

WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DISCLAIMER

This report, “Women’s Access to Justice in Europe and Central Asia,” was developed by the UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO), in close collaboration with UN Women country offices, in preparation for the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which is dedicated to ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, and addressing structural barriers.

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We also want to thank the readers who engage with this paper. Your interest and commitment to addressing gender equality and women’s access to justice are essential for driving meaningful change in our societies.

The report draws on a desk review undertaken between September and November 2025 and therefore draws on the publicly available resources from that period. Any data published afterwards has not been taken into consideration. The information in the report is expected to be updated regularly.

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A SNAPSHOT OF WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN THE EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA REGION

Report in preparation for the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, dedicated to ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices, and addressing structural barriers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Access to justice is a key human right and essential for the enjoyment of all other human rights. When women and girls can claim their rights and hold institutions accountable, they are better equipped to live free from discrimination and violence and to play an active role in public life. This study has been prepared by UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) in preparation for the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70) which will focus on ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls.

The study assesses the current state of women's access to justice in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region,¹ identifying progress, persistent gaps, and emerging challenges. The main objective is to provide strategic, evidence-based recommendations that will inform the engagement of Member States, UN entities, and civil society stakeholders in the CSW70 deliberations and negotiations.

The Europe and Central Asia region is extremely diverse, encompassing EU candidate countries, post-conflict settings, countries affected by ongoing war and displacement, and environments where civil society operates under significant constraints. Despite these very different contexts, there are striking common patterns across all three subregions, particularly in how women access justice, how institutions respond to GBV, and where the main gaps in legal implementation and protection persist.

Gender equality legal frameworks and implementation

Across all subregions, laws on gender equality have generally improved. However, several countries, particularly in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus and Central Asia, still need to adopt comprehensive non-discrimination laws, and revise, from a gender equality perspective, their legislation in different areas, including family law, property law, employment, and political and public participation. Legislation on gender-based violence (GBV) continues to be improved across countries, particularly in those that are parties to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention). However, important gaps remain — from the absence of dedicated criminal provisions on domestic violence (such as in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) to the lack of comprehensive legal measures addressing all forms of GBV, including technology-facilitated violence. For example, Türkiye addresses domestic violence and violence against women and girls across different criminal law provisions and has introduced several amendments to further emphasise the matter.

In terms of implementation, gaps between legal commitments and their practical application remain present across the sub-regions. Women continue to face discrimination and underrepresentation, and the enforcement of the legislation is weak. Furthermore, top-down initiatives reduce ownership for implementation of the legislation. Equality bodies and coordination mechanisms at national and local levels often lack the resources, mandates and staffing required to ensure accountability and drive policy coherence. In the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia, gender-based discrimination cases currently represent a small proportion of overall complaints (between 1–5 per cent). In Türkiye, courts are prioritized over equality bodies in accessing justice. In other Eastern Europe and Central Asia countries, data on gender-based discrimination cases is still emerging, reflecting an ongoing need to strengthen reporting and documentation systems.

The backlash to gender equality and policy backsliding — manifested through the introduction of restrictive laws, including 'foreign agents' legislation, intensified digital surveillance, and tighter NGO regulations, curbing freedom of association and constraining feminist movements in several countries across the region — further affects implementation and enforcement of gender equality legislation. Even when progress has been ongoing for years, such as in Albania, North Macedonia, and Serbia, the adoption of new updated laws on gender equality have been opposed by conservative forces, while in Georgia, a legislative amendment package removed the words "gender" and "gender equality" from the legislation altogether.

At the same time, there are important opportunities that can be leveraged across the regions. EU accession and partnership processes (CEDAW Committee; Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO), the monitoring body for countries party to the Istanbul Convention; and other human rights accountability frameworks) continue to provide incentives and structured pathways for legal and institutional reforms.

In this context, it is important that gender equality legislation and its implementation continue to be improved and that remaining gaps in anti-discrimination, GBV, labour, family, property, and other areas of legislation are adequately addressed in accordance with international standards (CEDAW, the Istanbul Convention, and EU legislation). Furthermore, it is important that regressive legal measures that weaken women's rights and gender equality principles are prevented and reversed, as well as that mandates, staffing and budgets of gender equality bodies and gender equality mechanisms further strengthened.

Justice reforms and women's experiences

Most countries have undertaken justice reforms, including legal and institutional measures to improve independence, accountability and quality of the judiciary, particularly in the Western Balkans, Moldova, and Ukraine in the context of their EU accession efforts, but also other regions. In Ukraine, despite progress in these areas, the full-scale war continues to severely undermine the judiciary, with judges and court staff among those killed.

Yet, the judicial reforms rarely take into account the specific barriers women face in relation to the justice system, and relevant national strategies generally do not include gender related considerations. Within justice institutions, gender stereotypes, lengthy proceedings, court caseload and limited specialisation continue to have an impact on gender-sensitive cases, such as GBV, divorce, child support or alimony. Economic insecurity, rural isolation and the high cost of legal services disproportionately affect women with limited income, women in informal employment, Roma and minority women, women with disabilities and migrant or displaced women, reducing their ability to seek remedies or protection in all countries included in this report.

Therefore, justice reforms should systematically integrate gender considerations into judicial strategies starting from planning to sustainable financing. Countries must assess how proposed changes affect rural women, young women, minority women, women with disabilities and women from other disadvantaged groups, and ensure that institutions have the capacity to respond effectively to gender-based discrimination, violence and other gender-sensitive cases. The ongoing digitalization of justice systems taking place in some countries in Central Asia offers the potential to increase efficiency and reduce caseload and geographic and financial barriers if designed with inclusion in mind. The increasing representation of women in the judiciary creates openings to strengthen gender responsiveness, particularly when accompanied by leadership development, institutional training and accountability measures. The EU, other international organizations and civil society have an active role to play in promoting gender-responsive justice system planning, including the systematic use of gender analysis, gender impact assessments, and sex-disaggregated justice data to inform reforms, modernization strategies, digitalization initiatives, and performance monitoring.

State legal aid and legal literacy

State legal aid frameworks are already established in all countries; the majority have dedicated legislation on legal aid, while others regulate legal aid through various pieces of legislation, including legislation on domestic violence or on legal professions (Türkiye, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Turkmenistan). In general, key groups formally identified as in need of support include women with low income and survivors of domestic violence, and in some cases, other forms of violence. However, in practice, legal aid

systems often fail to meet women's needs. Survivors of GBV, in particular, face complex bureaucratic requirements to access assistance, while the services available to them remain limited and insufficient. Across the Western Balkans, Türkiye, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, the number of women victims of GBV benefiting from legal aid is considerably lower than the number of reported cases. Across Central Asia, women face persistent barriers to legal aid, including the lack of free legal representation, limited availability of legal aid centres, and insufficient accommodation for women with disabilities. These challenges are compounded by low legal awareness and limited access to information about available services. Specific studies related to women's access to justice and sex-disaggregated and case-level data remain insufficient, restricting evidence-based policymaking and reforms.

To address these challenges, legal aid systems should be made easier to navigate, with simpler procedures and fewer administrative hurdles. GBV survivors should have automatic access to free legal aid, and services must reach rural and remote areas, not only major cities. Strengthening lawyers' expertise in GBV, discrimination, family, and property law, together with closer collaboration between legal aid providers and women's CSOs, would significantly improve support for women seeking justice. In addition, women should have information about their rights to access justice. Outreach should engage diverse groups through community networks, schools, digital tools, and women's centres. Strengthening legal literacy is key to turning legal rights into real access.

Institutional response to GBV

Efforts have been made to strengthen institutional responses to GBV, an area where women often need to engage with law enforcement and the justice system. The expansion of specialized police and prosecution units and emerging coordinated service models offer a basis for more survivor-centred responses and stronger enforcement and accountability. Yet in all countries, protection measures may not be consistently enforced, investigations and court processes may be slow, and lenient sentencing persists. In South Caucasus and Central Asia, survivors continue to face secondary victimization and service responses are still influenced by patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes.

In all countries, priority should be given to GBV response, particularly in consistent enforcement of protection orders, survivor-centred and timely investigations, and better-trained justice officials. Strong coordination across services and integrated legal, psychological, health, and social support are essential to ensure survivors receive effective protection and assistance.

Transitional justice

Among all countries that have been or are going through conflicts in the region, only those in the Western Balkans and Ukraine have made progress in advancing transitional justice through legal reforms, focusing primarily on the prosecution of war criminals; yet in general, there is lack of a comprehensive transitional justice approach, prosecutions remain slow, and regional cooperation weak. Gender dimensions remain insufficiently addressed: conflict-related sexual violence prosecutions are rare, reparations fragmented, and women underrepresented in post-conflict decision-making. Kosovo¹ and Ukraine have made more notable progress in establishing and implementing accountability frameworks for war-related crimes, including conflict-related sexual violence. In all countries, civil society organizations, particularly women-led and survivor-centered groups, continue to play a critical role in documenting violations, providing legal aid and psychosocial support, and advancing survivor-centered justice.

In the context of broader transitional justice efforts, a key gender priority is to ensure that conflict-related sexual violence is fully investigated and prosecuted through increased capacity for prosecutorial and judicial actors, survivor-centered procedures, and strengthened cross-border cooperation for evidence and witness protection.

Women's CSOs and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)

Women's rights organizations play a key role in providing services to women, but in several contexts, shrinking civic space and restrictions on civil society have further constrained their work. The engagement of women's CSOs in strategic litigation on gender-based discrimination and GBV cases remains limited, with few exceptions in North Macedonia, Georgia and Moldova.

Women human rights defenders also remain key actors in promoting and protecting women's rights. Yet, across regions, they face threats, harassment, intimidation, and weak institutional protection. In some regions and countries, the situation is even more alarming, with WHRDs facing arbitrary arrest, prosecution, or forced exile.

All countries should provide funding for women's CSOs that provide legal aid, particularly in rural and underserved areas, and remove legal or procedural barriers that prevent them from representing women in GBV and other gender-equality related cases. In addition, dedicated protection mechanisms for WHRDs should be established, including safe reporting channels, emergency protection measures, and legal safeguards aligned with international human rights standards.

Gender representation in the judiciary and trainings on gender equality

Finally, in terms of women representation in the judiciary, many Western Balkans countries, as well as Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia, have reached or nearly reached parity among judges, and other countries in the region have strong women representation in courts. Yet, women remain underrepresented in senior judicial leadership and in prosecutorial roles, and considerably underrepresented in police forces, often below 15 per cent.

Efforts to institutionalize gender-sensitivity training in the justice and law enforcement sectors have expanded over the past decade. Yet in most cases, these trainings are not continuous, mandatory or effectively evaluated.

Furthermore, gender-responsive justice requires inclusive recruitment, leadership, and mentorship pathways to help institutions better reflect the communities they serve, supported by stronger oversight and accountability systems. Reliable, disaggregated data systems are also essential to track trends, identify gaps, and measure progress. Very importantly, mandatory and continuous gender-sensitivity training for police and judicial institutions are essential to make justice systems more gender sensitive.

The study concludes with key findings and cross-cutting insights spanning all topics and subregions examined, along with comprehensive policy recommendations.



1 All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Access to justice is a cornerstone of gender equality and human rights. When women and girls can claim their rights, challenge discrimination, and hold institutions accountable, they are better able to live free from violence, participate fully in public life, and contribute to sustainable development. On the other hand, when justice systems are inaccessible or biased, inequality deepens, and entire communities are left behind. Ensuring women's access to justice is therefore not only a legal obligation but also a foundation for inclusive governance, peace, and social cohesion.

In this context, and in preparation for the 70th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW70), which will focus on ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, UN Women Europe and Central Asia Regional Office (ECARO) is undertaking this analytical study.

The main purpose of the study is to assess the current state of women's access to justice in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, identifying progress, persistent gaps, and emerging challenges, and to provide strategic, evidence-based recommendations that will inform the engagement of Member States, UN entities, and civil-society stakeholders in the CSW70 deliberations and negotiations. The study also aims to strengthen the regional knowledge base and support national and regional advocacy for gender-responsive justice systems.

Specifically, the study examines the legal, institutional, and structural dimensions of women's access to justice across 18

countries and territories in the region, namely: Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Türkiye, Turkmenistan, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. It analyzes the persistence of discriminatory laws, policies, and practices that restrict women's equal access to justice, while also identifying reforms and innovations that promote inclusive and equitable legal systems. The study assesses the gender responsiveness of institutions, looking at gender balance in the judiciary and law enforcement, the extent of gender-sensitivity training, and the availability and quality of survivor-centred and trauma-informed services.

A key focus of the analysis is the economic and intersectional barriers that impede women's ability to seek and obtain justice, including those related to poverty, disability, ethnicity, migration, rural residence, or conflict. The study also documents and showcases promising practices, such as legal aid programmes, women's legal empowerment initiatives, and partnerships with international development actors that have proven effective in enhancing women's access to justice.

Ultimately, the study seeks to generate evidence-based, action-oriented recommendations for governments, justice sector institutions, civil society organizations, and development partners. These recommendations will serve both to inform policy discussions at CSW70 and to advance gender-responsive justice systems that uphold the rights of all women and girls across the region.

CONTEXT: CSW70 THEME AND REGIONAL RELEVANCE

[The Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW\)](#) is the United Nations' principal global intergovernmental body dedicated exclusively to promoting gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls. Each year, Member States, UN entities, and civil society organizations assemble in New York to review progress, identify key challenges, set global standards and negotiate concrete policy guidance for advancing women's rights.

The key outcome of each session of the Commission is the Agreed Conclusions. These are negotiated commitments that capture the collective understanding of Member States on the priority theme. These conclusions outline concrete policy actions and measures that the governments and other stakeholders are expected to implement at national, regional, and global levels. They serve as an authoritative global policy framework for advancing gender equality within the UN system and beyond, guiding both national reforms and international cooperation.

[For its 70th session](#), scheduled for 9-19 March 2026, CSW has adopted the priority theme "Ensuring and strengthening access to justice for all women and girls, including by promoting inclusive and equitable legal systems, eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices, and addressing structural barriers." The review theme for that session will revisit "Women's full and effective participation and decision-making in public life, as well as the elimination of violence, for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls."

This thematic choice is timely and strategic. Access to justice sits at the intersection of human rights, the rule of law, gender equality and sustainable development. It resonates strongly with both SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions). In the ECA region, the context for this theme is clear: many countries have undertaken reforms to law and policy, yet persisting gaps in implementation and institutional capacity, as well as intersectional barriers, conflict and displacement, all leave women and girls at risk of exclusion from justice mechanisms.

From the perspective of the ECA region, the focus of CSW70 offers an important opportunity. Many countries in the region have already flagged access to justice as a priority in their national reviews of [the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#); these include, for example, legal aid reforms in Albania, the specialization of prosecutors in Georgia, and the recognition of free legal aid in Kyrgyz Republic. These signal momentum for action but also incomplete progress and uneven access for women, especially those facing intersecting discrimination or in humanitarian or conflict contexts.

By aligning the regional study with the CSW70 theme, the analysis will offer direct relevance to the upcoming global negotiations, and ensure that the particular experiences, systemic obstacles and good practices of the ECA region feed into the global policy dialogue. The regional lens adds value by showing how structural barriers, discriminatory laws, institutional weaknesses and economic constraints combine to block women's access to justice, not just in theory but in lived experience.

SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

The report covers the main developments and challenges over the last five years in relation to women's access to justice in UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia programme countries and territories, as following:

- Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia) and Türkiye;
- Eastern Europe and South Caucasus (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Ukraine); and
- Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan).

While each country is unique in terms of political, economic and social development, they also have regional geo-political commonalities.

This report is based on a structured desk-based review and a comparative analytical process carried out across the three subregions. The research began with the development of individual country profiles, following the thematic framework used in the report: (i) gender equality legislation and policy frameworks, their implementation, gaps and enforcement; (ii) gender equality considerations in the justice system; (iii) state legal aid systems and the role of civil society organizations; (iv) responses to gender-based violence; (v) transitional justice and conflict-related violations (where applicable); (vi) safety and legal protection for women human rights defenders; and institutional gender responsiveness in justice and law enforcement bodies.

Draft country profiles were then shared with and validated by UN Women Country Offices, who reviewed the accuracy, relevance, and contextual interpretation of findings and included additional information, based also on their work on the ground and collaboration with national partners and CSOs. The present report is the result of a comparative analytical synthesis of the country profiles, identifying common trends, recurring gaps, and cross-regional opportunities.

For each country, priority was given to credible and authoritative sources, including:

- Available national legislation, policy frameworks, and statistical data;
- Reports of international and regional human rights mechanisms: Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Concluding Observations of the Committee on the Elimination

of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW Committee) and other human rights treaty bodies, Special Procedures of the UN Human Rights Council (Special Procedures) and Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) under the Istanbul Convention);

- Publications and monitoring findings from international organizations, including the UN system, EU institutions, the Council of Europe, and the OSCE;
- Research and documentation by reputable international and national civil society organizations, research institutes and think tanks.

An intersectional approach was applied throughout the analysis to ensure that findings and recommendations reflect the diverse experiences of women facing multiple and overlapping forms of discrimination, including women with low income, rural women, Roma and other ethnic minority women, women with disabilities, single mothers, internally displaced women, migrant and refugee women, LGBTIQ+ women, women living with HIV/AIDS, and older women. For each thematic area, the report tries to identify, based on available information, where legal frameworks, access to services, enforcement practices, and institutional responses disproportionately affect these groups. This has informed the identification of specific gaps, risks, and targeted recommendations to improve access to justice and protection for women in situations of heightened vulnerability across regions.

Limitations

In some countries – particularly in Central Asia, but also in the Western Balkans, Eastern Europe and South Caucasus – reliable and up-to-date data were sometimes limited or unavailable, including government administrative data. Across multiple countries, publicly available information on legal aid usage, discrimination cases, access barriers faced by disadvantaged groups, women's legal awareness, and the institutional capacity of CSOs remains insufficient. In contexts where civic space is restricted, reporting by women human rights defenders and on gender-based violence may be incomplete due to risks faced by survivors and civil society actors. As a result, while the report provides a robust comparative overview based on the best available evidence, some thematic areas could not be analyzed with the same depth across all countries.

REGIONAL CONTEXT

Western Balkans and Türkiye

All countries in the subregion are classified as upper middle-income economies, and Türkiye is among the 17th largest economies in the world.² Economic growth across most of these countries is generally moderate, projected between 3 and 4 per cent in 2025. Montenegro's small and open economy is highly vulnerable to external shocks, while Türkiye continues to recover from the 2023 earthquakes.³

Demographic decline is a common challenge across countries, such as Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, reflecting persistent emigration, low fertility rates and aging populations. By contrast, Kosovo and Türkiye maintain younger demographic structures and relatively stable populations, though Kosovo continues to struggle with outward migration pressures.

EU integration remains the primary political priority and the main driver of reforms for most of the countries, which are part of the stabilization and association process (SAP)⁴. They are also EU candidate countries,⁵ with some exceptions: Kosovo is a potential candidate as candidate country status has not yet been granted,⁶ while accession negotiations between Türkiye and the EU have remained at a standstill since 2018.⁷

Justice reform and the rule of law are central across all contexts. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia continue to make progress in implementing reforms to strengthen judicial independence and accountability, improve access to justice and address corruption.⁸ Bosnia and Herzegovina's EU progress slowed due to the political crisis in Republika Srpska, with only limited reforms achieved. The submission of the Reform Agenda in September 2025 is a positive step, but advancing to accession talks requires adopting judicial reforms aligned with EU standards.⁹ Serbia has amended its Constitution to reduce political influence on the judiciary, but deepening polarization and erosion of trust have slowed judicial reforms, contributing to a

standstill in advancing the broader rule of law agenda.¹⁰ Kosovo remains committed to its EU path, though reform progress has recently slowed due to institutional delays in the formation of government, and the normalization of relations with Serbia and implementation of Dialogue commitments remain an integral part of Kosovo's European perspective.¹¹ Türkiye has adopted several judicial reform packages with comprehensive advancements, though EU concerns about democratic standards, the rule of law, the independence of the judiciary and respect for fundamental rights remain.¹²

Gender equality is increasingly integrated into the EU reform agenda and national strategies, with most countries party to CEDAW and the Istanbul Convention. Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia have ratified ILO Convention No. 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the workplace. Several countries have shown improvements in gender equality indices, though still below EU averages. However, concerns about pushbacks on gender equality agenda are present. Student protests in Serbia have expanded into a broader movement for transparency but UN experts have noted concerns about the government's restrictive response may limit civic space and affect the work of women's rights groups, with possible implications for advancing gender equality.¹³ Roma women and other minorities remain among the most disadvantaged groups in Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention in 2021 has raised concerns about protection of women's rights in the country.¹⁴

Overall, commitment to gender equality is visible in laws and strategies, but persistent stereotypes, fragile institutions, and pushbacks continue to undermine the protection and promotion of women's rights.

2 World Bank, Turkey (2024). Economic Outlook, last updated April 2025. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/turkey/overview#1>

3 Based on World Bank Economic Outlook of specific countries

4 https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en

5 https://european-union.europa.eu/principles-countries-history/eu-enlargement_en

6 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Glossary:Candidate_countries

7 European Commission (2024). Türkiye 2024 Report, Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/8010c4db-6ef8-4c85-aa06-814408921c89_en?filename=T%C3%BCrkiye%20Report%202024.pdf

8 European Commission (2025) Progress Reports for Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en

9 European Commission (2025). Progress Report for Bosnia and Herzegovina, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/bosnia-and-herzegovina-report-2025_en

10 European Commission (2025). Progress Report for Serbia, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/serbia-report-2025_en

11 European Commission (2025). Progress report for Kosovo, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2025_en

12 European Commission (2025). Progress Report, Türkiye, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/4bb4ddd1-4f20-4ee0-92db-926996ec8dd1_en?filename=turkiye-report-2025.pdf

13 <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2025/08/serbia-must-halt-crackdown-student-movement-uphold-human-rights-and-academic>

14 CEDAW Committee (2022). Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Türkiye, available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treaty-bodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FTUR%2FCO%2F8&Lang=en

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine are classified as upper middle-income economies. Armenia's projected growth is slightly higher, with estimates for 2025 ranging between 4.9 and 5.6 per cent,¹⁵ while Georgia's growth is estimated at between 5.5 and 7.2 per cent.¹⁶ Moldova's economy remains fragile, with 0.1 per cent growth in 2024 due to energy shocks and regional instability; its population shows a continued decline due to emigration and low fertility rates.¹⁷ Ukraine continues to face severe disruption due to the war, though governance and institutional reforms remain on track.¹⁸ The country has experienced large-scale displacement, with over 12 million people in need of humanitarian assistance in 2025.¹⁹

All countries in Eastern Europe are part of the EU Eastern Partnership (EaP), except for Belarus, which suspended its participation in 2021.²⁰ Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine are candidate countries to the EU. Despite the ongoing security pressures, both Ukraine and Moldova have remained firmly committed to their EU accession paths, completing the screening process and advancing key reforms in the rule of law, public administration, and democratic institutions.²¹ In November 2024, the Georgian government indicated that it would suspend EU accession talks at least until 2028 and since then, the EU has expressed growing concerns regarding democratic standards, the rule of law, and the protection of fundamental rights.²² Armenia is not a candidate country, but Parliament enacted a law in March 2025 declaring its intention to apply for EU membership.²³ EU and Armenia have entered an Enhanced Partnership Agreement (CEPA), in force since 2021. Azerbaijan has had a Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCA) with the EU since 1999, and negotiations are ongoing for an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA).²⁴ Belarus currently has a very limited relationship with the EU, which has imposed sanctions over political and human rights situation as well as Belarus' position with regards to the war in Ukraine.²⁵

Justice sector reforms are ongoing in Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia. Judicial and governance reforms are at the core of Moldova's EU path, focusing on strengthening rule of law, improving judicial independence, enhancing access to justice for all citizens, and tackling high-level corruption. Ukraine has pursued significant reforms during wartime, including anti-corruption measures and digitalization of justice services, though institutions are under extraordinary strain.²⁶ Armenia has also been implementing judicial and legal reforms over a longer period, resulting in gradual improvements in transparency, accountability, judicial independence, and reduced corruption risks, as well as improvement of justice system legislation and strategies.²⁷ Azerbaijan has made efforts to modernize its justice system and increase access to justice for its citizens.²⁸ In Georgia, the recent decision to postpone dialogue with the EU raises questions regarding the continuity and pace of reform efforts.²⁹

In the context of broader reforms, Moldova and Ukraine are prioritizing gender equality and the promotion of women's rights, in line with the EU's comprehensive legal and policy framework. Other Eastern European countries have also worked on promoting gender equality. All countries are party to major international human rights treaties, including CEDAW. Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine are also parties to the Istanbul Convention, while Armenia and Moldova are parties to ILO Convention No. 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. However, all countries continue to face entrenched gender stereotypes and growing traditional views on gender roles. In Ukraine, the war has disproportionately impacted women and girls, leading to increased poverty, displacement and gender-based violence, including conflict-related sexual violence.³⁰

15 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/armenia/overview#3>

16 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/georgia/overview#3>

17 World Bank (2024). Economic Outlook of Moldova, last updated April 2005. Available at <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/moldova/overview#1>

18 European Commission, Ukraine 2024 Report. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1924a044-b30f-48a2-99c1-50edeac14da1_en?filename=Ukraine%20Report%202024.pdf

19 Ibid.

20 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eastern-partnership_en

21 European Commission (2025). Progress reports on Moldova and Ukraine. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en

22 European Commission (2025). Progress Report https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en

23 Armenia's pivot to the EU - New Eastern Europe

24 https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/eu-trade-relationships-country-and-region/countries-and-regions/azerbaijan_en

25 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions-against-belarus/>

26 European Commission, Ukraine 2024 Report. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1924a044-b30f-48a2-99c1-50edeac14da1_en?filename=Ukraine%20Report%202024.pdf

27 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2017-12/eni_2017_040664_consolidation_of_the_justice_system.pdf

28 World Bank 2025, Azerbaijan: Modernizing the Judiciary for Better Access, Transparency and Efficiency

29 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en

30 Gender Alliance for Ukraine (2025), Annual Report of the Alliance for Gender-Responsive and Inclusive Recovery https://ukraine.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-07/report_alliance_for_gender_responsive_eng_final_0.pdf

Central Asia

In Central Asia, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are classified as upper-middle income countries, while Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are lower-middle-income countries. The projected growth for 2025 for all these countries varies but is estimated to be moderate to strong and between 4.5 and 7 per cent. In Tajikistan, this is linked to the substantial flow of remittance into the country.³¹ Tajikistan faces unique demographic pressures, including a young and growing population and high levels of labor migration, particularly among men. This migration has reshaped household dynamics and access to justice, leaving many women with increased care responsibilities, reduced economic security, and limited decision-making power, while also creating new spaces for women's agency in the absence of male family members.

