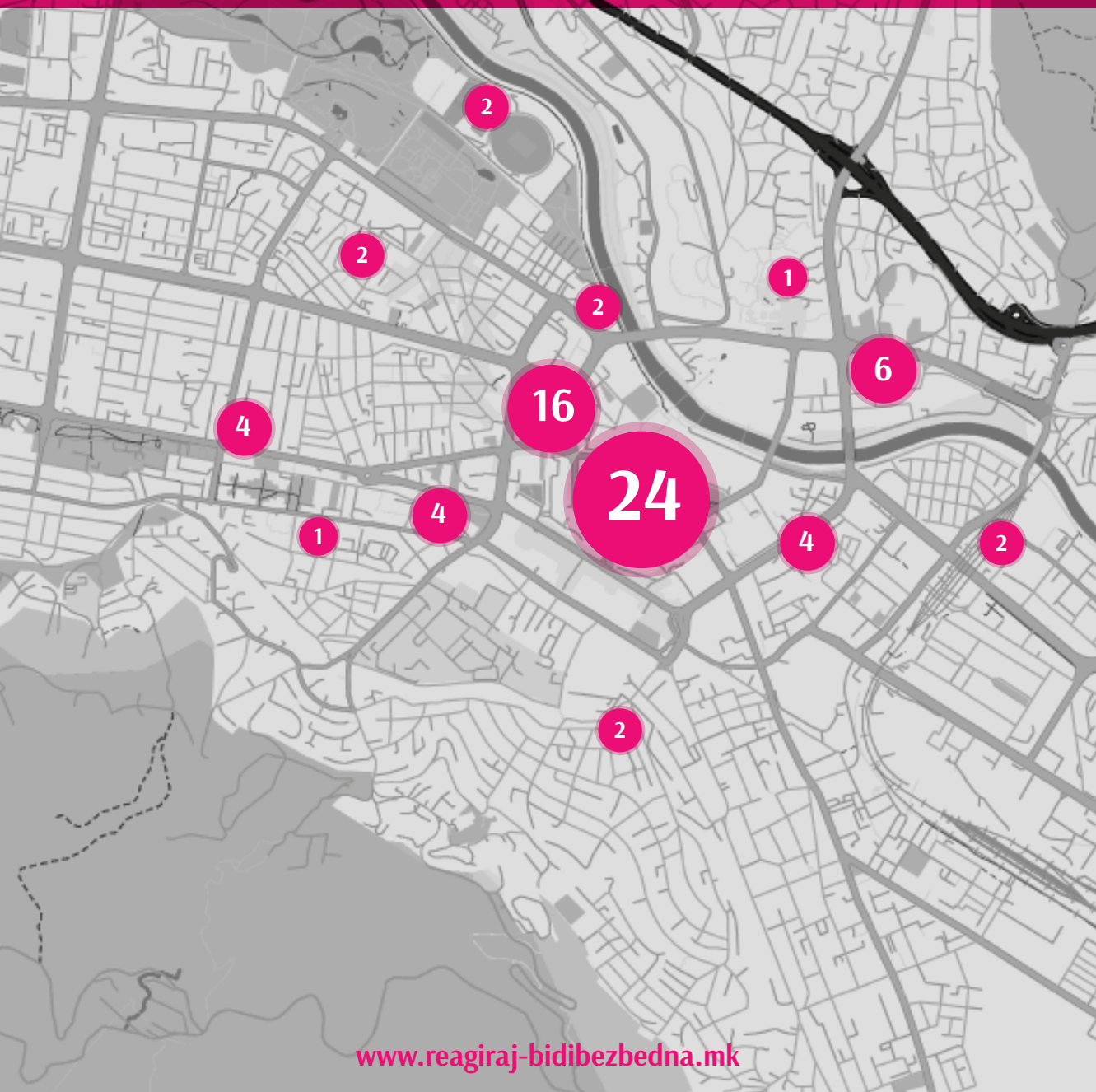


GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS IN PUBLIC SPACES IN SKOPJE AND TETOVO



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Ana Bojchevska Mitrevska, Jana Dimitrova, Dushica Lazova

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Background and Objectives

Gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and girls (VAWG)¹ are among the most widespread violations of human rights.² They include physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse, cutting across boundaries of age, race, culture, wealth, and geography. GBV and VAWG can take place at home, on the streets, in schools, and in the workplace and may manifest in different ways—from the most prevalent forms of domestic and sexual violence, sexual harassment and stalking to less prevalent harmful practices, so-called “honour killings” and other forms of femicide. Patriarchal norms and gender inequalities often contribute to the normalisation of violence against women and other marginalised groups. Limited awareness and understanding of GBV and VAWG perpetuate harmful stereotypes and attitudes, hindering efforts to create a supportive environment for survivors and to challenge societal norms perpetuating a culture of victim-blaming and impunity for perpetrators.³ Furthermore, the underreporting of GBV and VAWG incidents due to stigma, fear of retaliation, and lack of trust in the justice system hampers the accurate assessment of the problem’s scope and impact.

In line with the above, traditional gender roles limit women’s mobility and autonomy in public spaces, increasing their vulnerability to violence. Women’s and girls’ access to public spaces is commonly impeded by fear of crime and victimisation. Street harassment and various forms of violence—as well as threats thereof—are universal issues which negatively impact women’s right to the use of public space. Sexual harassment and VAWG occur in public space in diverse settings and limit their access to essential services, as well as cultural and recreational opportunities, and negatively impact women’s and girl’s health and well-being. The under-recognition of VAWG in public spaces is reinforced by the universal gap in specific, comparable, and systematically collected data and the limited capacity of local governments, civil society organisations (CSOs), and other stakeholders to produce it. Also, where public space is inadequate, poorly designed, or privatised, the city becomes increasingly segregated, and lines are drawn based on religion, ethnicity, gender, and economic status.⁴ On the other hand, public spaces can also serve to generate equality. Well-designed and maintained public spaces help lower rates of crime and violence and make room for formal and informal social, cultural, and economic activities that contribute to feelings of community belonging, trust and safety.

1 Gender-based violence (GBV) refers to any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender. Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) is a subset of GBV that specifically targets women and girls.

2 United Nations Declaration on Violence Against Women, 1993.

3 FRA, EIGE, Eurostat (2024), *EU gender-based violence survey – Key results*. Experiences of women in the EU-27, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/usiDQ7> on March 26, 2025.

4 UN Habitat. (2017). *Habitat III Issue Papers 11—Public Space*. United Nations Conference on Housing and Sustainable Urban Development. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/TOeAar> on March 26, 2025.

In North Macedonia there is a lack of systematic data collection on violence against women in public spaces. Some data is being gathered on specific issues, such as violence in schools (UNICEF, WHO, Ombudsman), and includes data on violence targeted toward girls. Moreover, the State Statistical Office does not implement surveys on the perception of public safety, while the Ministry of Interior only collects data related to the reported crimes. Other institutions and organisations collect data on violence victims and the enforcement of measures against perpetrators. In recent years, in an effort to fill the gap, there have been a few studies on a local level concerning violence in public spaces (referred to in the Context Analysis section), such as the two scoping studies on gender-based violence in public spaces in the city of Skopje conducted by Reactor in 2012⁵ and 2020,⁶ which form the basis for this study.

Objectives

This study is a continuation of Reactor's investment in the topic of gender-based violence in public spaces and represents a replication of the aforementioned studies, using a modified methodology and extending its scope to encompass the women and girls from both Skopje and Tetovo. The reason behind this study is to reassess the trends and changes in the manifestations of violence and the perceptions of safety in public spaces as experienced by women and girls in the respective cities.

As such, the follow-up assessment is intended to collect information that will provide insight into the steps needed to be taken to build safe and inclusive public spaces in North Macedonia by promoting urban planning and infrastructure improvements that prioritise the safety and security of all individuals, regardless of gender. Furthermore, the study is expected to raise more awareness about the issue and inspire further research in the area. The key objectives of the study are to:

1. Understand the specific local manifestations of violence against women and girls in particular public spaces in the targeted communities. More specifically to:
 - Determine what forms of violence/harassment women face in public spaces in the selected communities;
 - Determine what factors play a role or contribute to creating greater safety and inclusion for women;
 - Determine how women respond to harassment and lack of safety;

⁵ Reactor. (2012). *Scoping Study on Gender Based Violence and Discrimination Against Women and Girls in Urban Public Spaces of The City of Skopje*. Reactor – Research in Action. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/qJoMm8> on March 26, 2025.

⁶ Reactor. (2020). *Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces in Skopje: A Scoping Study*. Reactor – Research in Action. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/qJoMm8> on March 26, 2025.

- See whether the police are able to address women's rights and violations and to understand women's access to the police and their perception of the role of the police in safeguarding women's rights;
 - Determine what kinds of spaces are perceived as unsafe or inaccessible to women, especially in targeted communities.
2. Analyse local development policies, plans and relevant initiatives, as well as supportive infrastructure (identify and assess relevant existing services and projects).
 3. Ascertain the position and priorities of significant stakeholders.
 4. Identify and clarify the views of the intended beneficiary groups, outlining their positions and priorities, as well as locating and appraising potential delivery partners for the prevention of VAWG.

Literature Review

Violence against women is widely recognised and defined in internationally binding instruments. The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.” Furthermore, Article 3 of the CoE Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)⁷ restates these definitions. Therefore, this methodology is based on the already accepted definitions of violence against women in various UN definitions, most specifically:

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, general recommendation No. 19: *Gender-based violence against women is “violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman, or violence that affects women disproportionately. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.”*

“Gender-based violence, which impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of human rights and fundamental freedoms under general international law or under human rights conventions, is discrimination within the meaning of article 1 of the Convention.”

General Assembly resolution 48/104: Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women, article 1: *Violence against women “means any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.”*

General Assembly resolution 58/147 on the Elimination of Domestic Violence against Women: *Recognizes that “domestic violence can include economic deprivation and isolation and that such conduct may cause imminent harm to the safety, health or well-being of women.”*

⁷ Council of Europe. (2011). *Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence*. Council of Europe Treaty Series – No. 210, entered into force on August 1, 2014.

The UN Secretary-General's In-depth study on all forms of violence against women examined violence against women using a classification of various forms of violence⁸ one of which will be the focus of this research. Gender-based violence differs from other types of violence in that the victim's gender is the primary motive for the acts of violence. In other words, "gender-based violence refers to any harm that is perpetrated against a woman and that is both the cause and the result of unequal power relations based on perceived differences between women and men that lead to women's subordinate status in both the private and public spheres. This type of violence is deeply rooted in the social and cultural structures, norms and values that govern society, and is often perpetuated by a culture of denial and silence."⁹

The EU perspective further reinforces this classification of gender-based violence, as outlined in **the Istanbul Convention** and **the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025**. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 emphasises the obligation of the states to ensure women's safety in all environments. More recently, in **May 2024**, the EU adopted **The 2024 EU Directive on combating violence against women and domestic violence** (Directive (EU) 2024/1385)—a groundbreaking legal document aimed at preventing and combatting violence against women (VAW) and domestic violence. The directive has reinforced EU's commitment to gender equality by criminalising various forms of violence both offline (such as forced marriage and female genital mutilation) and online (including cyberstalking and harassment).¹⁰

Crucially, the Directive defines gender-based violence as acts that cause or are likely to cause harm, "whether occurring in **public or private life**", acknowledging that harassment, intimidation, and threats in public spaces are not isolated incidents but systemic barriers that restrict women's mobility, autonomy, and participation in society. The EU Directive aims to harmonise legal definitions and protection measures across member states, strengthening enforcement mechanisms and victim support systems.

8 1. Violence against women in the family: (a) Intimate partner violence; and (b) Harmful traditional practices; 2. Violence against women in the community: (a) Femicide: the gender-based murder of a woman; (b) Sexual violence by non-partners; (c) Sexual harassment and violence in the workplace, educational institutions and in sport; and (d) Trafficking in women; 3. Violence against women perpetrated or condoned by the State: (a) Custodial violence against women; and (b) Forced sterilisation; 4. Violence against women in armed conflict; 5. Violence against women and multiple discrimination; and 6. Areas requiring enhanced attention: (a) Psychological and emotional abuse and violence; and (b) Incarceration of women in mental hospitals or prisons for not conforming with social or cultural expectations.

9 United Nations. (2006). *In-depth Study on All Forms of Violence Against Women*. Report of the Secretary-General. General Assembly, A/61/122. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/ENik9T> on March 26, 2025.

10 European Parliament and Council of the European Union. (2024). "Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on combating violence against women and domestic violence". *Official Journal of the European Union*, L 138/85. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/3Y2Vza> on March 26, 2025.

Experiences of Violence and Perceived Fear of Violence

UN Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence Against Women (2014) have long since made their key long-term objective **to measure violence against women in all its forms and manifestations**.¹¹ This includes both **overt acts of physical and sexual violence**, as well as the more subtle, often overlooked forms of gender-based violence and harassment. **“Minor” forms of intimidating behaviour**—such as prolonged stares, unsolicited comments or intrusive sexual violence—are crucial in understanding women’s fear and vulnerability, as they contribute to the climate of fear simply by establishing the prospect of a violent occurrence, even when not immediately visible or acknowledged.¹²

Hence, scholars argue for the need **to carefully define and negotiate the terminology around what constitutes violence and harassment**, so as to include a wider range of experiences and incidents that may not always fit neatly into the clear-cut categories of what is traditionally considered or legally recognised as harassment.¹³ As Gray (2016) makes clear, when it comes to gender-based violence, legal frameworks and medical models typically distinguish between “normal and abnormal behaviours”, sanctioning or treating the latter. This approach, however, both individualises the problem by characterising some people’s behaviours as ‘deviant’ compared to the ‘normal’ majority, and fails to take into account behaviours and situations that women consider threatening and/or violent but may not be categorised as illegal or deviant.¹⁴ Instead, scholars insist on looking at gender-based violence through **a comprehensive feminist phenomenological approach that creates space for the personal, subjective and ordinary experiences of women**,¹⁵ examining (the threat of) violence as a lived experience and highlighting how mechanisms of gender inequality produce gendered power dynamics that shape women’s interactions with the public.¹⁶

Understanding both **women’s experiences of violence** and **their perceived fear of violence** is key to a more holistic approach. Research shows that personal safety is more influenced by perceived threats than by objective statistical risks.¹⁷ However, some scholars argue against comparing “objective” risk with “subjective” fear, noting that fear encompasses

11 United Nations. (2014). *Guidelines for Producing Statistics on Violence Against Women*. Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division. UN: New York. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/khTvuP> on March 26, 2025.

12 Pain, R. H. (1997). “Social Geographies of Women’s Fear of Crime”, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 22, No. 2. (1997), pp. 231-244. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/PIO3dn> on March 26, 2025.

13 Vera-Gray, F. (2016). *Men’s Intrusion, Women’s Embodiment*. Routledge. p. 10.

14 Ibid, pp. 24-25.

15 Feminist phenomenology is a qualitative research approach that builds on traditional phenomenology, which seeks to understand lived experiences from the perspective of individuals but integrates a critical feminist perspective. While traditional phenomenology seeks to describe universal structures of experience, feminist phenomenology challenges this universality by emphasizing how gender, power, and social structures shape lived experiences—particularly those of women and marginalised groups. It critically examines how women’s bodies are experienced and regulated in public and private spaces, challenging male-centred perspectives.

16 French, S.G., Teays, W. and Purdy, L. M. (1998). *Violence Against Women: Philosophical Perspectives*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

17 Madriz, E. (1997). *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women’s Lives*. University of California Press.

two dimensions: the perception of lacking safety in public spaces and personal fears.¹⁸ Yet growing evidence shows that the fear of crime is not a fixed trait of some people over others, but a “transitory and situational” perception that appears and undergoes changes in different groups differently based on personal experiences, as well as social, spatial and temporal situations.¹⁹

Fear of crime, especially gender-based violence, has been shown as **contributing to the restriction of women’s freedom and mobility in public spaces**. According to Sweet and Escalante (2014), “The actual risk of violence for women and women’s fear of violence are not the same thing, but they are linked”.²⁰ This fear could be seen as both a reaction to direct threats the women have experienced, as well as a **learned and internalised response to the persistent possibility of violence**. From a young age, women are socialised to fear and modify their behaviour in public spaces—what they wear, where they go, and how they act are all influenced by the pervasive fear of violence.^{21 22}

Gendered fear is also a significant factor in shaping public perceptions. Research indicates that *women are more likely to report feeling afraid in public spaces than men*,²³ and this gendered gap in fear of crime is often linked to women and girls’ fear of rape, further exacerbated by experiences of sexual harassment.^{24 25} Additionally, women tend to perceive themselves as more vulnerable, weaker, and slower in public spaces compared to men. This sense of vulnerability is not just a subjective perception of oneself, but a reflection of deep-rooted gendered power relations.²⁶ Women’s fear serves to reinforce the stereotype of men as strong, fearless protectors—or potential perpetrators—while women are socialised to be cautious, to the extent that acting confidently in public space can be considered “indecent” or “careless”. If a woman who does not adhere to these expectations is victimised, society may even blame her for not behaving “appropriately”.^{27 28}

18 Young, J. (1998). “Risk of Crime and Fear of Crime: A Realist Critique of Survey-Based Assumptions, in Maguire, M. and Pointing, J. (eds.). *Victims of Crime: A New Deal*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press. pp. 164-76.

19 Pain, R. H. (1997). *Social Geographies of Women’s Fear...*

20 Sweet, E.L. and Ortiz Escalante, S. (2014). “Bringing bodies into planning: Visceral methods, fear and gender violence”, *Urban Studies*, 52(10), pp.1826–1845. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098014541157> on March 26, 2025.

21 Koskela, H. (1997). “Bold Walk and Breakings: Women’s Spatial Confidence Versus Fear of Violence”, *Gender, Place & Culture*, 4(3), pp. 301-20. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/079160350501400207> on March 26, 2025.

22 Wennstam, K. (2002). *Flickan Och Skulden: En Bok Om Samhlets Syn På Våldtäkt (The Girl and the Guilt: A Book About Society’s Views on Rape)*. Stockholm: Bonnier.

23 Johansson, K., Hasselberg, M. and Laflamme, L. (2009). “Exploring the neighbourhood: a web-based survey on the prevalence and determinants of fear among young adolescent girls and boys”, *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*. 21(3), pp. 347-59.

24 Johansson, S. and Haandrikman, K. (2021). “Gendered fear of crime in the urban context: a comparative multilevel study of women’s and men’s fear of crime”, *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 45(7), pp.1–27. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2021.1923372> on March 26, 2025.

25 Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2005). “Is It Safe to Walk Here?”, *Research on Women’s Issues in Transportation, report of a conference*, Vol. II: Technical Papers. Washington, D.C.: Transportation Research Board. pp. 102-12.

26 Jalalkamali, A. and Doratli, N. (2022). “Public Space Behaviors and Intentions: The Role of Gender through the Window of Culture, Case of Kerman”, *Behavioural Sciences* 2022, 12(10), p.388. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/bs12100388> on March 26, 2025.

27 Koskela, H. (1997). *Bold Walks and Breakings...*

28 Madriz, E. (1997). *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls...*

The Fear of Violence and Safety Work

The social geographies of fear and crime reinforce gendered power structures, shaping *how* and *where* women are allowed to exist in public life and **teaching them to prioritise self-protection**: from modifying their routes and avoiding certain areas when trying to reach their destination to being hyper-aware of their clothing to minimise unwanted attention. Rather than moving freely through the public space as equal participants, women appear as vigilant visitors in a male-dominated public landscape, which regulates their quotidian movement and presence.

Research on the topic shows that the experience of fear in public spaces, accompanied by the coping strategies women adopt, construct what scholars call a “spatial expression of patriarchy”.²⁹ Fear, thus, functions as **a form of social control that upholds systemic gender inequality** and ultimately restricts women’s freedom of movement.³⁰ This self-imposed regulation, though a rational response to perceived threats, emphasises the stark contrast between men’s relative ease of movement and the constraints women experience in public space. In this way, fear does not merely reflect an individual emotion but serves as an invisible yet pervasive mechanism that turns social spaces into territories to be claimed and inhabited freely by some people over others.³¹

The various modifications, adaptations and decisions women resort to in response to gender-based violence and harassment—referred by Vera-Gray (2018) as **“safety work”**—serve as **coping mechanisms to maintain a sense of security in public spaces**.³² According to a study on public sexual harassment and women’s safety work, the vast majority of the measures and movement modifications are employed by women “just in case”, even before an incident takes place.³³ This pre-emptive behaviour is deeply rooted in the socialisation of women and girls, which often frames them in narratives that see them as being responsible for their own safety and, more often than not, guilty of encouraging sexual violence and harassment.³⁴ As a form of early social conditioning that continues well into adulthood, girls and women are constantly warned and instructed to avoid certain areas, dress a certain way or only travel in groups—all with the intent of preventing potential harm. While most men feel “at home” on the streets, women rarely do, and these taught submissive behaviours reflect this, they are learnt to uphold social norms of taking up less space in response to the threat of violence and harassment.³⁵ While these may all be well-meaning

29 Pain, R. H. (1997). *Social Geographies of Women’s Fear...*

30 Condon, S., Lieber, M. and Maillochon, F. (2007). “Feeling Unsafe in Public Places: Understanding Women’s Fears”. *Revue française de sociologie*, Vol. 48(5), pp.101-128. Retrieved from: DOI: [10.3917/rfs.485.0101](https://doi.org/10.3917/rfs.485.0101) on March 26, 2025.

31 Ahmed, S. (2004). *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.

32 Vera-Gray, F. (2018). *The Right Amount of Panic: How Women Trade Freedom for Safety*. Bristol University Press.

33 Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020). “Contested gendered space: public sexual harassment and women’s safety work”, *International Journal of Comparative and Applied Criminal Justice*, 44(4), pp.265–275. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01924036.2020.1732435> on March 26, 2025.

34 Ibid.

35 Weisman, L. (1994). *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*. Urbana: University Of Illinois Press.

messages, they still **strengthen the idea that women are personally accountable for preventing violence**, without considering the greater systemic context of gender inequality that perpetuates such violence.³⁶ As a result, women remain **hyper-vigilant**, shaping safety strategies before and after instances of gender-based violence and harassment, ultimately restricting their movement and limiting their “right to the city”.

Gender inequality is intertwined with different forms of discrimination and marginality, such as age, class, ability, ethnicity, sexuality and others, which may increase the risk, severity and frequency of sexual harassment and other forms of sexual violence against women and girls.³⁷ Ultimately, taking an intersectional approach in research on women fosters solidarity by enabling an examination of how structures of oppression and struggle are interlinked for women of different categories.³⁸ For example, women who experience a lack of social acceptance or integration are most likely to fear crime and violence.³⁹ This fear is not only a product of the actual risks they face but also of their exclusion from the social and cultural frameworks that shape public life. These intersecting axes of oppression reveal the different positions of power of certain social groups, their degree of access and the manner in which they interact with and in the public space.⁴⁰ Examining the experiences of women from different marginalised groups, such as women with disabilities, sex workers, LGBTQI+ or Roma women shows they face unique challenges that limit their freedom of movement in idiosyncratic ways. Acknowledging these diverse experiences promotes inclusivity and allows for a more nuanced understanding of the multiple contexts of safety and fear in the public space. According to the “Methodological manual for the EU survey on gender-based violence against women and other forms of inter-personal violence” (2021), this intersectional approach is vital to obtain a complete understanding of gender-based violence.⁴¹

Violence and the Physicality of Public Space

City planning and urban design can disproportionately impact women and girls, ultimately compromising their safety.⁴² According to Valentine (1990), for women, “The public environment can have an influence on...[their] perception of safety and hence on their

36 Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020). *Contested gendered space...*

37 Wilkens, E. and Capobianco, L. (eds.). (2020). *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls: Global Flagship Initiative: Second International Compendium of Practices*. United States of America: UN Women. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/uZTHVt> on March 26, 2025.

38 Carbado, D.W., Crenshaw, K.W., Mays, V.M. and Tomlinson, B. (2013). “Intersectionality: Mapping the Movements of a Theory”, *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 10(2), pp.303–312. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/uZTHVt> on March 26, 2025.

39 Pain, R. H. (1997). *Social Geographies of Women's Fear...*

40 Beebejaun, Y. (2017). “Gender, urban space, and the right to everyday life”. *Journal of Urban Affairs*, 39(3), pp.323–334. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07352166.2016.1255526> on March 26, 2025.

41 Eurostat (2021). *Methodological manual for the EU survey on gender-based violence against women and other forms of inter-personal violence (EU-GBV)*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieve from: <https://urlzs.com/ZA9is0> on March 26, 2025.

42 Cosgrave, E., Lam, T. and Henderson, Z. (2020). *Scoping Study-London's Participation in UN Women's Safer Cities and Safe Public Spaces Programme*. London: Department of Science, Technology, Engineering and Public Policy. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/gCE2L8> on March 26, 2025.

willingness to use spaces and places”.⁴³ The connection between fear and spatial organisation of social relations has been long reported by scholars arguing that the structure of spaces directly influences people’s sense of safety and fear, particularly in relation to crime and violence. The physical environment, including urban design and layout, plays a significant role in shaping these fears.⁴⁴ For example, poor lighting, seemingly deserted areas with poor hygiene, unclearly outlined exits in parking spaces, potholes on sidewalks and other aspects of public spaces can heighten women’s feelings of fear and impede free and easy movement. The absence of accessible transportation, lack of public restrooms, and limited safe waiting areas further contribute to a built environment that does not fully consider women’s safety needs.⁴⁵

Research has shown that women are more likely than men to factor in environmental cues when determining whether a space feels safe.⁴⁶ The presence of well-maintained infrastructure—such as clear sightlines, visible security personnel, and active pedestrian traffic—has been linked to increased feelings of safety and greater freedom of movement for women.⁴⁷ However, despite growing awareness of these concerns, mainstream urban planning continues to prioritise efficiency and economic considerations over gender-sensitive design. The lack of participatory planning processes that include women’s voices exacerbates this issue, resulting in urban landscapes that often neglect the lived realities of women and marginalised groups.

This is why feminist scholars insist that integrating gender perspectives into urban planning should not be an afterthought but a fundamental component of designing inclusive public spaces.⁴⁸ Additionally, feminist urbanists advocate for a broader reimagining of public spaces—one that shifts the focus from minimising harm to fostering environments where women and other marginalised groups can move freely without fear. Without intentional efforts to incorporate gender-sensitive perspectives into city planning and engaging with the lived experiences of women and the marginalised in a meaningful way, the public sphere will continue to reflect and reinforce gendered inequalities. All this goes to show how women’s fear, their coping strategies, and the physical design of public spaces are all intertwined, reflecting broader systems of power that restrict women’s autonomy.

43 Valentine, G. (1990). “Women’s Fear and the Design of Public Space”, *Built Environment* (1978-), 16(4), pp.288–303. Retrieved from: <https://urlzr.com/gCE2L8> on March 26, 2025.

44 Moonen, M. (2024). “(Wo)Man-Made Public Space”, *The Journal of Public Space*, 9(1), pp.25–42. Retrieved from: DOI: 10.32891/JPS.V9I1.1810 on March 26, 2025.

45 Navarrete-Hernandez, P., Vetro, A. and Concha, P. (2021). “Building safer public spaces: Exploring gender differences in the perception of safety in public space through urban design interventions”, *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 214(214). Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2021.104180> on March 26, 2025.

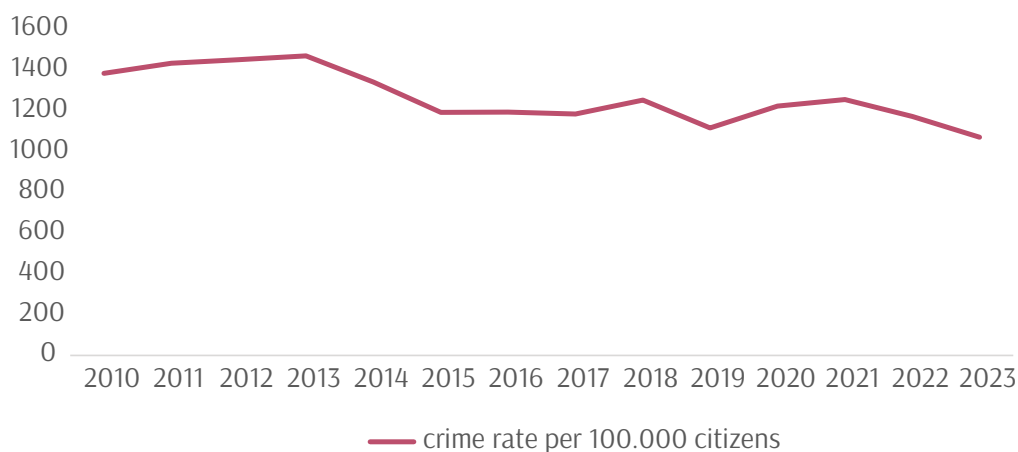
46 Whitzman, C. (2013). *Building Inclusive Cities: Women’s Safety and the Right to the City*. London: Routledge.

47 Kern, L. (2020). *Feminist City*. Verso Books.

48 Beebejaun, Y. (2016). *Gender, urban space...*

National Context

The Republic of North Macedonia is generally considered a safe country in terms of overall violence rates. Lately, work has been done at European level to improve the comparability of the data, allowing the possibility to make some analysis of trends in crime.⁴⁹ National sources of information on crime reveal considerable differences in approach and coverage, which makes it necessary to exercise caution when drawing direct comparisons between countries.

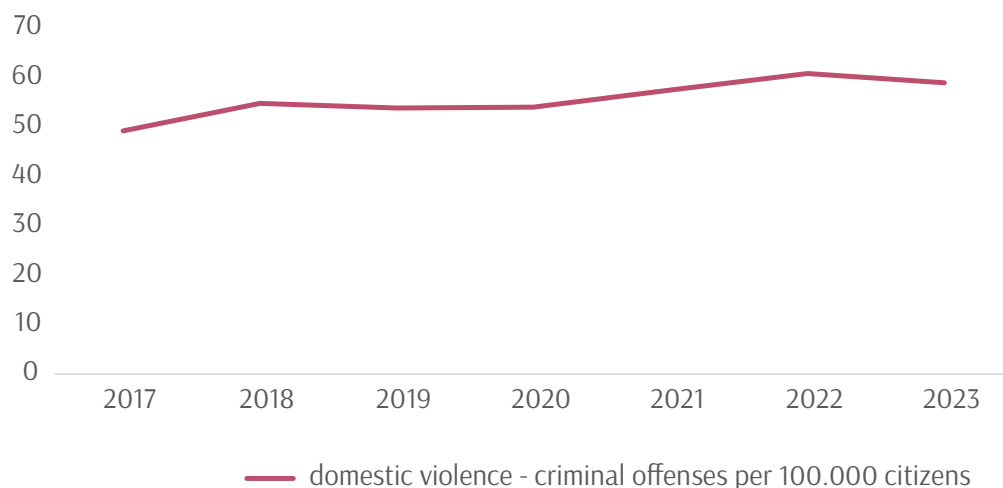


Graph 1: Crime rate per 100.000 citizens, 2010-2023.

The above figures refer to **the general crime rate**.⁵⁰ The crime rate per 100,000 citizens in North Macedonia has exhibited an overall declining trend over the period from 2010 to 2023. The data reveals a peak in 2013, followed by a noticeable decline. From 2014 onward, the crime rate shows a consistent downward path, with notable declines occurring in 2015 and 2019. Although there were slight increases in 2018 and 2021, **the overall trend remained downward**. By 2023, the crime rate reached its lowest point in the recorded period (Graph 1).

⁴⁹ Eurostat. (2024). "Police-recorded offences by offence category". Police-recorded offences.

