Violence against children and women in the Balkans – case studies of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania

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Violence against children in the Balkans - context

- Exposure to violence in childhood is associated with short- and long-term negative physical and mental health and poor educational outcomes.
- Violence exposure in childhood is linked with harsh parenting and abusive behaviour towards children by adults responsible for their care.
- These findings hold independent of country, cultural context and language, which means they are universal for every country, including the Balkan countries.
- Violence against children has over the past decade attracted international attention and its prevention and reduction has now been included into the Sustainable Development Goals.
A three stage stratified random sample of 42,194 school-attending children (response rate: 66.7%) in three grades (aged 11, 13 and 16 years) from schools in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Croatia, North Macedonia, Greece, Romania, Serbia and Turkey (Nicolaidis et al., 2018) shows:

1. Exposure rates for psychological violence were between 64.6% (North Macedonia) and 83.2% (Greece) for lifetime and 59.62% (Serbia) and 70.0% (Greece) for past-year prevalence.

2. Physical violence exposure varied between 50.6% (NM) and 76.3% (Greece) for lifetime and 42.5% (NM) and 51.0% (Bosnia) for past-year prevalence.

3. Sexual violence figures were highest for lifetime prevalence in Bosnia (18.6%) and lowest in NM (7.6%). Lifetime contact sexual violence was highest in Bosnia (9.8%) and lowest in Romania (3.6%). Past-year sexual violence and contact sexual violence prevalence was lowest in Romania (5.0 and 2.1%) and highest in Bosnia (13.6 and 7.7% respectively).

4. Self-reported neglect was highest for both past-year and lifetime prevalence in Bosnia (48.0 and 20.3%) and lowest in Romania (22.6 and 16.7%).
Violence against women - context

- Western Balkan countries' legislation on GBV, in general, started by adopting specific laws to fight primarily domestic violence (DV), often by avoiding its gendered approach.

- A major change in 2011 with the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) which is ratified by all WB countries; implementation lacking.

- Poor implementation of Article 50 of the Istanbul Convention, which requires responsible law enforcement agencies to adequately and immediately respond to the protection of victims/survivors, is a worrying trend throughout the region.
Police and court responses to protection remain inadequate in all Western Balkan accession countries, placing survivors at risk of repeat violence upon reporting.

Data collection on GBV – big issue in all WB countries. Data are still not complete, and most importantly, not harmonised. Each institution dealing with GBV collects its own data under templates that do not necessarily encompass a broad understanding or an adequate definition of GBV; it is most often limited to DV or sexual crimes.

During 2021 there were 12 cases of femicides in Albania, 9 in BiH, 2 in Kosovo and 2 in Montenegro, 6 in North Macedonia and 20 in Serbia.
Serbia – violence against children

- Research findings show that violence against children in Serbia is widespread in various forms.
- It occurs as direct, interpersonal, physical, psychological or sexual violence, as neglect that denies the child the satisfaction of his/hers needs and prevents his/hers development.
- It occurs in less direct but complex forms, such as structural violence that manifests itself in different forms —child marriage, child labor or other types of exploitation, or through multiple types of social exclusion.
- Children are not sufficiently recognised as victims in the context of gender-based violence because it is not recognised how violence affects children’s emotional, physical, psychological development, their behaviour and the process of socialisation.
Serbian legislation provides that authorities may protect DV victims/survivors by temporarily removing the perpetrator from the home from a minimum of 48 hours to a maximum of 30 days.

By law, police, prosecutors' office, courts, and social welfare centres are required to maintain an electronic database on individual cases of DV, as well as to undertake emergency and extended measures. Expectedly, as in other WB countries, these data is not harmonized.

In 2021 there were a total of 20 femicides committed in a family-partner context (unofficial information is that there were 26 femicide cases in 2022 – no official records of femicide despite a legal obligation to do so; usually the cases become public when getting to media) 5 victims had already reported violence to the officials.
When women reported violence to the police, it resulted in a warning in most cases, rather than criminal charges. In cases where the victim/survivor withdrew her testimony, the prosecution most often dismissed the criminal charges altogether, without continuing the investigation.

Women survivors of GBV are reluctant to report violence because they lack trust in institutions and fear reprisal.