Since 1991, several Central Asian countries have had internal or border disputes with their neighbors at different levels of intensity. On the other hand, Turkmenistan enjoys a special neutrality status, following a United Nations Special Resolution in 1995, and has not engaged in armed disputes with its neighbors. Some of these border conflicts have recently been resolved, such as between Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan in 2024 and Uzbekistan and Kyrgyz Republic in 2022.

In Central Asian countries, the EU has sought to develop and enhance its cooperation and partnership. In 2007, the EU adopted its first strategy on Central Asia. In addition, the EU has entered Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with all countries except Turkmenistan, over human rights concerns.³² More recently, the EU has signed an EPCA with Kazakhstan (2020) and Kyrgyz Republic (June 2024). Uzbekistan and the EU signed the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) on 24 October 2025.³³ Tajikistan and the EU initialed the EPCA in July 2025, paving the way for eventual ratification. These will provide a framework for cooperation on a variety of issues, including trade, energy, education and human rights.

There have nonetheless been positive changes for gender equality. All countries have ratified the CEDAW Convention. In 2024, Kyrgyz Republic became the only country in Central Asia to ratify the ILO Convention No. 190 on eliminating violence and harassment in the workplace. All Central Asian countries except Kyrgyz Republic improved their standing on the Gender Equality and Governance Index between 2022 and 2024. Uzbekistan made a significant jump from 103rd to 52nd place. Central Asian governments are enacting additional legislation and policies to support gender equality in some areas and counteract some of the negative gender norms that hamper women's access to justice. However, negative gender stereotypes, traditional gender roles alongside gaps in consistent political support hamper women's access to justice and services.



31 <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/07/30/tajikistan-economic-update-2025>.

32 The EU strategy on Central Asia: Towards a new momentum?

33 See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/10/24/joint-statement-on-the-occasion-of-the-signing-of-the-eu-uzbekistan-enhanced-partnership-and-cooperation-agreement-epca-between-the-european-union-and-its-member-states-and-the-republic-of-uzbekistan/pdf/>

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Gender-responsive legal frameworks

ANALYSIS OF EXISTING GENDER EQUALITY LAWS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

Western Balkans and Türkiye

All Western Balkans countries have adopted gender equality legislation that guarantees equal rights for women and men and prohibits direct and indirect discrimination. The laws provide the basis for gender equality across public, economic, and social life and in many cases require gender mainstreaming in policies and budgets and allow temporary measures such as quotas. Türkiye does not have a specific gender equality law, but equality between men and women is guaranteed in its Constitution and legislative provisions. Furthermore, anti-discriminatory legislation is in place in all countries, guaranteeing judicial protection and establishing equality bodies (e.g., Ombudspersons, Equality Councils, Commissioners for Protection from Discrimination). Individuals, including women who claim to be victims of gender-based discrimination, can submit complaints, with procedures that often place the burden of proof on respondents, in line with the EU anti-discriminatory legislation.

In addition, countries in the region have made progress in improving other areas of legislation, including labour legislation prohibiting discrimination and harassment in the workplace, property and inheritance laws guaranteeing equal rights for men and women, and political participation laws introducing quotas, the latter of which range from 30 per cent in Albania, 40 per cent in Montenegro (based on recent amendments of July 2025)³⁴ to 50 per cent parity in Kosovo, helping to increase women's representation in elected bodies. Türkiye does not have gender quotas for women's political participation. However, introduction of temporary special measures such as quotas are envisioned in the 12th National Development Plan to improve women's involvement and representation in work, education and decision-making processes.³⁵

However, implementation remains challenging. Overall, throughout the region, women's labour force participation is lower than men's, and there are persistent gender pay and

pension gaps. Informal and unpaid domestic responsibilities continue to limit women's economic opportunities. Political representation has improved through quotas but remains uneven: Albania has a gender-balanced cabinet but only 13 per cent women mayors;³⁶ in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), women hold less than a quarter of parliamentary seats;³⁷ in Montenegro, only 18 per cent of members of the Government are women;³⁸ and in Türkiye, women represent under 20 per cent of MPs.³⁹

Property ownership remains limited despite legal guarantees: only around 20 per cent of registered properties are owned by women in Kosovo,⁴⁰ and registered property shares of women in Albania and Montenegro remain very low. North Macedonia has made limited progress on gender equality, and the rise of the anti-gender movement negatively affects laws and policymaking.⁴¹ Across countries, women in rural areas and those who belong to disadvantaged groups (Roma and other ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, LGBTI+ women) face additional vulnerabilities and are more likely to suffer from intersecting forms of discrimination.

Legislation on gender-based violence has been strengthened across the region. Legislation in North Macedonia and Kosovo is among the most comprehensive, covering the main forms of violence in accordance with the Istanbul Convention and including a consent-based definition of rape. Albania and Serbia have revised their laws on domestic violence, and Montenegro amended its Criminal Code to criminalize new forms of violence. In BiH, the Federation of BiH adopted a Law on protection from domestic violence and violence against women in March 2025 and amended its Criminal Code in July 2025, improving overall alignment with the Istanbul Convention and EU legislation. Türkiye maintains extensive GBV legislation, but its 2021 withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention has raised concerns about enforcement. Yet, despite advanced frameworks, the implementation of GBV legislation remains challenging in all countries. Gender-based violence persists at high levels in all countries, with recurring femicides in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Türkiye; and high tolerance of violence in Montenegro.

34 2025 Communication on EU enlargement policy, page 23, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/9ae69ea7-81d6-4d6a-a204-bd32a379d51d_en?filename=montenegro-report-2025.pdf#:~:text=Following%20th%20adoption%20in%20July%20of%20the,the%20underrepresentation%20is%20a%20positive%20step

35 The Twelfth Development Plan (2024-2028), par. 727, https://www.sbb.gov.tr/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/Twelfth-Development-Plan_2024-2028.pdf

36 UN Women Albania (2025). Country Gender Equality Profile for Albania (unpublished)

37 The Equal Future Platform. Women Representation in Politics and Public Administration, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Available at <https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/womens-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/bosnia-and-herzegovina> Retrieved on August 2025.

38 The Equal Future Platform. Women Representation in Politics and Public Administration, Montenegro. Available at <https://www.equalfuture-eurasia.org/womens-representation-in-politics-and-public-administration/montenegro>

39 Turkish Statistical Institute and UN Women (2025). Women In Türkiye: A Statistical Overview 2024. Available at https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/report_english_digital.pdf

40 Kosovo Cadastral Statistics. Available at <https://akk-statistics.rks-gov.net/>

41 European Commission, North Macedonia 2024 Report. Available at: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/5f0c9185-ce46-46fc-bf44-82318ab47e88_en?filename=North%20Macedonia%20Report%202024.pdf

Kosovo has strengthened its legal and policy framework on violence against women through several key reforms, including a comprehensive Law on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, Violence Against Women and Gender-Based Violence, revised Criminal Code that criminalizes domestic violence, a Protocol for the Treatment of Sexual Violence, and the National Strategy on Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women (2022–2026). Violence against women is also a dedicated pillar in the Kosovo Gender Programme (2025–2035). UN Women has supported national institutions, including the Ministry of Justice and the Agency for Gender Equality, throughout these processes.⁴²

All countries in the region have established formal gender equality mechanisms, providing an institutional foundation for coordinating and monitoring gender policies. In most cases, these structures – typically departments, agencies, or coordination bodies supported by gender focal points across ministries and municipalities – are operational and mandated by law. However, common challenges persist across contexts, including insufficient financial and human resources, high staff turnover, and limited authority to influence sectoral decision-making. Coordination between central and local levels is often weak, and gender impact assessments and reporting mechanisms are inconsistently applied.

Overall, the region has comprehensive legal and policy frameworks aligned with EU and international standards, yet persistent barriers, such as gender stereotypes and conservative pushback, limit their impact. Limited institutional capacities further weaken enforcement and coordination, leaving a continuing gap between legal guarantees and actual implementation.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Legislation of Georgia and Armenia establishes a legal framework for equality between men and women and defines direct and indirect discrimination. Similarly, Azerbaijan's equality legislation prohibits discrimination on the grounds of gender, while Belarus' constitution reiterates the principle of equality between men and women. In comparison, Moldova and Ukraine have adopted gender equality legislation that guarantees equal rights and prohibits direct and indirect discrimination, complemented by dedicated anti-discrimination laws (also in Georgia) that ensure judicial protection and establish equality bodies mandated to receive and consider discrimination complaints.

Countries have made progress in strengthening other areas of legislation related to gender equality, including labour laws and electoral legislation promoting women's political participation. Encouraging examples include Ukraine and Moldova applying a 40 per cent gender quota and Armenia a 30 per cent quota for candidate lists; Georgia's amendment to the Labour Code in 2020 to expand the section on discrimination and defining sexual harassment; Azerbaijan's removal of restrictions on women's employment in 674 occupations across sectors, including agriculture, construction, transport, energy, and manufacturing;⁴³ and Belarus' introduction of paternity leave and lifting the ban on overtime work and business trips for mothers raising children under 3 years of age.⁴⁴

However, implementation remains challenging across all countries, particularly in ensuring women's economic opportunities, equal political leadership, and education. Several of these countries have experienced the entrenchment of traditional and patriarchal attitudes that limit women and girls' enjoyment of their rights. These challenges are amplified for marginalized women, who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination. The full-scale war has severely set back progress on gender equality in Ukraine, increasing women's exposure to unemployment and unpaid care work while reducing their economic and decision-making opportunities. Displaced women face lower employment rates and widening pay gaps, with the closure of childcare facilities further deepening their burdens.⁴⁵ Women with disabilities face intersecting forms of discrimination in most of the countries in the region. For instance, Belarus was recommended by CRPD to amend national legislation to ensure the protection of women with disabilities from violence, forced abortion and "forced abandonment" of their children.⁴⁶ Also, support for the employment of women with disabilities in an open labour market is recommended by CRPD/C/BLR/CO/1.

With regards to violence against women and domestic violence, all countries have made important legislative progress. Moldova has robust legislation, including a law on violence against women and domestic violence (2007) and recent amendments to criminal legislation that expand victim protection and prosecution measures. In 2025, the country criminalized femicide, forced marriage, and technology-facilitated violence. Ukraine also has made significant legal reforms, starting with the 2017 Domestic Violence Law and related amendments to criminalize domestic and gender-based violence. Further alignment with the Istanbul Convention in 2024 introduced new provisions on sexual harassment, protection of child witnesses, perpetrator rehabilitation, and stronger enforcement of restraining orders. Armenia enacted domestic violence legislation in 2017, and amendments in 2024 strengthened protection for all victims, including unmarried and same-sex partners. These legal provisions criminalize stalking, prohibit police-led reconciliation, and require public

42 Information provided by Kosovo UN Women office

43 World Bank (2024). Breaking Barriers to Women's Employment in Azerbaijan <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099101624174034921/pdf/P179715-053cf272-5f35-47e0-8828-75e5f0dd1aee.pdf>

44 Situation of human rights in Belarus (2025)

45 UN Women Ukraine (2025). Press release. Available at <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/02/three-years-of-full-scale-war-in-ukraine-roll-back-decades-of-progress-for-womens-rights-safety-and-economic-opportunities>

46 CRPD (2024). Concluding Observations in Belarus

prosecution of domestic violence cases. The law allows longer protection orders and removal of perpetrators from the home, prioritizes victim access to services, ensures shelters are disability-accessible, and recognizes children who witness violence as victims. Azerbaijan has had domestic violence legislation since 2010 and adopted amendments in 2024 that increased protection for women, including by extending the duration of protection orders. Georgia is one of the few countries in the region that has adopted legislation covering all forms of gender-based violence in 2016, following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention. Georgia was also one of the first countries in the region to criminalize domestic violence through an amendment of its criminal code in 2012. Over the years Georgia has made other significant reforms in this area, such as the inclusion of stalking in the criminal code and the 2022 adoption of regulation to provide victims of domestic violence with compensation in line with the Istanbul Convention. Belarus enacted legislation more recently in 2022, which is an important step in recognizing the need to combat GBV, and undertook efforts to criminalize domestic violence and expand support services.

In terms of *gender equality mechanisms*, they formally exist in all countries but vary in functionality. Ukraine stands out with a well-structured, high-level coordination system that has remained active even during wartime.⁴⁷ Despite an organized system, Moldova's mechanisms face challenges related to unclear mandates for some mechanisms and limited resources.⁴⁸ Georgia has established institutional structures, but recent legislative reforms removing "gender equality" terminology, replacing it with "equality between woman and man" and abolishing gender quotas signal backsliding and undermine the system's relevance. Armenia also has the required councils and departments in place, but they meet irregularly and lack authority, as noted by CEDAW Committee.⁴⁹ In Azerbaijan, among the key challenges also identified by CEDAW Committee, are a lack of information on intersectoral cooperation mechanisms and reporting lines within the national machinery, including among the gender focal points at the local level.⁵⁰ In Belarus, the National Council on Gender Policy lacks decision-making authority and adequate resources to effectively coordinate gender policies.⁵¹

Central Asia

All countries in Central Asia have constitutional provisions or legislation that recognize the principle of equality between men and women. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan specifically prohibit gender-based discrimination. In some countries, like Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, the law also prohibits

direct and indirect discrimination and allows for temporary special measures. In some countries, specific legislation provides for equality between men and women in labour, education, marriage and health. All countries have an ombudsperson or a commissioner for human rights empowered to receive complaints linked to its mandate, including on gender equality and discrimination. Kyrgyz Republic is the only country that has adopted gender quotas for elections.

Several countries – most notably Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyz Republic – have adopted or amended legislation to expand the scope of domestic violence offences, introduce or extend protection orders, and improve police obligations in responding to complaints. In particular, Kazakhstan has removed reconciliation as a resolution mechanism (in cases involving physical violence) and required police to act without a victim's formal complaint, Uzbekistan has criminalized domestic violence and expanded shelter services, and Kyrgyz Republic has recognized economic abuse and established a more comprehensive legal framework.⁵² These developments signal a growing political and policy-level commitment to addressing violence against women.

With regards to gender equality mechanisms, each country has created formal institutional frameworks for gender equality. They have different responsibilities but are generally responsible for drafting and implementing national action plans. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic have a National Council or Commission which act as consultative and advisory bodies. Uzbekistan has set up several committees and commissions to implement state policies on gender equality. In Tajikistan, a Committee for Women's and Family Affairs has a broad mandate that includes research and coordination on gender equality, as well as monitoring the government's compliance with international commitments on women's rights.

However, the CEDAW Committee in its review of countries' efforts to implement the CEDAW Convention over the years has noted several challenges in the functioning for these mechanisms, including: fragmented mandates, insufficient coordination, chronic underfunding, and weak cooperation with civil society in Kyrgyz Republic;⁵³ gaps in mandate, coordination, civil-society engagement, and monitoring in Tajikistan;⁵⁴ and challenges in coordination among gender institutions, limited involvement of civil society, particularly organizations representing rural women, and the need for clarifying institutional roles and increasing resources in Uzbekistan.⁵⁵ Turkmenistan still lacks a dedicated national machinery for the advancement of women that is equipped with authority and resources to coordinate gender equality policies across all government sectors.⁵⁶

47 NIRAS/ EU4GENDEREQUALITY REFORM HELPDESK (2023). Country Gender Profile Ukraine. Available at https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk_ukrainegenderprofile_2023-cgp_v3.pdf

48 https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/23fa6af0-89b3-4532-a3d9-d1638727d14c_en?filename=moldova-report-2025.pdf EU Report on Moldova, 2025

49 CEDAW (2023). *Concluding Observations* on Armenia

50 CEDAW (2022). *Concluding Observations* on Azerbaijan

51 CEDAW (2025). *Concluding Observations* on the ninth periodic report of Belarus <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/BLR/CO/9>

52 European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice, *Evaluation of the Judicial Systems* (2020-2022), Kazakhstan, page 22.

53 CEDAW (2021) *Concluding Observations*, Kyrgyz Republic

54 CEDAW (2024) *Concluding Observations*, Tajikistan

55 CEDAW (2022) *Concluding Observations*, Uzbekistan

56 CEDAW (2024) *Concluding Observations*, Turkmenistan

IDENTIFICATION OF DISCRIMINATORY LAWS AND LEGAL GAPS

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Although all countries in the Western Balkans have adopted laws on gender equality and non-discrimination, gaps persist in harmonization with evolving international standards and EU legislation on equality and non-discrimination. Thus, several countries are updating or considering revising their frameworks accordingly. In November 2025, Albania adopted a new- government-backed- Gender Equality Law⁵⁷ amid strong opposition by some political groups and conservative forces over definitions related to gender and intersectionality.⁵⁸ North Macedonia has also initiated the revision process of its Gender Equality Law to harmonize definitions, strengthen gender mainstreaming, expand quotas, and reinforce accountability, but the draft Law is pending approval by the Parliament and has encountered opposition by conservative groups.⁵⁹ Serbia and Kosovo have already adopted improved new legislation, but in Serbia, the Law on Gender Equality is under substantial legal scrutiny. Montenegro is revising its Law on Anti-Discrimination and the Law on the Ombudsperson. Bosnia and Herzegovina faces significant fragmentation, as laws differ across entities and lack gender-specific guarantees, which directly affects women's access to justice, as women in different parts of the country do not enjoy equal legal protections, remedies, or entitlements. Entity- and canton-level variations create inconsistencies in legal procedures, victim rights, and available services, resulting in unequal protection and uncertainty for women seeking judicial redress. In Türkiye, there is no specific legislation on gender equality. However, equality between women and men is guaranteed in the Constitution and is reflected across legislation.

Legal gaps extend beyond equality laws, although a detailed analysis is not available in all countries under review. Exceptions to the legal marriage age of 18 remain through court approval in Albania and Türkiye, resulting in early and child marriages, especially for girls. Frameworks on work-life balance, care, and employment equality are only partially harmonized with EU legislation, with fragmented maternity, paternity, and parental leave provisions and weak family-friendly and care policies (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina). Gender quotas for political participation vary: Kosovo applies a 30 per cent quota in electoral legislation, below the 50 per cent target in the gender equality, while Türkiye lacks temporary special measures altogether. As previously mentioned, in Türkiye, the 12th National Development Plan envisages the

introduction of temporary special measures. Some countries show signs of backsliding, such as North Macedonia's removal of gender and equality references from education laws,⁶⁰ while discriminatory provisions and implementation persist in civil law, including surname rules and alimony awards and enforcement that disadvantage women in Türkiye.⁶¹

With regards to gender-based violence, across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, all countries have adopted or are reforming relevant legislation, reflecting gradual progress toward alignment with the Istanbul Convention and EU Directive 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence, though some forms of violence are addressed across different legal frameworks. Common gaps in most countries include the incomplete coverage of all forms of violence recognized under the Istanbul Convention and outdated definitions⁶² of sexual violence (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro). Montenegro does not have an adequate definition of gender-based violence in conformity with the Istanbul Convention, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, although the legislation at the federation level has improved considerably, Republika Srpska failed to adopt a bill on protection from domestic and gender-based violence. Overall, in the region, there is limited attention to technology-facilitated violence.

Several countries are in the process of further reviewing their GBV legislation. Albania is in the process of adopting a new comprehensive law on gender-based violence and revising its Criminal Code to criminalize all forms of violence recognized in the Istanbul Convention, including a consent-based definition of rape, as well as technology-facilitated violence. Montenegro has also prepared amendments to the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and Criminal Law to provide clearer definitions of domestic violence, recognize psychological violence alongside physical violence, and expand the definition of "family" to include current and former unmarried partners as well as same-sex partners. Serbia is also in the process of updating its criminal legislation in this area, but women CSOs have expressed concerns that the proposed definition is not fully in conformity with the Istanbul Convention.

Turkish legislation does not explicitly criminalize domestic violence. While amendments to criminal law have increased penalties for certain crimes perpetrated against women, spouses and ex-spouses, a district offence of violence against women or domestic violence, or a gender-based motives are not legislated. Gaps remain on recognizing some forms of psychological, economic and technology-facilitated violence as offences. However, legislative analyses remain a priority in Türkiye's 5th National Action Plan on Combating Violence Against Women.

57 See: <https://albania.un.org/en/304869-united-nations-albania-welcomes-adoption-new-gender-equality-law>

58 <https://balkaninsight.com/2025/11/07/albania-gender-equality-law-draws-praise-and-condemnation/><https://albania.un.org/en/304869-united-nations-albania-welcomes-adoption-new-gender-equality-law>; <https://euronews.al/en/adoption-of-the-gender-equality-law-european-commission-a-step-toward-the-eu/>

59 UNCT North Macedonia (2023). Joint Submission of the UN Country Team in North Macedonia prepared for the Fourth Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of North Macedonia. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/mk-un-contributions-s46>

60 European Commission/European Network of Legal Experts in Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination (2025). Revision of several education laws raises concern over regress on gender equality. Available at <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/6326-north-macedonia-revision-of-several-education-laws-raises-concern-over-regress-on-gender-equality>

61 CEDAW Committee (2022). Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Türkiye, available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treaty-bodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FTUR%2FCO%2F8&Lang=en

62 Definitions that do not regulate sexual violence on the basis of consent.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Despite progress in improving their gender equality and non-discrimination legislation, all countries in the region have gaps. Moldova⁶³ and Ukraine still need to align their equality and non-discrimination legislation with the EU *acquis communautaire*, particularly regarding equal treatment in employment.

