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POLICY BRIEF

EDUCATIONAL PROFESSIONALS

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

Role

Educational workers, including teachers, psychologists, pedagogues, and social workers, play a crucial role as first responders to gender-based violence in schools. They are often the first point of contact for children and adolescents who may be experiencing or witnessing violence at home or within their community. Their responsibilities include recognizing signs of abuse, providing immediate support and comfort to victims, and ensuring that the child feels safe and heard. Educational workers are also key in reporting suspected gender-based violence (GBV), violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence (DV) to the appropriate authorities, such as social services or law enforcement, in accordance with the legal requirements. In North Macedonia, the responsible and managerial staff in institutions performing activities in the fields of education are obliged to report any knowledge of gender-based violence against women and domestic violence to a police station or a Center for Social Work (CSW). Regular training and awareness programs for educational staff are crucial in enabling them to respond effectively and sensitively to cases of GBV.

Furthermore, educational workers should provide initial counselling and referral services, helping the victim to access necessary resources such as medical care or legal support. Their ability to act swiftly and empathetically is essential in mitigating the immediate effects of GBV and ensuring the protection and well-being of the child as well as his/her mother. Therefore, these professionals should be trained to detect signs of distress, so they can offer a critical intervention in cases where children may be too afraid or unable to seek help themselves. By creating a nurturing environment within the school, educational workers help children feel valued and protected, providing a crucial counterbalance to the violence and instability they may experience at home. This approach prioritizes the child's need for a safe, nurturing space, free from violence that may otherwise define their daily life.

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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.

- 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: A total of 106 psychological and pedagogical support staff from primary and secondary schools across 46 municipalities in North Macedonia participated in the research. This group, primarily composed of pedagogues and psychologists, represents a diverse and experienced cohort of school professionals, most of whom hold a Bachelor's or Master's degree and have more than 10 years of work experience. Additionally, interviews were conducted with representatives from civil society and international organizations, as well as three representatives from the Bureau for Development of Education (BDE).

Key Findings – Educational Professionals

Between 2021 and 2024, numerous training programs with a focus on gender-based violence (GBV), gender equality, peer violence, and child protection for educational professionals—teachers, psychologists, pedagogues, and other school staff—were mapped. These trainings were both accredited and non-accredited, with a diverse range of topics covered and institutions involved, including the Bureau for Education Development (BED), CSOs, and international organizations.

Key Topics Covered

- **Gender equality and gender sensitivity**: BED-accredited training reached 46 teachers, providing foundational understanding of gender roles, stereotypes, and inclusive curriculum design.
- **Peer and cyber violence prevention**: 2,657 teachers were trained in managing peer and cyber violence with a focus on intervention and prevention.
- **Conflict resolution and socio-emotional skills**: Over 4,000 educators were trained on conflict resolution, building student confidence, and fostering emotional resilience.
- **Violence prevention and safe school environments**: Several accredited programs (e.g., one for 2,925 secondary school teachers) focused on violence prevention and early intervention.
- **Family-school cooperation in preventing violence**: Training for 605 professional staff emphasized building parent-school collaboration as a means of tackling peer violence.
- **Prevention of trafficking in huma beings**: Non-accredited training for 50 professionals (supported by the Council of Europe and EU) focused on identifying and assisting children at risk.
- **GBV-specific training:** Coalition Margins and BED provided structured GBV education for around 83 school staff, incorporating the 2020 Regulation on handling violence cases in schools. Trainings addressed sex, gender, GBV, gender identity, referral procedures, and sensitization.
- **Child-focused DV recognition:** Training for 30 professionals helped kindergartens and schools detect signs of domestic violence in children's families and navigate the child protection system.

Gaps and limitations identified

- **Limited reach of gender equality trainings**: While thousands were trained in general violence prevention, only a small number of teachers (46) received specific training on gender equality and sensitivity.
- **Insufficient GBV-specific training**: Despite notable efforts by CSOs, GBV-specific education remains limited in scale and mostly targets primary schools.
- **Inconsistent integration of human rights-based approaches and intersectionality**: Many trainings did not sufficiently address key principles such as trauma-informed care, intersectionality, and professional bias.
- **Lack of training for educators on teaching GBV prevention to students**: There is a notable absence of capacity-building efforts aimed at preparing educational professionals to educate students on preventing GBV.
- **Lack of institutional curricula for GBV prevention and protection**: There is no comprehensive curriculum integrated into educational institutions to guide professionals on prevention and protection from GBV.

