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POLICY BRIEF

# EMPLOYMENT CENTERS

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

## Role

The Employment Agency of the Republic of North Macedonia is a public institution that implements employment measures and carries out professional, organizational, administrative, and other tasks related to employment and unemployment insurance. It provides support, assistance, and services to labour market participants including groups of people in vulnerable situations. As a first responder, the Employment Agency of North Macedonia plays a crucial role in the economic empowerment of gender-based violence survivors by facilitating their integration into the labour market. As stated in the Protocol for Inter-institutional cooperation, when protection measures are implemented, professionals from a Center for Social Work (CSW) notify the Employment Agency's relevant Employment Center to coordinate the survivor's inclusion in active employment measures. This includes participation in training and retraining programs tailored to their needs and opportunities, ultimately supporting their long-term economic independence and reducing the risk of returning to abusive situations. However, recent research has shown that in many cases the CSW did not receive a formal answer by the local Employment Center on whether they have assisted the victim and supported her in finding a job or receiving training.

Therefore, training for career advisors and employees of the Employment Agency is essential to ensure they can effectively support victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence. These professionals play a crucial role in victims' reintegration by providing career guidance, facilitating access to employment opportunities, and connecting them with financial assistance programs. Specialized training will equip them with the knowledge to recognize signs of abuse, adopt a trauma-informed approach, and offer tailored support that meets the specific needs of survivors. By enhancing their skills, the agency can contribute to victims' long-term economic empowerment and independence, reducing their risk of returning to abusive situations.

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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.

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.



## Обем на истражувањето

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 47 employees from 25 Employment Centers participated in the survey. The majority were women (39), with a smaller number of men (7), and one respondent not disclosing their sex. Most held a Bachelor's (37), while others held a Master's degree (5), post-secondary vocational (3), or secondary education (1). Roles varied from senior and associate professionals in employment services to psychologists, counsellors, and heads of centers, with 35 respondents having more than 6 years of professional experience. This reflects a highly experienced workforce engaged in diverse employment support functions.

## Key Findings – Employment Centers

The research reveals that staff from Employment Centers have received the least training on GBV, VAW and DV compared to other first responders. Despite their limited preparedness, their role is critical in the economic reintegration of victims that are not economically active or are at risk of losing their jobs due to the violence they are experiencing—a key component of long-term recovery and prevention of re-victimization. This training gap undermines the Employment Centers' potential to support survivors effectively and calls for urgent capacity-building measures within this sector.

A key finding indicates that only half of the respondents from Employment Centers acknowledge the influence of institutional trust and professional conduct on a victim's decision to report gender-based or domestic violence. The remaining respondents either attribute the decision solely to the victim's will or express uncertainty of their own role in preventing and/or reporting GBV. This points to a limited understanding of the crucial role employment professionals play in the broader protection system—particularly in building trust and supporting the economic empowerment of victims.

### *Work with Victims and Perpetrators of GBV*

Approximately 38% of respondents reported working directly with GBV, VAW, or DV victims—usually through referrals from CSW—offering career counselling, profiling, and inclusion in active employment measures. Over 60% indicated no direct engagement with victims, reflecting gaps in institutional procedures or role clarity. Few respondents had experience with perpetrators, and even then, engagement was incidental through general services, not targeted interventions. This highlights a critical gap in structured mandates for perpetrator rehabilitation.

### *Legal Awareness and Reporting Obligations*

Most respondents recognized their role in reintegration of GBV victims, as mandated by Article 99 of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (LPPVAWDV). However, many did not identify reporting GBV as part of their duties, indicating insufficient understanding of legal obligations. Alarmingly, only 2 out of 45 respondents were fully familiar with the LPPVAWDV, and just as few were familiar with the Istanbul Convention. This significant legal literacy gap reinforces the need for focused training.

### *Training Gaps and Participation*

A major finding is that 85% of respondents reported either no or insufficient training on GBV. Only 5 professionals attended training between 2021 and 2024, often limited to general topics. Critical content such as reintegration, employer sensitization, trauma-informed approaches, and victim empowerment were rarely covered. Yet, participants who did receive training reported high satisfaction.