Armenia has yet to adopt a law on protection from discrimination, an ongoing process for some years. This law would provide clear legal definitions of direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, segregation and victimization, the lack of which currently limit effective identification and redress of discriminatory practices. In addition, institutional oversight remains weak, as the strengthening of the Human Rights Defender's mandate and the establishment of a Council on Discrimination Issues are still pending.⁶⁴ Similarly, Azerbaijan and Belarus do not have comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation that prohibits discrimination against women and covers direct and indirect discrimination in the public and private spheres, as well as intersecting forms of discrimination.⁶⁵

In Georgia, recent development indicate that the country may be backsliding in its commitments to gender equality. From February-April 2025, the Parliament passed a legislative amendment package to remove words "gender" and "gender equality" from Georgian legislation altogether and replace them by "woman and man" and "equality between woman and man" respectively. As a result, 16 laws were amended, including the laws on gender equality and non-discrimination.⁶⁶ This shift marks a significant departure from previous advances of Georgia in gender equality as recognized by human rights mechanisms (CEDAW and GREVIO) and its efforts to align Georgia's legal framework with international human rights standards and the EU gender equality *acquis*.⁶⁷

Challenges remain in other areas of legislation as well. Moldova's gender equality framework lacks an intersectional approach, failing to address the specific needs of underrepresented groups of women. Laws on minorities, persons with disabilities, and children overlook gender-specific provisions, risking further marginalization and limiting the effectiveness

of equality measures. In Ukraine, significant shortcomings exist in labour legislation, which need to be addressed collaboratively with social partners to bring it in line with the EU *acquis*, including from a gender perspective.⁶⁸

Azerbaijan and Belarus do not have quotas for women's political participation, and women's representation in parliament is 20.8 per cent in Azerbaijan⁶⁹ and 35.6 per cent in Belarus⁷⁰. Georgia abolished its gender quotas in 2024, and as a result, in the 2024 parliamentary elections only 29 per cent of party list candidates were women, with most of them in non-electable positions, marking a substantial decrease from 44 per cent in the 2020 elections. Among the elected Members of Parliament (MPs), 34 were women, representing 23 per cent of the total.⁷¹

In Azerbaijan, recent changes to the Civil Procedure Code requiring parties to undertake mediation in family law proceedings, including divorce, and a mandatory 3-months reconciliation period are likely to discriminate against women, especially those seeking to leave violent relationships.⁷² Despite the legal minimum marriage age of 18, child marriage through cohabitation persists. As a prevention measure, recent amendments to the Family Code removed a provision that previously allowed the marriage age to be lowered from 18 to 17 in the presence of reasonable excuses, while an amendment to the Criminal Code entered into force that broadens the definition of "early marriage" to include "early cohabitation" and establishes penalties for coercing a person under the legal marriage age into early marriage. Women are still prohibited from doing certain jobs in Belarus, and there are restrictions on employment for pregnant women and women with children under the age of three. In the area of GBV legislation, despite previously mentioned improvements, challenges persist in all countries. Moldova's Contravention Code bases perpetrators' criminal liability on the severity of bodily injury, resulting in inconsistent enforcement and leaving many serious cases of domestic and psychological violence unpunished. In addition, while Moldova criminalized several new forms of violence, it still lacks clear provisions on female genital mutilation, forced abortion, and sterilization, and although Moldova's rape law now refers to consent, it still broadly links non-consent to physical or mental coercion.⁷³ Ukraine continues to strengthen

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- 63 EU Commission (2025), report on Moldova, 2025. https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/23fa6af0-89b3-4532-a3d9-d1638727d14c_en?filename=moldova-report-2025.pdf
- 64 Council of Europe (2025), Armenia's path to ratification of the Istanbul Convention Progress and challenges, <https://rm.coe.int/arm-2025-armenias-path-to-ratification-of-the-istanbul-convention-fina/native/48802854d2>
- 65 CEDAW (2023), Concluding Observations of Azerbaijan. CEDAW (2025). Concluding Observations of Belarus
- 66 The Law of Georgia on Gender Equality, the Law on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination, the Law on the Elimination and Prevention of Violence against Women and Girls and Domestic Violence, the Criminal Code, the Code on Local Governance, the Law on Normative Acts, the Law on Public Broadcaster, the Law on Persons with Disabilities, the Law on Entrepreneurship, the Law on Civil Service, the Law on Labour Inspection, the Rules of the Procedure of the Parliament and few others.
- 67 EU Commission (2025). Report on Georgia, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b3089ad4-26be-4c6a-84cc-b9d680fe0a48_en?filename=georgia-report-2025.pdf
- 68 European Commission, Ukraine 2024 Report. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1924a044-b30f-48a2-99c1-50edeac14da1_en?filename=Ukraine%20Report%202024.pdf; and NIRAS/ EU4GENDEREQUALITY REFORM HELPDISK (2023). Country Gender Profile Ukraine. Available at https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk_ukrainegenderprofile_2023-cgp_v3.pdf
- 69 <https://www.ipu.org/parliament/AZ>
- 70 [https://gender.belstat.gov.by/social/158?type=table®=\(F\)](https://gender.belstat.gov.by/social/158?type=table®=(F))
- 71 EU Commission (2025). Report on Georgia, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b3089ad4-26be-4c6a-84cc-b9d680fe0a48_en?filename=georgia-report-2025.pdf
- 72 Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Azerbaijan
- 73 Amnesty International (2025). Moldova. Submission to the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women 93rd pre-sessional working group, 7-11 July 2025, list of issues. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEAW%2FICO%2FMDA%2F63228&Lang=en

its legal framework in line with the Istanbul Convention and EU standards, with forthcoming GREVIO findings expected to guide further reform. In Georgia, recent changes to remove gender-related terminology from legislation is likely to undermine the legal protection afforded under GBV legislation. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus have not directly criminalized domestic violence, and do not have a consent-based definition of rape.

Central Asia

Despite some positive developments, gaps remain in the legal framework to support equality between men and women. Some countries in Central Asia do not define indirect discrimination (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic). In addition, failing to include gender as a ground for discrimination in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz Republic means that a deeper layer of discrimination may not be recognized, and vulnerable populations at risk of intersectional discrimination may not be able to avail themselves of the protection of the law.

With the exception of Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan, Central Asian countries do not have quotas for women's participation in politics. Kazakhstan applies a mixed 30 per cent quota for women, youth and persons with disabilities. On average, women make up about 20-25 per cent of national parliaments, except in Uzbekistan where they make up 38 per cent of the lower chamber.⁷⁴

One of the common legislative gaps in Central Asian countries relates to bans on women working in certain jobs or at certain times. Although most countries have taken steps to remove these bans, all countries retain legislation to prevent pregnant women or women with young children from accessing certain jobs or working certain hours. Tajikistan made efforts to reduce the list of banned professions from 334 to 194 occupations, with 94 more to be reduced later in 2025 and another 100 to be gradually reduced or eliminated altogether. In Uzbekistan, a list of jobs recommended as not suitable for women was introduced immediately after the repeal of the law, which is likely to nullify the benefits of the law.⁷⁵

In family law, there are gaps linked to divorce and associated procedures. Recent amendments in 2024 to the Family and Civil Procedure Code of Turkmenistan make it more complicated to divorce, with a requirement of a reconciliation period of three to six months.⁷⁶ In Tajikistan, housing shortages and limited access to affordable housing options mean that some divorced women have no alternative but to continue

residing in their former spouse's household, sometimes being allocated a separate room within the same dwelling. This situation is driven by structural economic barriers rather than legal requirements and leaves divorced women in vulnerable positions, underscoring the need for expanded social housing and economic support programs for women.⁷⁷

There are also significant gaps in relation to GBV. The lack of standalone legislation on domestic violence in Turkmenistan means that protection orders are not available for victims of domestic violence. It also prevents the adoption of integrated services and a coordinated approach. For countries with legislation, there are trends across the region that continue to harm survivors of violence. Protection orders tend to be issued for periods that are too short (usually between 15 and 30 days) to adequately protect survivors who need time to remove themselves from violent relationships. Reconciliation often nullifies a protection order or a criminal prosecution. The lack of criminalization of domestic violence offences is a serious gap which hampers accountability. In some countries (Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) cases of domestic violence are usually victim-initiated prosecutions unless the physical harm is severe.⁷⁸ This means that women have to hire lawyers and collect evidence of the crime themselves. For sexual violence, no Central Asian country has adopted a consent-based definition of rape, instead relying on force or the threat of force. However, amendments adopted in 2024 to the Law on Domestic Violence in Tajikistan represent a step toward strengthening survivor protections. While these reforms signal progress, further changes are required to ensure automatic prosecution of domestic violence cases and to remove the burden on survivors to initiate legal proceedings.

CHALLENGES IN ENFORCEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY MECHANISMS

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, the enforcement of gender equality and anti-discrimination laws remains weak. Equality bodies have been operating for many years, but their mandates, visibility, and independence vary widely. In most countries, the number of gender-based discrimination complaints is low. In Albania, such cases accounted for only around 4.5 per cent of all complaints handled by the Commissioner against Discrimination in 2024;⁷⁹ in Kosovo, this figure is around 1 per cent of over 1,400 cases handled by the Ombudsperson in one year;⁸⁰ in Montenegro, only about 4.5 per cent of cases in 2023 related to gender or gender iden-

74 <https://www.ipu.org/parlement/UZ>

75 <https://kun.uz/en/news/2023/04/05/govt-to-limit-the-use-of-female-labor-in-some-industries-list>

76 Turkmenistan makes changes to the divorce legislation: What you need to know. – Progres.Online

77 Tajikistan: Barriers to Aid for Domestic Violence Victims | Human Rights Watch

78 Criminal Procedure Code of Turkmenistan, articles 31 and 33

79 UN Women Albania (2025). Country Gender Equality Profile for Albania (unpublished)

80 Institute of the Ombudspersons of Kosovo. 2024. Annual Report. Available at <https://oik-rks.org/en/2025/03/28/annual-report-2024/>

81 The Institution of the Protector of Human Rights and Freedoms of Montenegro Ombudsman (2024). Written submissions to the CEDAW Committee on issues relevant to the implementation of the Convention. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEDAW%2FNHS%2FMNE%2F58104&Lang=en

tity.⁸¹ In North Macedonia, individuals can choose between the Antidiscrimination Commissioner and Ombudsperson to submit complaints, but this flexibility often creates confusion about the roles and responsibilities of different institutions. In Türkiye, there is no public data on gender-based discrimination cases handled by equality bodies, and the lack of specific legislation on gender equality and anti-discrimination makes the enforcement of constitutional and other legal provisions related to gender equality challenging, although institutional mechanisms such as parliamentary commissions and civil society actors contribute to monitoring and advocacy efforts.

Judicial complaints are rare and poorly documented across the region. In Albania and North Macedonia, gender-based case law remains largely undeveloped, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, victims face lengthy procedures, lack of legal aid, and limited judicial specialization. Montenegro reported no recent court cases on gender discrimination.⁸²

Serbia's Commissioner for the Protection of Equality is more active, handling 714 complaints in 2024, including 192 gender-based discrimination cases. Most cases concern employment and healthcare discrimination, including obstetric violence and workplace dismissals during pregnancy. The Commissioner also highlights intersectional discrimination affecting Roma, women with disabilities, and LBT women, though it lacks binding powers and courts rarely share rulings.⁸³

Overall, equality bodies across the region suffer from limited independence, resources, and investigative authority, while judicial systems remain hesitant and undertrained to adjudicate discrimination claims. As a result, legal guarantees of equality rarely translate into effective protection or accountability in practice.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

In all Eastern European and South Caucasus countries, the enforcement of gender equality and anti-discrimination laws remains limited. In Moldova, there are two equality bodies — the Ombudsperson and the Equality Council — both active but significantly under-resourced. Between 2024 and 2025, 37.5 per cent of complaints received by the Ombudsperson came from women, mainly concerning employment, access to justice, and social protection. Field visits revealed persistent barriers such as early marriage among Roma girls, unequal pay in care professions, and inaccessible infrastructure for women with disabilities. The Equality Council reported nine harassment

cases since 2020 and only four gender-based rulings in 2025, highlighting low reporting rates and limited sanctioning powers.⁸⁴ In Ukraine, the Parliamentary Ombudsperson is active but overstretched, with complaints increasing from 42,000 in 2022 to over 123,000 in 2024, of which 63 per cent were from women. The institution conducted over 3,300 monitoring visits, opened 4,765 proceedings in response to citizens' appeals and filed two constitutional complaints to the Constitutional Court, reflecting its active role despite limited resources. However, data on how many of these cases related to gender-based discrimination is unavailable. In Georgia, the Public Defender's Office (PDO), which receives individual complaints, examined 127 complaints of alleged discrimination in 2024, of which 18 related to gender-based discrimination. From those, 7 cases involved sexual harassment, while other 7 cases involved sexual orientation and/or gender identity issues.⁸⁵

In Armenia, the office of the Human Rights Defender can receive complaints about discrimination and can make recommendations on amendments to the law. It produces annual reports on its work. In Azerbaijan, the Commissioner for Human Rights has a wide mandate, and can receive individual complaints. In Belarus, there is no ombudsperson or human rights commissioner. There is no data in any of these countries on the number of cases related to gender equality and discrimination.

Central Asia

All Central Asian countries have an ombudsperson or a commissioner for human rights that is mandated to receive individual complaints. They produce annual reports, but with a few exceptions, they do not provide specific information about the types of cases received (including on gender or sex discrimination). The only statistics come from Uzbekistan, where a recent article reported that 7 people were held accountable and fined for a breach of the Administrative Code and promoting gender discrimination in a 12-month period ending in October 2024.⁸⁶

These institutions receive also complaints related to violence against women, where statistics are more available. For example, in 2024, the office of the Ombudsperson in Kazakhstan received 20 complaints related to violations of women's rights, of which 10 concerned family-domestic conflicts (property, alimony, custody), 6 involved threats or stalking, and 4 related to physical injury or beating.⁸⁷ In the first 6 months of 2024, the Tajik Commissioner for Human Rights received 8 complaints related to violence against women. While collecting data on the number of cases related to violence against women is very important, this does not provide information on cases of

82 Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review (2025). Türkiye, Compilation of information prepared by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/WG.6/49/TUR/2>

83 European Commission/European Network of Legal Experts in Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination (2025). Summary of the Annual Report of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality concerning gender equality. Available at <https://www.equalitylaw.eu/downloads/6307-serbia-annual-report-of-the-commissioner-for-the-protection-of-equality-concerning-gender-equality>

84 <https://egalitate.md>

85 PDO Special Report on Combating and Preventing Discrimination and Equality Situation, 2024 (unofficial translation). See at: 2025050217541826490.pdf

86 21 people punished for promoting polygamy and gender discrimination in one year - Tashkent Times.

87 Report for 2024 on the activities of the Human Rights Ombudsman in the Republic of Kazakhstan.

gender or sex discrimination overall, and it appears that these mechanisms do not collect data on gender or sex discrimination more widely. In all Central Asian countries, conviction rates for domestic violence or assault arising out of domestic violence are low. Nonetheless, statistics show that between 12 and 26 per cent of women experience physical or sexual violence in their lifetimes. This suggests that most women do not seek formal help when they experience domestic violence and that there is therefore an accountability gap.

Gender equality considerations in the justice system

KEY DEVELOPMENTS AND CHALLENGES IN WOMEN'S ACCESS TO JUSTICE

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Access to justice for women is closely linked with broader reforms to strengthen independence, transparency, and efficiency of the judiciary. Judicial reform remains a core element of the EU accession process, with most countries having adopted judicial reform strategies and action plans. Reforms include efforts to combat corruption within the justice system, strengthen judicial governing bodies, improve digital case management and reduce backlogs of cases. However, based on regular progress assessments under Chapters 23 and 24 of the EU *acquis* by the European Commission, implementation remains challenging. Albania and Montenegro are moderately prepared, with some level of progress in applying the EU standards in this area for 2025; North Macedonia with a moderate level of preparation with no progress in 2025; Serbia some level of preparation but no progress for 2025; Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo some level of preparation but no progress for Bosnia and Herzegovina and limited progress in Kosovo for 2025.⁸⁸

Common challenges that affect women's access to justice across countries include lengthy proceedings, case backlogs, insufficient resources, and limited gender sensitivity within the judiciary. These create barriers especially for women's cases related to family law, property law, employment and discrimination, as well as for victims of gender-based violence. Courts remain overburdened and understaffed, with poor enforcement of decisions and inconsistent jurisprudence. Patriarchal attitudes within the judicial system, limited understanding of gender-based offences, lack of gender-disaggregated data, and inadequate gender sensitivity in legal processes are common factors that discourage women from seeking justice and contribute to lenient sentencing and revictimization in gender-based violence cases.

All countries in the region have adopted strategic frameworks to guide their judicial reforms, such as national justice strategies and action plans. Although extensive to ensure compliance with EU standards on the rule of law and access to justice, these frameworks are largely gender-blind, missing opportunities to mainstream gender equality principles and standards and address systemic barriers faced by women.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Access to justice for women in Eastern European countries such as Moldova and Ukraine remains closely tied to broader judicial reforms aimed at strengthening independence, integrity, and accountability of the judiciary, driven by EU accession processes. Both countries have some level of preparation in aligning their justice systems with EU standards, and progress is noted in judicial accountability, salary increases for court staff to reduce turnover (Moldova), the appointment of new Constitutional Court judges, and the resumption of judicial selection and vetting processes (Ukraine). However, in Ukraine, institutional capacity remains limited, and Russia's full scale invasion continues to severely undermine the judiciary, with judges and court staff among those killed.⁸⁹

Reforms are also ongoing in South Caucasus. Armenia has been implementing judicial and legal reforms for years, guided by judicial reform strategies (currently 2022–2026), which have prioritized the establishment of anti-corruption courts, expansion of e-justice, and integrity checks for judges and other justice sector officials.⁹⁰ In Azerbaijan, reforms to modernize the justice system aim at greater efficiency and transparency in court operations and helped facilitate access to justice, including for groups facing particular barriers.⁹¹ Reform of the judicial system in Georgia is one of key priorities set by the European Commission.⁹²

88 European Commission (2025). Progress reports on EU Enlargement Package, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/news/2025-enlargement-package-shows-progress-towards-eu-membership-key-enlargement-partners-2025-11-04_en

89 EU Progress Reports of 2024 and 2024

90 <https://www.primeminister.am/en/press-release/item/2022/07/21/Cabinet-meeting/>

91 World Bank (2025), Azerbaijan: Modernizing the Judiciary for Better Access, Transparency and Efficiency

92 Opinion on the EU membership application by Georgia, 2022

However, the recent decision to postpone dialogue with the EU raises questions regarding the continuity and pace of these reform efforts. According to the EU Commission in its 2025 report, in the area of judiciary and fundamental rights, Georgia is between an early stage of preparation and having some level of preparation. For a second consecutive year, there was backsliding during the reporting period.⁹³

Common challenges affecting women's access to justice in many of these countries include lengthy proceedings, low clearance rates, limited trust in judicial institutions, and limited gender sensitivity. In Moldova, the new judicial map risks creating additional access barriers for women and disadvantaged groups, while survey data show that women experience more severe impacts from legal disputes, particularly domestic violence.⁹⁴ In Ukraine, the destruction of infrastructure, delays in proceedings, and rising cases of gender-based violence exacerbate systemic barriers, with underreporting and stigma remaining widespread.

In Armenia, ongoing reforms aim to address long-standing pressures in the judiciary, including high caseloads, outdated digital systems, and limited resources, which continue to affect the recruitment and retention of qualified staff and hinder effective case management.⁹⁵ These structural challenges have implications for women's and girls' access to justice, although evidence on the impact of reforms remain limited. The CEDAW Committee has highlighted persistent barriers, including low awareness of rights and limited capacity among justice actors to apply gender equality standards in practice.⁹⁶

In Georgia, access to justice is hindered by low trust in the judiciary, linked to concerns about judicial independence, integrity and merit-based appointments. Perceptions of corruption and lack of accountability discourage many from reporting cases, particularly where cooperation with police is stigmatized or confidentiality is not assured. Lengthy delays, backlogs and unfilled judicial vacancies further deter litigants, who may abandon cases due to cost and time. Physical and informational barriers particularly affect marginalized groups, including persons with disabilities and those who do not speak Georgian, many of whom are unaware of available legal aid services.⁹⁷

In Azerbaijan, key barriers to women access to justice include limited knowledge among women and girls about their rights and the remedies available to claim them, limited capacity of the judiciary and law enforcement officials to apply international standards on gender equality, and persistent

gender stereotypes among the judiciary.⁹⁸ Another concern is the limited number of lawyers in the country: in 2022 there were 2,237 lawyers, or 22 lawyers per 100,000 inhabitants. Only 470 lawyers were based outside of Baku. This is six times lower than the average number in Europe (136 out of 100,000).⁹⁹ In July 2025, the chair of the Azerbaijan Bar Association announced that the number of lawyers holding the Bar membership had reached 2,770 lawyers, of which only 595 (21.5 per cent of the total membership) were women.¹⁰⁰ In Belarus, the number of attorneys decreased between 2022 and 2025 from 1,872¹⁰¹ to 1,602.¹⁰²

In a positive example from Moldova, its Justice Development Strategy Action Plan includes several positive measures addressing gender-related challenges, such as aligning criminal and procedural laws with the Istanbul Convention, strengthening victims' rights in sexual offense cases, and expanding the specialization of state legal aid lawyers for vulnerable groups, including survivors of violence. However, the Justice Strategy as a whole does not mainstream gender, lacks sex-disaggregated indicators, and makes no reference to women's rights within the legal and policy framework, leaving broader gender biases in the justice system unaddressed.¹⁰³

The common priorities ahead for all countries include integrating gender equality into judicial strategies, ensuring adequate resources, and strengthening judicial independence and integrity as prerequisites for both women's access to justice and credible EU integration progress for those countries seeking EU integration.

Central Asia

Across Central Asia, countries have made some progress in improving and reforming their justice systems and increasing access for women and men. In Kazakhstan, the ongoing reform of the judiciary has aimed at improving access to justice and strengthening judicial independence in order to ensure fair and impartial proceedings. Court infrastructure has also been upgraded for persons with disabilities, digital services developed to facilitate access to justice.¹⁰⁴

93 EU Commission (2025). Report on Georgia, https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/b3089ad4-26be-4c6a-84cc-b9d680fe0a48_en?file-name=georgia-report-2025.pdf

94 Survey on access to justice in the Republic of Moldova, <https://www.undp.org/moldova/publications/survey-access-justice-republic-moldova>

95 World Bank (2023). The 5 biggest challenges to reforming Armenia's justice system

96 See CEDAW 2022, Concluding Observations of Armenia

97 See Access_to_Justice_in_Georgia_2021.pdf

98 CEDAW Concluding Observations on Azerbaijan. 2023.

99 Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Azerbaijan, page 27

100 <https://barassociation.az/en/news/1709>

101 КОНЦЕПЦИЯ РАЗВИТИЯ АДВОКАТУРЫ РЕСПУБЛИКИ БЕЛАРУСЬ НА ПЕРИОД ДО 2030 ГОДА

102 https://minjust.gov.by/directions/advocacy/?sphrase_id=381490

103 Strategy for the Reform of Justice and the Action Plan for its implementation, https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=129241&lang=ro

104 Human Rights Council (2025). Report of the Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review of Kazakhstan, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/c452dfa0-4957-470b-8e90-17633f510e39>

In Turkmenistan, efforts have been made to improve access to justice and judicial independence through the improvement of policy and legal frameworks on justice administration and judicial autonomy.¹⁰⁵ However, practical concerns remain about both the functioning of the judiciary and its impact on women's rights. The Human Rights Committee expressed concerns about judicial independence, lack of a public database of court decisions, limited human rights training for legal professionals, and a shortage of lawyers affecting the quality of legal aid.¹⁰⁶ In addition, women's lack of economic means due to work in lower paid or unpaid work and in the informal economy means that they have less access to resources. This can constrain their ability to pay for lawyers and other costs when accessing justice.¹⁰⁷

In Uzbekistan, the CEDAW Committee has recognized advancements, such as the increased transparency of previous judicial reforms and the introduction of e-justice tools allowing online submissions, payments, and participation through video conferencing, thus significantly improving access for rural women.¹⁰⁸ However, persistent barriers continue to limit women's and girls' ability to claim their rights, including low legal literacy, limited institutional capacity to apply gender equality norms, judicial bias, and the prevalence of reconciliation practices before mahalla committees in cases of gender-based violence.¹⁰⁹

Concerns for the overall justice system have also been expressed for Kyrgyz Republic regarding the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, with recommendations for stronger safeguards for judicial independence, addressing corruption, and preventing undue interference in judicial appointments and decision-making.¹¹⁰ In Tajikistan, recommendations have been made for comprehensive justice-sector reforms, including rights awareness campaigns developed with community leaders and civil society, confidential and survivor-centered evidentiary rules and courtroom practices, and institutionalized training for judges, prosecutors, lawyers, and police with accountability mechanisms to address gender bias in the system.¹¹¹

In both Tajikistan and Kyrgyz Republic, these challenges have a direct impact on women's right to access justice. Women in rural areas face intersecting barriers; the lack of qualified lawyers, travel costs, and distrust in state institutions discourage them from pursuing cases, especially those related to domestic violence, family disputes, and inheritance. Many women lack independent income and rely on informal justice mechanisms, such as elders' councils or religious figures, which often reinforce patriarchal norms and fail to provide adequate protection. In Kyrgyz Republic, many women lack valid residence permits, which further restricts access to basic social services. Women with disabilities encounter additional challenges, including geographic isolation, low literacy, and increased stigma.¹¹² Entrenched discrimination and a lack of accommodation for their needs make it harder to access justice.¹¹³ In Tajikistan, women in unregistered polygamous marriages face extreme vulnerability, as such unions are not recognized by law, leaving them without legal recourse in cases of abandonment or violence. Police and judicial actors frequently dismiss women's complaints, particularly those involving gender-based violence, perpetuating a cycle of impunity and mistrust.¹¹⁴

COSTS OF ACCESSING JUSTICE AND AVAILABILITY OF FREE LEGAL AID

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, financial, procedural, and structural barriers continue to limit women's and girls' access to justice. Specific data on court fees and legal representation costs are scarce, but studies and perception surveys in some countries confirm that the cost of pursuing justice continues to be an obstacle. In Albania, 61 per cent of respondents in a 2024 survey said financial constraints are the main barrier to accessing justice.¹¹⁵ In Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, administrative dispute fees reach up to ten per cent of an average monthly salary – among the highest levels in the region¹¹⁶ – while in North Macedonia¹¹⁷ and Türkiye¹¹⁸ regu-

105 Human Rights Committee (2023) Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Turkmenistan <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/b2c06842-a9e0-41cf-9c8c-1a382d541a52>

106 Human Rights Committee (2023) Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Turkmenistan <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/b2c06842-a9e0-41cf-9c8c-1a382d541a52>

107 CEDAW committee report, *Document Viewer*, 2024, para. 47.

108 CEDAW Committee (2022). Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Uzbekistan, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/89db8c99-a206-48d7-917d-8b3b3617c397>

109 CEDAW Committee (2022). Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Uzbekistan, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/89db8c99-a206-48d7-917d-8b3b3617c397>

110 Economic and Social Rights Committee (2024). Concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of Kyrgyz Republic, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/b593d337-1eda-453d-97a0-7c52ab1ded82>

111 CEDAW (2024). Concluding observations on the seventh periodic report of Tajikistan, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/bf7a380e-315a-46a1-9489-79b75af817d2>

112 EN-Disability-in-Kyrgyzstan.pdf, page 8.

113 Kyrgyz Republic: Domestic Violence Against Women, Girls with Disabilities | Human Rights Watch

114 CEDAW (2024). Tajikistan

115 UNDP 2025. Survey on Access to justice in Albania. 2024, <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/study-access-justice-albania>

116 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – OECD (2024). The functioning of administrative judiciaries in the Western Balkans. SIGMA Paper No.73. Available at [https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/SIGMA\(2024\)6/en/pdf](https://one.oecd.org/document/GOV/SIGMA(2024)6/en/pdf)

117 <https://globalaccesstojustice.com/global-overview-north-macedonia/>

lated attorney tariffs and other procedural costs such as expert fees, document preparation, or travel remain unaffordable for most low-income women, particularly those living in rural or remote areas.

