

AGREE! ACTION FOR GIRLS' RIGHTS TO EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT

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Contents

1. INTRODUCTION	4
2. METHODOLOGY	9
2.1 The Purpose of the Research	9
2.2 Research Approach and Methodological Framework.....	9
2.3 Data Collection Methods	10
2.4 Research Instruments	11
2.5 Participant Selection	12
2.6 Ethical Considerations.....	13
3. DATA ANALYSIS.....	15
3.1 MUNICIPALITIES AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS	15
3.1.1 Organizational Capacities	15
3.1.2. Institutional Capacities and Policies	16
3.1.3. Implementation Challenges.....	17
3.1.4. Effectiveness and Impact	18
3.1.5 Entrepreneurship and Economic Independence of Girls.....	18
3.1.6 Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Young Women	19
3.1.7 Conclusions and Recommendations	20
3.2 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS	22
3.2.1 Organizational Capacities	22
3.2.2 Advocacy capacities, experiences, and barriers.....	23
3.2.3 Cooperation with local authorities and institutions	25
3.2.4 Networking.....	26
3.2.5 Effectiveness and evaluation of work (results).....	27
3.2.6 Conclusions and Recommendations	28
3.3 PARENTS / GUARDIANS / CAREGIVING FAMILIES	29
3.3.1 Demographics	29
3.3.2 Parental attitudes toward gender equality.....	29
3.3.3 Communication with children on gender equality and relationships	31
3.3.4 Awareness and response to gender-based and peer violence	32
3.3.5 Support networks and institutional support	33
3.3.6 Parental support for children in gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence	34
3.3.7 Conclusions and recommendations	35
3.4 EDUCATORS, TEACHERS, AND EDUCATION INSTITUTION STAFF	37



3.4.1 Demographics	37
3.4.2 Teachers' attitudes toward gender equality	38
3.4.3 Education for gender equality and school relationships.....	40
3.4.4 Response to gender-based violence and peer violence	41
3.4.5 Support networks and institutional approach	43
3.4.6 The role of teachers in education for equality and violence prevention	44
3.4.7 Conclusions and recommendations	45
3.5 YOUTH	47
3.5.1 Demographics	47
3.5.2 Youth Participation	48
3.5.3 Gender Equality	49
3.5.4 Gender-Based Violence	51
3.5.5 Conclusions and recommendations	51
4. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS	54
4.1 Parent-Child Relationship	54
4.2 Attitudes Toward Gender Equality	54
4.3 Communication with Children on Gender Equality.....	55
4.4 Awareness and Response to GBV and Peer Violence	55
4.5 Institutional Support and the Role of the School.....	56
4.6 Parental Support for Children	56
4.7 Conclusion	57
5. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE WITH THREE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO THE ONLINE COMPLETION.....	59
5.1. Participation and Influence in Decision-Making	59
5.2. Perceptions of Gender Equality	59
5.3. Experiences and Understanding of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)	60
5.4. Conclusions and Recommendations	60
6. SOURCES	62
Primary Sources:	62
Secondary Sources:	62

1. INTRODUCTION

The AGREE! – Action for Girls’ Rights to Equality and Empowerment project is a regional initiative funded by the European Union under the IPA III mechanism. It is implemented across six Western Balkan countries and Turkey, with the aim of promoting gender equality, preventing peer gender-based violence (GBV), and empowering girls and young women through civil society engagement, capacity building, and inclusive policy advocacy.

The overall goal of the project is to support and encourage civil society’s participation in the promotion and protection of girls’ and women’s rights, with a specific focus on:

- Strengthening anti-discrimination practices.
- Enhancing regional cooperation and social cohesion.
- Supporting the development of youth-led initiatives and peer education programs.
- Promoting girls’ economic empowerment and challenging harmful gender stereotypes.

The project envisions the creation of a regional civil society network and the strengthening of national-level advocacy and service provision efforts through evidence-based approaches. In Albania, the implementation of the project is led by the organization “Woman to Woman” (Gruaja tek Gruaja), which coordinates activities in close partnership with grassroots organizations, educational institutions, and local government structures.

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The research process in Albania was structured according to the regional methodology outlined in the AGREE! research protocol and adapted to the local context by “Woman to Woman.” It targeted five key groups: (1) teenage children and youth aged 13–29, (2) parents and foster families, (3) teachers and educational staff, (4) grassroots civil society organizations (CSOs) and NGOs, and (5) representatives from local institutions and municipalities. These groups were selected to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the social environment, capacities, and gaps related to gender equality, girls’ empowerment, and the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) and peer violence.

Data collection in Albania was conducted through:

- Online questionnaires, tailored to each target group and distributed nationally through partner networks and institutions, with an emphasis on inclusivity and gender balance;
- Focus group discussions, conducted in person in Shkodra and surrounding municipalities, offering space for deeper reflection and qualitative insights;
- Semi-structured interviews, held with individuals from underrepresented or vulnerable groups (e.g., Roma youth, youth with disabilities, and parents with low literacy), to ensure their experiences and perspectives were captured.

The research aimed to assess current awareness, attitudes, and practices regarding gender equality and GBV, while also exploring institutional and community capacities to respond to these issues. Special attention was given to the empowerment of girls and young women, particularly through entrepreneurship, education, and civic engagement. This report presents the findings from the national data collection in Albania. It is structured to reflect the experience and feedback of each target group, offering both quantitative and qualitative data. The conclusions provide a foundation for national-level recommendations to guide advocacy efforts, strengthen local capacities, and inform the next phase of project implementation.

Focus Groups:

As a key component of the qualitative data collection in this research phase, a total of five focus group discussions (FGDs) were organized in Albania, each representing one of the core target groups identified in the AGREE! project framework. The objective of these sessions was to gather in-depth insights, contextual experiences, and subjective perceptions on gender equality, girls’ empowerment, and the prevention of gender-based and peer violence.

Each focus group was composed of at least 6 and maximum 16 carefully selected participants, ensuring diversity in age, gender, socio-economic background, professional roles, and geographic location (urban and rural representation where possible). Discussions were guided by a standardized set of open-ended questions, adapted to the specific context of each group, and facilitated by trained moderators. The focus groups lasted between 90 to 120 minutes, providing ample time for participants to reflect, share experiences, and engage in dialogue.

The targeted groups were as follows:

- Children and Youth (ages 13–29)

This group included both adolescents and young adults from various educational and social backgrounds. The discussion focused on their understanding of gender roles, experiences with peer violence, access to support systems, and perceived barriers to participation and

empowerment. Special emphasis was placed on exploring how stereotypes affect girls' self-perception and opportunities for leadership, education, and entrepreneurship.

- Teachers, Educational and Research Institutions

Participants included primary and secondary school teachers, school psychologists, and representatives from educational administration. The conversation explored the institutional approaches to gender equality, the presence (or absence) of gender-sensitive curricula, the capacity of educators to address cases of peer violence, and the support mechanisms available for students experiencing GBV or discrimination.

- Families and Parents, including Foster Families

This group represented a mix of mothers, fathers, and foster caregivers from different socio-economic and cultural contexts. The discussion focused on parental attitudes toward gender roles, communication with children about relationships and gender equality, and the level of awareness and preparedness to support children, especially girls facing discrimination or peer violence.

- Civil Society Organizations and Community-Based Groups

Participants included staff and volunteers from grassroots CSOs, youth associations, and local NGOs working in the fields of gender equality, youth rights, and community development. The discussion centered on their organizational capacities, experiences with advocacy, barriers to sustainable programming, and collaboration with public institutions. Challenges in accessing funding and scaling up initiatives were also discussed.

- Local Municipalities and Public Institutions

Representatives included staff from social services, education departments, youth offices, and gender equality focal points within municipal structures. The discussion explored the role of local government in promoting gender-sensitive policies, their cooperation with CSOs, existing prevention mechanisms for GBV, and institutional challenges in outreach and implementation.

Each focus group provided valuable qualitative insights into the perceptions, needs, and gaps across sectors, highlighting both promising practices and areas requiring targeted support. The diversity of participants ensured a rich exchange of perspectives and helped capture the complex, multi-level nature of gender-based issues affecting girls and young women in Albania.

Online Survey:

In parallel with the focus group discussions, an online survey was administered to complement the qualitative findings with quantitative data. The survey aimed to capture broader trends in knowledge, attitudes, and practices across the five target groups, offering a more representative snapshot of the current situation regarding gender equality, girls' empowerment, and gender-based violence (GBV) prevention in Albania.

Each questionnaire was specifically tailored to the needs, realities, and professional or personal roles of the respondents, following the research instrument guidelines defined in the regional

AGREE! protocol. Questions were predominantly multiple-choice or scaled responses (1–5 levels of agreement), with some open-ended items to allow for more nuanced feedback.

The minimum target of 10 respondents per group was met, with the following number of participants successfully completing the survey:

- Children and Youth (16 participants). The survey explored participants' understanding of gender equality, experiences with peer discrimination or violence, and involvement in civic or school-based initiatives. The responses highlighted varying levels of awareness, with girls generally reporting greater interest in social engagement and empowerment opportunities.
- Teachers and Educational/Research Institutions (25 participants). Educators provided insight into their awareness of institutional policies on gender equality, their perceived ability to address peer violence in schools, and the challenges they face in integrating gender-sensitive approaches into daily teaching. A notable percentage expressed the need for further training and institutional support.
- Families and Parents, including Foster Families (27 participants). This group offered a range of views on traditional gender roles, communication with children about equality and relationships, and their readiness to respond to peer violence or GBV. While some reported confidence in supporting their children, others indicated low awareness of available resources and institutional mechanisms.
- Local NGOs and Grassroots Groups (11 participants). Respondents from civil society provided data on their organizational capacities in advocacy, monitoring and evaluation, community outreach, and collaboration with public institutions. Many cited insufficient resources and limited access to training as major obstacles to sustainable programming.
- Local Municipalities and Institutions (13 participants). Municipal officials and public servants shared perspectives on existing policies, institutional gaps, and the degree of intersectoral coordination. While some municipalities had gender focal points and mechanisms for addressing GBV, others lacked formal structures or clear implementation plans.

The online survey results offered valuable quantitative insights that, when combined with the qualitative findings from focus groups and interviews, help to build a holistic understanding of the opportunities and challenges facing girls and women in Albania. This dual-method approach ensures that the research findings are both inclusive and grounded in lived realities across different levels of society.

Semi-Structured Interviews:

To ensure inclusiveness and capture the voices of individuals who might otherwise be excluded from digital data collection methods, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who did not have access to phones or the internet. This approach was particularly important to reach marginalized or underrepresented populations, including families living in poverty, children from remote areas, and those with limited access to education or technology.

A total of six interviews were carried out by trained local researchers, using a flexible interview guide adapted from the online questionnaire. The interviews were conducted in person, in a safe and private setting, with the informed consent of all participants (or their guardians, in the case of children). The participants included:

- 3 parents (two mothers and one father) from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, who did not have access to mobile devices or the internet.
- 3 youngsters (one boy and one girl) aged 14–18, who were not connected to online platforms and would not have otherwise participated in the online survey.

These interviews provided deeper, context-specific insights into lived experiences, challenges, and knowledge gaps regarding gender roles, peer violence, and institutional support. Parents reflected on the cultural norms influencing gender dynamics within their families and their limited access to information or services related to GBV prevention. Young participants shared their views on stereotypes, school environments, and the absence of safe channels for reporting violence or discrimination. The main objective of this evaluation phase was to identify local challenges, service gaps, and capacity-building needs related to the promotion of gender equality and the protection of girls and young women. The inclusion of these semi-structured interviews ensured that hard-to-reach voices were represented in the research findings.



2. METHODOLOGY

The first phase of the *AGREE – Action for Girls’ Rights to Equality and Empowerment* project in Albania was implemented using an integrated research approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods. This mixed-methods design enabled a thorough and inclusive analysis of the needs, experiences, and capacities of the identified target groups, while also ensuring consistency with the regional research framework developed for the Western Balkans and Turkey. The research was led nationally by the organization “*Woman to Woman*” (Gruaja tek Gruaja), in alignment with the common protocol adopted across all partner countries.

2.1 The Purpose of the Research

The overarching purpose of this research phase was to generate evidence that would inform advocacy, capacity-building, and program development aimed at improving gender equality and empowering girls and young women. Specifically, the research sought to:

- Identify the knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors related to gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women;
- Highlight personal and community-level experiences with gender-based violence (GBV) and peer violence;
- Analyze the level of civic engagement and social inclusion of girls and young women, especially in public, educational, and family spaces;
- Assess the needs for capacity building, resources, and institutional support at both local and national levels

2.2 Research Approach and Methodological Framework

The research methodology was built upon the principles of triangulation, inclusivity, and contextual relevance, ensuring that data was collected from multiple sources and perspectives to enhance the credibility and validity of findings. The methodological framework was aligned with the regional research protocol developed by international project partners and tailored to the Albanian context.

The approach relied on the following core elements:

- Quantitative data collection through structured online questionnaires designed to capture measurable trends and patterns;
- Qualitative data collection through focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews to explore deeper insights, perceptions, and lived experiences;
- Inclusive stakeholder engagement, ensuring representation from youth, educators, parents, civil society organizations (CSOs), and public institutions, including individuals from marginalized and hard-to-reach populations.

A strong emphasis was placed on ethics and safeguarding, particularly when involving minors and vulnerable populations, and all participants were engaged based on informed consent protocols.

2.3 Data Collection Methods

1. Quantitative Questionnaires (Online):

- Separate questionnaires were developed and disseminated for each key target group: youth, teachers and school staff, parents and caregivers, public officials, and civil society representatives.
- The online format enabled wider geographic reach and facilitated consistent and comparable data collection across regions.
- Questions covered themes such as gender norms, experiences of discrimination or violence, levels of institutional trust, perceived civic engagement, and barriers to empowerment.
- A total of 92 respondents participated in the online survey, with each target group exceeding the minimum required number of participants.

2. Focus Groups:

A total of five focus groups were conducted, each composed of six participants representing the following groups:

- Youth (students and young people aged 13–29)
- Teachers and educational professionals
- Parents and caregivers, including foster families
- Representatives of public institutions and local government
- Civil society organizations and community-based groups
- Discussions were guided by a semi-structured framework and facilitated by trained moderators. They lasted between 90–120 minutes.
- The focus groups explored social norms, perceptions of gender roles, support mechanisms, access to services, and experiences with GBV and peer violence.
- Care was taken to ensure gender balance, diversity of backgrounds, and inclusion of both urban and rural participants.

3. Semi-Structured Interviews:

In-depth interviews were conducted with individuals who lacked access to digital tools and were at risk of being excluded from the study.

The interviews included:

- 3 parents (two mothers, one father) without access to phones or internet;
- 3 youngsters (one boy and one girl aged 14–18);

These interviews were held in safe environments and followed ethical and safeguarding protocols. Interviews explored similar themes to those in the online questionnaires, with added flexibility to adapt questions based on individual understanding and context.



2.4 Research Instruments

The development of research instruments for the AGREE! project was guided by internationally recognized research standards and tailored to reflect the specific expertise of each thematic partner organization involved in the regional consortium. Each instrument was collaboratively designed, piloted, and approved to ensure contextual relevance, methodological rigor, and comparability across participating countries.

