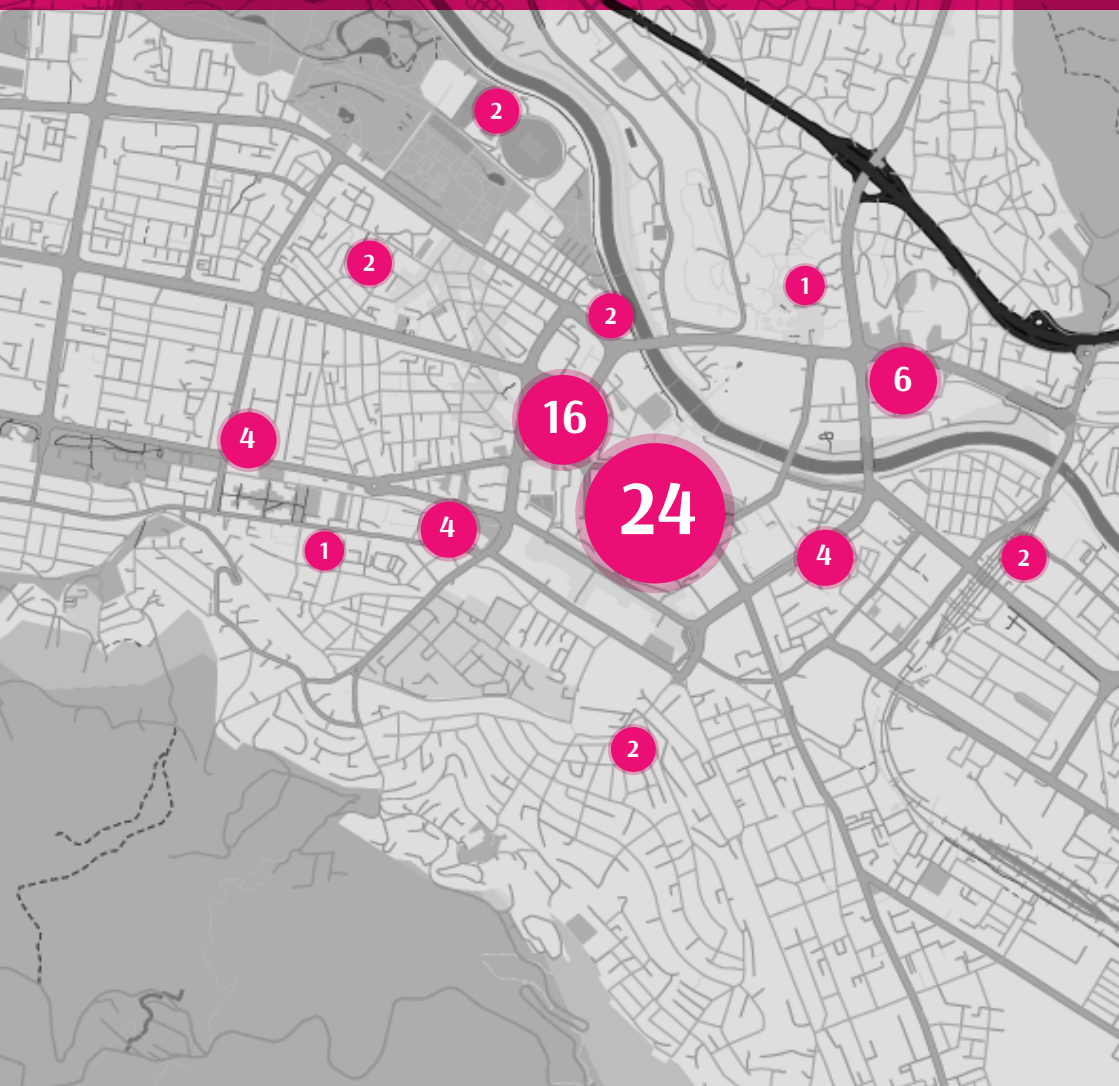


GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN PUBLIC SPACES IN SKOPJE AND TETOVO

- Key Findings -



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Key Findings

Skopje, 2025

This publication was produced with financial support from Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and UK International Development. The views and analysis expressed in the publication belong to Reactor and do not necessarily represent the views of Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation and UK International Development.

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Context

The crime rate per 100,000 citizens in North Macedonia has shown an overall declining trend from 2010 to 2023. After peaking in 2013, it steadily decreased, with notable declines in 2015 and 2019. Although slight increases were recorded in 2018 and 2021, the overall trajectory remained downward, reaching its lowest point in 2023.