All countries in the Western Balkans have adopted free legal aid laws and have established systems that distinguish between primary legal aid (information, advice, document preparation), secondary legal aid (representation in court) and exemptions from court fees and litigation costs. Eligibility for free legal aid is generally determined through a combination of financial criteria and direct entitlements for specific groups. In all countries, low-income individuals qualify based on means tests, though procedures are often lengthy and documentation-heavy, often discouraging applicants to request legal aid. Beyond financial hardship, most countries extend automatic eligibility to certain groups, including victims of gender-based violence, persons with disabilities and others. Türkiye stands apart, with criminal and civil legal aid provisions regulated across different laws. The service is administered by local bar associations, with variations in implementation.

Women constitute an important share of applicants for free legal aid, benefiting based on different grounds, including economic status or status as a victim of domestic or other forms of violence. In Albania, women with disabilities or victims of human trafficking are able to benefit, and in Montenegro, foreign women seeking international protection are entitled to free legal aid. However, across the region, sex disaggregated data in legal proceedings is often missing, which is needed to determine in which area women primarily benefit from legal aid; most data and information, when available, relates only to victims of domestic violence as beneficiaries of legal aid. Lack of data makes it difficult to identify systemic barriers, track trends in the use of services by women versus men, and design targeted policies to address gender-specific obstacles.¹¹⁹

Overall, women's access to effective representation remains limited. Lengthy and bureaucratic application procedures discourage many potential claimants, particularly those seeking secondary legal aid for court representation. Financial eligibility assessments often rely on household income rather than individual means, disregarding women's restricted access to family resources. Awareness about the existence of free legal aid remains low, especially outside main urban centers and among disadvantaged groups. The situation becomes more challenging for women from rural areas and disadvantaged groups. Insufficient resources allocated for the implementation of the legal aid legislation further compound these challenges.

A positive example comes from UN Women in Kosovo, which, in partnership with the Kosovo Law Institute, established a dedicated online legal aid platform that has enabled thousands of women — including many from non-majority communities — to access free, tailored legal assistance. The platform not only supports survivors of violence in pursuing their rights, but has also informed broader judicial reforms through evidence-based monitoring of court decisions. Thanks to strengthened institutional capacities, these legal aid services continue to operate sustainably beyond the initial project period, ensuring lasting access to justice for women in Kosovo.¹²⁰

As mentioned, all countries have expanded eligibility to victims of domestic violence and in some cases more broadly victims of other forms of violence such as sexual violence. Yet, in countries where it was possible to receive data, the number of victims of violence benefiting in practice from legal aid remains very low compared to the number of reported cases or the overall beneficiaries of legal aid. For example, in Albania, victims of violence were respectively 18 per cent and 28 per cent of total beneficiaries of primary and secondary legal aid in 2024,¹²¹ and in Kosovo only 3 per cent.¹²² In Montenegro, only 168 women used the state free legal aid over three years (2020-2023), while CSOs registered as many as 669 beneficiaries for the same period.¹²³ In Serbia, the number of beneficiaries slightly increased between 2022-2023, but specific data on women benefiting from legal aid is not available.

In practice, victims of violence often face multiple administrative requirements that delay or discourage applications. In Albania and North Macedonia, for instance, women must first provide proof of victim status through a protection order or an official certificate before being eligible for secondary legal aid, which creates delays in time-sensitive cases. Bosnia and Herzegovina's complex multilevel system means access depends heavily on where the victim lives, while in Serbia, victims of forms of violence other than domestic violence must demonstrate their eligibility through a lengthy application process. Türkiye has a decentralized bar association-led system, and access to legal aid for women depends on local practice, with some bars waiving economic assessments for GBV cases. Türkiye also faces additional intersectional barriers, with refugee women, minority women, and women with disabilities encountering linguistic, physical, and procedural barriers.¹²⁴

118 CEDAW Committee (2022). Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Türkiye, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/ba8f5474-7cb5-43e5-869c-705c7030335d>;

Council of Europe (2022). Understanding Barriers to Women's Access to Justice and Legal Aid In Türkiye, <https://rm.coe.int/understanding-barriers-to-women-s-access-to-justice-and-legal-aid-in-t/1680a967d7>

119 Code of Civil Procedure (Arts. 334- 340), the Code of Criminal Procedure (Arts. 150 and 234/1), the Code of Lawyers (Arts. 176-181) as well as the Union of Turkish Bar Associations' By law on Legal Aid.

120 Information provided by UN Women Country Office

121 Ministry of Justice of Albania (2025). Annual Report of the Department of Free Legal Aid for 2024. Available at <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/study-access-justice-albania>

122 Data analyzed from the annual report of the FLAA

123 Women's Rights Center (2024). Shadow report on the Implementation of CEDAW Convention In Montenegro, submitted on behalf of four CSOs. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEDAW%2FCSS%2FMNE%2F58227&Lang=en

124 Council of Europe, (December 2022). Understanding barriers to women's access to justice and legal aid in Türkiye. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/understanding-barriers-to-women-s-access-to-justice-and-legal-aid-in-t/1680a967d7>

Another shared feature is that women's CSOs continue to play a crucial role in providing legal information, counseling, and representation, although they often lack accreditation, financial support, or legal authority to represent victims in court. In Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, CSOs handle a significant proportion of cases, compensating for weak public systems, but financial support for them is limited. In Serbia, women's CSOs, which used to provide tailored and specialized legal support to victims of all forms of violence based on the 2018 Law on Legal Aid, can now only provide basic legal support such as information and help complete forms, but are no longer allowed to offer legal advice, court representation, or other specialized services.¹²⁵ Similarly, in Montenegro, CSOs remain outside the formal legal aid framework altogether, despite demonstrating higher specialization in GBV cases.¹²⁶

Limited institutional capacity and the lack of gender-sensitive training for lawyers are recurring challenges across the region, reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro, where most lawyers are unprepared to address GBV cases effectively or with sensitivity.

Despite these shared gaps, there are still positive trends. Montenegro stands out for its 2024 amendments introducing a specialized, trauma-informed model, where one trained lawyer represents victims of violence across all related proceedings – an emerging regional good practice. In addition, North Macedonia's 2024 reforms introduced digital and simplified procedures, potentially improving access, though rural implementation remains weak.¹²⁷

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, a Witness Support Office has been established within the Court of BiH, providing psychological, logistical, and informational assistance to witnesses, particularly those involved in war-crimes proceedings and other sensitive cases. This model has proven essential in reducing retraumatization and improving the overall experience of witnesses throughout judicial processes. Building on the state-level example, several cantonal and district courts have developed their own mechanisms for witness support, although the level of institutionalization and the scope of services vary across courts. While a fully standardized system is not yet in place countrywide, the practice pioneered by the Court of BiH is widely recognized as a positive and replicable model that can be further strengthened and expanded, including in cases involving gender-based violence.¹²⁸

In terms of court and other related fee exemption, they are usually granted as part of secondary legal aid. In Albania, this requires court authorization through a dedicated procedure, which in practice is often hindered by procedural delays and the limited reimbursement of expert fees by the Ministry of Justice, which discourages expert participation and may shift costs back to applicants. As a result, the system designed to alleviate financial barriers can inadvertently create new ones.¹²⁹ In North Macedonia, unclear definitions of eligible costs and advance-payment requirements continue to restrict access to justice for low-income individuals. In Serbia, fee waiver provisions exist in law but no public data is available on their implementation or outcomes, making it difficult to assess their real impact.

Overall, while legislative frameworks across the region increasingly recognize women victims of violence as priority beneficiaries, actual access to free legal aid continues to depend on geography, bureaucratic discretion, and institutional willingness rather than on need. The persistence of procedural preconditions, low funding, and insufficient specialization reveals a systemic gap between formal entitlement and effective protection, leaving women's right to equal access to justice largely unrealized in practice.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

While information on the cost of accessing justice is generally not available, reports from some countries, such as Moldova, indicate that affordability remains a major obstacle, with only 20.9 per cent of citizens viewing court services as affordable.¹³⁰

Among Eastern European and South Caucasus countries, only Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have adopted specific legislation on provision of primary and secondary free legal aid and have established dedicated institution for management and provision of services for specific groups in need, including victims of domestic violence. In Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus, legal aid is regulated through different pieces of legislation, including legislation on domestic violence (Azerbaijan) or on the legal profession (laws on advocates; Armenia and Belarus).

However, many gaps remain between law and practice, especially for women victims of gender-based violence. In Moldova, previous research shows that the state legal aid system remains difficult to access. It is complex, understaffed, and unevenly distributed, with many women unaware of their

- 125 Government of Serbia (2024). Report submitted by Serbia pursuant to Article 68, paragraph 1 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (First thematic evaluation round). Available at <https://rm.coe.int/reply-to-1st-thematic-questionnaire-by-serbia/1680b20fd9>
- 126 Women's Rights Center (2024). Shadow report on the Implementation of CEDAW Convention In Montenegro, submitted on behalf of four CSOs. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolNo=INT%2FCEDAW%2FCSS%2FMNE%2F58227&Lang=en
- 127 Human Rights Action with the support of OHCHR (2025). Free legal aid in Montenegro: Progress, Challenges and Recommendations. Available at <https://www.hraccion.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/FREE-LEGAL-AID-1.pdf>
- 128 Information provided by UN Women Country Office in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- 129 Ministry of Justice of Albania (2025). Annual Report of the Department of Free Legal Aid for 2024. Available at <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/study-access-justice-albania>
- 130 UNDP Moldova (2025). Survey on Access to Justice in Moldova. Available at <https://www.undp.org/moldova/publications/survey-access-justice-republic-moldova>

rights or available free services. Refugees are legally entitled to the same services, including legal aid, but in practice many do not know how to claim these rights, making NGOs the main entry point for support.¹³¹ In Georgia, there are reports of confusion in relation to how to decide who is eligible for legal aid and the type of legal aid that they are entitled to.¹³² In addition, women survivors often cannot obtain the documents required to apply for legal aid, especially when these are controlled by the abuser or inaccessible due to safety concerns. Many legal aid lawyers also lack training on domestic violence, which can leave survivors feeling misunderstood or re-victimized when seeking support.¹³³

In Armenia, women victims of other forms of GBV than domestic violence are not automatically entitled to legal aid and instead must show that they meet certain criteria, including being unemployed or having a disability and even victims of domestic violence. However, women's organizations report that survivors often face significant financial burdens when seeking access to justice.¹³⁴ In Azerbaijan, despite amendments improving access to free legal aid, women must still prove financial need and obtain court approval, which can be difficult if they are unaware of the procedures. These barriers are compounded by the very limited number of lawyers, meaning that even when women are entitled to free legal aid, they may struggle to find available legal representation in their area.¹³⁵ A project funded by international donors provided free legal aid through women's resource centres in 14 regions, but ended in 2024, leaving people in those areas without access to free legal aid. These projects should be institutionalized to support continued and sustainable access to justice.

Ukraine's network on legal aid, created under the 2011 Law on Free Legal Aid, is more extensive and institutionalized, offering services through nationwide centers, hotlines, and mobile outreach. Despite disruptions caused by the full-scale war, Ukraine's system has shown remarkable adaptability, maintaining remote counseling and legal representation for internally displaced persons and survivors of gender-based violence. Between 2023 and early 2025, extensive awareness campaigns reached an estimated 13 million people, helping sustain access to legal advice and restraining orders despite disrupted judi-

cial processes.¹³⁶ Yet, the system faces persistent challenges of limited awareness and quality of services, and insufficient specialization to meet the needs of disadvantaged groups.

Overall, in all countries, women's awareness of their right to legal aid, and therefore their ability to ask for and access legal aid, remains low. In Moldova, women made up only 13.5 per cent of beneficiaries of legal aid in 2022, and persons with the status of victims/injured only 2.6 per cent.¹³⁷ In Ukraine, awareness raising campaigns and efforts to expand legal counseling through hotline and secondary legal aid have reached more victims in recent years. However, the overall number victims of domestic and gender-based violence benefiting remains low. In 2023, requests for free legal aid in Ukraine accounted for only about 1 per cent of the total number of reports to the police, and in 2023, FLA lawyers prepared 860 applications for the issuance of restraining orders, of which 626 were filed with the court, representing only 3.5 per cent of confirmed cases of violence. The chances for a survivor to obtain a restraining order through the court without legal assistance are very low.¹³⁸ In Georgia, legal aid services were provided to 55 victims of domestic violence in 2021, 551 in 2022, and 531 in 2023,¹³⁹ which are very low, considering that statistics from the latest national survey on domestic violence show that 22.9 per cent of women experienced one form of intimate partner violence in their lifetime.¹⁴⁰

In Moldova, the Law on State Tax No. 213 (2023), effective from January 2024, introduced important fee exemptions to improve access to justice for survivors of domestic violence. It exempts victims from paying state taxes and stamp duties in cases related to protection measures, compensation for material or moral damages, and property division or other disputes arising from domestic violence. While a positive step toward reducing financial barriers, data on the implementation and effectiveness of these exemptions is not yet available.¹⁴¹

131 Council of Europe (2022). Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in the Republic of Moldova. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/barriers-remedies-good-practices-republic-moldova-2748-8251-8536-1/1680ac9b82>

132 See Assessment report on quality assurance of legal aid provision in Georgia.pdf, page 8

133 Assessment report on quality assurance of legal aid provision in Georgia.pdf

134 Council of Europe (2025), Armenia's path to ratification of the Istanbul Convention Progress and challenges, <https://rm.coe.int/arm-2025-armenias-path-to-ratification-of-the-istanbul-convention-fina/native/48802854d2>

135 Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Azerbaijan

136 Government of Ukraine (May 2025). Addendum to the report submitted by Ukraine on 3 July 2023 pursuant to Article 68, paragraph 1, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Baseline Report). Available at <https://rm.coe.int/addendum-to-the-state-report-addressed-to-grevio/1680b5ca11>

137 Government of Moldova (2024): Seventh periodic report submitted by the Republic of Moldova to CEDAW Committee. Annex (4) Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/TBSearch.aspx?CountryID=142&Lang=En&ctl00__PlaceholderMain_radResultsGridChangePage=5

138 Centre "women's perspectives" (2024). Shadow Report on the Implementation of the the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence by Ukraine. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/shadow-report-on-the-istanbul-convention-centre-women-s-perspectives-2/1680b5a669>

139 See Beijing 30+ report, *Georgia Report.pdf*, page 45.

140 Geostat, UN Women and the EU, National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia 2022 (2023). Available at <https://georgia.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2023/12/national-study-on-violence-against-women-in-georgia-2022>.

141 https://www.legis.md/cautare/getResults?doc_id=149713&lang=ro#

Central Asia

One of the main developments in the last few years is the adoption in several countries of specific legislation on legal aid and fee waivers for recipients of legal aid (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). This is usually reserved for the most disadvantaged groups, including women victims of violence and those with limited economic opportunities. In Turkmenistan, there is no specific legislation on legal aid, but the issue is in principle regulated through the legislation on the legal profession.

Overall, data in Central Asia on the number of women benefiting free legal aid is limited, and therefore it remains challenging to assess the impact of the legislation. Kyrgyz Republic has some statistics on this, showing that in 2024, legal advice and assistance was provided to 83,795 citizens including 49,205 women (around 58 per cent) with 187 cases related to domestic violence,¹⁴² however, this number might be considered low for a country with a population of around 7 million. In Kazakhstan, where some legal aid is provided through a digital platform, there is no disaggregated data on the types of cases or the recipients who have been supported through this system. In Tajikistan, in 2022, the State Agency Legal Aid Center (SALAC) provided legal aid to 4,265 women, including 52 women seeking assistance in violence-related cases. These figures likely reflect significant underreporting, as many women remain unaware of available services, face geographic and financial barriers, or rely on informal support mechanisms. A 2024 survey indicated that only 25 percent of the population is aware of SALAC, highlighting the need for expanded outreach and awareness-raising.¹⁴³

Overall, access to legal aid remains challenging for women, with some common regional trends emerging. Women are often not aware of their right to legal aid, and lawyers may not inform them of this right. For example, in Tajikistan, a recent survey showed that only 25 per cent of people are aware of the new State Agency Legal Aid Center (SALAC).¹⁴⁴ In some countries, legal aid is not available for all types of cases. In Tajikistan, victims of domestic violence are only entitled to primary legal aid, which includes basic advice and assistance, but not representation in court. In Turkmenistan, the law is unclear, and it is up to the judge to waive payment for legal assistance. As such, there is no automatic right to legal aid and women have to request it through a process they may not be familiar with. With no automatic right to legal aid, women will have to pay for a lawyer, and as women often have fewer resources due to lower pay or unpaid work, costs related to legal advice or associated court fees may be difficult to cover. In Uzbekistan, an analysis of 1,111 randomly selected cases of domestic violence under the Administrative Code showed that only eight cases (0.7 per cent) indicated the presence of a lawyer.¹⁴⁵ Without a lawyer, access to justice is severely constrained as women may not know how to argue for their rights.

Encouraging examples in the region come from Kazakhstan, where the establishment of digital platforms such as Zan Komegi has significantly increased the reach of free legal assistance, with hundreds of thousands of people reportedly benefiting from state-supported legal services.

In 2024, Kyrgyz Republic introduced an Automated Information System for free legal aid in order to streamline access.¹⁴⁶

Hotlines have also opened in Tajikistan that provide legal assistance over the phone. However, the absence of disaggregated data on beneficiaries and types of cases prevents a clear picture of the extent to which women benefit from these mechanisms.

Overall, procedures for accessing legal aid and assistance are complicated. Women are not aware of their rights. Access to legal aid should be automatic, regardless of means, for certain types of cases, including domestic violence. Access to legal aid centres and lawyers is restricted for women, especially those living in rural areas or with disabilities. Women's lack of financial means prevents them from accessing justice.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS AND JUSTICE OUTCOMES

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, women's economic insecurity remains a major determinant of access to justice. In countries where information is available (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Türkiye), common patterns persist. Rural isolation, limited legal awareness, and low digital literacy hinder access, particularly as certain administrative services move online. Legal aid centres are concentrated in urban areas, and restrictive financial eligibility rules often exclude women slightly above income thresholds who still cannot meet actual costs. These challenges are especially present for rural women, Roma and other ethnic minorities, women with disabilities, single mothers, and survivors of violence, who face intersecting economic and social disadvantages.

However, each country faces its own specific challenges. In Albania, women in low-paid, informal work often lack control over their earnings and face geographic and financial barriers to free legal aid. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, despite formal guarantees, many women – especially Roma women,

142 Widening Access to Justice for Legal Empowerment in the Kyrgyz Republic | United Nations Development Programme; Spotlight_initiative_Kyrgyz Republic_final_cumulative_report_2023_final.pdf, page 36.

143 portali-huquqi.tj/publicadliya/view_qonunhoview.php?showdetail=&asosi_id=23470.

144 ReportTj_Last.indd, page 7.

145 Gbv_admin_offence_eng.pdf.

146 Justice for All: How UNDP is Helping Make Justice Accessible in Kyrgyz Republic | United Nations Development Programme.

rural women, and those with disabilities – work in unpaid or informal jobs, have limited internet access, and show low trust in judicial institutions.¹⁴⁷ In Kosovo, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women; LGBTI women; women with disabilities; and single mothers encounter overlapping economic and institutional discrimination, with single mothers particularly affected by housing insecurity and lengthy court proceedings.¹⁴⁸ In Montenegro, marginalized women continue to face structural barriers; the 2022 Alimony Fund, meant to support single mothers, was undermined by bureaucratic delays and retroactive payment rules, suspending payments for months.¹⁴⁹ In Türkiye, legal aid thresholds and procedural costs may limit access for many.

Overall, economic dependency, informal employment, and weak state support mechanisms systematically undermine women's access to justice across the region. Structural poverty reinforces legal inequality, leaving many women, particularly those from marginalized groups, unable to claim their rights or obtain protection from violence and discrimination.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Across the region, women's economic insecurity systematically shapes their justice outcomes, influencing both the types of disputes they encounter and their ability to pursue redress. In Moldova, survey data illustrates this relationship: among the poorest women, 7.5 per cent reported domestic violence as their main dispute (compared to none among the wealthiest), while 23.7 per cent faced disputes related to welfare benefits (versus 12.1 per cent among the wealthiest). This economic divide is mirrored in institutional trust, where only 25 per cent of the poorest women perceive police or bailiffs as impartial, and 40 per cent report complete distrust in the justice system (compared to 12 per cent among the wealthiest), increasing the likelihood that disputes remain unresolved.¹⁵⁰

Similar patterns appear in other countries, where women's financial dependence and lower earnings limit their capacity to cover legal fees, secure representation, or sustain lengthy legal procedures. In Armenia, women's concentration in lower-paid jobs and higher unemployment rates compared to men restrict their independent access to the resources needed to initiate legal cases.¹⁵¹ In Georgia, the prevalence of informal employment among women, particularly in rural areas, combined with a gender pay gap of approximately

23 per cent,¹⁵² means many women lack both disposable income and social security coverage, making justice processes financially prohibitive. In Azerbaijan, access to justice is likewise constrained by lower earnings and a widening gender wage gap, alongside limited childcare options that reduce women's ability to engage in paid work and afford legal services.¹⁵³

These trends show that economic marginalization simultaneously heightens women's exposure to disputes, particularly domestic violence, social protection, and housing or property-related issues, while reducing their capacity to seek justice. Strengthening women's economic security is therefore not only a socio-economic priority, but a structural prerequisite for equal and effective access to justice.

