magDA

Dialogue Academy Magazine

5TH EDITION

WE GIVE VOICES TO THOSE WHO RISE

AGAINST THE HARM THAT THRIVES IN SILENCE

CONTENTS

Magda

MAGDA
DIALOGUE ACADEMY MAGAZINE
5th Edition – December 2025

Dear Reader,

Sixteen days arrive each year as a reminder, but the weight they carry is constant. Gender-based violence does not wait for campaigns. It exists in everyday spaces, in moments we overlook, in words that diminish, in the quiet fears people learn to hide.

These sixteen days ask us to stop pretending that harm is distant or rare. They ask us to look closely at how fear moves through homes, workplaces, and streets that should have been safe. They urge us to listen without judgment, to believe without demanding proof, and to honour those who carry their stories in their bodies, memories, and guarded smiles.

Survival is not simple. **Healing does not follow a schedule.** Some wounds reveal themselves immediately, others appear years later in the middle of ordinary days. Yet these days also remind us of our responsibility: to stand beside one another, to intervene when needed, to shift blame away from survivors, and to build a world where safety is not a privilege.

Sixteen days, and every day after, call us to act with clarity and compassion. Dignity cannot depend on timing. Freedom from fear cannot be conditional. The courage of those who have lived through violence is far greater than the world has ever acknowledged, and it is our duty to ensure their voices are heard, protected, and believed.

In solidarity and strength,
The MagDA Team

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CONFLICT-RELATED SEXUAL VIOLENCE: THE TRAUMA, THE NEGLECT AND THE PATTERN PERSISTENCE

Anja Zloporubović

The war ended. Not yesterday, but not long enough ago either. The soldiers lowered their arms, the politicians signed the peace agreements, and the judges rendered their verdicts. Children stopped screaming, but mothers kept weeping. The holes in the buildings got covered, the bodies got buried, and the blood got washed off the clothing. Or hands, it depends on which side of history you were on at the time. Schools reopened, neighbours started sipping coffee together again and hope filled the streets once soldiers stomped through. Men started walking freely. Most women never did.

You have probably heard many times that the Yugoslav wars represent the bloodiest conflict on European land since the Second World War. This is due to many different factors: the high death toll, the number and scope of war crimes, cases of ethnic cleansing and many other aspects that were thought to be buried after WWII. Although there is no human right violation that deserves less attention than another, it often seems like victims of conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) are positioned very low on the priority list in the Balkans. CRSV is an umbrella term which includes rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and many other forms of sexual violence perpetrated against any person during a conflict. It is usually used to produce fear and assert dominance while simultaneously instilling shame and guilt among the victims. Although CRSV was explicitly prohibited in Article 27 of the 1949 Fourth Geneva Convention, it was not before the adoption of the 1989 Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court that it was decided that acts of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity and, in special circumstances, genocide. The first conviction to find individuals guilty of rape as a crime against humanity was made by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) in the Kunarac et. al case regarding the sexual violence perpetrated by Republika Srpska Army (VRS) officers in Foča, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In total, it is estimated that several tens of thousands of women experienced rape during the wars in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo.

However, the purpose of this article is not to explore the past. On the contrary, it will try to explain the future. Thirty years after the wars, CRSV remains a rarely studied and mentioned topic in the region. Even though the crimes are forgotten, the trauma and stigma continue to live on. So do the power relations. But let’s take it step by step.

Imagine having to fight for your life for years during a war you never asked for, not knowing when or how it will end. Then imagine having your dignity taken away as well. Finally, imagine that once the war is over, the government acts as if this dignity was never yours. It forces you to forget, to move on, and to start a new life. It expects you to deal with your trauma, acting as if it didn’t play a role in its creation. As it has nothing to apologise for. CRSV victims require proper recognition, mental health support, and legal benefits such as reparations. These are crucial for addressing the past and helping prevent cycles of violence and social fragmentation.

Among all the countries in the Balkans, Serbia remains the only one that has not recognised CRSV victims as civilian victims of war, leaving them without much-needed support and compensation. Serbia's Law on the Rights of Civilian Invalids of War requires women to prove two things to be recognised as a civilian victim of war: first, that they have been raped; second, that they have suffered 50% bodily damage. This outdated law, adopted during Milosević's rule in 1996, forces victims to go through a re-traumatisation process, further discriminating against them instead of offering adequate healing and integration measures. And while victims and their trauma remain overlooked, status-related violence and behavioural patterns reemerge.

The best example of this reemergence are the cases of women experiencing police brutality during the ongoing student protests in Serbia - they are taken away, beaten and threatened. The policemen approach them with arrogance and a "do you know who I am?" attitude, common among those in positions of power. By doing so, they aim not only to threaten and intimidate the victims, but also to assert their authority - to make them feel ashamed, scared, and powerless. Listening to the testimonies of women victims of CRSV in front of the International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia (ICTY), one will most likely recognise similar patterns.

Although the setting, uniform, and command status changed, the patriarchal approach of a man in power remained the same. Sexual violence, therefore, is always linked to power - the power to command, control, or instil fear. It stems from patriarchy, which itself is based on socially constructed power relations. These relations furthermore create violent behavioural patterns.

The government allows these patterns to prevail. By ignoring and choosing to forget. By not condemning. By overlooking the alarming number of femicides committed in recent years. By pointing fingers at the victim, not the perpetrator. By protecting the perpetrator. By initiating law modifications that will introduce the concept of a "lighter act of rape". The list goes on. The loop needs to be broken. The war ended. Men started walking freely. Most women never did.

WELCOME TO THE SYSTEM HUMANITY NOT INCLUDED

Medine Dauti

I walked into the courthouse believing in a promise, that when you report sexual harassment, the system exists to care, to protect and give back dignity. Instead, I walked out a few hours later as a file. A number. The paperwork had begun, but everything else seemed optional.

According to the UN Women 2024 Country Profile for Kosovo, 29 % of women in Kosovo have experienced sexual harassment. Yet when you finally speak aloud what happened to you, when you gather every piece of courage left in your body and ask the state to do its job, you do not become a person in the eyes of the system, you become a statement to be verified and a case to be processed.