⁵⁰ Ministry of Interior Affairs of North Macedonia. (2024). "Aggregate Analysis of Total Crime 2010 - 2023". Retrieved from: <https://mvr.gov.mk/analiza/kriminal/70> on March 26, 2025.



Graph 2: Domestic violence criminal offenses per 100.000 citizens, 2017-2023.

However, over the past seven years, North Macedonia has seen **a gradual yet steady increase in criminal offenses related to domestic violence** (Graph 2). Despite some fluctuations, the overall trend shows a gradual rise in these offenses, which further emphasises the lack of systemic measures to prevent and decrease these offenses.

In North Macedonia, there is no systematic data collection on violence against women in public spaces. Some data is collected on specific issues, such as violence in schools (UNICEF, WHO, Ombudsman), which includes violence against girls. The State Statistical Office does not implement surveys on the perception of public safety. The Ministry of Interior only collects data on reported crimes. Other institutions and organisations maintain data on victims of violence and the enforcement of perpetrators.



Graph 3: Violence experienced by women.

According to the OSCE led and EU funded survey “Safety and Wellbeing of Women”,⁵¹ based on a nationally representative sample, more than half or **54% of the women in North Macedonia had experienced some form of violence in their lifetime** (Graph 3). The most experienced is the psychological violence by intimate partners with 44% of women suffering this type of violence. Furthermore, nearly one in three was sexually harassed (30%), 14% experienced physical and/or sexual violence and one in ten had experienced stalking (7%).

The prevalence of violence disclosed in the survey is comparably lower than across the EU, but this could be attributed to attitudes that normalise violence.⁵² For example, almost half (48%) of the women in North Macedonia agree that violence is a private matter to be handled within the family and this rate is three times higher compared to the EU. Furthermore, nearly one third (30%) of the women agree that women who say they were abused often make up or exaggerate their claims of abuse or rape. Yet more than **half of the women in the country (60%) think violence against women is a common phenomenon, and almost three in ten women believe that it happens frequently.**⁵³

51 Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2019). “Wellbeing and Safety of Women: OSCE survey on violence against women in North Macedonia”. OSCE. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/YwL23d> on March 26, 2025.

52 Disclosure of experienced violence is higher in countries with a longer standing tradition of gender equality policy. According to the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) survey conducted across the EU, the three nations where women were most likely to report having experienced physical and/or sexual violence at the hands of a partner or a non-partner since the age of 15 were Denmark (52%), Finland (47%), and Sweden (47%).

53 OSCE (2019). *Wellbeing and Safety of Women...*

In terms of reporting the violence to the competent institutions, women who had experienced non-partner or former partner violence were more likely to report their most serious incident to the police or another institution compared to those who had been subjected to violence at the hands of their current partner. However, it needs to be noted that **the majority of victims do not report violence. Nearly nine in ten women who have suffered physical and/or sexual violence from their current partner did not report it to any competent institution or service provider organisation and only 2% reported what they considered to be the most serious incident of violence to the police.**⁵⁴ Among those who suffered physical and/or sexual violence from the current partner, one in five reported it to the police, while the reporting rate is one in four for non-partner physical and/or sexual violence. In addition to the prevalent social norms that normalise violence and stigmatise victims, according to the OSCE-led survey, most women do not know what to do if they experience violence and are unaware of local specialised services that can help them.

Rate of intentional homicide of women, 2002-2018



Graph 4: Rate of intentional homicide of women, 2002-2018.

Similarly to the absence of data on other forms of gender-based violence, no institutions in North Macedonia systematically collect data on femicides. This lack of formal tracking obscures the scope of the issue and prevents evidence-based policy responses. However, the World Bank provides gender-disaggregated data on intentional homicides, which can serve as a proxy to estimate the rate of murdered women per 100,000 female citizens (Graph 4). An analysis of this data shows significant spikes, which may be linked to broader socio-economic and political conditions. For example, a notable increase in femicides occurred in 2002, likely connected to conflict-related violence, while another spike in 2010 coincides

⁵⁴ Ibid.

with the aftermath of the global economic crisis, illustrating just how such external factors can exacerbate violence against women.⁵⁵

The National Network to End Violence Against Women attempted to collect relevant data on femicides for the UNDP-funded analysis on the matter,⁵⁶ however, noting that conducting such a thorough and complete analysis of all femicides at the national level is not feasible due to the lack of cooperation from some courts and public prosecutor's offices. It is also important to note that Macedonian criminal law does not classify femicide specifically as a distinct crime. However, in 2023, the law was amended to include an article that classifies the murder of a woman or a girl under the age of 18, when committed in the context of gender-based violence, with penalties ranging from 1 to 8 years. Similarly, in EU member states, femicide is not defined as a separate crime, but their laws do provide more specific aggravating circumstances, such as gender-based murder of a woman, partner murder, or the death of a woman due to intimate partner violence.

Furthermore, a few studies concerning violence in public spaces have been conducted at the local level, notably by Reactor (in 2012 and 2020), and other organisations. An initial assessment of women's safety perceptions in Skopje found that while public spaces are generally seen as safe, many women still feel unsafe when alone. **Over a third of the women claimed they are afraid to go out alone during the day, and nearly 60% fear going out alone at night.** Women in Skopje face various forms of gender-based violence, including verbal harassment, unwanted attention, and physical and sexual violence. **Open spaces are seen as the least safe**, while familiar and enclosed spaces like cars, workplaces, and schools are considered safer. Unsafe areas include parks, underpasses, hidden paths, parking lots, construction sites, cafes, nightclubs, and public transport. The fear of potential abuse significantly limits women's freedom of movement. This fear is influenced by media reports, personal experiences, and a general sense of vulnerability. Narratives about who and what is threatening shape women's perceptions of safety and restrict their access to public spaces.⁵⁷

Moreover, the study conducted in 2020 revealed that **one in five women** know someone who has been sexually assaulted or raped, while 5% have experienced it themselves. Additionally, 35% know a woman who has been physically assaulted, with 9% reporting that they have been victims of physical assault. One out of three women knows someone who has been grabbed or touched in a sexual way, and 21% have personally experienced this type of harassment. **Over half of the women, or 54%, know someone who has been stalked or followed**, and one in three women has been in this situation herself. **Flashing**

55 World Bank Group. "Intentional homicides, female (per 100,000 female) - North Macedonia (1998-2019)". UN Office on Drugs and Crime's International Homicide Statistics database. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/OOMbnX> on March 26, 2025.

56 Dimushevska, E., Avramoska-Nushkova, A. & Alili, A. (2021). *Analysis of Cases of Femicides: Murders of Women in the Republic of North Macedonia (2017-2020)*. National Network to End Violence against Women and Domestic Violence – "Voice against Violence". Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/OOMbnX> on March 26, 2025.

57 Reactor. (2012). *Scoping Study on Gender Based Violence and Discrimination Against Women and Girls in Urban Public Spaces of The City of Skopje*. Reactor – Research in Action. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/qJoMm8> on March 26, 2025.

is another common issue, with 40% of the women having been subjected to it, while 51% know a woman who has experienced flashing or someone masturbating in front of her. **Catcalling** is the most prevalent form of violence, with 86% of women having experienced it firsthand and 83% also knowing someone who has been catcalled in public spaces in Skopje.⁵⁸

Furthermore, a study on sexual violence in public spaces in Skopje from 2020 revealed that all surveyed women reported experiencing at least one form of sexual harassment, with no respondents indicating not having encountered such incidents. Furthermore, the study found that women were subjected to multiple forms of harassment rather than isolated incidents. The most reported types included whistling/honking (from individuals on the street or in cars), verbal harassment/catcalling (such as being called “cat,” “heart,” or “chicken”), and intense staring. While verbal and non-verbal harassment were the most frequently recorded, some respondents also reported experiencing physical violence or threats of violence.⁵⁹

In a similar manner, a study conducted in 2018 by Coalition Margins showed that women in Tetovo also face various forms of violence in public spaces. The most common types include whistling, scolding, slapping, sexually suggestive comments, and staring. Nearly half of the respondents believe they are very likely to experience whistling or someone staring at them. Sexual comments and offensive remarks based on sexism, ethnicity, or religion, as well as intentional obstruction, are also common. The study also emphasised that women perceive these actions as violent. They report feelings of nervousness and fear. Verbal and visual forms of violence, such as indecent and vulgar comments and staring, make women feel angry and nervous, with significant percentages reporting these emotions. Fear is even more pronounced with physical violence and sexual violence, such as touching, attempted rape, and rape, where a substantial majority of women report feeling afraid.⁶⁰

58 Reactor. (2020). *Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces in Skopje: A Scoping Study*. Reactor – Research in Action. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/qJoMm8> on March 26, 2025.

59 Velinova, A. & Zdravevska, J. (2020). *Sexual Harassment in Public Spaces in the City of Skopje (Empirical Study Report)*. Female Free Zone. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/OOMbnX> on March 26, 2025.

60 Cvetkovikj, I., Drndarevska D. & Kocavska, J. (2019) *Research on the Scope of Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls in Public Spaces in Tetovo*. Coalition Margins. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/YwL23d> on March 26, 2025.

Mobility of Women in Public Spaces

Beyond studies on violence against women, including violence in public spaces, a relevant analysis on public space evaluation in Skopje (2018–2023) highlights the gendered dynamics of urban space use. The findings reveal that public spaces are predominantly used by mothers with children, particularly on weekdays, reflecting the gendered burden of caregiving. However, these spaces remain largely inaccessible and inadequately designed for women, particularly those navigating the city with strollers or young children.⁶¹

This finding is confirmed by the safety audit walks conducted in 2020 as part of Reactor's scoping study – during the safety walks, the average safety ratings did not exceed a moderate score (3 out of 5), even during daylight. Notably, daytime assessments were not consistently higher than nighttime scores, indicating that women experience a persistent sense of insecurity regardless of the time of day. The study identified different infrastructural issues that contribute to this insecurity: during the day, chaotic traffic, unstructured pedestrian circulation, and illegal parking heightened feelings of vulnerability; at night, poor lighting and narrow, enclosed streets created an “unsafe maze” effect.⁶²

Gendered transportation patterns further illustrate these dynamics. According to the 2021 Census of the State Statistical Office,⁶³ among the economically active population aged 15 and older, **55.4% of pedestrians are women and girls**, with women representing **65.5% of public transport users** (specifically buses) as well. In contrast, women account for only **27.7% of drivers**, while research done by Reactor shows that **women own only 18% of cars**.⁶⁴

These figures suggest that women rely more heavily on walking and public transportation, which exposes them to greater public safety risks and limits their mobility in comparison to men. This demonstrates the gendered nature of public spaces, and the need for adequate measures, policies and practices that enhance women's accessibility, mobility and sense of safety in the city.

61 Dokuzova, M., Rafailovska, A. & Veljanoski, P. (2023). Tools for Evaluating Public Spaces (Looking at Public Spaces and Case Studies in Skopje (2018-2023)). Organisation for the Protection of Animals and the Environment EQUALITY DIGNITY EMPATHY NATURALISM (E.D.E.N). Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/OOMbnX> on March 26, 2025.

62 Reactor. (2020). *Gender-Based Violence...*

63 State Statistical Office. (2022). “Total economically active population aged 15 and older by gender and the type of transport most commonly used to work or school, by municipality, Census 2021.” Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/9modDy> on March 26, 2025.

64 Reactor. (2022). *Gender Statistics and Gender Mainstreaming of the Statistical System of North Macedonia*. Reactor – Research in action. p. 85. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/OOMbnX> on March 26, 2025.

Legal Analysis

To assess the legal and institutional environment for combating gender-based violence (GBV) and violence against women and girls (VAWG) in public spaces, we conducted a content analysis of the relevant legal framework. This analysis covers international conventions applicable in North Macedonia, as well as national legislation and key policy documents. By examining relevant national and international standards, the goal is to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing legislative landscape and identify areas for improvement.

International Conventions Ratified by the Republic of North Macedonia

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

Adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly in 1979, **the Convention on the Elimination on All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)**⁶⁵ serves as a cornerstone for advancing gender equality and women's rights. It is often referred to as the "international bill of rights for women". North Macedonia has been a state party to CEDAW since its ratification by Parliament in 1994 and is bound by its provisions. In its preamble, the Convention explicitly acknowledges that "extensive discrimination against women continues to exist" and emphasises that such discrimination "violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity". Across its 14 articles, the Convention outlines an agenda for achieving equality, with a strong focus on the legal status of women.

General Recommendation No. 19 (1992)⁶⁶ and the updated **General Recommendation No. 35 (2017)**⁶⁷ explicitly address GBV as a form of discrimination that severely inhibits women's ability to fully enjoy their rights and freedoms. These recommendations emphasise that the full implementation of the Convention requires state parties to take proactive measures to eliminate all forms of violence against women. General Recommendation No. 19 defines violence against women as gender-based, while General Recommendation No. 35 refines this understanding by adopting the term "gender-based violence against women," recognising it as a social rather than an individual issue. Moreover, General Recommendation No. 35 highlights that GBV against women occurs across all spaces, both public and private. This includes public spaces, workplaces, leisure activities, politics, health services, sports, educational settings, and even digital platforms, where technology has redefined the

65 United Nations. (1979). *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. Treaty Series, 1249, 13. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/wluW4L> on March 26, 2025.

66 *Ibid*, General Recommendation No.19 (1992). Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/H9NbT6> on March 26, 2025.

67 *Ibid*, General Recommendation No.35 (2017). Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/W4bop3> on March 26, 2025.

boundaries between public and private spaces. Under CEDAW's provisions, state parties are obligated to establish legal norms, design public policies, institutional frameworks, and monitoring mechanisms aimed at eliminating all forms of GBV. Additionally, they must adopt and implement measures to eradicate the prejudices, stereotypes, and practices that are the root causes of GBV. Consequently, states must ensure that **both public and private spaces are safe and accessible to all women and girls**.

Although CEDAW addresses various aspects aimed at advancing gender equality, several articles could be understood as specifically underscoring the importance of safe public spaces for achieving this goal. For instance, Articles 10, 11, and 13 affirm women's rights to non-discrimination in education, employment, and economic and social activities, respectively, while Article 14 places special emphasis on the rights of rural women, including their right to participate in all community activities. Ensuring public spaces are free from GBV and harassment is crucial for enabling women to fully participate in all aspects of economic, social, and cultural life.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention)

After continuous advocacy efforts led by feminist civil society organisations, North Macedonia's Parliament ratified **the Istanbul Convention**⁶⁸ in December 2017, and it entered into force in early 2018. The Convention imposes numerous obligations on its parties, including the need to adopt legislative and other measures to prevent GBV, protect victims, and provide adequate remedies. It also requires states to *criminalise specific acts* such as psychological violence, stalking, physical violence, sexual violence (including rape), forced marriage, female genital mutilation, forced abortion and forced sterilisation, and sexual harassment, setting firm standards for punishable conduct. Additionally, the Convention provides clear definitions for "violence against women", "domestic violence", "gender", "gender-based violence against women", "victim" and "women", leaving no room for wordplay and ensuring clarity in its implementation.

The Istanbul Convention defines violence against women as "a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women", encompassing all acts of GBV that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women. This definition includes threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, regardless of whether such acts occur in public or private spaces. Furthermore, Article 4, titled "Fundamental Rights, Equality and Non-Discrimination", obligates state parties to take all necessary legislative and other measures to promote and protect the right for everyone, particularly women, to live free from violence in both public and private spheres.

68 Council of Europe. (2011). Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence. Council of Europe Treaty Series – No. 210, entered into force on August 1, 2014.

By committing to the Istanbul Convention, North Macedonia is obligated to ensure that public spaces are secure and inclusive, enabling women to fully participate in all aspects of social, economic and cultural life. In 2018, the country adopted a **National Action Plan for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention**,⁶⁹ covering the period from 2018 to 2023. However, several actions outlined in the Action Plan have not been fully implemented,⁷⁰ with notably weak progress observed in efforts aimed at preventing violence against women and domestic violence⁷¹. Furthermore, not all national institutions have met their obligation to prepare specific annual operational plans with budget implications for implementation. Some institutions only prepared operational plans for 2019 and 2020, and many failed to make these plans publicly available on their official websites.⁷² The weak implementation of the Istanbul Convention, largely due to insufficient funding and ineffective cross-institutional coordination, has also been repeatedly criticised by the EU, as seen in the 2024 Country Report for North Macedonia.⁷³

The competent institutions responsible for implementing the activities have an obligation each year to prepare an operational plan for carrying out this action plan. According to the action plan there are 11 entities in charge of the activities.

Num	Institution	Operational Plans
1	Min of social policy	/
2	Min of Justice	2019, 2021, 2022, 2023
3	Min of Interior	2019
4	Min of Health	2019, 2021
5	Min of Education	2021, 2022
6	Min of Information Society and Administration	/
7	Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Services	2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024
8	The Government	/
9	Min of Local Self-Government	/
10	Biro for Development of Education	/
11	National Coordinative Body for GBV	/

69 Ministry of Labor and Social Policy. (2018). Operational plan for the implementation of the Convention for prevention and combating violence against women and domestic violence in the Republic of Macedonia (2018-2023). Retrieved from: <https://mtsp.gov.mk/dokumenti.nsp?x> on March 26, 2025.

70 Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. (2023). "GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) North Macedonia." GREVIO. Retrieved from <https://urlzs.com/9GL4Vt> on March 26, 2025.

71 Dimushevska, E. & Avramoska Nushkova, A. (2023). "Summary report on the progress of the Republic of North Macedonia in implementing the National Action Plan for the implementation of the Istanbul Convention (October 2018 - October 2023)", *National Network against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence*. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/RfNMYd> on March 26, 2025.

72 Ibid.

73 European Commission. (2024). *Commission Staff Working Document: North Macedonia 2024 Report*. Brussels, SWD (2024). Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/u0ZieY> on March 26, 2025.

The City of Skopje has failed to adopt an operational plan for implementing the activities outlined in the National strategy on GBV. In its 2023 annual report,⁷⁴ the City of Skopje refers to its own gender equality strategy accompanied by an action plan;⁷⁵ however, this document is outdated, and its timeframe has already expired. Moreover, the City of Skopje currently lacks an operational plan that specifically addresses the obligations under the Istanbul Convention, making it unclear how the city will systematically fulfil its responsibilities regarding the prevention and protection from GBV as mandated by national and international commitments.

On the official website of **the Municipality of Centre**, there is no publicly available strategy, action, or operational plan specifically addressing gender equality or the municipality's obligations under the Istanbul Convention. Nevertheless, in 2021, the local **Commission for Equal Opportunities (KEM)** published an activities program for the following year, listing the prevention and protection from domestic violence as its primary activity and allocating a notably modest sum of 10,000 MKD (approximately 165 EUR).⁷⁶ Kem recently adopted its 2025 activities program⁷⁷ which does not provide a clear indication of any future activities or enhanced funding dedicated to this area, continuing the minimal engagement and inadequate financial prioritisation of GBV at the local level.

Turning our focus to Tetovo, on the official website of **the Municipality of Tetovo**, there is no available strategy, action plan, or operational plan related to gender equality. Additionally, there is no publicly accessible document addressing the municipality's obligations under the Istanbul Convention. The only available information related to gender equality is the list of appointed members to the Commission for Equal Opportunities,⁷⁸ but without further details regarding specific activities, strategic objectives, or planned interventions. This lack of publicly accessible planning documentation significantly undermines transparency and accountability in addressing gender equality and combating gender-based violence at the local level.

Although the previous Action Plan **expired in 2023**, a new comprehensive National Action Plan addressing gender-based violence has not yet been adopted. This delay creates a significant policy vacuum, weakening the continuity of efforts and institutional responses essential for fully implementing the Istanbul Convention. The absence of a current strategic framework limits coordinated actions among relevant stakeholders, reduces clarity in roles and responsibilities, and slows down progress toward effectively addressing the Convention's

74 The City of Skopje. (2023). "Annual report of the local self-governing units on the progress in ensuring equal opportunities for men and women in 2022". Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/mOuKec> on March 26, 2025.

75 The City of Skopje. (2011). *Strategy for Gender Equality of the City of Skopje*. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/oiGrxl> on March 26, 2025.

76 Council of the Municipality of Centre. (2021). "Program of the Commission for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men for 2022". Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/nqfOdM> on March 26, 2025.

77 Council of the Municipality of Centre. (2024) "Program of the Commission for Equal Opportunities of Women and Men for 2025". Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/PsfQKy> on March 26, 2025.

78 Municipality of Tetovo. "A list of the commissions of the Council of the Municipality of Tetovo". Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/kQB5GA> on March 26, 2025.

key provisions. Additionally, without a valid strategic document in place, institutions lack clear guidelines and measurable objectives, making it difficult to monitor progress, evaluate outcomes, and ensure accountability. Consequently, the ongoing gap negatively impacts North Macedonia's capacity to achieve meaningful and sustainable changes in preventing and combating GBV in accordance with the Istanbul Convention.

Convention concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (C190)

In June 2023, North Macedonia became the ninth country in Europe to ratify the ILO Convention no.190 on Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (C190).⁷⁹ This landmark Convention is the first international treaty to comprehensively address violence and harassment in the workplace, including GBV and sexual harassment. It recognises that such behaviours are a violation of human rights and can prevent individuals, particularly women, from accessing, remaining, and advancing in the labour market. The Convention is rooted in the principle that everyone has the right to work in an environment free from violence and harassment, ensuring dignity, equality, and well-being for all.

One of the unique aspects of C190 is its extensive and inclusive scope. It adopts a broad definition of “workers and other persons in the world of work,” covering not only employees with formal contracts but also persons in training, workers whose employment has been terminated, volunteers, jobseekers, and applicants. It applies across all sectors—public and private, formal and informal, urban and rural. Additionally, the Convention defines the “world of work” in an equally comprehensive manner, encompassing public and private spaces when used as places of work, including locations where workers are paid, take breaks, or access facilities; work-related travel, training, events, or social activities; employer-provided accommodation; and commutes to and from work. This broad framework recognises that violence and harassment are not confined to traditional workplaces and can occur in various contexts.

While North Macedonia's ratification is a significant milestone, the Convention's entry into force and the harmonisation of national legislation with its provisions are still in pending. Once it enters into force, the state will be required to take concrete steps to prevent violence and harassment, including through education, awareness-raising, and employer obligations to adopt policies and procedures addressing these issues. These measures will also intersect with the broader safety of women in public spaces, as harassment and violence at work can extend beyond the workplace itself.

79 International Labour Organisation. (2023). “North Macedonia ratifies ILO Convention 190 on Elimination of Violence and Harassment in the World of Work (C190)”. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/6eYoLJ> on March 26, 2025.

National Legislation

Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men

The Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men⁸⁰ serves as the main gender equality legislation in North Macedonia. As outlined in Article 2, the law aims to establish equal opportunities for women and men, and it was intended to apply to both the public and private sectors, with various responsibilities primarily assigned to public sector entities. Originally adopted in 2012, it could be considered somewhat outdated and not fully aligned with the more progressive legislation passed in recent years. After two separate studies^{81, 82}, assessed its practical implementation as mainly ineffective, the Ministry for Labour and Social Policy (now the Ministry for Social Policy, Demography and Youth) established a working group to draft a new Law on Gender Equality.

Despite years of effort from the working group, which included feminist civil society members, the draft law seems to have been sidelined largely due to the gender backlash and the rise of anti-gender narratives in North Macedonia and an apparent lack of political will to pass this key gender equality legislation. This stagnation has significant implications for gender equality, leaving the country with a less favourable legal framework. Consequently, the delay in adopting a more progressive gender equality law leaves a gap in ensuring that all spaces, including the public ones, are secure, inclusive, and accessible to all women and girls.

Based on the Law on Equal Opportunities, the Government prepares, and the Parliament adopts, a strategy for gender equality, which is intended to cover an eight-year period. However, the current **Gender Equality Strategy (2022-2027)**, spanning only five years, was adopted by Parliament in July 2022, following a gap of over a year and a half after the previous strategy (2013-2020) expired. This left North Macedonia without a key strategic framework for gender equality during that period. Currently, Reactor is preparing the 5th Shadow Report on the implementation of the Gender Equality Strategy, covering the period from August 2022 to December 2023. This independent assessment evaluates the progress of measures and activities outlined in the Strategy, the National Action Plan for Gender Equality (2022-2024), and the 2023 Operational Plan of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Preliminary findings suggest that less than 40% of the planned activities have been fully implemented.

80 Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 6/12, 30/13, 166/14 and 150/15 and Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 53/21.

81 Chalovska-Dimovska, N. (2019). "Assessment Report on the Implementation of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men at the Central Level." Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/N0johb> on March 26, 2025.

82 Savovska, M. (2019). "Assessment Report on the Implementation of the Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men at the Local Level." Akcija Zdruzenska. Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/epBIM7> on March 26, 2025.

Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination

In 2020, North Macedonia adopted **the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (LPPD)**,⁸³ representing a significant advancement towards achieving equality and enhancing human rights protection. This comprehensive legal framework explicitly includes gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity among the protected grounds against discrimination, aligning national legislation more closely with international human rights standards. It clearly defines various forms of discrimination, such as harassment, sexual harassment, victimisation, segregation, incitement, and other serious discriminatory practices. Additionally, the law established **the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (CPPD)**, an independent parliamentary body mandated to prevent discrimination and protect citizens across all spheres of public and private life.

According to **the 2023 Annual Report**,⁸⁴ the Commission issued 59 opinions establishing discrimination, identifying serious cases involving intersectional, continuous, and repeated discrimination across various grounds. The highest incidence of discrimination was observed in labor relations, predominantly involving personal characteristics, social status, sexual orientation, gender identity, national or ethnic origin, political belief, and belonging to marginalised groups. Public sector institutions were notably involved in the majority of these cases, accounting for approximately 56% of complaints, with a significant concentration of reported incidents originating in Skopje (180 cases or 36.22%).⁸⁵ Many of these complaints pertain to discriminatory actions by managerial staff or arise directly from the institutional mandates.

Nonetheless, the effective implementation of the law faces substantial obstacles, primarily due to structural, operational, and financial constraints. Financially, the CPPD operates with a limited budget, which restricts its ability to fulfil even basic legally mandated tasks consistently. As a result, the commission predominantly relies on externally funded projects managed by international donors, foreign foundations, or civil society organisations for more proactive measures like public awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and promotional activities. Such reliance on external funding raises concerns about the sustainability of preventive efforts, weakens institutional independence, and indicates insufficient political prioritisation of discrimination-related issues.

Moreover, the Commission is burdened by an overly ambitious legal mandate, defined by Article 21 of the LPPD, which enumerates 27 distinct competencies. In practice, due to limited human, technical, and financial resources, the CPPD effectively handles only several

⁸³ Law on prevention and protection against discrimination. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 258/20.

⁸⁴ Commission for Protection of Discrimination. (2024). "2023 Annual Report of the Commission for prevention and protection against discrimination". Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/1kgtxa> on March 26, 2025.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

of these competences. This disparity between extensive formal responsibilities and limited practical capacity creates a strategic discrepancy between efficacy and efficiency. While the Commission successfully resolves individual discrimination cases, the broader impact on societal attitudes and behaviours remains minimal. This imbalance dilutes institutional focus, resulting in superficial success that does not translate into substantial societal transformation.

An additional barrier has been the prolonged vacancy of key positions within the Commission, notably two commissioner roles and several important professional staff positions.⁸⁶ These staffing gaps have significantly reduced the operational capacity and effectiveness of the institution, compromising its overall ability to implement its legally prescribed responsibilities and respond adequately to cases and trends of discrimination.

Overall, the CPPD's experience highlights both the crucial nature of its role in combating discrimination and the need for substantial structural changes. Ensuring adequate resources, clarifying legal responsibilities, and addressing operational deficiencies are essential steps towards enabling the CPPD to fulfil its strategic goals effectively, strengthen societal impacts, and comprehensively respond to complex, evolving discrimination issues in North Macedonia.

Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Family Violence (GBV Law)

Several positive legislative changes regarding GBV and VAWG have taken place in North Macedonia following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention in 2017. For instance, **the Law on the Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Family Violence (GBV Law)**⁸⁷ was adopted and entered into force in 2021. This law represents a significant step forward in North Macedonia's legislative framework, as it expands the scope of GBV beyond domestic violence. It provides clear definitions for terms such as "violence against women", "gender-based violence", "family violence" and "violence by an intimate partner". Notably, the law differentiates between "sex" and "gender" and introduces the definition of "transgender person", a first in the Macedonian legal system. Furthermore, it provides a broad definition of "victim" as any natural person subjected to violence that falls within the scope of the law.⁸⁸ Similarly to the Istanbul Convention, the GBV law defines "VAW" as:

a violation of human rights, discrimination against women and all acts of gender-based violence that led or are likely to lead to physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering of women, including direct and indirect threats and intimidation of such acts, extortion, arbitrary

⁸⁶ These positions have been filled out in 2024. The Commission has been functioning in full capacity since then.

⁸⁷ Law on the prevention and protection from violence against women and family violence. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 24/2021.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.* Article 3, paragraph 1, subparagraph 9.

restriction and/or deprivation of liberty, regardless of whether they occur in public or private life.⁸⁹

Legal protection against domestic violence in North Macedonia is provided through two distinct yet complementary frameworks: criminal proceedings, governed by **the Criminal Code** and **the Law on Criminal Procedure**, and civil protection measures outlined in the Law on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence (GBV), adopted in 2014 and in force since January 1, 2015. This latter law clearly defines roles and obligations for state institutions as well as civil society organisations (CSOs), ensuring coordinated action and multi-sectoral support for victims. Additional legislative instruments enhancing this protection include **the Law on Social Protection**, which facilitates crucial services such as emergency accommodation and counselling, and **the Law on Free Legal Aid**, providing victims essential legal support through representation and counselling in administrative and court proceedings, especially related to rights in social, health, pension, and disability domains.

Article 4 of the GBV Law introduces a due diligence clause for national institutions, in line with the Istanbul Convention. It also outlines the procedure for courts to impose urgent and temporary protection measures. The urgent measure of removing the perpetrator from the home and banning them from approaching it is intended to address an immediate and serious threat to the victim's life and the physical and psychological well-being of the victim and their family members. Additionally, the law provides an open list of temporary protection measures, allowing courts to impose any other measure (not specifically listed) that is deemed necessary to ensure the safety of the victim and their family.

Importantly, the law introduces a significant new provision – the right of victims to file lawsuits against national institutions in civil courts for failing to fulfil their due diligence obligation. This provision allows the court to award compensation to the victim and to oblige the state institution to act in accordance with the law. In such cases, the plaintiff must present facts sufficient to establish a *prima facie* case (present enough evidence to establish a claim is true at first glance, unless disproved by further evidence), after which the burden of proof shifts to the state institution. Additionally, the law prohibits courts from mandating settlements and ensures victims are not burdened with court fees or expenses prior to receiving the awarded financial redress.

However, as noted in the baseline evaluation report of the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO),⁹⁰ there is an absence of information on the practical implementation of these civil remedies, and it remains unclear

⁸⁹ *Ibid.* Article 3, paragraph 1, subparagraph 1.

⁹⁰ Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. (2023). "GREVIO's (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) North Macedonia." GREVIO. Retrieved from <https://urlzs.com/9GL4Vt> on March 26, 2025.

whether women victims of violence in North Macedonia are adequately informed of their rights under the GBV law. As a result, **GREVIO could not assess the effectiveness of the GBV law in providing access to justice for victims**. Additionally, the GREVIO report notes that a number of by-laws remain to be adopted to ensure the full implementation of several provisions of the GBV law.⁹¹ These by-laws are essential for the operationalisation of the law's framework, as their absence hampers effective enforcement and delays the realisation of its intended protections for victims of GBV.