Central Asia

Similarly to other regions, women's economic situation and other factors such as disability, ethnicity or geographic location affect their relationship with the justice system in Central Asia. For example, although in Kazakhstan, the system allows for fee waivers covering court and ancillary costs, including expert services and bailiff fees, many women, especially those in rural areas, ethnic minorities, or in unstable employment, are unlikely to seek legal help even when eligible for aid. In Kyrgyz Republic, women without independent income, especially in rural areas, face prohibitive travel costs. In addition, complex procedures and social stigma—particularly in family law, domestic violence and property cases—further discourage women from seeking support. While legal aid is formally available, many women ultimately forgo legal recourse due to the combined economic, social and procedural barriers they encounter. Women with disabilities encounter additional challenges, including geographic isolation, low literacy, and increased stigma.¹⁵⁴ Access to justice in Tajikistan remains particularly challenging for people living in poverty and in rural areas, where geographic isolation compounds the limited availability of legal services. With a shortage of lawyers and an overburdened court system experiencing significant delays, many people—especially women—turn to community-based dispute resolution mechanisms through local councils of elders. While these mechanisms may offer accessible conflict resolution, they often lack gender-sensitive approaches and formal legal safeguards, particularly in cases involving domestic violence, inheritance, and family law disputes.¹⁵⁵

147 UNDP Albania 2025, Access to Justice in Albania, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/study-access-justice-albania>

UN Women Kosovo (2024). Gender Country Profile. Available at https://www.eas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/UNWOMEN_GEF_ENG.pdf

148 Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence – GREVIO (2022). Assessment of the alignment of Kosovo's laws, policies and other measures with the standards of the Istanbul Convention <https://www.coe.int/en/web/istanbul-convention/-/new-report-assessing-the-alignment-of-measures-on-violence-against-women-in-kosovo-with-the-istanbul-convention>

149 Women's Rights Center (2024). Shadow report on the Implementation of CEDAW Convention In Montenegro, submitted on behalf of four CSOs. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEDAW%2FCSS%2FMNE%2F58227&Lang=en

150 UNDP Moldova (2025). Survey on Access to Justice in Moldova. Available at <https://www.undp.org/moldova/publications/survey-access-justice-republic-moldova>

151 See Armenia_GB_Barriers remedies and good practices still to read.pdf, page 17.

152 https://georgia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/cgep_eng_web_1.pdf

153 See Gender Based Violence in Azerbaijan 2020.

154 EN-Disability-in-Kyrgyzstan.pdf, page 8.

155 Providing access to justice to citizens in Tajikistan | United Nations Development Programme.

For all countries in the region, the CEDAW Committee in its respective concluding observations has raised concerns about limited access to services, including justice, for women from disadvantaged groups, and more specifically: Kazakhstan (women with disabilities, LGBTI women, refugees, asylum seekers, and stateless women, who face multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination);¹⁵⁶ Kyrgyz Republic (older women, women with disabilities, ethnic minorities, migrants, refugees, and LGBT women);¹⁵⁷ Tajikistan (women living with HIV/AIDS, rural women and former women prisoners);¹⁵⁸ Turkmenistan (refugee, asylum-seeking, and stateless women, particularly for their lack of access to asylum procedures and legal assistance)¹⁵⁹ and Uzbekistan (older women, women with disabilities, those from ethnic minorities, particularly Mughat/Luyli communities, refugees, migrants, women living with HIV/AIDS, and lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women).¹⁶⁰

While the 2024 CEDAW concluding observations raised serious concerns, they also acknowledged Tajikistan's efforts to strengthen its domestic violence legislation and to establish the State Agency Legal Aid Center, while emphasizing the need for sustained implementation, adequate funding, and institutional capacity-building.

LAWYERS' KNOWLEDGE AND CAPACITY TO HANDLE GENDER EQUALITY CASES

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Lawyers' capacity to handle gender equality and GBV cases is not systematically assessed in the region. However, various reports indicate that in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and North Macedonia, common gaps include the absence of systematic training to manage complex and sensitive cases involving victims of domestic violence and trafficking, where risks of intimidation and re-victimization are high, limited specialization among legal aid lawyers, and weak monitoring of service quality, leaving survivors of violence and discrimination insufficiently supported. Initiatives such as Council of Europe's HELP courses and national judicial training programmes have improved awareness but remain fragmented and not sustainable.

In Montenegro, while courts report overall improvements in legal aid delivery, CSOs note lawyers' limited ability to represent women victims of violence, and no regular gender training is in place. In Türkiye, bar associations and CSOs offer

gender and VAW training, and the 2025 Legal Aid Regulation now mandates and encourages training and specialization in legal aid services, whereas progress towards standardization of implementation is expected.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

In Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, efforts have been made to strengthen lawyers' capacity to handle gender equality and discrimination cases. In Moldova, the National Institute of Justice offers regular training for lawyers and legal professionals providing state-guaranteed legal aid, which integrate gender-sensitive content and align with international standards. However, there is no assessment of training quality or its practical impact, and the effectiveness of legal aid in addressing gender-based or discrimination cases remains largely undocumented. In Ukraine, concerns persist about the limited specialization and irregular training of legal aid providers on gender-responsive access to justice and GBV. As a result, service quality is inconsistent, and many women express dissatisfaction with available support. Over 55 per cent of women who sought assistance through Centres for Social Work or the Ministry of Justice reported issues such as slow case processing, unclear guidance, and insufficient institutional protection, which erode confidence in the legal aid system and discourage further use.¹⁶¹ In Georgia, three specialized lawyers were recruited to support victims of VAWG/DV. To date, they have handled 68 VAWG cases. UN Women has also conducted various trainings to enhance access to justice and has developed SOPs for lawyers in this regard.

Central Asia

In Central Asia, there are limited studies on the capacity and knowledge of lawyers on gender equality legislation. There are some programmes to build the capacity of lawyers in this area, but they are ad hoc. In Kyrgyz Republic, for example, specialized training for lawyers was provided as part of the Spotlight initiative, and 49 lawyers are now providing pro bono legal assistance to victims of SGBV.¹⁶² In Tajikistan, lawyers and judges also received training on gender equality as part of Spotlight initiative¹⁶³ and Rule of Law and Access to Justice Programme¹⁶⁴ implemented by UNDP.

Gender equality and SGBV do not form part of training curriculum for attorneys and should be included from the outset. Additional training on this topic should be included as part of continued professional development.

156 CEDAW (2019) Concluding Observations on Kazakhstan <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/529b70cb-ce4e-408e-8606-be19c0ef61f4>

157 CEDAW (2021), Concluding Observations on Kyrgyz Republic <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/056438da-eac1-4a0f-9af3-02eb1b9595fc>

158 CEDAW (2024) Concluding Observations on Tajikistan <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/bf7a380e-315a-46a1-9489-79b75af817d2>

159 CEDAW (2024) Concluding Observations on Turkmenistan <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/dfbe361c-a4e8-4a2e-a9c1-2fd47df700c7>

160 CEDAW (2022) Concluding Observations on Uzbekistan <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/89db8c99-a206-48d7-917d-8b3b3617c397>

161 Council of Europe (2022). Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Ukraine. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/study-pggiii-barriers-remedies-and-good-practices-ukraine-2023-fin-279/1680ad79d6>

162 Trainings in Kyrgyz Republic - Equality Now and spotlight_initiative_Kyrgyz Republic_final_cumulative_report_2023_final.pdf, page 36.

163 See: Spotlight Initiative Tajikistan Report 2022

164 <https://www.undp.org/tajikistan/projects/rule-law-and-access-justice-programme>

CAPACITIES OF WOMEN'S CSOS TO REPRESENT DISCRIMINATION CASES, INCLUDING STRATEGIC LITIGATION

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Women's CSOs play a crucial role in promoting gender equality, combating gender-based violence, and supporting women's access to services. In Western Balkans and Türkiye, they are central actors in advocacy, awareness-raising, monitoring of state obligations, and service provision, including psychosocial support and provision of free legal aid for survivors of violence. Despite limited resources and heavy reliance on donor funding, these organizations remain the main drivers of community outreach and institutional accountability and often filling gaps in service provision for women in need.

However, in terms of legal representation and strategic litigation, their role remains more limited. In Albania and Kosovo, women's CSOs primarily provide individual legal assistance but rarely engage in litigation before national or international bodies. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, several women's CSOs offer direct representation but face constraints linked to funding and legal standing. By contrast, North Macedonia shows more progress: CSOs have successfully litigated discrimination cases before the Equality Commission, Constitutional Court, and CEDAW Committee. In Türkiye, although CSOs are legally allowed to intervene to cases in support of victims, courts' practice in allowing interventions requires progress.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

In Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, the engagement of women CSOs in strategic litigation is either limited or undocumented, except for Moldova and Georgia. In Moldova, the Women's Law Center (CDF) stands out for its work in strategic litigation on gender-based discrimination and gender-based violence. CDF provides specialized legal aid to victims of violence and uses litigation to challenge systemic gaps and promote institutional reform. Its lawyers have represented applicants in key European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) cases, such as *Vieru v. Moldova*¹⁶⁵.

Since 2022, UN Women in Georgia has been supporting three women's rights CSOs – Sapari, Partnership for Human Rights (PHR) and Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG) – to carry out strategic litigation on issues regarding VAWG/DV, sexual violence, sexual harassment, women with disabilities and LGBTIQ and discrimination. As a result, in 2025, several strategic cases were ongoing at the national and international levels: CSOs are representing 37 strategic cases before the common courts of Georgia, 11 cases before the European Court of Human Rights and 1 case at the CEDAW Committee. In addition, CSOs have been advocating for the implementation of six ECtHR judgments and one CEDAW decision. In these cases, CSOs represent the interests of women and children with disabilities, women human rights defenders, women athletes who were victims of sexual harassment, women victims of domestic violence and sexual violence, and LGBTI women.

Central Asia

In Central Asia, the capacities of women's civil society organizations to engage in strategic litigation remain limited due to restrictive civic space and resource constraints. They remain primarily focused on service provision. In Kyrgyz Republic, women's rights groups play a key role in advancing efforts to end discrimination against women and girls, by providing shelters, legal and psychosocial assistance, and conducting awareness campaigns,¹⁶⁶ but they operate in an increasingly hostile environment marked by restrictive amendments to the Non-Profit Organizations Act and reliance on foreign funding.¹⁶⁷ In Kazakhstan, the potential of women's CSOs to represent discrimination cases is undermined by barriers to registration for feminist groups and LGBTI organizations and limited state cooperation, despite growing grant support.¹⁶⁸ Tajikistan¹⁶⁹ and Turkmenistan¹⁷⁰ show even weaker engagement of women's organizations in legal representation and policymaking: women's CSOs are rarely consulted in legislative processes, face burdensome registration requirements, and lack stable institutional support. Across the subregion, women's CSOs contribute to access to justice through service delivery and advocacy, but their engagement in strategic litigation at national or international levels remains sporadic and largely dependent on external technical and financial assistance.

165 A case related to suicide as a consequence of domestic violence <https://strasbourgobservers.com/2025/01/31/paradox-of-escape-from-violence-suicide-as-a-potential-consequence-of-state-negligence-in-vieru-v-moldova/>

166 Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice, Kyrgyz Republic, 2023

167 Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Kyrgyz Republic, 2024

168 CEDAW, Kazakhstan, 2019

169 CEDAW, Tajikistan, 2024

170 CEDAW, Turkmenistan, 2024

LEGAL LITERACY AMONG WOMEN

Western Balkans and Türkiye

In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Türkiye, low levels of legal awareness and limited access to information continue to restrict women's ability to seek redress for discrimination or violence. CEDAW, other human rights treaty bodies and GREVIO consistently highlight legal illiteracy and distrust in institutions, especially among rural women, minorities, women with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ groups. This is also backed by some surveys related to legal awareness among the broader population. In Albania, for example, only 13 per cent of citizens had sought legal information in the past five years (2019-2024)¹⁷¹, while in Kosovo, 78 per cent of respondents of a 2021 survey – mostly women and youth – had never heard of the State Legal Aid Agency.¹⁷² In Albania, there have been concerns about limited legal awareness among women on property rights, and there is a need to increase outreach and legal aid so women can fully benefit from improved provisions enabling the registration of joint property in the names of both spouses.¹⁷³ Similar patterns emerge in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where rural and Roma women often lack information about their rights, despite promising models to address these gaps through programmes such as a free legal aid mobile application and pilot legal literacy training in other contexts.¹⁷⁴ In North Macedonia, according to a 2023 GREVIO report, women are rarely informed about free legal aid services. In Türkiye, despite inclusion of legal literacy goals in national action plans, awareness remains low. This was further made visible after the 2023 earthquakes, when many women did not seek support due to limited knowledge.

Overall, limited awareness of legal rights, low outreach, and digital and social barriers prevent many women – especially those in vulnerable groups – from recognizing or claiming violations, leaving them without effective protection or remedies under the law.

A positive example comes from Türkiye, after the 2023 earthquakes, where UN Women and the Union of Turkish Bar Associations, with funding from the Government of Germany, launched the project “Enhancing Women’s Post-Earthquake Legal Literacy”. Based on an assessment of women’s immediate legal priorities, local lawyers provided on-site legal information sessions in temporary

settlement areas, helping women understand rights related to housing, social protection, custody, and protection from violence.¹⁷⁵ To ensure this information was accessible to women with different literacy levels, UN Women applied a Legal Design Approach, translating complex legal procedures into simple, visual, user-friendly materials co-designed with affected women and legal practitioners. These tools were shared through CSOs and bar association outreach teams, expanding access to clear, relevant legal guidance.¹⁷⁶ 4,198 women were supported through informative sessions.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

In Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, low legal literacy among women, especially in rural and disadvantaged groups, continues to hinder access to justice. While comprehensive data and dedicated studies are not available, related reports and surveys offer important insights. For example, according to the 2025 access to justice survey in Moldova, only 56 per cent of those surveyed knew that women have the legal right to divorce without their husband's approval; by contrast, awareness of gender equality mandates in pay was higher, at 78.5 per cent.¹⁷⁷ Knowledge increases with education, income, and urban residence, showing persistent socio-economic gaps. In Ukraine, many women, particularly in rural areas, are unaware of anti-discrimination laws or their rights, leading to very few legal claims. From 2005 to 2015, the Law on Equal Rights and Opportunities was used as a reference in only 115 court cases, mostly initiated by state bodies, reflecting weak rights awareness and limited access to remedies.¹⁷⁸ In Georgia, the latest national study on violence against women from 2022 shows that only half of women surveyed knew about the national hotline for victims of violence.¹⁷⁹ In Armenia, in a UN Women survey from 2022, only 1 in 10 respondents indicated that they were fully aware of the legal provisions on domestic violence legislation and rape. Comparatively, 34 per cent of respondents reported being unaware of the legal provisions on domestic violence and 50 per cent being unaware of the legal provisions on rape.¹⁸⁰

171 UNDP Albania 2025, Access to Justice in Albania, 2024, <https://www.undp.org/albania/publications/study-access-justice-albania>

172 UN Women Kosovo (2024). Gender Country Profile. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/2024/UNWOMEN_GEF_ENG.pdf

173 UNCT Albania (2024). Submission for the Fourth Universal Periodic Review of Albania. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/al-un-contributions-s47>

174 GIZ / ORF Legal Reform project

175 <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/03/enhancing-womens-post-earthquake-legal-literacy-project-brief#:~:text=The%20brief%20on%20the%20%22Enhancing,following%20the%20devastating%20earthquakes%20that>

176 <https://eca.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2025/02/legal-design-a-pathway-to-accessible-justice-in-post-earthquake-recovery>

177 UNDP Moldova (2025). Survey on Access to Justice in Moldova. Available at <https://www.undp.org/moldova/publications/survey-access-justice-republic-moldova>

178 Council of Europe (2022). Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Ukraine. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/study-pgiii-barriers-remedies-and-good-practices-ukraine-2023-fin-279/1680ad79d6>

179 See National Study on Violence against Women in Georgia 2022, pg 181.

180 BASELINE STUDY-5_0.pdf

Central Asia

As above, there is limited data on women's legal literacy, but in most countries, this is recognized as a gap, and some are taking steps to address this. In Uzbekistan, in a 2022 survey of women in both rural and urban areas, more than 75 per cent indicated that their legal knowledge was not adequate.¹⁸¹ Additionally, UNDP conducted a Legal Needs Assessment in 2024, which found that the most common reason for legal issues (39.4 per cent) was due to a lack of understanding of the law. This was especially pronounced in rural areas.¹⁸² Low legal literacy is a key barrier to obtaining legal assistance, with 88.3 per cent indicating at least some level of agreement (partial to strong).¹⁸³ The latest CEDAW recommendations for Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan highlight the need to increase awareness among women of their rights under the CEDAW Convention and relevant national legislation, the justiciability of those rights and the remedies available to claim those rights.

Information campaigns and other awareness raising activities have taken place in most Central Asian countries. For example, in Kyrgyz Republic, an information campaign on the availability of pro bono legal aid for victims of SGBV reached 175,000 people between 2021 and 2023.¹⁸⁴ In Kazakhstan, the government recognizes that legal literacy is low among men and women. As such, in 2024, the government launched a number of initiatives to counter this, including "People's Lawyer", "Justice Advice", "Open Day", and "Days of Free Legal Aid". These campaigns included 1,310 events throughout the country, reaching more than 100,000 people.¹⁸⁵ In Tajikistan, the Human Rights Commissioner made efforts to raise awareness through 47 radio and television appearances between 2019 and 2022 to promote gender equality and inform the public about domestic violence prevention.¹⁸⁶

Functioning of GBV response systems

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Across the region, countries have made steady progress in strengthening legal and institutional responses to gender-based violence, notably through the adoption and improvement of legislation and protocols aligned with the Istanbul Convention. While the main legal developments have been discussed above, this section focuses on institutional aspects, particularly those related to access to justice and the effectiveness of protection and prevention measures. Encouraging examples include the expansion of multi-sectoral coordination mechanisms in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina, faster police response times and expanded services in Kosovo, and enhanced data collection through a unified database in Montenegro and Kosovo. North Macedonia is establishing specialized police units on domestic violence, while Serbia has introduced integrated risk assessments and emergency protection orders that have improved coordination between police, prosecutors, and social services. In Türkiye, Prevention and Monitoring Centers now provide comprehensive support to survivors, including shelter, financial aid, counselling, legal and medical assistance,

childcare, employment support, and education services. Across the region, despite improvements, significant implementation gaps persist from protection to prosecution both within the law enforcement and judiciary.

While legal frameworks for protection and emergency measures are largely in place, implementation remains inconsistent. Across the Western Balkans, the enforcement of protection orders is often hindered by delays, limited police and social services follow-up, and insufficient monitoring of compliance. In Türkiye, discussions around the efficiency of protection orders and their implementation continue.¹⁸⁷

Challenges persist in ensuring effective investigation and prosecution of GBV cases. High levels of case attrition where complaints are withdrawn or dismissed before reaching court often undermine access to justice. Many survivors discontinue cases due to lack of trust in institutions, prolonged procedures, or fear of retaliation. Secondary victimization remains a major barrier, with survivors often facing victim-blaming attitudes during investigation or trial.

181 See https://parl.uz/articles/society/women_in_central_asia_face_the_fate_of_mustahkam

182 https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-05/undp_uzbekistan_legal_needs_assessment_report_in_english.pdf p.30

183 https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-05/undp_uzbekistan_legal_needs_assessment_report_in_english.pdf p.33

184 [spotlight_initiative_Kyrgyz_Republic_final_cumulative_report_2023_final.pdf](#), page 36.

185 [Digital Justice: How Kazakhstan increases legal literacy and access to legal aid.](#)

186 [Tajikistan-Report_ru.pdf](#), page 61.

187 CEDAW Committee (2022). Concluding observations on the eighth periodic report of Türkiye, <https://uhri.ohchr.org/en/document/ba8f5474-7cb5-43e5-869c-705c7030335d>;

In several countries there are challenges with weak evidence gathering, limited specialization among prosecutors and judges, and lengthy court proceedings, which contribute to low conviction rates. Even where police response times have improved initial protection steps, ensuring consistent prosecutorial follow-up remains a challenge. Lenient sentencing remains common across several countries, sending a message of limited accountability for perpetrators.

Beyond domestic violence, law enforcement and justice system responses to other forms of gender-based violence remain limited across the region. Survivors of sexual violence, harassment, stalking, and technology-facilitated violence continue to face barriers in accessing protection and justice. Survivors of sexual violence often face stigma, procedural delays, and secondary victimization during investigation or trial. While legislative frameworks increasingly recognize diverse forms of GBV, institutional practices and service provision remain narrowly centered on domestic violence, leaving other forms of gender-based violence insufficiently addressed.

Overall, coordination among police, prosecutors, courts, and social services is often ad hoc. Risk-assessment tools and victim-protection protocols, though introduced in several countries, are not systematically applied. Specialized training for justice professionals is limited, affecting the quality and sensitivity of proceedings.

Monitoring court proceedings is an important tool for assessing progress and remaining gaps in women's access to justice, particularly in GBV cases. In Albania, with support from UN Women and the Government of Sweden, the Center for Civil Legal Initiatives monitored court hearings related to protection orders and criminal proceedings between 2023 and 2025. The reports highlight both positive developments and areas for improvement. On the positive side, the monitoring showed that victims of GBV were generally treated equally to other parties in court, with no cases of discriminatory or unequal treatment based on gender, ethnicity, religion, economic status, disability, sexual orientation, age, or other personal characteristics. This suggests progress toward a gender-sensitive and inclusive justice process. However, significant gaps remain in access to legal representation. Of the 479 protection order cases monitored, only 108 victims had a lawyer. Among these, just seven were represented by state legal aid, 23 by licensed CSOs, and the rest by private lawyers, indicating the need to strengthen free legal aid and support mechanisms for survivors.¹⁸⁸

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

In Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have strengthened their legal and institutional frameworks to prevent and address GBV, aligning national systems more closely with the Istanbul Convention. Armenia, Belarus and Azerbaijan have also taken positive steps to prevent and address GBV.

In Moldova, progress includes legal reforms providing free legal aid to victims of domestic and sexual violence, empowering police to issue emergency barring orders, the adoption of national programmes establishing multi-agency cooperation mechanisms and the opening of Moldova's first sexual assault centre, which offers multi-sectoral support to victims of sexual violence, including to women fleeing the war in Ukraine.¹⁸⁹ In Ukraine, major developments include specific guidance and protocols on urgent actions to prevent and combat domestic and gender-based violence, procedures for medical examinations and care for victims, and the establishment of the Expert Council on Preventing and Combating GBV. The National Police has set up 58 full-time domestic violence sectors and 63 mobile response teams, and the Office of the Prosecutor General created a dedicated department for managing domestic violence cases and protecting victims. Convictions for domestic violence have increased from 253 in 2020 to 1,069 in 2024, indicating stronger law enforcement.¹⁹⁰

In Georgia, the number of criminal domestic violence cases have increased in recent years.¹⁹¹ The creation in 2018 of specialized prosecutors and investigators for domestic violence, as well as the creation of a Victim and Witness Coordination Service within the office of the prosecutor, are likely to benefit victims. Their role is to provide information to victims about the process and their case and to refer them when necessary to other support services, including shelters.¹⁹² In 2024, there were 257 specialized employees of the Prosecution Service (for domestic violence and domestic crimes), including 38 managers, 184 prosecutors, 25 investigators and 10 witness and victim coordinators, and 174 employees specialized in sexual violence.¹⁹³ In Azerbaijan, recent amendments in 2024 to the legal framework have increased the length of protection orders. In Armenia, recent amendments to the law in 2024 provide better protection for all victims of domestic violence, including those who are unmarried or in same sex relationships and recognizes children who witness domestic violence as victims. The police are obligated to investigate cases of domestic violence, and reconciliation is no longer available as an outcome of the case. In Belarus, 2022 amendments to legislation on domestic violence provide a framework for the issuance of protection orders.¹⁹⁴

188 Center for Civic Legal Initiative (2025). Monitoring Report: Implementation of the Law on Measures Against Violence in Family Relations (Monitoring period: 2023–2025); *Monitoring report: Implementation of criminal and criminal procedural legislation in the adjudication of domestic violence and gender-based violence cases by first instance courts of general jurisdiction in Tirana, Fier, Durrës, Elbasan, Berat, Shkodër, and Vlorë (October 2023–April 2025)*

189 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report Republic of Moldova, Council of Europe, 2023, Strasbourg

190 Government of Ukraine (May 2025). Addendum to the report submitted by Ukraine on 3 July 2023 pursuant to Article 68, paragraph 1, of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Baseline Report. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/addendum-to-the-state-report-addressed-to-grevio/1680b5ca11>

191 Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Georgia, page 17.

