. Cross-border collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and monitoring can reinforce accountability and best practices.

Ensure Participation and Representation: Decision-making bodies must include women from marginalised groups, ensuring their perspectives influence policy and program design. Quotas, targeted empowerment programs, and participatory platforms can help embed intersectionality in governance structures.

Sustainable Funding and Capacity Building: Multi-year funding schemes should support capacity building for organizations working on intersectional issues, allowing long-term planning, professionalisation, and systemic change rather than ad hoc interventions.

VII. Gender pay and pension gaps

In March 2017, Polish conservative politician Janusz Korwin-Mikke, speaking at a debate on the gender pay gap, declared: *"Of course women must earn less than men because they are weaker, they are smaller, they are less intelligent, they must earn less, that's all."* This statement sparked widespread criticism across Europe and highlighted entrenched gender stereotypes shaping public discourse. Since 2017, no politician in the region has repeated such openly derogatory remarks in public as those made by the Polish representative, yet the gender pay gap persists, reflecting structural inequalities, occupational segregation, and the cumulative impact of care responsibilities on women's economic status. While some countries show gradual improvement, others continue to struggle with deeply entrenched disparities.

Romania remains among the highest in the EU for gender pay disparities at 22.4%, compounded by occupational segregation and limited uptake of parental leave by men. Rural women face additional challenges. Pension gaps exceed 35%, as early retirement for caregiving roles reduces benefits. Weak enforcement of pay transparency directives further entrenches these inequalities.

Türkiye presents a stark example of structural inequality, with gender pay gaps favouring men across all education levels, reaching up to 20% among high school graduates. Women's labor market participation is limited (31.3%), and many remain outside formal employment and social security. Consequently, women disproportionately rely on widowhood or old-age pensions, receiving only 36% of public transfers compared to men. Syrian refugee women face severe exclusion from employment and benefits, illustrating how intersecting inequalities deepen economic disparities.

In *Bulgaria,* women face one of the highest risks of poverty (at 25%) in the EU, and one of the highest pay gaps - the average gross annual salary for women remains roughly 20% lower than men's. Despite some efforts to increase pay transparency, Bulgaria's gender pay gap has remained relatively stable from 2008 to 2022. Pension disparities reflect these wage inequalities and career interruptions, leaving older women disproportionately vulnerable to poverty.

In *North Macedonia,* gender pay equity remains a significant challenge. Women consistently earn less than men across sectors, with the gender pay gap estimated at around 11%, although State Statistical Office data suggests women's average monthly salary is 22% lower than men's. Pension inequalities are even more pronounced: women receive on average 30% less than men, primarily due to lower lifetime earnings and career interruptions for caregiving. These figures

illustrate the long-term economic consequences of persistent pay gaps, particularly for women who balance work and unpaid care responsibilities.

The Czech Republic is another country with one of the highest pay gaps in the EU (at 17.9%), largely due to occupational segregation. Women dominate lower-paid sectors such as healthcare, education, and social care, while men dominate IT and high-paid technical fields. Vertical segregation limits women's access to leadership positions, with only 27% of managerial roles held by women. These disparities compound over a lifetime, resulting in a higher risk of poverty for women over 65 (20%) compared to men (14%).

Croatia has a legal framework prohibiting gender-based pay discrimination, yet implementation gaps persist. Pay transparency measures are weak, particularly in private sector firms, and EU directives on equal pay and pay transparency are not yet fully transposed. The average gender pay gap is reflected in pensions, where women receive 17% less than men on average. Contributing factors include lower wages over a lifetime, career interruptions for caregiving, and overrepresentation in part-time or precarious work. Longer life expectancy further reduces monthly pension benefits for women.

The Baltic states show mixed results. *In Estonia,* the gender pay gap is around 13.2%, with particularly large differences in finance and information technology. Efforts to promote pay transparency include the Palgapeegel digital tool for employers, though its use remains voluntary. Estonia's pension gap is relatively low at 2%, attributed to high female participation in full-time employment, though women's longer life expectancy still poses challenges. *Latvia* has a 17.1% pay gap, with severe disparities in certain sectors such as arts and ICT. The gender pension gap is 11.3%, reflecting women's longer life expectancy and historically lower wages. In *Lithuania,* the pay gap has remained around 13%, with gradual reductions in the pension gap from 20% in 2019 to 16% in 2024, driven by reforms and strengthened Labour Code provisions promoting pay transparency and workplace equality.