The reporting process begins with intake forms, checkboxes, and a tone that suggests you are creating work. Many officers are not trained to handle trauma and have limited understanding of gender-based violence. According to UN Women research, a significant proportion of public-sector employees in Kosovo have never received training on handling sexual harassment complaints. This gap shows immediately that survivors are questioned in ways that minimize their experiences, while perpetrators move through a routine that does nothing to address the harm they caused.

The first thing you learn is that urgency is an illusion. You enter with adrenaline and expectation, but the system meets you with fluorescent lights and an investigator who has heard too many stories to hear yours. You want to speak. They want to finish the form. And slowly, you shrink into the shape they make for you.

There is a point where you stop being a person and become a process, a timeline, a case code, a task they need to tick off before lunch. Nobody warns you that the worst part of reporting is not what happened to you, but the indifference you find afterward. Because the violence you experienced becomes secondary to the violence of being treated as administrative noise.

And here’s the part that the system avoids admitting, they fail perpetrators too.
When a harasser is treated like a nuisance on a desk rather than a human being who must confront the harm they caused, nothing changes. There is no rehabilitation, no education, no accountability, only the illusion of order. A case moves forward. A file gets stamped. A perpetrator walks out unchanged, ready to repeat the same harm.

This is an institutional culture. The justice system prioritizes closing cases over understanding a shaking woman who feels like she is the one on trial. They know how to archive, not how to accompany. They know how to schedule hearings, not how to create safety. And when delays stretch for months or years, the survivor’s life becomes suspended, stuck between what happened and what will happen and what the state refuses to resolve.

Seeing how the system treats you as a burden, as if our presence disrupts the order of things, I kept thinking if the system is this cold to me, what would this mean to someone younger? Someone more scared? Someone without support?

This is how institutions reproduce patriarchal harm, quietly, bureaucratically, and without ever raising their voice. Through disbelief. Through delays. Through emotional distance. Through pretending that “procedure” is the same as justice. This is why so many women never report. And this is why so many perpetrators walk away untouched.

Because justice, as it exists now, does not seek healing. It seeks closure. And closure is not the same as transformation.

The justice system will continue to fail us - victims and perpetrators alike - as long as it refuses to recognize the humanity of the people inside it. The 16 Days of Activism are not only about naming violence, but about naming the violence of institutions that claim to protect us while operating without empathy, without vision, and without urgency.

Until the system learns that simple truth, women will keep walking into these buildings as human beings and walking out as files. And that is the abandonment of humanity.

A NEW GENDER EQUALITY LAW IN ALBANIA: IS THE REST OF THE BALKANS FALLING BEHIND?

Nol Musa

Recently, one Balkan country took an important, but though heavily compromised, step forward in strengthening gender equality. On 7 November 2025, with 77 votes in favor, the Albanian Parliament passed a new Gender Equality Law after intense public debate and significant last-minute amendments.

Although the final version of the law has not yet been published in the Official Gazette by the time this article was written, and we have therefore not seen the official text, as it has been reported by QIKA NGO, several key terms were removed during the amendment process. References to “multiple affiliations,” “inclusive,” “gender identity,” and “gender diversity” were taken out of the draft. The final version of the law now recognizes only two genders, a change made in response to pressure from religious groups and right-wing political actors.

This law was not passed quietly. It immediately sparked backlash, especially from so-called “pro-family” groups who objected to the expanded definition of gender. Despite the criticism, the purpose of the law is to guarantee gender equality and ensure effective protection against gender-based discrimination in both public and private life. What sets this law apart is that it introduces concepts and protections that are still unfamiliar, or even absent, in most of the Balkans legislation.

Starting from the top, the initial draft of the law, Article 6, paragraph 1 sets a new standard. It states:

“Any less favorable treatment of a person on the grounds of sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or sex characteristics, compared to the treatment that is given, has been given, or would be given to a person of the other sex in the same or a similar situation, constitutes direct discrimination on the basis of sex and is prohibited. This prohibition also includes intersectional discrimination and all other forms of discrimination.”

This formulation is groundbreaking. This provision acknowledges that discrimination is not one dimensional. A person can be disadvantaged for multiple reasons at once, for instance, a woman who is also a lesbian, or a transwoman belonging to an ethnic minority. This approach plays an important role in the recognition of intersectionality in struggles for equality.

Article 10 of the law introduces another transformative measure: the requirement for gender-sensitive, and inclusive language across state institutions, private sector, media, and education. Unlike other Balkan legislation, which often treats language reform as symbolic, Albania makes it a binding state obligation. Legislative, executive, and judicial bodies, as well as private organizations, must use language that challenges gender stereotypes prevalent in the region, addresses intersectional discrimination, and promotes gender equality in all policies, programs, budgets, and public communications.

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The law also extends these obligations to audiovisual, print, and online media, requiring them to adopt gender-sensitive terminology in reporting and public engagement. Recognizing the media's influence, this provision aims to reshape societal perceptions and normalize equality in everyday discourse.

Moreover, Article 24 establishes ambitious standards for gender balanced representation in decision making bodies. The law requires a 50 percent gender quota in leadership positions, while guaranteeing that representation never falls below 30 percent for any gender. This applies to all levels of leadership, from local and national institutions to international posts such as diplomatic missions. By legally codifying these thresholds, Albania goes beyond encouragement and creates a framework that ensures higher participation for women in institutions. This marks a significant advancement in a region where gender parity in governance remains largely aspirational and most of the times a seen as an "overreach".

The law also strengthens labor rights. Employers are now required to protect employees from violence, discrimination, harassment, and especially sexual harassment in the workplace. They must draft internal regulations outlining preventive measures, formal and informal complaint procedures, and disciplinary actions against perpetrators.

Employers must act promptly when aware of violations, follow a regulated legal process, and take measures to prevent recurrence. This ensures workplaces are safe, accountable, and responsive to violations.

One of the most gripping aspects of the law is its recognition of unpaid work under Article 32. Unlike traditional labor legislation that focuses solely on paid employment, the law acknowledges the essential contributions of both women and men in child care, household management, family support, and family agriculture or businesses. Importantly, this recognition is tied to tangible benefits from the state: access to community services, healthcare, professional training, flexible working hours, and remote work options. By framing unpaid labor as socially and economically valuable for the society, the law challenges traditional gender roles, promotes shared responsibility on domestic work, and introduces structural measures to reduce gender gaps in income and employment.