However, in contrast to this general decline in crime, North Macedonia has witnessed a steady rise in criminal offenses related to domestic violence over the past seven years. Despite occasional fluctuations, the upward trend in these offenses underscores the absence of systemic measures to prevent and address domestic violence effectively.

While domestic violence is increasingly recognized as a critical issue, violence against women in public spaces remains largely unexamined due to a lack of systematic data collection. The State Statistical Office does not conduct surveys on public safety perceptions, and the Ministry of Interior collects only reported crime data. Some data exists on specific issues, such as violence in schools, but there is no comprehensive dataset on violence against women in public spaces. This data gap limits both the understanding of the issue and the ability to develop targeted interventions.

Legal Analysis

The legal analysis conducted as part of the study confirmed that although the legal framework is aligned with international conventions, its implementation is hindered by the lack of political will, translated, as an example, in the absence of essential bylaws and regulations. These missing legal provisions prevent institutions from effectively addressing violence against women in public spaces, creating a disconnect between policy and practice. Furthermore, institutional analysis shows that public safety for women is not seen as a political or strategic priority, which results in a lack of resources and institutional action to address the issue.

North Macedonia's commitment to the Istanbul Convention requires it to ensure safe and inclusive public spaces for women. However, the implementation of its National Action Plan (2018–2023) has been weak, particularly in preventing violence against women and domestic violence. Many institutions failed to develop annual operational plans with budget allocations, and the lack of funding and coordination has been criticized by the EU in the 2024 Country Report.

At the local level, the City of Skopje has not updated the operational plan for implementation of the activities outlined in the national strategy on gender-based violence (GBV), relying instead on an outdated gender equality strategy. The Municipality of Centar lacks any publicly available strategy or plan addressing gender equality or its obligations under the Istanbul Convention, with minimal financial commitment to GBV prevention. Similarly, Tetovo Municipality provides no publicly accessible planning documents on gender equality, which furtherly limits the municipality's transparency and accountability.

With the previous National Action Plan expiring in 2023, no new comprehensive strategy has been adopted, creating a policy vacuum that weakens institutional coordination and slows progress in addressing

GBV. The absence of a clear framework hinders monitoring, evaluation, and accountability, and weakens North Macedonia's capacity to fully implement the Istanbul Convention.

The Geography of Fear: Where and When Women Feel Unsafe

As the cityscape shifts from day to night, so does the experience of safety for women navigating public spaces. During daylight hours, two out of three women (75%) report feeling either “quite safe” (53%) or “completely safe” (22%). However, as the sun sets, this confidence diminishes dramatically—only 16% of women feel safe to use public spaces at night, and a mere 2% report feeling “completely safe.” Instead, fear takes hold: 39% report feeling “very unsafe,” while another 44% feel “a bit unsafe” after dark. This stark contrast in the subjective perception of safety is reflected in behavioral patterns—nearly one in five women (18%) report not having gone outside alone at night even once in the past month, while nearly half (46%) only did so rarely. These figures demonstrate that for a significant portion of the population, nighttime mobility is severely restricted—but is it a matter of personal choice, or a necessity arising from safety concerns?

Although shared between them, this experience is not uniform across all women. For older women, the nature of safety concerns has evolved. While younger women frequently cite the threat of sexual harassment or assault, women over 50 report experiencing greater fear of petty crime and robberies.

The perception of safety is not just about ‘when’ but also about ‘where’. Certain environments provide a greater sense of security, while others induce fear. Women who participated in the survey feel safest in spaces with controlled access, such as elevators or building entrances, as well as in well-lit and high-traffic areas like public squares or markets.

However, opinions are divided on spaces such as parks, streets, bus stations, and taxis—places where a significant portion of women feel secure, but just as many express unease.

At the extreme end of insecurity are parking garages (59% unsafe) and bars and nightclubs (52% unsafe)—locations that are often poorly lit, isolated, or characterized by social dynamics that facilitate harassment and violence. These findings reinforce broader research suggesting that visibility and the presence of others can be a deterrent to violence, while isolation, neglected infrastructure and lack of lighting amplify vulnerability.

