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POLICY BRIEF

LAW ENFORCEMENT SERVICES

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

Role

Law enforcement officers play a critical role as first responders to gender-based violence (GBV). They are often the first point of contact for victims, and their initial actions can significantly impact the victim's safety, well-being, and access to justice. Officers are responsible for ensuring the immediate safety of the victim, documenting evidence, and providing the necessary referrals to support services such as medical assistance, shelters, counselling, and legal aid. In addition, they must be trained to handle sensitive cases with empathy and professionalism, maintaining confidentiality while adhering to legal procedures, especially in smaller towns/communities where people have personal ties that might compromise these aspects. Their ability to assess the situation, protect the victim, and collect evidence can help secure legal outcomes for the survivor and prevent further violence. Effective first-response by law enforcement is essential in breaking the cycle of violence and ensuring that victims are supported throughout the process of recovery and justice.

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)

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- 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: Interviews were conducted with a representative from the Training Centre within the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA), as well as with representatives of international organizations (OSCE, UNFPA, UNDP) that supported the Ministry of Internal Affairs through GBV-related training programs for first responders. Additional interviews were conducted with representatives from civil society organizations that included police officers in their GBV training activities.

Limitation: The MoIA did not disseminate the questionnaire for GBV first responders to police officers and domestic violence inspectors. We therefore lack information on the perspectives, attitudes and needs of the law enforcement.

Key Findings – Law Enforcement

Between 2021 and 2024, significant progress was made in strengthening the capacities of police officers in North Macedonia to address GBV, VAW and DV. Over 11 major training programs were mapped, targeting a broad range of law enforcement personnel including uniformed officers, inspectors, domestic violence unit members, and police cadets. These trainings were organized by a mix of international organizations (OSCE, UNFPA), civil society (Association for Emancipation, Solidarity and Equality of Women (ESE), Helsinki Committee), and national institutions (MoI), with a focus on building a victim/survivor-centered, gender-sensitive, and multi-sectoral response.

Key Topics Covered

- **Legal frameworks**: Strong emphasis on the Istanbul Convention, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against women and Domestic Violence (LPPVAWDV), and national legislation governing police action.
- **Risk assessment and protection measures**: Officers were trained to conduct risk assessments, implement emergency and temporary protective measures, and remove perpetrators when necessary.
- **Victim-centered interviewing**: Several sessions focused on trauma-informed interviewing techniques, especially toprevent secondary victimization.
- **Gender equality and gender-responsive policing**: Topics like gender-sensitive communication, intersectionality, andmixed-gender police teams for DV response were covered.
- **Multi-sectoral cooperation**: Integrated approaches involving CSOs, healthcare, and social workers to strengthen victim referrals and follow-up.
- **Hate crimes and LGBTQI+ protection**: This training addressed hate crimes motivated by homophobia and transphobia and fostered police empathy and non-discriminatory practices.
- **Innovative approaches:** A theatrical performance based on real-life DV cases was used as an educational tool in police cadet training.
- **Training of trainers (ToT)**: A cascade model was implemented to institutionalize knowledge sharing and establish internal police trainers on GBV and DV.

Gaps and limitations identified

- **Inconsistent coverage**: Training participation varies significantly across regions and ranks, with no national standard ensuring mandatory GBV training for all officers.
- **Limited focus on intersectionality**: While the concept was introduced, there is insufficient depth in addressing violence against marginalized groups (e.g., Roma women, migrants, people with disabilities).
- **Follow-up and evaluation**: There is limited data on impact assessments and post-training application in practice, highlighting a gap in monitoring and feedback mechanisms.
- **Burnout and officer well-being**: Stress management and mental health support for police officers handling GBV cases are topics largely missing from training content. The provision of such measures also need to be support by organizational structures.
- **Advanced investigation skills**: While interviewing techniques were included, investigative methodologies for complex GBV cases, especially digital violence, need further expansion.