In *Hungary,* the pay gap is approximately 15.4%, with significant disparities in top positions and long career trajectories. Policies such as the "Women 40" pension scheme attempt to recognise unpaid care work, but pension inequalities persist due to cumulative career interruptions and the limited redistributive capacity of pensions. Family-oriented tax incentives have partially mitigated these disparities for mothers, though overall structural inequalities remain.

Moldova exhibits a persistent gender pay gap of 12–14%, driven by occupational and sectoral segregation. Women dominate lower-paid fields such as education and healthcare, while men dominate high-paying sectors. Career breaks and limited access to leadership roles exacerbate the gap, mirrored in pensions where women earn roughly 20–25% less than men. Civil society

initiatives have begun to promote women's access to STEM and entrepreneurship, but the impact on pay statistics is gradual.

Serbia has seen a widening gender pay gap, currently averaging 14%, with the largest gaps in artisan-related occupations and among those aged 35–39. Women's pensions are 17% lower than men's, reflecting structural inequalities and unpaid care work, which constitutes an estimated 14.9% of GDP. National strategies recognise the need to reduce gender disparities in economic participation, though implementation remains uneven.

In *Poland,* the wage gap stood at 7.8% in 2022, with recent legal amendments (2025) introducing mandatory disclosure of salaries, bans on prior-pay inquiries, and gender-neutral job descriptions. The gender pension gap is approximately 15.6%, and older women face higher risks of poverty due to lower lifetime earnings and interrupted careers.

Slovenia shows a smaller pay gap of 5% overall, but sector-specific gaps persist, with women earning 17–22% less in healthcare, social care, and insurance. Pension disparities remain around 9%, reflecting historical work and life patterns. Recent reforms have removed some measures aimed at reducing women's pension gaps, risking the loss of progress.

Taken together, the comparative picture underscores the cumulative impact of unequal pay, occupational segregation, and care-related career interruptions on women's pensions across the region. Countries with legal frameworks and proactive enforcement (e.g., Lithuania, Estonia) show some progress, while others (Türkiye, Romania, North Macedonia, Hungary) continue to struggle with persistent structural and cultural barriers. Policy recommendations across the region emphasise pay transparency, recognition of unpaid care work in pension systems, stronger enforcement of equal pay provisions, and targeted initiatives to increase women's access to high-paying sectors and leadership positions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Enforcement: Governments should ensure full implementation of existing equal pay legislation and EU directives, including mandatory pay transparency, gender-neutral job classifications, and robust mechanisms for addressing discrimination. Strong monitoring and penalties for non-compliance are essential.

Promote Pay Transparency: Introduce compulsory reporting of salaries by gender across sectors and organisations, coupled with digital tools and audits to identify and rectify

unjustified disparities. Transparency should extend to recruitment, promotion, and remuneration practices.

Recognise Unpaid Care Work and Prevent Care-Caused Poverty in Old Age: Pension systems should account for career interruptions due to caregiving, maternity, and eldercare, ensuring that women's contributions are fairly recognised and do not translate into long-term economic disadvantage. This requires measures such as credited pension years, caregiver allowances, and mandatory state contributions to pension schemes up to the level of an average full-time salary for all people caring for newborn or sick children or dependent relatives, even if their previous earnings were lower.

Reduce Occupational Segregation: Governments, employers, and civil society should encourage women's participation in high-paying and male-dominated sectors such as STEM, finance, and technology. Training, mentorship, and targeted employment programs can help dismantle vertical and horizontal segregation.

Support Women's Career Progression: Leadership development, flexible working arrangements, and parental leave policies that encourage men's uptake can mitigate barriers that limit women's access to senior positions and reduce long-term pay and pension gaps.

Address Regional and Marginalised Groups' Inequalities: Policies must prioritise rural women, ethnic minorities, migrants, and refugees, who face compounded economic disadvantages. Equal access to education, employment opportunities, and social protection is critical.

Foster Civil Society Engagement: NGOs and advocacy groups should be supported to monitor pay and pension disparities, provide guidance to women on their rights, and advocate for structural reforms. Collaboration between government, employers, and civil society strengthens accountability and impact.