In line with these findings, two environmental factors stand out as key determinants of safety: lighting and human presence. Poor lighting was consistently cited as a factor that heightened insecurity, confirming prior findings that suggest women feel safer when they know they can be seen by others. Neglected infrastructure, such as broken, littered and overall poorly maintained spaces, further increases the sense of deterioration and lack of care, instilling fear when navigating these spaces. Yet, while a lack of visible police presence is another common concern (74% of women in Skopje and 73% in Tetovo report feeling unsafe due to its absence), this does not necessarily indicate confidence in law enforcement—rather, it points to a broader structural deficiency which is discussed in the findings on reporting below.

Public transportation emerges as yet another site of gendered vulnerability. Women are overrepresented among bus users, which is why it is alarming that 62% report feeling unsafe on crowded buses and at bus stops. The reasons might extend beyond general concerns about crime—public transit confines women in enclosed spaces with limited escape routes, often while they are en route to work or school, where they cannot afford to exit early. In Skopje, underpasses and construction sites were also cited as particularly unsafe, a concern less frequently raised by women in Tetovo. This suggests that differences in urban infrastructure shape experiences of safety, potentially due to maintenance, lighting, or the presence of security measures. Further investigation is required to

examine the factors contributing to this disparity in perception between women in the two cities.

A striking difference in perception emerges in relation to groups of young men occupying public spaces. In Tetovo, 59% of women feel unsafe in these situations, compared to 48% in Skopje. This disparity might suggest that the gendered use of public space is experienced differently across cities, likely shaped by social norms that dictate when and where women can exist without scrutiny. Women's presence in public spaces is frequently contested—whether through overt harassment or the more subtle dynamics of exclusion, where they are made to feel unwelcome.

In response to these risks, women develop their own strategies for moving through the city in ways that make them feel safer. The most common tactics include frequently looking around (almost always: 33%, often: 38%), avoiding eye contact with men (almost always: 49%, often: 28%), or talking on a mobile phone (almost always: 23%, often: 36%)—behaviors that suggest a belief that appearing occupied or connected to someone offers a layer of protection.

Beyond these small, moment-to-moment responses, women also alter their overall mobility patterns. They avoid places perceived as unsafe (almost always: 51% often: 35%), restrict nighttime movement (almost always: 29% often: 31%), take longer routes to bypass certain areas (almost always: 22% often: 36%), or modify their clothing choices to lessen the chances of harassment (almost always: 23% often: 28%). Taken together, these strategies reflect the extent to which women must engage in “safety work” to exist in public spaces.

This burden, however, is not inevitable—it is the result of an environment that fails to provide systemic solutions to gendered insecurity. The responsibility for safety should not rest solely on women's ability to self-regulate their movements but should be addressed through broader structural interventions that challenge the conditions which allow public spaces to remain sites of fear rather than freedom.

Navigating Fear: How Women Experience and Respond to Public Space Violence

For the purpose of this study, incidents of harassment and violence were categorized into four groups based on their nature.

Verbal harassment

Verbal harassment is a routine experience of women in public spaces, with staring being the most expected (87%) and most frequently encountered form, affecting nearly nine in ten women personally or through a woman they know. Honking and catcalling (77%) and inappropriate comments (73%) follow closely in perceived likelihood, with 80% and 86% of women, respectively, reporting personal experiences of experience of a woman they know. While swearing and vulgar gestures (49%) and ethnic or religious insults (45%) are considered less likely, they remain significant, with 65% and 42% of women experiencing them firsthand or through others.

The emotional responses to verbal harassment reveal both commonalities and distinct variations depending on the nature of the harassment. Across all forms, irritation and anger are the most frequently reported emotions, indicating widespread frustration and resentment toward public harassment as an intrusion on personal boundaries. Additionally, fear is a recurring reaction to experiencing verbal harassment, regardless of the perceived level of threat.

However, certain forms of harassment trigger additional emotions that highlight differences in their impact on women's emotional state. Shame, for example, emerges selectively, primarily in response to catcalling and inappropriate comments. This suggests that forms of harassment that objectify women's bodies or impose social judgment contribute to internalized discomfort and self-consciousness, making them distinct

from more overtly aggressive verbal abuse like swearing or ethnic/religious insults, which predominantly provoke anger rather than shame.

Women's responses to verbal harassment reveal a consistent tendency toward inaction, with the majority opting not to respond across all forms. This choice is most pronounced in cases of staring and catcalling, where public harassment is often normalized, making resistance less common. However, the likelihood of resistance increases as the harassment becomes more overt and aggressive. While inaction remains the most common response to inappropriate comments, nearly as many women report verbally defending themselves, suggesting that direct and explicit harassment is more likely to provoke a response. Similarly, swearing and vulgarities elicit the highest levels of resistance, with half of women actively confronting the harasser. This may indicate that as harassment becomes more explicitly aggressive, women feel more compelled, or perhaps feel that it is more justified to push back.