The provisions of the GBV law aim to protect women from violence, whether it occurs in public spaces or in private. This approach highlights the importance of safeguarding women's rights and promoting their ability to move freely and participate fully in both public and private life, without fear of violence or harassment. Strengthening the implementation of the GBV law, collecting relevant data and fostering coordinated institutional responses are crucial steps toward creating public spaces that are truly inclusive, accessible, and safe for all women and girls.

Labour Legislation - Law on Labour Relations and Law on Protection against Workplace Harassment

The legislative framework in North Macedonia addressing workplace violence and harassment consists of several overlapping regulations, primarily **the Law on Labour Relations, the Law on Protection against Workplace Harassment, and the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (LPPD) and the Criminal Code** which includes a section with crimes against labour relations.⁹²

The **Law on Labour Relations**⁹³ addresses issues such as discrimination, harassment, sexual harassment, and psychological harassment (mobbing) within the context of employment relationships. In parallel, the **Law on Protection against Workplace Harassment**²⁵ specifically regulates the rights and responsibilities of both employers and employees concerning prevention measures, reporting mechanisms, and procedures for handling workplace harassment cases. However, there are notable inconsistencies between these two laws, particularly regarding definitions, procedural mechanisms, and specifically the interpretation and handling of mobbing, creating confusion and often limiting workers' effective recourse to legal remedies. Additionally, despite the clear interrelation of these laws with the broader scope of the LPPD, harmonisation with this overarching anti-discrimination framework remains incomplete. Both laws have been subject to ongoing revisions for several years without a clear timeline or definitive outcome, creating uncertainty and hindering the practical protection of workers' rights.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Criminal Code. Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 37/96, 80/99, 4/02, 43/03, 19/04, 81/05, 60/06, 73/06, 7/08, 139/08, 114/09, 51/11, 135/11, 185/11, 142/12, 166/12, 55/13, 82/13, 14/14, 27/14, 28/14, 41/14, 115/14, 132/14, 160/14, 199/14, 196/15, 226/15, 97/17 and 248/18 and Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no.36/23. Articles 166-171.

⁹³ Law on Labour Relations. Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 62/05, 106/08, 161/08, 114/09, 130/09, 50/10, 52/10, 124/10, 47/11, 11/12, 39/12, 13/13, 25/13, 170/13, 187/13, 113/14, 20/15, 33/15, 72/15, 129/15, 27/16, 120/18 and Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 110/19, 267/20, 151/21 and 288/21.

To further strengthen labour legislation, amendments should explicitly include provisions that guarantee the safety of women across all environments associated with work activities. Following the broader approach established by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) standards, legislative measures should expand protections beyond traditional workplace boundaries to cover all spaces and contexts where work occurs—such as public spaces, travel for work purposes, work-related social events, and commuting. Such comprehensive coverage would align domestic law with international standards, specifically **the Convention 190 of the ILO (Violence and Harassment Convention)**, thereby reinforcing the commitment to ensuring a violence-free environment for all workers, particularly addressing the distinct vulnerabilities faced by women in public and semi-public work-related contexts.

Furthermore, to effectively address workplace harassment and mobbing, North Macedonia should prioritise aligning the definitions within the Law on Labour Relations and the Law on Protection against Workplace Harassment to ensure legal clarity and consistent implementation. It is essential to introduce explicit guidelines and consistent definitions to help avoid conflicting interpretations, particularly regarding mobbing. To achieve this comprehensively, legislation should mandate employer accountability, including regular inspections, establishment of confidential reporting channels and more effective internal grievance mechanisms, and transparent procedures to handle harassment cases. Employers should also be explicitly required to provide regular training for all staff on recognising, preventing, and reporting workplace harassment, thus significantly strengthening institutional responsiveness and effectiveness in combating workplace violence.

Criminal and Misdemeanour Legislation – Criminal Code and Law on Misdemeanours Against Public Order and Peace

In February 2023, North Macedonia adopted important amendments to the Criminal Code⁹⁴ aimed at harmonising national legislation with the Istanbul Convention, introducing significant enhancements, such as clearly defining gender-based violence (GBV) against women, domestic violence, and recognising new forms of victimisation. Notably, these amendments established explicit legal definitions for gender-based violence, domestic violence, harassment, sexual harassment, and other critical offences, including female genital mutilation. Despite these advancements, the legislation has yet to fully align with all provisions of the Istanbul Convention. A significant gap remains concerning psychological violence.⁹⁵ While Article 122, paragraph 21, of the Criminal Code now recognises psychological violence within the scope of family violence, it does not introduce psychological violence as an independent criminal offence.⁹⁶ Consequently, this creates ambiguity in addressing psychological abuse comprehensively, complicating enforcement and reducing protection efficacy for victims.

⁹⁴ Law on amending and supplementing of the Criminal Code. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no.36/2023.

⁹⁵ GREVIO (2023)

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

In the area of public order, the Law on Misdemeanours Against Public Order and Peace defines offences that disrupt public order and safety, including acts humiliating or endangering citizens in public areas.⁹⁷ However, this law currently lacks gender-sensitive provisions, failing to address the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls in public spaces adequately. The broad definition of public space and offences, while beneficial, does not explicitly incorporate measures tailored to women's experiences of harassment or violence in these environments.

In North Macedonia, hate speech is regulated through multiple legislative frameworks, resulting in overlaps and enforcement challenges. The Criminal Code explicitly addresses hate speech through Articles 319 and 394-g, criminalising acts intended to incite hatred, violence, or intolerance based on various discriminatory grounds, such as race, ethnicity, religion, gender, and sexual orientation. Additionally, Article 407-a criminalises justifying or promoting discrimination or violence based on identity characteristics. The Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination indirectly complements this regulation by prohibiting harassment and incitement to discrimination (Articles 9 and 10). Similar prohibitions are found in other laws: the Law on Audio and Audiovisual Media Services prohibits media content promoting discrimination or hatred, the Law on the Prevention of Violence at Sports Events bans symbols and actions inciting hatred or violence, the Law on Political Parties disallows party activities inciting hatred, and the Law on Citizens' Associations and Foundations forbids establishing organisations whose activities promote hate or discrimination. Despite the extensive legislative coverage, enforcement remains inconsistent, primarily due to ambiguity in clearly defining and interpreting hate speech, resulting in limited prosecutorial actions and legal uncertainty.

Further complicating enforcement is the absence of clear institutional accountability for addressing hate speech, as the audiovisual media regulator explicitly excludes online spaces from its oversight.⁹⁸ Online hate speech thus falls primarily under the jurisdiction of the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Sector within the Ministry of Interior, which has limited capacity and scope. The fragmented legal approach—multiple laws addressing hate speech without clear coordination—also creates confusion regarding institutional competencies, further complicating consistent enforcement. To improve effectiveness, it is recommended to streamline and clarify legislation, establish well-defined competencies and coordination mechanisms among responsible institutions, and enhance capacities, especially for the Ministry of Interior and public prosecutors, to proactively enforce hate speech regulations across both offline and online environments.

To overcome these challenges, several recommendations should be prioritised. Firstly, it is essential to harmonise definitions across all relevant laws—particularly concerning

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* Article 3, paragraph 1.

⁹⁸ Mihajlova Stratilati, E. (2023). *Analysis of the legal framework of North Macedonia on regulating hate speech*. The Helsinki Committee for Human Rights.

psychological violence and hate speech—to eliminate existing ambiguities and ensure uniform application. The introduction of a standalone offence for psychological violence, aligned with GREVIO recommendations, is essential to strengthen victim protection. Furthermore, gender-sensitive revisions are necessary within misdemeanour and public order legislation. Enhanced institutional cooperation, clearly defined competencies, and comprehensive, targeted professional training for law enforcement personnel, prosecutors, and judges are vital to bridge gaps between legislative provisions and their practical implementation. Strengthening the technical and operational capacity of relevant institutions, especially the Cybercrime Sector within the Ministry of Interior, is also critical for effectively addressing and prosecuting online hate speech incidents.

Urban Development Legislation – Law on Urban Planning and Law on Urban Greenery

Public spaces should be designed and developed to promote both freedom and safety of movement within them. In this context, two additional laws relevant to this analysis are **the Law on Urban Planning**⁹⁹ and **the Law on Urban Greenery**.¹⁰⁰ As their names suggest, the former regulates urban planning and spatial arrangements, while the latter focuses on the planning, design, construction, protection and reconstruction of urban greenery, such as parks and park-forests. However, neither law incorporates a gender perspective or references women's safety and well-being in public spaces.

This gap is notable given the gendered nature of experiences in public spaces, where women often face unique safety risks, including harassment and violence. Integrating a gender-sensitive approach could ensure that urban planning and green space development address these challenges. Without such measures, public spaces risk perpetuating inequality, limiting women's ability to fully participate in social, economic and cultural activities and undermining broader efforts to achieve gender equality.

Both laws provide opportunities for citizens and civil society to participate in the decision-making process. The Law on Urban Planning explicitly regulates the establishment of a participatory body by local self-government units to enhance citizen involvement, participation, and contributions to urban planning. These bodies include representatives from civil society within the local community, offering a potential entry point for feminist civil society perspectives to promote inclusivity in urban planning and ensure safety in public spaces. However, the effectiveness of these participatory bodies in integrating both civil society and gender perspectives should be further assessed.

99 Law on urban planning. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 32/20, 111/23 and 171/24

100 Law on urban greenery. Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 11/18 and Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 42/20.

A notable challenge is the limited presence of feminist civil society organisations across all municipalities. While many organisations have the necessary expertise, the requirement for civil society representatives to come specifically from the local community can hinder the inclusion of feminist perspectives in areas where such organisations are not established.

Although feminist civil society participation is crucial, the primary responsibility for gender mainstreaming urban planning lies within the institutions themselves. This obligation can be interpreted as stemming from the Law on Equal Opportunities, which emphasises the duty of institutions to advance gender equality. Therefore, ensuring a gender perspective in urban planning requires both institutional accountability and proactive measures to involve diverse civil society voices, creating public spaces that are inclusive, safe and reflective of the needs of all citizens.

Research Approach

Methodological Principles

The overall research approach adopted for this study is grounded in feminist methodology, which emphasises the centrality of gender and power relations in shaping both knowledge and lived experiences. Methodology, in this context, is understood as a complex process and a bridge between *epistemology* ('how we know' - questions about what can be known, and the interrelationship between knowledge, experiences and reality); *theory* (ideas about how things work); *ontology* (the categorisation and classification of these ideas and how they fit together, i.e. what exists and can be known); as well as *reflections on validity* (reflexive research outcomes), *ethics and accountability* in the production of knowledge (including the choice of data collection methods). This part of the document provides a description of the **four guiding principles** that shape the research design.¹⁰¹

Gender-Aware Intersectional Framing

The first guiding principle is that **feminist research prioritises gender inequality and power dynamics**.^{102 103 104} Moving beyond the frame that solely examines violence against women, this study expands to include gender-based violence (GBV). **The shift to 'gender violence'** broadens research perspectives and acknowledges that gender violence is not confined to violence against women, but also affects children, young people and LGBTQI+ individuals. Additionally, the research is sensitive to the intersecting roles of age, ethnicity, ability, and social status in shaping vulnerabilities.

Minimising Power Hierarchies

The second principle **deliberately minimises the standard academic distance between the researcher and the 'researched' (participant)**, in line with participatory and feminist principles.^{105 106 107} The team was composed entirely of women researchers, and several steps were taken to involve participants in shaping the research tools and interpreting findings.

101 Mainly based on Skinner, T., Hester, M. and Malos, E. (2005). *Researching Gender violence: Feminist Methodology in Action*. Cullompton: Willan Publishing.

102 Renzetti, C.M., (1997). "Confessions of a reformed positivist: Feminist participatory research as good social science", In M.M. Devault (ed.), (1999). *Liberating Method: Feminism and Social Research*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, pp. 131-143.

103 Cancian, F. M. (1992). "Feminist science: Methodologies that challenge inequality", *Gender & Society*, 6(4), pp. 623-642. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1023376225654> on March 26, 2025.

104 Oakley, A. (2000). *Experiments in Knowing: Gender and Method in the Social Sciences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

105 Bergen, R. K. (1993). "Interviewing survivors of marital rape: Doing feminist research on sensitive topics", *Sage Focus Editions*, 152, pp.197-212.

106 Cancian, F. M. (1992). *Feminist science...*

107 Renzetti, C.M., (1997). *Confessions of a reformed positivist...*

This inclusive approach reflects a commitment to co-production of knowledge and ethical engagement, and it is in line with the position that social studies should acknowledge, respect and explain the differences between various respondents, and between respondents and researchers.¹⁰⁸ As such, this methodology values women's knowledge and treats women and girls as key sources of information/informants by encouraging them to freely express their thoughts, emotions, and experiences.

Feminist Phenomenology As Epistemological Foundation

The study employs feminist phenomenology to centre women's embodied experiences and subjective perceptions of public space.¹⁰⁹ While traditional phenomenology seeks to describe lived experiences in their essence, feminist phenomenology expands further and, rather than treating incidents of violence as isolated, **it situates women's embodied experiences within broader gendered power structures**.¹¹⁰ This approach acknowledges that women's experiences of violence and harassment in public spaces are not just individual or isolated incidents but are shaped by deeply embedded patriarchal norms, spatial inequalities, and intersecting discriminations – which produce and reinforce fear, restricted mobility, and insecurity.¹¹¹

By centring women's first-hand narratives, the study aims to **illuminate how fear, safety, and restricted mobility are produced and maintained through social, political, and environmental structures**. This perspective challenges traditional objectivist methodologies that treat experiences of violence as isolated events, instead emphasising the relational, contextual, and embodied dimensions of women's interactions with public space.

Reflexivity And Researcher Well-Being

Finally, the fourth principle is **reflexivity**, which requires researchers to openly acknowledge their assumptions, beliefs, sympathies and biases and remain critically aware of their own positionality, emotional responses, and ethical responsibilities.^{112 113} Special attention was given to the power relations within the research process, the ethical judgments made and accountability for the knowledge produced.

This principle also encompasses **the emotional and physical wellbeing of the researcher and the 'researched'**. While participants may have already experienced emotional and/or physical harm and could be retraumatised by the research process (a phenomenon

108 Skinner, T., Hester, M. and Malos, E. (2005). *Researching gender violence...*

109 Vera-Gray, F. (2016). *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment*. Routledge.

110 Young, I.M. (2005). *On Female Body Experience: "Throwing like a girl" and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

111 Fisher, L. (2000). "Feminist phenomenology", In Fisher, L. and Embree, L. (eds.). *Feminist Phenomenology*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, pp.1–16.

112 Ramazanoglu, C., & Holland, J. (2002). *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices*. Sage.

113 Bergen, R. K. (1993). *Interviewing survivors of marital rape...*

known as re-victimisation), researchers studying gender-based violence are also at risk of emotional distress. They, too, may experience feelings of pain, fear, anger, powerlessness, or emotional exhaustion before, during, and after the research process.^{114 115}

Recognising the emotional labour and potential re-traumatisation for both participants and researchers, the study incorporated **support mechanisms and reflexive practices throughout the data collection and analysis processes.**

Methodological Foundation

The research design draws from a range of internationally recognised frameworks and practical tools for measuring and analysing gender-based violence. Key references include:

- Federal/Provincial Territorial Ministers responsible for the Status of Women – Canada. (2002). *Assessing Violence against Women: A Statistical Profile*.
- Ellsberg M, and Heise L. (2005). *Researching Violence Against Women: A Practical Guide for Researchers and Activists*. Washington DC, United States: World Health Organization, PATH.
- United Nations General Assembly. (2006). *In-depth study on all forms of violence against women: Report of the Secretary-General*. Sixty-first session. New York: United Nations.
- Vargas, V. (2007). *Cities Without Violence Against Women, Safe Cities for All*. New York: UNIFEM.
- EUROMED. (2010). *Gender-based violence, methodological protocol: Harmonized methodology and concepts to conduct GBV surveys*.
- Women in Cities International. (2011). *Tools for gathering information about women's safety and inclusion in cities*.
- Reactor. (2012). *Scoping Study on Gender Based Violence and Discrimination Against Women and Girls in Urban Public Spaces of The City of Skopje*. Reactor – Research in Action.
- Cvetkovikj, I., Drndarevska D. & Kocevskaja, J. (2019). *Research on the Scope of Gender-Based Violence Against Women and Girls in Public Spaces in Tetovo*. Coalition Margins.

114 Schwartz, M. D. (ed.). (1997). *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women: Methodological and Personal Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

115 Stanko, E.A. (1997). "I second that emotion: Reflections on feminism, emotionality, and research on sexual violence", In Schwartz, M.D. (ed.). *Researching Sexual Violence Against Women: Methodological and Personal Perspectives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, pp.74–85.

- Reactor. (2020). *Gender-Based Violence in Public Spaces in Skopje: A Scoping Study*. Reactor – Research in Action.
- Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe. (2019). “Wellbeing and Safety of Women: OSCE survey on violence against women in North Macedonia”. OSCE.

Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data was collected and analysed to provide contextual understanding and inform the design of primary research tools. Sources included:

- Official crime reports
- Legal and policy analysis
- Municipal safety and urban development strategies
- Previous national and local research on VAWG and public space

Primary Data Collection

Quantitative Survey (CAWI and CAPI Self-Completion)

To gain insight into the experiences of violence and women’s fear of violence in public spaces in Skopje and Tetovo, a structured quantitative survey was conducted with a total of **715** women and girls – 505 from Skopje and **210** from Tetovo. A **convenience sampling** approach was used, targeting women in urban areas through both online and in-person outreach.

The survey captured:

- General perceptions of safety in various public spaces, including environmental and personal factors that contribute to the feeling of safety and lack thereof;
- Perceptions of personal safety (day/night);
- Common avoidance strategies and personal safety measures employed by women;
- Perceived risk of violence and harassment - probability of specific types of gender-based violence happening to women;
- Personal experiences of gender-based violence in public areas, including feelings and reactions related to these experiences.
- Perceptions of institutional support (particularly police response)

A data collection platform (panel) was prepared for respondents to complete the questionnaire online via CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) or CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing). Participants residing in Skopje and Tetovo were recruited, and those who provided contact details received a link for self-completion. To boost recruitment and response rates, fieldwork collaborators were stationed at central locations in both cities, where they approached women to either sign up to receive the questionnaire via email or complete it on the spot on a CAPI device.

Fieldwork was conducted from mid-November to the end of February. The extended data collection period was necessary due to several factors. First, field conditions at central locations were significantly affected by the holiday season, which begins in mid-December and lasts until mid-January, during which time public engagement decreased and filling out questionnaires was not a priority for many women. Second, colder weather during the winter months resulted in reduced use of public spaces; women primarily used central locations for transit rather than leisure, limiting their availability to participate in surveys. To address these challenges, we relied more heavily on the computer-assisted web interviewing (CAWI) method, which ultimately accounted for nearly half of the completed sample. Additionally, in Tetovo, refusal rates were higher compared to Skopje, particularly among older women. To mitigate this, we supplemented the survey data with qualitative focus group discussions with women from these age groups.

A total of 715 interviews were completed, which involved:

- **385** respondents completing surveys via CAPI (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) on tablets at central locations (devices provided by fieldwork interviewers at central locations)
- **230** through the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing) link distributed through Reactor online channels and platforms, including social media
- **100** via emailed CAWI links to women who signed up during outreach at central locations.

The instrument drew on validated tools used in similar international surveys, including the DELHI Safe City Project, ENVEFF (Survey on Violence against women in France), the Australian Bureau of Statistics' Personal Safety Survey (Feeling Unsafe in Public Spaces: Understanding Women's Fears by Stephanie Condon et al.), and the South Africa VAW Impact Survey (Study on the impact and service delivery on VAW in metropolitan South Africa). Adaptations were made to reflect the local context and deepen understanding of personal experiences. For this third iteration of the study, the instrument was further adapted to capture more detailed personal experiences with various types of violence.

Strict adherence to the World Health Organisation (WHO) ethical guidelines for researching violence against women was maintained throughout the research process. Privacy and

confidentiality were ensured throughout, and respondents could skip sensitive questions or withdraw at any time. Special emphasis was placed on establishing rapport with respondents and ensuring confidentiality and privacy during data collection.

Qualitative Discussions with Marginalised Women, Elderly Women and CSOs

Focus group discussions (FGD) are a valuable qualitative research method for exploring norms, beliefs, practices, and language related to violence against women, particularly within specific marginalised and vulnerable groups (e.g., LGBTQI+ women, sex workers, etc.).

During the fieldwork phase, five focus groups were conducted with marginalised populations who were underrepresented in quantitative data. This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of how different groups of women perceive and navigate public spaces, especially those that cannot be easily reached via street surveys. The discussions explored:

- Experiences of safety/insecurity in public spaces
- Strategies for risk avoidance and protection
- Perceptions of institutional support
- Suggestions for improving public safety and inclusion

Due to the specificity and sensitivity of the research questions, all participants were required to sign a confidentiality statement and were granted an opportunity to opt out from participating any time during the focus group discussions. Particular attention was given to the choice of the venue for the discussions and all focus groups were conducted in safe, private venues with careful attention to ethics and informed consent. Target groups included:

1. Roma women
2. Elderly women (50+) in both cities (2 groups)
3. Sex workers
4. Representatives of CSOs supporting vulnerable women

In line with the adaptive nature of the research process, focus groups with elderly women were introduced following the preliminary analysis of quantitative survey results. This decision was made to address gaps in the data and gain deeper insights into the specific experiences and safety concerns of older women, which were underrepresented in the initial fieldwork.

While audio recordings were used as a standard transcription method for most focus groups, a different approach was taken with the group involving sex workers. To ensure a

safe, respectful, and trusting environment conducive to open sharing, researchers opted for detailed notetaking instead of audio recording. This method helped create a more secure space for participants to speak freely about their experiences.

While the study aimed to include a dedicated focus group with women with disabilities to explore their specific safety challenges in public spaces, logistical and accessibility constraints made this unfeasible. Instead, the research team conducted one **in-depth key informant interview with a disabled woman** who is also an activist and works with other women with disabilities, ensuring that their perspectives were still meaningfully reflected in the findings.

Safety Audit Walks

Safety audit walks were conducted in selected urban areas to assess the physical, environmental, and social characteristics that contribute to feelings of safety or insecurity for women and girls. Participants - including local women and youth - walked through predefined routes and identified:

- Inadequate lighting
- Poor visibility and maintenance
- Lack of emergency support infrastructure
- Design features that may facilitate harassment or exclusion

These audits combined direct observation with participants' narratives, photographs, and scoring tools to produce qualitative and visual data. The audit results were triangulated with survey and FGD findings to provide a comprehensive assessment of urban safety in Skopje and Tetovo.

Consultation with relevant stakeholders

During the design and fieldwork stage, **key informant interviews and roundtable discussions** were held with relevant stakeholders, including:

- Local government and ministries
- Urban planners and municipal authorities
- Police representatives
- Academia and civil society organisations

These consultations explored institutional perceptions, existing initiatives, gaps in service provision, and potential avenues for collaboration in preventing and addressing VAWG in public spaces. The data from stakeholder consultations helped contextualise the findings and refine policy recommendations.

To ensure the relevance and practical value of the findings, a final **stakeholder validation session** was held as a closed working event with key actors involved in urban safety and gender equality. The session, organised under the title “Safer Cities – Stronger Communities”, brought together representatives from local government, urban planning departments, the Ministry of Interior, civil society organisations, and women’s rights activists. Participants were presented with the preliminary findings from the survey, focus groups, and safety audits, and invited to reflect on the implications for urban planning, service delivery, and institutional responses to gender-based violence. The event served not only as a validation mechanism, but also as a collaborative space to co-develop recommendations for safer and more inclusive public spaces in Skopje and Tetovo. The feedback gathered during the session was instrumental in refining the study’s conclusions and ensuring alignment with stakeholders’ perspectives and policy priorities.

Limitations of the study

While the study offers important insights into women’s experiences of safety and violence in public spaces in Skopje and Tetovo, several methodological limitations should be acknowledged. These limitations do not undermine the value of the research but **highlight areas for caution in interpretation and avenues for future inquiry**.

Sampling and Representativeness

The research relied on non-probability, convenience sampling for both the survey and qualitative components. As a result, **the sample cannot be considered statistically representative of all women and girls in the respective cities**. The findings primarily reflect the perspectives of those who were more accessible and willing to participate in

public spaces or online platforms. Marginalised groups with limited mobility, access to technology, or reluctance to engage in public research activities may be underrepresented, despite efforts to address this through targeted focus groups.

Furthermore, the study's sample is not representative of the general female population in Skopje and Tetovo, as it is skewed towards younger, more educated, and employed women. With an average age of 30 and approximately 70% of respondents aged between 18 and 34, the data primarily captures the experiences and attitudes of younger women, potentially limiting its generalisability to older age groups. The high levels of educational attainment, with most participants having completed high school or university, further suggest a bias toward the perspectives of highly educated individuals.

Additionally, the majority of respondents are either students or full-time employees, which reflects a specific socioeconomic profile not fully representative of the broader female population. While qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions with older women were incorporated to enrich and contextualise the findings interpreting the results as reflective of all women in Skopje and Tetovo should be avoided.

Digital divide and Access Barriers

Although the CAWI (online) component increased reach and cost-effectiveness, it may have excluded women without consistent internet access or adequate digital literacy – particularly elderly women, those with low income, and women from rural or marginalised urban neighborhoods. This **digital exclusion** may have skewed the sample toward more connected, more active or younger demographics.

Temporal Ambiguity

The survey captured personal experiences of violence and perceptions of public safety, but it did not explicitly differentiate between recent and historic incidents. As a result, it is difficult to determine whether experiences occurred within a specific timeframe or reflect longer-term patterns. This limits the ability to measure changes or trends over time and complicates causal interpretation.

Limited Perpetrator Data

Due to ethical and practical considerations, including questionnaire length and respondent fatigue, the survey included **limited questions about perpetrators' identity**, relationship to the respondent, or group characteristics. These data could have enhanced understanding of the contextual dynamics of public violence but were omitted to maintain participant comfort and response rates.

Scope of Geographical Coverage

The study was confined to urban areas in Skopje and Tetovo. While these cities were selected due to their demographic, ethnic, and infrastructural diversity, the **findings may not be generalisable to rural areas or smaller municipalities** in North Macedonia, where patterns of public space use and exposure to GBV may differ significantly.

Self-reporting and Social Desirability Bias

As with all studies involving sensitive topics, there is a possibility of **underreporting due to fear, trauma, or social stigma**, as well as **overreporting or framing influenced by recent public discourse**. Although researchers emphasised confidentiality and ensured a safe environment, some respondents may still have tailored their responses due to concerns about judgment, retraumatisation, or lack of trust in institutions.

Language and Cultural Nuances

Although the survey and focus group materials were carefully translated and culturally adapted, subtle language differences or culturally specific understandings of “violence,” “safety,” or “harassment” may have led to varied interpretations among respondents, particularly those from minority ethnic backgrounds or with limited formal education (though these are not directly reached through the quantitative survey).

Survey Findings (Quantitative And Qualitative)¹¹⁶

To gain extensive insights, we employed a multi-faceted approach: conducting a CAPI survey at a central location, offering an online survey to respondents recruited on location who preferred to complete it later, and distributing an online survey via our social media channels. The reference population for the surveys were women and girls aged 18 and over, living in Skopje and Tetovo. The sample comprised 715 participants, including 505 women from Skopje and 210 women from Tetovo. Of these, 385 participants completed the questionnaire at the central location in both cities. An additional 100 participants provided their contact details to complete the questionnaire at a later time, while 231 participants responded via the online survey link distributed through social media platforms.

Following the fieldwork progress, a need arose for a more representative sample including women aged 55+ whom we could not reach in central locations or with the online survey. Therefore, we supplemented our data by conducting focus group discussions (FGDs) with women of this age to capture their perspectives and identify any unique characteristics pertinent to this demographic.

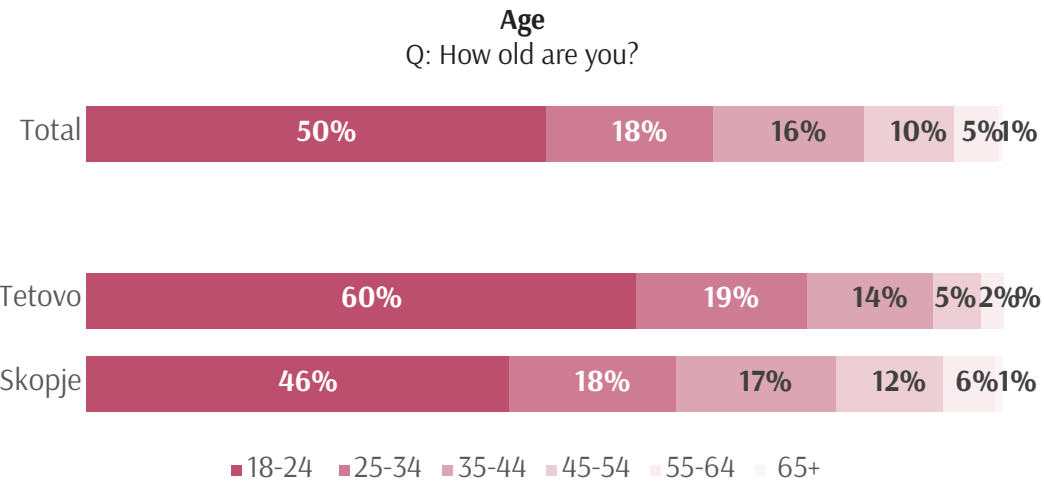
Demography

		Skopje	Tetovo	Total
Age	18-24	46%	60%	50%
	25-34	18%	19%	18%
	35-44	17%	14%	16%
	45-54	12%	5%	10%
	55-64	6%	2%	5%
	65+	1%		1%

116 Given the demographic composition of the sample, which primarily includes young, highly educated, and employed women, it is important to note that the findings presented in this chapter should not be interpreted as representative of the entire population of women in Skopje and Tetovo. Instead, these insights specifically reflect the experiences and perspectives of the women who participated in the study (505 from Skopje and 210 from Tetovo).