192 Barriers, remedies and good practices for women's access to justice in Georgia page 18.

193 Beijing 30+ report, Georgia-Report.pdf, page 47.

194 <https://pravo.by/document/?guid=12551&p0=H12200151>

Despite these advances, implementation challenges remain significant. Gender stereotypes, discriminatory judicial practices, limited access to legal and other services, and lack of implementation of protection orders are common in all countries.

In Moldova, prosecution and sentencing of GBV cases remain limited, while victims face barriers in accessing justice, particularly in rural areas. Coordination between police and prosecution services needs to be strengthened, and the monitoring of outcomes such as prosecution rates and sentencing remains insufficient. Violence against marginalized groups, including women with disabilities, Roma women, and LGBTQ+ persons, remains widespread and often unaddressed.¹⁹⁵

In Ukraine, while national institutions have strengthened law enforcement and judicial responses, significant gaps persist. CSOs report that few emergency restraining orders are issued, several regions lack shelters, and judicial practices continue to reflect harmful stereotypes, with domestic violence still treated as a “family conflict.” Protection orders are often ineffective, and survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and LGBTQI+ persons face persistent stigma, limited services, and lack of specialized support. The war has intensified risks, contributing to higher rates of domestic violence, especially involving military personnel, with insufficient psychological rehabilitation services for both victims and perpetrators.¹⁹⁶

In Armenia, the police are often dismissive of women reporting domestic violence, which may lead to low reporting rates. Although the police are required to investigate cases, this often does not happen. Long delays in court and statutes of limitations often result in cases being dismissed before their completion.¹⁹⁷

In Armenia and Azerbaijan, evidentiary and investigative practices can be discriminatory. For example, in Azerbaijan, the police process is often not gender-sensitive, with victims being asked to provide their statements in public rooms in police stations or asked to return to the scene of the crime to re-create it. In court, family members of the accused are

often present, which can lead to intimidation.¹⁹⁸ For sexual violence, physical and biological materials are usually required for the prosecution to proceed, on the basis that women’s evidence may not be sufficient.¹⁹⁹ In Armenia, CSOs report that women who report are often questioned about their own morality or behaviour.²⁰⁰ In Georgia, reports suggest that GBV investigations are marred by gender stereotyping, often leading to the re-victimization of women and low prosecution and conviction rates. Evidential requirements, including the need for physical proof such as visible injuries or forensic evidence, prevents cases from being prosecuted. Survivors are also subjected to retraumatizing procedures, such as reenacting the assault during investigations, and face intrusive, judgmental questioning that reflects deep-rooted gender stereotypes.²⁰¹

In Belarus, according to the CEDAW Committee, the barriers faced by victims/survivors in gaining access to justice, include the absence of ex officio prosecution and gender bias on the part of law enforcement officials, who reportedly often discourage reporting through threats of child removal or by labelling households as “socially dangerous.”²⁰²

Central Asia

In Central Asia, progress in strengthening GBV response systems has been uneven, with countries adopting diverse approaches and varying levels of implementation. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have made significant legislative advances in recent years. In Kazakhstan, the amendments to the 2024 Law on the Protection of Women’s Rights and Children’s Safety²⁰³ reinstated criminal liability for battery and minor bodily harm in domestic violence cases, require police to investigate all reports of violence even without a victim’s complaint, and eliminate reconciliation²⁰⁴ as a resolution mechanism. However, the law still fails to recognize domestic violence as a distinct criminal offence, and patriarchal norms continue to normalize violence, leading to low reporting rates (only six per cent of victims report abuse).²⁰⁵ The 2025 Universal

195 GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report Republic of Moldova, Council of Europe, 2023, Strasbourg *Women with Disabilities from Moldova: Invisible Victims for Law and Society*, Association of Entrepreneurs with Disabilities, 2025, Chisinau; <https://moldova.europalibera.org/a/varstnicii-supusi-violentei-in-familie-re-cunosc-abuzurile-dar-nu-cauta-ajutor/33216730.html>

196 Centre “women’s perspectives” (2024). Shadow Report on the Implementation of the the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence by Ukraine. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/shadow-report-on-the-istanbul-convention-centre-women-s-perspectives-2/1680b5a669>; NIRAS/ EU4GENDEREQUALITY REFORM HELPDESK (2023). Country Gender Profile Ukraine. Available at https://euneighbourseast.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/eu4genderhelpdesk_ukrainegenderprofile_2023-cgp_v3.pdf <https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/2024-10/Gender-Based%20Violence%20EN.pdf>

197 ACCESS TO JUSTICE IN THE REPUBLIC OF ARMENIA FOR WOMEN WHO ARE VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE

198 Final-Submission-on-Azerbaijan-to-CRPD-Committee-by-EN.pdf, para 25.

199 Final-Submission-on-Azerbaijan-to-CRPD-Committee-by-EN.pdf, para. 18. See also Gender Based Violence in Azerbaijan 2020

200 https://tbinetnet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=INT%2FCEDAW%2FCSS%2FARM%2F50124&Lang=en

201 Equality Now, Sapari, Addressing Violence and Discrimination against Women and Girls Submission to the UN Universal Periodic Review at 51st Session of the UPR Working Group of the Human Rights Council, July 2025, available online at: <https://equalitynow.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/UPR-Georgia-Submission-by-Equality-Now-and-Sapari.pdf>

202 CEDAW 2025 Concluding Observations on Belarus

203 Information provided by UN Country Office in Kazakhstan

204 See, *Briefing-paper-on-GBV.pdf*, page 4. law ‘On Introducing Amendments and Additions to Certain Legislative Acts of the Republic of Uzbekistan in Connection with Further Improvement of the System of Reliable Protection of the Rights, Freedoms and Legitimate Interests of Women and Children (12 April 2023). Law ‘On Protection of Women against Harassment and Abuse’ (defines stalking)

205 Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2024). Comprehensive Review of the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Periodic Review (UPR)²⁰⁶ encouraged Kazakhstan to criminalize domestic violence as a stand-alone offence, adopt a consent-based definition of rape, and extend legal protections to cover all forms of gender-based violence, including stalking, forced marriage, and psychological abuse. Around the same time (July 2025) Kazakhstan passed legal amendments to criminalize stalking and forced marriage.²⁰⁷ Similarly, Uzbekistan's 2023²⁰⁸ reforms criminalized domestic violence and expanded the duration of protection orders for up to one year. Besides, the government reported managing 197 shelters for GBV in 2024.²⁰⁹ Yet, gaps remain in implementation: protection orders are inconsistently enforced, most shelters are under-resourced or not fully operational,²¹⁰ and sexual violence continues to be prosecuted under evidentiary and consent standards that disadvantage victims.²¹¹ Marginalized groups—such as women with disabilities, women living with HIV, and ethnic or religious minorities—remain inadequately protected.²¹²

Kyrgyz Republic has developed one of the more comprehensive legal frameworks in the region through the 2017 Law on Safeguarding and Protection from Domestic Violence²¹³ and 2019 amendments to the Criminal Code,²¹⁴ which criminalize domestic violence and expand the definition to include economic violence. Nevertheless, concerns have been raised about the current dual classification of domestic violence as both as an offence under the Code of Offences and a crime under the Criminal Code, which creates a legal ambiguity and undermines the seriousness of such acts.²¹⁵ In addition, CEDAW Committee Concluding Observations which have encouraged full criminalization of all forms of violence against women—including psychological, physical, sexual violence, stalking, intimate partner rape, forced marriage and sexual harassment—to ensure effective protection, accountability and access to remedies—still remain relevant.²¹⁶

The introduction of electronic monitoring and extended administrative arrest marks progress toward stronger enforcement. Nonetheless, survivors still face major barriers to justice due to entrenched gender stereotypes, limited services, and a definition of rape based on coercion rather than lack of

consent.²¹⁷ Recent studies have exposed high levels of SGBV against women and girls with disabilities, with only a small proportion feeling safe in public or even at home. Few cases of such violence are investigated or prosecuted, and survivors rarely obtain justice or redress. Barriers to reporting include stigma, lack of procedural accommodations, and investigative practices that retraumatize victims such as confrontations with perpetrators and invasive forensic examinations. Law enforcement officials often lack training on disability and gender-sensitive approaches, perpetuating secondary victimization.²¹⁸

Tajikistan's 2013 Law on Domestic Violence,²¹⁹ amended in 2024, provides for protection orders but lacks clear enforcement mechanisms and does not define domestic violence as a separate criminal offence. Protection orders in Tajikistan, typically issued for 15–30 days, are insufficient to ensure survivor safety. Short durations do not allow adequate time for women to secure alternative housing, achieve economic stability, or safely exit violent relationships. Available reporting points to inconsistent police practice in the initiation and follow-up of domestic violence complaints, which can discourage reporting and reduce trust in formal justice mechanisms. In practice, medical documentation is frequently treated as essential for case progression, which can create delays and barriers, particularly for women in remote areas.²²⁰ Access to justice continues to be hindered by limited legal awareness, re-traumatizing investigative and court practices, and a lack of systematic training for justice actors. Survivors of GBV are often required to return to crime scenes and may face questioning by alleged perpetrators, while gender-responsive procedures are not consistently in place.²²¹ For women with disabilities, the challenges are worse, as there are no specific guidelines for interviewing women with disabilities and statements of persons with mental disability are often automatically excluded on the basis of medical expert evaluations.²²² In addition, women with disabilities are often subjected to more violence from family members as well as others.²²³

206 Tukhtasinova, D. (2023). Quality and comprehensiveness of services in centres of rehabilitation and adaptation for female victims of violence. Agence Française de Développement & Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1X6dwlH_oyW0FSe7F6OmY1JJU1CwnfIG/view

207 See, Joint-NGO-submission-to-CEDAW-2.pdf, page 6.

208 CEDAW, Uzbekistan, 2022

209 <https://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/111570/edition/14086/ru>

210 <https://mvd.gov.kg/rus/ministry/normative-bases/22>

211 In September 2025, the OHCHR and UN Women in the Kyrgyz Republic sent an official letter to the Chair of the Cabinet of Ministers to raise this concern.

212 CEDAW Kyrgyzstan 2021,

213 EN-Disability-in-Kyrgystan.pdf

214 Report of the Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities, Heba Hagrass

215 <https://ncz.tj/content/%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%BD-%D1%80%D0%B5%D1%81%D0%BF%D1%83%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8-%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B4%D0%B6%D0%B8%D0%BA%D0%B8%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%BD-%D0%BE-%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B4%D1%83%D0%BF%D1%80%D0%B5%D0%B6%D0%B4%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%B8-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D0%B8%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%8F-%D0%B2-%D1%81%D0%B5%D0%BC%D1%8C%D0%B5>

216 See Tajikistan: Barriers to Aid for Domestic Violence Victims | Human Rights Watch

217 See CEDAW, Tajikistan, 2024

218 See Joint-submission-to-CEDAW-on-Tajikistan-by-Equality-Now-Women-Lawyers-for-Development-and-the-Public-Foundation-Your-Choice.-.pdf, para 29.

219 See, Spotlight_Baseline_-KAPB_Summary_0.pdf, page 14.

220 Code of Turkmenistan on administrative offenses article 43.

221 See CEDAW, Turkmenistan, 2024

222 See Tajikistan: Barriers to Aid for Domestic Violence Victims | Human Rights Watch

223 See CEDAW, Tajikistan, 2024

Turkmenistan remains the weakest in the subregion, lacking a dedicated domestic violence law or integrated GBV response system. Domestic violence is treated as an administrative offence, and police responses are limited to issuing warnings.²²⁴ In 2024, CEDAW raised concerns about the prevalence of gender-based violence, with 12 per cent of women reporting physical or sexual abuse by an intimate partner, and about the absence of legislation criminalizing such violence. The 2021 Social Services Act does not explicitly provide victim support, and the country lacks state-run services and sufficient funding for NGOs assisting survivors.²²⁵

Across the subregion, patriarchal attitudes, limited institutional capacity, and weak coordination among law enforcement, health, and social services impede the full realization of women's right to live free from violence. While legislative progress in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, and Uzbekistan marks a shift toward greater accountability, enforcement gaps, discriminatory evidentiary standards, and under-resourced support systems continue to hinder effective GBV prevention and response.

Transitional justice mechanisms and conflict-related violations

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Nearly three decades after the wars of the 1990s, the Western Balkans still struggles to advance transitional justice, as reconciliation and social cohesion remain fragile. A combination of criminal accountability efforts has been deployed in the region, including a fully international criminal tribunal, domestic war crimes trials and internationalized or hybrid accountability mechanisms. This has enabled the prosecution of several high-level perpetrators. Post-war processes in the region have helped break the silence around conflict-related sexual violence and highlight the need for gender-sensitive approaches to deal with the past. The courage of women survivors has driven major international advances in criminal justice, reparations, psychosocial support, and truth-seeking and memorialization efforts addressing wartime sexual violence.²²⁶ Civil society organizations, particularly women-led and survivor-centered groups, continue to play a critical role in documenting violations, providing legal aid and psychosocial support, and advancing survivor-centered justice. However, shrinking civic space, limited funding, and growing political pressure increasingly constrain their ability to sustain these functions and meaningfully engage in transitional justice processes.²²⁷

Recent positive developments in the region include Kosovo's adoption of the first comprehensive National Strategy on Transitional Justice (2024–2034), which explicitly integrates gender perspectives and builds on a reparations system for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. In addition, Montenegro adopted a new War Crimes Investigation Strategy

for 2024–2027 and amended its Criminal Procedure Code (CPC) to address legal and practical obstacles to war crimes investigation and prosecution. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, both Brčko District (2022) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023) have enacted laws recognizing children born of wartime rape as victims, and a new Federation-wide law protecting civilian war victims. In Serbia, investigation and prosecution are currently guided by the National Strategy for War Crimes Prosecution (2021–2026), which sets priorities for case processing, victim protection, and regional cooperation.

However, despite advances, many transitional justice processes are at a standstill or unresolved with limited domestic prosecutions and access to effective and adequate reparations. Across the region, accountability for war crimes remains hampered by significant backlogs and cross-border obstacles. Bosnia and Herzegovina still lacks a state-level framework law on civilian victims of war, resulting in unequal rights and access to services across the entities. Implementation of the 2023 FBiH Law also remains inconsistent across cantons. In addition, fragmented institutional responsibilities across state, entity, and cantonal levels further hinder coherent victim support, prosecution, and reparations processes, leaving around 40 per cent of cases stalled due to suspects residing in Serbia or Croatia, where extradition is not possible.²²⁸ Kosovo's Special Prosecution Office has expanded staffing but continues to face major delays,²²⁹ while in Serbia, prosecutions of high-level suspects are largely avoided, and more than 1,700 cases remain pending, reflecting persistent systemic bottlenecks.²³⁰ Overall concerns in various countries include political denial, glorifi-

224 See [Joint-submission-to-CEDAW-on-Tajikistan-by-Equality-Now-Women-Lawyers-for-Development-and-the-Public-Foundation-Your-Choice-.pdf](#), para 29.

225 See, [Spotlight_Baseline_-_KAPB_Summary_0.pdf](#), page 14.

226 Code of Turkmenistan on administrative offenses article 43.

227 See [CEDAW, Turkmenistan, 2024](#)

228 Council of Europe (2023). *Dealing with the Past for a Better Future: Achieving justice, peace and social cohesion in the region of the former Yugoslavia*. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/issue-paper-on-transitional-justice-dealing-with-the-past-for-a-better/1680ad5eb5>

229 CSW70 Civil Society Position Paper: Ensuring and Strengthening Access to Justice for All Women and Girls in the Crisis Context (2025), unpublished

230 OSCE Mission to Bosnia And Herzegovina (2024). Universal Periodic Review OSCE Submission. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/hr-bodies/upr/ba-stakeholders-info-s48>

cation of war criminals, and selective reparations that deepen divisions.²³¹ Persistent cross-border impunity highlights the need for stronger regional cooperation mechanisms, including harmonized investigative standards, mutual legal assistance, and evidence-sharing frameworks, as encouraged by international frameworks. Without such cooperation, accountability gaps continue to undermine survivors' trust in justice systems.

Gender dimensions of transitional justice across the Western Balkans are not sufficiently addressed, with gaps in investigating and prosecuting sexual war crimes. While several countries have recognized survivors of conflict-related sexual violence through legal or reparations frameworks, implementation remains slow and fragmented. Kosovo stands out for granting survivor status and reparations to over 1,600 CRSV survivors, yet challenges persist in processing cases and ensuring justice due to weak prosecutorial capacity and lack of cooperation with Serbia.²³² Delays in case processing and limited prosecutorial capacity underscore the importance of sustained institutional support, specialized training for justice actors, and continued partnership with civil society organizations that support survivors throughout verification and reparations procedures.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, protection mechanisms for victims and witnesses of sexual war crimes were inadequate, and comprehensive reparation measures for victims are still absent. More than 20,000 survivors of conflict-related sexual violence continue to face severe barriers in accessing justice, reparations, health care, and psychosocial support. This is in addition to the low level of participation of women in decision-making related to post-conflict reconstruction, reflecting a broader pattern of exclusion from transitional governance processes.²³³ Although the Federation of BiH adopted a new Law on the Protection of Civilian Victims of War in 2023, its implementation remains slow and inconsistent across cantons. Survivors also continue to face court fees in civil compensation cases in Republika Srpska due to the application of statutes of limitations, contrary to international human rights standards and the UN Committee against Torture's 2019 views.²³⁴ In Serbia, overall, sexual war crimes are not given sufficient priority, leading to impunity and limited justice for survivors.²³⁵ In Montenegro, additional efforts have continued to introduce legal amendments that would enable the country to effectively investigate and prosecute cases of conflict-related sexual violence.²³⁶ Overall, the absence of integrated,

trauma-informed standard operating procedures across police, prosecution, courts, health, and social services continues to expose survivors to re-victimization, stigma, and inconsistent access to justice, particularly for displaced women, women with disabilities, and children born of war.²³⁷

Elsewhere, transitional justice remains less institutionalized. North Macedonia's post-conflict settlement under the Ohrid Framework Agreement of 2021 prioritized political stability rather than formal truth-telling or comprehensive prosecutions, including for conflict-related sexual violence, through dedicated transitional-justice mechanisms. Albania, while not affected by the 1990s conflicts, faces unresolved issues linked to the communist era, including a lack of truth-seeking, restitution, and acknowledgment of gender-related harms.

Transitional justice comprises "the full range of processes and mechanisms associated with a society's attempt to come to terms with a legacy of large-scale past violations and abuses to ensure accountability, serve justice, and achieve reconciliation."²³⁸ In the Western Balkans, however, despite notable progress in prosecutions and victim recognition, transitional justice efforts have yet to fully achieve these goals. Persistent impunity, fragmented institutional responses, and the politicization of wartime narratives continue to hinder accountability and reconciliation across the region.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Ukraine has made major strides in establishing a national and international accountability framework for war-related crimes, including conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV), supported also by international mechanisms.²³⁹ The creation of the Coordination Centre for the Support of Victims and Witnesses and the active role of the Prosecutor General's Office in registering and investigating thousands of alleged war crimes mark important institutional progress.

In Ukraine, CRSV remains a grave concern. Between February 2022 and December 2024, the UN documented 433 cases of conflict-related sexual violence, affecting 302 men, 119 women, 10 girls, and 2 boys, though actual numbers are likely much higher due to underreporting and limited access to occupied areas.²⁴⁰ Survivors face long-term trauma, displacement, and social exclusion.

231 European Commission (2024). Kosovo 2024 report. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/c790738e-4cf6-4a43-a8a9-43c1b6f01e10_en?filename=Kosovo%20Report%202024.pdf

232 European Commission 2024 Serbia Report. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/3c8c2d7f-bff7-44eb-b868-414730cc5902_en?file-name=Serbia%20Report%202024.pdf

233 Council of Europe (2023). Dealing with the Past for a Better Future: Achieving justice, peace and social cohesion in the region of the former Yugoslavia. Available at <https://rm.coe.int/issue-paper-on-transitional-justice-dealing-with-the-past-for-a-better/1680ad5eb5>

234 UN Women Kosovo (2024). Women-led Organizations Drive Support for Survivors of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence in Kosovo. Available at <https://untf.unwomen.org/en/stories/news/2024/10/women-led-organizations-drive-support-for-survivors-of-conflict-related-sexual-violence-in-kosovo#:~:text=With%20in%2Dcountry%20support%20from,of%20UN%20Women%20Kosovo%20Office>

235 CEDAW (2019). Concluding observations on the sixth periodic report of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Available at <https://docs.un.org/en/CEDAW/C/BIH/CO/6>

236 Information provided by UN Women office in Bosnia and Herzegovina

237 Foundation Humanitarian Law Center (2024). The Second Decade: Analysis of War Crimes Trials In The Period 2014-2024. Available at <https://www.hlc-rdc.org/en/publications/the-second-decade-analysis-of-war-crimes-trials-in-the-period-2014-2024/>

238 Human Rights Council, Working Group on the Universal Periodic Review, Forty-third session, 1–12 May 2023, National report of Montenegro, A/HRC/WG.6/43/MNE/1.

239 CSW70 Civil Society Position Paper: Ensuring and Strengthening Access to Justice for All Women and Girls in the Crisis Context (2025), unpublished

240 United Nations (2004). Report of the Secretary General on the Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in conflict and post-conflict societies, S/2004/616*

Despite these challenges, Ukraine has taken concrete steps toward justice and reparation. The adoption of Law 4067-IX on urgent interim reparations and Law 4071-IX on the registration of victims of aggression (January 2025) laid the foundation for a survivor-centred reparations framework. A pilot project on interim CRSV reparations, implemented jointly by government institutions and the Global Survivors Fund, provided compensation to 634 survivors (including 241 women and 10 girls). The establishment of a national sexual assault registry in May 2024 further supports documentation and future reparations. Women-led organizations remain central to documentation, survivor support, and referrals, and support to them is necessary to address operational strain due to prolonged conflict, security risks, and funding uncertainty.²⁴¹

In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, there are no formal transitional justice mechanisms. In these contexts, the absence of institutionalized transitional justice frameworks results in limited recognition of gender-based and conflict-related harms, weak accountability, and minimal access to survivor-centered reparations or support services.

Central Asia

None of the Central Asian countries have institutionalized transitional justice mechanisms. As a result, gender perspectives remain largely absent from post-violence responses and longer-term prevention efforts. Kyrgyz Republic had created a commission of inquiry to investigate inter-ethnic violence in the south of the country in 2010. A report was released but no further accountability measures were taken.

Safety and legal protection for women human rights defenders

Western Balkans and Türkiye

In all countries in the region, Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) have been at the forefront of promoting gender equality and human rights, yet they continue to face widespread threats, harassment, and limited institutional protection. They are frequently targeted with online and offline abuse, defamation, and intimidation, particularly when working on sensitive issues such as gender-based violence, LGBTQI+ rights, or transitional justice. Institutional responses remain weak, with law enforcement and judicial authorities often lacking awareness or failing to act on reported threats, leaving defenders exposed and without effective recourse.

In Albania, a 2025 study revealed that WHRDs face persistent online harassment, defamation, and social stigma, while state protection remains inconsistent and largely symbolic.²⁴² In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women activists advocating for equality, transitional justice, and LGBTQI+ rights face escalating risks, including SLAPP (Strategic Lawsuit Against

Public Participation) lawsuits, doxxing, and physical threats, amid a growing climate of hostility and weak institutional responses.²⁴³ Kosovo's legal environment is generally conducive to activism, but WHRDs still face intimidation and hate speech, especially online, with limited accountability for perpetrators.²⁴⁴ In Montenegro and North Macedonia, women defenders and LGBTQI+ activists face harassment and hate speech, with reports of human rights mechanisms and European Commission reports urging stronger mechanisms to combat anti-gender movements and improve protection frameworks.

The situation in Serbia and Türkiye is particularly concerning. In Serbia, women activists, journalists, and organizations promoting gender equality face intensifying repression, online threats, and smear campaigns, with authorities failing to ensure proper investigation or protection.²⁴⁵ In Türkiye, WHRDs operate in a shrinking civic space, where peaceful feminist and Pride gatherings are often met with restrictions and excessive police force. Women defenders face intimidation, surveillance, and online abuse aimed at delegitimizing their work.²⁴⁶

241 Including the UN Commission of Inquiry, Joint Investigation Teams under Eurojust, and the International Centre for the Prosecution of the Crime of Aggression, with the establishment of a Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression in partnership with the Council of Europe further strengthening accountability.