Intimidation and threats

Among forms of intimidation in public spaces, stalking is perceived as the most likely to occur (58%) and is also the most commonly experienced, with 71% of women reporting direct or indirect encounters. Physical obstruction follows, with 42% considering it likely and 54% having experienced it or knowing someone who had. Explicit threats of harm, though perceived as less common, remain a significant concern, with 39% of women considering them likely and 41% reporting direct or indirect experiences.

Fear is the dominant emotional response across all forms of intimidation and threats, though its intensity varies. While all forms of intimidation generate fear, stalking stands out as the most fear-inducing, whereas blocking a path and threats of harm elicit a broader range of emotional reactions. More specifically, stalking elicits the strongest fear, with even those who have not experienced it anticipating fear. Threats of harm also provoke significant fear, though irritation and anger are also reported. Blocking a woman's path evokes a mix of fear, irritation,

and anger, suggesting both immediate distress and frustration over the intrusion.

Across all forms of intimidation and threats, inaction remains a common response, though its prevalence varies. Women are most likely to resist when facing explicit threats of harm, while resistance is lower in cases of stalking and blocking a path. Seeking support from friends or family is more frequent in response to stalking, indicating that persistent or recurring harassment may drive women to seek external help. Reporting to the police is consistently rare across all types (8–10%), raising the question of whether this is due to low trust in institutions or simply the normalization of harassment in public spaces.

Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment in public spaces remains a pervasive issue. Public masturbation emerges as the more prevalent, with nearly two-thirds (59%) of women reporting direct or indirect exposure. Non-consensual touching, while perceived as less likely to occur, has been experienced by nearly half of respondents or women the respondents know (48%). Notably, women's perceptions of the likelihood of these incidents vary by location, with women in Skopje more likely to anticipate unwanted touching compared to those in Tetovo. However, actual experiences of sexual harassment do not significantly differ between the two cities.

While fear and irritation are shared responses when sexual harassment happens, anger and shame show regional and contextual differences, reflecting how personal and societal factors shape women's experiences of harassment. Fear is a common emotional response across both forms of sexual harassment. Irritation and anger are also widely reported, though the intensity varies—anger is stronger in response to touching without consent than to public masturbation, while irritation is similarly high for both.

A pattern of inaction is observed across both forms of sexual harassment, though the extent varies. Public masturbation is met with silence in

40% of cases, while 22% of women take no action when experiencing unwanted touching. Resistance is more common in response to physical intrusion—62% of women who experienced unwanted touching defended themselves or shouted, compared to 30% in cases of public masturbation. Institutional reporting remains extremely low for both, with only 4% reporting public masturbation and 2% reporting touching without consent to the police. These findings highlight that while women are more likely to resist direct physical violations, both forms of harassment are rarely reported to authorities.

Physical and sexual violence

Physical attacks in public spaces are perceived as a likely or very likely occurrence by over one-third (36%) of women surveyed. Notably, women in Skopje (39%) are more likely to anticipate such violence compared to those in Tetovo (27%). However, when it comes to actual experiences, the prevalence is similar across both cities—36% of women have either personally experienced a physical attack or know another woman who has.

Fear is the most consistent emotional response across both physical and sexual attacks, though its intensity varies. Women in Skopje are more likely to report fear and anger, while women in Tetovo report higher levels of shame, suggesting that cultural and social norms influence emotional processing. Anger is significantly more pronounced in Skopje compared to Tetovo, whereas shame is more prevalent in Tetovo, indicating an internalization of gender-based violence in more traditional communities. This requires a deeper exploration of the research questions and a more detailed examination of the foundations of emotional reactions.

For sexual attacks and rape, fear remains dominant, but anger, irritation, and shame are also present, highlighting the deeply personal and violating nature of such experiences. Notably, women in Tetovo express more uncertainty about their emotional reactions, which may reflect a lack of open discourse and preparedness to process such experiences.