The thematic allocation of responsibility for developing the research tools was as follows:

- Teachers, Educators, and School Staff instruments developed by *MIOS – Bosnia and Herzegovina*, focusing on gender-sensitive pedagogy, institutional support for GBV prevention, and challenges faced in educational settings.
- Youth Participation instruments developed by *VCS – North Macedonia*, designed to assess youth engagement, awareness of gender issues, and experiences of peer-based violence and empowerment.
- Parents and Caregivers instruments developed by *KALBEN – Turkey*, addressing attitudes toward gender roles, communication with children on gender equality, and readiness to support children exposed to GBV.
- Local Administrations and Public Institutions instruments developed by *Woman to Woman – Albania*, aimed at assessing institutional policies, gaps, and capacities for implementing gender-sensitive and inclusive practices.
- Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Capacities of CSOs instruments designed by *INNOVATE – Kosovo*, evaluating tools, practices, and internal mechanisms for data collection, reporting, and impact tracking.
- Organizational Capacity and Advocacy Needs of CSOs instruments developed by *Pomoć Deci – Serbia*, focusing on internal governance, advocacy practices, ethical frameworks, and sustainability mechanisms.

Structure and Content of Questionnaires

Across all instruments, a common structure was followed to ensure consistency and ease of comparison. The questionnaires typically included the following sections:

- Demographic Information: Age, gender, geographic location (urban/rural), education level, professional role, or affiliation with institutions or organizations.
- Knowledge and Awareness: Assessment of understanding of gender equality principles, legal frameworks, and forms of GBV (psychological, physical, emotional, economic).
- Attitudes and Personal Experiences: Exploration of gender norms, stereotypes, and individual encounters with discrimination or violence.
- Community Participation and Social Inclusion: Extent of involvement in civic life, activism, or community-based initiatives related to girls' and women's rights.
- Perceived Needs and Access to Services: Identification of existing gaps, needed interventions, and awareness of institutional or community-based support services.

Focus Group and Interview Guides

In addition to the structured questionnaires, focus group discussion (FGD) guides and semi-structured interview guides were developed to foster rich, qualitative insights. These tools were carefully crafted to:

- Encourage open dialogue and diverse viewpoints;
- Allow flexibility, enabling facilitators to probe deeper into key themes;
- Promote inclusive participation, particularly among vulnerable or underrepresented groups;
- Address sensitive issues such as GBV and discrimination with empathy, neutrality, and confidentiality.

All instruments were developed to be culturally sensitive, accessible in clear language, and adaptable to different communication needs, ensuring the meaningful participation of all target groups regardless of age, literacy level, or digital access.

2.5 Participant Selection

The selection of participants for the AGREE! research in Albania was carefully designed to ensure diversity, inclusivity, and relevance across all target groups. The goal was to gather data that reflects the complex social, cultural, and institutional realities influencing gender equality and the empowerment of girls and young women in different local contexts.

The participant selection strategy was guided by the following key principles:

- Equal Gender Representation

Efforts were made to ensure balanced participation of male and female respondents across all data collection tools (questionnaires, focus groups, and interviews). Where possible, non-binary perspectives were also welcomed to reflect gender diversity.

- Geographical Balance

Respondents were selected from both urban centers (e.g., the city of Shkodra) and rural/remote areas (e.g., administrative units within Shkodër Prefecture). This ensured that the data captured reflects disparities in service access, attitudes, and experiences between more developed and underserved communities.

- Socio-Economic and Cultural Diversity

Participants included individuals from various income levels, educational backgrounds, and ethnic communities. This was critical for capturing the intersectional nature of gender inequality, particularly among groups who face multiple forms of discrimination or exclusion.

- Inclusion of Vulnerable or At-Risk Groups

A dedicated effort was made to reach marginalized populations, such as:

- Children and youth not enrolled in school;
- Roma and Egyptian communities;
- Individuals with disabilities;
- Parents and families with low literacy or without internet access;
- Single-parent households and foster caregivers.

To achieve meaningful representation, the research used a combination of random and purposive sampling techniques:

- Random sampling was used primarily for online surveys, where broad distribution allowed participants to self-select within target criteria.
- Purposive sampling was applied for the selection of focus group and interview participants, especially in cases where specific characteristics (e.g., disability status, community role, geographic location) were essential to ensure thematic coverage.

Local community-based organizations, schools, and municipal institutions supported the recruitment process by identifying and referring suitable participants. Ethical guidelines were strictly followed, ensuring informed consent, privacy, and the voluntary nature of participation at all stages.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

All research activities conducted during the first phase of the AGREE! project in Albania were carried out in strict adherence to international ethical research standards and national legal requirements. Ethical integrity was a cornerstone of the data collection process, especially given the sensitivity of the topics explored, such as gender-based violence (GBV), discrimination, and social exclusion.

The following ethical principles and protocols were applied throughout the research process:

- **Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent:** During focus group discussions and semi structured interviews, all participants were informed about the objectives, procedures, duration, potential risks, and benefits of the study before agreeing to take part. Participation was entirely voluntary, with no incentives or pressure applied. Individuals were clearly informed of their right to refuse to answer any question or to withdraw from the process at any time.
- **Written Consent and Parental Approval for Minors:** During focus group discussions and semi structured interviews, prior to participation, all adult participants signed a written consent form. In the case of minors (under the age of 18), written parental or guardian consent was obtained in accordance with national child protection regulations. Children and youth also provided assent, affirming their voluntary agreement to participate.
- **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All data collected was treated with strict confidentiality.
- **Right to Withdraw Without Consequences:** Participants were repeatedly reminded that their participation was optional and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any stage without providing a reason and without any consequences.
- **Psychosocial Safety and Emotional Well-Being:** Special care was taken during focus groups and interviews to ensure a safe, non-judgmental, and respectful environment, particularly when discussing personal experiences related to violence, discrimination, or trauma. Facilitators were trained to recognize signs of distress and respond sensitively. If participants showed discomfort, the discussion was redirected or paused, and referrals to psychosocial support were offered when needed.
- **Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusion:** All instruments and interactions were designed to be culturally appropriate and respectful of local norms and diversity. The use of accessible



language and the adaptation of tools for marginalized groups helped ensure meaningful participation from individuals across a range of literacy, ethnic, and social backgrounds.

These ethical safeguards were not only critical for the protection of participants but also for enhancing the trust, reliability, and validity of the research findings.



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3. DATA ANALYSIS

3.1 MUNICIPALITIES AND LOCAL INSTITUTIONS

This section aims to assess the institutional awareness, policy implementation, service delivery capacities, and inter-sectoral collaboration related to gender equality, prevention of gender-based violence (GBV), and the empowerment of girls and young women. It targets local government structures and public institutions operating at the municipal level, including representatives from education, health, social protection, law enforcement, and employment services. The findings offer insights into both structural strengths and operational gaps within local institutions in Shkodra. Through this analysis, the report identifies areas for capacity building, improved coordination, and policy enhancement at the municipal level.

The analysis presented in this section is based on data gathered through two main methods:

- **Online Questionnaire:** A structured survey completed by 13 representatives from key public institutions, including Shkodra Municipality, the Regional Education Directorate, public health institutions, social services, and the police.
- **Focus Group Discussion:** A qualitative session held on April 21, 2025, at the Shkodra Local Education Office, involving institutional representatives from various sectors:
 - Shkodra Municipality
 - Regional Education Directorate
 - Employment Office
 - State Police
 - Public Health Sector
 - Municipal Social Services

The following subsections examine in detail the organizational capacities of institutions, the status of gender-responsive policy frameworks, challenges in implementation, and the level of institutional engagement in promoting economic independence and safety for adolescent girls and young women. The section concludes with evidence-based recommendations to strengthen local governance mechanisms in support of gender equality.

3.1.1 Organizational Capacities

The assessment of organizational capacities within local municipalities and institutions revealed a mixed and uneven institutional landscape regarding gender equality and the empowerment of girls and women. According to the questionnaire responses, while a significant portion of respondents (over 50%) reported having more than six years of experience in implementing institutional policies and programs, the overall level of internal expertise and readiness remains limited:

- 46% of respondents reported having 0–5 years of experience;
- 38% had between 6–10 years;
- Only 15% indicated more than 10 years of experience.

These figures suggest that while some institutional actors may have technical or operational knowledge, long-term institutional memory and strategic planning for gender-related issues remain weak. When asked whether their institution had a dedicated department or staff member responsible for gender equality or gender-based violence, 60% confirmed such units existed,

while 40% did not. However, further qualitative insights from focus group discussions exposed deeper challenges. Many of the reported “units” were not formally structured or resourced, and often gender issues were delegated as secondary tasks to existing personnel, without clear mandates or accountability mechanisms. The data also showed that only a small portion of institutions had staff who received specific training on gender equality or GBV prevention. In the majority of cases, the integration of gender perspectives into daily institutional work was either incidental or tied to short-term donor-funded initiatives, rather than embedded in the institution’s core functions.

This reality was reinforced during the focus group with institutional representatives. A notable example came from a representative of the Education Directorate, who highlighted the absence of a gender equality unit within the directorate. They explained that gender-related topics in schools are rarely part of the formal curriculum and are usually addressed through extracurricular programs, or by psycho-social service staff, depending on individual engagement and external partnerships.

3.1.2. Institutional Capacities and Policies

The analysis of institutional capacities and existing policies revealed a significant disconnect between policy development and practical implementation within local institutions. While there is growing awareness of the importance of promoting gender equality and addressing gender-based violence (GBV), the structural and procedural mechanisms needed to translate this awareness into action are often lacking. According to the questionnaire, only 25% of respondents confirmed the existence of formal strategic documents, such as gender equality strategies or GBV prevention plans, within their institutions. Among these, implementation is typically partial and fragmented, with policies often dependent on individual initiative or temporary project-based support rather than being integrated into the institutional framework. For example, while Shkodra Municipality has taken steps to draft a gender equality strategy, its implementation remains inconsistent and not fully institutionalized.

During the focus group discussions, the municipal representative highlighted two major barriers:

1. The absence of gender-responsive budgeting, which limits the ability to finance and operationalize strategic commitments.
2. High staff turnover, which disrupts continuity and weakens institutional memory, making it difficult to sustain progress or build long-term gender expertise within teams.

Additionally, representatives from the health and police sectors reported that their institutions lack clear internal guidelines for integrating gender-sensitive approaches into daily operations and response protocols. This points to a broader institutional weakness: while policies or mandates may exist in national frameworks, they are not adequately adapted, operationalized, or monitored at the local level. Even where institutional strategies have been introduced, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) mechanisms are insufficient. Only about 50% of respondents indicated that their institution has any form of monitoring tools or indicators to evaluate the implementation or impact of gender equality initiatives. This lack of accountability further weakens policy effectiveness and makes it difficult to assess whether institutional efforts are achieving meaningful outcomes for girls and women.

Moreover, focus group participants noted that intersectoral collaboration, critical for addressing complex issues like GBV, is often limited by rigid hierarchies, insufficient communication across departments, and a lack of shared goals or protocols.

Key institutional capacity gaps identified include:

- Lack of gender-responsive budgeting;
- Inadequate internal coordination mechanisms;
- Absence of clear operational guidelines for integrating gender across sectors;
- Weak or non-existent monitoring and evaluation frameworks.

3.1.3. Implementation Challenges

The findings from both the questionnaire responses and focus group discussions point to a set of persistent and systemic challenges that hinder the effective implementation of gender equality policies and services at the local level. These obstacles affect the ability of institutions to address gender-based violence (GBV), support the empowerment of girls and women, and promote inclusive development. Participants across all target institutions, municipalities, health services, educational sectors, law enforcement, and employment agencies, identified several common barriers, which can be categorized into four main areas:

1. Institutional Capacity and Resources

- Many institutions operate with limited staff capacity, and often lack personnel specifically trained on gender equality, GBV prevention, and rights-based approaches.
- The absence of dedicated funding for gender-related programs was one of the most frequently cited challenges. Even where strategies or plans exist, they are rarely accompanied by budget lines, making implementation difficult or impossible.
- A representative from the Employment Office in the focus group noted the complete absence of any active scheme to address youth unemployment among girls or the reintegration of new mothers, highlighting the lack of targeted institutional responses for vulnerable sub-groups of women.

2. Leadership and Institutional Awareness

- A low level of awareness among senior decision-makers was reported, with gender-related responsibilities often perceived as peripheral rather than essential to institutional mandates.
- This lack of leadership commitment translates into ad-hoc practices, rather than the strategic and coordinated implementation of policies.

3. Fragmented Inter-Institutional Cooperation

- One of the most significant challenges cited was the fragmentation of institutional efforts. While municipalities, schools, health services, and police may individually engage with gender-related cases, they often do so in isolation, lacking shared protocols, case management systems, or referral pathways.
- Participants noted the absence of regular communication, joint planning, or coordinated action between sectors, especially in smaller municipalities or rural areas.

4. Data and Evidence Gaps

- Institutions also acknowledged the lack of sex-disaggregated data and standardized documentation systems. Without reliable data, it becomes difficult to monitor trends, assess needs, or design evidence-based interventions.
- This data gap also limits the visibility of GBV cases and prevents institutions from responding proactively or adapting programs based on real-time developments.

5. Cultural and Societal Barriers

- In rural and conservative communities, cultural resistance to gender-transformative approaches remains a major obstacle. Discussions around women's rights, empowerment, or sexual and reproductive health are often considered taboo, and institutional efforts may face pushback from both community leaders and the public.

3.1.4. Effectiveness and Impact

The assessment of institutional effectiveness in promoting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence reveals a significant disconnect between strategic intentions and measurable outcomes. While local institutions in the Shkodra region express awareness of the relevance of gender-responsive policies, their ability to evaluate results and demonstrate impact remains notably weak.

According to the data collected through the online questionnaire, only 2 out of 13 institutions reported having conducted any form of impact assessment related to gender-focused interventions. This finding is reinforced by focus group discussions, where participants from education, health, and municipal offices acknowledged that no formal performance measurement systems are currently in place to evaluate the effectiveness of gender equality activities.

Moreover, institutions lack structured mechanisms to monitor progress or adapt programming based on evidence. There is no standardized methodology for tracking outcomes, and data collection related to gender, such as disaggregated indicators or feedback from service users, is either absent or sporadic. This compromises the ability of institutions to determine whether gender-related initiatives are achieving intended results, particularly in areas such as education, employment, and violence prevention.

Public consultations, which could serve as a tool for evaluating community perceptions and service impact, were also described as ineffective. Focus group participants noted that such consultations are often formalistic, limited in outreach, and lacking in follow-up procedures. Consequently, community feedback rarely informs institutional learning or planning.

3.1.5 Entrepreneurship and Economic Independence of Girls

The research findings show that the promotion of entrepreneurship and economic independence among girls and young women is notably underdeveloped within local institutional agendas. Despite growing regional and global emphasis on women's economic empowerment as a pathway to gender equality, local-level efforts in this domain remain fragmented, underfunded, and largely absent from institutional priorities. Data collected through the questionnaire



revealed that only 17% of local institutions reported offering any concrete programs or services targeting women entrepreneurs. This statistic underscores a significant policy gap, particularly given the economic vulnerabilities that disproportionately affect young women, especially those in rural areas, ethnic minority communities, or single-parent households.

Focus group discussions further reinforced these findings. The representative from the Employment Office acknowledged that although some initiatives aimed at women's employment and entrepreneurship had been piloted in the past, they were largely short-term, donor-driven projects that lacked sustainable follow-up or institutional ownership. As a result, the impact of such initiatives was minimal and failed to address systemic barriers in a meaningful or lasting way.

Across both data sources, participants highlighted several key barriers preventing girls and young women from pursuing entrepreneurial paths:

- Lack of access to information about available services, grants, or training programs;
- Limited access to funding and financial support, particularly for first-time or informal entrepreneurs;
- Scarcity of positive role models or mentorship programs that could inspire and guide young girls in their economic journeys.