Article 36 addresses gender equality in media and public information, explicitly prohibiting the publication or distribution of materials that contain or promote discrimination based on gender, intersectional identities, or gender-based violence. Public and private media must eliminate sexist language, hate speech, and stereotypes, while promoting gender-sensitive communication, equal access to content creation, and public awareness campaigns to combat gender-based violence. This comes as a breath of fresh air after the global trend of anti-gender movement spread often by the mainstream media and keeps media more accountable for the content that might be distributed in the future.

The law also establishes financial penalties for violations, ensuring accountability. Individuals can be fined between 60,000 and 120,000 lekë (€620 - €1,240), while legal entities face fines of 120,000 -200,000 lekë (€1,240 - €2,070).

Individuals responsible for violations on behalf of organizations and public officials are also subject to fines. These measures reinforce compliance and highlight the tangible consequences of gender-based discrimination.

Compared to the rest of the region, Albania's new law sets a notably high standard through its structural gender quotas, its formal recognition and valuation of unpaid work with tangible benefits, its binding requirements for gender-sensitive language, and, uniquely in the Balkans, its explicit codification of intersectional and multiple discrimination as a legal principle. However, it is less explicit on LGBTI-specific protections than the original draft and remains less ambitious than Kosovo and Serbia when it comes to explicitly listing gender identity as a protected identity.

By contrast, Kosovo's legal framework, including the 2015 Law on Gender Equality and the Anti-Discrimination Law, contains more vigorous protections when it comes to gender identity and sexual orientation. Yet, Albania integrates more mechanisms systematically and comprehensively across sectors.

In Kosovo, the Gender Equality Law similarly recognizes unpaid work and protects against gender-based discrimination, including gender identity. However, Albania goes further by integrating these protections across multiple sectors and by mandating structural mechanisms like gender-sensitive language and participation quotas. Kosovo's framework is strong on paper but less comprehensive in systemic implementation.

Serbia has a legal framework through the "Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti", prohibiting direct and indirect discrimination based on sex, gender (treated in a binary aspect), and sex characteristics, and mandating gender-responsive budgeting, reporting, and awareness campaigns.

Public authorities and employers are required to implement gender equality measures, and media and education institutions must adopt gender-sensitive content. Serbia recognizes unpaid work in concept, acknowledging its societal value, but it does not provide tangible benefits or institutional support. Furthermore, Serbia's law has faced social and political resistance, including a temporary suspension by the Constitutional Court, limiting practical enforcement, and in 2025 the court suspended the gender-sensitive language provision.

In short, while the adopted law in Albania represents a clear advance for women's rights and brings Albania closer to EU standards, the major amendments made under public pressure falls short of the groundbreaking, fully inclusive reform many activists had hoped for. The rest of the Balkans is not as far behind as the original draft would have left them. At the same time, the changes made should prompt us to reflect on the influence of anti-gender movements, which are increasingly shaping legislative processes across the region.

The Albanian Gender Equality draft represented an ambitious model, but it was ultimately pushed back by political winds.

Erta Berisha

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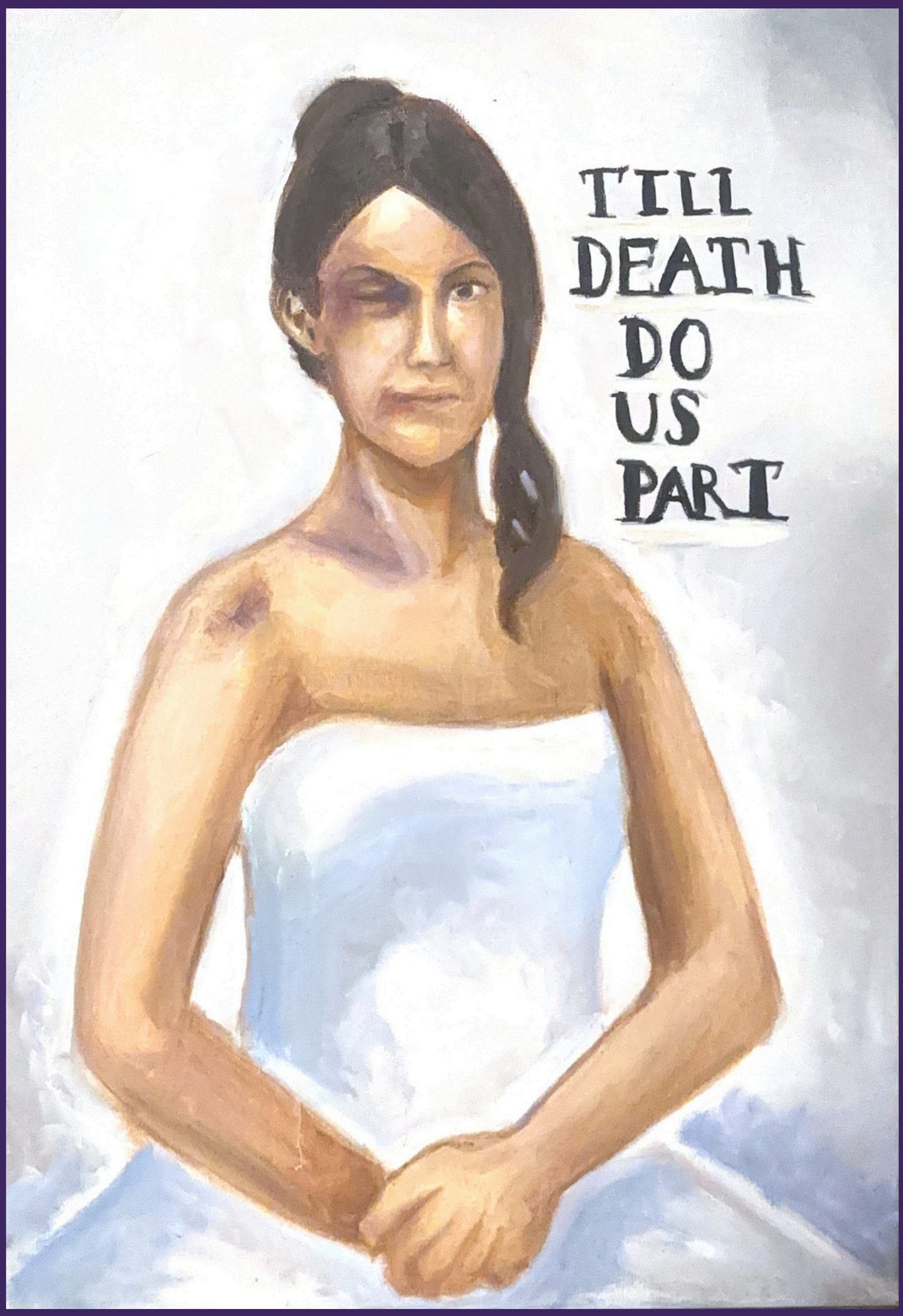