Gaps Between Legal Framework and Practical Implementation

According to Article 18 of the LPPVAWDV, the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) bears a key legal responsibility to prevent and respond to gender-based violence (GBV), including violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence (DV). This includes not only developing protective policies and ensuring victim support, but also designing and implementing both initial and continuous training for police officers. These trainings—legally mandated to be approved by the Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth—are essential for enabling law enforcement to act effectively, sensitively, and in accordance with the law. However, while this legal framework establishes clear obligations, in practice, the implementation remains fragmented and under-institutionalized. Although GBV is now partially included in the basic police curriculum and certain protocols have been developed, the reach, depth, and consistency of these efforts fall short of the scale needed.

From 2021 to 2024, over ten major training programs were conducted, many supported by international organizations. While these programs built foundational knowledge, most trainings remain ad hoc, short-term, and limited to small groups of selected participants. Crucially, the MoIA lacks clear internal mechanisms for distributing tools such as the GBV protocol, and there is no evidence of widespread training or institutional uptake. Many officers continue to report confusion around newer Criminal Code provisions (e.g., stalking, digital violence), and harmful gender stereotypes persist, undermining victim-centered approaches. The absence of centralized data on trained personnel and the lack of a systematic approach to ongoing training and supervision further hinder progress. Although the MoIA Strategic Plan 2024–2026 identifies gender-sensitive policing as a priority, it fails to specify concrete indicators—such as the number, roles, or locations of officers to be trained. To close this gap between legal obligations and practice, training must be institutionalized through the MoI Training Center, supported by a dedicated budget, a standardized national GBV curriculum, and a robust monitoring and evaluation framework.

Recommendations for First Responders within the Law Enforcement Services

Institutionalization and standardization of GBV response protocols

- Adopt and operationalize the protocol/reminder on GBV procedures developed by the Ministry of Internal Affairs by making it publicly available, ensuring it is officially disseminated to all police stations and accompanied by training, and embed the protocol/reminder into internal operating procedures.
- Ensure nationwide application of a unified standard for GBV response across all MoIA first responders to GBV, VAW and DV, with clear mandates on how to act upon first contact, including detailed guidance on victim protection, referral, evidence collection, and risk assessment.
- Introduce mandatory internal audits or supervisory mechanisms to verify whether police officers follow GBV protocols during investigations and interventions.

Address the institutional culture, gender bias, and secondary victimization

- Implement mandatory gender-sensitive training to tackle harmful stereotypes and attitudes and reduce harmful responses (e.g., victim blaming, biases, etc.).
- Train all officers in trauma-sensitive interviewing techniques to prevent secondary victimization and promote trust among survivors.
- Encourage the establishment of mixed-gender patrols and investigation teams, especially in DV and sexual violence cases, to foster a more sensitive and balanced approach to victims.

Comprehensive and tailored training system for police officers

- Develop a national training curriculum on GBV, VAW, and DV that integrates international standards (Istanbul Convention, CEDAW, CRC), trauma-informed care, intersectionality, risk assessment, and victim-centered and rights-based approaches.
- Ensure all police officers, inspectors, cadets, and trainers complete tiered, role-specific training—ranging from basic GBV awareness for patrol officers to advanced interviewing and case management skills for inspectors.
- Guarantee periodic refresher training every 2–3 years to ensure that practices evolve with legal reforms and emerging challenges (e.g., digital GBV, stalking, human trafficking).

Strengthen multi-sectoral collaboration and victim referral systems

- Institutionalize multi-sectoral cooperation in GBV cases by formalizing joint response mechanisms with CSW, healthcare, judiciary, education, and CSOs.
- Ensure each police station designates a GBV focal point officer and a deputy, trained to coordinate with shelters, psychological services, and legal aid providers to ensure the victim's needs are met beyond immediate safety.
- Expand cross-sector training programs to promote a shared understanding of mandates, limitations, and effective cooperation, especially in high-risk and repeat violence cases.

Develop and implement monitoring, evaluation, and data-driven training planning

- Strengthen the MoIA Training Center's coordination role by requiring annual GBV training needs assessments.
- Track training participation and implementation outcomes, including the number of officers trained, the quality of their GBV responses, and the impact on case outcomes (e.g., reporting rates, protection order issuance).
- Invest in capacity building for trainers and curriculum developers, ensuring cascade training remains aligned with legal standards and evidence-based practice.

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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