Breaking the Silence: Reporting Violence and Access to Support

Although the lack of police presence in public spaces creates a pervasive sense of insecurity among women, the distrust in law enforcement is starkly evident in the alarmingly low reporting rates of incidents against women. A mere 8% of the surveyed women indicated that they had personally reported an incident to the police. The reported cases primarily involved physical and sexual assault in public spaces perpetrated by strangers, authority figures, or current/former partners. Other incidents encompassed a range of violations, including stalking, threats, verbal harassment, theft, robbery, and witnessing violence against other women.

The vast majority of incidents against women remain shrouded in silence, unreported and unaddressed. This is corroborated by the OSCE's Violence Against Women (VAW) study, which revealed that only 2% of violent incidents are reported to the police. Focus group discussions conducted in this study further illuminated the deep-seated institutional distrust that pervades the relationship between women and law enforcement. Disturbing instances emerged, such as Roma police officers advising Roma women experiencing domestic violence to endure the abuse, and sex workers feeling threatened for their freedom and their safety when seeking police assistance.

Among women who chose not to report an incident, the reasons for their silence fell into five main categories: distrust in authorities, minimization of the incident, fear and safety concerns, shame, guilt, and stigma, and reliance on alternative coping strategies. These findings paint a troubling picture where women, while more likely to resist direct physical violations, harbor a profound distrust of institutional responses. This distrust, in turn, contributes to the normalization of public sexual harassment and violence, perpetuating a cycle of impunity and injustice.

A significant majority (87%) of surveyed women are unaware of support services for harassment and violence victims. Of those who are aware of them, the most commonly mentioned are existing helplines and crisis centers like ‘Hope’, HERA, and the National Network Against Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. This lack of awareness hinders access to crucial support, necessitating urgent public education efforts through outreach, announcements, and educational programs.

Visibility, Mobility, Security: Women’s Safety Walk Audit Findings

To understand how urban design influences women’s perceptions of safety, we conducted four safety audit walks in Skopje and Tetovo in December 2024 and February 2025. By organizing one walk during the day and one in the evening in each city, we aimed to capture how different lighting and environmental conditions shape women’s experiences in public spaces.

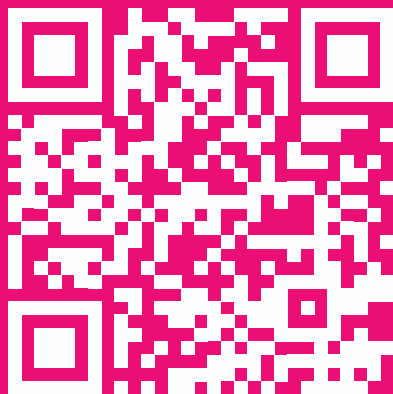
During the daytime walks, participants in both cities highlighted significant challenges related to accessibility and infrastructure. Many sidewalks were in poor condition, with potholes and deteriorating asphalt making movement difficult. Parked vehicles frequently blocked pedestrian pathways, further restricting access and forcing women to navigate around them, sometimes stepping into the street. In Tetovo, concerns about traffic hazards were particularly prominent. Reckless or unlicensed drivers, speeding cars, and inattentive cyclists and e-scooter riders contributed to a constant sense of unpredictability and danger. The lack of cleanliness and maintenance of public spaces also emerged as a major issue. Uncollected waste, disorganized urban spaces, and visible neglect reinforced a feeling of abandonment, aligning with the Broken Windows theory, which suggests that visible and untreated signs of disorder contribute to further deterioration and crime. Participants stressed that regular maintenance and a higher level of hygiene are not

just aesthetic concerns but essential for fostering a sense of safety and community engagement.

In the evening walks, many of the daytime concerns persisted, and poor lighting and limited visibility emerged as the most pressing issues. Participants frequently pointed out that existing streetlights were obstructed by trees, bushes, or poles, making it difficult to see street signs, sidewalks, and even other pedestrians. The lack of alternative, well-lit routes left women with few safe options for navigating the city after dark. In Skopje, one participant described a particularly isolated and dimly lit street as giving off “a bad vibe that makes me feel unsafe,” an observation echoed by many others in both cities. Despite the widespread concerns about lighting, there was limited awareness among participants in both cities on who to contact regarding lighting malfunctions, which indicated a gap in communication between residents and local authorities.

The safety walks in Skopje and Tetovo demonstrated how the physical environment influences the level of safety felt by women when moving through public spaces in their cities. **Improving street lighting, maintaining infrastructure, and ensuring cleanliness are essential steps toward making public spaces safer. In this way, there would be equitable access and use of public spaces and all women would acquire the ‘right to the city’.**

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