This painting depicts a bride seated in a soft, muted background, her white gown symbolizing purity and new beginnings. In stark contrast, the bruises on her face and shoulder reveal a painful and hidden truth. The phrase “Till Death Do Us Part” painted next to her becomes a haunting commentary on the darker realities faced by many behind closed doors.

Through its raw emotion and subdued color palette, the artwork forces the viewer to confront the tension between societal expectations and lived experience. Women are expected to be married without complaint, yet are put through continuous abuse, be it physical or verbal, in those marriages.

It stands as a powerful call for awareness, empathy, and the urgent need to address domestic violence.

THE DAY THE PHONE BECAME A WEAPON

Hadia Abdelfatah

Often, when we think of the term "violence against women," the first thing that comes to mind is physical assault or face-to-face violence. But in today's world, where social media has become an integral part of our daily lives, violence is no longer confined to the street or the home; it has also moved to screens, taking the form of cyber violence that affects women and girls everywhere.

While social media has become an essential space for women and girls to express themselves, communicate, and work, it has unfortunately also become an unsafe environment. Many comments and campaigns rife with hate speech and bullying, and we also see numerous instances of cyber harassment, blackmail, and all forms of violence. The impact of this violence is no longer fleeting; it extends to a woman's self-image, her sense of self-worth, and her feeling of security.

Cyber violence against women doesn't take a single form, but rather many forms that converge on one point: the phone or computer screen becomes a tool to harm a woman somewhere. The story might begin with a girl posting a picture of herself, only to be bombarded with comments about her skin tone, stretch marks, acne, and so on. Other cases involve a man posting a personal photo of his ex-girlfriend, a photo she had sent him in a moment of trust.

Later, she discovers that her picture is circulating in private groups or on public pages without her permission, with the aim of humiliating, blackmailing, or defaming her. Sometimes, the harm is limited to words: a barrage of insults and threats, and hurtful comments under every post, making staying on the platform an unbearable daily burden.

In other cases, private photos or information are stolen and used to blackmail women with intimate images or screenshots of their conversations.

They are threatened with having these materials sent to their parents or published online. We also see many women whose online identities are stolen, and fake accounts are created using their names and photos. Sometimes, these accounts are used to post offensive content or messages to others, damaging their reputation and threatening their sense of security. There are also women who are subjected to constant digital harassment; someone monitors their every move online, deliberately comments on their posts, sends them relentless messages, and may even try to extend this harassment from the virtual world to real life. Or someone might send them photos of their genitals and sexually explicit messages for the purpose of online sexual harassment. Amidst all this, hate speech remains present, words of denigration, mockery, and contempt targeting women simply because they are women, stripping them of their humanity and encouraging others to accept violence against them. Some girls and women are lured through chat, calls, and videos into fake relationships that end in sexual exploitation and blackmail. In other cases, a woman's home address, phone number, or workplace is publicly disclosed in what is known as "ducksing," exposing her to real dangers that extend far beyond the screen.

All these practices may seem to some like "just the internet," but in reality, they constitute a complex web of violence that damages women's reputations, affects their mental health, and can threaten their professional and family lives.

Several years ago, a more profound term than "cyber violence" emerged to describe what social media has become: "technology-facilitated gender-based violence." This violence leaves its mark not only on the screen but also extends to affect the mental and emotional well-being of women. Many women and girls who have been subjected to defamation, blackmail, or bullying describe a constant feeling of fear; fear of every new notification on their phones and fear of social stigma. This fear is accompanied by panic attacks, relentless anxiety, insomnia, and a growing sense of inferiority. In addition to the immediate psychological harm, there are other long-term effects on the lives of survivors of violence. When their reputation and social standing are damaged, there are severe long-term consequences for their social lives, limiting their opportunities for employment and professional growth, and disrupting their education by making it more difficult to concentrate or even preventing them from completing their studies. Many survivors may withdraw from social media and online platforms or reduce their digital participation because they no longer feel safe, which increases their isolation and excludes them from important social, educational, and economic opportunities. The impact extends to the victims' daily and social lives. Sometimes they refuse to go out with their friends, stop participating in activities they used to enjoy, or delete their social media accounts entirely, not because they dislike these platforms, but because they no longer feel safe on them. This type of violence is not confined to the digital world; sometimes it escalates from comments and messages to real threats or confrontations in the real world, carrying with it greater physical and psychological harm.

We don't disagree much about these forms of cyber violence, but there is a hidden, insidious form that is no less dangerous: violence disguised as a "joke" or "funny banter."

On many pages offering comedy and entertainment content, jokes are built on the backs of women, bullying their bodies and mocking independent women or working mothers, who are always portrayed as irritable and neglectful of their children and appearance. There are also videos depicting a woman's appearance and its decline after marriage, promoting the idea that women are infertile after 30, or portraying women's feelings and decisions as merely "hormonal imbalances."

The problem is that this discourse is presented as "lighthearted banter," leading some women to share or laugh at these jokes. With the repetition of these stereotypes, laughter becomes a tool for normalizing and reproducing violence, while those who try to object or call what is happening violence face further ridicule and bullying. Thus, the digital space becomes a place for recycling old ideas about women, instead of a space for their liberation—unless it is also used to raise awareness and question this "joking" that hurts more than it makes you laugh.