Gaps in responsibility perception

- While more than half respondents acknowledged responsibilities in prevention, reporting suspicions, and child protection, a little less than two in ten respondents believed it was their duty to respond directly to GBV/DV cases.
- Hardly any respondents acknowledged victim reintegration, perpetrator reintegration, or recognizing economic aspects as their responsibilities.

Attitudes and perceptions on gender equality and GBV

- Respondents widely rejected harmful stereotypes and myths about violence, with strong support for gender equality and victim sensitivity.
- However, a minority still held problematic beliefs—some showed tolerance for traditional gender roles, victim blaming, or misunderstandings about perpetrators.
- One in five respondents did not fully recognize their mandatory reporting obligations under the law.

Gaps Between the Legal Framework and Practical Implementation

In the education sector, despite the legal framework assigning a key role to psychologists and pedagogues as first responders to gender-based violence (GBV), there are significant gaps in implementation. The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence obliges all staff in educational institutions to report any suspicion or knowledge of violence, and corresponding national protocols have already been adopted. However, research findings indicate that only a small portion of psychological-pedagogical staff recognize that they have a direct role in responding to GBV or DV cases, and some are not fully aware of their legal obligation to report. Furthermore, there is limited familiarity with national protocols and guidelines, pointing to a lack of systematic, continuous, and mandatory training. Educational professionals still lack adequate support to identify early signs of violence and do not have tools to manage traumatized students or students displaying risky behavior. These gaps undermine the effective application of the legal framework and limit the ability of schools to function as safe and protective environments for children.

Recommendations for First Responders to GBV among School Psychologists and Pedagogues

Develop and implement foundational and role-specific GBV training

- Introduce structured basic training for all newly appointed school psychologists and pedagogues that covers core concepts of GBV, VAW and DV.
- Ensure that capacity building includes school-specific guidance on how to recognize signs that students may be affected by GBV, VAW and DV and how to respond appropriately.
- Cover the role of school professionals within the national protection system, especially as first responders and referral points, ensuring professionals know their roles and obligations.

Build capacities on the legal frameworks and raise awareness for existing protocols

- Provide mandatory training on the Law on Prevention and Protection against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, the Istanbul Convention and other international human rights standards, in particular the Convention on the Rights of the Child as well as relevant national guidelines, including "Guidelines for the Procedure for Reporting and Protecting a Student Victim of Any Form of Violence, Abuse, and Neglect."
- Ensure professionals understand their institutional obligations, reporting duties, and legal protection mechanisms available for students and families.
- Offer follow-up sessions to promote compliance with existing protocols, especially given the low awareness of established national procedures.

Develop and implement skills-based and trauma-informed training

- Deliver training focused on practical skills, including communication with victims, handling disclosures, providing psychological first aid, and addressing trauma.
- Build capacity in behavioural observation and psychosocial support, particularly when working with children whose parents are victims or perpetrators of violence.
- Strengthen emotional resilience and self-care strategies to support the mental health of professionals dealing with sensitive cases. The provision of such measures also need to be supported by organizational structures.

Enhance multi-sectoral and inter-institutional collaboration

- Develop joint trainings with professionals from Centers for Social Work, the police, and healthcare services to encourage coordinated action and mutual understanding.
- Clarify information-sharing procedures, the school's role in multi-sectoral teams, and strategies for maintaining continuity and safety in case management.
- Promote cross-sector learning through real-life case simulations and reflection sessions with professionals from other sectors.

Enhance prevention and awareness

- Train school staff on how to implement preventive activities on GBV in schools, including awareness raising among students, parents, and the wider school community.
- Capacity building efforts should explicitly include awareness raising among boys and male students, addressing their specific role in challenging GBV and promoting respectful relationships.
- Encourage capacity building in gender equality education, challenging harmful gender norms and stereotypes in the school environment.

Ensure early identification and referral of perpetrators

- Introduce specialized training for school psychologists and pedagogues on recognizing early signs of perpetrator behaviour among students (e.g., aggression, control, entitlement, exposure to violence at home).
- Equip professionals with tools for early intervention and structured communication with at-risk students, using non-confrontational, trauma-informed approaches.
- Establish clear referral pathways to external services (CSW, CSOs) such as counselling, and behavioural programs for students who display early signs of perpetration.
- Promote preventive education targeting boys and male students, focused on healthy masculinity, emotional regulation, and respectful relationships.
- Encourage collaboration with CSOs, social services, and healthcare professionals to support a whole-school approach to early intervention.

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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