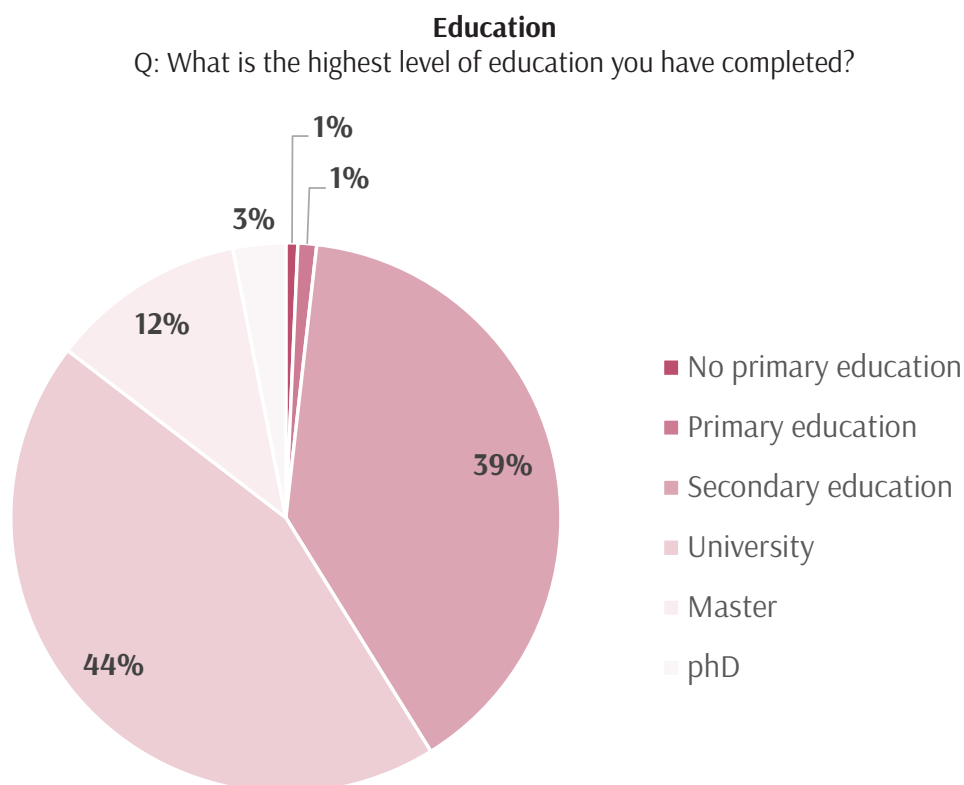
		Skopje	Tetovo	Total
Education	No primary education	0%	2%	1%
	Primary education	0%	3%	1%
	Secondary education	42%	32%	39%
	University	42%	50%	44%
	Master	12%	10%	11%
	phD	3%	3%	3%
Work status	Full-time employee	50%	35%	46%
	Part-time employee	4%	5%	4%
	I do occasional work	5%	8%	6%
	Unemployed, actively looking for work	2%	7%	4%
	Unemployed and not looking for work	3%	3%	3%
	I take care of the household	1%	3%	1%
	Self-employed	2%	2%	2%
	Unpaid family worker	0%		0%
	Student	31%	37%	33%
	Disability pension recipient	0%		0%
	Pensioner	1%	0%	1%

The sample’s average age is 30 years, with a significant proportion (approximately 70%) of respondents aged between 18 and 34 (Graph 5). This demographic skew is important to acknowledge, as the quantitative data primarily captures the experiences and attitudes of younger women in Skopje and Tetovo, potentially limiting the generalisability to the broader population. However, to address this limitation, we have incorporated qualitative data from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving older women. These FGDs provide valuable insights and contextual understanding of the perspectives and experiences of older age groups, thereby enriching and complementing the quantitative findings.



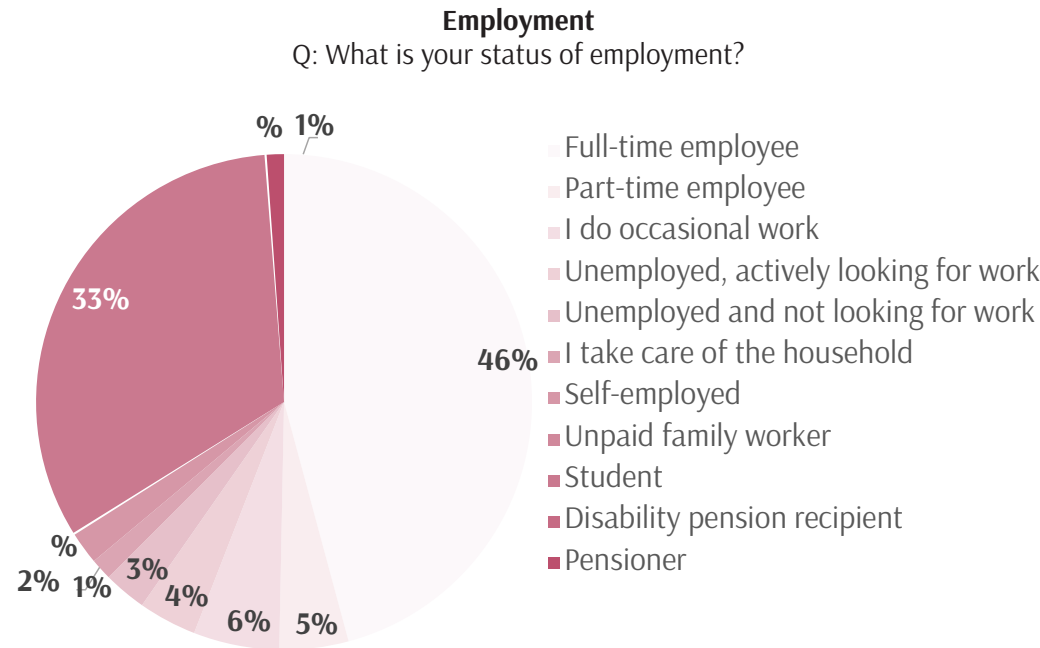
Graph 5: Age of respondents, in total and by city. Total n=715, Skopje n=505, Tetovo n=210

The sample also exhibits a high level of educational attainment, with the majority of participants having completed high school or university. More specifically, among the younger participants aged 18-24, a significant proportion has completed high school, while most of the participants aged 25 and above hold at least a bachelor's degree (Graph 6). While the educational background of the participants can enhance the reliability and depth of the data collected, it is important to recognise that this advantage is limited by the potential bias towards the views of highly educated individuals. More specifically, the high educational level of the sample necessitates caution when generalising the findings to the broader population, which may have varying levels of education. With a high proportion of participants having completed high school or university, the sample may not adequately reflect the perspectives of those with lower educational attainment. Consequently, the findings might be more relevant to highly educated individuals, potentially overlooking the experiences and attitudes of less educated groups.



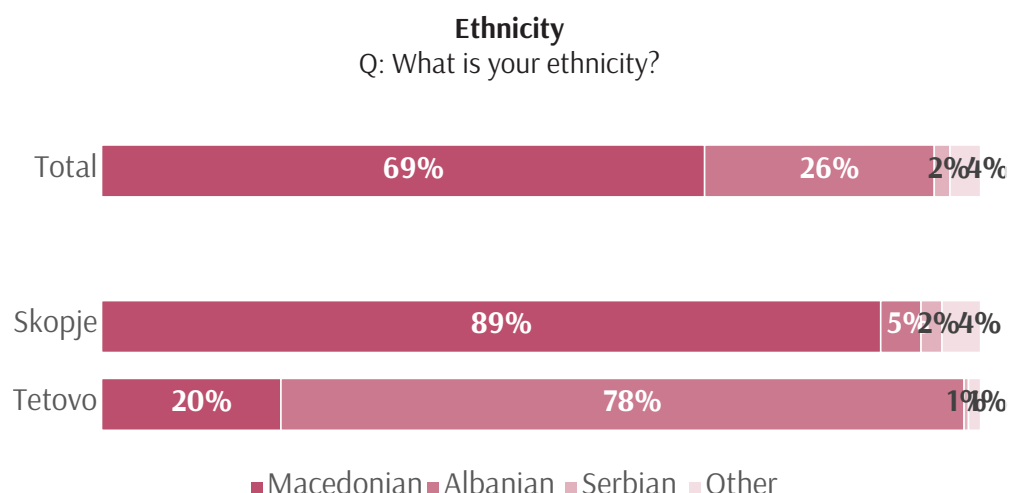
Graph 6: Level of education of respondents. Total n=716

Most survey participants are full-time employees, which is consistent with their average age of 30 years and high educational attainment (Graph 7). This demographic profile suggests that the respondents are actively engaged in educational or professional pursuits, reflecting the typical life stage of individuals within the 18-34 age range. As a result, their roles as students or professionals likely shape their experiences and attitudes, offering valuable insights into the perspectives of young, educated and employed women in Skopje and Tetovo.



Graph 7: Work status of respondents. Total n=715

The ethnic composition of the sample closely aligns with national demographic distributions. Albanian women, primarily from Tetovo, constitute 25% of the sample, while Macedonian women, predominantly from Skopje, represent 69%. The remaining 5% of respondents belong to other ethnic backgrounds (Graph 8).



Graph 8: Ethnicity, Total n=715, Skopje n=505, Tetovo n=210

The Geography of Fear: Where and When Women Feel Unsafe

Daytime vs. Nighttime Experience

Women’s perception of safety varies by time of day. In examining women’s perceptions of safety in urban spaces, a stark contrast emerges between daytime and nighttime experiences. During the day, 75% of respondents report feeling either “quite safe” (53%) or “completely safe” (22%) while walking around the city. However, this sense of security diminishes significantly at night, when only 16% of women feel safe, with a mere 2% reporting feeling “completely safe.” Instead, most women experience heightened insecurity, with 39% describing themselves as “very unsafe” and an additional 44% feeling “a bit unsafe” after dark (Graph 9).



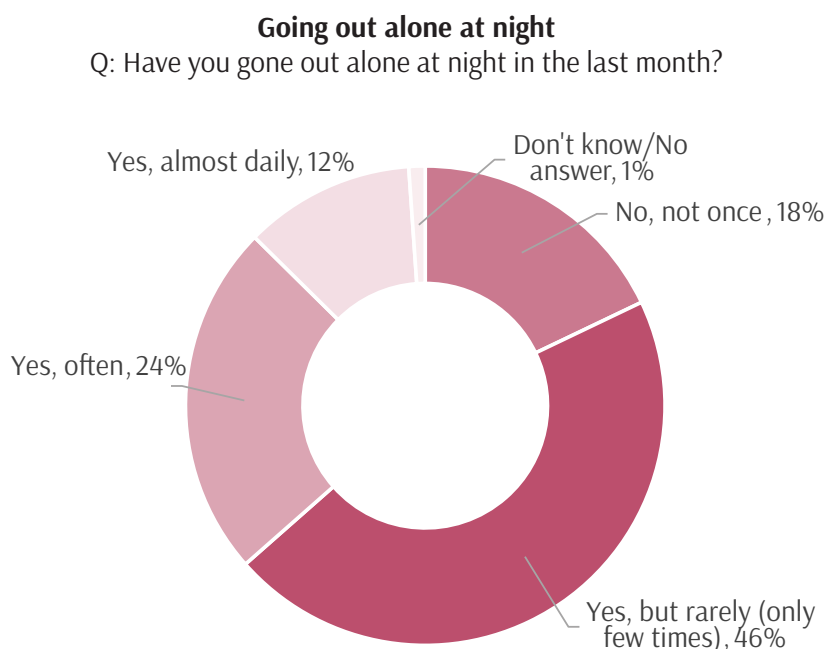
Graph 9: Perceptions of personal safety while walking around the city during the day and night. Total n=715.

The sharp decline in perceived security at night could reflect structural deficiencies in urban planning, law enforcement, and public infrastructure (which is discussed in more detail in the section on environmental factors contributing to feelings of unsafety below), as well as the pervasive fear of gender-based violence in public spaces. Other studies also confirm that the overwhelming sense of vulnerability reported by women after dark is not a reflection of personal anxieties but rather a response to an urban environment that fails to provide adequate safety measures.^{117 118}

117 Wilkens, E. and Capobianco, L. (eds.). (2020). *Safe Cities and Safe Public Spaces for Women and Girls: Global Flagship Initiative: Second International Compendium of Practices*. United States of America: UN Women.

118 Scarponi L, Abdelfattah L, Gorrini A, Valenzuela Cortés C, Carpentieri G, Guida C, Zucaro F, Andreola F, Muzzonigro A, Da Re L, et al. (2023). "Thematic Review on Women's Perception of Safety While Walking in Public Space: The STEP UP Project", *Sustainability*. 15(21), 15636. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152115636> on March 26, 2025.

This is also compounded by the finding that in the past month, almost one in five women reported not having gone out alone at night even once (18%), while nearly half only did so rarely (46%). Only 12% felt comfortable going out alone at night almost daily (Graph 10). 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 dictated by concerns for safety?



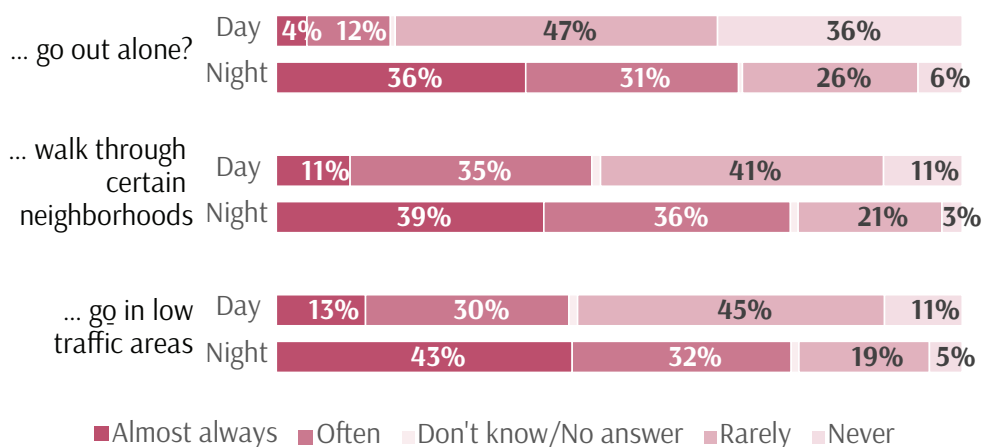
Graph 10: Going out alone at night. Total n=715.

When asked how often they feel afraid to engage in certain activities, responses reveal a strong contrast between daytime and nighttime experiences. During the day, the reported feeling of fear is relatively low. Only 4% of women report “almost always” feeling afraid to go out alone, while 12% feel this way “often.” However, these numbers increase dramatically at night, with 36% of women feeling “almost always” afraid and 31% reporting frequent fear. Similarly, the fear of walking through certain neighbourhoods or streets is much more pronounced at night—while 11% of the women are “almost always” afraid to walk during the day and 35% “often” experience fear, with numbers rising to 39% and 36%, respectively, after dark. The presence of few people in the area further exacerbates women’s feelings of insecurity. While 13% are “almost always” afraid in such situations during the day and 30% experience fear “often,” at night, 43% report “almost always” feeling afraid and 32% feel this way “often.” (Graph 11)

Fear during specific circumstances

Q: During the day, how often are you afraid to...

Q: During the night, how often are you afraid to...



Graph 11: Fear during specific circumstances. Total n = 715.

These findings show the role of urban environments in ensuring safety for women and the ways in which the environment and the conditions force women to modify their behaviour and limit their mobility. This is not just about discomfort—it is about exercising the fundamental right to freedom. Research shows that when a significant portion of the population feels unsafe for at least one-third, if not half, of the day, their ability to participate in public life, access opportunities, and exercise autonomy can be severely constrained.¹¹⁹ This restriction on movement further shapes economic, social, and political participation and reinforces existing inequalities.¹²⁰

119 Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020). *Contested Gendered Space...*

120 Whitzman, C. (2013). *Building Inclusive Cities: Women's Safety and the Right to the City*. London: Routledge.

Consulted key experts highlight the personal nature of perceptions of safety, while also noting that the fear of crime remains strongly influenced by gender, i.e. by patriarchal norms shaping the raising of girls. According to them, public safety measures fail to address women's concerns, lacking gender-sensitive planning and improvements in transportation options, leaving mobility challenges unresolved.

Findings from focus group discussions with women aged over 50 further emphasise the complexities of perceived safety in public spaces. While many initially reported feeling safe, their sense of security at night was largely attributed to mobility patterns, particularly traveling by car with a male family member rather than walking alone. When asked specifically about walking at night, additional safety concerns emerged. Notably, inadequate street lighting was identified as a significant factor contributing to feelings of vulnerability, particularly within a car-centric urban environment. Moreover, age appears to influence the nature of safety risks faced by women; as they grow older, the likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment and gender-based violence diminishes, while the risk of petty crime and robbery increases:

→ *"I live near a pedestrian crossing, and I have to say that one or two years ago, there was a man attacking women and stealing their handbags around Zelen Pazar. I feel scared at night, especially after midnight."* – Female, 55, Skopje

→ *"In certain areas, such as Bit Pazar and the university faculties, I don't feel safe if I return after 9 PM. There are all kinds of men there hiding in the bushes near the faculties, throwing things, moving suspiciously. That part of Skopje just doesn't feel safe."* – Female, 52, Skopje

This trend was further supported in a consultative meeting with an expert on gender perspectives of crime:

→ *"If you look at the statistics, older women are clearly targeted in street robberies due to their reduced ability to resist. Their vulnerability is a direct result of how perpetrators assess their likelihood of success. In this sense, age becomes a distinct risk factor for women—street robbery risk increases proportionally with age."* – Expert

The perception of safety among sex workers differs significantly from that of the other focus groups, as their experiences are shaped by both their profession and the stigma surrounding it. Many reported feeling unsafe due to the risk of being recognised by clients in public spaces, which often leads to harassment. This was described as a common and persistent concern among participants. Additionally, transgender sex workers face intersecting vulnerabilities, experiencing heightened risks both as sex workers and as transgender individuals. Public spaces, including public transportation, were identified as particularly unsafe environments where they frequently encounter verbal harassment, stalking, and threats to their personal safety:

→ *“The streets are not safe because most customers are rude—they shout at you, expose you, and harass you. You always have to look over your shoulder because a customer might shout at you, even when you’re with your family. That’s why I avoid large, open spaces where I might be recognised. It has even happened that I was followed.” – Sex worker, cis woman, 40, Skopje*

→ *“I feel safe where I live, but not when I’m outside or at an event. If a customer recognises me, they assume I’m working. I have been followed home and had to come up with ways to protect myself. I also don’t feel safe on public transportation—not just as a sex worker, but also as a transgender person. We all know what happens on buses.” – Sex worker, trans woman, 39, Skopje*

Findings from focus group discussions reveal that Roma women are less inclined to move freely at night due to a combination of safety concerns and traditional values that limit their mobility outside the home.

→ *“Look, we mostly stay at home, focused on domestic duties, and we don’t really bother going out. We know it’s not safe, so we stay inside. Sometimes we do go out, but never alone, especially in places that don’t feel safe.” – Roma woman, 24, Skopje*

→ *“Honestly, as women, it’s not even about whether we move freely—we’re not free at all. For example, if things get tough and we just want to take a walk to clear our heads, we can’t even sit in a park alone. There are always these creeps passing by, and it makes you suspicious and uneasy, so you end up leaving. We’re constantly under pressure and stress. We live in a world where there’s no peace. And it’s not just that—when you call the police if something happens, they don’t even take it seriously. There’s no urgency anymore.” – Roma woman, 29, Skopje*

Safety of Different Public Spaces

Women's perception of safety is also shaped by the specific characteristics of different environments. As mentioned in our literature review, the presence of well-maintained infrastructure, unobstructed views, security presence and active pedestrian movement are linked to increased feelings of safety and greater freedom of movement among women.¹²¹ As our study goes to show, variations in spatial design, visibility, and social dynamics influence whether a space is perceived as secure or threatening, further reinforcing how safety is not just a personal feeling, but a condition shaped by external factors. While two-thirds of the respondents consider **the city, in general**, to be safe (61%), the perceived safety is reported most often in relation to spaces with controlled access, such as **elevators** and **building entrances** (each considered to be either mainly or completely safe by 62% of the respondents), as well as open, well-lit, and high-traffic areas like **public squares** (71%). Similarly, locations with a strong communal presence, such as **markets** (77%), and regulated social settings, like **restaurants** (94%), are perceived as relatively safe. Notably, most of the respondents also associate **being inside a car** with safety (81%), likely due to the privacy and sense of control it affords—an indication of how autonomy and enclosure influence women's experiences of security in urban spaces.¹²²

On the other hand, there are spaces on whose safety respondents remain divided. Certain public spaces elicit divided perceptions of safety among women, which reflects the complexity of urban security dynamics. **Parks**, for example, are perceived as moderately safe, with 48% of women feeling secure, yet an equal percentage expressing concern. Similarly, **roads and streets** are considered safe by 53% of women, but 46% remain apprehensive. Public transport infrastructure, including **bus stations** and **transit vehicles**, is also seen as moderately safe, with 51% of respondents feeling secure. However, 45% stated they are feeling unsafe.

Certain spaces, such as **open parking lots** and **taxis**, occupy a middle ground in women's perceptions of safety. While a significant proportion of respondents feel secure in these environments, a substantial share still expresses concern. **Taxis**, for instance, are considered safe by 55% of women, yet 40% perceive them as unsafe. The relatively high sense of security may stem from the controlled environment within the vehicle and the fact that big proportion of young women use controlled mobile application for taxis that share information of the driver and follow the car by GPS. Similarly, **open parking lots** are viewed as safe by 55% of respondents, while 41% report feeling unsafe. Unlike enclosed parking garages, open lots offer greater visibility, yet concerns persist, likely due to their often-isolated nature and lack of security measures as studies reveal.¹²³

121 Kern, L. (2020). *Feminist City*. Verso Books.

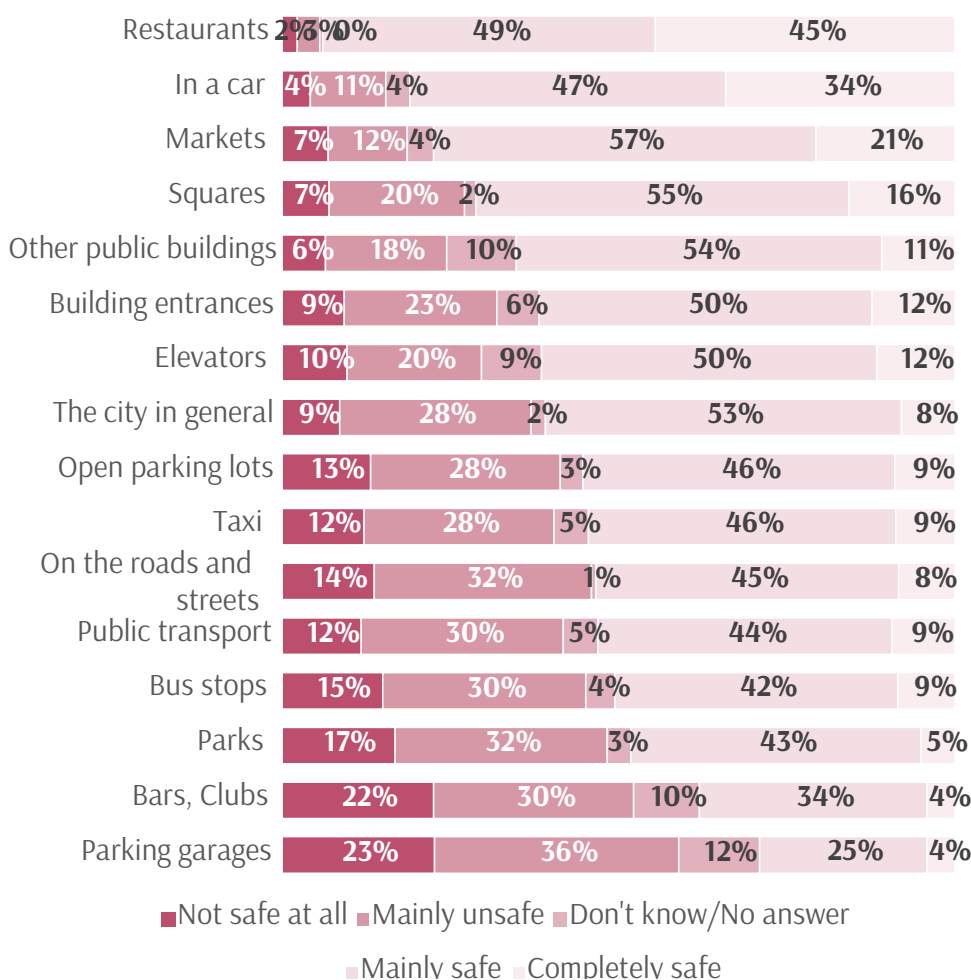
122 Koskela, H. (1997). *Bold Walk and Breakings...*

123 Navarrete-Hernandez, P., Vetro, A. and Concha, P. (2021). "Building safer public spaces: Exploring gender differences in the perception of safety in public space through urban design interventions", *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 214(214). Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.landurbplan.2021.104180> on March 26, 2025.

The most unsafe public spaces identified by respondents are **parking garages** (59% unsafe) alongside **bars and nightclubs** (52% unsafe), environments that are often poorly lit, isolated, or characterised by social dynamics that heighten the risk of harassment or violence. Parking garages, in particular, raise significant safety concerns, with 23% of women considering them “not safe at all” and an additional 36% perceiving them as “mainly unsafe.” The combination of enclosure, low visibility, and the likelihood of being alone makes these spaces particularly distressing. Similarly, bars and clubs are perceived as unsafe by 52% of respondents, likely due to the presence of alcohol, the normalisation of inappropriate behaviour, and insufficient security measures (Graph 12).

Safety of public spaces

Q: In your opinion, how safe are the following public spaces for women?



Graph 12: Perception of safety of public spaces. Total n = 716.

Environmental Factors

The environmental factors play a role in the subjective perception of safety among the respondents. More specifically, the overwhelming majority of respondents identify **poor lighting** as a key factor contributing to their sense of insecurity, with 96% in Skopje and 86% in Tetovo highlighting it as a concern (Graph 13). The overall average of 93% of respondents identifying this factor reflects a structural issue that transcends geographic differences. **The absence of people or movement in public spaces** similarly reinforces feelings of vulnerability, with 87% of women in Skopje and 79% in Tetovo acknowledging its impact. The widespread concern signals that women's safety is deeply linked to "traces of behaviour and presence of city users" in shared spaces. Being seen by others in a public area has been reported as comforting by women in other studies as well.¹²⁴

On the other hand, the presence of **stray dogs** is a significant concern for the majority of women in both cities, and appears particularly pronounced in Tetovo, where 90% of respondents cite it as a source of insecurity, compared to 77% in Skopje. This suggests that women's movement is not only shaped by human threats but also by the risks posed by unregulated urban conditions, reflecting a broader failure to ensure safe public environments. In contrast, both cities report similar levels of concern regarding the **lack of visible police presence** (74% in Skopje and 73% in Tetovo) (Graph 13). Women's safety is often framed in terms of individual responsibility rather than state accountability, and these findings reaffirm the demand for more effective, gender-sensitive policing practices.

Similarly, while concerns about safety in public transportation are nearly identical in both cities, with 62% of respondents reporting **feeling unsafe on crowded buses** and at **bus stops**, this finding highlights the persistent issue of harassment in transit environments. Public transport remains a critical yet often unsafe necessity for women, reinforcing the urgency of integrating gender-sensitive policies into urban mobility planning.^{125 126}

A particularly stark contrast emerges in the perception of **underpasses**. While 79% of women in Skopje report feeling unsafe in such spaces, only 51% of women in Tetovo express the same concern. This disparity may be indicative of differences in urban infrastructure, but further exploration is needed to delve into the reasons behind it. Similarly, **construction sites**, are considered unsafe by 72% of women in Skopje compared to 58% in Tetovo, reinforcing the need for further exploration.

124 Scarponi L, Abdelfattah L, Gorrini A, Valenzuela Cortés C, Carpentieri G, Guida C, Zucaro F, Andreola F, Muzzonigro A, Da Re L, et al. (2023). "Thematic Review on Women's Perception of Safety While Walking in Public Space: The STEP UP Project", *Sustainability*. 15(21), 15636. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.3390/su152115636> on March 26, 2025.

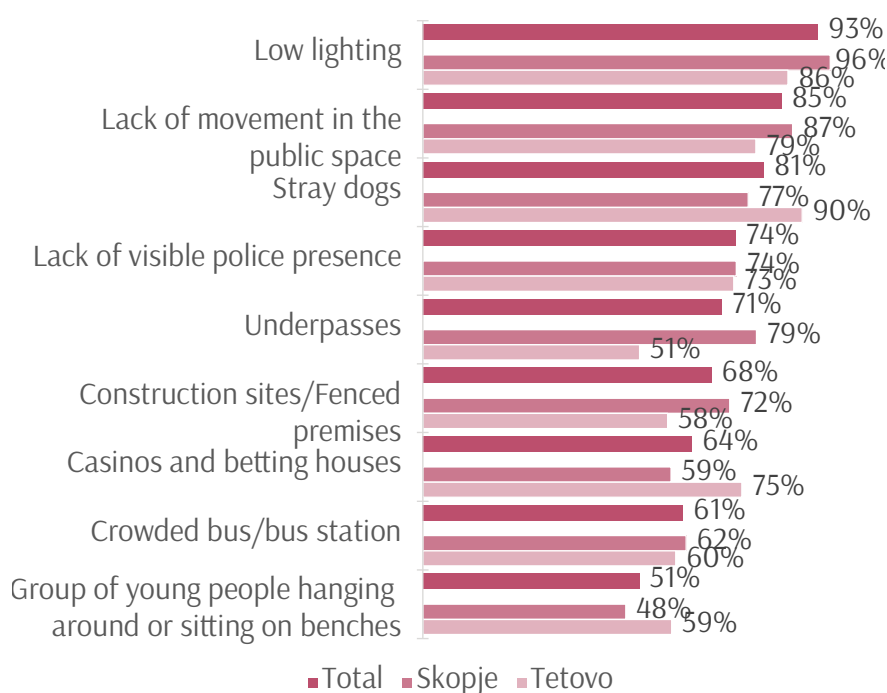
125 Carter, M. (2005). "Gender differences in experience with and fear of crime in relation to public transport", *Research on Women's Issues in Transportation*. Washington DC: Transportation Research Board. Vol. 2(25), p. 100.

126 Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2014). "Fear and safety in transit environments from the women's perspective", *Security Journal*. Vol. 27, pp. 242–256. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1057/sj.2014.9> on March 26, 2025.

The presence of **casinos and betting houses** is a more significant safety concern for women in Tetovo, with 75% of respondents identifying them as unsafe compared to 59% in Skopje. A notable difference in perception is also found in the way women view **groups of young people occupying public spaces**. In Tetovo, 59% of respondents feel unsafe in such situations, compared to 48% in Skopje (Graph 13). This suggests that the gendered use of public space is perceived differently in the two cities, potentially shaped by social norms and expectations that regulate women's visibility and mobility. The heightened sense of insecurity stemming from factors such as low visibility, reduced pedestrian presence, and the increased risk of harassment has been widely documented as contributing to women's fear in public spaces.¹²⁷ Furthermore, women's presence in public spaces is frequently contested or policed, and their perception of safety is influenced not only by physical threats but also by the implicit dynamics of male-dominated spaces, which make them feel less "at home" than men when in public.^{128 129}

Environmental factors contributing to women feeling unsafe

Q: In your opinion, do any of the listed environmental factors contribute to women feeling unsafe in this city? (% of 'yes' answers)



Graph 13: Perceptions of environmental factors contributing to feelings of unsafety. Total n=716, Skopje n=505, Tetovo n=211.

127 Loukaitou-Sideris, A. (2005). *Is It Safe to Walk Here...*

128 Kanes, L. W. (1992). *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

129 Pain, R. (2001). "Gender, Race, Age and Fear in the City." *Urban Studies*, 38(5-6), pp. 899-913. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00420980120046590> on March 26, 2025.

Consulted key experts further confirm the significant role of local governments when it comes to ensuring public safety and highlight the importance of appropriate sociocultural content and events, as well as investment in infrastructural elements that address the specific community needs.

→ Unlike the police, who usually step in after something happens, local authorities have the power to tackle the root causes of citizens' perceptions of unsafety (...) For example, visible police presence and free student transport to their living place can really help young women feel safer and discourage potential offenders. – Key expert

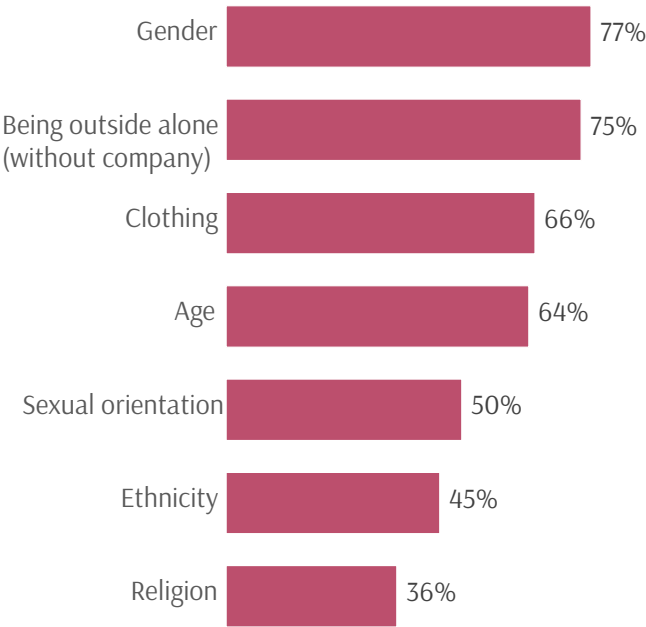
Personal Factors

The findings on personal factors that contribute to the feelings of safety are similar between respondents from Skopje and Tetovo, highlighting recurring patterns in the factors shaping women's sense of insecurity across both cities. These results emphasise the significant role personal characteristics play in shaping women's perceptions of safety in public spaces. **Gender** emerges as the most significant factor, with 77% of respondents identifying it as a source of insecurity. Closely following is the vulnerability associated with **being alone in public**, with 75% of women reporting that the absence of company heightens their feelings of unsafety. **Clothing** also plays a crucial role, with 66% of respondents indicating that their attire affects their perceived security, reflecting the ways in which societal norms regulate women's bodies and reinforce gendered expectations in public spaces (Graph 14).