Also, with the development of modern communication technologies, the popularity of social media platforms, and the rapid advancement of artificial intelligence technologies, we have found that this can lead to new forms of cyber violence, especially with the spread of "deepfakes" technology, which is now being used, for example, to create pornographic content of female victims using ordinary photos of them available on their social media accounts.

Even more dangerous is the fact that, in many societies, there is a kind of The “normalization” of violence against women

means that cyber violence is not taken seriously as a crime, but rather downplayed or ignored. This makes perpetrators feel immune from punishment.

The digital space is used to reproduce the same patterns of traditional violence: harassment, threats, and emotional or financial blackmail using women's photos or personal information.

Legal protection gaps are a key part of the problem; in many countries, laws are still unable to seriously prosecute this type of crime or do not recognize it as a distinct form of violence. This vacuum leaves millions of women alone to face the consequences, while many perpetrators escape punishment, as if what happens online is less dangerous than what happens offline, even though the pain is the same in both cases. I myself have experienced many forms of it.

Like many young women, I have a prominent presence on social media and have thousands of followers, but this has exposed me to violations of my privacy, and my photos and identity have been misused. A fake account was created in my name, using my photos, and I was subjected to numerous messages of sexual harassment and bullying about my appearance. This is what encouraged me to write this article, and I sincerely hope that, within the framework of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign, acknowledging this digital violence becomes an essential first step. Gender-based violence, whether it occurs in the street or on screen, is itself an attempt to silence women and restrict their presence in public life. The question that remains open to us all is: What kind of digital space do we want to leave for the girls growing up today?

DID YOU KNOW?

The following section highlights everyday realities that often go unnoticed when we talk about gender based violence.

Each tile offers a simple insight that helps challenge assumptions, clarify misunderstandings, and make space for more informed conversations.

Freezing is one of the most common survival responses	Silence or stillness does not mean agreement. Many people freeze because their body chooses safety first.
Not all violence is visible	Digital, emotional, and financial harm can be deeply damaging even when unseen.
Jealousy is not a sign of love	Love grows in trust and respect. Jealousy can be used to justify controlling or restrictive behaviour.
Consent is something that continues throughout any interaction	A person can change their mind at any moment. Consent must be free, ongoing, and respected.
Humour shapes norms	Jokes about women or men can make harmful ideas seem acceptable and normal.
Manipulation often hides behind romantic language	Statements like if you love me you will do this create pressure, not partnership.
You can support without fixing	Being present, calm, and non judgemental is a powerful form of care.
Controlling behaviour often starts with small actions	Checking messages, deciding who someone talks to, or tracking their location are patterns of control.
You can support a survivor without knowing every detail	Listening, trusting, and offering calm presence are more meaningful than collecting information.
Most people harmed by gender-based violence know the perpetrator	Many experiences involve partners, relatives, or acquaintances rather than strangers.
Gender-based violence affects people across all backgrounds	Education, income, and status do not protect someone from experiencing harm
Asking for help does not always lead to support	Fear, stigma, and lack of access often stand between a victim and the assistance they need.
Challenging gender stereotypes helps prevent violence	Shifting norms and expectations is part of building safer, more equal communities.
Leaving a harmful relationship can be dangerous	Many survivors return because of fear, finances, or safety concerns. It is not weakness.

THESE ARE NOT HEAVY FACTS BUT GENTLE REMINDERS OF HOW POWER, SAFETY, AND RESPECT SHOW UP IN DAILY LIFE.

TAKE A MOMENT WITH EACH ONE AND NOTICE WHAT FEELS FAMILIAR, SURPRISING, OR WORTH THINKING ABOUT AGAIN.

DREAMS

Mila Mihajlović

In my dreams
I am free
There are no shackles
Nor fear of not being enough
Or that I won't be cherised
By men
By system
Or anyone else who sets my worth

In my dreams
I'm far beyond expectations of any
I exist in power
And rise in love

In my dreams
My sisters from Jordan,
Sudan,
Palestine,
Congo,
Afghanistan
And anywhere else in the world
Enjoy peace as rays of Sun fall on their tired hands
Tired from poverty
Tired from death
Tired from blood

In my dreams
I'm not seen as an object
I'm seen as the subject
The basis of life
The core of civilizations
The inspiration for societies

In my dreams
I'm not compared to standards
Standards don't exist in my head
My beauty isn't determined by a pace that everyone else takes
My body is a temple that deserves to be embraced
My mind is a strength not formulated by men

In my dreams
I am free
There are no shackles
Nor fear...

FROM BELGRADE TO PRISHTINA:
WOMEN WHO REFUSED TO BE SILENT

Ana Adžić & Bubulina Peni

On August 14, 2025, after one of many student protests in Belgrade, a group of students was attacked by the police while heading home and taken to a nearby garage. Among them was Nikolina Sinđelić, a survivor of police brutality.

“As we were walking down Nemanjina Street, we encountered members of the JZO (Unit for Protection of Certain Persons and Facilities), police officers, and several masked men whose identities were unknown to us,” Sinđelić said in an interview for N1.

According to her, men in plain clothes and balaclavas rushed out of a government building and began beating protesters with batons. The students claim they were forced to kneel with their hands behind their backs as the JZO commander arrived. When he noticed a red light on Nikolina’s camera, he accused her of recording the violence, even though the camera had no batteries. All students had their phones immediately smashed, except Nikolina, whose phone was first confiscated and later returned completely destroyed. Her camera was seized as well.

Sinđelić spoke publicly about how the commander physically assaulted her, threatening to strip and rape her in front of others. After the ordeal, all detained students were taken to the police station. Unfortunately, this was only the beginning of her story.

Less than four days after Sinđelić spoke publicly about police brutality and the actions of the commander, former State Secretary, convicted earlier this year for influence peddling, and the pro-government TV channel Informer published her intimate photos.

The images were likely taken from her destroyed phone, in an attempt to discredit her. With REM (Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media) inactive and prosecutors silent, Nikolina’s only legal option was to file a private lawsuit.