Furthermore, institutions reported limited collaboration with vocational training centers, microfinance institutions, or civil society actors that could help bridge the gap between policy and practice. This disconnect results in a missed opportunity to link gender equality efforts with local economic development strategies, particularly in areas with high unemployment among youth and women. The lack of institutional focus on this issue is especially concerning given the role that economic dependence plays in perpetuating gender-based violence and social exclusion. Without economic agency, girls and young women are more vulnerable to exploitation, early or forced marriage, and limited decision-making power within their households and communities.

3.1.6 Violence Against Adolescent Girls and Young Women

The research findings confirm that gender-based violence (GBV) against adolescent girls and young women is a deeply concerning and persistent issue across local municipalities and institutions. While there is broad recognition of the problem, institutional responses remain limited, inconsistent, and largely reactive. According to the questionnaire, all respondents acknowledged the presence of GBV and peer violence affecting adolescent girls and young women in their municipalities. The most commonly reported forms of violence include:

- Psychological and emotional abuse, often occurring in school settings or within families;
- Social exclusion and harassment, particularly on the basis of gender, appearance, or behavior;
- Early or forced relationships, especially among vulnerable or low-income populations.

Despite this awareness, very few institutions reported having established procedures or standardized protocols to identify, refer, and manage cases of violence. Most reported handling incidents on an ad hoc basis, referring survivors to the police or social services without a clear

or coordinated intervention plan. This points to serious gaps in institutional readiness and accountability, particularly in the absence of multi-sectoral coordination.

In focus group discussions, representatives from the Health Care and Police sectors highlighted that many cases of violence go unreported due to fear, stigma, and a general lack of trust in institutions. Girls and young women are often discouraged from speaking out, either by their families or communities, and when they do, institutional responses can be slow, fragmented, or insensitive to their needs.

Furthermore, participants emphasized the lack of preventive education and awareness programs in schools and community spaces. The role of the education system in addressing violence was described as minimal, with prevention efforts largely dependent on external actors such as NGOs or international projects. School-based psycho-social services, where available, were described as under-resourced and overburdened.

Key weaknesses identified include:

- Limited training for frontline staff (teachers, police, health workers) on how to recognize and handle GBV cases involving minors;
- Absence of youth-friendly reporting mechanisms that ensure confidentiality and safety;
- Lack of inter-institutional referral protocols that clearly define roles and responsibilities;
- Cultural norms and stigma that prevent open discussions about violence and discourage survivors from seeking help.

3.1.7 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The findings from this research indicate that while local institutions have made initial efforts to address gender equality and girls' empowerment, these efforts remain fragmented, under-resourced, and inconsistently implemented. Despite increased awareness and recognition of gender-related challenges, institutional responses lack the strategic coherence and sustainability required to achieve systemic change.

Key conclusions include:

- Local gender equality policies and strategic frameworks exist but are often outdated, donor-driven, or only partially implemented. These documents are frequently not embedded into broader municipal development agendas and lack mechanisms for sustainability and accountability.
- Local institutions demonstrate limited capacity in terms of staff training, technical expertise, and financial resources. Gender equality is not systematically mainstreamed across planning processes or service provision. Most actions are reactive rather than preventive or transformative.
- While there is a stated willingness to collaborate, particularly with civil society organizations (CSOs), such cooperation remains largely informal, lacking structured platforms, joint objectives, or shared accountability mechanisms. Cross-sectoral coordination is notably weak.

- Programs promoting the economic independence of girls and young women are scarce and largely non-gender-specific. Few institutions have adopted a strategic approach to integrate girls' empowerment into employment or entrepreneurship support systems.
- GBV is widely acknowledged as a critical concern, especially among adolescent girls and young women. However, institutional responses are limited to ad hoc or isolated interventions. There is an absence of structured referral mechanisms, comprehensive prevention programs, or survivor-centered services.

Recommendations

To address the institutional and policy gaps identified in this research and to enhance local responses to gender equality and girls' empowerment, the following strategic actions are recommended:

- Establish Inter-Institutional Coordination Structures on Gender Equality -Formalize multi-sectoral committees or working groups at the municipal level, involving key actors such as education, health, law enforcement, social services, and CSOs. These structures should be tasked with planning, implementation, and monitoring of gender equality interventions.
- Develop and Institutionalize Gender Units or Focal Points - Ensure each local institution designates a gender equality focal point or establishes a dedicated unit with clearly defined responsibilities, sufficient financial and human resources, and links to institutional planning and accountability systems.
- Implement Regular and Targeted Capacity-Building - Provide systematic training for municipal staff, teachers, healthcare professionals, and police officers on gender equality, GBV prevention, inclusive service delivery, and inter-agency referral protocols.
- Integrate Monitoring and Evaluation Tools - Develop and apply tools to assess the gender impact of local policies and programs. These tools should include relevant indicators and ensure the collection and analysis of sex- and age-disaggregated data for evidence-based decision-making.
- Formalize and Strengthen Cooperation with Civil Society - Establish partnership agreements with local CSOs and community groups working in the fields of gender equality, youth empowerment, and GBV prevention. Encourage co-design and co-implementation of services based on local needs and contextual realities.
- Support the Economic Empowerment of Girls and Young Women - Integrate gender-responsive approaches into local employment and entrepreneurship strategies. This may include vocational training, mentorship schemes, microfinance opportunities, and subsidies targeted at adolescent girls and young women from marginalized groups.
- Strengthen GBV Prevention and Referral Mechanisms - Develop and institutionalize clear procedures for the identification, reporting, and referral of GBV cases, particularly in schools, health centers, and youth facilities. These protocols must ensure survivor-centered, confidential, and timely support services, including psychosocial care and legal assistance.

By adopting these measures, local institutions in Shkodra region can move toward a more effective, equitable, and sustainable approach to promoting gender equality, preventing violence, and empowering girls and young women as active participants in their communities.



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3.2 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS

This section focuses on local civil society organizations based in Shkodra Municipality, including formally registered NGOs, grassroots associations, and youth-focused groups that are actively involved in gender, human rights, youth empowerment, and social inclusion.

Two data collection instruments were employed to assess the organizational capacities, advocacy practices, cooperation frameworks, and challenges faced by CSOs in addressing gender equality and GBV prevention:

- **Online Questionnaire:** Completed by 11 civil society organizations, providing quantitative data on operational structure, funding, communication, and advocacy experience.
- **Focus Group Discussion:** Conducted on April 23, 2025, at the Youth Center "Arka", with 8 representatives from local NGOs. The session explored more nuanced insights into institutional relationships, advocacy barriers, and partnership models.

The aim of this assessment is to understand the capacities, limitations, and roles of CSOs in the Shkodra region in promoting gender-responsive approaches and supporting adolescent girls and young women. Particular attention is given to:

- Organizational governance and sustainability;
- Public advocacy and influence on policy;
- Collaboration with local institutions;
- Network participation and knowledge exchange;
- Monitoring and evaluation of impact;
- Identification of gaps and resource needs.

The results are used to formulate targeted recommendations for strengthening civil society engagement in the prevention of gender-based violence and the promotion of gender equality in the region.

3.2.1 Organizational Capacities

The assessment of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Shkodra revealed a landscape marked by long-standing engagement, functional structures, and deep community ties, but also chronic structural limitations that threaten long-term sustainability. According to the online questionnaire, 73% of participating organizations have been active for more than 15 years, highlighting their strong institutional presence and consolidation within the community. All respondents confirmed that their organizations have engaged staff, either on full-time or part-time contracts, with most operational support coming from project-based funding.

From an organizational standpoint, several positive features emerged:

- 100% of organizations have an approved strategic plan and a formal communication strategy, which indicates a structured approach to planning and outreach;
- 91% maintain a digital presence through active websites and social media platforms, allowing for continuous information dissemination and stakeholder engagement;
- Most CSOs also use email newsletters to keep their audiences informed and engaged.

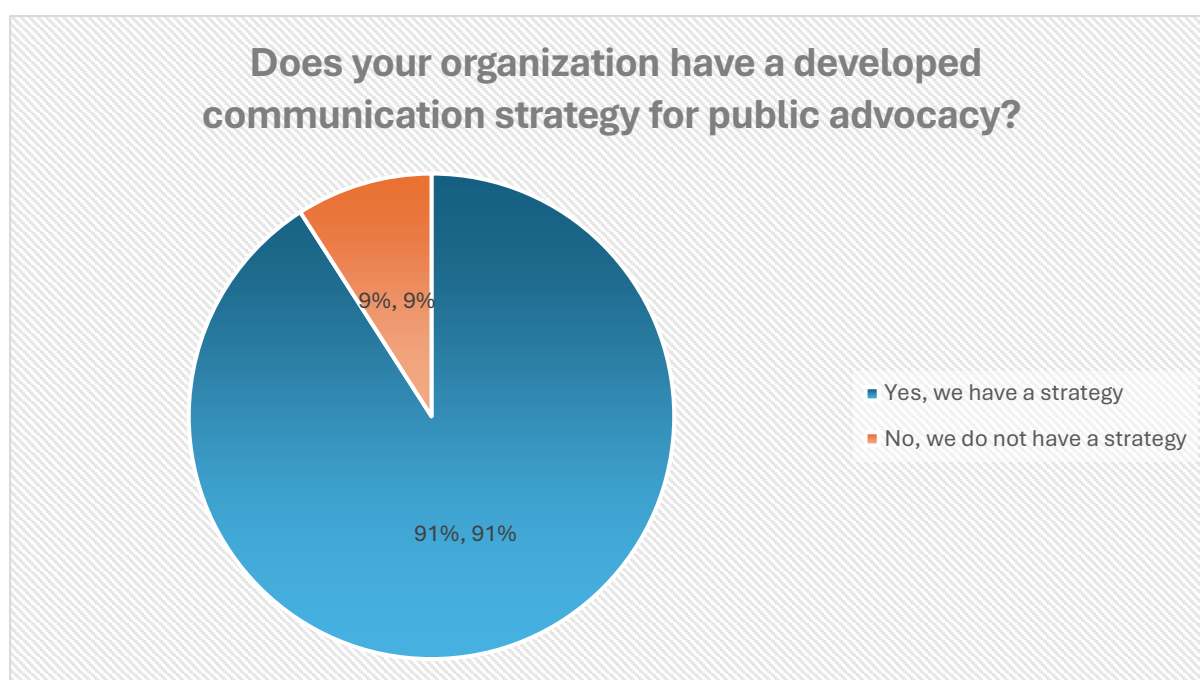
However, alongside these strengths, several key challenges were identified that hinder institutional growth and sustainability:

- Only 55% of organizations reported regularly publishing financial reports, suggesting weaknesses in transparency practices and public accountability;
- A significant number of CSOs face ongoing difficulties in securing sustainable funding, particularly for staff retention and internal capacity development;
- Staffing limitations were repeatedly mentioned in the focus group discussion, where participants shared that many organizations operate with very small teams, often requiring one person to handle multiple roles, from project design to reporting and communications. This multitasking, while often a necessity, negatively affects the efficiency, quality, and strategic depth of program implementation.

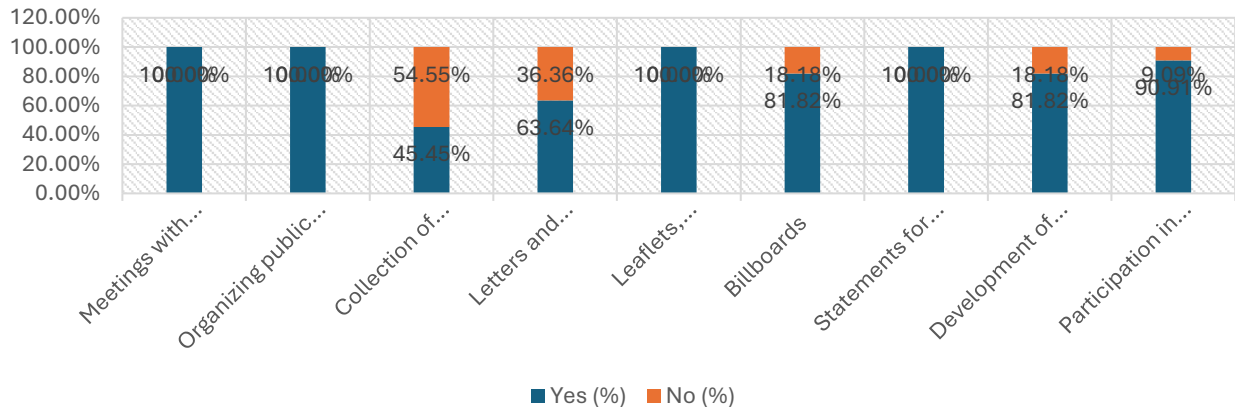
During the focus group held at the Youth Center “Arka,” participants emphasized that these structural limitations have a direct impact on institutional sustainability. While CSOs play a critical role in advancing gender equality, youth engagement, and community development, their reliance on short-term funding and limited human resources restricts their ability to scale interventions or maintain consistent advocacy.

3.2.2 Advocacy capacities, experiences, and barriers

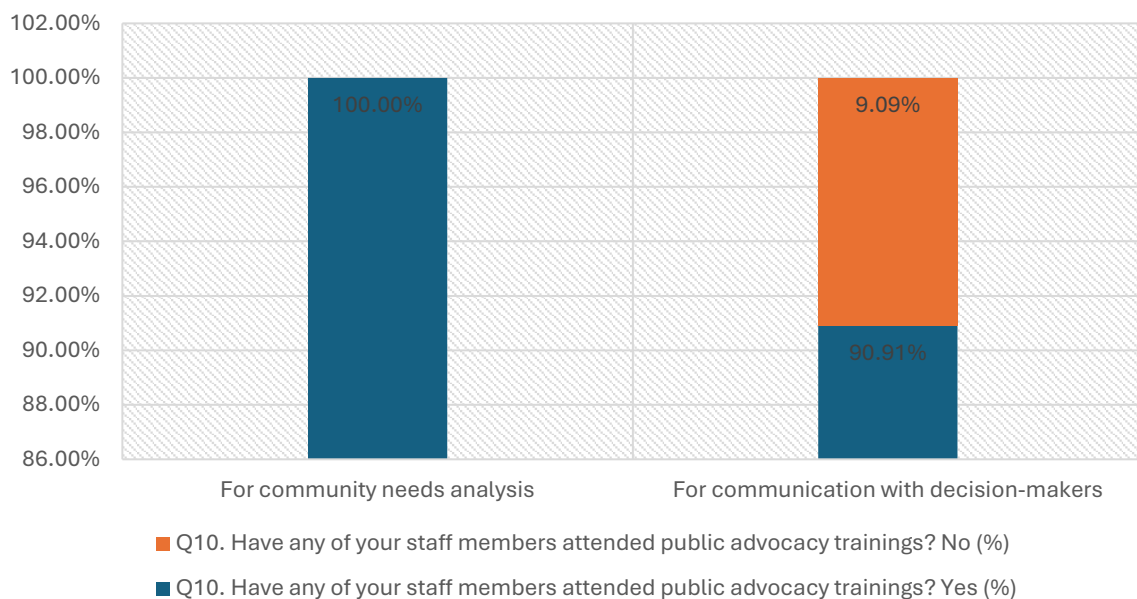
The civil society organizations (CSOs) participating in this assessment demonstrated a strong and ongoing engagement in public advocacy, particularly around gender equality, youth empowerment, and community development. According to the questionnaire, 91% of organizations reported active involvement in public campaigns, direct lobbying efforts, the production of awareness materials, and participation in policy-related working groups. Furthermore, 9 out of 11 organizations confirmed they had taken part in specialized training on public advocacy and institutional communication, reflecting a deliberate and strategic investment in capacity building.