Invest in Data and Research: Collect and disseminate disaggregated data on pay, pensions, and labor market participation to identify trends, evaluate policies, and inform targeted interventions. Regular reporting ensures transparency and drives evidence-based policymaking.

Promote Cultural and Social Change: Awareness campaigns should challenge gender stereotypes, highlight the value of women's work, and encourage shared domestic responsibilities, reducing the long-term impact of unpaid care on women's economic security.

VIII. Women's participation in peace-making and peace-building

Women's involvement in peace and security remains limited across the region, despite formal commitments under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325). While some countries have developed National Action Plans (NAPs) and integrated women into security and defence structures, actual representation in decision-making, peace negotiations, and post-conflict reconstruction is uneven. Civil society, particularly women-led organisations, plays a crucial role in driving grassroots peace initiatives, supporting refugees, and responding to crises, such as the war in Ukraine in 2022.

Countries such as *Bulgaria, Croatia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, North Macedonia, Romania and Slovenia* have active NAPs and show moderate to strong engagement with the Women, Peace, and Security agenda. In these countries, formal frameworks set strategies for conflict prevention, protection from gender-based violence, and post-conflict recovery. Women's representation in security institutions is generally moderate, ranging from eight to nineteen percent, with Slovenia standing out for its high-level leadership across the military, police, diplomacy, and peacekeeping missions. In all these countries civil society plays a significant role in supporting refugees, offering psychosocial care, and promoting dialogue programs and grassroots peace initiatives. Despite these efforts, women remain underrepresented in formal peace negotiations and high-level decision-making, highlighting the gap between policy commitments and actual practice.

A second group, including *Poland and Serbia*, has either weak or expired NAPs. While some formal frameworks exist, they are often outdated, underfunded, or poorly coordinated. Women's participation in security and peace structures remains low, and the work of civil society becomes essential in filling these gaps. Women-led organisations provide critical support to refugees, manage local-level crises, and engage in grassroots peacebuilding, compensating for the limited impact of formal policies. Weak political commitment and insufficient resources continue to constrain meaningful progress in these countries.

Türkiye and Hungary form a third group, where no NAPs or state-led initiatives exist to support women's participation in peace and security. In these countries, women are largely excluded from formal decision-making, conflict resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction processes. Civil society, especially women's NGOs, carries the responsibility for humanitarian assistance, refugee support, and grassroots peace initiatives. The absence of structured policies undermines

sustained women's engagement, despite the critical contributions of women at the community level.

The ongoing war in Ukraine has highlighted the gendered dimension of conflict across the region. Women, both refugees and local actors, have taken central roles in humanitarian response, integration efforts, and maintaining social cohesion. Their leadership has been essential in bridging gaps where state mechanisms are weak or absent. Nonetheless, women remain largely excluded from formal peace negotiations and high-level security decision-making, revealing the persistent prevalence of male-dominated peace structures.

Looking forward, advancing Women, Peace, and Security requires stronger political commitment, sustained resources, and the systematic integration of women's voices into all levels of decision-making. Governments need to ensure that National Action Plans are effectively implemented, with measurable targets and gender-sensitive monitoring. Support for civil society must be strengthened to sustain grassroots peacebuilding and refugee support initiatives. Expanding women's participation in security institutions, peace negotiations, and post-conflict reconstruction is essential to creating inclusive and resilient peace processes. Regional cooperation should be promoted to enhance coordination in crisis response, leveraging women's leadership across borders. Finally, gender perspectives must be embedded in broader security, defence, migration, and humanitarian policies to ensure that peace and security are truly inclusive and sustainable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthen Political Commitment and Policy Frameworks: Governments should develop, update, and fully implement National Action Plans (NAPs) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS), ensuring clear targets, timelines, and gender-sensitive monitoring mechanisms. Policies must translate commitments under UNSCR 1325 into concrete actions.

Expand Women's Representation in Decision-Making: Women's participation should be systematically increased at all levels of peace and security structures, including formal negotiations, post-conflict reconstruction, military, police, and diplomatic roles. Quotas, mentorship programs, and leadership development initiatives can help overcome entrenched male dominance.

Resource and Support Civil Society: Women-led organisations and NGOs play a critical role in grassroots peacebuilding, refugee support, and community resilience. Sustained funding,

capacity-building, and formal recognition of their contributions are essential to strengthen their impact and ensure continuity of local initiatives.