A month later, the government introduced a draft law criminalising the misuse of intimate photos, videos, and recordings. Under current Serbian law, such cases are not prosecuted ex officio, forcing victims to initiate private lawsuits. However, questions remain about how the new offence will be applied, given the judiciary’s dependence on the ruling party. Human rights organisations warn that women’s rights could once again be used for political gain rather than genuine protection.

Milena Vasić, attorney-at-law and program director at the Lawyers’ Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM), emphasised that introducing a new offence is meaningless without institutional capacity. “The capacities of the Office of the Prosecutor for High-Tech Crime, which should deal with it, also need to be strengthened. We have a very small number of prosecutors currently dealing with this specific type of criminal offence that falls under high-tech crime,“ she said.

Vasić added that the government is using women’s rights for populist purposes, while serious issues in the draft law remain unresolved.

Ana Zdravković from the organisation Osnažene told Zoomer.rs that one of the key issues with the draft law is the lack of clear definitions, particularly of what constitutes “sexually explicit content”, leaving room for inconsistent interpretations by courts. She also noted the absence of legal mechanisms for removing leaked content from the internet, meaning victims may remain exposed to violence even after court proceedings

In the same Zoomer.rs interview, Vanja Macanović from the Autonomous Women's Centre added that similar international acts, such as the UK's Online Safety Act or the US Take It Down Act, often fail in practice because lawmakers do not understand how digital platforms function and rarely consult civil society experts.

Ultimately, Nikolina's story reveals more than one case of police brutality. It exposes a system where perpetrators act with impunity, and victims are left to seek justice on their own. Without independent institutions and political will, the new law risks becoming another example of performative justice.

Her story is not an isolated incident but part of a broader regional pattern where speaking out, especially against gender-based violence, often comes at a cost. The mechanisms of impunity that protect perpetrators in Serbia are mirrored elsewhere in the Balkans, revealing a shared culture of silencing and intimidation. If you travel south from Belgrade to Prishtina, you'll find a journalist who faced a strikingly similar fate for raising her voice, Ardiana Thaçi Mehmeti.

On the morning of Monday, May 7, 2024, Klan Kosova journalist Ardiana Thaçi Mehmeti faced a day unlike any other. Her phone flooded with messages and calls from unknown numbers, men demanding sexual favours, commenting on her appearance, asking her rates, and even sending nude photos.

This harassment began after her number was shared in the infamous AlbKings group, a notorious online community in Kosovo that circulated private information and targeted women with threats, blackmail, and exposure.

Only weeks earlier, Thaçi Mehmeti had reported on the group in her investigative show Kiks Kosova.

"The difference between this case and the other threats I have received is that this time I did not know who was behind it.

In other cases of harassment and threats, I usually knew the person responsible and that it was connected to my work," Thaçi Mehmeti explained.

"This time, there were around seventy thousand people involved, and when you go out on the street, you cannot identify who they are. That made it much more dangerous, especially because it was the first time someone attacked me based on gender and in a sexual way."

The scale of the group's reach was massive. According to a report by Balkan Insight in September of this year, the AlbKings group on Telegram had 120,000 members at its peak.

In response to the incident, the Association of Journalists of Kosovo (AJK) condemned the sharing of her phone number and the insulting messages and calls she received, stating that these actions aimed to damage her reputation.

"The publication of journalist Thaçi Mehmeti's personal phone number as an act of revenge by AlbKings not only endangers her personal safety but also serves as an attempt to intimidate and silence her," the AJK stated.

Despite public condemnation, the harassment against Thaçi Mehmeti escalated when group members sought contact information for her family.

For the first time, she questioned whether continuing her work was worth it, as the situation affected not only her but also her children, husband, and parents, especially her mother, who had undergone a mastectomy that January due to breast cancer.

"When my case happened, my mother saw it on television. The police, who had offered me close protection, were already at her house before I arrived. Seeing them and learning I was being targeted again, she feared I had been killed and had a panic attack that took two to three hours to calm." she vividly remembers.

A nonchalant response leaves the victim without proper support

By February 9, 2024, Albkings had accumulated 20,993 photos and 19,516 videos. Shortly after that date, it switched to private mode. In May 2024, prosecutor Elza Bajrami explained that the group had previously been shut down but was later reopened on two separate occasions.

Ariana points out that public figures and ordinary women face very different experiences in seeking justice for harassment or abuse.

“When I went to report the case, the first thing a police officer told me was, “Just change your phone number.” I asked him, “Why should I? We live in the age of technology. If I change my number, everyone gets notified automatically.” - Thaçi Mehmeti explains.

“Besides, why should I give up something that belongs to me just because someone decided to harass me? If a police officer can say that to a journalist like me, what do they say to women who do not have a public voice?” she adds.

Another aspect of the issue appears to lie within Kosovo’s legal system.

In the second Albkings case, the prosecution removed Thaçi Mehmeti from the indictment, saying that she had not continued to communicate with the harassers.

“It felt strange to me because they were the ones harassing me. I had taken screenshots, blocked their numbers, and reported them. Even though two admitted to sending nude photos and asking for sexual favours, the prosecution argued the crime was not completed since I did not respond.” she says.
She adds that prosecutors often struggle to classify these cases and to apply the right punishments.
According to Thaçi Mehmeti, public trials, harsher punishments, and better-trained police are crucial to prevent harassment and ensure real accountability.

“The penalties are far too light. I wanted the trial to be public because I believed that when justice is transparent, others will think twice before committing the same acts. We fought for months to find and arrest those people.” she explains.

Once they were caught, I wanted them to face real punishment, not two months in prison or a fine of two thousand five hundred euros. When offenders are hidden or lightly punished, nothing changes.”

“Always report it. Reporting is power.”

Despite being targeted, insulted, and constantly subjected to intimidation and denigrating comments, Ardiana became the voice for many women who drew strength from her courage.

“Today, one of them has been convicted, while two others were released by the prosecution. I am happy that I became a voice for many women. When I went to court, I saw around twenty other women who had also been harassed by the same people, but they did not want their names revealed or their families to know.” she explains, adding that in the Balkans, traditional attitudes still treat women as shameful victims, even when they are the targets.