Which public advocacy activities are present in your work?



Have any of your staff members attended public advocacy trainings?



Despite this commitment, several key challenges emerged that limit the reach, sustainability, and inclusiveness of advocacy efforts:

- Lack of continuous funding is a major obstacle, making it difficult to maintain advocacy as a strategic and long-term effort. Without core financial support, many initiatives remain fragmented and project-dependent.



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- Cultural and social resistance, especially in rural or conservative communities, continues to hinder outreach. Persistent gender stereotypes, stigma around activism, and community pushback were all cited as barriers to inclusive engagement.
- The exclusion of disadvantaged groups, particularly women from Roma communities or unemployed women, was also noted. These groups are often left out of advocacy processes due to limited access to information, spaces for participation, or self-confidence to engage in public dialogue.

However, the focus group discussions brought to light several challenges that limit the impact and sustainability of advocacy efforts. One of the main obstacles mentioned was the lack of sustainable funding, which makes it difficult to develop advocacy as a continuous and planned process. Beyond financial aspects, organizations also highlighted social and cultural barriers, especially in rural areas and marginalized communities, where social stigma and gender stereotypes remain strong. Another significant challenge is the inclusion of women from disadvantaged groups, such as those from the Roma community or unemployed women, who are often left out of advocacy processes due to a lack of access and empowerment. Nevertheless, organizations have developed effective strategies to address these challenges. Among them, awareness campaigns based on lived stories were especially mentioned, as they emotionally resonate with the public and stimulate reflection. Citizen petitions have also been used as tools to influence decision-making processes, giving voice to community demands. Additionally, direct meetings with local authorities have been evaluated as one of the most effective ways to build dialogue and increase impact at the local level.

3.2.3 Cooperation with local authorities and institutions

The findings of both the online questionnaire and focus group discussion indicate that civil society organizations (CSOs) in Shkodra maintain consistent engagement with local and national public institutions, with 100% of respondents reporting collaboration with local/state authorities and 73% reporting cooperation with international stakeholders. However, the quality and structure of these partnerships vary significantly. While institutional cooperation is widespread, it is often informal and relationship-based, rather than grounded in systematic or policy-driven collaboration.

Key insights include:

- Only 30% of CSOs rated their cooperation with local institutions as “very good.”
- Many organizations described this collaboration as superficial or symbolic, with limited joint planning or operational follow-through.
- Institutional support often lacks tangible outcomes, and many CSOs reported limited responsiveness or inconsistent engagement from public bodies.

The focus group discussion confirmed that the success of partnerships frequently depends on specific individuals within institutions, such as particularly engaged municipal staff or school directors. This dependence on personal rapport rather than formal agreements makes cooperation fragile and inconsistent, especially in the context of staff turnover or shifting political priorities.

Despite these challenges, several enabling practices were identified that can serve as foundations for stronger institutional collaboration:

- The use of Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) to define roles, responsibilities, and shared goals;
- Participation in inter-institutional forums, which allow for ongoing dialogue and visibility;
- Joint initiatives in schools and employment centers, particularly in the areas of youth empowerment, social inclusion, and violence prevention.

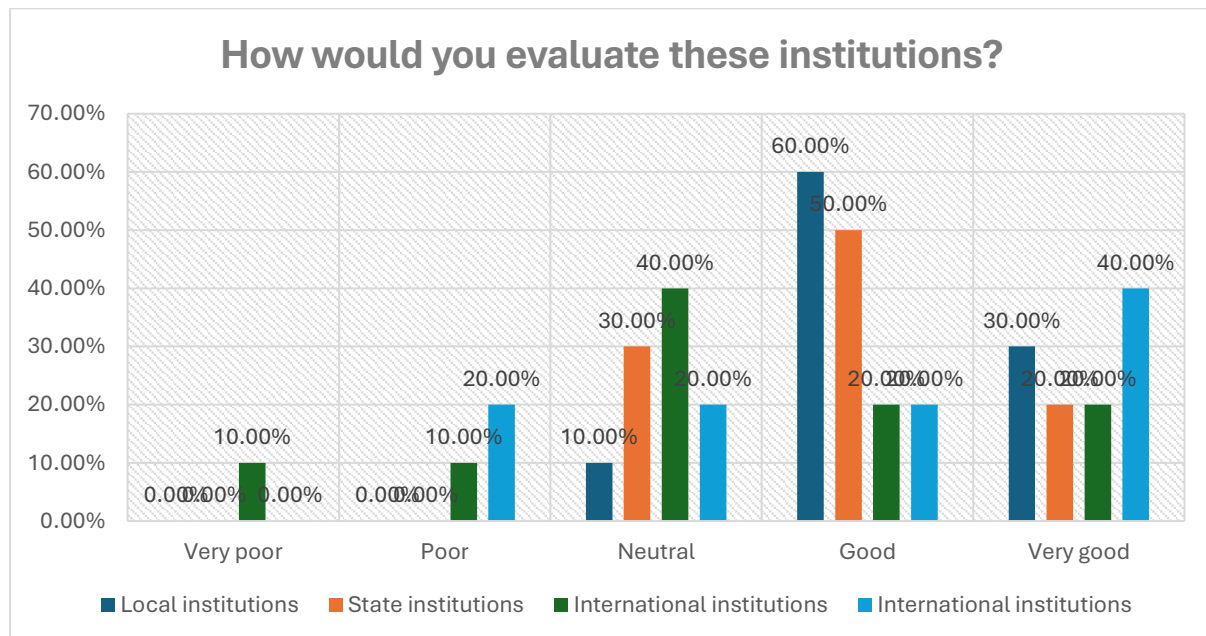
3.2.4 Networking

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- Participation in inter-institutional forums, which allow for ongoing dialogue and visibility;
- Joint initiatives in schools and employment centers, particularly in the areas of youth empowerment, social inclusion, and violence prevention.

3.2.5 Effectiveness and evaluation of work (results)

The analysis shows that while civil society organizations (CSOs) in Shkodra region are highly active in programming and advocacy, their ability to evaluate and demonstrate the impact of their work remains limited and underdeveloped.

From the online questionnaire:

- Only 2 out of 11 organizations reported having a formal system in place to evaluate the impact of their advocacy efforts.
- The majority rely on narrative reports, annual activity summaries, and participant feedback as their primary methods of performance assessment.

During the focus group discussion, CSOs openly acknowledged the lack of standardized tools for monitoring and evaluation (M&E). This gap hinders their ability to:

- Measure change over time;
- Quantify community-level outcomes;
- Provide data-driven evidence to funders and partners.

As a result, organizations struggle to demonstrate concrete results from their interventions, which in turn limits their access to longer-term and impact-focused funding. Participants emphasized that while advocacy is central to their mission, it is often difficult to “prove” its effect without adequate tracking mechanisms.

The discussion also revealed a shared need for technical support and institutional guidance to develop or strengthen M&E systems. Specific areas of support requested by organizations include:

- Training on simplified monitoring and evaluation tools appropriate for small and mid-sized organizations;
- Development of impact measurement frameworks tailored to community-based work;
- Technical assistance for collecting, managing, and presenting data for reports and project proposals.

3.2.6 Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The analysis of civil society organizations (CSOs) in Shkodra region reflects a landscape of long-standing engagement and commitment, but one that continues to operate under significant structural constraints. Despite their resilience and vital role in promoting gender equality and youth empowerment, CSOs face multiple challenges that affect their capacity for sustainable impact.

Key conclusions include:

- CSOs have extensive experience and well-developed internal structures, yet they remain understaffed and underfunded, heavily dependent on project-based financing.
- Advocacy efforts are vibrant and diverse, but the absence of formal impact evaluation tools limits their ability to measure and communicate long-term results.
- Cooperation with public institutions, although frequent, tends to be informal and based on individual initiative, lacking strategic frameworks or formalized agreements.
- While networking is strong at local, regional, and international levels, there is a notable gap in district-level coordination focused specifically on gender equality and the protection of girls and women.

Recommendations

To strengthen the effectiveness, sustainability, and influence of CSOs working in this field, the following actions are recommended:

1. Ensure sustainable funding for internal development, with particular attention to strategic planning, staff stability, and the development of monitoring and evaluation systems.
2. Establish a formal local CSO network focused on gender equality and the prevention of violence against girls and young women, to foster collective action, resource sharing, and coordinated advocacy.
3. Provide advanced training for CSO staff and volunteers on advocacy techniques, gender-responsive policymaking, youth engagement, and rights-based programming.
4. Develop joint protocols for collaboration between CSOs and public institutions, especially regarding GBV case referral systems, community outreach, and policy development.
5. Support the production of practical tools and knowledge products by CSOs themselves, including manuals, position papers, policy briefs, and advocacy guidelines to enhance their influence and contribute to national and local policy discourse.



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3.3 PARENTS / GUARDIANS / CAREGIVING FAMILIES

This section presents the analysis of data collected from parents and caregiving families as part of the AGREE project's broader needs assessment on gender equality and the protection of girls in Albania. The analysis explores parental beliefs, practices, and capacities in relation to gender roles, gender-based violence (GBV), and communication with children on these issues. It also examines how families interact with institutions such as schools and civil society organizations when facing or preventing violence and discrimination.

The dual-method approach, combining a structured online questionnaire with an in-depth focus group, allowed for both quantitative trends and qualitative insights to be captured.

Analyzed data:

- Online questionnaire: 27 responses
- Focus group: 6 participants (18.04.2025, 14:15–15:45, Shkodër)

3.3.1 Demographics

From the participants in the online questionnaire:

The majority of survey participants were mothers (74%), while fathers represented 26%. No legal guardians or foster caregivers participated. Most parents (81%) reported full-time employment, and the majority held a university-level education.

93% were married, primarily representing nuclear family structures. These findings suggest the respondents are predominantly from relatively stable and educated family units.

The focus group included only women (mothers and grandmothers), which allowed for a gender-sensitive perspective on parenting roles and family values, particularly related to gender equality and upbringing practices.

3.3.2 Parental attitudes toward gender equality

The analysis of parental attitudes reveals a high level of awareness and support for gender equality principles, reflecting a broader shift in social norms among families in Shkodër. The questionnaire responses and focus group insights collectively paint a picture of parents who are actively reconsidering traditional roles and aspiring to raise their children in a more inclusive and egalitarian environment.

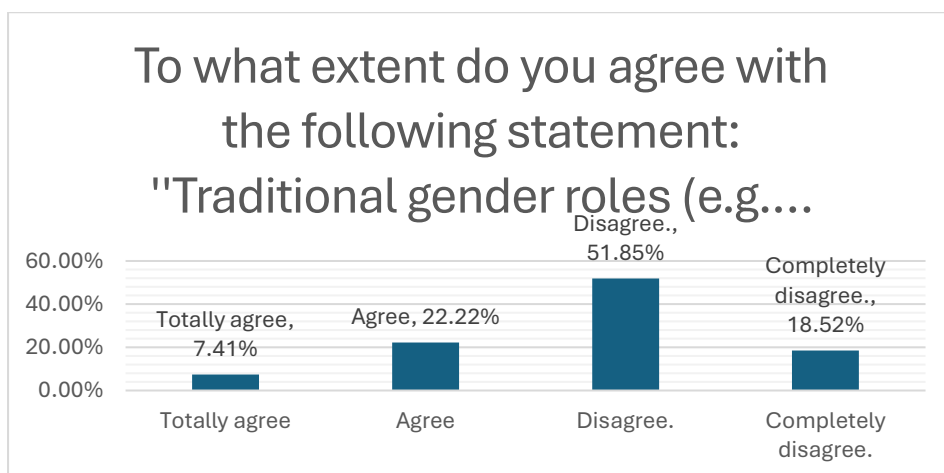
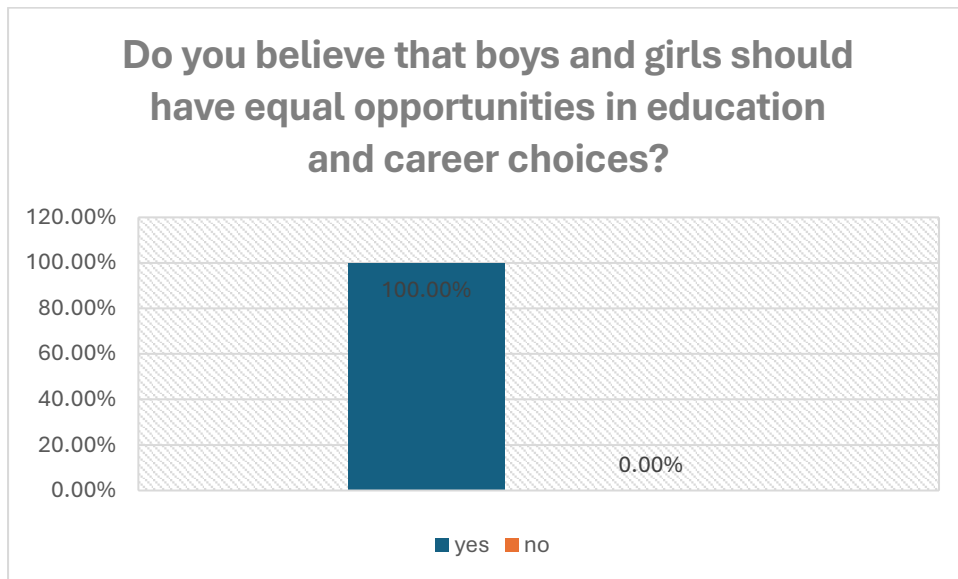
Key findings from the questionnaire include:

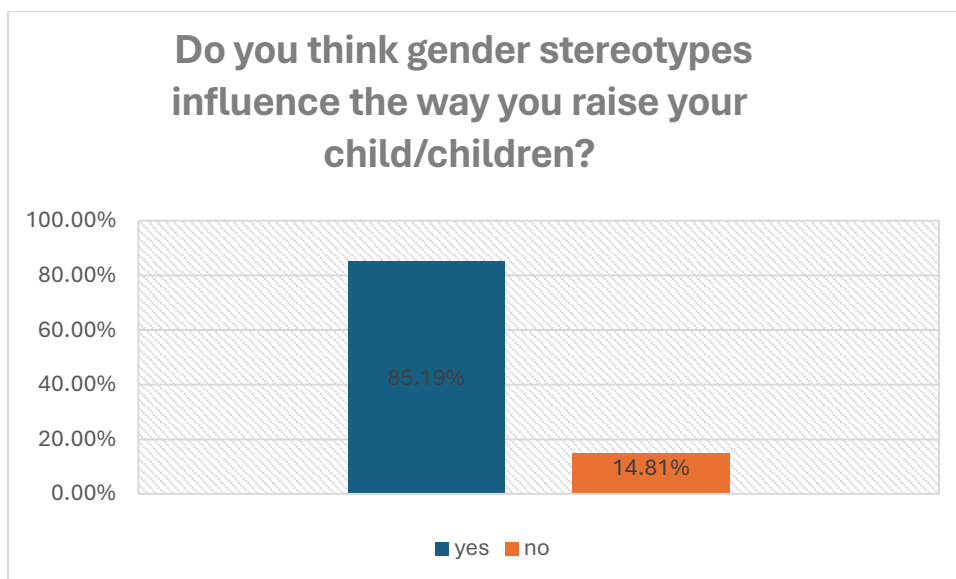
- 100% of respondents agreed that girls and boys should enjoy equal opportunities in both education and future careers. This unanimous consensus demonstrates a clear alignment with fundamental gender equality values and a rejection of discriminatory limitations based on sex.
- 70% disagreed or strongly disagreed with the idea that traditional gender roles remain relevant, signaling a substantial departure from older, patriarchal narratives that assign fixed responsibilities to men and women within the household or community.