Age is another influential factor, with 64% of women identifying it as a contributor to their insecurity, suggesting that both younger and older women experience distinct but significant safety concerns (as mentioned earlier). **Sexual orientation** is cited by half of the respondents (50%), highlighting the intersection of gender and LGBTQ+ identity in shaping public safety experiences. **Ethnicity**, reported by 45%, further points to the compounded risks faced by marginalised groups, where racial and ethnic identity may expose women to additional threats or discrimination. **Religion** is perceived as the least influential among the listed factors, with 36% of respondents acknowledging its role in shaping their sense of security (Graph 14).

Personal factors contributing to feelings of unsafety

Q: In your opinion, do any of the listed personal factors contribute to women feeling unsafe in this city? (% of 'yes' answers)



Graph 14: Personal factors contributing to feelings of unsafety, Total, n=715

Some qualitative responses suggest that perceptions of safety in public spaces are influenced by ethnic and cultural biases, with women and girls linking harassment or threatening behaviour to specific ethnic groups more than others. While these perceptions may stem from personal experiences, they also risk reinforcing societal divisions and stereotypes. At the same time, several women wearing religious headscarves/hijab reported experiencing discrimination and harassment in public spaces, suggesting that ethnicity and religious identity can also increase the risk of violence women face outside. This dual perspective confirms the need to address GBV without reinforcing harmful ethnic biases, while also acknowledging the ways in which different social identities intersect in experiences of public space:

Fellow citizens of Albanian ethnicity are constantly attacking, catcalling, stalking, following women in Tetovo. This is not a new problem; this has been happening since 2001 and no one reacts. – extract from an open-ended question in the quantitative survey.

→ *I feel that I'm discriminated based on religious symbols, i.e. for wearing a headscarf - extract from an open-ended question in the quantitative survey.*

Age and **clothing** emerged as key factors influencing perceptions of unsafety in public spaces, even among women from Tetovo over the age of 50. However, these perceptions primarily centred on the vulnerabilities of younger women, who were at greater risk of harassment due to their youth and clothing choices:

→ *Young girls are particularly at risk, as they often attract attention based on their clothing. Unfortunately, society tends to target girls who dress differently, and younger girls with more developed physiques are especially vulnerable. - Tetovo, 70, female*

→ *Adolescent girls, around 13 or 14 years old, are generally the most vulnerable. At this age, they are often unprepared to handle violence and may take such situations lightly. - Tetovo, 57, female*

Identified Dangerous Places

The findings from the study shed light on a range of locations perceived as unsafe by women in public spaces across various urban and peripheral areas. Key neighbourhoods identified include Aerodrom, Novo Lisiche, Kisela Voda, Bit Pazar, Chair, and parts of the Municipality of Centar such as Rekord, the main square, and Woman Warrior Park. Peripheral areas like Avtokomanda, Butel, Skopje Sever, Bunardzik, Gazi Baba, Topansko Pole, and Chento were consistently noted as problematic. Participants also highlighted areas adjacent to central municipalities, reinforcing concerns about safety beyond the city centre.

Specific streets with low lighting were frequently mentioned, such as Boulevard "Partizanska" and "Third Macedonian Brigade" near the railway station, as well as "Justinian Prvi Street" in Drachevo and "Parizanska Street" near the Catholic Church and Romanian Embassy. Poorly lit underpasses, particularly near East Gate, Continental Hotel, and the railway station, were identified as high-risk areas. These issues indicate the significance of adequate lighting as a measure to enhance safety in public spaces.

Public areas like parks were also a major point of concern, with locations such as City Park (Gradski Park) and the Vardar Riverbank being deemed unsafe, especially at night. Similarly, the Transporten Centar, encompassing the bus and railway station in Skopje, emerged as a key zone where women feel insecure. Notably, areas surrounding university campuses, including those of UKIM, Southeast European University, and the State University of Tetovo, were highlighted as unsafe, particularly for students navigating these spaces.

Miscellaneous locations, including bus stops, parking garages, construction sites, casinos, and betting shops, were also flagged as unsafe. In addition, women noted that peripheral neighbourhoods where they are not part of the ethnic majority exacerbate feelings of

vulnerability. These findings emphasise the need for urban interventions targeting lighting, security personnel visibility, transportation accessibility, and infrastructure improvements to ensure that women feel safer in public spaces, allowing for greater mobility and participation in urban life.

These findings are further supported by data from the open-source project “Crime Map of Macedonia”,¹³⁰ which documents reported criminal activity across the country. In particular, the area around the Record bus stop in central Skopje—already identified by participants as unsafe—has been the site of multiple documented incidents, including physical altercations between groups of young people, an assault on a woman waiting for public transport, and a case involving a male perpetrator assaulting a young child. While not all these incidents specifically target women, their visibility and violent nature contribute to a broader climate of fear, reinforcing perceptions of insecurity in public spaces and exacerbating women’s sense of vulnerability in everyday urban environments.

Strategies for Self-Defence

In response to these risks, women develop their own strategies for moving through the city in ways that make them feel safer. One of the most common behaviours is constant vigilance— more than two-thirds of respondents report **avoiding eye contact with men** (almost always: 49%, often: 28%). **Frequently looking around** is another widespread practice, with nearly third of women (33%) reporting that they almost always do so, and an additional third (38%) stating that they often use this strategy. Similarly, **talking on a mobile phone**, whether genuinely or as a performance of safety, is used by a significant number of women. More specifically, genuine talking on the phone is done almost always by one in four women (23%) and often by one in three (36%), while pretending to talk on the phone is also present but to a lesser extent (almost always: 15%; often: 24%) (Graph 15).

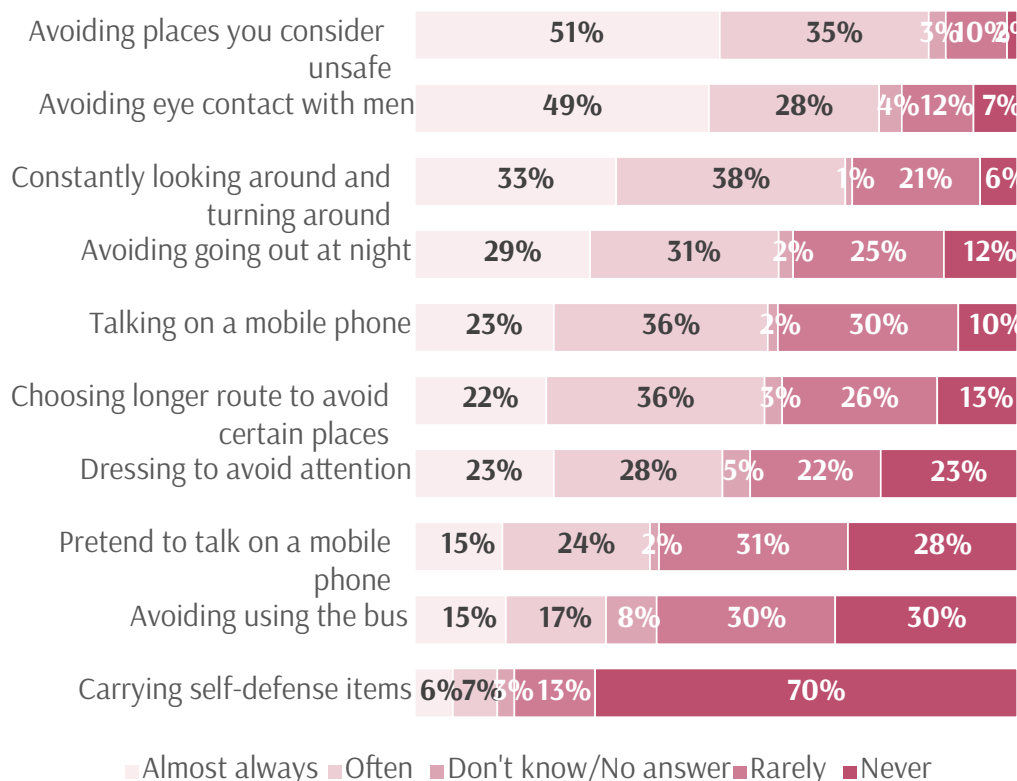
Beyond these immediate, moment-to-moment responses, women also structure their movement in ways that minimise exposure to potential threats. **Avoiding places deemed unsafe** is the most common precaution, with more than half of respondents (51%) indicating that they almost always do so, and an additional 35% reporting that they often take this measure. This extends to limiting nighttime mobility – over 60% of respondents report **avoiding going out alone at night** (almost always: 29%, often: 31%). Similarly, **taking longer routes to avoid certain locations** is a common adaptation, reported as almost always (22%) or often (36%) by a significant proportion of respondents. **Clothing choices** are also influenced by safety concerns, with more than half of respondents modifying how they dress to avoid unwanted attention (almost always: 23%, often: 28%). Additionally, **public transportation is avoided by some**, with 15% of respondents almost always opting out of using the bus, and 17% often doing so. Finally, while **carrying self-defence items**

130 FINKI. Crime Map of Macedonia. Retrieved from: <http://crimemap.finki.ukim.mk/home/en> on March 26, 2025.

such as pepper spray or knives is less common (almost always: 6%, often: 7%), it remains a strategy used by a small portion of women (Graph 15).

Strategies for self-defense

Q: Please answer how often you use each of the following strategies to protect yourself from harassment in public.



Graph 15: Strategies for self-defence from harassment in public. Total n=715.

Participants were also asked to expand the list of strategies they employ to feel safe in public spaces. The most common answer was **carrying keys between their fingers** when walking alone at night, with others mentioned carrying a lit cigarette. Many women said **they inform their friends or family about their exact location** (or share it in real-time online), in case something goes wrong. One woman said she prefers walking on the bicycle lanes over the pedestrian ones because they tend to be better lit.

These strategies were echoed in the qualitative findings, where one young woman recalled an incident of being followed and how she had to **talk on the phone** with her friend while trying to run away from the man following her. The distressing experience and lack of police action and placing responsibility on the victim for the incident led to **lasting feelings of unsafety** for the woman:

→ “I just said goodbye to my best friend at the square. I took out my phone to scroll through social media. I had never in my life felt unsafe in my city. In the background, I heard someone talking... I kept hearing the voice getting closer to me. I turned around... He asked, **‘Where are we going for the afterparty?’** I pretended not to hear him. At that moment, he stuck himself to me and put his right hand around my waist. I got scared. I immediately pushed his hand away and started running. He started running after me. I tried to hide behind a car, but he saw me. I kept running. While running, I called my best friend and told him that someone was chasing me. I asked [my friend] to come toward me. When the “monster” heard that, he backed off, but I kept running home, still talking on the phone with my friend. At one point, I turned around and saw that the “monster” was still following me, but this time, he was about 10-20 meters away. I hid behind every car and every tree, hoping he wouldn’t see where I lived.

→ When I got home, still on the phone with my best friend, I started crying. My mom woke up, and I told her what had happened. The next day, I went to the police with her. I told an officer what had happened. He said, **‘What were you doing alone at 3-4 in the morning? You gave him a reason to chase you.’** He told me they wouldn’t be able to do anything at all because I hadn’t taken any pictures of the “monster” and hadn’t asked him for his name. With tears in my eyes, I walked out of the police station. To this day, nothing has been done about this case. When I told a friend about it, she said the same thing had happened to her in the same place. **After this, I never felt safe alone in my city again.**”

Still, specific nuances emerged across different demographic groups. For instance, women aged over 50 expressed less concern about sexual harassment or unwanted advances but **voiced significant worries about street crime**. As a result, their safety strategies focused on avoiding unsafe areas, limiting nighttime outings to when accompanied by a male partner or while driving, and other similar precautions.

Interestingly, **young women’s strategies have shown little change over the years**. While newer technologies have introduced tactics such as talking on the phone or sharing live locations, older women recalled employing similar methods when they were younger, like avoiding eye contact and carrying keys for self-defence. Older Roma women, for example, reported avoiding eye contact with men to minimise the risk of harassment:

→ ‘When you’re young you don’t really consider the risks. I remember walking home holding a key between my fingers, ready to defend myself if I had to. Whenever I passed someone on the street, **I’d avoid eye contact and just try to get by**. Over time, I got to know neighbours from different religions, and they offered protection, almost like a gang in their territory. I’ve been attacked before, and I narrowly escaped rape twice—at least I think that’s what would have happened. Everyone knows the crime in the area—the police station works, but **everyone is connected to everyone, and they don’t do anything to protect women.**’ – Female, 60, Skopje

Findings from interviews reveal that sex workers employ various strategies to cope with the risks they face. For instance, **they avoid walking or using public transportation**; instead, they prefer taxis or bicycles to stay mobile and avoid lingering in one place for extended periods. They also employ practical measures, such as **avoiding wearing high heels and jewellery to ensure mobility, wearing light clothing to facilitate escape**, and **carrying deodorant** as a substitute for tear gas spray, which cannot be classified as a weapon by the police. They are also advised to stay in well-lit areas, remain close to one another when in groups, and memorise vehicle registration numbers if entering a car, enabling them to report incidents if necessary.

→ “We usually tell girls not to wear high heels or jewellery and to stick to light clothing so they can run and escape more easily. Personally, **I always carry deodorant in my bag**—it works like tear gas spray, but the police can’t classify it as a weapon. We advise them to use deodorant to defend themselves and then run if they’re ever in a dangerous situation. If there’s a group of girls, they should stay close together, not spread out, and stick to well-lit areas instead of dark ones. And if they get into a car, we tell them to **remember the license plate number** so we can report it if anything happens.” – Sex worker, trans woman, 40, Skopje

In instances with inadequate police response, some victims may feel compelled to take matters into their own hands. Sometimes this includes **community efforts to identify the perpetrators** and keep each other safe by avoiding them:

→ “I was walking home alone after having coffee with my friend. About ten minutes before I got home, I noticed a vehicle slowing down in front of me. When the driver started looking around as if searching for me, I knew. I turned onto another street, and he stopped across from me, on the other side. I clenched the knife in my left hand with all my strength. He nodded his head and kept saying, ‘Come on!’. From all the adrenaline, I only realised later that I was yelling at him, asking if he had a problem?! If he wanted me to solve it for him?! Even though I was shaking. He kept circling, but I blended in with some people and ran home. I reported it to the police but to no avail. The incident happened again ten days later; this time, it was someone else in a different car. I reported it again. Still nothing. **We found him with the women from the neighbourhood. He was a neighbour!!! Apparently, it wasn’t his first time.**”

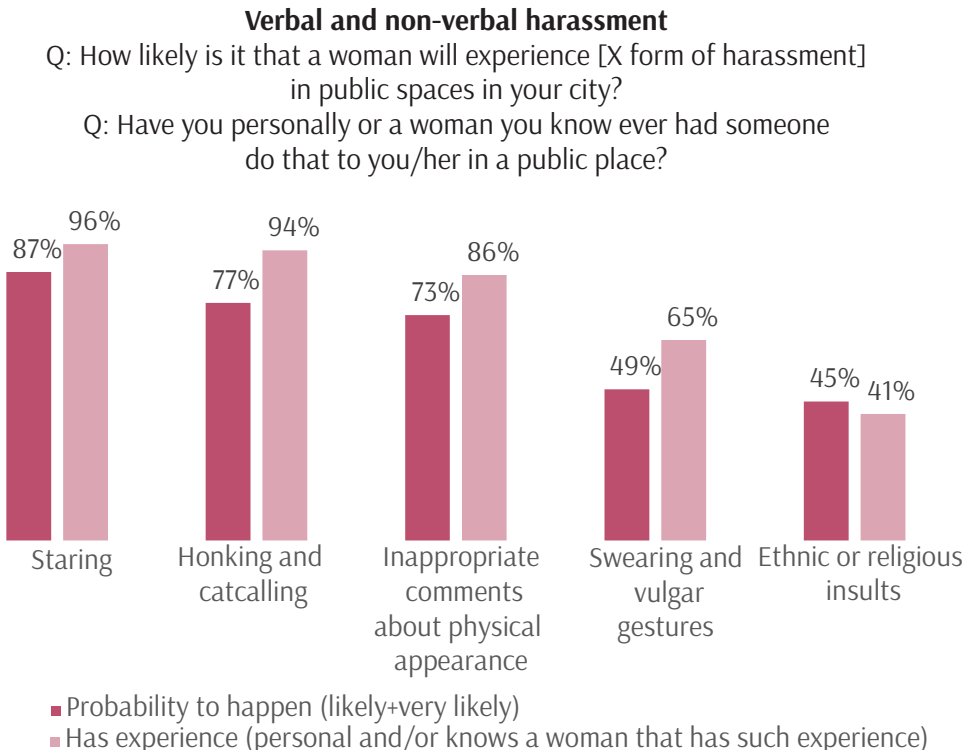
Taken together, all these avoidance strategies reveal the extent to which women’s everyday movements are shaped by the anticipation of harassment. The need to remain hyper-vigilant, modify personal appearance, avoid specific places, and limit nighttime mobility illustrates the burden placed on women to perform their own “safety work” in the absence of systemic solutions.¹³¹

131 Vera-Gray, F. and Kelly, L. (2020). *Contested gendered space...*

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

Verbal and Non-Verbal Harassment

Verbal and non-verbal harassment is a common part of women’s daily experiences in public spaces. The findings show that staring is the most expected form of harassment, with 87% of women believing it is likely or very likely to happen, followed by honking and catcalling (77%), inappropriate comments (73%), swearing and vulgar gestures (49%), and ethnic or religious insults (45%). These perceptions are based on real experiences—staring is the most frequently encountered, with more than nine in ten women (96%) having experienced it themselves or knowing someone who has. Honking and catcalling (94%) and inappropriate comments (86%) are also widespread, while swearing (65%) and ethnic or religious insults (41%) are less common but still significant (Graph 16).



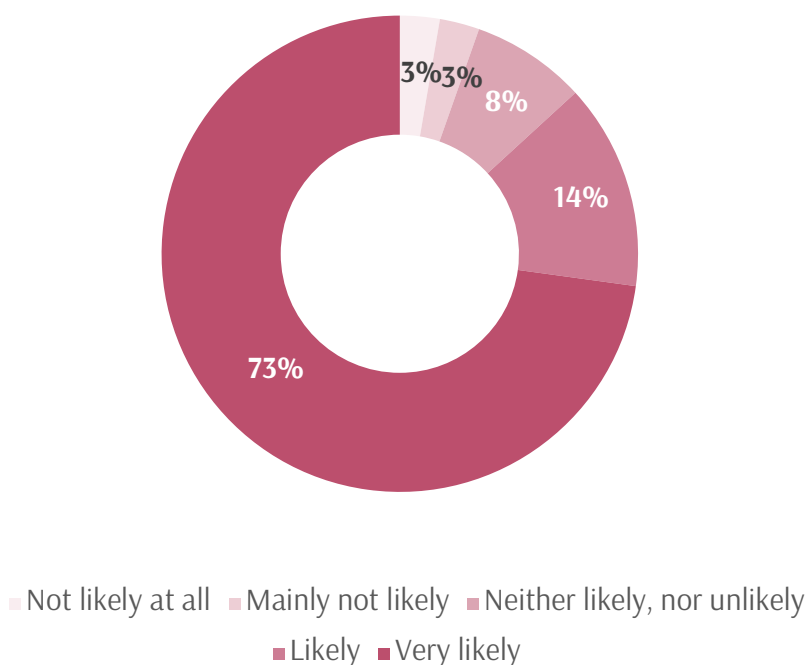
Graph 16: Verbal and non-verbal harassment. Total n=715.

The findings reveal that **staring** is one of the most pervasive forms of gender-based harassment in public spaces. As mentioned above, nearly nine out of ten women (87%) who participated in the study perceive staring as a likely or very likely occurrence in their city (Graph 17). This perception is not unfounded, as an overwhelming majority of women

(96%) report either experiencing unwanted staring themselves and/or knowing another woman who has (Graph 18). Despite its frequent occurrence, the impact of staring is far from trivial. It evokes strong emotional responses, with fear (44%), irritation (44%), and anger (33%) being the most reported feelings (Graph 19). However, despite these negative emotions, the data reveals a concerning pattern of inaction—67% of women report that they do not respond in any way when they experience staring (Graph 20). This lack of action is not necessarily a reflection of indifference (as shown by the emotional response) but rather an indication of the deeply ingrained power imbalances that shape women's ability to respond to harassment in public spaces.

Probability

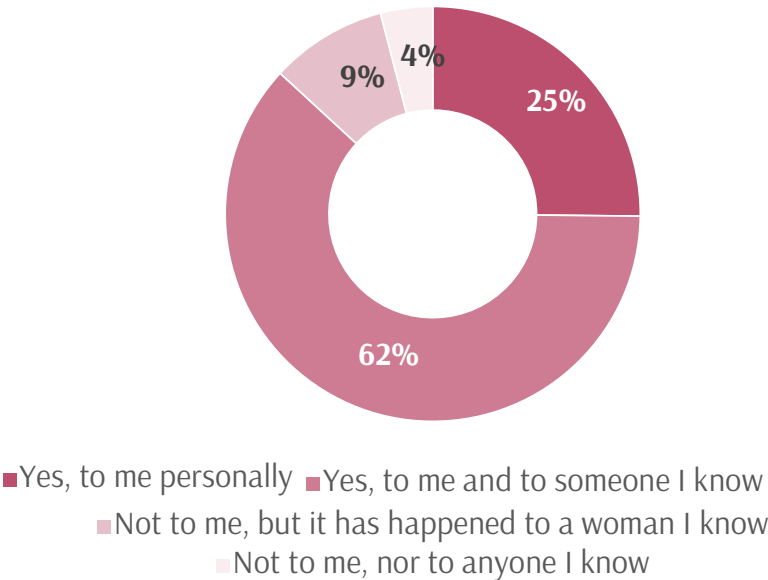
Q: How likely is it that a woman will be stared at in public spaces in your city?



Graph 17: Perceptions of probability of experiencing staring. Total n=715.

Experience

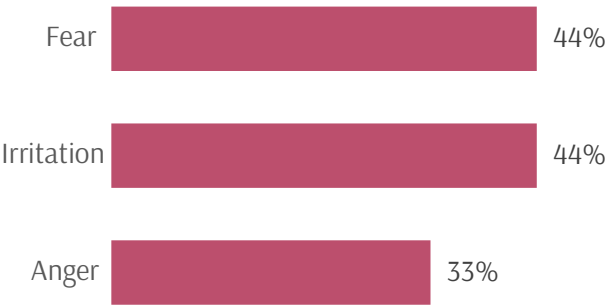
Q:Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone stare at you in a public place?



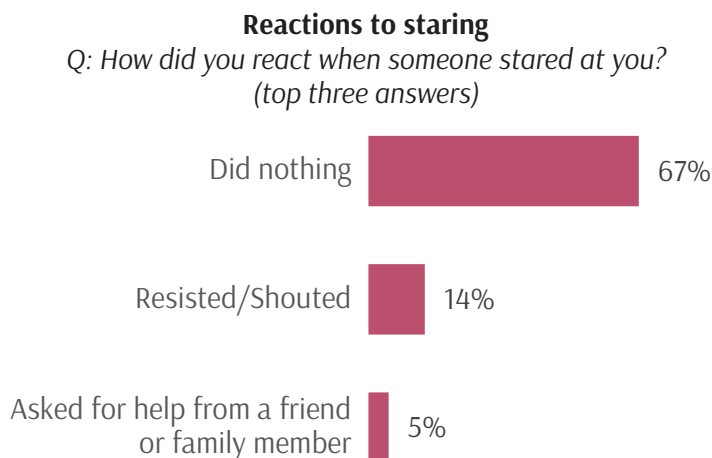
Graph 18: Experiences of staring. Total n=715.

Emotional responses to staring

Q:How did you feel when someone stared at you?
(top three answers)



Graph 19: Emotional responses to staring.



Graph 20: Reactions to staring.

STARING - Probability of happening – personal experience – feelings (top three? Or the top one?) - action

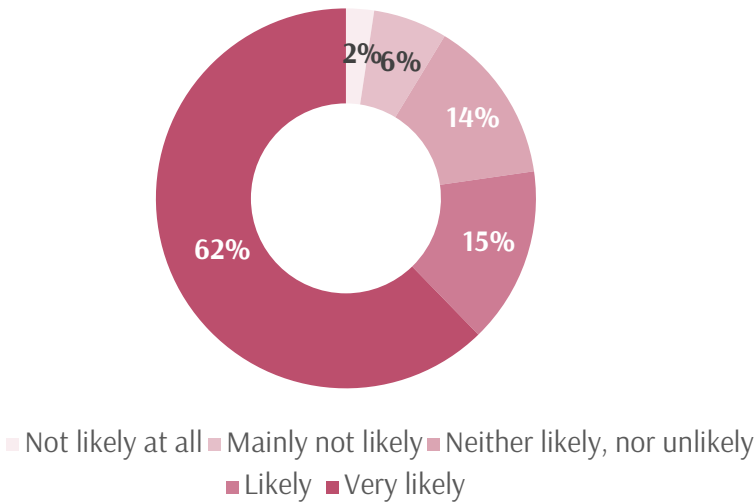
Honking from a car and catcalling, like staring, are widely perceived as common occurrences in public spaces in Skopje and Tetovo, with 77% of women considering them likely or very likely to happen (Graph 21). However, beyond perception, the prevalence of catcalling is even more pronounced in women's lived experiences. One in five women reports having experienced catcalling personally, while nearly two-thirds have both personally experienced it and know other women who have. An additional 14% of women, though not having been targeted themselves, know someone who has (Graph 22).

Despite its normalisation, catcalling continues to elicit strong emotional responses, demonstrating its impact as a form of public harassment. Irritation (57%) and anger (47%) are the most frequently reported emotions, reflecting the frustration and resentment women feel toward this intrusive behaviour. However, beyond annoyance, catcalling also evokes fear in more than one in three women (38%) and nearly one in five women (17%) report feelings of shame, pointing to the internalised effects of harassment and the ways in which it imposes an unwarranted sense of culpability on those targeted (Graph 23).

While, as with staring, the most common reaction to catcalling is to do nothing (as reported by 61% of women who have personal experience with this form of harassment), the data also suggests a higher tendency toward resistance. Nearly one in three women who has experienced it (29%) report responding by shouting or otherwise defending themselves, indicating that catcalling, as a verbal and more overt form of harassment, provokes greater pushback than staring. However, no one turned to reporting to the police (Graph 24).

Probability of happening

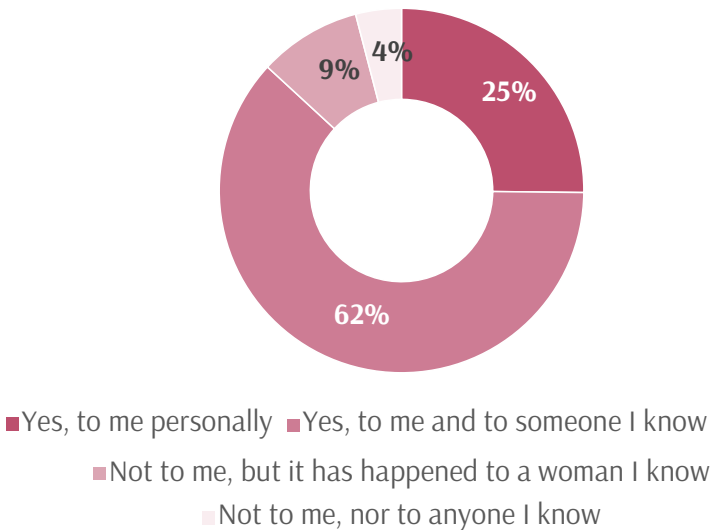
Q: How likely is it that a woman will be honked at/catcalled in public spaces in your city?



Graph 21: Perceptions of probability of being honked at/catcalled in public spaces. Total n=713.

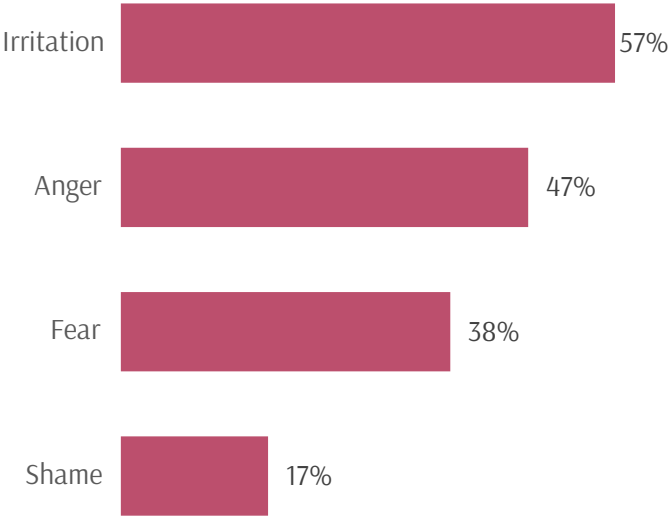
Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone honk at /catcall you in a public place?



Graph 22: Experiences of being honked at/catcalled in public space. Total n=714.

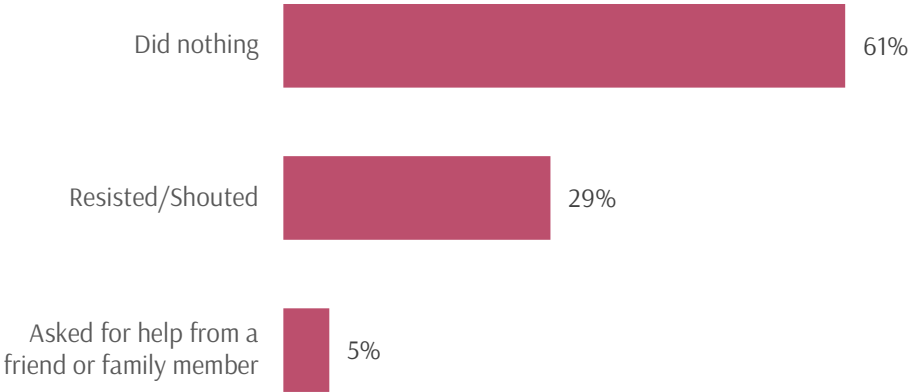
Emotional responses to honking/catcalling
*Q:How did you feel when you were honked at/catcalled?
(top four answers)*



Graph 23: Emotional responses to honking/catcalling.

Reactions to honking/catcalling

*Q:How did you react when someone honked at/catcalled you?
(top three answers)*



Graph 24: Reactions to honking/catcalling.