242 United Nations (2025). Joint statement by UN Women and women-led CRSV survivors' networks, SEMA Ukraine and Numo Sestry, on the occasion of the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict 2025. Available at <https://ukraine.un.org/en/296604-joint-statement-un-women-and-women-led-crsv-survivors-networks-sema-ukraine-and-numo-sestry>

243 CSW70 Civil Society Position Paper: Ensuring and Strengthening Access to Justice for All Women and Girls in the Crisis Context (2025), unpublished

244 Albanian Women Empowerment Network – AWEN (2025). Women as Human Rights Defenders in Albania: Challenges, Contributions, and Calls to Action. Available at https://awenetwork.org/media/682f2843bb7b1.pdf?utm_source

245 United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Mary Lawlor (2025). Preliminary findings and recommendations, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/statements/20250620-sr-hr-defenders-eom-statement-bh.pdf>

246 The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (2024). Women's Rights in Western Balkans 2024: Women's labour market participation & security for human rights defenders. Available at <https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/womens-rights-in-western-balkans-2024/>

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Women human rights defenders face risks in this region as well. Reports from Ukraine before the full-scale war indicated growing concern over the safety and legal protection of WHRDs, who increasingly faced harassment, intimidation, and online abuse. Currently, while civil society organizations operate in a generally enabling environment, the EU's 2024 report notes increasing pressure and intimidation against some activists and organizations. These developments underscore the urgent need for effective investigation and accountability mechanisms to protect WHRDs from retaliation. The adoption of the Law on Public Consultations would strengthen this protection by institutionalizing CSOs' participation in policymaking and recognizing their essential role in promoting inclusive and democratic governance.²⁴⁷

Azerbaijan (in 2014) and Georgia (in 2024) adopted legislation to restrict foreign funds for NGOs and require them to register with the government when they receive foreign funds. This has restricted civic space. WHRDs in both countries face harassment and threats. While there is no specific information on WHRDs in Azerbaijan, the Committee against Torture²⁴⁸ observed that human rights defenders in general continue to face intimidation, arbitrary detention, and violence amid a shrinking civic space, underscoring the urgent need for independent investigations, legal reforms, and protection of freedom of expression and association. In Armenia, WHRDs face harassment and threats, and the latest CEDAW report²⁴⁹ notes a lack of investigation of these cases and limited accountability for perpetrators and recommended the Government to strengthen protection and accountability for WHRDs by ensuring investigation, prosecution, and public reporting of all gender-based attacks and by raising awareness of their vital role in advancing women's rights.

Central Asia

In all Central Asian countries, women human rights defenders face safety risks and abuse. In all countries, dissent, criticisms of state actors, or organizations of protest can lead to false charges, imprisonment and exile. Women working on domestic violence and NGOs that provide support for women can face surveillance, harassment and threats. In 2024, Kyrgyz Republic enacted legislation to require NGOs receiving international funds to register as "foreign representatives" and subjected those NGOs to increased monitoring. By the end of 2024, only a few NGOs had registered. The Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice observed that women and girls human rights defenders in Kyrgyz Republic play a vital role in advancing gender equality and supporting survivors of violence, yet they increasingly face a hostile environment marked by shrinking civic space, underfunding, and fear of reprisals, underscoring the need for stronger protection and recognition of their work.²⁵⁰

In Tajikistan,²⁵¹ UN human rights mechanisms and civil society sources have raised concerns about a tightening operating environment for civil society, including reports of intimidation, harassment (including online), and restrictions affecting women-led organizations. Although there is no specific information on women human rights defenders, the 2023 Universal Periodic Review²⁵² recommended that Uzbekistan ensure all human rights defenders are able to freely exercise their rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly—both online and offline—by fostering a safe and enabling environment, protecting them from intimidation, harassment, and reprisals, and safeguarding their security and access to information in accordance with international standards.

Women human rights defenders and women's organizations in Turkmenistan face severe restrictions, including burdensome registration requirements, harassment, intimidation, and reprisals, while cooperation with civil society remains limited. CEDAW urged the State to ensure registration, create an enabling environment, protect defenders from retaliation, and engage diverse women's organizations in policymaking and reporting processes.²⁵³

In all countries, anecdotal evidence and court records show that WHRDs have faced harassment, physical violence, long periods of imprisonment, arbitrary arrests and other threats.

247 Ibid

248 Ibid,

249 Human Rights Council (2023) Visit to Türkiye, Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem. Available at <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/country-reports/ahrc5336add1-visit-turkiye-report-special-rapporteur-violence-against>

250 European Commission, Ukraine 2024 Report. Available at https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/document/download/1924a044-b30f-48a2-99c1-50edeac14da1_en?filename=Ukraine%20Report%202024.pdf

251 Committee against Torture, Azerbaijan, 2024

252 CEDAW, Armenia, 2023

253 The Working Group on the issue of discrimination against women in law and in practice, Kyrgyz Republic, 2023

Institutional gender responsiveness in the justice system

GENDER BALANCE IN JUDICIARY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, women's representation in the judiciary has improved significantly over the past decade, marking steady progress toward gender parity in many countries. In Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia, women now form the majority of judges and in some cases prosecutors, ranging from 57 per cent to over 70 per cent. Kosovo and Türkiye have lower levels of women's participation in the judiciary: in Kosovo, women account for around 35 per cent of judges and remain absent from senior prosecutorial leadership; while in Türkiye, despite significant progress across the years, women represent around 46 per cent of judges but only 17 per cent of prosecutors.²⁵⁴ Despite these advances, overall leadership positions remain men-dominated across most systems, reflecting persistent 'glass ceiling' barriers that limit women's progression to top judicial roles.

The increasing presence of women in the judiciary has not necessarily translated into more gender-sensitive justice. Across the region, there is little evidence that higher women's representation has improved judicial responsiveness to gender-based violence or discrimination. Gender sensitivity and understanding of intersectional discrimination remain uneven. In countries such as North Macedonia, surveys show that fewer than one-third of women judges have received training on gender-based violence, and even fewer consistently use gender-sensitive language in rulings.²⁵⁵ Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, women judges and prosecutors sometimes reproduce patriarchal biases, including leniency in GBV cases, showing that representation alone does not ensure gender-responsive justice.²⁵⁶

In contrast, women remain underrepresented in law enforcement across the region. Their participation ranges from roughly 9 per cent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 14–15 per cent in Albania, Montenegro, and Kosovo, to 27 per cent in Serbia. This

is still below gender parity and concentrated in administrative rather than operational roles. Leadership positions are particularly scarce for women, with Albania and Kosovo having no women in top police command. Recent initiatives, such as the creation of women's police associations and specialized gender units, signal progress, but gender stereotypes, limited career advancement, and weak institutional support continue to constrain women's roles in policing.

In Albania, some positive developments of engagement of women in police forces include the increased engagement of young women in meetings across district directorates to promote the Academy of Security and highlight opportunities for women in the State Police. In addition, the Association of Women in the State Police also became active in 2023, holding consultative meetings on issues affecting women and young employees in the police force.²⁵⁷

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Women's participation in the judiciary and law enforcement has increased steadily in recent years in Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, marking progress toward gender balance in traditionally male-dominated sectors, especially in the judiciary.

In Moldova, in 2021, women represented 49.2 per cent of judges, including senior roles such as the President of the Constitutional Court,²⁵⁸ while in Ukraine, women account for 55 per cent of judges, 56 per cent of lawyers, and 53 per cent of senior legal professionals.²⁵⁹ Despite this progress, women's representation declines at higher levels of authority. In Ukraine, only around 40 per cent of leadership positions in the judiciary are held by women.²⁶⁰ In Azerbaijan, the number has increased to 26 per cent of women judges in 2024 compared to 17 per cent in 2021.²⁶¹ However, most leadership positions are occupied by men, with only 4 women out of the 38 supreme court justices.²⁶² In Belarus, women make up 66 per cent of judges.²⁶³

254 CEDAW, Tajikistan, 2024

255 UPR, Uzbekistan, 2023

256 CEDAW, Turkmenistan, 2024

257 Turkish Statistical Institute and UN Women (2025). Women In Türkiye: A Statistical Overview 2024. Available at https://eca.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-05/report_english_digital.pdf

258 UNDP. (2024). Gender and Justice Survey in North Macedonia 2024.

259 USAID 2004. Country Gender Analysis: Bosnia And Herzegovina. Available at https://measurebih.com/uimages/USAID_MEASURE2011_GenderAnalysis-508_f.pdf

260 Information provided by UN Women office in Kosovo.

261 https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/country_gender_profile.pdf

<https://www.constcourt.md/tabview.php?l=en&idc=18&t=/Composition-and-organization/Constitutional-judges/Constitutional-judges/>

262 International Bar Association (2024). Gender representation across the legal profession: Ukraine Results Report, 2024 <https://www.ibanet.org/document?id=IBA-Gender-Report-Ukraine-2024>

263 Ibid.

In Georgia, women make up 49 per cent of judges, although leadership roles remain disproportionately men-dominated.²⁶⁴ In Armenia, a report from 2022 showed that women made up around 26 per cent of all judges. However, there were only 2 women (11 per cent) out of 18 Presidents of Chambers and Courts. Similarly, there was only 1 woman (10 per cent) in the 10-person Supreme Judicial Council.²⁶⁵

In law enforcement, some countries have also made measurable gains. In Moldova, women's share in the police increased from 20.6 per cent in 2022 to 26.4 per cent in 2024, though they hold only 15 per cent of management positions within the Ministry of Internal Affairs.²⁶⁶ In 2025, in Ukraine, women made up 27 per cent of National Police personnel, including 16 per cent in leadership, and more than 70,000 women now serve in the Armed Forces, representing a 20 per cent rise since 2022.²⁶⁷ Georgia's latest figures show that women constitute 13 per cent of the police force.²⁶⁸ In Armenia, women make up only 9 per cent of the police force, although they occupy 29 per cent of leadership positions.²⁶⁹ In Azerbaijan, 10 per cent of the employees of the Ministry of Internal Affairs are women, and 90 per cent are men.²⁷⁰ Belarus does not have statistics on this.

The impact of women's increased participation in these sectors, particularly towards more gender-responsive law enforcement and justice systems has yet to be analyzed, and there is no clear evidence that it has led to meaningful change in terms of creating a more gender sensitive justice system.

Central Asia

Women continue to be underrepresented in the judiciary in Central Asia. In Kazakhstan they make up 24 per cent of judges, as of 2024. In the Kyrgyz Republic, the most recent data from 2022 indicates that women represented 35 per cent; in Tajikistan, the 2024 figure stood at 25 per cent; and in Uzbekistan, the latest available data from 2023 was 16 per cent. Turkmenistan does not produce these statistics.

The share of women in the police force remains comparatively low, standing at 13.6 per cent in Kazakhstan in 2024 and 14 per cent in the Kyrgyz Republic in 2023. The other three countries do not provide these statistics.

Statistics reveal a lack of gender balance in the judiciary and law enforcement. The numbers for law enforcement are particularly low and raise concerns related to the ability of women to access justice, especially for SGBV, where it is usually easier for women to report cases to women police officers.

AVAILABILITY AND EFFECTIVENESS OF GENDER-SENSITIVITY TRAINING

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Efforts to institutionalize gender-sensitivity training in the justice and law enforcement sectors have expanded over the past decade. Most countries now provide some form of gender-responsive instruction for judges, prosecutors, and police officers—often supported by international partners such as UN Women, other UN agencies, the Council of Europe, etc. However, the degree of institutionalization and follow-up varies widely.

Albania has a positive experience with its structured and mandatory approach; gender and GBV modules are embedded in both initial and continuing judicial education and in police curricula, reflecting a more systemic integration of gender sensitivity. Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina has established one of the most comprehensive frameworks through its Gender Equality Strategy for the Judiciary (2020), coupled with institutional action plans and practical modules on victim-centered justice, vulnerable witnesses, and workplace discrimination. However, the degree of institutionalization and implementation of these modules varies across judicial institutions, as many elements are still being integrated into regular training programmes rather than fully embedded nationwide. These examples demonstrate progress toward embedding gender awareness within formal training structures rather than relying solely on ad-hoc projects.

In Kosovo, gender training has been gradually institutionalized through a coherent framework led by the Agency for Gender Equality and the Academy of Justice, supported by international actors. The inclusion of gender perspectives in municipal governance and law enforcement, as well as Kosovo's participation in the Gender Champions in the Judiciary Network, highlights growing political commitment, though limited participation data and impact evaluation still constrain progress. North Macedonia has also advanced with targeted GBV-focused training for judges and prosecutors, but the scale remains modest.

In Montenegro and Türkiye, gender-sensitivity initiatives need to be embedded in institutional policy. In Montenegro, few judicial professionals regularly attend training, and gender equality remains marginal in judicial education.

Across all countries, the main common challenge lies in ensuring the continuity, mandatory character, and evaluation of these trainings. Most programmes are donor-driven, short-term, and not linked to professional performance or promotion. Consequently, while awareness has increased, measurable

264 www.stat.gov.az

265 See <https://caucasusedition.net/how-many-women-in-the-countries-of-the-south-caucasus-have-a-say-in-state-governance/>. See Azerbaijan-Report.pdf, page 41.

266 See [https://gender.belstat.gov.by/social/165?type=lineChart®=\(F\)](https://gender.belstat.gov.by/social/165?type=lineChart®=(F))

267 UN Women, Country Gender Equality Profile: Georgia, 2023. Available on-line at: https://georgia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/cgep_eng_web_1.pdf

268 See [gender-equality-in-the-judiciary-of-armenia_eng.pdf](#), pages 8-9.

269 Government of Moldova (2024): Seventh periodic report submitted by the Republic of Moldova to CEDAW Committee. Available at https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CEDAW%2FC%2FMDA%2F7&Lang=en

270 <https://mod.gov.ua/news/ponad-5-500-zhinok-sogodni-sluzhat-na-peredovij-sergij-melnik>

improvements in gender-sensitive adjudication, investigation, or victim protection remain limited. The persistence of gender bias in judicial reasoning, underreporting of GBV cases, and weak victim support mechanisms suggest that training efforts, though expanding, have yet to achieve the deep institutional transformation required for a genuinely gender-responsive justice system.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Across Eastern Europe and South Caucasus, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have taken important steps to strengthen gender-sensitivity training within the justice and security sectors, though the scope and institutionalization of such efforts vary.

In Armenia, a new police handbook to help the police investigate cases of domestic violence in a victim- and survivor-centred way was launched in 2024. While a recent positive development, any impact is unlikely to be immediate, as managing cases of domestic violence in a gender-sensitive way will require a shift in mindset for many police officers. This handbook should be accompanied by training and monitoring of its use.

In Azerbaijan, the Academy of Justice, which provides training for judges, collaborates with the Council of Europe on projects related to women's access to justice. As part of phase 3 of the EU project Partnership for Good Governance, the EU has designed and delivered courses on domestic violence and training police officers and judges. In 2025, the Council of Europe launched the Azerbaijani adaptation of the HELP (Human Rights Education for Legal Professionals) online course on preventing and combating domestic violence for law enforcement officials, and eleven police officers from Azerbaijan were awarded certificates for successfully completing this course.²⁷¹

In Georgia, in recent years, special prosecutors and investigators have been trained in domestic violence. In addition, the Police Academy's training programme includes a module on domestic violence. The Ministry of Internal Affairs, in partnership with international organizations, has trained police officers and developed a handbook on domestic violence. The initial training programme for judicial candidates includes domestic violence, and judges have in-service training on violence against women.

In Moldova, gender training for judges, prosecutors, and police has expanded through Council of Europe-supported workshops on digital, sexual, and domestic violence, complemented by gender-responsive policing guides and "train-the-trainer" models. These initiatives align with GREVIO recommendations and represent growing institutional awareness, though sustainability and systematic integration into core police and judicial curricula remain challenges.

In Ukraine, progress has been more extensive and systematized. Since 2023, the establishment of the National Training Center for Preventing and Combating GBV has enabled large-scale capacity-building, training over 5,600 officials on GBV and 7,000 on gender discrimination prevention. Cooperation between the Prosecutor General's Office, UN Women, and other partners has led to practical, survivor-centred training for judges and investigators, while specialized police units and the Gender Justice Platform further strengthen accountability and response to gender-based and conflict-related sexual violence.

Central Asia

In all Central Asian countries, gender-sensitivity training has taken place with judges, police officers, prosecutors, lawyers, CSOs and other relevant justice actors. However, these are ad hoc training, conducted by international partners, using donor funds. There is no coordinated approach to designing mandatory training curriculum for justice sector professionals on gender equality and SGBV and no long-term sustainability planning to ensure that this training is available to all justice actors.

Gender equality and SGBV should form part of the mandatory formal training curriculum for all justice actors.

271 UN Women, Country Gender Equality Profile: Georgia, 2023. Available on-line at: https://georgia.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-04/cgep_eng_web_1.pdf

272 Women in Armenian Leadership: Progress and Challenges - CIVILNET

273 <https://modern.az/az/olke/523787/qadin-polislerimiz-onlarin-sayi-ne-qederdir/>

274 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/genderequality/-/azerbaijani-police-officers-successfully-complete-council-of-europe-help-course-on-combating-domestic-violence>

KEY FINDINGS AND CROSS-CUTTING INSIGHTS

Western Balkans and Türkiye

Key findings related to gender equality legislation, implementation and enforcement

- All countries have adopted gender equality and antidiscrimination legislation, while Türkiye relies on constitutional guarantees and legislative provisions. However, harmonization with evolving international standards and EU legislation is needed. Some countries have already or are in the process of revising their gender equality frameworks accordingly but have encountered gender backlash from conservative forces. In some cases, gender backlash is moving to policy backsliding.²⁷⁵
- Laws guaranteeing equality in employment, political participation, property rights and other sectors have improved women's public and political participation and economic empowerment. Yet, gender pay gaps, informality, unpaid care work, and low property ownership continue to limit progress, especially among disadvantaged women. Quotas have increased women's political participation in national parliaments, but participation in local governance remains low.
- Most countries have strengthened legislation on GBV in line with the Istanbul Convention and the 2024 EU Directive on EVAW, yet implementation remains weak. High levels of violence against women, including femicide - the most extreme form of violence - persist in all countries. Key gaps include incomplete criminalization of all forms of violence, outdated sexual violence definitions, and limited attention to technology-facilitated violence. Overall, GBV persists at high levels in all countries, with recurring femicides in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia and Türkiye, and high tolerance of violence in Montenegro. Türkiye's withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention and lack of dedicated criminal law provisions of domestic violence raises further concerns about the effective protection of women from violence.
- Gender equality mechanisms at central and local levels exist across the region but remain underfunded and understaffed and lack authority to ensure accountability and policy coherence.
- Despite legal frameworks, enforcement of gender equality and anti-discrimination legislation remains limited; the number of complaints for gender-based discrimination to equality bodies is very low across the region and these institutions lack resources, visibility and in some cases adequate mandate; few gender discrimination cases reach the courts.

Key findings related to gender equality considerations in the justice system

- Across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, judicial reforms linked to EU accession aim to strengthen independence, efficiency, and accountability of the judiciary, but implementation remains slow and challenging for all countries.
- While most countries have adopted justice reform strategies to align with EU standards, these remain largely gender-blind and fail to address systemic barriers affecting women, particularly disadvantaged women.
- Challenges within the justice system that directly affect women's access to justice include lengthy proceedings, case backlogs, limited gender sensitivity, and gender stereotypes among members of the judiciary, especially in family, property, and gender-based violence cases.
- Economic insecurity and rural isolation remain key barriers to women's access to justice, especially for Roma and other minorities, women with disabilities, and single mothers. Justice institutions and legal aid centers are generally urban-centred, making access more difficult for low-income and rural women, while poverty and informal work limit women's ability to claim rights or seek protection.
- Low legal awareness and limited access to information remain major barriers to women's access to justice across countries. Some surveys show that many women — especially those in rural areas and disadvantaged groups — are unaware of their rights or available legal aid.

Key findings related to the state legal aid system and role of CSOs

- Although data is limited, available evidence indicates that financial constraints — including court fees and legal representation costs — significantly hinder women's access to justice, particularly for low-income and rural women.
- State legal aid systems guaranteeing counseling and legal representation are in place in all countries; persons in difficult economic situation and specific groups including victims of domestic and/or other forms of gender-based violence (regardless of their income) are entitled to benefit from the legal aid system. But often the legal aid system is bureaucratic, underfunded, and unevenly implemented.

275 This conceptual framing of policy backsliding was coined by Roggeband and Krizsán 2020 and argues that, in practice, backsliding of gender equality policies encompasses four dimensions: (1) discursive (de)legitimation of gender policy objectives; (2) dismantling and reframing of existing policies; (3) undermining implementation; and (4) eroding accountability and inclusion mechanisms. (based on UN Women and UNRISD (2025). Understanding Backlash Against Gender Equality, Evidence, Trends and Policy Responses. <https://knowledge.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2025/09/understanding-backlash-against-gender-equality-evidence-trends-and-policy-responses>)

- Women are key beneficiaries of legal aid, but the system is far from meeting the needs of most eligible women. The lack of sex-disaggregated data obscures the full picture of women's access to legal aid. Available information is mostly on GBV cases, which shows that only a small share of women report violence to authorities and receive free legal aid due to administrative hurdles, limited specialization, and low awareness.
- Lawyers' capacity to handle gender equality and GBV cases remains limited across the Western Balkans and Türkiye, due to the absence of systematic training, weak specialization, and inconsistent service quality.
- Women's CSOs are vital in advancing gender equality and filling critical gaps in providing legal information and representation, particularly in GBV cases, but face funding shortages and in some countries legal restrictions that limit their ability to represent victims effectively. CSOs' role in strategic litigation remains limited, with notable progress in North Macedonia.

Key findings related to the GBV response system

- Legal and institutional responses to GBV have strengthened through new legislation, coordination mechanisms, specialized police units, and victim services, yet implementation remains inconsistent.
- Enforcement of protection measures are often delayed or weak; prosecutions suffer from poor evidence gathering, lengthy court procedures, and lenient sentencing; and coordination between police, prosecutors, and courts is still ad hoc.
- Survivors frequently face secondary victimization, victim-blaming, and limited institutional sensitivity, while responses to sexual, online, and other forms of violence remain inadequate and narrowly focused on domestic violence.

Key findings related to transitional justice mechanisms and conflict-related violations

- The Western Balkans have made progress in advancing transitional justice through legal reforms, focusing primarily on prosecution of war criminals; yet in general, there is lack of a comprehensive transitional justice approach, prosecutions remain slow, and regional cooperation is weak.
- Gender dimensions remain insufficiently addressed: conflict-related sexual violence prosecutions are rare, reparations fragmented, and women underrepresented in post-conflict decision-making, while political denial and impunity continue to hinder reconciliation.

Key findings to safety and legal protection for women human rights defenders

- Across the countries, women human rights defenders face widespread harassment, intimidation, and weak institutional protection, especially when advocating on GBV, LGBTQI+, or transitional justice; the situation is more severe in Serbia and Türkiye amid shrinking civic space.
- Full accountability and legal safeguards are insufficient in all counties.

Key findings related to institutional gender responsiveness in the justice system

- Women's representation in the judiciary has reached near parity in much of the Western Balkans, yet leadership roles remain men-dominated. In law enforcement, women's participation remains low – typically below 25 per cent – with few in senior positions due to persistent gender stereotypes and limited institutional support.
- Greater representation has not necessarily translated into more gender-sensitive justice systems. However, more data is needed to assess the impact of increased women participation in the judiciary.
- Gender-sensitivity training for justice and law enforcement professionals has expanded across the region but remains uneven, short-term, and largely donor-driven, and there is need for more institutionalized approaches.