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- At the same time, 85% of parents admitted that gender stereotypes still influence their parenting practices. This self-awareness is significant, as it reflects a recognition that broader societal and cultural expectations continue to shape behavior, even when intentions are progressive.





The focus group discussion provided deeper context for these numbers. Participants, primarily mothers and grandmothers, described the intentional steps they take to promote gender equality in their households, such as encouraging daughters to pursue science or leadership roles, or challenging their sons to express emotions openly. However, they also noted the ongoing influence of traditional beliefs, particularly from older family members (e.g., grandparents) or within social circles. These external pressures often reinforce conservative expectations around how boys and girls should behave, dress, or contribute to family life. Mothers spoke candidly about the emotional and practical tensions this creates, especially when they find themselves mediating between modern parenting values and traditional family norms.

This section highlights a critical transitional phase in parenting culture: while attitudes are clearly evolving, the legacy of patriarchal structures still lingers in daily life. It also underscores the importance of supporting parents not only with information but also with strategies for navigating intergenerational tensions and building confidence to advocate for gender-equitable practices in their families and communities.

3.3.3 Communication with children on gender equality and relationships

The research findings suggest that parents in Shkodër region are increasingly proactive and intentional in discussing issues related to gender equality, relationships, and personal safety with their children. The responses to the online questionnaire highlight a notable shift in parenting practices, with growing recognition of the importance of early and open dialogue on sensitive topics.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 83% of parents reported having spoken with their children about gender-based violence (GBV), an encouraging indicator of increased parental responsibility in early prevention and awareness;
- 90% discussed the concept of consent and the importance of personal boundaries, reflecting a broader understanding of how early conversations can promote respect, self-agency, and healthy relationships;

- 79% of parents stated that these discussions should begin after the age of 6, suggesting that most see early childhood as an appropriate starting point for education on respect and equality, though not necessarily from preschool age.

The focus group offered qualitative depth to these findings. Participants, primarily mothers, described using everyday encounters and real-life scenarios as entry points for dialogue with their children. For example, hearing a sexist remark in public or witnessing unequal treatment between siblings were cited as teachable moments to address gender roles, fairness, and empathy. These organic, real-time interventions were described as more effective and relatable for children than formal lectures or abstract concepts.

Despite this strong willingness to engage, parents also voiced a clear need for support tools to better structure these conversations. Many expressed uncertainties about how to explain complex issues in age-appropriate ways and asked for:

- Child-friendly educational materials (books, cartoons, games);
- Visual aids and infographics to explain concepts like consent and boundaries;
- Workshops or training sessions that model how to respond to children's questions or behavior in a gender-conscious way.

The feedback indicates that parents are not only open to taking on a more active educational role, but are also eager to be equipped with resources and skills to do so more confidently and effectively.

3.3.4 Awareness and response to gender-based and peer violence

The findings reveal a complex picture of high parental concern but limited confidence when it comes to identifying and responding to gender-based violence (GBV) and peer-related harm. While parents demonstrate a strong sense of responsibility, many feel underprepared to act effectively, especially in cases involving subtle or non-physical forms of abuse.

Key findings from the questionnaire include:

- 92% of parents expressed a strong willingness to support their children if faced with violence, harassment, or inappropriate behavior;
- However, only 22% felt confident in recognizing the signs of gender-based or peer violence, indicating a clear gap between awareness and practical capability.

Among the 18% of respondents who had direct experience with a violence-related incident involving their child:

- 80% chose to speak directly with their child about the situation;
- 40% reported the incident to school authorities;
- 20% sought professional help, such as psychologists or counselors.

This data suggests that while dialogue within the family is a common first step, formal support systems and external reporting channels are underused, either due to lack of awareness, fear of stigma, or skepticism about institutional responsiveness.

The focus group provided deeper insight into the types of violence that concern parents the most. Participants, especially mothers, voiced strong sensitivity to less visible forms of violence, such as:

- Verbal harassment;
- Exclusion from peer groups;
- Mockery or controlling behavior among children and adolescents.

Many parents expressed uncertainty about when and how to intervene, particularly when the harm involved emotional manipulation, digital abuse, or peer pressure rather than physical aggression. There was a strong desire for more guidance on recognizing red flags, knowing what actions to take, and understanding how to support children without escalating the situation or causing distress.

3.3.5 Support networks and institutional support

The findings from both the online questionnaire and focus group discussion reveal that schools are perceived as the primary line of defense when children experience gender-based violence (GBV), but trust in broader institutional support systems remains limited.

Key survey results:

- 73% of parents indicated they would turn to the school as their first point of contact if their child experienced GBV;
- Only 13% would consider approaching the police or extended family;
- No respondents mentioned civil society organizations (CSOs) as a support resource.

This reliance on schools reflects both their proximity to children and their perceived responsibility for handling child-related issues. However, the near absence of police, family, or CSOs as mentioned options suggests a narrow perception of available support systems, and a lack of awareness or confidence in their capacity to respond effectively.

In the focus group discussion, participants voiced mixed experiences:

- The work of local organizations such as “*Woman to Woman*” was positively acknowledged, especially in terms of awareness-raising and psychosocial support;
- However, parents did not see CSOs as active or accessible partners in crisis situations, indicating a visibility and outreach gap that limits community engagement;
- Schools, while recognized as a primary contact point, were also described as ill-equipped to offer sustained or structured responses to cases involving GBV, peer violence, or gender discrimination.

Parents expressed concern that schools often fail to address gender equality in a systemic and sustained manner, frequently limiting their efforts to one-off events or extracurricular activities. Institutional responses were also viewed as weak or inconsistent, with some families feeling that their concerns were not taken seriously or were handled superficially.

This combination of institutional underperformance and underutilized community support structures highlights a critical need to:



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- Strengthen school-based response systems and ensure staff are trained to identify and manage cases of violence sensitively and appropriately;
- Improve coordination between schools, CSOs, and public institutions;
- Raise parental awareness of the roles and services offered by CSOs, particularly in prevention, reporting, and recovery support.

3.3.6 Parental support for children in gender equality and prevention of gender-based violence

The data reveals a strong and growing parental commitment to gender-sensitive parenting and active engagement in promoting respectful, equitable attitudes among their children. Parents in Shkodër demonstrate a clear willingness to adopt progressive approaches and serve as role models, yet many also express the need for institutional and community-based support to enhance their effectiveness in this role.

Key findings from the online questionnaire include:

- 100% of respondents said they actively encourage their children to express emotions, regardless of gender, a crucial foundation for emotional intelligence, empathy, and non-violent behavior;
- 81% supported involving young people in decision-making processes related to gender equality and violence prevention, reflecting a recognition of the importance of youth agency in shaping equitable norms and peer behavior.

At the same time, 73% of parents acknowledged the need for further support in order to effectively engage with these topics at home and in the community. The most commonly identified areas of support included:

- Education on gender-based violence (GBV): Many parents lack confidence in discussing sensitive topics or identifying harmful behaviors, and seek age-appropriate tools and training to guide such conversations.
- Access to family counseling services: Parents expressed a desire for professional guidance on managing intergenerational conflicts, addressing trauma, or navigating behavioral concerns.
- Clear reporting mechanisms in schools: There is a strong demand for well-defined, accessible procedures within educational institutions to report and respond to incidents of GBV, bullying, or exclusion.
- Peer support groups for parents: Parents value opportunities to learn from each other's experiences, share challenges, and exchange practical strategies for addressing gender and violence-related issues with children.

In the focus group discussions, participants advocated for co-learning opportunities, where parents and children attend joint sessions to explore themes such as gender stereotypes, respectful communication, and personal boundaries. They highlighted the benefits of having external facilitators, such as psychologists, teachers, or trained CSO staff, lead these sessions, ensuring professional guidance and fostering open, informed dialogue in a safe environment.

Several participants also noted that parents are more likely to engage when educational efforts are framed not as corrective, but as empowering and supportive, helping them navigate complex topics with confidence rather than reinforcing a sense of failure or inadequacy.

3.3.7 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The assessment of parents, guardians, and caregiving families in Shkodër reveals a community that is increasingly aligned with principles of gender equality and child protection, yet still navigating persistent challenges related to cultural expectations, institutional capacity, and access to structured support.

The key conclusions are as follows:

- Parents in Shkodër demonstrate progressive and inclusive views on gender roles and express a clear commitment to raising their children with values of equality, emotional openness, and respect.
- Despite these intentions, parents face ongoing challenges from entrenched cultural norms, limited access to practical resources, and insufficient institutional support, especially when addressing sensitive topics such as gender-based violence (GBV) or personal boundaries.
- Schools are regarded as the first and often only point of contact for concerns related to children's exposure to violence or discrimination. However, they are widely perceived as unprepared or under-resourced to provide systematic prevention and response.
- Although civil society organizations like "Woman to Woman" are respected, they remain largely invisible or underutilized by families, highlighting a need for stronger outreach and integration into community-level support frameworks.
- There is a strong and consistent call from parents for structured training, tools, and collaborative opportunities to help them raise children in a safe, inclusive, and gender-equitable environment. Parents are not only open to support, they are actively seeking it.

Recommendations

Based on these insights, the following actions are recommended to strengthen the role of families in promoting gender equality and preventing violence:

1. Develop regular information sessions and practical trainings for parents, delivered in collaboration with schools and civil society organizations. These sessions should cover topics such as gender equality, child development, violence prevention, and communication strategies.
2. Create structured peer support groups where parents can meet regularly to exchange experiences, build solidarity, and learn from each other. These groups can also serve as a platform for identifying emerging community concerns and generating grassroots solutions.
3. Implement school-based educational programs that address gender equality, respectful relationships, digital safety, and emotional literacy. These should involve both children and their parents, using interactive methods and age-appropriate materials.
4. Strengthen institutional reporting and intervention systems within schools, ensuring that psychologists, educators, and parents are trained and engaged in prevention, early identification, and coordinated response to cases of GBV or peer violence.

5. Consolidate and formalize collaboration between schools, civil society organizations, and public institutions to ensure a holistic, coordinated, and child-centered approach to violence prevention and the promotion of gender equity in the community.



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3.4 EDUCATORS, TEACHERS, AND EDUCATION INSTITUTION STAFF

This section presents the key findings from teachers and education professionals engaged in the formal education system in Shkodër. The aim of this component of the research was to better understand the perceptions, knowledge, practices, and institutional constraints faced by educators in promoting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence (GBV) in the school environment. Teachers play a vital role not only in the academic development of students but also in shaping values, behaviors, and social norms. As such, their capacity to identify and challenge gender stereotypes, create inclusive classroom environments, and intervene appropriately in cases of peer violence is central to the success of any long-term effort to ensure gender-responsive education.

Analyzed data: Online questionnaire: 25 responses. Focus group: 16 participants (19.04.2025, 11:00–12:30, Shkodër)

By combining quantitative data collected through structured online questionnaires with qualitative insights from a focus group, the analysis explores:

- Teachers' attitudes and beliefs around gender equality;
- Their preparedness and practical capacity to address GBV and peer violence;
- The extent to which gender equality is integrated into teaching and school culture;
- The availability and effectiveness of institutional support systems;
- Needs for training, tools, and collaborative mechanisms with other actors such as civil society organizations and local education offices.

The results help to identify both the strengths that can be built upon and the systemic gaps that must be addressed to ensure that educational institutions become safe, inclusive, and empowering environments for all students, especially girls and young women

3.4.1 Demographics

The demographic profile of participating teachers and school staff reflects a highly experienced and predominantly female professional group, working primarily in public pre-university education institutions across the Shkodër region.

Key characteristics of the online questionnaire respondents include:

- 80% were women, while 20% were men, illustrating the gendered composition typical of the primary and lower secondary education workforce;
- Respondents were primarily engaged in primary and lower secondary education, the foundational levels of Albania's public education system;
- 84% reported having over 10 years of experience in the education sector, indicating a mature professional cohort with significant classroom exposure and pedagogical knowledge;
- All participants were employed in public schools, located either in urban Shkodër or surrounding rural areas, offering a diverse geographical perspective within the region.

The focus group discussion, which brought together 6 educators from similar educational settings, added depth to the statistical data. It created space for teachers to reflect on their

personal and institutional challenges, share strategies for engaging students on gender-related topics, and voice their needs for professional development and institutional support.

This demographic context sets the stage for interpreting the subsequent findings, as it highlights a group of educators who are professionally experienced, committed to their roles, and positioned to serve as key agents of change within the school system, provided they are supported with the right tools, training, and institutional frameworks.

3.4.2 Teachers' attitudes toward gender equality

The findings indicate that teachers demonstrate a strong personal and professional commitment to gender equality as a guiding principle in their educational approach. This shared value base is an important asset in shaping inclusive learning environments and countering discriminatory practices from an early age.

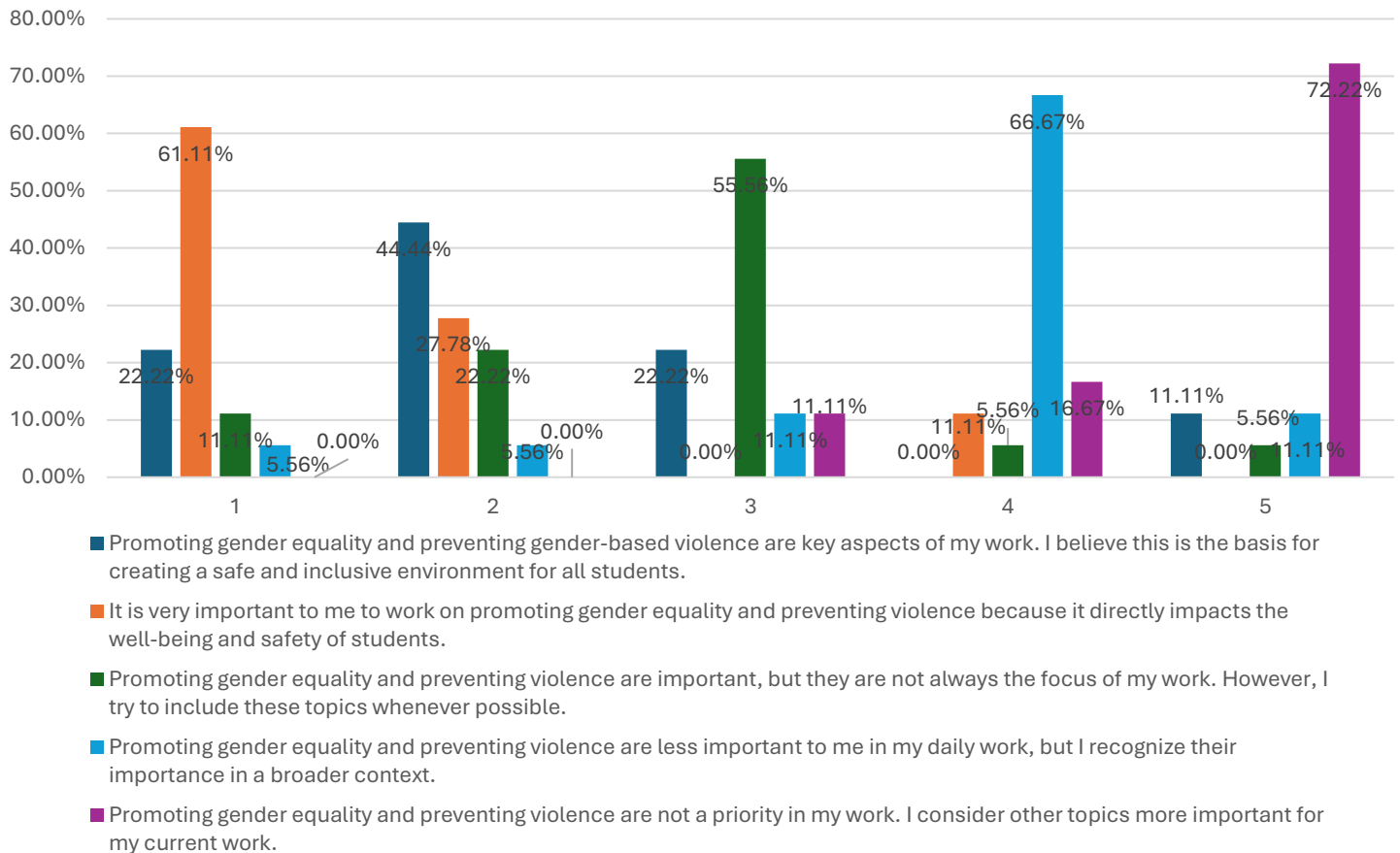
Key data from the online questionnaire reveals:

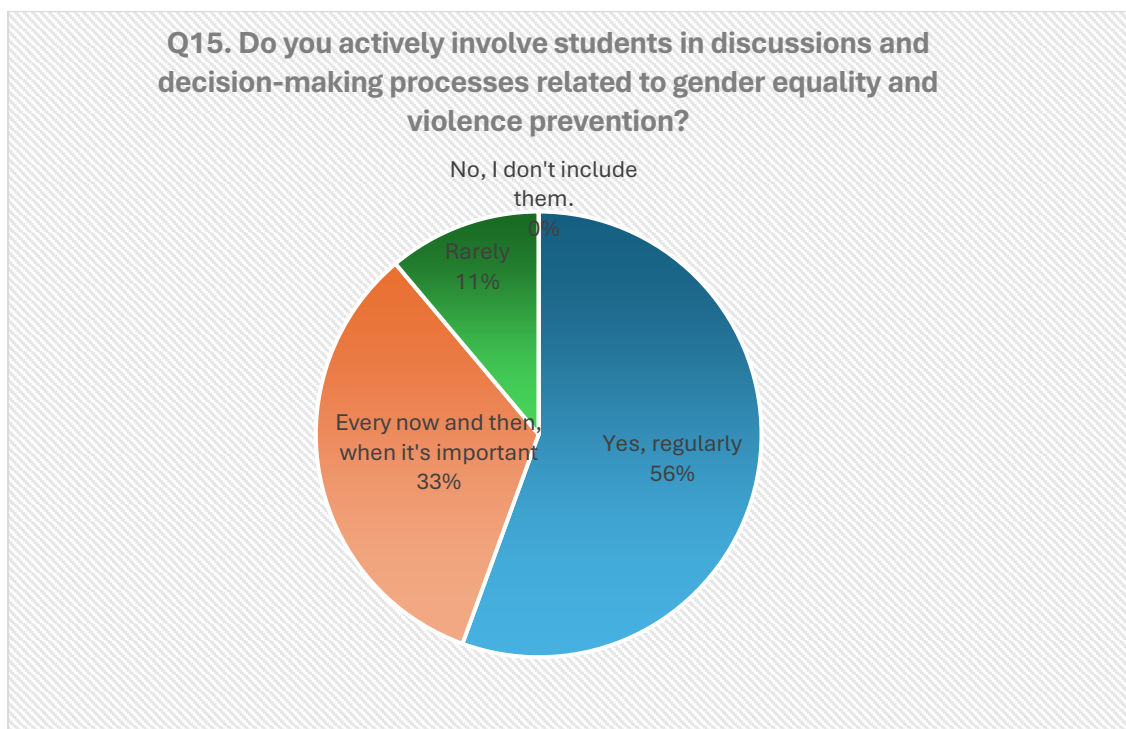
- 92% of respondents consider gender equality a fundamental educational value, underscoring a broad consensus that schools have a responsibility to model and promote fairness between girls and boys;



- 88% reported actively encouraging both boys and girls to participate equally in classroom discussions, leadership roles, and learning activities, demonstrating intentional efforts to balance opportunities for engagement and visibility among students.

Rank the statements provided in order of importance so that the statement you agree with the most is number 1 and the statement you disagree with the least is last.





However, despite these positive orientations, 40% of educators acknowledged that gender stereotypes continue to influence student attitudes and school culture. These stereotypes were most commonly reported as being:

- Reinforced unconsciously through textbooks, curricular examples, or peer dynamics.
- Mirrored by family expectations, with certain behaviors or subjects still perceived as more appropriate for one gender than the other.

During the focus group discussion, teachers openly discussed these contradictions and the challenges of translating personal values into systematic school-wide practice. Many noted that efforts to address gender bias are often:

- Carried out in isolation, driven by individual motivation rather than institutional policy.
- Lacking continuity or resources, with little integration into formal lesson planning or school development strategies.

Participants voiced a clear demand for practical, ready-to-use pedagogical tools, including classroom activities, examples of inclusive language, and visual materials, that could help them tackle gender norms more effectively. They also emphasized the importance of institutional backing, such as leadership support, inclusion of gender equality in school planning documents, and professional peer exchange.

3.4.3 Education for gender equality and school relationships

Although teachers in Shkodër express a clear commitment to gender equality in principle, the findings indicate that translating this commitment into classroom practice remains limited and

inconsistent. The integration of gender-related themes into formal curricula is hindered by a lack of institutional support and practical teaching resources.

Key survey findings include:

- Only 36% of teachers reported actively incorporating gender equality topics into the subjects they teach;
- A significant 64% cited a lack of clear guidance, teaching materials, or structured curricula as the main barrier to addressing gender equality in a sustained way.

This points to a disconnect between positive attitudes and practical implementation, where even motivated educators are constrained by systemic gaps. The absence of standardized tools or clear frameworks means that efforts to promote equality are largely dependent on individual initiative and informal approaches.

Encouragingly, the data also reveals a strong demand for capacity building:

- 76% of respondents expressed a willingness to participate in training programs, particularly those focused on:
 - Socio-emotional learning;
 - Gender-sensitive classroom management;
 - Building inclusive and respectful relationships among students.

During the focus group, teachers reiterated this enthusiasm for professional development but also emphasized a critical lack of structural backing. Participants stressed that without leadership support from school principals or the Local Education Office, individual efforts often remain peripheral and are not embedded into broader school strategies or institutional culture.

Teachers called for the development of systematic, school-wide approaches that embed gender equality into:

- Lesson planning and curriculum design;
- Teacher training and mentoring;
- School development plans and annual activity calendars.

They also advocated for interdisciplinary collaboration, encouraging a shared responsibility across subjects, from civic education and literature to science and physical education.

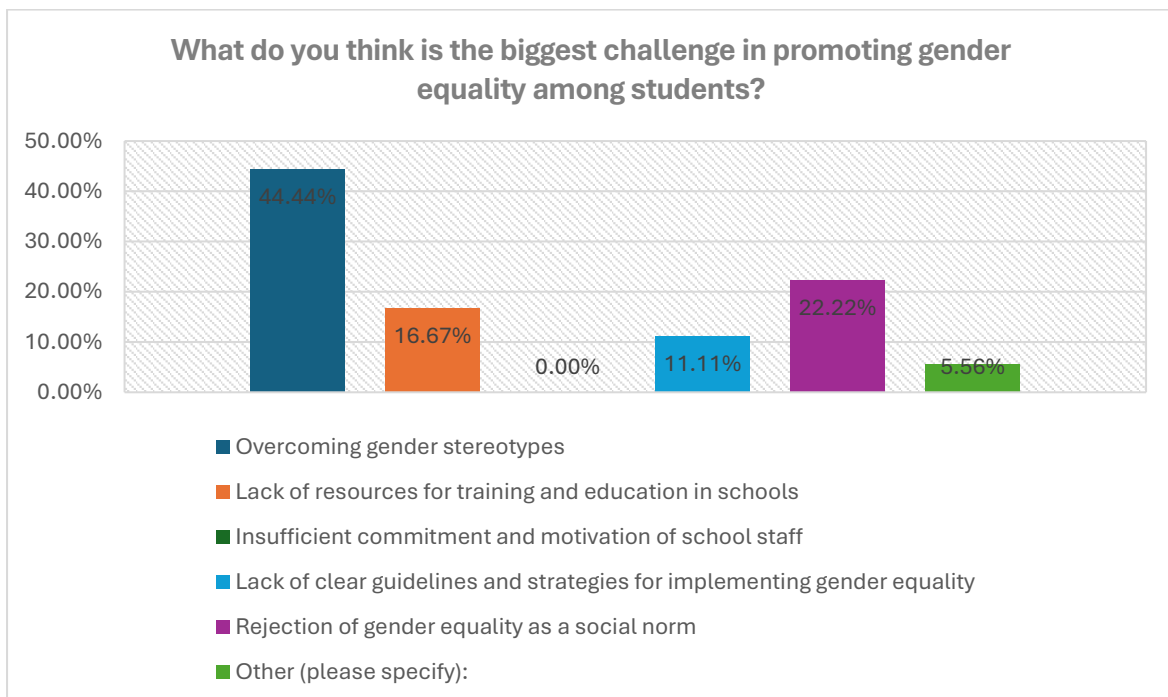
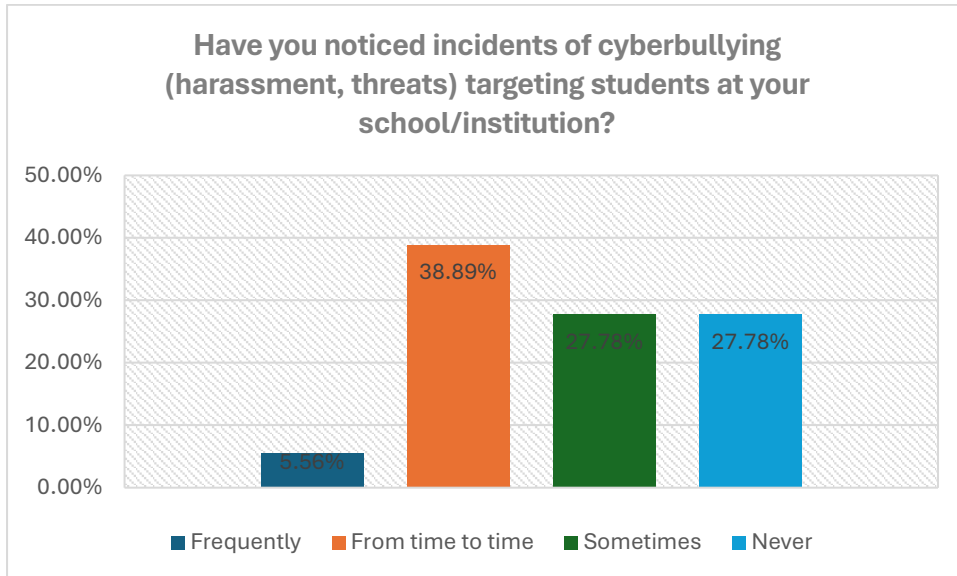
3.4.4 Response to gender-based violence and peer violence

The data reveal that gender-based and peer violence are present and recognized challenges within the school environment, yet teachers often feel ill-equipped to respond effectively. While there is broad awareness of the issue, there is a concerning gap in preparedness, training, and institutional protocols.

Key findings from the online questionnaire include:

- 48% of teachers reported having encountered cases of gender-based bullying or exclusion in their classrooms or schools;

- Despite this, 44% stated that they do not feel professionally prepared to handle such situations appropriately;
- Only 30% had followed formal procedures to report these incidents to school psychologists, administrators, or relevant authorities.



These results highlight a systemic weakness in response mechanisms within educational institutions. While teachers are often the first to observe signs of peer aggression, gender-based bullying, or discriminatory behavior, they are frequently left without clear tools or institutional support to take appropriate action.

Insights from the focus group discussion confirmed this gap. Many educators described responding to incidents based on personal judgment, in the absence of a clearly defined reporting structure. Several admitted being unaware of existing school protocols or unsure of when and how to involve psycho-social services.

Teachers voiced a strong demand for clearer institutional guidelines, including:

- Standard operating procedures for identifying and reporting GBV and peer violence;
- Training on early detection and appropriate interventions for both victims and perpetrators;
- Greater involvement of psycho-social staff in prevention and response efforts;
- Clarification of the roles and responsibilities of teachers, administrators, and other school staff in handling these cases.

Participants also emphasized the need for a more proactive and preventive approach, suggesting that schools move beyond a reactive model and invest in regular awareness sessions, classroom discussions, and inclusion of violence prevention themes in the broader school culture.

3.4.5 Support networks and institutional approach

Teachers overwhelmingly recognize the central role of schools in promoting gender equality and preventing gender-based violence. However, the data also point to a significant disconnect between this responsibility and the institutional support available to educators, particularly when dealing with complex or sensitive issues.

Key survey findings include:

- 80% of respondents identified the school environment as the most appropriate and influential space for gender equality interventions;
- Yet, only 12% reported having collaborated with civil society organizations (CSOs) on gender-related topics or violence prevention;
- 68% of educators expressed feeling isolated or lacking adequate support when addressing issues of gender inequality or student violence.

This imbalance highlights a critical gap: while schools are seen as natural platforms for intervention, the absence of strong support networks and sustainable partnerships severely limits the depth and continuity of these efforts.

In the focus group, teachers described the burden of being expected to respond to gender-related challenges without access to:

- Specialized knowledge or external expertise.
- Peer support from professional networks.
- Clear coordination with local NGOs, psycho-social services, or municipal structures.



Several teachers recalled instances in which they participated in one-off awareness sessions or pilot projects led by NGOs but noted that these initiatives often lacked follow-up or integration into long-term school programming. As a result, even well-intentioned efforts tend to be reactive, fragmented, or dependent on temporary donor funding rather than embedded in institutional practice.

Participants called for the creation of formal cooperation mechanisms that would allow schools to:

- Establish ongoing collaboration agreements (e.g., Memoranda of Understanding) with local CSOs and gender equality experts.
- Ensure routine engagement of psycho-social professionals in both prevention and intervention efforts.
- Create interdisciplinary working groups within schools to coordinate responses to GBV and promote gender equity as a cross-cutting issue.

3.4.6 The role of teachers in education for equality and violence prevention

Teachers in Shkodër strongly identify with their role as educators, mentors, and influencers of student values and behaviors. They recognize that their responsibilities extend beyond academic instruction to include shaping social norms and fostering a culture of equality, respect, and non-violence.

Key findings from the survey include:

- 88% of teachers see themselves as role models who influence student behavior both in and beyond the classroom.
- 72% expressed a clear need for concrete tools and teaching materials to address gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV) in age-appropriate, engaging, and pedagogically sound ways.
- 64% recommended the formal integration of gender equality themes into civic education curricula and extracurricular programs, such as school clubs, student forums, and awareness campaigns.

These findings reflect an important level of self-awareness and readiness among educators to contribute to gender-transformative education. Teachers are not only aware of their impact, they are actively seeking ways to increase their effectiveness and confidence when addressing complex social issues.

During the focus group, teachers emphasized that isolated, individual efforts are not enough to create lasting change. Many participants noted that when only a few teachers take initiative, without institutional reinforcement or peer collaboration, the impact is limited and often unsustainable.