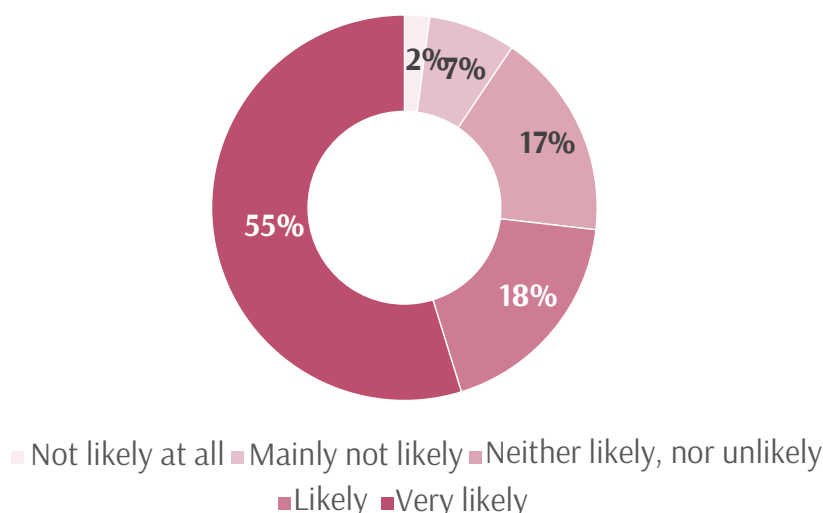
Inappropriate comments about one's physical appearance are widely recognised as a form of harassment in public spaces, with 73% of women considering them likely (18%) or very likely (55%) to occur (Graph 25). The prevalence of such comments is reflected in the lived experiences of almost nine out of ten women (86%), who report either having been personally subjected to them or knowing another woman who has (Graph 26).

The emotional toll of inappropriate comments is again significant. The most reported emotional responses to this form of harassment are irritation (62%) and anger (51%), indicating both frustration and outrage at the intrusion. However, beyond these immediate reactions, one in three women (30%) also report fear, while one in four (25%) experience shame, confirming that public harassment not only violates personal boundaries but also imposes a sense of vulnerability and self-doubt. Even women who have not directly faced inappropriate comments anticipate feelings of irritation and anger (41% each), indicating a shared understanding of the hostility these situations create (Graph 27).

Patterns of response to public harassment suggest that resistance may increase with the severity or directness of the intrusion. While inaction remains the most reported reaction (48%), compared to the previous forms of harassment, when it comes to inappropriate comments about appearance, a substantial share of women (42%) also report actively defending themselves, either verbally or through other forms of resistance. However, no one reported inappropriate comments to the police (Graph 28).

Probability of happening

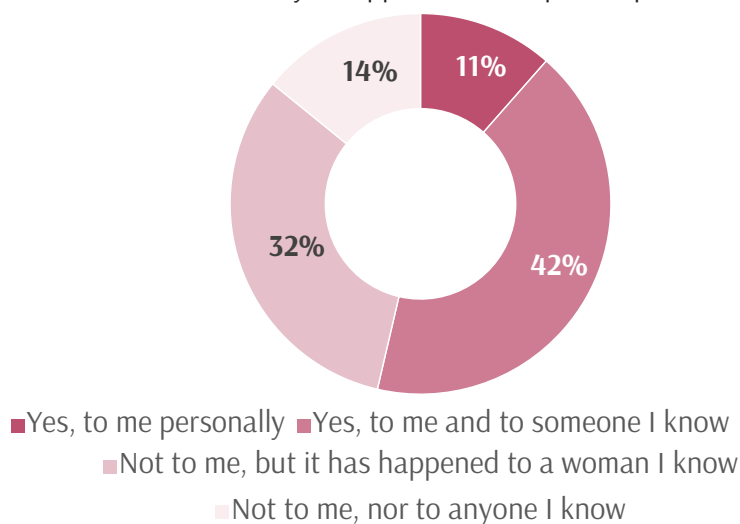
Q: How likely is it that inappropriate comments about a woman's appearance are made in public spaces in your city?



Graph 25: Perceptions of probability of inappropriate comments being made about a woman's appearance. Total n=712.

Experience

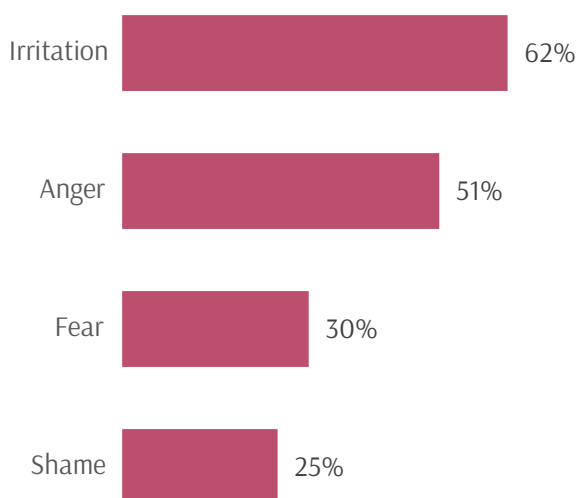
Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone make inappropriate comments about your appearance in a public space?



Graph 26: Experiences of inappropriate comments about a woman's appearance. Total n=714.

Emotional responses to inappropriate comments

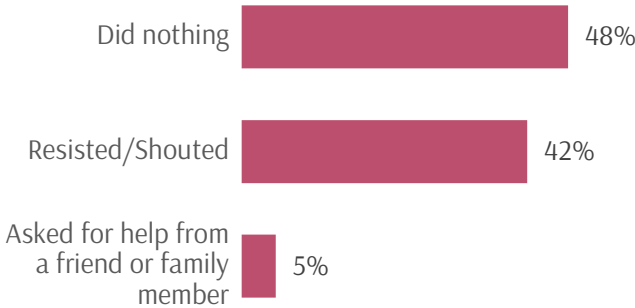
Q: How did you feel when someone made inappropriate comments about your appearance in a public space? (top four answers)



Graph 27: Emotional responses to inappropriate comments about a woman's appearance.

Reactions to inappropriate comments

Q:How did you react when someone made inappropriate comments about your appearance in a public space? (top three answers)



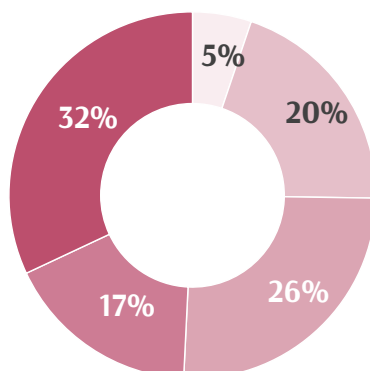
Graph 28: Reactions to inappropriate comments about a woman's appearance.

Nearly half of the women (49%) believe that it is likely or very likely that they will be subjected to **cursing or vulgar gestures** while in public (Graph 29). The data further reveals that this form of verbal abuse is not an isolated experience. Two out of three respondents (65%) have either personally been sworn at or made the target of vulgar gestures in public spaces or did not experience the abuse firsthand but know another woman who has (Graph 30). Among those who have experienced it, irritation (64%) and anger (54%) are the predominant emotional responses (Graph 31). Moreover, a significant portion of women who have not personally experienced such harassment still anticipate a negative emotional reaction—41% expect they would feel anger or irritation in such a situation.

Notably, compared to other forms of verbal harassment, swearing and vulgar gestures seem to provoke a stronger inclination toward resistance. Half (49%) of those who reported experiencing this form of harassment indicated that they responded by resisting, defending themselves, or confronting the harasser. The fact that this form of harassment is encountered with more resistance than other forms may indicate the overt aggression involved. However, despite this increased inclination toward self-defence, a significant proportion (38%) still reported opting for inaction, 7% asked for help from a friend or a family member and only 1% of those who participated in the study reported this form of harassment to the police (Graph 32).

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it that people swear at a woman or make vulgar gestures in public spaces?

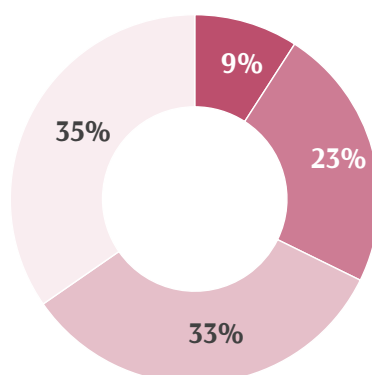


■ Not likely at all ■ Mainly not likely ■ Neither likely, nor unlikely
■ Likely ■ Very likely

Graph 29: Perceptions of probability of swearing/vulgar gestures directed at a woman in public space. Total n=713.

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone swear at you or make vulgar gestures at you in a public space?

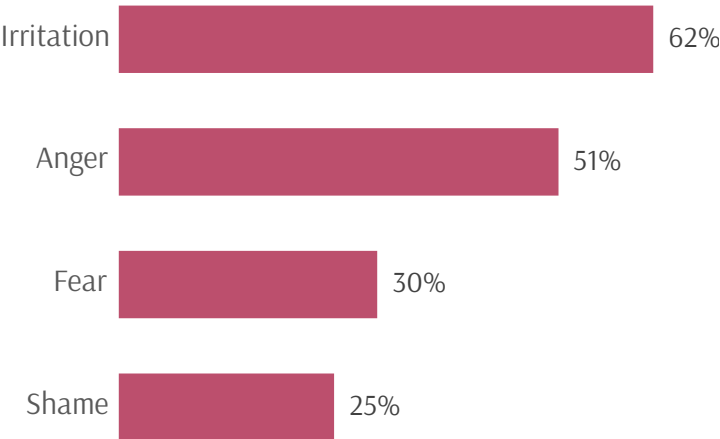


■ Yes, to me personally ■ Yes, to me and to someone I know
■ Not to me, but it has happened to a woman I know
■ Not to me, nor to anyone I know

Graph 30: Experiences of swearing/vulgar gestures directed at a woman in public space. Total n=713.

Emotional responses to swearing/vulgar gestures

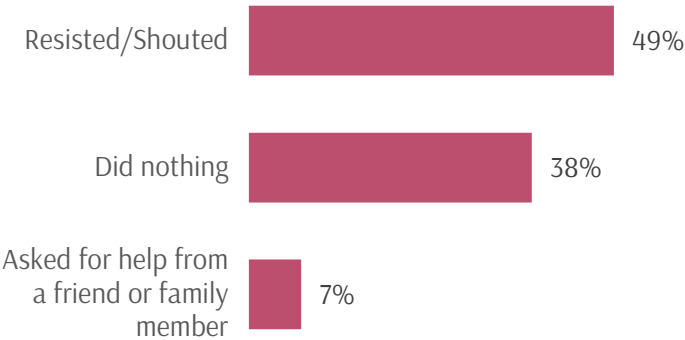
Q:How did you feel when someone swore at you or made vulgar gestures at you in a public space? (top three answers)



Graph 31: Emotional responses to swearing/vulgar gestures.

Reactions to swearing/vulgar gestures

Q:How did you react when someone swore at you or made vulgar gestures at you in a public space? (top three answers)



Graph 32: Reactions to swearing/vulgar gestures.

Verbal harassment based on ethnic or religious identity presents a more polarized perception among women compared to other forms of public harassment. While 45% of respondents consider it likely or very likely to occur, a substantial proportion (34%) believe it to be unlikely (Graph 33). Similarly to the perception of likelihood, unlike other

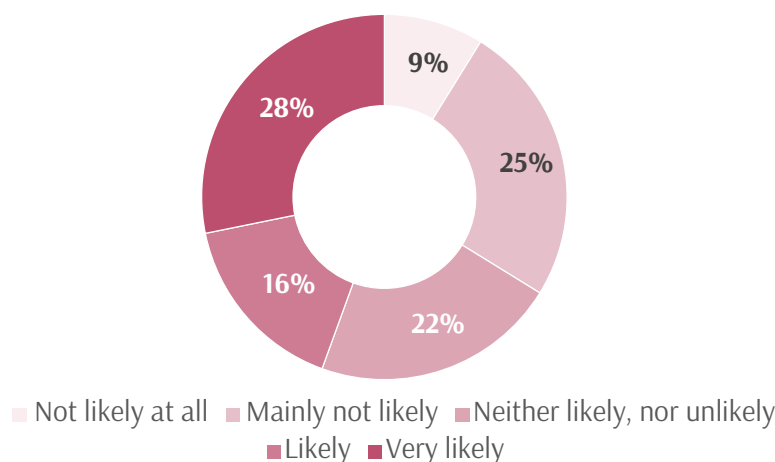
forms of verbal harassment, ethnic and religious insults are reported to be experienced less frequently as well. The majority of women (59%) have neither personally experienced nor know another woman who has been targeted in this way (Graph 34). However, nearly one in three (29%) is aware of another woman who has faced such harassment, and 13% report direct personal experience, including those who experienced it solely themselves and those who both experienced it personally and know someone else who did.

The emotional impact of this form of harassment aligns with other types of public verbal abuse, predominantly eliciting irritation and anger. However, it also provokes fear in nearly one-third of those who have experienced it, showing an additional layer of threat that accompanies insults targeting one's ethnic or religious identity.¹³² (Graph 35)

Responses to this form of harassment suggest a slightly stronger inclination toward resistance than other types of verbal abuse. The greatest share of those who have experienced it report pushing back by defending themselves, speaking out, or resisting the harassment (Graph 36). However, a substantial proportion still chose inaction and only 2 women from Tetovo reported it to the police. The fact that many women do nothing in response reflects the societal norms that discourage confrontation, leaving them with few options for addressing these experiences.¹³³

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it that a woman will be insulted on ethnic or religious grounds in public spaces in your city?



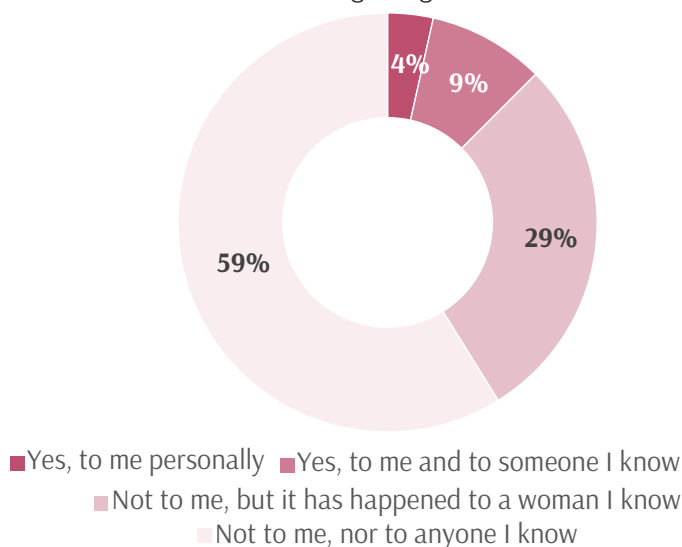
Graph 33: Perceptions of probability of a woman being insulted based on ethnic or religious grounds. Total n=713.

¹³² The sample size of women with personal experience is insufficient for reliable percentage representation. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted descriptively rather than as a percentual distribution.

¹³³ The sample size of women with personal experience is insufficient for reliable percentage representation. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted descriptively rather than as a percentual distribution.

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever been insulted in a public space on ethnic or religious grounds?



Graph 34: Experiences of a woman being insulted based on ethnic or religious grounds. Total n=712.

To conclude, verbal and non-verbal forms of harassment in public spaces are common and widely anticipated by most women. However, these forms of harassment are rarely reported to the police, leaving them largely unaddressed by formal mechanisms of accountability.

Police professionals interviewed as part of this study expressed a lack of clarity in addressing such incidents and emphasised the difficulty of fighting against them when there is no tangible evidence connected to the incident.

→ “It could be harassment, but it’s not a crime. Unless he stops and touches her, that’s different. But if he just drives by, honks, and says, “Hey, girl,” then leaves—what can you do? It’s not right, and it might scare her, but how do you report that? There’s nothing solid to act on, just one complaint and that’s it.” – Police officer, male, Tetovo

On the other hand, a key expert validating the survey findings emphasised the severity of the issue and the urgent need for systemic change. They argued that the Ministry of Interior and the prosecution must collaborate to develop strategies for gathering evidence, rather than shifting blame onto victims and dismissing cases prematurely. The expert emphasised that shifting blame onto victims is a form of structural discrimination that demands focused institutional reforms to be resolved.

Intimidation and Threats

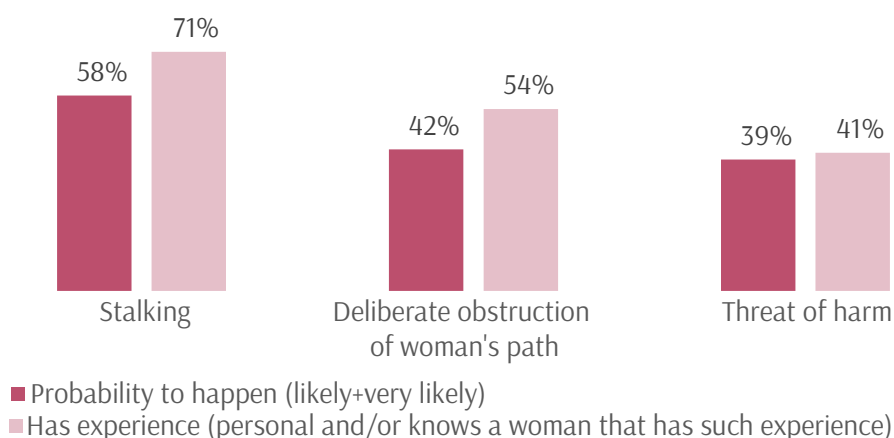
Another category of public space harassment examined in this study are different types of intimidation and threats, which encompass stalking, physical obstruction of path, and explicit threats of harm. Among these, stalking is perceived as the most likely to occur, with 58% of women considering it likely (20%) or very likely (38%). The deliberate obstruction of a woman's path follows, with 42% perceiving it as likely (16%) or very likely (26%). Explicit threats of harm are seen as the least likely, though still a concern for one third (39%) of respondents (Graph 35).

When considering personal experience, stalking is again the most frequently reported form of intimidation. Nearly three in four respondents (71%) have either experienced it firsthand, both personally and through someone they know, or know about another woman's experience. The deliberate obstruction of a woman's path follows, impacting 54% of women through direct or indirect experiences. Explicit threats of harm are the least commonly reported, with 41% of women having encountered them directly or indirectly (Graph 35). The following section provides a detailed analysis of the findings for each specific form of harassment.

Intimidation and threats

Q: How likely is it that a woman will experience [X form of harassment] in public spaces in your city?

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone do that to you/her in a public place?

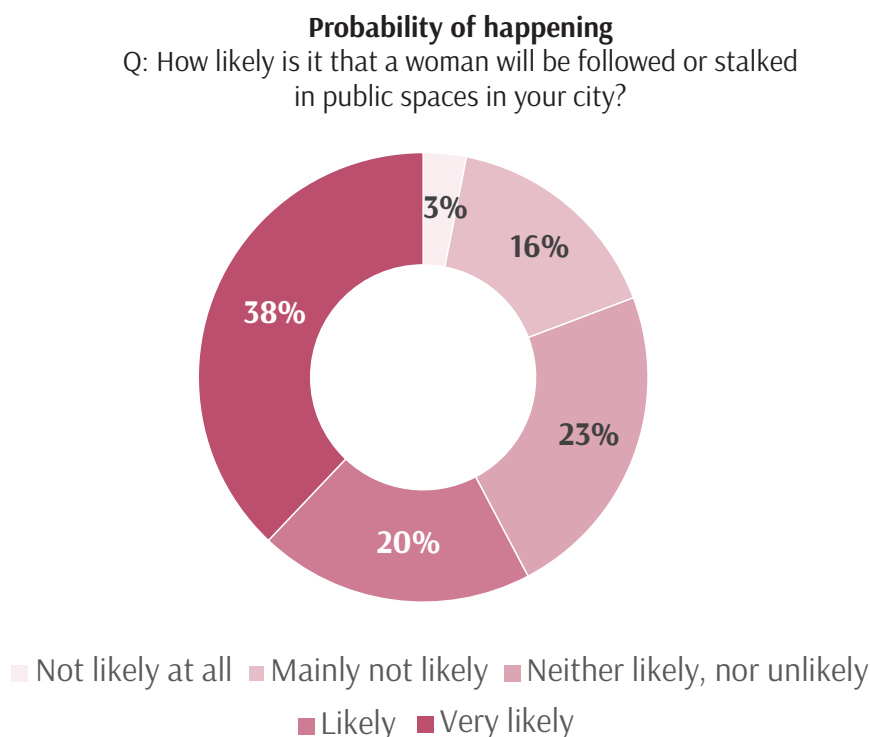


Graph 35: Intimidation and threats. Total n=715

Stalking is generally perceived as a likely threat in public spaces, with 58% of respondents considering it likely or very likely to occur (Graph 36). However, beyond perception, stalking emerges as an omnipresent reality for many women. Nearly three in four respondents (71%) have either experienced it firsthand (15%), both personally and through someone they know (26%), or indirectly through another woman's experience (30%) (Graph 37).

The emotional toll of stalking is distinct from other forms of harassment, particularly in its capacity to generate fear. An overwhelming 85% of women who have experienced stalking report feeling afraid, making fear the most common response (Graph 38). Even among women who have not personally experienced stalking, 79% anticipate fear as their primary emotional reaction, which further confirms the strong sense of vulnerability associated with this form of harassment.

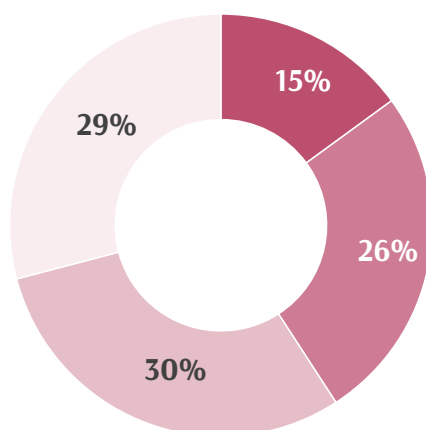
Women's responses to stalking reveal a greater inclination toward seeking support compared to verbal harassment. More than one-third (36%) of those who have experienced stalking turned to friends or family for help, while 26% actively resisted or defended themselves. However, one in four (24%) did nothing. However, only 8% reported the stalking to the police (Graph 39).



Graph 36: Perceptions of probability of a woman being followed or stalked in public. Total n=712

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone follow or stalk you/her in a public place?

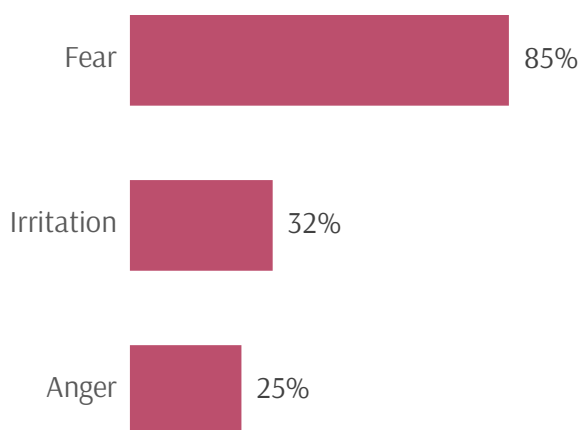


■ Personal experience ■ Both personal and experience of another woman
■ Knows someone with such experience ■ No experience

Graph 37: Experiences of being followed or stalked in public. Total n=715

Emotional responses to being followed/stalked

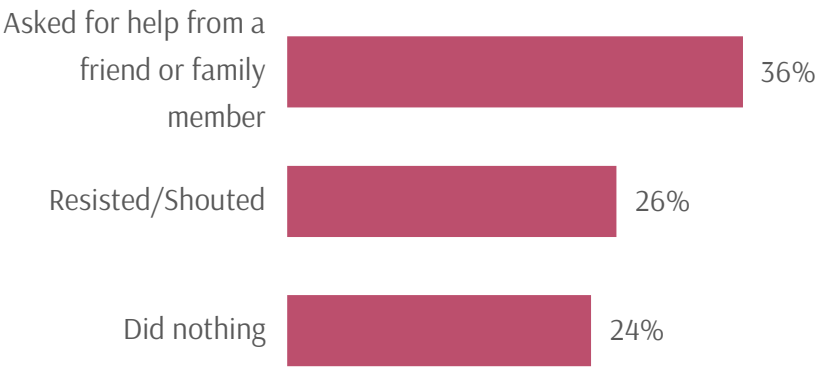
Q: How did you feel when you had someone follow you or stalk you in a public place? (top three answers)



Graph 38: Emotional responses to being followed/stalked.

Reaction to being followed/stalked

Q: How did you react when you had someone follow you or stalk you in a public place?
(top three answers)



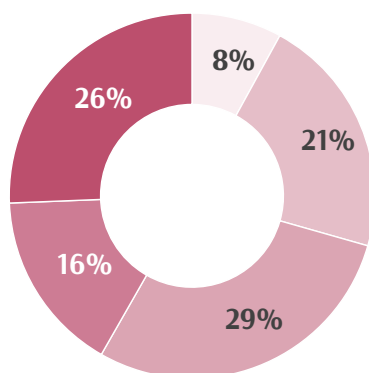
Graph 39: Reactions to being followed/stalked.

In comparison to stalking, the **deliberate obstruction of a woman’s path** is perceived as a somewhat less frequent occurrence, with 42% of women considering it likely or very likely to happen in public spaces in their city (Graph 40). However, the prevalence of this form of harassment remains significant—more than half (54%) of respondents have either experienced it personally or know another woman who has (Graph 41).

Being intentionally blocked provokes fear (57%), irritation (46%), and anger (38%), reflecting both the immediate distress and the broader frustration with public space harassment (Graph 42). Notably, women are more likely to resist this form of intrusion compared to other types of harassment. Half of those who have experienced it report actively defending themselves, raising their voices, or otherwise pushing back against the perpetrator (49%). However, despite this increased inclination toward resistance, inaction remains a common response, with one in three women choosing not to react (31%), while 15% sought support from friends or family. Only 3% of women reported this form of harassment to the police (Graph 43).

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it that a woman's path is intentionally obstructed in public spaces in your city?

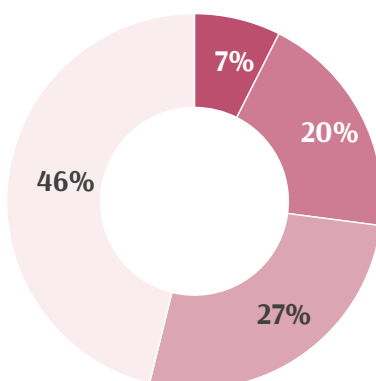


■ Not likely at all ■ Mainly not likely ■ Neither likely, nor unlikely
 ■ Likely ■ Very likely

Graph 40: Perceptions of probability of someone intentionally blocking a woman's path in public. Total n=714

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone intentionally block your path in a public place?

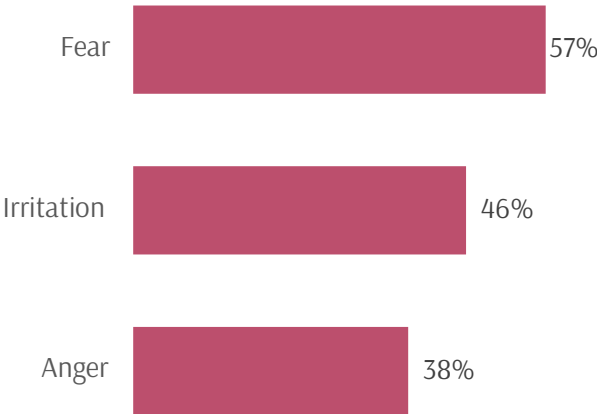


■ Personal experience ■ Both personal and experience of another woman
 ■ Knows someone with such experience ■ No experience

Graph 41: Experiences with someone intentionally blocking your path. Total n=713.

Emotional responses to having someone intentionally block your path

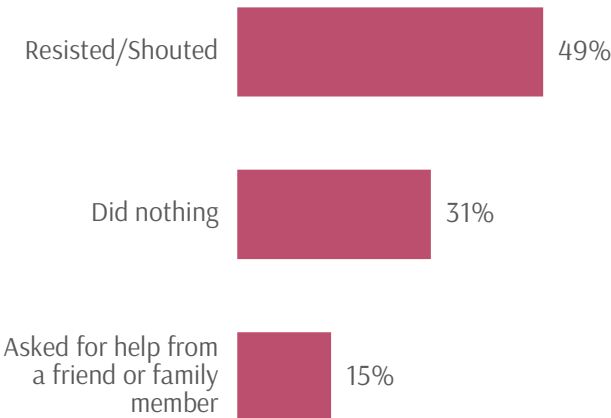
Q: How did you feel when you had someone intentionally block your path in a public place? (top three answers)



Graph 42: Emotional responses to having someone intentionally block your path.

Reaction to to having someone intentionally block your path

Q: How did you react when you had someone intentionally block your path in a public place? (top three answers)



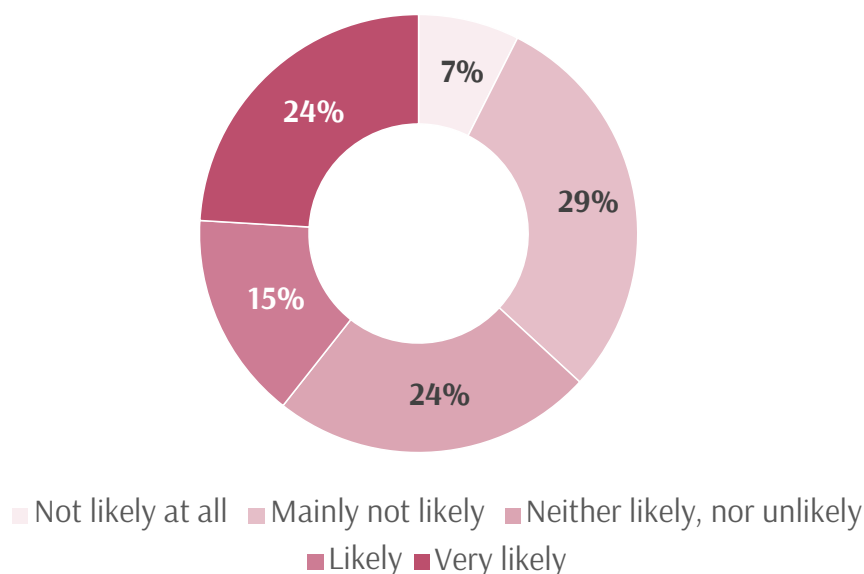
Graph 43: Reactions to having someone intentionally block your path.

Explicit threats of harm are the least anticipated and least commonly experienced form of intimidation-based harassment and violence. Only one in four women (24%) perceive this as a very likely occurrence in public spaces, while an additional 15% consider it somewhat likely (Graph 44). In line with these perceptions, 41% of respondents reported either personal or second-hand experience with such threats—4% had experienced it themselves, 10% had both personal experience and knew another woman who had, while 27% had only heard of it happening to a woman they know (Graph 45).

Fear dominates the emotional response to threats of harm, while irritation and anger follow, though to a lesser extent. Notably, resistance emerges as the most common response among those who have been threatened. However, quite a few women still report taking no action, and reporting to the police remains the least chosen course of action, with only 10 women seeking institutional intervention.¹³⁴

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it that a woman will be threatened with harm in public spaces in your city?

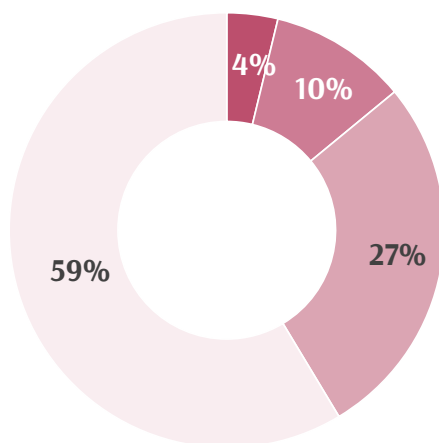


Graph 44: Perceptions of probability of a woman being threatened with harm in public.
Total n=711.