Integrate Gender Perspectives Across Security and Humanitarian Policies: Gender must be mainstreamed into defence, security, migration, and humanitarian policies to ensure that peace and reconstruction efforts address the specific needs and experiences of women, including protection from gender-based violence.

Foster Regional Cooperation and Knowledge Sharing: Cross-border coordination among governments, civil society, and regional bodies can enhance crisis response, share best practices, and amplify women's leadership in peace processes.

Monitor and Evaluate Progress: Establish independent monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to track women's participation, assess the effectiveness of NAPs and policies, and adjust strategies based on evidence and lessons learned.

Promote Awareness and Cultural Change: Public awareness campaigns should highlight the value of women's contributions to peace and security, challenge gender stereotypes, and foster societal support for inclusive decision-making in conflict prevention and resolution.

Conclusion

Women's rights in the region stand at a turning point: fragile commitments are collapsing under anti-gender and authoritarian pressure. Across the region, women's rights are under direct attack. Without them, the promise of democracy - freedom, equality, justice, and participation - cannot be fulfilled. The erosion of women's rights is the erosion of democracy.

Civil society is the backbone of progress, yet it is delegitimised, underfunded, and deliberately excluded from decision-making. Women's rights organisations continue to provide essential services, advocacy, and peacebuilding, often at great personal risk. Their resilience is proof that no sustainable progress is possible without their active participation.

The evidence is clear: pay and pension gaps, weak healthcare and reproductive rights, low political representation, and systemic discrimination prove that **equality on paper is not equality in practice**. Symbolic reforms without resources, accountability, and enforcement are meaningless.

Governments must take decisive action now: adopt binding quotas, enforce equal pay, recognise unpaid care, guarantee reproductive rights, and create inclusive policy frameworks. **Independent institutions must be strengthened**, not dismantled. At the same time, **EU institutions and international partners must embed gender equality into rule of law mechanisms, funding, and monitoring, and hold states accountable for regression.**

The region stands at a crossroads. One path leads to deepening inequality, democratic backsliding, and exclusion. The other leads to genuine equality, stronger democracies, and inclusive societies. **The choice is urgent and unavoidable: ensuring that no woman is left behind is not only a matter of justice, it is a condition for democracy itself.**

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Annex 1: Template of national overview

COUNTRY NAME: ……..

1. Institutional Mechanisms and Legal Framework

   Overview of national gender equality mechanisms (e.g., equality bodies, ministries, ombudspersons).

   Key legislation and policy frameworks adopted or amended in the last five years. Implementation status of national gender equality strategies/action plans.

2. Challenges Faced by Civil Society

   Shrinking civic space: legal restrictions, public delegitimization, smear campaigns.

   Funding limitations and donor dependency of women's rights organizations.

   Concrete examples (e.g., attacks on feminist activists, loss of public funding, barriers to registration).

3. Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women

   Status of Istanbul Convention ratification and/or denunciation.

   Transposition of the EU Directive on VAW and alignment of national laws.

   Accessibility of services (shelters, helplines, protection orders).

   Noteworthy court cases, legislative amendments, or implementation challenges.

4. Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR)

   Accessibility and affordability of contraception and abortion services.

   Comprehensive sexuality education in schools.

   Recent reforms or regressions in SRHR policies.

   Public attitudes and political resistance/support.

5. Women in Decision-Making

   Participation of women in national/local parliaments and executive bodies.

Quotas or temporary special measures in use.

Progress or setbacks in gender parity efforts.

6. Multiple Discrimination and Intersectionality

Barriers faced by Roma women, LGBTQI+ women, women with disabilities, migrant and refugee women.

Civil society or governmental responses to intersectional discrimination.

7. Gender Pay and Pension Gaps

Latest available national data.

Efforts to address pay transparency and equal pay.

Pension gap statistics and analysis of contributory factors.

8. Women's Participation in Peace-making and Peacebuilding

National strategies or commitments under UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

Inclusion of women in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict reconstruction.

Civil society initiatives led by women for peace and dialogue. The role of women in supporting Ukrainian refugees or contributing to peace initiatives regionally.

9. Testimonials and Media Representation

Media narratives around gender equality and women's rights. Significant media cases or campaigns. Public opinion trends. Testimonies from survivors, activists, or professionals (anonymized).

10. Recommendations:

- to the institutions;

- to donors and civil society organisations.

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