Several key recommendations emerged:

- The need for a coherent, school-wide strategy that embeds gender equality and GBV prevention across all levels of school life, from classroom instruction and student counseling to staff development and school governance;

- The importance of peer learning mechanisms, such as teacher reflection groups or mentorship programs, to allow for exchange of practices, challenges, and locally adapted solutions;
- A call for training-of-trainers models, enabling more experienced educators to guide their colleagues and build internal expertise within each school.

Teachers stressed that addressing gender equality should not be perceived as an "extra task," but rather as a core component of quality education. Institutional recognition of this role, through policy, professional development, and time allocation, is essential to empower educators to fully assume their transformative potential.

3.4.7 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The assessment of teachers and educational staff in Shkodër highlights a professional community that is deeply committed to gender equality and student well-being, but whose impact is limited by systemic barriers. These educators are ready to act as agents of change but require greater institutional alignment, resources, and intersectoral collaboration to fulfill their role effectively.

Key conclusions include:

- Teachers hold strong values in support of gender equality and see themselves as role models. However, their efforts are constrained by the lack of institutional policies, pedagogical resources, and formal support mechanisms;
- Gender stereotypes continue to persist in school environments, sometimes reinforced unintentionally through curricula, textbooks, or informal peer dynamics;
- Although schools are open to external cooperation, partnerships with NGOs, psycho-social services, and gender equality organizations are often sporadic, project-based, or dependent on individual initiative, rather than embedded in institutional practice.

The research underscores the need to transition from fragmented, individual efforts to a systematic, school-wide approach, underpinned by policies, professional development, and coordinated partnerships.

Recommendations

1. Implement ongoing professional development for teachers and school staff on:
 - Gender equality and inclusive pedagogy;
 - Socio-emotional learning and student well-being;
 - Early identification and prevention of gender-based and peer violence.
2. Develop and distribute curriculum-aligned teaching materials that promote gender equality and respectful relationships, tailored to students' age and learning level, and suitable for cross-disciplinary use.
3. Create formal, sustainable collaboration mechanisms between schools and local actors such as:
 - Civil society organizations working on gender and youth rights;
 - Psycho-social services;
 - Local education offices and child protection structures.



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4. Produce a practical teacher's guide with clear, context-sensitive steps on:
 - Identifying and responding to GBV and bullying;
 - Collaborating with school psychologists and external services;
 - Integrating gender-sensitive practices into classroom routines.
5. Promote the school as a safe and inclusive space by embedding gender equality into:
 - School development plans and codes of conduct;
 - Extracurricular and civic education programs;
 - Internal staff culture and professional peer learning structures.



3.5 YOUTH

This section presents findings from adolescents and youth who participated in a combined quantitative and qualitative assessment designed to explore their views, experiences, and roles in advancing gender equality and addressing gender-based violence (GBV). The research aimed to capture young people's perceptions of their educational and social environments and to assess the extent to which they feel empowered to promote change.

Through a targeted questionnaire and a focus group discussion, the study investigated not only awareness and attitudes, but also personal experiences with violence, levels of civic participation, and youth-driven advocacy efforts. These insights are essential to guide the development of interventions that are relevant, youth-centered, and capable of fostering a culture of inclusion, equality, and safety.

Data analyzed:

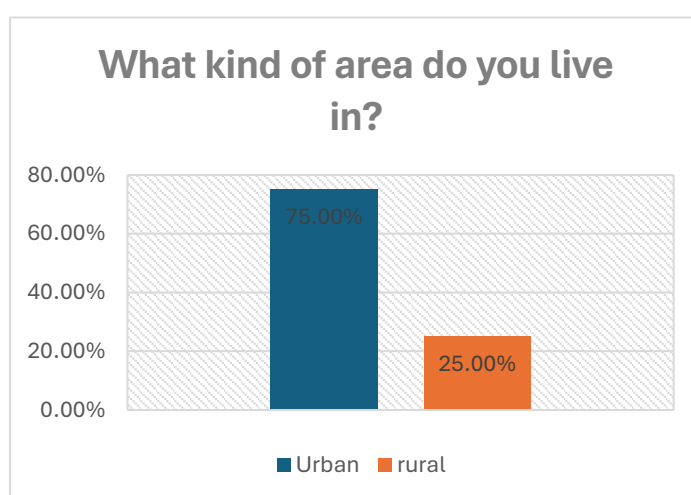
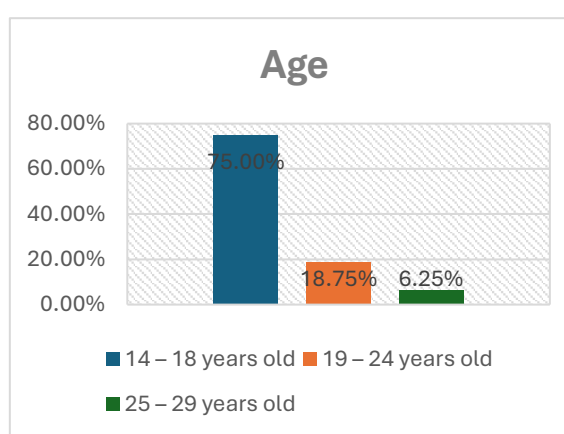
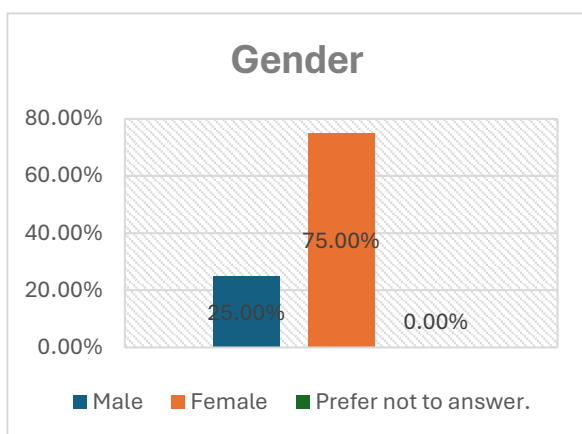
- Online questionnaire - 16 responses
- Focus group - 6 participants (22.04.2025, 10:00–11:45, Shkodër, “Skënderbej” 9-year school)

3.5.1 Demographics

The demographic profile of youth participants in this study highlights strong engagement among adolescent girls in urban settings, with limited representation from older youth and rural communities. This distribution points to both existing strengths in outreach and critical gaps that must be addressed to ensure inclusivity in future interventions.

Key demographic breakdown:

- **Gender:**
75% of respondents identified as female, and 25% as male. No participants selected "prefer not to say." The predominance of girls may indicate a greater interest, awareness, or comfort in discussing gender-related issues, particularly gender equality and violence, suggesting that girls are more willing to voice their experiences in such platforms.
- **Age:**
The 14–18 age group comprised 75% of the total participants, demonstrating a high level of engagement among secondary school students. By contrast, only 19% were aged 19–24, and 6% were aged 25–29, pointing to a sharp drop in participation among older youth. This pattern may reflect differences in access, interest, or availability, with younger students being more exposed to school-based initiatives and peer-driven programs.
- A significant majority, 75% of participants, reside in urban areas, while only 25% live in rural settings. Urban youth likely benefit from better access to internet connectivity, social activities, youth clubs, and school-led awareness campaigns. In contrast, the lower participation from rural youth may be attributed to geographical isolation, digital exclusion, or fewer institutional opportunities for civic and gender education.



This demographic snapshot reveals that adolescent girls in urban schools are particularly responsive to gender equality initiatives and willing to engage in dialogue and self-reflection. However, the findings also point to the need for more inclusive outreach strategies, especially to mobilize older youth and those living in rural areas, who are often at higher risk of marginalization and less likely to benefit from existing awareness and prevention programs.

3.5.2 Youth Participation

The data reveal a notable level of civic and social engagement among young people in Shkodër when it comes to gender equality and human rights. A strong majority of participants have already been involved in awareness-raising activities, discussions, or school-based projects, indicating that youth are not only aware of gender issues, they are also eager to take action.

Key findings include:

- 70% of respondents reported having participated in school or university-based initiatives that addressed gender equality. These included:
 - Awareness campaigns;
 - Classroom debates;
 - Human rights clubs or events linked to 16 Days of Activism;

- Activities led by civil society organizations or external facilitators.

Such participation suggests that schools and educational spaces are functioning as important entry points for youth engagement in social change. Beyond their existing involvement, participants also expressed a strong desire for deeper and more sustained forms of engagement.

Youth are increasingly seeking:

- Opportunities to co-design programs and interventions.
- Active roles in shaping school policies on equality and safety.
- Peer leadership roles, such as mentoring, awareness campaigning, or facilitating student-led workshops.

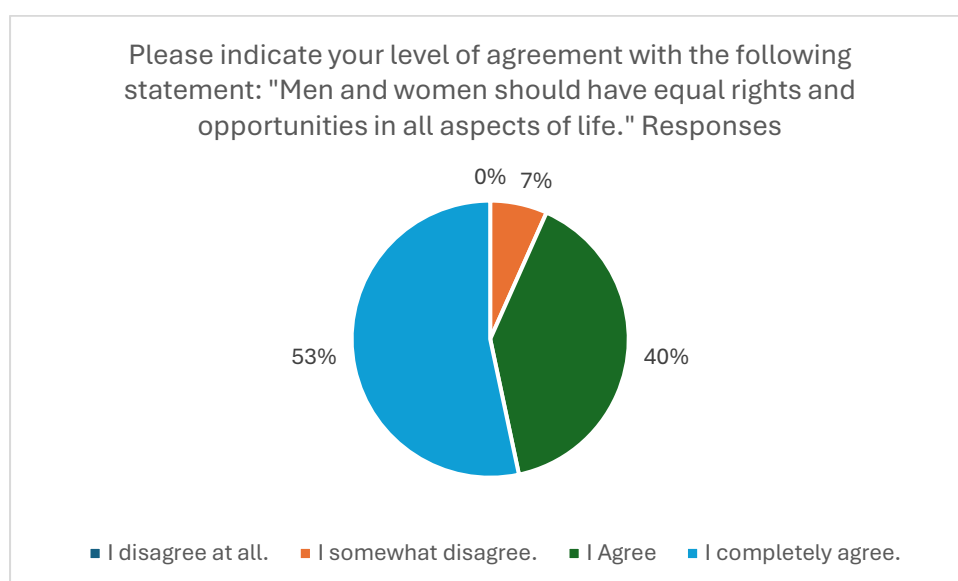
The focus group further emphasized that young people do not want to remain passive recipients of information. Instead, they want to be recognized as co-creators of inclusive environments, capable of mobilizing their peers, challenging harmful norms, and holding institutions accountable.

3.5.3 Gender Equality

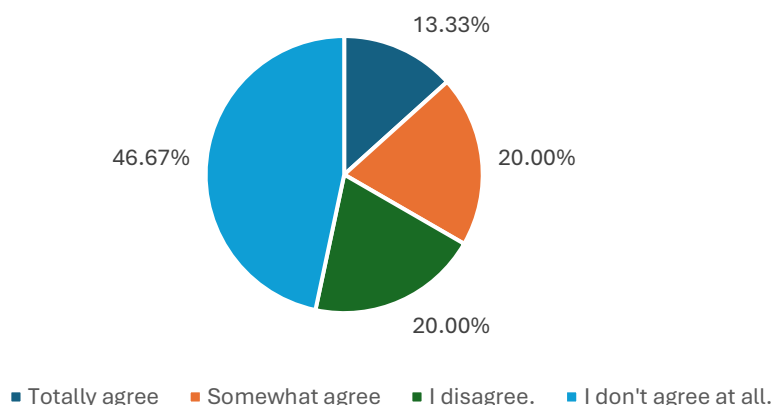
The findings show that youth participants have a strong theoretical awareness of gender equality, but limited opportunities to apply this understanding in practice. While most respondents recognize the value of equality in principle, they feel constrained by entrenched societal norms and the lack of enabling structures to take action.

Key results from the questionnaire:

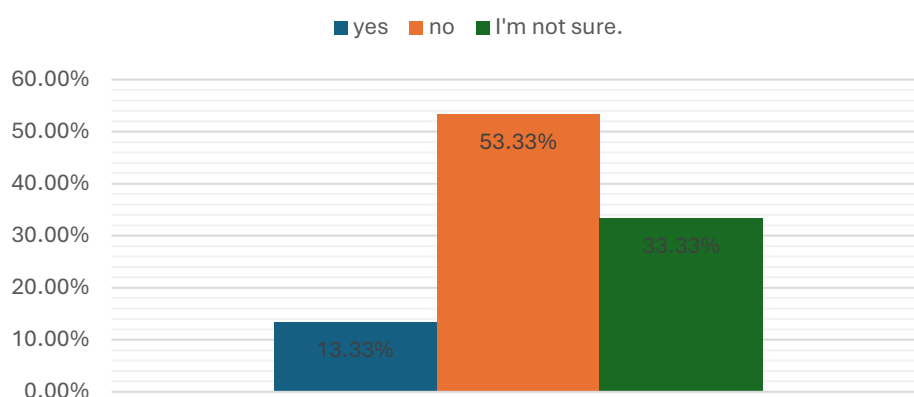
- Over 90% of youth stated they understood the importance of gender equality in both educational and social contexts.
- However, only 13.3 % felt they have sufficient opportunities to participate in decision-making and actively contribute to creating a more equal and inclusive environment.



Do you agree with the statement: “Men should be the main financial providers for the family, while women should take care of the home and children”?



Do you believe that young people in your community have sufficient opportunities to participate in decision-making processes?



This gap between awareness and empowerment highlights the barriers that limit youth agency, even among those who are motivated and informed. During the focus group discussions, participants described real-life experiences of gender inequality, citing examples such as:

- Unequal expectations placed on boys and girls in both school and home settings (e.g., household responsibilities, leadership roles, behavior monitoring);
- Social pressure to conform to traditional gender norms, which restricts both girls' freedom and boys' emotional expression.
- A noticeable absence of safe, inclusive spaces where young people can discuss gender-related concerns without fear of judgment or backlash.

Importantly, 65% of respondents emphasized that gender equality is not solely an educational issue, it must also be addressed at the social and cultural level. Participants called for a broader

societal shift that challenges outdated gender roles, media portrayals, and community expectations that continue to reinforce inequality. In this context, schools are viewed not just as places of learning but as critical institutions for modeling and shaping equality, yet youth reported that current efforts often lack depth, continuity, or the ability to confront the broader societal drivers of inequality.

3.5.4 Gender-Based Violence

The research findings reveal alarming levels of exposure to gender-based violence (GBV) among youth in Shkodra region, underscoring the urgent need for targeted prevention, education, and support systems. Participants reported experiencing a range of abuses, emotional, physical, and digital, within both school and online environments.

Key statistics from the questionnaire:

- 40% of respondents reported exposure to psychological or emotional violence, such as sexist jokes, social exclusion, and verbal attacks.
- 30% experienced physical violence, often tied to power dynamics and gender-based discrimination.
- 25% encountered verbal harassment or abuse on social media, highlighting the growing impact of cyber violence on adolescents.

These numbers reflect a pervasive and normalized culture of gender-based harm that many young people endure, often without clear avenues for redress.

The focus group discussion provided deeper context, revealing how such violence is frequently trivialized or disguised as humor. This framing creates a social environment where:

- Victims feel pressured to stay silent to avoid being labeled as "overreacting".
- Bystanders often dismiss abusive behavior as harmless teasing.
- Institutional responses remain reactive rather than preventive.

Girls, in particular, described experiences with online harassment, including unwanted messages, image-based abuse, and threats of blackmail. Despite recognizing the harm, participants expressed a lack of clarity on how to seek help, and low confidence in institutional responses.