¹³⁴ The sample size of women with personal experience is insufficient for reliable percentage representation. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted descriptively rather than as a percentual distribution.

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever been threatened with harm in a public place?

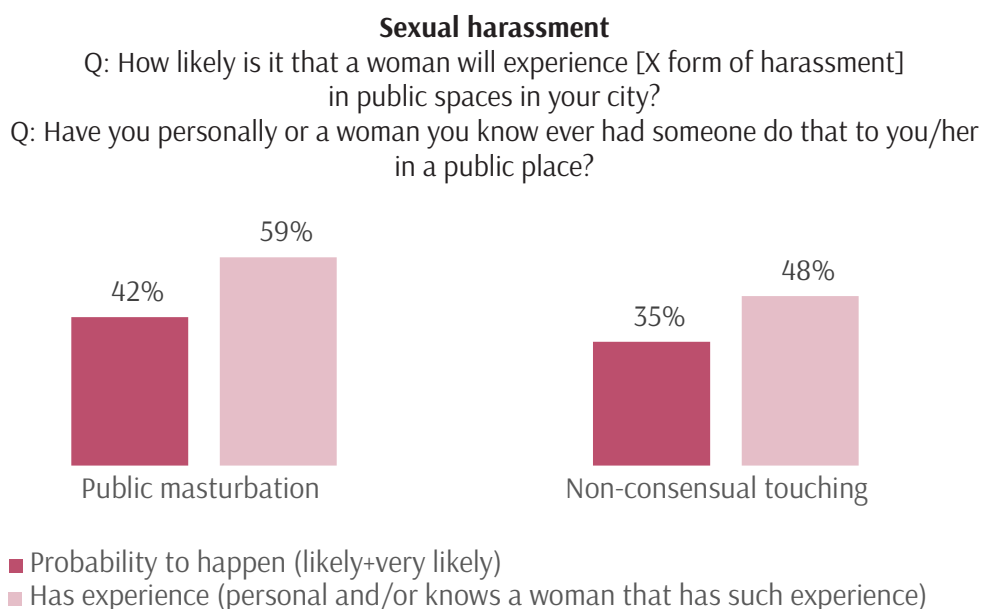


- Personal experience
- Both personal and experience of another woman
- Knows someone with such experience
- No experience

Graph 45: Experiences with being threatened with harm in public. Total n=714.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment in public spaces remains a pervasive issue. **Public masturbation** emerges as the more prevalent, with 42% of participants considering it likely or very likely to happen and 59% reporting personal experience or an experience of a woman they know. **Non-consensual touching**, while perceived as likely or very likely to occur by one in three women (35%), has been experienced by nearly half of respondents (48%) (Graph 46). 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 harassment do not significantly differ between the two cities.



Graph 46: Sexual harassment. Total n=715.

Public masturbation is perceived as a likely occurrence in public spaces by 17% of respondents and as a very likely occurrence by one in four women who participated in the survey (27%) (Graph 47). However, beyond perception, the prevalence of this form of sexual harassment is significant, with nearly two-thirds (59%) of women reporting direct or indirect exposure. Specifically, 16% have personally experienced it, 19% have both experienced it themselves and know another woman who has, and 24% know of it happening to a woman they know (Graph 48).

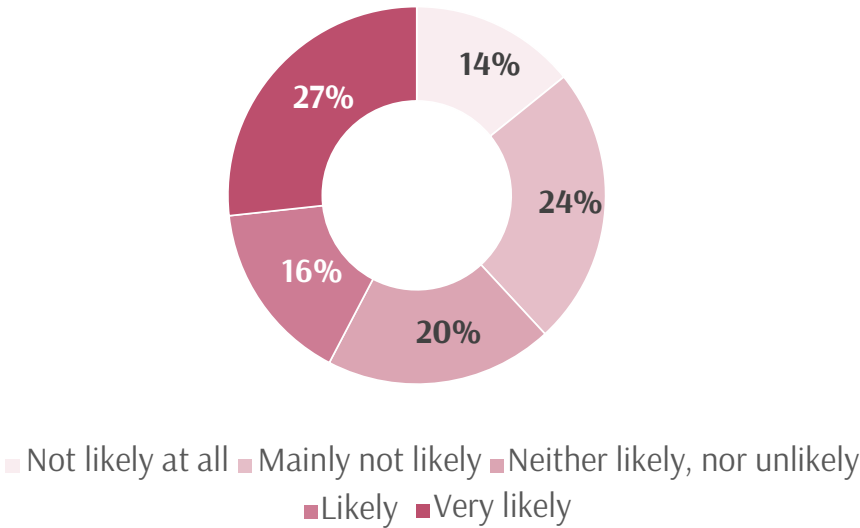
The emotional impact of public masturbation is profound, with fear (59%), irritation (47%), and anger (46%) being the most reported responses among those who have encountered

it. Notably, shame also emerges as a significant reaction, affecting one in four respondents (26%) (Graph 49). Even among those without direct experience, anticipated emotional responses remain strong, with 52% expecting to feel fear, 40% anger, 38% irritation, and 27% shame.

Despite the intensity of these emotional responses, public masturbation remains largely unchallenged in public spaces. Inaction is the most common reaction, with 40% of those who have witnessed or experienced it choosing not to respond. While 30% resisted or shouted in response, institutional reporting remains rare—only 4% of affected women reported the incident to the police (Graph 50).¹³⁵

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it to expose one's genitals or masturbate in front of a woman in public spaces in your city?

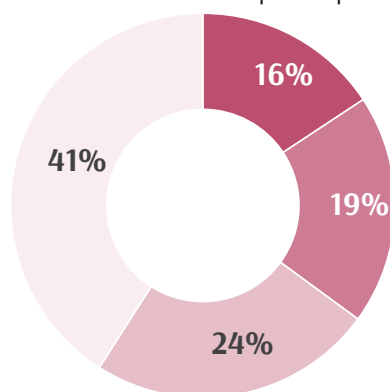


Graph 47: Perceptions of probability of someone showing their genitals to or masturbating in front of a woman in public. Total n=711.

¹³⁵ Total n=9 out of 250 who have experienced it personally.

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had someone show you their genitals or masturbate in a public place?

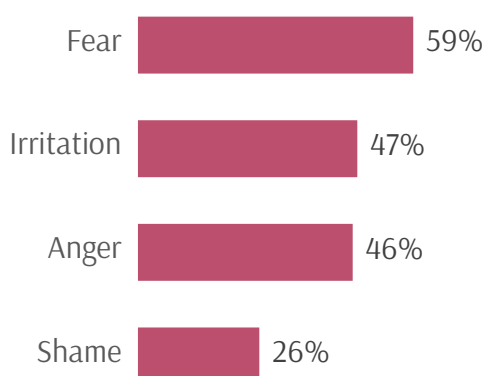


- Personal experience ■ Both personal and experience of another woman
- Knows someone with such experience ■ No experience

Graph 48: Experiences with someone showing their genitals or masturbating in front of you in public. Total n=713.

Emotional responses to someone showing their genitals or masturbating in front of you in public

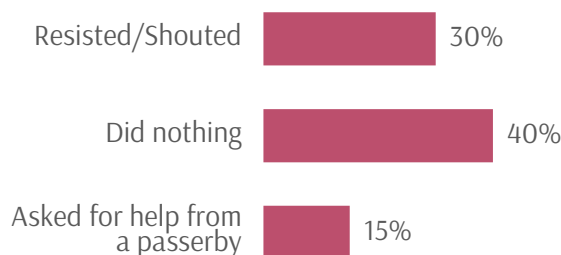
Q: How did you feel when someone showed you their genitals or masturbated in front of you in a public place? (top four answers)



Graph 49: Emotional responses to someone showing you their genitals or masturbating in front of you in public.

Reaction to someone showing their genitals or masturbating in front of you in public

Q: How did you react when someone showed you their genitals or masturbated in front of you in a public place? (top three answers)



Graph 50: Reactions to someone showing you their genitals or masturbating in front of you in public.

Perceptions of the likelihood of being **touched or groped without consent** in public spaces vary significantly between women in Skopje and Tetovo. Overall, one in three women (33%) consider this form of sexual harassment likely or very likely to happen. However, women from Skopje—who are predominantly Macedonian—are more likely to perceive it as a probable occurrence (40%) compared to women from Tetovo—who are predominantly Albanian—where only 22% share this view. Conversely, scepticism about the likelihood of such harassment is higher among women in Tetovo, with 45% considering it unlikely, compared to 35% of women in Skopje (Graph 51).

Despite these differences in perception, actual experiences of non-consensual touching in public spaces are common and do not significantly differ between the two cities. Nearly half of all respondents (48%) have encountered this form of harassment, either personally (6%), both personally and through another woman they know (15%), or indirectly through a woman they know (27%) (Graph 52).

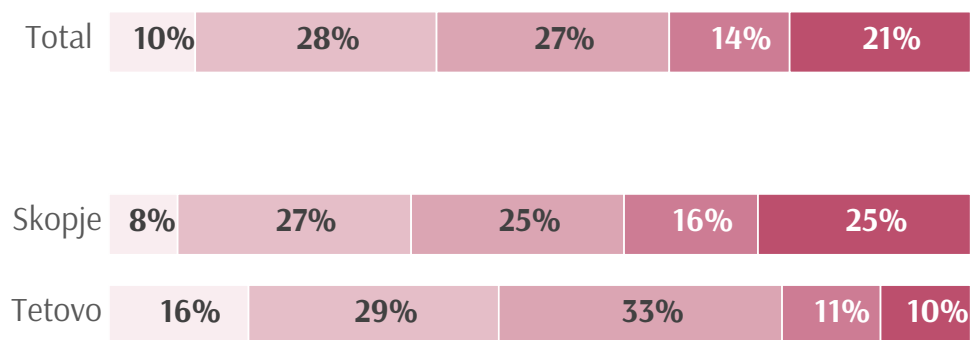
Emotional responses to unwanted touching reveal notable regional differences. While fear and irritation are consistently reported across all respondents, shame is more prevalent among women in Tetovo than in Skopje. In contrast, anger is significantly more pronounced among women in Skopje compared to those in Tetovo.¹³⁶ These disparities suggest that cultural norms and traditional values tied to ethnicity influence not only how women perceive public space harassment but also how they emotionally process and respond to it. Women from communities with stronger expectations of modesty and restraint may internalise shame more deeply, while those from backgrounds where gender equality and

¹³⁶ The sample size of women with personal experience is insufficient for reliable percentage representation. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted descriptively rather than as a percentual distribution.

personal autonomy are more emphasised may be more likely to express anger as a response to such violations.^{137 138} Among women who have personally experienced unwanted touch, the majority reported resisting and defending themselves. However, a significant number chose to remain passive and only three participants with such experiences reported the incidents to the police.¹³⁹

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it that a woman will be unwantedly touched or groped in a sexual manner



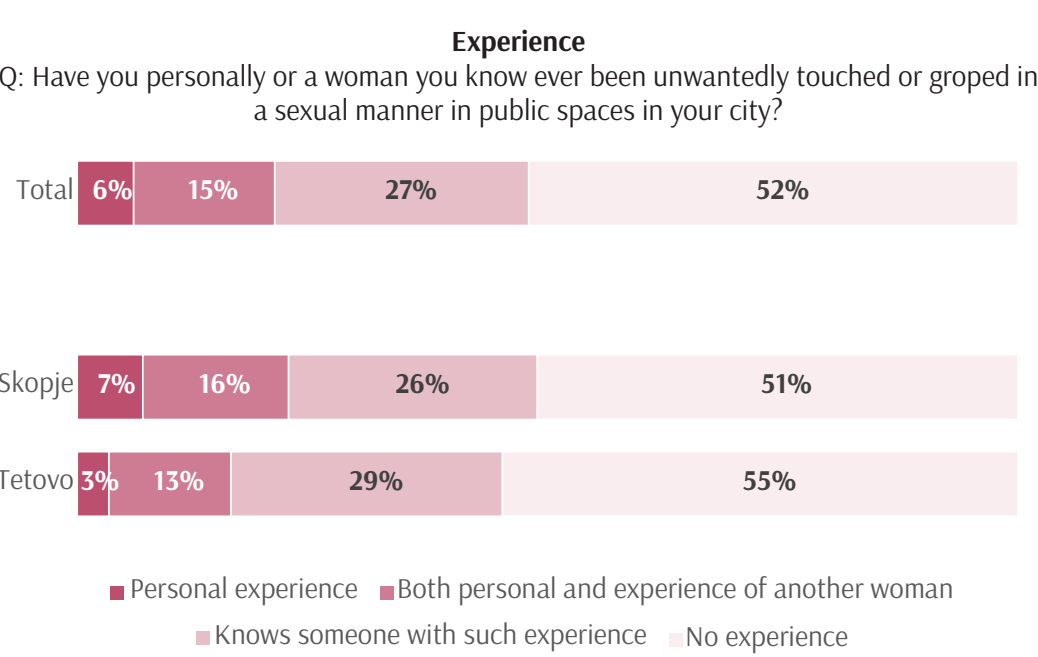
■ Not likely at all
 ■ Mainly not likely
 ■ Neither likely, nor unlikely
 ■ Likely
 ■ Very likely

Graph 51: Perceptions of probability of someone unwantedly touching or groping a woman in public. Total n=712, Skopje n=502, Tetovo n=210.

137 Veltman, A. and Piper, M. (2014). *Autonomy, Oppression, and Gender*. Oxford University Press.

138 Christianson, M., Teiler, Å., & Eriksson, C. (2020). "A woman's honour tumbles down on all of us in the family, but a man's honour is only his': young women's experiences of patriarchal chastity norms", *International Journal of Qualitative Studies on Health and Well-Being*, 16(1).

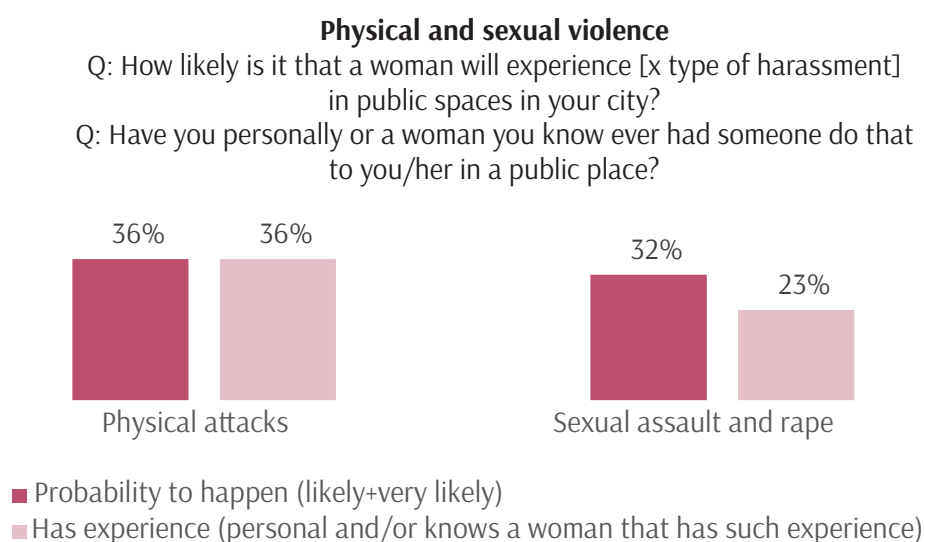
139 Out of n=147



Graph 52: Experience with someone unwantedly touching or groping you in public. Total n=711, Skopje n=503, Tetovo n=208.

Physical and Sexual Violence

Physical and sexual violence, though less anticipated and experienced compared to other forms of harassment, remain disturbingly prevalent among the women surveyed. Physical attacks are perceived as likely by 39% of respondents, while 32% consider sexual assaults and rape as probable threats. Actual experiences reflect similar levels of prevalence: 36% of respondents have either personally experienced physical attacks or know a woman who has, and 23% report personal experience or knowledge of sexual assaults and rape (Graph 53).



Graph 53: Physical and sexual violence. Total n=715.

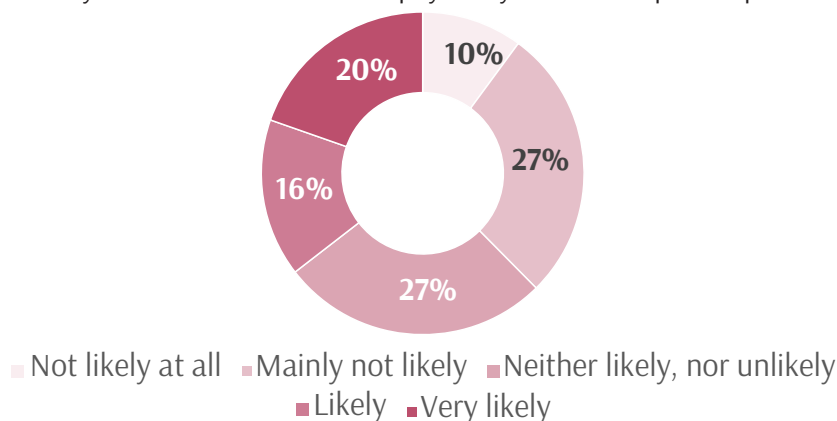
Physical attacks in public spaces are perceived as a likely or very likely occurrence by over one-third (36%) of women surveyed (Graph 54). Notably, women in Skopje (39%) are more likely to anticipate such violence compared to those in Tetovo (27%). However, when it comes to actual experiences, the prevalence is similar across both cities—36% of women have either personally experienced a physical attack or know another woman who has (Graph 55).

Emotional responses to physical violence reveal significant regional differences. Fear, anger, and irritation are the most reported emotions among survivors, but shame is notably higher among women in Tetovo than in Skopje. Conversely, anger is more prevalent among women in Skopje compared to Tetovo. In response to physical attacks, more than half of respondents with personal experience report resisting or defending themselves, though a considerable proportion still take no action. Reporting to the police remains limited despite the severity of the violence—only 11 respondents from Skopje who have experienced a

physical attack¹⁴⁰ have reported it. This is the highest rate of reporting among all forms of harassment examined.¹⁴¹

Probability of happening

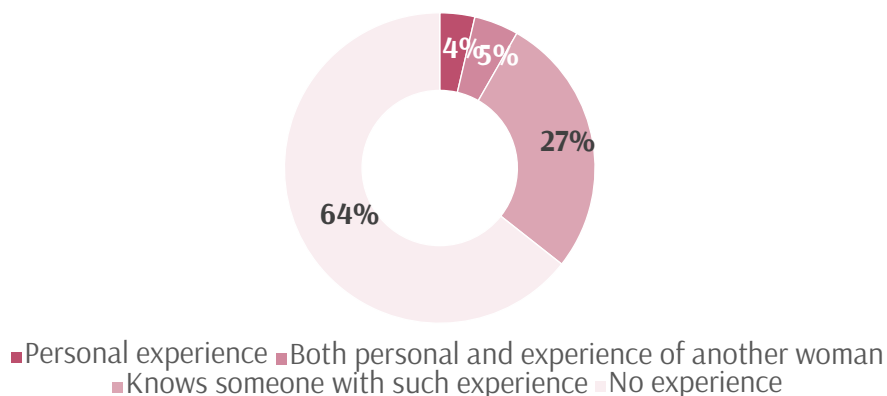
Q: How likely is it that a woman will be physically attacked in public spaces in your city?



Graph 54: Perceptions of probability of a woman being physically attacked in public. Total n=713.

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever had been physically attacked in a public place?



Graph 55: Experiences with being physically attacked in public. Total n=713.

¹⁴⁰ Out of total n=59

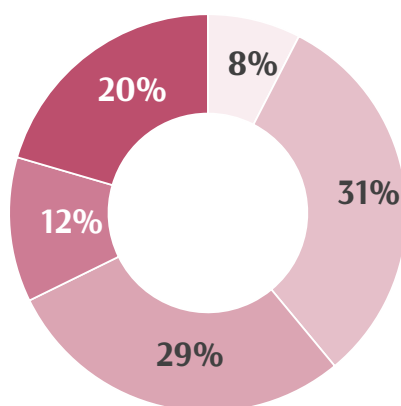
¹⁴¹ The sample size of women with personal experience is insufficient for reliable percentage representation. Therefore, these findings should be interpreted descriptively rather than as a percentual distribution.

Perceptions of the likelihood of **sexual assault and rape** in public spaces vary, with one in three women (32%) considering it a probable occurrence (Graph 56). This perception is more prevalent among women in Skopje (36%) than in Tetovo (23%). However, actual experiences of sexual violence do not differ significantly between the two cities—one in five women (23%) have either personally experienced sexual assault or rape in a public space or know another woman who has (Graph 57).

Given the relatively low number of women who have personally encountered this form of violence (17 in Skopje and 10 in Tetovo), emotional and behavioural responses are analysed in absolute numbers. Of the 27 women who have experienced sexual assault in public spaces, 15 reported feeling scared at the time of the incident, while 8 reported anger, irritation, or shame. Similarly, among those without direct experience, fear is the most anticipated emotional response, followed by anger, irritation, and shame. Survivors' reactions to the assault suggest significant obstacles to seeking justice. While 10 women resisted or shouted, and 7 turned to friends or family for support, 9 did not take any action. Institutional responses remain critically underutilised, as only 2 women reported the assault to the police.

Probability of happening

Q: How likely is it that a woman will be sexually assaulted or raped in public spaces in your city?

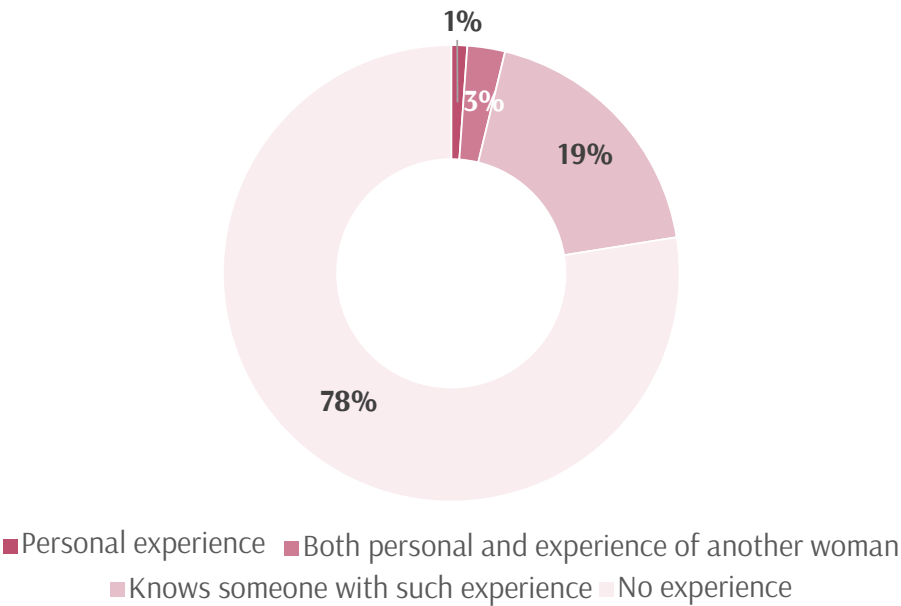


- Not likely at all
- Mainly not likely
- Neither likely, nor unlikely
- Likely
- Very likely

Graph 56: Perceptions of probability of a woman being sexually assaulted or raped in public. Total n=713.

Experience

Q: Have you personally or a woman you know ever been sexually assaulted or raped in a public place?



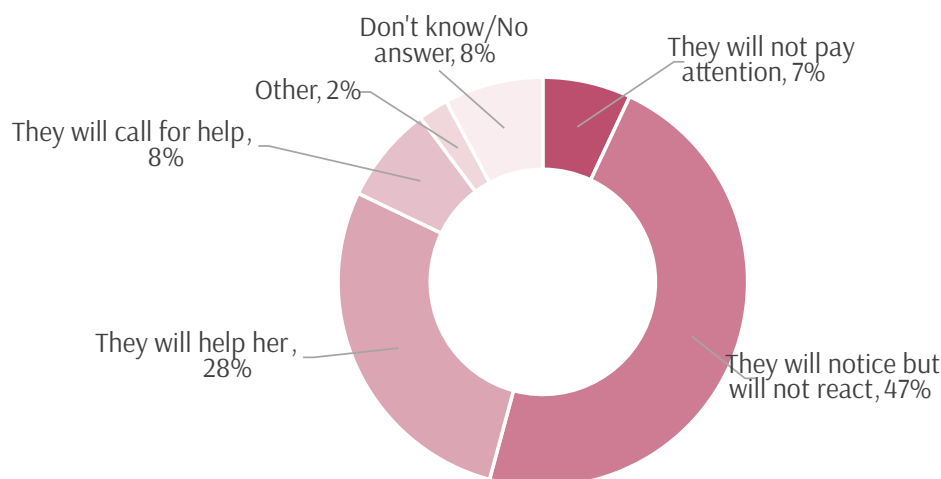
Graph 57: Experiences with being sexually assaulted or raped in public. Total n=712.

Breaking the Silence: Reporting Violence and Access to Support

Nearly half of the survey participants (47%) stated that bystanders would notice but fail to intervene if a girl or woman were harassed or attacked in public. In contrast, only 28% believed that passersby would offer assistance (Graph 58). These findings confirm the bystander effect and a lack of collective responsibility in addressing violence, including gender-based violence in public spaces,¹⁴² with research showing greater bystander involvement in social environments where there is a belief that more peers approve of this behaviour.¹⁴³

Reaction of witnesses of violence

Q: In your opinion, how do people usually react if they pass by a girl or woman on the street who is being attacked or harassed in any way?



Graph 58: Reactions of witnesses of violence. Total n=715.

Half of the respondents have neither reported an incident to the police nor know a woman who has (50%). Those who have reported an incident (8% have personal experience with reporting, while 5% have both personal experience and know another woman who has done it) described cases involving physical and sexual assault in public spaces, perpetrated by strangers, persons in authority, or current and former partners (Graph 59). However,

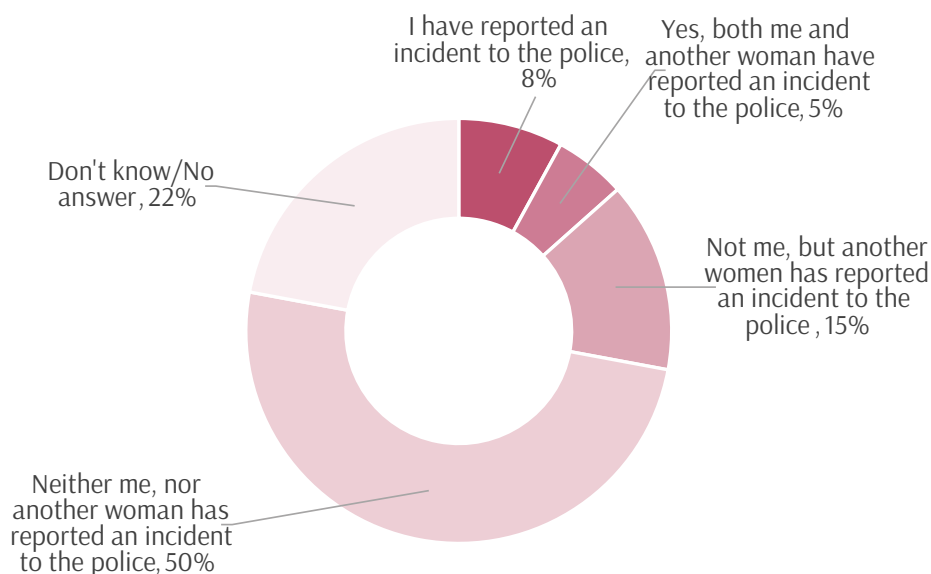
¹⁴² Park, S., Woo, H., & Kim, S. H. (2024). "A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Bystander's Barriers to Intervene in Gender-Based Violence and the Role of Failed Prior Attempts", *Trauma, violence & abuse*, 25(3), pp.1998–2011. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231204887> on March 26, 2025.

¹⁴³ Mainwaring, C., Gabbert, F., & Scott, A. J. (2023). "A Systematic Review Exploring Variables Related to Bystander Intervention in Sexual Violence Contexts", *Trauma, violence & abuse*, 24(3), pp. 1727–1742. Retrieved from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380221079660> on March 26, 2025.

other reported incidents included a range of offenses that did not necessarily fall under the category of gender-based violence in public spaces.

Reporting to the police

Q: Have you ever reported an incident to the police or do you know another woman who has reported an incident to the police?



Graph 59: Reporting incidents to the police. Total n=715.

Among respondents who had experienced an incident but chose not to report it to the police, the reasons for non-reporting can be categorised into five key areas. The most cited reason was **distrust in authorities or the legal system**¹⁴⁴, with nearly one in three respondents (31%) convinced that reporting an incident would be ineffective, either because the police would not take action or would not believe them. **Lack of awareness or understanding for the incident's severity**¹⁴⁵ was noted by 19% of respondents, many of whom either considered the incident too trivial to report or did not realise reporting was an option. **Fear and safety concerns**¹⁴⁶ were cited by 18%, with respondents expressing fear of the perpetrator, concern over potential retaliation, or feeling too overwhelmed to contact the police. **Shame, guilt, and social stigma**¹⁴⁷ also played a significant role, as 14% of respondents felt ashamed or uncomfortable, feared judgment from others, believed they were responsible for what happened, or did not want the perpetrator to face legal

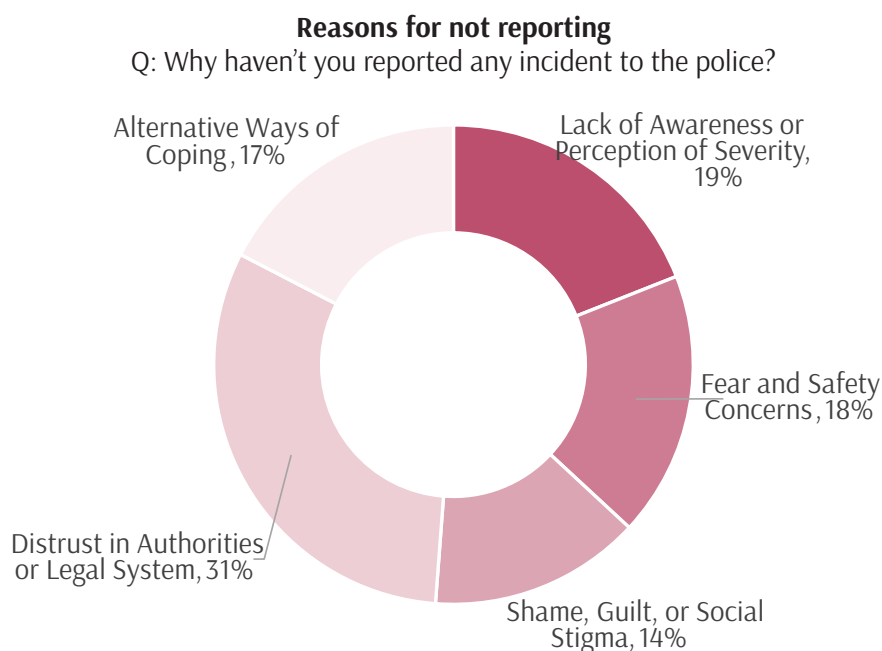
¹⁴⁴ Sum of answers: 'I thought the police wouldn't do anything' and 'I thought the police wouldn't believe me'

¹⁴⁵ Sum of answers: 'It was too trivial/It wasn't serious enough' and 'It didn't occur to me that that was an option'

¹⁴⁶ Sum of answers: 'I was afraid of the perpetrator', 'I was afraid of retaliation', and 'I was too upset to call the police'

¹⁴⁷ Sum of answers: 'I was ashamed, uncomfortable', 'I didn't want anyone to find out', 'I thought it was my fault', 'Someone stopped me or discouraged me' and 'I didn't want the attacker to get arrested or have trouble with the police'

consequences. Lastly, 17% of respondents opted for **alternative ways of coping**,¹⁴⁸ either by handling the situation themselves or seeking support outside the justice system (Graph 60).