At the end of 2024, Ardiana Thaçi Mehmeti was awarded the Journalist of the Year 2024 by the Association of Journalists of Kosovo.

“By coincidence, I was added to a group called Albkings, and I dedicate this award to all those women who didn’t have other women to stand by them, who were forced to change their lives, their phone numbers, to stay silent, and not even tell their own families,” she said while receiving the award.

She also thanked the team of journalists from KIKS Kosova and expressed gratitude to her teenage children, who had a difficult time during this period due to bullying at school.

Today, looking back at the fear many women endure when their intimate photos are shared, Thaçi Mehmeti urges every woman to report such cases and not feel ashamed.

“You are not guilty because someone decided to harass or humiliate you because of your gender.” she says.
“Healing takes time, and I know how difficult it is, especially in a society where victims are often blamed. But we must keep our heads up and say, yes, this happened to me. We should not keep it a secret, and we should not isolate ourselves, because silence allows worse things to happen.” she concludes.

In both Belgrade and Prishtina, two women who dared to tell the truth found themselves punished for it. Their experiences reveal not only the gaps in the legal systems of these two societies but also the deep-rooted mindset that has cultivated a culture of silence, one where speaking up against injustice often comes at a cost, and where a woman’s morality is placed under scrutiny by the very society that claims to define what is moral and what is not.

Yet, the stories of these two women carry a glimmer of hope, showing that resistance begins when someone dares to speak, and that change, however slow, is born from that first act of defiance. Nikolina and Ardiana remind us that raising one’s voice is not only an act of courage but also a way of reclaiming dignity, truth, and the right to be heard.

THE OLD HOUSE THAT KICKS YOU OUT

Adelina Tërshani

The house is not just a lump of concrete.
In the house whose every brick you've counted,
there is no place for you
not even when you stand alone
on the tenth brick you once claimed as yours.

The house whose every brick you've counted
is not yours
just because you know by heart
the number of steps leading to the second floor.

The house whose every brick you've counted,
where you marked the date of your first period in blood,
does not remember you
not even though you've memorized
every tile on its roof.

The house whose every brick you've counted
is not necessarily your home.
Because the one whose word rules inside it
makes sure you remain distant
emotionally, materially
never fully belonging.

The house whose every brick you've counted
does not remember the first steps
you pressed into its foundation.
The house whose every brick you've counted
does not remember the clothes stained
by the oil of an old lamp,
even though they were the clothes
you wore on your first day of school.

The house whose every brick you've counted
does not remember the sound of the slaps
you took inside its walls.

Because even the house has learned
that every generation of women raised within it
stands bowed,
too subdued to dare
to carve her own name into its doorway.

"All the women before you," the house says,
"counted these same bricks
as they rose slowly each morning
to set the table for the man who bruised them.

But not one of them ever dared
to claim these bricks as her own."
And so, the house has "given up,"
even though in its bricks
live the stories of your great-grandmother,
grandmother, mother, sister
and you.

And the house whose every brick you've counted
has decided on its own to collapse
so it will no longer stand
as the property of men
who never knew its worth.

A house is still a house,
and with whatever strength it has left,
it is fighting.

And you
what are you waiting for, woman?

THE LINE

A.J

It begins softly,
with a sentence that sounds like concern,
something light enough to pass unnoticed.

Show me your messages,
just so I know you are safe.
The words land like care,
but sit like a weight.

And somewhere between the request and your hesitation,
a thin line appears.
A line you did not know was there,
drawn quietly between trust and doubt,
between protection and possession.

Care does not need proof.
Love does not require permission slips.
Safety does not grow in someone else's hands.

But when the line is crossed once,
it becomes easier to cross again.

The small questions turn into expectations,
the expectations turn into rules,
and the rules slowly rearrange the shape of your days.

Why didn't you answer sooner.
Who were you with.
Why didn't you tell me.

Each question framed as worry,
each demand wrapped in softness,
each limit disguised as love.

And one morning you notice
that your world has become smaller,
your voice quieter,
your choices filtered through someone else's fear,
your freedom repackaged as devotion.

This is how control grows:
not all at once,
but in fragments,
in the space between words,
in every moment you feel yourself shrink just a little more.

And the most dangerous part is often the beginning,
when it still sounds like care,
when it still feels easier to give in,
when the line is still thin enough to miss.

THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING A MAN

Visar Kukaqi

As a young activist and educator, I have often spoken about disadvantaged groups and the struggles they face to reach the opportunities they deserve. Yet I had rarely stopped to ask myself a simple, uncomfortable question: are women disadvantaged in ways men never even notice? Not only through unequal treatment or limited opportunities, but in the everyday moments that shape how safe, free, or respected someone feels.The second moment happened during a training on gender equality, as part of my experience with Teach for Kosova

Two experiences forced me to rethink what “privilege” truly looks like.

The first was in the summer of 2022 in Crete, Greece. A female friend from Athens came to visit me while I was living in Heraklion through an Erasmus programme. To me, the city felt completely safe, even late at night. When we arranged to meet for dinner, she asked if I could pick her up because her Airbnb was in a dark area. I didn’t understand why. I thought: She’s Greek, she speaks the language. Why would she feel unsafe?

On the way, I asked her whether she found Heraklion safe. Her answer stayed with me:
“It’s safe, yes - mostly because you are a man.

In our monthly session, our trainer, Liri Kuçi, explained economic violence, how financial dependence is used as a tool of control. She described how, in our society, the idea of the “man of the house” often becomes a silent permission for dominance. A man asking his partner for money rarely feels shame; a woman asking her partner often feels like she’s begging. The imbalance is not accidental, it is taught, reinforced, and normalized.

These moments made something clear: no matter what a man does, his actions are usually interpreted through a lens of privilege. Even something as absurd as a male driver causing an accident is sometimes excused by blaming a woman in a short dress for “distracting him.”

When I think about how many women fear walking alone even at 9 or 10 p.m., I recognize how shielded my own life has been. As a man, I can go out drinking without worrying that someone might spike my drink. I can choose my partner freely without hearing that I’m “too old” or “won’t find anyone better.” I can change jobs, get divorced, or start over without being judged as a failure or a disgrace.