Eastern Europe and South Caucasus

Key findings related to gender equality legislation, implementation and enforcement

- Across the region, gender equality is formally recognized in specific gender equality legislation. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have also anti-discrimination laws and dedicated equality bodies with enforcement mandates. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Belarus on the other hand lack anti-discrimination legislation to complement gender equality laws and to clearly address direct and indirect discrimination in the public and private spheres, as well as intersecting forms of discrimination. Georgia appears to be backsliding in its commitment to gender equality with the recent removal of the word “gender” from 16 laws and replacement with “man and woman.”
- Some countries have made improvements from a gender perspective in other areas of legislation, such as labour legislation and political participation. However, discriminatory practices persist in some cases; for example, Azerbaijan does not apply gender quotas on women’s political participation, while Georgia abolished its gender quotas in 2024.
- In the area of GBV legislation, all countries have enacted domestic violence legislation to provide better support and protection for victims of domestic violence. Nonetheless, key gaps persist and include incomplete criminalization of all forms of violence, including domestic violence in some countries, outdated sexual violence definitions, and limited attention to technology-facilitated violence.
- Gender equality mechanisms at central and local levels exist but are generally weak, ineffective and lack adequate funds.
- Despite legal frameworks, enforcement of gender equality and anti-discrimination legislation remains limited. There are limited statistics for courts and gender equality bodies on gender discrimination cases, and where available, those reveal a low number of cases on gender discrimination.

Key findings related to gender equality considerations in the justice system

- Access to justice for women in most countries in the region remains closely tied to broader judicial reforms, for which different levels of progress have been made, with Moldova, Ukraine and Armenia making efforts towards independence, integrity, and accountability of the judiciary and Azerbaijan in modernizing the justice system. Challenges within the justice system that

directly affect women’s access to justice include lengthy proceedings, case backlogs, lack of lawyers, limited gender sensitivity, and gender stereotypes among all justice service providers, especially in family, property, and gender-based violence cases.

- Women with lower incomes face more disputes, including domestic violence and welfare issues, but are the least able to afford legal action or trust justice institutions. Economic insecurity therefore both increases women’s need for justice and limits their ability to access it.
- Low legal awareness and limited access to information remain major barriers to women’s access to justice across the countries.

Key findings related to the state legal aid system and role of CSOs

- Although data is limited, available evidence indicates that financial constraints—including court fees and legal representation costs—significantly hinder women’s access to justice, particularly for low-income, vulnerable and rural women.
- State legal aid systems and legal representation are available in all countries, although only Moldova, Georgia and Ukraine have adopted specific legislation and have dedicated institutions for the management and provision of services.
- The type of available assistance varies. Although women victims of domestic and in some cases other forms of violence may be entitled to free legal aid, systems to access that aid may be complicated, with requirements to show and produce certain documents.
- Furthermore, lack of awareness and understanding of how the legal aid system works hampers women’s ability to access this help or to ask for it.
- Lawyers’ capacity to handle gender equality and GBV cases remains limited across these countries due to the absence of systematic training, weak specialization, and inconsistent service quality. A lack of lawyers in some countries further restricts the ability of women to access such services.
- There is limited information on women’s CSOs capacities in strategic litigation except in Moldova and Georgia, where there has been an increase in strategic litigation in recent years, including at the international levels.

Key findings related to the GBV response system

- Legal and institutional responses to GBV have been strengthened through new legislation, and in some countries increased coordination mechanisms, specialized police and prosecution units, and better victim support services. However, implementation remains weak in all countries, especially as attitudes on GBV remain firmly entrenched in patriarchal norms. Legislation on GBV is a positive first step, but should be accompanied by an integrated response framework, with survivor-centered services.
- Lack of implementation or enforcement of protection orders often leave victims without adequate protection.
- Inadequate and discriminatory laws and evidential rules prevent victims from accessing justice, and adequate remedies as cases are often delayed, dropped or withdrawn. Lenient sentences, reflecting a belief that GBV is a family matter or can be blamed on the victim, leave victims without adequate remedies.
- Victims frequently face secondary victimization, victim-blaming, and limited institutional sensitivity from all justice service providers, linked to patriarchal gender norms, which impact all justice processes.

Key findings related to transitional justice mechanisms and conflict-related violations

- In Eastern Europe, Ukraine stands out for survivor-centred war crimes and CRSV mechanisms being established with the support of the international community.
- In Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova, there have been no coordinated formal transitional justice mechanisms.

Key findings related to safety and legal protection for women human rights defenders

- In some of countries in the region, women human rights defenders face varying levels of harassment, intimidation, and weak institutional protection. In others, the overall civic space is shrinking, with laws requiring the registration of CSOs that receive foreign funds, which have severely constrained the ability of CSOs to operate and has resulted in organizations being forced to close. In some countries, WHRDs have been forced into exile or face risk of arbitrary arrest and detention.

Key findings related to institutional gender responsiveness in the justice system

- Women's participation in the judiciary has increased steadily in recent years, with some countries reaching parity (Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia). However, in the rest of the region, women remain inadequately represented overall in the system and continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles.
- In law enforcement, available figures continue to show an underrepresentation of women, who make up between 9 and 13 per cent of the police force.
- Greater representation in the judiciary has not necessarily translated into more gender-sensitive justice systems. However, more data is needed to assess the impact of increased women's participation in the judiciary.
- Gender-sensitivity training for justice and law enforcement professionals has expanded across the region but remains uneven, short-term, and largely donor-driven; there is need for more institutionalized approaches.

Central Asia

Key findings related gender equality legislation, implementation and enforcement

- All countries in Central Asia have constitutional provisions or adopted legislation that recognize the principle of equality between men and women and prohibit sex discrimination. However, failure to adequately define direct and indirect discrimination or to prohibit gender-based discrimination in some countries prevent adequate legal remedies and leave vulnerable populations at risk of intersectional discrimination.
- In some countries, specific legislation provides for equality between men and women in labour, education, marriage and health. However, discriminatory provisions in employment and family laws still exist in some countries.
- On women's participation in politics, some countries do not apply gender quotas, with women generally making up about 20-25 per cent of national parliaments.
- On legislation on GBV, progress remains uneven. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyz Republic have taken important steps to strengthen legal protections, though gaps in criminalization, enforcement, and reporting persist. Tajikistan's framework remains limited, and Turkmenistan lacks a dedicated domestic violence law and coordinated support mechanisms.
- All countries have gender equality mechanisms or coordination bodies made up of consultative or advisory bodies, although there is limited data on their effectiveness.

- Enforcement of gender equality and anti-discrimination legislation remains limited. There are limited statistics for courts and gender equality bodies on gender-discrimination cases, and where available, those reveal a low number of cases on gender discrimination.

Key findings related to gender equality considerations in the justice system

- While most Central Asian countries have introduced reforms to modernize their justice systems—such as digitalization, improved court infrastructure, and measures to strengthen judicial independence—these advances have not translated into equitable access to justice for women.
- Persistent structural barriers, limited legal aid, low legal literacy, and reliance on informal dispute resolution continue to disproportionately affect women, particularly those in rural areas, in unpaid or informal work, and those facing gender-based violence. As a result, women remain less able to claim their rights despite formal reforms.
- Women in rural areas, women with disabilities, older women, ethnic minority women, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, stateless women, women living with HIV/AIDS, and LGBTI women face heightened financial, social, and practical barriers to using formal justice systems—even where fee waivers or legal aid exist. Low legal awareness and limited access to information remain major barriers to women’s access to justice across the countries.

Key findings related to the state legal aid system and role of CSOs

- In this region, data and evidence are limited about the impact of costs related to seeking justice, particularly for low-income, disadvantaged and rural women.
- A recent development over the last few years has been the adoption in all countries of stand-alone legislation to provide legal aid or the regulation of legal aid by legislation on legal professions and fee waivers for recipients of legal aid. However, the type of available assistance varies, and although women victims of GBV may be entitled to free legal aid, systems to access that aid may be complicated, with requirements to show and produce certain documents.
- Furthermore, lack of awareness and understanding of how the legal aid system works hampers women’s ability to access this help or to ask for it.
- Access to lawyers and legal aid centres is restricted, especially for women living in rural areas or women with disabilities. Lawyers’ capacity to handle gender equality and GBV cases remains limited due to the absence of systematic training, weak specialization, and inconsistent service quality.

- There is limited information on the ability of women’s CSOs to bring forward strategic litigation on gender discrimination.

Key findings related to the GBV response system

- Legal and institutional responses to GBV have been strengthened through new legislation, and in some countries through increased coordination mechanisms, specialized police and prosecution units, and better victim support services. However, implementation remains weak in all countries, especially as attitudes on GBV remain firmly entrenched in patriarchal norms. Legislation on GBV is a positive first step, but should be accompanied by an integrated response framework, with survivor-centered services.
- Lack of implementation or enforcement of protection orders often leave victims without adequate protection.
- Inadequate and discriminatory laws and evidential rules prevent the victims from accessing justice and adequate remedies as cases are often delayed, dropped or withdrawn. Lenient sentences, reflecting a belief that GBV is a family matter or can be blamed on the victim, leave victims without adequate remedies.
- Victims frequently face secondary victimization, victim-blaming, and limited institutional sensitivity from all justice service providers, linked to patriarchal gender norms, which impact all justice processes.

Key findings related to transitional justice mechanisms and conflict-related violations

- There have been some ad hoc mechanisms in the past but no systemic or institutionalized transitional justice mechanisms.

Key findings related to safety and legal protection for women human rights defenders

- Across all countries, women human rights defenders face varying levels of harassment, intimidation, and weak institutional protection.

Key findings related to institutional gender responsiveness in the justice system

- Women’s representation in the judiciary is low, with women making up 16-35 per cent of judges across the region.
- In the police force, for those countries with statistics, the percentage of women is also low at around 14 per cent.
- Gender-sensitivity training for justice and law enforcement professionals has expanded across the region but remains uneven, short-term, and largely donor-driven; there is need for more institutionalized approaches.

Common bottlenecks and opportunities

Across all regions, several common bottlenecks continue to hinder progress on women's access to justice and gender equality. While laws on gender equality, non-discrimination and GBV have generally improved, the gap between legal commitments and implementation remains significant and enforcement is weak. Gender equality bodies and coordination mechanisms at national and local levels often lack the resources, authority and staffing required to drive policy coherence and accountability. The backlash on gender equality has manifested as the introduction of restrictive laws, including "foreign agents" legislation, intensified digital surveillance, and tighter NGO regulations, curbing freedom of association and constraining feminist organizations in many countries and affecting the improvement, implementation and enforcement of gender equality legislation.

Justice reforms, which are ongoing in several countries across the region, do not take into account the specific barriers women face in relation to the justice system, and national relevant strategies are generally gender blind. Within justice institutions, gender stereotypes and limited specialization continue to influence decision-making, particularly in family law, property disputes and GBV proceedings. Economic insecurity, rural isolation and the high cost of legal services disproportionately affect women with limited income, women in informal employment, Roma and minority women, women with disabilities and migrant or displaced women, reducing their ability to seek remedies or protection. Legal aid, when available, does not meet the needs of women and in particular victims of gender-based violence. These challenges are compounded by low legal awareness and limited access to information about available services. Specific studies related to women's access to justice, sex-disaggregated and case-level data remains insufficient, restricting evidence-based policymaking and reforms.

In the area of GBV, despite strengthened legal and institutional frameworks, implementation remains uneven. Protection measures are not consistently enforced, investigations and court processes are slow, and lenient sentencing persists. Survivors continue to face secondary victimization and service responses are still influenced by patriarchal norms and gender stereotypes.

Women's rights organizations play a key role in providing services, including legal aid to women, but in several contexts, shrinking civic space and restrictions on civil society have further constrained the work of CSOs, while women human rights defenders continue to face pressure, harassment, and in some countries, persecution and criminalization.

At the same time, there are important opportunities that can be leveraged across regions. EU accession and partnership processes, GREVIO monitoring for countries that are party to the Istanbul Convention, and CEDAW and other human rights accountability frameworks continue to provide incentives and structured pathways for legal and institutional reform. The key legal basis for gender equality and non-discrimination is present in many countries.

Ongoing efforts and national legal and policy frameworks to improve judicial independence, accountability, and quality create important entry points to address the structural barriers that women face in accessing justice. State legal aid frameworks are already established across the regions, with women with low income and survivors of GBV formally identified as key groups entitled to support. Ongoing digitalization of justice systems offers potential to increase efficiency, reduce caseload and geographic and financial barriers if designed with inclusion in mind. The increasing representation of women in the judiciary creates openings to strengthen gender responsiveness—particularly when accompanied by leadership development, institutional training and accountability measures.

Across regions, there is a continued trend towards improving GBV legislation and aligning with EU and international standards. The expansion of specialized police and prosecution units and emerging coordinated service models offer a basis for more survivor-centred responses and stronger enforcement and accountability.

Women's rights organizations play a critical role in legal assistance, survivor support and strategic litigation and, despite funding challenges, continue to expand their networks and influence. Finally, regional cooperation, peer learning and exchange platforms offer valuable opportunities to accelerate shared progress, transfer lessons learned and reinforce collective accountability.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Action-oriented recommendations for Member States

STRENGTHEN AND HARMONIZE GENDER EQUALITY AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATION FRAMEWORKS

- Fully align gender equality legislations with the CEDAW Convention and other international standards, as well as EU acquis on gender equality (for EU-aspiring countries); remove any remaining discriminatory provisions in labour, family, property and other areas of law; and ensure gender mainstreaming in all key sectorial legislation and policies of the country.
- Ensure clear definitions of direct, indirect and intersectional gender-based discrimination applicable in both public and private spheres. Where anti-discrimination laws are missing or incomplete, adopt comprehensive legal frameworks with enforcement mandates and complaint procedures.
- Reverse and prevent regressive legal measures, such as the removal of gender quotas or the word “gender” and “gender equality” from different laws, which weaken women’s rights and gender equality principles.
- Increase mandates, staffing and budgets of gender equality bodies and gender equality mechanisms.

CLOSE KEY GAPS IN GBV LEGISLATION AND ENSURE FULL CRIMINALIZATION

- Ensure full harmonization of legislation on GBV with Istanbul Convention (for State Parties) and EU Directive on EVAW (for EU aspiring members) or use their standards as reference for IC non-state parties.
- Ensure domestic violence is fully criminalized as a stand-alone offense in all countries where it is not yet explicitly recognized and prohibit reconciliation and mediation in domestic violence cases.
- Adopt adequate criminal and civil legislation on domestic violence and all forms of violence against women where incomplete, with a particular emphasis on expanding definitions and criminalization to include femicide, psychological and economic violence, stalking, harassment, technology-facilitated and other forms of gender-based violence; revise sexual violence definitions to be consent-based, and reinforce aggravated penalties for recidivists.

INTEGRATE GENDER CONSIDERATION IN JUSTICE SYSTEM REFORMS

- Ensure that judicial reform strategies, court modernization plans, and EU accession-related justice reforms explicitly address barriers faced by women and disadvantaged groups, based on gender gap analyses.
- Introduce gender impact assessments for draft laws, justice strategies or procedural reforms to assess the impact of reforms on women and men, including in particular women from rural areas and disadvantaged communities.
- Establish or reinforce independent oversight bodies to monitor judicial performance, case handling and professional conduct.
- Increase transparency of decisions through public access to judgments and judicial statistics.
- Take measures to reduce case backlogs and improve case management systems, prioritizing sensitive cases related to protection measures for victims of gender-based violence, family law cases, including divorce, child support and alimony, and gender-based discrimination cases.
- Ensure that efficiency measures such as judicial territorial reforms and digitalization processes take into account physical distances and potential accessibility barriers for women living in rural and remote areas and women from disadvantaged communities

STRENGTHEN AND EXPAND STATE LEGAL AID SYSTEMS

- Simplify eligibility procedures for legal aid for women with low income and from disadvantaged communities, and remove any administrative barrier for victims of gender-based violence.
- Organize awareness raising campaigns and proactively inform women about their right to legal aid.
- Ensure funding, staffing and geographic expansion of legal aid services, including mobile legal aid and community-based outreach.
- Establish specialized legal aid units or rosters for GBV, discrimination, family and property cases and integrate mandatory, continuous training on gender equality into Bar Association training systems.

- Support justice access points at the local level, legal information clinics and referral services, particularly in rural and underserved areas.
- Introduce quality assurance and supervision mechanisms to monitor lawyers' performance with regards to free legal aid provision.
- Collaborate with women's CSOs to provide legal literacy and community-based legal education programmes.
- Develop unified, sex-disaggregated administrative data systems that track complaints, legal aid use, case progression and sentencing outcomes for perpetrators of GBV.
- Conduct regular national access-to-justice surveys, including experience-based indicators and barriers faced by women from rural areas and disadvantaged groups.

SUPPORT AND INVEST IN WOMEN'S CSOS AS KEY ACTORS IN SUPPORTING WOMEN TO ACCESS JUSTICE

- Ensure stable, multi-year funding for women's CSOs specialized in providing legal aid, representation, and court accompaniment, especially in rural and underserved areas.
- Remove legal or procedural barriers when present to enable CSOs to represent women in GBV or other gender equality related cases in court proceedings.

INCREASE WOMEN'S LEGAL LITERACY AND ACCESS TO INFORMATION

- Integrate legal literacy and awareness materials into social assistance centres, healthcare services, schools, shelters, and municipal offices, using plain language and minority languages.
- Use community-based outreach networks (social workers, mediators, rural women's groups, Roma and disability organizations) to reach women with low digital or formal literacy.
- Combine national awareness campaigns with local, practical guidance (where to go, what documents are needed, how to request free legal aid).
- Tailor outreach, representation and services to rural women, Roma and minority women, women with disabilities, LGBTIQ+ women, migrants/refugees, and single mothers, based on identified barriers.

STRENGTHEN JUSTICE SYSTEM RESPONSE TO GBV

- Adopt survivor-centred and trauma-informed procedures across police, prosecution and courts, ensuring no secondary victimization and guaranteeing access to legal and psychosocial support.

- Strengthen the enforcement of protection measures through clear operational protocols and real-time coordination among police, prosecutors and judges.
- Improve evidence collection and case handling by using standardized risk assessment tools and strengthening forensic capacities.
- Institutionalize mandatory, continuous GBV-specific training and specialization for police, prosecutors, judges and legal aid providers through judicial and police training academies.
- Formalize multi-agency coordination and referral pathways between justice, health and social services to ensure integrated survivor support.
- Ensure immediate and automatic access to free legal aid for GBV survivors without income or documentation barriers.

ESTABLISH AND STRENGTHEN TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE SYSTEMS FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

Where transitional justice frameworks do not yet exist and are needed:

- Develop formal transitional justice mechanisms tailored to national contexts, ensuring early inclusion of gender-sensitive approaches and recognition of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.
- Ensure transitional justice mechanisms address the full spectrum of gender-related harms, including sexual, psychological, economic, domestic, digital, and intergenerational violence linked to conflict, displacement, and militarization, beyond narrowly defined war crimes.
- Integrate gender-sensitive early warning and prevention mechanisms into transitional justice frameworks, drawing on data and analysis from women's CSOs, displaced communities, and youth to detect and respond to escalating risks of violence.
- Establish integrated referral pathways linking justice, health, psychosocial, social protection, and livelihood services, to ensure continuous, coordinated, and survivor-centred support throughout and beyond legal proceedings.

Where transitional justice frameworks exist:

- Strengthen and fully implement existing transitional justice strategies, ensuring all pillars are operational—truth-seeking, criminal accountability, reparations, memorialization, and guarantees of non-repetition—with systematic integration of gender perspectives.

- Prioritize the investigation and prosecution of conflict-related sexual violence by establishing specialized prosecutorial capacity, mandatory trauma-informed procedures, and enabling cross-border cooperation for evidence and witness protection.
- Ensure meaningful and accessible reparations for survivors of CRSV and other conflict-related harms, including interim financial support, healthcare, psychosocial assistance, legal aid, and access to livelihoods and housing.
- Strengthen victim and witness protection measures, ensuring confidentiality, trauma-informed interviewing and continuous procedural support throughout legal processes.
- Address legal and political barriers to cross-border cooperation, facilitate extradition, and avoid safe havens for perpetrators.
- Ensure transitional justice mechanisms explicitly include displaced women, women in protracted displacement, refugees, and women veterans, addressing the overlapping legal, social, health, and accountability barriers they face in accessing justice and reparations.
- Guarantee women's full and equal and institutionalized participation in all transitional justice, peace dialogue, memorialization and reparation decision-making bodies.
- Support women's CSOs and survivor networks through stable, multi-year funding and formal consultation roles in documentation, advocacy and community-based support.
- Promote education and public acknowledgment of conflict-related gendered harms to counter denial, shift stigma from survivors to perpetrators, prevent the glorification of perpetrators, and foster reconciliation.

GUARANTEE SAFETY AND LEGAL PROTECTION FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

- Establish dedicated protection mechanisms for WHRDs, including safe reporting channels, emergency protection measures, and legal safeguards aligned with international human rights standards.
- Ensure prompt, independent investigation and prosecution of threats, harassment, and violence against WHRDs, both online and offline.
- Adopt clear protocols and training for police, prosecutors, and judges to recognize and respond to attacks against WHRDs as rights violations, not private disputes.
- Repeal or amend restrictive laws that limit freedom of association, peaceful assembly, foreign funding, or registration of CSOs, including those affecting feminist movements and LGBTQI+ organizations.

- Create rapid response and emergency support measures, including legal aid, psychosocial support, relocation/safety planning, and digital security assistance.
- Publicly acknowledge and legitimize the role of WHRDs, including through national statements, institutional partnerships, and inclusion in policymaking and monitoring bodies.
- Provide sustained, multi-year funding for women's rights organizations, especially those providing survivor support, legal representation, community mobilization, or documentation of abuses.

STRENGTHEN GENDER BALANCE IN JUDICIARY AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Where parity gains already exist in the judiciary, consolidate and institutionalize gender balance objectives, with targeted measures to increase women's representation in leadership and decision-making roles across courts, prosecution services, and police command structures.
- Where women remain significantly underrepresented, introduce affirmative measures such as recruitment targets, leadership pipelines, mentorship and career advancement programmes to increase the participation of women, especially in operational and senior positions.
- Integrate mandatory gender-sensitive and survivor-centred training for judges, prosecutors, and police officers, linked to career progression and professional accreditation.
- Strengthen internal accountability and reporting mechanisms to address gender bias, discriminatory practices and barriers to promotion within judicial and law enforcement institutions.
- Expand specialized units within police and prosecution services trained to handle GBV, sexual violence and discrimination cases, ensuring the availability of women officers in all districts.
- Support women's professional associations and peer networks to promote leadership, mentorship, and a safe institutional environment.

Guidance for civil society and development actors

GUIDANCE FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

- Strengthen coordinated advocacy platforms and coalitions to respond to backlash, defend international standards, and collectively advance gender-equality and justice reforms.
- Consolidate CSOs' role as accountability actors by monitoring the implementation of laws, tracking institutional performance, documenting access-to-justice barriers, and publicly reporting gaps.
- Expand community-based legal awareness and outreach, prioritizing rural, minority, low-income, migrant, and other marginalized women, using peer and locally embedded networks.
- Develop and sustain strategic litigation capacity, including partnerships with bar associations, law faculties, equality bodies, and legal clinics.
- Strengthen security and solidarity networks for women human rights defenders, including collective care, shared risk-monitoring and coordinated responses to attacks on civic space.

GUIDANCE FOR DEVELOPMENT PARTNERS SUPPORTING JUSTICE REFORMS

- Embed gender equality and non-discrimination as core principles of support and capacity building on justice reform, ensuring that judicial independence, efficiency, and accountability initiatives also address women's barriers to accessing justice, particularly for those facing intersecting discrimination.
- Promote gender-responsive justice system planning, including the systematic use of gender analysis, gender impact assessments, and sex-disaggregated justice data to inform reforms, modernization strategies, digitalization initiatives, and performance monitoring.
- Strengthen the institutional capacity of state legal aid systems, prioritizing sustainable financing models, quality assurance mechanisms, and integration of specialized assistance for gender-based violence, discrimination, family law and property cases.
- Support the institutionalization of gender-sensitive professional development through judicial training academies, police training institutions, bar associations, and prosecution services — moving beyond short-term or project-based training.
- Invest in research, data and monitoring systems that track case flows, protection measures, sentencing patterns, access to legal aid, and justice outcomes across different groups of women, enabling evidence-based policy adjustments.
- Promote inclusive and participatory reform processes, ensuring the meaningful involvement of women's rights organizations, survivor groups, legal aid centres, and community-based organizations in consultation, design and oversight mechanisms.
- Facilitate regional peer learning and cooperation on gender-responsive judicial practices, access to justice, GBV case handling, survivor-centred services, and accountability mechanisms to accelerate convergence toward shared standards.
- Provide sustained, multi-year funding for women's rights organizations, especially those providing survivor support, legal representation, community mobilization, or documentation of abuses.