### *Institutional Protocols and Professional Conduct*

2 out of 13 respondents confirmed the existence of clear institutional protocols for handling GBV cases. Others either reported none, were unsure, or described informal practices. This indicates a pressing need for standardized, legally compliant internal procedures. While most professionals acknowledged the importance of treating victims with sensitivity, some held conflicting views about whether all clients should be treated equally to avoid stigma. This underscores the need for clearer ethical guidance and trauma-informed approaches.

### *Perceptions, Attitudes, and Stereotypes*

While most respondents supported gender equality and rejected violence-justifying beliefs, troubling attitudes persist. One-third agreed or were neutral to the belief that victims provoke violence. Misconceptions also remained around marital rape, psychological violence, and victim credibility. Many respondents held views suggesting that perpetrators are primarily mentally ill or substance abusers, or doubted their capacity for change. These findings point to the need for gender-transformative training to address underlying biases.

### *Impact of Professional Conduct and Trust*

Roughly, half of respondents acknowledged that institutional trust and professional behaviour significantly affect a victim's decision to report or pursue legal action. However, many did not fully appreciate this influence, revealing a disconnect that can hinder effective engagement and survivor support.

### *Training Needs and Institutional Recommendations*

Most professionals called for comprehensive, role-specific, and in-person training—especially on legal frameworks, trauma-informed communication, referral procedures, and economic reintegration strategies. Respondents also stressed the need for clear internal protocols, employer sensitization, and addressing burnout risks among staff. There was strong support for continuous, multi-sectoral training aligned with the Employment Centers' legal and ethical responsibilities.

## Gaps between the Legal Framework and practical Implementation

Gaps between the legal framework and practical implementation are particularly evident in the role of the Employment Agency. According to Article 99 of the LPPVAWDV, the reintegration of victims of gender-based and domestic violence includes several components, such as temporary housing, psychological counselling with mentorship, financial assistance specifically for women victims of violence, access to education and training in various fields, and legally defined employment measures tailored to the specific needs of victims. Although this legal framework clearly defines the role of the Employment Agency in implementing employment measures for vulnerable groups, including victims of GBV, VAW, and DV, significant challenges are observed in practice.

The lack of systematic training, weak institutional coordination, and unclear procedures result in insufficient application of these legal measures, reducing the Agency's capacity to effectively support victims in their economic reintegration and independence.

Employment Centers hold a critical role in the economic empowerment of GBV survivors, but lack of training, legal literacy, institutional guidance, and lingering harmful stereotypes undermine their effectiveness. Urgent investment in gender-sensitive, legally grounded, and practice-based capacity building is essential to ensure that these institutions fulfil their mandate in supporting survivors' recovery, safety, and reintegration.

## Recommendations for First Responders to GBV among Staff of Employment Centers

### *Enhance capacities on legal and institutional frameworks*

- Training on the Law on Prevention and Protection against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence and the Istanbul Convention.
- Clarification of the role of Employment Centers in the GBV protection system.
- Development and implementation of internal protocols and procedures for GBV cases.

### *Strengthen capacities in the areas of economic empowerment and reintegration*

- Offer training on designing personalized employment support plans for survivors.
- Equip staff with methods to identify barriers to employment (e.g., lack of childcare, trauma, legal status) and refer survivors to appropriate services.
- Train professionals on engaging employers, reducing stigma, and promoting inclusive hiring practices for survivors.
- Share good practices on linking economic support to survivor safety and empowerment, including access to state programs, skills development, and entrepreneurship.

### *Support development and implementation of victim-centered and trauma-informed approaches*

- Train professionals in victim-sensitive communication, trust building, and confidentiality.
- Improve understanding of the psychological, emotional, and economic aspects of violence, including recognition of non-physical abuse.
- Provide tools to address intersectionality and specific needs of survivors based on age, socio-economic status, parenthood, or other factors.

### *Promote multi-sectoral cooperation*

- Strengthen cooperation with other institutions (e.g., CSW, educational sector, local government, CSOs, service providers) through joint training modules and shared case-handling procedures.
- Provide practical simulations and case studies to reinforce learning and teamwork in cross-sectoral responses.

**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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