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POLICY BRIEF

# ACADEMY FOR JUDGES AND PUBLIC PROSECUTORS

A Safer Future: Strengthening the Prevention of Gender-Based Violence through Professional Training in North Macedonia

## Role

Judges and public prosecutors play complementary and essential roles in the prevention and effective response to gender-based violence (GBV). Judges are responsible for issuing protective measures, restraining orders, and timely decisions that uphold the rights of survivors and prevent further harm. Their ability to interpret laws through a gender-sensitive and trauma-informed lens helps ensure victim-centered justice and accountability for perpetrators. By setting legal precedents and reinforcing the consequences of GBV, judges contribute to building public trust in the justice system and encouraging survivors to report violence. Ongoing training on international standards, such as the Istanbul Convention, and trauma-informed practices is crucial to enhancing their capacity to prevent and address GBV effectively.
Public prosecutors, as first responders, ensure immediate legal protection and initiate criminal proceedings against perpetrators. They play a key role in assessing reports of GBV, coordinating with law enforcement and social services, and minimizing secondary victimization through protective measures such as confidential handling of personal data, secure testimony environments, and limited re-interviewing of victims. Prosecutors should also maintain specialized records for monitoring GBV cases and must be provided with gender-sensitive and trauma-informed training. Strengthening the capacity of both prosecutors and judges is critical for delivering timely, sensitive, and effective justice, ultimately contributing to the prevention of GBV and the protection of survivors.

## Introduction and Context

Gender-based violence (GBV), including violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence (DV), remains a serious and persistent social issue in North Macedonia, deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, unequal power relations, and gender stereotypes. Despite existing legislation and alignment with the Istanbul Convention, challenges remain in the implementation of laws, limited institutional coordination, and insufficient capacities for prevention and protection.

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GBV continues to be widespread in North Macedonia. Nearly half of all women (45%) have experienced some form of intimate partner violence—whether physical, sexual, or psychological—since the age of 15. (OSCE, 2019)

- Internal data collected by the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth (MSPDY) from the 30 Centres for Social Work show a continuous increase in reported cases of gender-based and domestic violence between 2022 and 2024.
- Psychological violence remains the most frequently reported form, increasing from 1,051 cases in 2022 to 1,492 in 2024.
- Physical violence has also shown a steady rise, with 846 cases reported in 2022, 944 in 2023, and reaching 951 cases in 2024.
- Although less frequently reported, economic violence is on the rise—from 25 cases in 2022 to 36 in 2024.
- According to publicly available data from the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA), reported rape cases increased from 18 in 2022 to 33 in 2023, in 2024 31 cases were reported.
- Cases of bodily harm continue to dominate in the context of domestic violence, with more than 650 criminal offenses registered each year.
- The number of femicides—ranging from 3 to 7 annually—is particularly alarming in a country with a population of just 1.8 million.

A survey conducted by the OSCE (2019) revealed that only 2% of women in North Macedonia who experienced gender-based violence reported the incident they considered most serious to the police.

The EU Gender-Based Violence Survey (2024) covering all 27 EU Member States shows that 21% of women who experienced physical violence, threats, and/or sexual violence at some point in their lives sought support from a healthcare or social service, while only 14% reported the incident to the police.



## Scope of the Research

The research aimed to answer the following main question: "How can the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) in North Macedonia be improved through training of professionals/first responders?"

The study employed a mixed-methods approach that included a review and analysis of relevant literature and legal documents, as well as qualitative data collected through interviews and online questionnaires with professionals and first responders. The research was conducted between November 2024 and April 2025. The data collected focuses on preventive measures, specifically the trainings for professionals and first responders, conducted between January 2021 and December 2024.

**Coverage**: The questionnaire was distributed in collaboration with the Academy of Judges and Public Prosecutors (AJPP). A total of 41 members of the AJPP —29 women, 11 men, and 1 of unknown gender—responded to the questionnaire. Their professional positions include judges, public prosecutors, legal practitioners, legal associates/assistants, and trainees (in initial training at the AJPP). The majority of respondents have 1–3 years of work experience (24 respondents), followed by a significant group with more than 10 years of experience (14 respondents), while only a few had 3–6 years or less than one year of experience. In addition, interviews were conducted with representatives from civil society and international organizations that organized the trainings.