Graph 60: Reasons for not reporting an incident to the police.

Findings indicate that distrust in the police is prevalent among older (Roma and non-Roma) women. Participants highlighted incidents where perpetrators had connections within law enforcement, leading to further victimisation and a lack of accountability. This perceived affiliation between police officers and offenders discourages women from reporting crimes, as it fosters fear and undermines confidence in justice systems.

→ *The most troubling aspect is that even individuals employed in law enforcement can be part of this problem. For instance, a woman who experienced violence at the hands of someone under the influence of drugs reported the incident to the police, only to have the same individual confront her later and question why she reported him. This undermines trust in the police, particularly when law enforcement officers are perceived as acquaintances of the perpetrator. Such connections can embolden the perpetrator to become even more violent toward the victim following a report. Furthermore, news reports often highlight the presence of security personnel in court proceedings, which further erodes public confidence in law enforcement institutions. – Female, 50, Tetovo*

¹⁴⁸ Sum of answers: 'I dealt with it by myself' and 'I sought help elsewhere'

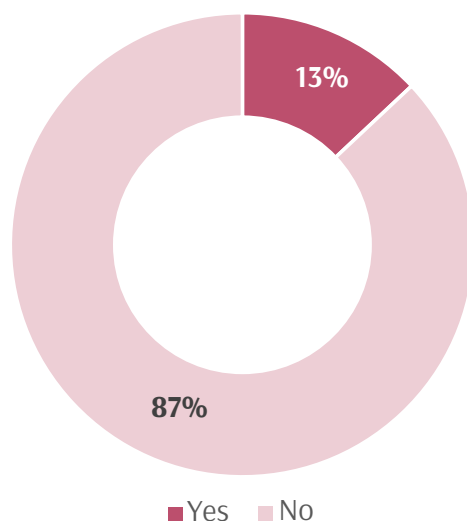
→ *There is a problem with police intervention because everyone knows someone in the police and thinks they can do whatever they want. You're afraid of your life to report. – Female, 57, Tetovo*

→ *“The police are trained for these situations, so if they notice someone with a mental disability, they should intervene. Instead, when you reach out to them, they yell at you and say, ‘We’re not Bardovci, call them.’ But what happens if this person ends up attacking someone later? Whose responsibility is that? Isn’t it your job to protect people and ensure their safety?” - Roma woman, 65, Skopje.*

These barriers to reporting are intensified by the finding that the vast majority of surveyed women (87%) were unaware of existing and available hotlines, crisis centres, or organisations they could contact in cases of harassment or violence (Graph 61). Among the 13% who reported knowing of such services, crisis centre ‘Hope’, HERA, SOS lines (mentioned in general), the National Network Against Violence Against Women and Domestic violence were the most frequently mentioned. This lack of awareness further limits access to support and emphasises the urgent need for stronger outreach and education on available resources for survivors.

Awareness about support services to victims of violence

Q: Do you know of a hotline or center for victims of violence or harassment, or organisations you can contact?



Graph 61: Awareness about support services to victims of violence. Total n=715.

In discussion with representatives from NGOs that provide social and legal services to victims of violence, another perspective was gained. According to them, the main challenge

of their work lies in the difficulty of addressing non-contact violence. Instances such as public harassment are often not categorised or processed adequately by institutions, which require visible evidence for action. Therefore, victims often lose trust and interest in engaging with authorities after repeated unsuccessful reporting attempts, resulting in underreporting. Furthermore, there is the issue of deficiency of institutional feedback. These organisations frequently experience a lack of feedback from social services or police, making it difficult to track case outcomes. This disconnects leaves organisations and victims uncertain about progress, including arrests, legal actions, or care provided.

→ *‘Victims or potential victims often don’t trust institutions. I’ve talked to many women who refuse to report violence because they don’t believe institutions will help them. It speaks volumes about the situation in the country regarding gender-based violence. For example, a victim went to the police and heard officers making inappropriate comments about her appearance, like, ‘Look at her, I’d do things to her too.’ Instead of protecting her, they did that.’ – CSO representative, Skopje*

In Their Own Words: Women's Lived Experiences of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment in Public Spaces

In line with our methodological principles, and guided by a feminist phenomenological approach,¹⁴⁹ our research creates space for the personal, subjective and ordinary experiences of women and girls to be heard and documented. Treating women and girls as key sources of information, the following report outlines the personal feelings, perceptions and responses of victims concerning their experiences.

We collected women's testimonials of lived experiences of gender-based violence and harassment in public spaces by incorporating open-ended questions as part of our questionnaire, issuing an open call for submissions and reviewing reports on the "Reagiraj!" platform.¹⁵⁰

Experiences With Verbal Harassment

The testimonials we received from victims highlight the prevalence of verbal harassment women and girls face in the streets of Skopje and Tetovo. One such account describes verbal harassment during daylight hours in a central area that is generally considered safe:

→ *"We were walking with a friend toward Leptokarija, literally barricaded in scarves and hats. As we were talking, an older man at the age of around 50 rode past us on a bike. He reached out his arm wanting to touch us (but didn't succeed) and yelled: 'I would go down on both of you!'. We were literally shocked that we would experience something like this in the middle of the day, in a neighbourhood that counts as 'safe'."*

Non-Verbal Harassment

Similarly, another case of harassment occurred in broad daylight on "Leninova" Street, a high-traffic area in the centre of the city, where a man persistently invaded a woman's personal space, moving increasingly close in a way that made her feel uncomfortable, until her husband arrived in a car to pick her up, ultimately ensuring her safety:

149 Vera-Gray, F. (2016). *Men's Intrusion, Women's Embodiment*. Routledge.

150 "Reagiraj!" - <https://www.reagiraj-bidibezbedna.mk/>

→ “I was waiting for my husband to pick me up by car. A man of about 40 years of age, in black trousers, was standing by the corner across from me, then continued to move 3 meters away from me, then was only one meter apart, ultimately **coming into my personal space**. He kept standing next to me and waited with me for 10 minutes. When my husband came to pick me up, I nervously got in and the man left as if nothing had happened.”

Harassment can also manifest through unsolicited display of pornographic material or public masturbation in front of women. Testimonials show that the common response is to ignore the perpetrator and, if possible, take a different route. The following incident occurred in a narrow alley between the “Kliment Ohridski” and “Vasil Glavinov” Boulevards, showing how urban layout can prevent victims’ ability to escape to safety, as the passage offers limited side paths for rerouting:

→ “The same man has appeared in this alley before, touching his genitals and walking around undressed. Because of the lack of clear visibility throughout the entire alley, I would turn a corner only to find him in another section—either undressed or touching himself. This used to happen when I finished work after 5 PM, so now I changed my route to avoid this area entirely.”

A similar incident around the MRT building was reported by another participant:

→ “I was taking the pedestrian path opposite MRT, a small walkway that runs through the courtyard of several university faculties...I was walking with a normal pace, lost in thought, when I saw a man approaching me from a distance...He was coming from the opposite direction, walking toward me, and he looked to be around 60 years old—someone who seemed like a working-class man. He seemed cheerful and was holding a mobile phone in his hand. As he got closer, he stretched out his arm, holding the phone toward me with the screen facing my direction. I thought he wanted to ask for the time or directions—tourists sometimes stop passersby like that, showing their phone screens to ask for the right location. So, I assumed he needed help, but as he brought the phone closer, **I saw that he had played a pornographic video of a man and a woman**. The moment I realised what it was, I looked away, ignored him, and just kept walking.”

We often assume that danger looks a certain way, but appearances can be misleading. Sometimes, those who seem the least suspicious can still be perpetrators of harassment, as reported in the following account:

→ “It was late, around 12:30 AM. I got off at Record and started walking toward Kuzman Student Dorm (where I used to live) because there was no other bus stop that was closer. The streets were empty, except for one figure of a man standing right by the weeping willow near the pastry shop next to Garson. He was well-dressed wearing a brown leather coat, cream-colored pants, nice shoes, and a neatly styled haircut. From a distance, he looked like someone respectable. As I got closer, I noticed he was staring directly at me while

doing something with his hand. The moment I passed by him; I realised that his genitals were exposed—non-erect (which probably meant he had just started when he saw me). He smiled gently, without moving, and continued to pleasure himself, only following me with his gaze until I disappeared from his sight. I was really taken aback and confused, but the incident made me realise that we need to let go of the prejudice that someone who looks ‘presentable’ couldn’t be a predator. To this day, I remember the whole incident, and it fills me with disgust.”

In addition to adult victims, there are also instances of minors facing non-verbal harassment in an educational institution. The following case opens questions concerning the role of authority figures like school staff and parents in providing support and addressing the circumstances:

→ *“My ex-partner has been causing problems for me at school for some time. I am 17 years old, and no one knows about this situation, and I’m scared to tell anyone. For a while now, he’s been staring at me, provoking me, and causing trouble with my current partner.”*

Physical Harassment

Experiencing physical harassment in public spaces can leave victims feeling not only vulnerable but also deeply frustrated and powerless. The sudden, intrusive nature of these acts often sparks a mix of shock, humiliation, and anger—emotions that linger long after the incident itself. When harassment happens quickly, with no time to react, identify and/or confront the perpetrators, the sense of injustice is even greater. The following account illustrates how these experiences can be both physically violating and emotionally overwhelming, especially when the perpetrators remain faceless and unaccountable:

→ *“It was a summer evening, I was 17-18 years old, and I was walking from Karposh to the Centre to meet my friends at Simpo. I was wearing a loose short skirt. At one moment, someone slapped me hard on my behind, and before I could turn around, a guy on a bike rode past me, laughing. As I looked straight at him, about to shout something, within two seconds, his friend slapped me too—also on a bike. Both, laughing, kept riding away. I started running after them and cursing at them. I felt incredibly humiliated and angry, yet there was nothing I could do because they were on bikes. I don’t even know what they looked like.”*

Public Transport

Some women pointed out the lack of night bus lines and the prevalence of unlicensed taxi drivers, which limits their safe transportation options after dark, considering that several of them admitted they sometimes switch buses just to get off closer to their final destination, or opt for taxis, even for short distances. What these reports suggest is that unsafe cities impose a financial burden on women and girls, underscoring the broader costs of navigating urban spaces.

At the same time, precisely the fear of lingering alone in the streets at night, combined with the scarcity of reliable public transport at night, often leaves women little choice in how to get home safely. The following incident illustrates how the absence of safe transportation alternatives can push women into vulnerable situations, where the cost extends beyond money and becomes a question of personal safety:

→ “After a party, it was quite cold to walk back home, and since I was near Record, I decided to go to the nearest taxi stand. There was only one available taxi. It didn’t have the official yellow plates, but I wanted to get home quickly, so I got in. Right from the start, the driver acted suspiciously. When I asked if he was available, **he told me to sit in the front seat.** Up until that moment, I had never had a bad experience with a taxi driver, so I figured it should be okay.

→ As we were driving, he made the usual small talk to pass the time, but then **he started asking more personal questions**, like who I lived with. That’s when I started feeling uneasy, so I made up some answers. When we almost arrived at my address, I decided to get out one street earlier, just to be safe. He stopped the car, and I reached to give him money for the ride, but he refused to take it. Instead, **he grabbed my hand**, trying to learn my name and **insisting we ‘get to know each other.’** Out of fear, I told him a fake name, but then **he suddenly pulled me toward him and tried to kiss me.**

→ I struggled to push him away, terrified that he might start driving again and take me somewhere else. At one point, he reached for his door, and I heard a ‘click’—he tried to lock the car. That’s when I panicked even more, **realising we were now ‘trapped’ inside.** I kept dodging him, trying not to make him angry in case he decided to drive off with me in the car. After about two to three minutes of this struggle, I decided to take my chances and reached for my door handle. Luckily, it opened, and I managed to get out. As I walked away, **he slowly followed me with his car, trying to keep the conversation going.** But as soon as I found a spot where I could move away from the street, I turned behind a building, and he finally left.”

Police Responses

Testimonials showcase different instances of inadequate police support, where filing a report is often met with judgement or an indifferent and dismissive attitude. In one instance, a woman filed a report for continuous verbal harassment on the phone, and because of the perpetrator’s personal ties with the police, no significant measures were taken. This aligns with some women’s perceptions of the police force as corrupt, implying a lack of trust in the sector’s capacity and willingness to adequately respond to women victims in need:

→ “They investigated the case, found the person, **but nothing was done about it because, as it turned out, he [the perpetrator] knew the inspector,** and they only gave him a verbal warning.”

In one case, the police offered support by suggesting taking the victim home after a violent attack by her partner. She rejected their offer, but shortly thereafter, the perpetrator returned, leaving her vulnerable while no further measures were taken. Other testimonials reveal police responses to instances of gender-based harassment such as, “maybe he just liked you”. In the following case, a victim filed a report for a man who had been stalking her on her way to work. However, based on the interaction with the police officers, rather than focusing on the perpetrator’s actions, they viewed the incident as her responsibility due to the way she was dressed:

→ *“They informed me that they identified the perpetrator. **I was told that he followed me because he liked the way I looked, especially because I was dressed provocatively (it was summer, and I was wearing a skirt).**”*

Safety Walk Report

Introduction

Safety audits serve as analytical tools to evaluate the environment by examining spatial and social factors that shape perceptions of safety across different societal groups. Initially introduced in Canada in the late 1980s,¹⁵¹ women's safety walks have become an important participatory method for assessing the safety and accessibility of community spaces from the perspective and lived experiences of women as users of urban environments. By recognising women as "experts of experience", this approach makes sure their insights hold equal value to those of "professional experts", such as urban planners and police officers.¹⁵² Moreover, the walks facilitate an intersectional analysis that takes into account the perspectives of diverse categories of women and identifies ways to make public spaces inclusive and accessible for all women.

In order to gain insight into women's perceptions of safety in relation to the urban design of the public space, in December 2024 and February 2025, we organised four safety audit walks in Skopje and Tetovo. By organising two safety walks during the day and two in the evening in each city, we aimed to capture women's perceptions in different lighting and environmental conditions. The safety walk route in each city was divided into two sub-routes, with a break in-between intended for answering the questionnaire. This approach allowed us to gather more data on the participants' sense of safety in public spaces in different areas within the cities, considering the contrasts in urban infrastructure between the two sub-routes within each city. The safety walks included a de-brief session upon the completion of the route, which served to create space for reflecting on any questions and comments concerning the experiences and insights gained from the safety walks.

Although a few men participated in the safety audit walks, the focus was on gathering insights from women who navigate the public spaces in Skopje and Tetovo. This included citizens, a mother with two young girls (a pupil and a student), representatives from the police sector, the media, international and local CSOs, local embassies and the Faculty of Security from the University "St. Clement of Ohrid" - Bitola.

The purpose of the safety audit walks was to generate general information regarding the overall feelings about the safety of the area, as well as specific information regarding spatial features (lighting, maintenance, signs and maps, accessibility, sightlines), security (spatial isolation, emergency protocol, entrapment sites, public transportation), and attitudes and behaviours (feeling threatened or intimidated, experiences of discrimination based on limited accessibility to public spaces).

151 Whitzman, C., Shaw, M., Andrew, C. and Travers, K. (2009). "The effectiveness of women's safety audits", *Security*, 22(3), pp.205–218.

152 Andrew, C., Cook, C. C., & Bruin, M. (2000). *Gendering the City: Women, Boundaries and Visions of Urban Life*. Rowman & Littlefield.

In Skopje, the 3km route started at the parking area by the Central Railway Station, passed by the Youth Cultural Centre as a mid-point, and concluded in front of the Macedonian Post Office. In Tetovo, the 2km route began in front of Restaurant Garden, followed by a middle point by the city mosque and a final point on the main “Tetovo” square.

Table 1. Number of answered questionnaires for safety assessment			
		Skopje	Tetovo
February 2025	Day safety audit walk	15	7
December 2024	Evening safety audit walk	15	9
Total		30	16
		46	

A total of 46 questionnaires were completed during all four safety audit walks. In Skopje, the complete number of answered questionnaires was 30 (23 filled out by women), whereas 16 were filled out in Tetovo (11 filled out by women).

Participants completed the safety assessment questionnaires on printed paper or via an online form, available in both Macedonian, English and Albanian, accessed through a QR code. All participants were informed regarding the purpose and methodology of the safety evaluation walks, and Reactor employees were present to provide support regarding any questions or technical difficulties when accessing the online questionnaire.

Safety Walk Insights

The day safety audit walks in Skopje and Tetovo revealed limited accessibility to pedestrian sidewalks and a strong need for better maintenance of the street infrastructure. Participants in both cities noticed potholes and deterioration of the asphalt along pedestrian sidewalks. The presence of many parked vehicles on the sidewalks limits the free and easy movement in both cities, especially for women with disabilities and women with strollers. Mothers or other caregivers are most present in public spaces both during and after working hours, as noted by a study evaluating public spaces in Skopje.¹⁵³ While the lack of sidewalk accessibility was a less recurring issue throughout the second sub-routes in both cities (as presented in Table 2), where perceptions in Skopje are slightly more ‘optimistic’, it did pose a significant issue during the first sub-route in Tetovo. During conversations with local stakeholders

153 Dokuzova, M., Rafailovska, A. & Veljanoski, P. (2023). Tools for Evaluating Public Spaces (Looking at Public Spaces and Case Studies in Skopje (2018-2023)). Organisation for the Protection of Animals and the Environment EQUALITY DIGNITY EMPATHY NATURALISM (E.D.E.N). Retrieved from: <https://urlzs.com/OOMbnX> on March 26, 2025.

in Tetovo, it was noted how building permits have been issued for constructions that do not fully align with community needs, contributing to a shortage of designated parking areas. This has resulted in limited parking spaces for drivers, leading to increased use of pedestrian areas for parking.

Traffic hazards and the unpredictability of urban mobility also featured prominently among participant concerns in Tetovo, as well as in questionnaire responses. Reckless or unlicensed drivers, instances of cars speeding through streets or chasing down boulevards, as well as inattentive cyclists and e-scooter riders contribute to a sense of constant threat. This is the case both with side streets such as “Blagoja Toska” in Tetovo and with other high-traffic areas that women already associate with a heightened risk of accidents and aggressive behaviour that might compromise their safety.

Table 2. How much of the path included an accessible sidewalk?

Perceived amount of accessible sidewalk	Skopje				Tetovo			
	Day safety audit walk		Night safety audit walk		Day safety audit walk		Night safety audit walk	
	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route
0%	/	/	/	/	14,28%	/	16,66%	/
25%	20%	/	11,11%	16,66%	57,14%	/	66,66%	/
50%	50%	/	44,44%	/	14,28%	/	16,66%	/
75%	30%	80%	22,22%	/	14,28%	33,33%	/	33,33%
100%	/	20%	22,22%	83,33%	/	66,66%	/	66,66%

In both Skopje and Tetovo, the low degree of hygiene and orderliness in the public space reinforced the impression of overall abandonment and neglect. This included visible graffiti on the walls, as well as garbage and broken objects on the streets. In Skopje, by the underpass under the Central Railway Station, the participants expressed that there is a need for regular garbage removal, better placement of bins and regular maintenance of vegetation. In Tetovo, people reported a high number of stray dogs, with one participant recounting an instance of a stray dog unexpectedly attacking a pedestrian woman, thereby posing a safety hazard. Disorder in public space, manifested through graffiti, vandalism, poorly maintained infrastructure, such as broken benches or overflowing bins, undermine

the perceived sense of safety.¹⁵⁴ According to the Broken Windows theory, visible disorder and neglect go hand in hand with further deterioration and crime; if one broken window in a building remains unrepaired, it implies that no one cares, leading to more broken windows.¹⁵⁵ Hence, regular maintenance and a sufficient level of hygiene and cleanliness are not just aesthetic concerns; they demonstrate the presence of an engaged community and responsive authorities, cultivating a public space where safety and comfortable usage of public spaces are actively sustained.

Discussing underpasses, one participant from Skopje noted that inside, “there are some spaces where potential attackers can hide, but not for someone who wants to be safe from others”. The dark corners and large pillars may allow potential perpetrators to conceal themselves, while not offering refuge for those under threat. For this part of the route, participants agreed that it would be ‘very difficult’ for a victim to escape, adding that: “It’s deserted and dark... There is a lack of visibility to move easily and if someone wants to run to escape, they might stumble on one of the potholes on the ground”.

In Tetovo, participants noted the “Blagoja Toska” street, dark alleys and the yards of abandoned houses as places where a potential perpetrator could hide from view. “The street is not maintained at all, nor is it safe, only God protects you here,” commented one participant. This sentiment is reflected in the most common answer regarding how difficult it would be for the victim to escape, being ‘almost impossible’ in this section of the route in Tetovo. While the areas around the Youth Cultural Centre and the “Cyril and Methodius” University Library and faculty buildings in Skopje were frequently mentioned as unsafe, the indoor facilities were identified as places where potential victims could seek help in circumstances of threat or insecurity. Similarly, in Tetovo, participants often enter the surrounding stores when they feel unsafe, either to seek help or regain a sense that the perceived and/or experienced danger has passed.

154 Wallhagen, M. and Cehlin, M. (eds.). (2023). *Urban Transition - Perspectives on Urban Systems and Environments*. Retrieved from: DOI: 10.5772/intechopen.97353 on March 28, 2025.

155 Wilson, J.Q. and Kelling, G.L. (1982). “The Police and Neighbourhood Safety: Broken Windows”, *The Atlantic Monthly*, 249(3), pp.29–38. Retrieved from: <https://urlz.com/cbokj5> on March 28, 2025.

Table 3. Perception of safety for different categories of women, presentation of average results, 1 = very unsafe, 5 = very safe

How safe would you feel on this route if...	Skopje				Tetovo			
	Day safety audit walk		Night safety audit walk		Day safety audit walk		Night safety audit walk	
	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route	1st sub-route	2nd sub-route
You were alone?	2.66	2.75	3	3.33	3.4	4	2	4
You were with children?	2.2	2.25	2.75	2.83	4	3.25	2	4
You were a person with a disability?	2	3	2.25	2.4	3.25	3	5	3
You were an older person?	2.2	4	2.2	3.2	3.4	3.2	2	3.33
You were part of an ethnic minority group?	2.71	3.5	2.57	3.16	3.2	3	2	3.33
You were a foreigner?	2.66	2.66	2.5	2.66	3.33	3	2	4
You were driving a car?	3.11	3	3.37	3.6	3.25	4	3	4
You were walking alone?	2.66	2.66	2.5	3.4	3.25	4	2	3.5

Regarding the perceptions of safety for different categories of women, in Skopje, the lowest average results correspond to women walking with young children and women with disabilities. While the average results for Tetovo show an overall higher perception of safety

for different categories of women, women from ethnic minority groups and elderly women are perceived as most vulnerable, with limited access to public spaces. These insights showcase the perception that not all women have equal access to public spaces, ultimately limiting participation in public life and activities. In response to this, one participant noted that “city planning and safety concerns must be considered with the most vulnerable in mind...most of the time, the least vulnerable are in charge of this and it needs to change”. For example, in practice, inclusive city planning can mean ensuring accessible entry into public facilities and institutions for women with disabilities by placing ramps for easy wheelchair access.

During the evening safety audit walks in both cities, concerns regarding the level of hygiene, street infrastructure and traffic hazards remained consistent with those identified during the day walks. In the evening, the lack of sufficient street lighting and limited visibility emerged as pressing issues, significantly impacting the sense of safety. The light from the already-existing streetlights was obstructed by bushes, trees, and poles, leading to poor visibility of street signs, pedestrians, sidewalks and the inability to see what lay ahead further down the street. Throughout the first sub-route in Tetovo, advertising panels from private businesses played a crucial role to enhance visibility in the area, as there was not enough street lighting provided by the Municipality. In contrast, the second sub-route was well-lit, with adequate street lighting and a steady flow of people, contributing to a greater sense of safety.

In the case of Skopje’s first sub-route, a participant commented: ‘There are no people, it’s poorly lit, and there’s an overall bad vibe that makes me feel unsafe’. This is problematic because, according to questionnaire responses, no alternative or better lit routes are available in the area. Participants were generally more satisfied with the level of street lighting along the second sub-route in Skopje, however, some still urged for placing more lighting poles to further enhance visibility. In discussions with participants in both cities, they all highlighted the need for “more frequent lighting” and overall “better lighting on side streets.” In terms of filing reports about broken streetlights or other lighting problems, there was limited awareness among participants in both cities on who to contact regarding lighting malfunctions.

Given the need for safe spaces offering shelter and support, apart from stores which participants in Tetovo consider as potential points to seek help in circumstances of threat, it would be beneficial to mark which public facilities and buildings have security personnel or guards at night. A young student during the evening walk in Tetovo expressed discomfort about passing by cafés only frequented by men, where women’s entry does not seem welcome or acceptable. She expressed the need for places intended to provide support and shelter only for women: “My friends and I wanted to turn an empty shop into a place only intended for girls”, she notes. This indicates a pressing need for inclusive or specifically designated spaces that offer security for women and girls.

Conclusion

The safety walks in Skopje and Tetovo revealed a range of insights and perceptions regarding how the physical environment influences the level of safety felt by women when moving through public spaces in their cities. Given the considerable differences in the extent of lighting, urban infrastructure and maintenance between the sub-routes in each city, it is clear how these factors contribute to perceptions of safety.

Most participants in both cities perceived the first sub-routes as unsafe, and the second sub-routes as safer. During the day, deteriorated sidewalks and low levels of hygiene left impressions of institutional negligence and a sense of abandonment, increasing vulnerability and undermining the perception of safety. Traffic hazards such as high-speed driving posed issues for safe movement, whereas in Tetovo specifically, the lack of sufficient parking areas led to cars obstructing movement for pedestrian women on sidewalks. On the other hand, the evening walks revealed the crucial role of sufficient lighting and visibility in the public space, in context of women's increasing vulnerability after dark. When it comes to equal accessibility to public space, the urban infrastructure in both cities allowed for limited access for different categories of women, such as women with disabilities, mothers with children and elderly women.

Therefore, in line with participants' recommendations, improvements in street lighting, maintenance of street infrastructure and higher levels of hygiene, need to be undertaken in line with inclusive city planning principles that incorporate the insights of all women. This may also include installing public services, such as toilets and drinking water fountains, making sure public spaces are more fit to address everyone's physical needs and allow for comfortable movement. These changes would lead to a more equitable access and use of public spaces, so that all women eventually acquire their 'right to the city'.

Key Findings and Conclusions

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 recognised 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 criticised 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 Centre 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 further 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 behavioural 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 characterised 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.

In terms of personal factors contributing to feelings of safety, gender emerges as the most significant factor, as 77% of respondents identified it as a source of insecurity. This is followed by being alone in public as a factor that heightens feelings of unsafety. Responses also indicated that clothing attire affects perceived security, showcasing how societal norms regulate women's bodies and reinforce gendered expectations in public spaces. On the other hand, age also plays a role, as younger and older women experience different concerns for safety. Half of the respondents pointed to sexual orientation and how the intersection of gender and LGBTQ+ identity is a factor that shapes experiences of public safety. In terms of ethnicity, 45% of respondents reported that racial and ethnic identities may expose women to additional threats or discrimination. Religion is listed as a factor that is perceived as the least influential among the others, as 36% of respondents acknowledged its role in shaping a sense of security. On another note, the findings showed how ethnic and cultural biases influence perceptions of safety in public spaces. Some specific ethnic groups were linked to harassment and threatening behaviour more than others. While these perceptions may stem from personal experiences, they pose the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and societal divisions.

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%)—behaviours 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

To provide clearer insights in this study, incidents of harassment and violence were systematically categorised into four distinct groups according to their specific characteristics.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Harassment

Verbal and non-verbal forms of 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 internalised 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 normalised, 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 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 normalisation 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 internalisation 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 substantiated 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, minimisation 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, harbour a profound distrust of institutional responses. This distrust, in turn, contributes to the normalisation 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 centres 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 organising 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, disorganised 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’.**

Recommendations

1. Local Governments and Municipalities

- Implement gender-responsive budgeting to allocate resources for safety infrastructure, inclusive design, and community-led safety initiatives.
- Integrate gender perspectives into urban planning by involving women and civil society; conduct safety audits and establish public feedback mechanisms to shape safer public environments.
- Ensure consistent lighting, clear signage, accessible sidewalks, and organised parking; maintain cleanliness and greenery to enhance safety and accessibility for all, especially women, caregivers, and people with disabilities.
- Create interactive, safe public spaces such as parks, sports areas, and cultural zones that encourage positive use and make women and marginalised groups feel welcome.
- Provide tailored services for vulnerable groups (e.g., Roma women, women with disabilities) and implement anti-discrimination training for local officials.
- Provide free or subsidised transportation options at night for women, such as night buses or safe ride programs.

2. National Government and Policymakers

- Mandate gender-sensitive legislation in urban planning, improve data collection, and define legal responses to non-contact violence such as harassment.
- Ensure justice systems and public institutions are physically and procedurally accessible to all women.
- Improve data collection and reporting on sexual harassment and GBV, such as ensuring that sex-disaggregated data is collected, made publicly available and used to inform urban planning and public safety policies.
- Support civil society organisations in collecting and analysing mapped data on harassment and violence against women in public spaces, enabling targeted preventive policing and securing identified hotspot areas that will inform relevant interventions.

3. Law Enforcement and Judiciary

- Increase visibility of police patrols (especially at night and within unsafe areas) and respond promptly to reports of safety hazards to reinforce trust and deterrence.
- Provide gender-sensitive training to officers, promote victim-centred approaches, and increase visibility in vulnerable areas to prevent GBV and support survivors.
- Eliminate institutional bias through anti-discrimination training and equitable service delivery to marginalised groups.
- Law enforcement agencies and judicial bodies must strengthen their cooperation to ensure effective prosecution and sanctioning of perpetrators.

4. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) and NGOs

- Collaborate with municipalities to co-develop gender-sensitive policies and provide expertise in community consultations and audits.
- Lead grassroots campaigns and advocacy efforts to challenge social norms and influence institutional reform.
- Offer survivor support, act as intermediaries between victims and institutions, and run educational and community safety programs that empower bystanders and promote prevention.
- Work with local authorities to co-develop and facilitate educational programs in schools to address gender norms and promote respectful relationships, as well as community safety initiatives, such as anonymous and accessible reporting mechanisms for women who experience violence and bystander intervention programs that empower communities to intervene safely when witnessing harassment.

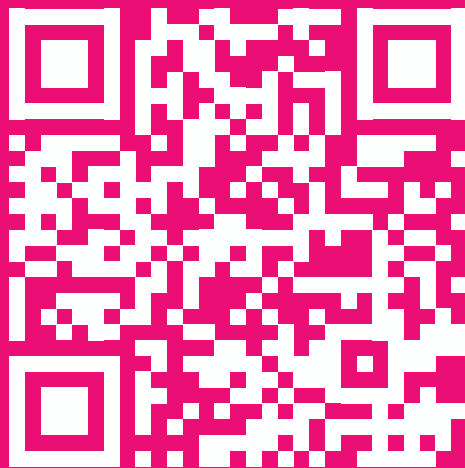
5. Media Outlets

- Promote respectful, accurate reporting on GBV, emphasising survivor-centred language and context.
- Facilitate public debates and discussions on gender, urban safety, and accountability.
- Help shift public attitudes through campaigns that challenge victim-blaming and harmful norms.

6. Community Members

- Actively participate in shaping safe public spaces through feedback and respectful use of communal areas.
- Engage in educational programs and community-led initiatives that foster a culture of safety, accountability, and solidarity against GBV.

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