Men rarely pause to notice these gaps. These problems are not invisible, we have simply been trained not to see them. And too often, gender equality is treated as an exaggeration, a nuisance, or “too dramatic,” even while women continue to face violence, exclusion, and discrimination.

That is why I call it a privilege to be a man: not because men are better off in every aspect of life, but because society grants us a level of safety, freedom, and legitimacy that women are forced to fight for. Men are not beaten to death simply for being men. Men are rarely reduced to housework, excluded from property, labelled for their social lives, or followed on the safest street by someone intending to harm them.
There are countless details that seem insignificant to us, but cost women their sense of safety, equality, and sometimes even their lives.
That is the privilege of being a man:
to move through the world without ever fully understanding what it means to walk in a woman’s shoes, and the responsibility to ensure that changes.

FROM LANGUAGE TO VIOLENCE

Marija Ilić

Violence against women or violence towards women — two phrases that seem almost identical, but actually open an important question: what is the relationship between women and violence?

Language is not neutral — words reshape reality

The difference appears minimal, almost technical. But the way we choose words also determines how we understand reality. When we say violence towards women, the phrase is structured so that the violence appears to be “moving” in some direction, as a phenomenon that exists on its own, between supposedly equal participants.

In contrast, the phrase violence against women clearly puts unequal power relations in focus and shows that violence is an act committed against someone, not something that “just happens.”

This is how language stops being neutral. In a society where violence against women is deeply connected with gender roles, stereotypes, and symbolic messages, the way we speak about violence becomes part of both the problem and the solution. When we present violence as something that simply “happened,” as an incident or a result of circumstances, we obscure the fact that there is a perpetrator, a power dynamic, and consequences that disproportionately affect women.

How speech shapes our understanding of violence

Violence against women is not only physical — it is also linguistic, symbolic, and socially constructed. It begins long before it becomes visible: in the messages we absorb, in the norms we learn, and in the language we rarely question. Sociolinguistics shows that language is not just communication but a mirror of social hierarchies. Through language, we see who has power, whose voice is considered credible, and whose is silenced.

If we frame violence only as an individual act, we miss the broader social context behind it. This is why the way we talk about violence matters: language shapes how we assign responsibility and how visible victims become.

Messages we no longer even notice

In practice, this means that many misogynistic messages are so normalised that we no longer even notice them: “men are like that,” “women exaggerate,” “it’s not that serious”.

Here, language functions as a filter, presenting certain patterns of behaviour as expected and others as deviations.

In the context of violence against women, this is visible in everyday situations: a woman’s voice is questioned, relativised, or presented as less credible. This is not accidental. It is a consequence of broader power structures maintained through language.

When we constantly repeat that women are “emotional,” “weaker,” or “oversensitive,” while men are “rational” and “self-controlled,” we are not describing reality, we are creating it.

These patterns are not harmless: they set the stage on which violence becomes possible, justified, or invisible.

This is why it is not enough to talk only about physical violence. Everyday speech normalises gender roles, preparing the ground on which violence can happen and later be justified. When insults directed at women are considered “normal”, when we quietly justify control, jealousy, or humiliation, language becomes part of the mechanism of violence.

Mechanisms through which language normalises violence

Language not only reflects violence — it normalises it. This is most clearly visible through several mechanisms:

The first is euphemization, when violence is presented as a “family dispute,” a “marital argument,” or “relationship drama.” In this way, a serious act is reduced to a private disagreement.

Then comes the erasure of the perpetrator in the media: “woman beaten” instead of “man beat a woman”. The passive construction hides responsibility and suggests that violence “just happened”.

There is also victim-blaming, through questions and comments like “why didn’t she leave?” or “she must have provoked him”. This discourse blames the woman, not the perpetrator.

Popular culture contributes by romanticising the abuser: jealousy is portrayed as proof of love, and the “troubled but passionate man” as a desirable figure, turning control and aggression into emotions rather than danger.

Finally, there is frequent relativisation of violence, through phrases like: “those are their issues”, “everyone fights”, “he’s not bad, he just lost control”. Such language minimises and almost justifies violence.

Together, these practices blur reality and shift the focus from the perpetrator to the woman. This is why it is important to recognise how language affects what we consider “normal” and what we are willing to tolerate.

The experience of violence and the way it is discussed is not the same for all women: race, class, sexual orientation, migration status, and disability influence whose voice is heard and whose is silenced. Language that marginalises women further marginalises those already on the edges of social visibility.

Gender-sensitive language: visibility as power

The debate about gender-sensitive language in Serbia shows that language is much more than grammar, it is a political issue. The rejection of the Law on Gender Equality that would have introduced this is not just an administrative decision but a signal of how deeply rooted resistance to gender equality is.

Opposition usually comes packaged with stereotypes: “it’s unnatural,” “it sounds ugly,” “it’s being imposed”. But behind these arguments lies a simple truth, resistance to changing hierarchies.

Gender-sensitive language has one key function: to name women as actors, not as footnotes of society. When we say ministarka (woman minister), doktorka (woman doctor), or autorka (woman author), we are not deforming language, we are restoring visibility. Because if the only word that exists in regional languages for a minister is in male form, the default assumption is that power is also male.

Naming is always political. The one who is named exists. The one who remains in the generic masculine form disappears.

This is why gender-sensitive language is not a “trend” but a tool for redistributing social power and agency. If women are not visible in language, they can hardly be visible in institutions, media, or politics. Language does not only describe the world — it shapes it.

If, as a girl, I had heard more about women scientists, prime ministers, or pilots, and less about women teachers, secretaries, and flight attendants, perhaps I would have learned earlier that the world is much larger than the roles society offered me.

Words expand or narrow the space of possibilities. If we do not hear in the public sphere that women can be commanders, scientists, programmers, or presidents, then those positions do not open up to women in our culture. Language does not determine destiny, but it shapes imagination. And imagination is the foundation of ambition.

This is why we must start with language: to name responsibility, not to hide perpetrators behind euphemisms, and to return women to their rightful place in words, just as in society. Changing language will not abolish violence by itself — but without it, we remain blind to its roots.

DON'T STAY SILENT.
REPORT GENDER
BASED VIOLENCE

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