## Key Findings – Judges and Public Prosecutors

From 2021 to 2024, a range of targeted training sessions were implemented to strengthen the capacity of judges, public prosecutors, and legal practitioners in North Macedonia to address GBV, VAW and DV, including femicide, and hate-motivated crimes. Trainings were primarily delivered by the AJPP, OSCE, AIRE Center, ESE, and Helsinki Committee, with an emphasis on international standards, victim-centered justice, and inter-sectoral collaboration.

***Key Topics Covered:***

- **Istanbul Convention and legal frameworks**: Multiple trainings focused on the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, alignment of national laws, and judicial practice related to GBV and femicide.
- **Femicide and criminal justice response**: A strong focus in 2023–2024 was placed on handling femicide cases, including trainings of trainers and in-depth legal analysis.
- **Victim-centered approaches**: Trainings addressed trauma-informed practices, secondary victimization, and needs of groups in vulnerable situations, including LGBTIQ+ individuals.
- **Hate crimes and diversity:** Legal professionals were trained to address hate speech and hate crimes, especially those targeting LGBTIQ+ persons.
- **Legal aid and practical skills**: Legal practitioners, especially young lawyers and law students, received practical training on court procedures, legal advice, and written submissions for DV-related cases.
- **Support access to free legal aid**: Trainings targeted regional offices of the Ministry of Justice to improve the delivery of free legal aid and enhance the collaboration with institutions of the social protection systems.

### *Gaps and Limitations identified*

- **Low and uneven participation**: Despite numerous training sessions, most had a very low numbers of participants (often under 10 judges or prosecutors), limiting reach and systemic impact. Judges participated more regularly in trainings than public prosecutors, despite prosecutors' key role in GBV case prosecution.
- **Lack of institutionalization**: Trainings were project-based and not systematically embedded into mandatory judicial/prosecutorial curricula.
- **Underrepresented topics**: There was a limited focus on digital violence, custody and visitation in DV cases, restorative justice, procedural rights, intersectionality, and economic empowerment of survivors.
- **Practical training gaps**: Most trainings remain theoretical, with limited use of court simulations, role-play, or scenario-based learning for victim handling and adjudication.

### *Roles, Responsibilities, and Gaps in Practice*

- Respondents confirmed the following key roles in the area of GBV:
- Interviewing victims and perpetrators,
- Issuing and enforcing protection measures,
- Leading judicial proceedings and sanctioning perpetrators,
- Collaborating with institutions (CSW, police, health institutions)

A few respondents showed a limited understanding of their responsibilities in the area of GBV:

- Limited engagement in reintegration of victims and perpetrators,
- Under-recognition of child protection,
- Incomplete understanding of domestic violence in civil and administrative proceedings.

### *Attitudes towards Victims and Professional Conduct*

- Almost all respondents support victim-sensitive approaches.
- A minority of respondents believe GBV cases should not be prioritized.
- About eight in ten respondents agree that trust in institutions influences victims' decisions to report.
- Eight in ten respondents recognize professional conduct as critical to victims pursuing legal action.

### *Training Participation and Gaps*

- One in ten respondents felt fully prepared by initial training for GBV cases.
- Six in ten respondents attended GBV-related training (the majority once, several respondents multiple times), while four in ten did not attend any GBV-related training.
- One third of respondents attended multi-sectoral trainings.

### *Focus of Training Content*

- The majority of respondents who had attended training sessions saw intimate partner violence, legislation, the Istanbul Convention, and victim needs covered.
- Respondents assessed secondary victimization, intersectionality, and gender equality as not so well covered in the trainings they attended.
- Largely not covered were topics like legal aid standards, custody, perpetrator treatment, and burnout prevention.

### *Familiarity with the Legal Framework*

- Six in ten respondents are fully familiar with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (LPPVAWDV), five in ten respondents with the Istanbul Convention
- A third to nearly half respondents lack full understanding of legal obligations.