Difficulties in criminal proceedings for the protection of victims/survivors of DV include: inefficiency of proceedings, high numbers of rejected criminal charges, withdrawal and postponement of criminal prosecution, most often suspended sentences without protective supervision, failing to inform the victim/survivor about the proceedings and inadequate protection against re-victimisation.
Bosnia and Herzegovina – violence against children

- Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is a country with a highly complex and decentralised system of administration; this influences prevention, reaction and adequate statistical information on violence against children.

- The legal framework that outlaws exploitation of children for sexual violence, especially prostitution, lacks consistency and efficiency, exacerbated by BiH’s complex administrative structure.

- Comprehensive, reliable, recent data on violence against children does not exist in BiH. Relevant institutions do collect scattered data, but no unified data collection exists to inform a comprehensive analysis of this issue.
Bosnia and Herzegovina – violence against children/2

According to the 2011-2012 MICS, 55% of children aged 2-14 had experienced a violent method of discipline, with 40% subjected to physical punishment and 42% to psychological violence.

A high level of tolerance for violence, within both the family and wider community, serves as a barrier to understanding violence and seeking redress.

Entrenched beliefs and patterns perpetuate abusive attitudes, and make it appear unacceptable for children to confide in an adult about problems within the home, or raise a complaint against a family or community member.

Cultural norms reinforce the belief that violent disciplinary measures are an acceptable part of child upbringing.
Bosnia and Herzegovina – violence against women

- BiH has adopted legislation that incriminates violence against women and stipulates protection of survivors. Relevant legislation in all entities has undergone some amendments in line with Istanbul Convention requirements; BiH has yet to fully harmonise its legal framework with the IC
- Increase in reported cases of DV, but decrease of conviction; Often perpetrators returned to their homes less than 24 hours after a violent event.
- There had been no urgent protection measures issued in relation to fifty-eight (58) (or 77%) cases of violence in the last 12 months. 61% of interviewed women stated that no criminal proceedings was initiated by the police (Udružene žene, 2021)
- There have been recent efforts to improve data collection on GBV. Entities have established databases for the collection of information and monitoring of DV from relevant actors involved in detecting and responding to such cases – data not published regularly and not available to public
Situation on violence against women and children in Albania

- The data of the National Population survey – violence against women and girls in Albania 2018 provided significant evidence that VAWG in Albania is widespread.
- In particular, as many as 1 out of 2 or 52.9% of women age 18-74 experienced one or more of five types of violence (intimate partner violence, dating violence, non-partner violence, sexual harassment and/or stalking) during their lifetime.
- In addition, 3.1% of women experienced child sexual abuse before the age of 18
- The VAWG survey found that 47.7 percent of women who experienced domestic violence had children of age 0–17 years living in their household

2018 National Population Survey Violence Against Women and Girls in Albania
Situation in Albania

January - August 2021

- 33 cases of alleged sexual assault reported by Police;
- 3,563 cases of domestic violence - in 2,205 cases, a protection order was issued;
- 13 women had been killed by their partners;

Situation in Albania

- 112 of 154 victims of trafficking identified in 2021 were children;
- Of 154 victims, 61 were sex trafficking victims, 65 forced labor victims, and 33 victims of multiple types of exploitation; 99 were female, and 60 were male; 112 were children, and 47 were adults;
- Three were foreign victims: two from Romania and one from Serbia.

2022 Trafficking in Persons Report: Albania
Situation of violence against children in Albania

- 26 percent of 11-, 13-, and 15-year-old adolescents reported that they had been physically abused once or twice in their lifetime, and six percent had experienced physical abuse many times. (Health Behavior in School-age Children of 11, 13 and 15 years: main findings, 2018. Tirana)

- 42 percent of children have been subjected to psychological aggression, such as yelling, and 32 percent to some form of physical aggression by their parents Albanian (Demographic and Health Survey: UNICEF in Albania)

- 61 percent (70 children) of all sexual abuse cases in Albania were committed against children (INSTAT, 2018. Crime and Criminal Justice Statistics 2016–2017)

- One in ten children reported at least one unwanted sexual experience through the Internet, often initiated by someone the child already knew. (One Click Away: Children’s Experience of Internet Use in Albania. UNICEF in Albania)
“Different & Equal” is an Albanian Non Profit organization established in May 2004 dedicated to providing high quality reintegration services for victims of trafficking, exploitation and abuse, and to improving the legal, institutional and social context to prevent and counter these violations of human rights.
Activities of Different & Equal
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION!

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