### *Perceptions and Gender Attitudes*

- The respondents broadly support gender equality in principle.
- The respondents showed somewhat ambivalent perceptions of traditional gender roles in households and economic contributions.
- Most respondents reject harmful GBV myths (e.g., DV being private, women provoking violence), but they remained neutral towards key issues (e.g., credibility of victims, no potential perpetrators among their social circles).

## Gaps between the Legal Framework and Practical Implementation

Despite the existing legal framework and clearly defined obligations of the Ministry of Justice and the AJPP, there are significant gaps between theoretical provisions and their practical implementation. The Ministry of Justice has a key role in establishing initial and continuous training programs for authorized free legal aid providers and lawyers who provide victim protection. However, research shows that the standardization and reach of these trainings are limited, with insufficient coverage of topics such as secondary victimization, intersectionality, child protection, economic empowerment of victims and treatment of perpetrators.

The AJPP, although regularly organizing trainings for judges and prosecutors, in practice faces low and uneven participation, especially by public prosecutors, whose presence is crucial in handling GBV cases. In addition, trainings often remain theoretical, without sufficient practical exercises, simulations or protocol guidelines for cooperation between institutions. These inconsistencies point to the need to institutionalize training, clarify roles, and establish standardized procedures for effective implementation of the LPPVAWDV.

## Recommendations for First Responders to GBV among Judges and Prosecutors

### *Strengthen legal and procedural competence*

- Ensure all judges and public prosecutors receive in-depth, mandatory training on the implementation of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the Istanbul Convention.
- Provide regular updates on relevant legislative changes, case law, and institutional obligations to guarantee legal consistency and compliance.
- Develop clear, role-specific guidance on the use of protection measures, prosecutorial discretion, and coordination with social services in high-risk GBV cases.

### *Challenge gender bias and stereotypes in judicial reasoning*

- Implement gender-transformative modules that help judges and prosecutors recognize and critically examine their own implicit biases and gender role assumptions.
- Address harmful stereotypes—such as disbelief in marital rape, minimization of psychological violence, or assumptions about false reporting—through evidence-based training.
- Create safe spaces for self-reflection and structured dialogue on how traditional beliefs may unconsciously affect collection of evidence, interpretation, sentencing, or prosecutorial strategies.

### *Enhance judicial sensitivity and victim-centered and rights-based practice*

- Introduce specialized training on secondary victimization prevention, emphasizing courtroom conduct, trauma-informed questioning, and minimizing re-traumatization during hearings.
- Strengthen skills in trust building and communication with victims, particularly in cases involving witnesses in vulnerable situations, conflicting testimonies, or delays in reporting.
- Encourage the use of procedural protections (e.g., closed sessions, remote testimony) to reduce the psychological burden on victims participating in proceedings.

### *Promote multi-institutional alignment and coordination*

- Facilitate joint training sessions with representatives from police, Centers for Social Work, health institutions, and civil society organizations to harmonize response protocols.
- Develop or reinforce inter-institutional referral pathways, with clear roles and timelines for action, to reduce delays and fragmentation in victim protection.
- Incorporate practical exercises on cross-sector case handling and early risk detection involving multi-agency cooperation into capacity building.

### *Apply case-based and experiential learning methods*

- Move beyond lecture-style training and adopt scenario-based workshops, mock hearings, and case simulations tailored to GBV proceedings.
- Use real anonymized case studies to discuss ethical dilemmas, prosecutorial decisions, and judicial interpretation challenges.
- Encourage peer exchange and case review sessions among prosecutors and judges to foster collective learning and improve consistency.

### *Improve standardization and accountability*

- Support the development and consistent implementation of internal protocols and institutional guidelines for GBV case handling.
- Ensure that all judges and prosecutors have access to and understand these procedures, and that gaps in adherence are identified and addressed through supervision and training.
- Promote regular internal meetings to review the application of protocols and align practices across prosecutors and judges.

**FOR FULL ACCESS TO THE RESEARCH "A SAFER FUTURE: STRENGTHENING GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION THROUGH PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN NORTH MACEDONIA", SCAN THE QR CODE!**

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