Additionally, youths identified several barriers to reporting, including:

- Fear of stigma or victim-blaming, especially within peer groups or close communities.
- Limited trust in school authorities or reluctance to involve parents.
- Absence of youth-friendly, confidential reporting mechanisms, both online and offline.

3.5.5 Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The findings from the youth component of the needs assessment in Shkodër reveal a dual reality: on the one hand, young people, particularly adolescent girls in urban areas, demonstrate high levels of awareness regarding gender equality and a willingness to engage in related

initiatives. On the other hand, their ability to act meaningfully remains constrained by social, institutional, and structural barriers.

Firstly, while 80% of respondents reported an understanding of gender equality as a core social and educational value, only 45% felt they had opportunities to contribute actively to promoting these values in their schools or communities. This highlights a significant gap between awareness and empowerment. Youth articulated a desire for meaningful inclusion in decision-making, but existing structures for participation are limited or underutilized.

Secondly, exposure to gender-based violence (GBV), particularly psychological and online abuse, was widespread among respondents. Alarming, 40% reported experiences of emotional violence, while 30% cited incidents of physical abuse. The normalization of violence as "humor" or teasing and the lack of confidential, accessible reporting mechanisms compound the problem. Despite clear recognition of the problem among youth, institutional responses remain inadequate and disconnected from their lived experiences.

Lastly, the data demonstrate that schools are perceived as the central setting for intervention on gender-related issues, yet many youth report the absence of comprehensive educational content on gender equality and the absence of safe spaces for reporting abuse. The role of civil society organizations remains undervalued, and linkages between youth, educators, and service providers are weak or non-existent.

Recommendations

To effectively support youth in becoming agents of change for gender equality and GBV prevention, the following strategic recommendations are proposed:

1. Institutionalize Gender Equality Education

- Integrate comprehensive gender equality and GBV prevention modules into the formal school curriculum, ensuring age-appropriate content that addresses both theoretical concepts and practical applications.
- Mandate teacher training on gender-sensitive pedagogy, classroom management, and response protocols for GBV.

2. Formalize Youth Engagement Mechanisms

- Establish permanent youth-led structures (e.g., school equality councils, municipal youth advisory boards) that are formally recognized and resourced to contribute to local policy development and awareness campaigns.
- Support peer education programs that empower young people to lead prevention efforts, raise awareness, and challenge harmful norms within their peer groups.

3. Strengthen Reporting and Referral Systems

- Develop standardized protocols for identifying, documenting, and referring cases of GBV within school environments, including digital abuse.
- Ensure that these protocols are known and accessible to students and include pathways to psychosocial and legal support.



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4. Expand Youth Access to Safe Spaces and Support Services

- Establish and promote youth-friendly spaces within schools and community centers where young people can access information, counseling, and support in a confidential and non-judgmental setting.
- Encourage civil society organizations to play a more visible role in providing services, advocacy platforms, and capacity-building for youth on gender and rights issues.

5. Promote Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration

- Foster coordination between schools, local government, law enforcement, civil society, and youth structures to ensure a coherent and sustained approach to GBV prevention and gender mainstreaming.
- Establish monitoring mechanisms to evaluate the effectiveness of youth engagement, school-based programs, and institutional responsiveness.

These measures, if implemented comprehensively and in coordination with young people themselves, will contribute to a more equitable, informed, and resilient environment, one in which youth are not only protected but empowered to shape a gender-just society.



4. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PARENTS

As part of the broader assessment under the *AGREE – Action for Girls’ Rights to Equality and Empowerment* project, a semi-structured questionnaire was conducted through in-person interviews with three legal guardians of children. The participants included a biological mother, a grandmother, and an adoptive parent. This approach was intentionally selected to ensure the inclusion of vulnerable and digitally excluded caregivers, thereby maintaining the equity and inclusivity of the research process. The instrument explored multiple dimensions, including demographic information, attitudes toward gender equality, parent-child communication practices, and perceptions regarding gender-based violence (GBV).

4.1 Parent-Child Relationship

The analysis of the semi-structured questionnaire, conducted with three participants representing diverse caregiving roles, a biological mother, a grandmother, and an adoptive parent, offers a multidimensional perspective on caregiving structures and intergenerational influences on gender socialization. This diversity of respondents enhances the understanding of how gender norms are interpreted and transmitted across different familial arrangements.

Each caregiving role is associated with specific cultural expectations and emotional responsibilities. The biological mother reflected a direct and active role in shaping daily routines and values, the grandmother brought insights from a generational lens often steeped in tradition, and the adoptive parent highlighted concerns specific to the vulnerabilities of children in alternative care settings.

Despite these differences, the responses revealed a consistent commitment to ensuring the well-being of children, particularly regarding emotional support and protection from harm. However, the nature of support and the strategies used to address gender norms and risks, especially in relation to gender-based violence, varied according to the caregiver’s personal experience, level of awareness, and access to resources. These variations underscore the importance of context-sensitive interventions that take into account the heterogeneity of family roles in both program design and service delivery.

4.2 Attitudes Toward Gender Equality

The data from the semi-structured interviews reveal generally favorable attitudes toward gender equality among the participating caregivers, though variations in interpretation and application were evident.

All respondents expressed support for equal opportunities for girls and boys, particularly in the domains of education and personal development. This shared position suggests that gender equity is increasingly recognized as a normative expectation within family life, even among caregivers with differing social and generational backgrounds.

However, when asked about traditional gender roles, responses diverged. While some participants explicitly challenged stereotypical expectations, such as the assignment of domestic tasks based on gender, others reflected ambivalence or partial adherence to traditional norms. These mixed views illustrate the coexistence of progressive and conservative beliefs

within family systems, and point to the complex process of attitudinal transition shaped by generational, cultural, and socio-economic factors.

Encouragingly, most caregivers reported that they actively support their children in questioning and resisting gender stereotypes. This reflects not only awareness but also a degree of intentional parenting aimed at fostering critical thinking and equitable values in children. The fact that this practice is present across different caregiving roles (mother, grandmother, adoptive parent) is a noteworthy sign of intergenerational value shifts toward gender equality within the family context.

4.3 Communication with Children on Gender Equality

All three caregivers interviewed reported engaging in conversations with their children about gender equality and gender-based violence (GBV). However, the nature and quality of these discussions varied in terms of depth, frequency, and confidence in addressing sensitive topics.

The adoptive parent demonstrated heightened concern regarding potential exposure to GBV, highlighting a perception that children in alternative care arrangements may be more vulnerable to risk and thus require more proactive and protective communication. This observation is consistent with broader evidence that children without biological parental care often face increased exposure to social and emotional stressors, including violence.

While the intent to educate and protect was evident across all participants, the findings also point to important gaps in knowledge and tools. Most caregivers expressed uncertainty about how to approach complex and age-sensitive subjects such as consent, personal boundaries, discrimination, and cyber violence. These limitations suggest that parents and guardians, though motivated, are not adequately equipped with the language, strategies, or resources necessary to guide children through nuanced conversations around gendered experiences and rights.

This underscores the need for structured support, including training and educational materials, to strengthen caregivers' ability to foster meaningful, age-appropriate dialogue on gender equality and violence prevention within the home.

4.4 Awareness and Response to GBV and Peer Violence

The interviews revealed significant variability in caregivers' awareness and capacity to recognize and respond to gender-based violence (GBV) and peer-related harm. While some participants exhibited a degree of familiarity with behavioral warning signs, such as emotional withdrawal, anxiety, or changes in social behavior, others expressed uncertainty about how to distinguish between typical adolescent struggles and indicators of abuse or violence.

This variation highlights a critical gap in parental preparedness, particularly among those not formally trained or exposed to resources on child protection and GBV prevention. A consistent theme across interviews was the need for targeted support to help parents better understand both overt and subtle forms of violence, including emotional abuse, cyberbullying, and social exclusion.

When reflecting on past incidents, caregivers described a range of response strategies. These included:

- Reporting concerns to schools or relevant authorities.
- Seeking help from psychologists or social workers.
- In some cases, refraining from action due to fear of social stigma, lack of procedural knowledge, or perceived institutional ineffectiveness.

Such findings underscore the importance of institutional trust and the availability of clear, accessible reporting mechanisms. The decision to act, or not, was often shaped less by the severity of the incident than by the caregiver's confidence in institutional responses and their own perceived competence to intervene effectively.

Ultimately, the data point to a pressing need for structured guidance, community-based training, and integrated family support services to strengthen early detection and response to violence affecting children.

4.5 Institutional Support and the Role of the School

Caregivers consistently identified schools as central actors in the promotion of gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV). Across interviews, schools were viewed as both educational and protective environments with a responsibility to provide children with foundational knowledge about respectful relationships, consent, and equality.

However, while this expectation was clearly articulated, caregivers also highlighted the limitations of current school-based interventions. Respondents noted that educational institutions often lack structured curricula or trained personnel to adequately address GBV and gender-related issues. As a result, discussions on gender equality are either superficial, confined to isolated extracurricular activities, or entirely absent from school programming.

Furthermore, parents expressed the need for schools to extend support beyond students, by also engaging families in awareness-raising and capacity-building efforts. Suggestions included organizing joint workshops, distributing informational materials, and integrating parents into school-based prevention initiatives.

The findings indicate that while schools are widely trusted and viewed as essential partners, there is a critical need to strengthen institutional capacity, pedagogical approaches, and family-school collaboration in order to fulfill their potential as effective platforms for gender equality education and violence prevention.

4.6 Parental Support for Children

The data show a shared commitment among caregivers to foster emotionally supportive and gender-sensitive parenting practices. All interviewed participants stated that they encourage their children, regardless of gender, to express their feelings openly. This approach reflects an understanding of the importance of emotional literacy and its role in developing balanced psychosocial skills and resilience in children.

Despite these positive intentions, parents also identified several structural and cultural challenges that limit their ability to provide adequate support, particularly in situations involving gender-based violence or discrimination. Key barriers included:

- Prevailing social norms that discourage emotional vulnerability, particularly among boys;
- Limited access to educational materials or professional guidance on how to approach sensitive conversations;
- A general lack of integration between schools, families, and support services, which leaves parents feeling isolated in responding to complex gender-related challenges.

The findings suggest that while parental attitudes are increasingly aligned with the principles of gender equality and child-centered care, systemic gaps in knowledge, community resources, and institutional cooperation undermine their effectiveness in practice. Addressing these gaps through structured support mechanisms and inclusive education is essential for empowering parents as active agents in the promotion of equality and violence prevention.

4.7 Conclusion

Conclusions

The findings from the semi-structured interviews with parents and caregivers underscore a genuine and growing commitment to gender equality and the prevention of gender-based violence (GBV) within the family context. Caregivers demonstrated a strong desire to support their children emotionally, challenge stereotypes, and engage in meaningful communication around sensitive topics. However, this commitment is constrained by limited access to structured resources, cultural norms, and institutional shortcomings.

Notable conclusions include:

- Progressive attitudes toward emotional expression and gender equity are present but are often undermined by social expectations and insufficient knowledge of how to address GBV effectively.
- Parents frequently rely on individual efforts rather than institutional frameworks, due to a lack of guidance, formal training, and collaboration mechanisms with schools and community organizations.
- Schools are viewed as central to addressing gender issues, but parents perceive them as underprepared or inconsistently involved, particularly in supporting families.
- Caregivers, especially those from alternative care backgrounds, express heightened concern about vulnerability to violence but often lack confidence in recognizing signs or responding appropriately.

Recommendations

To strengthen the capacity of parents and caregivers to support their children in matters of gender equality and GBV prevention, the following interventions are recommended:

1. Develop structured training programs for parents focused on gender equality, GBV awareness, and respectful communication, delivered in collaboration with schools and civil society organizations.
2. Create and disseminate age-appropriate educational materials (e.g., guides, toolkits, visual resources) to support dialogue between parents and children on topics such as consent, online safety, and emotional expression.

3. Establish community-based parent support groups, fostering peer learning, mutual support, and shared strategies for addressing gender-related challenges.
4. Enhance collaboration between schools and families by organizing joint sessions, workshops, and referral mechanisms that involve school psychologists, educators, and parents as co-actors in prevention.
5. Strengthen institutional trust through improved visibility, responsiveness, and accessibility of support services, including school-based reporting pathways, family counseling, and child protection professionals.

By addressing both the attitudinal and structural gaps identified in this research, these measures can contribute to a more coordinated and effective effort to prevent violence and foster an equitable environment for all children and adolescents.



5. NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE WITH THREE YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DID NOT HAVE ACCESS TO THE ONLINE COMPLETION

This section presents the narrative findings derived from three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with young individuals who were unable to participate in the online component of the research due to limited internet access. Despite the small sample, these qualitative insights offer valuable perspectives on youth experiences related to participation in decision-making, gender equality, and gender-based violence (GBV), themes central to the *AGREE – Action for Girls’ Rights to Equality and Empowerment* project.

5.1. Participation and Influence in Decision-Making

The respondents described their influence in decision-making processes as marginal. One participant suggested that youth voices can occasionally influence community-level decisions, particularly when youth are organized, supported by schools or local institutions, or represented in peer networks. However, such opportunities were seen as sporadic and dependent on individual engagement rather than institutionalized pathways.

The participants expressed differing views on the existence and accessibility of participation spaces. One felt that there are platforms, such as school councils or youth forums, though not all youth are aware of or encouraged to join them. The other respondents were more skeptical, noting that the information is often inaccessible and that participation requires prior knowledge, confidence, or social connections that many young people lack, especially in rural or underserved communities.

A shared concern emerged regarding the lack of space for critical thinking and debate in the formal education system. The three participants emphasized that schools emphasize discipline, memorization, and conformity over participatory and reflective learning. As a result, students are often not equipped or encouraged to voice opinions or engage in civic discourse.

One respondent reported involvement in a local youth initiative and described it as a positive experience that boosted their sense of agency. In contrast, the other participants had no experience in activism or voluntary engagement and expressed a sense of detachment, attributing it to both lack of opportunity and confidence.

5.2. Perceptions of Gender Equality

The three interviewees expressed support for gender equality and affirmed the importance of equal opportunities in education, employment, and leadership. They articulated awareness of the gap between formal equality and societal realities, where cultural expectations continue to shape roles and behaviors.

Respondents identified several persistent obstacles for girls and women, including:

- Pressure to conform to traditional gender roles, particularly in relation to caregiving and domestic responsibilities;
- Limited access to leadership opportunities and visible role models;
- Social judgment or family resistance when girls challenge traditional expectations.

The interviewees emphasized the need for intentional encouragement of leadership among girls and boys alike, suggesting that schools and youth programs should work actively to dismantle gender norms and provide equal platforms for expression, responsibility, and visibility.

5.3. Experiences and Understanding of Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

The participants described physical violence, verbal harassment, and cyber violence as the most prevalent forms of abuse they observed or heard about among peers. Particular concern was raised about online spaces, where hate speech, threats, and humiliation are widespread, especially targeting girls. A consistent theme was the lack of trust in institutional responses, such as schools or the police. The respondents noted that young people often refrain from reporting GBV due to:

- Fear of not being taken seriously.
- Fear of retaliation from peers or family.
- Lack of confidentiality or follow-up support.

All three interviewees underscored the rapid rise of digital abuse through messaging apps and social media platforms. They described this as a deeply invasive form of violence that contributes to anxiety, isolation, and in some cases, school avoidance. They emphasized the urgency of institutional engagement, particularly from schools, in prevention, digital literacy education, and early intervention.

5.4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Although limited in scope, this narrative analysis provides critical insight into the lived experiences of youth who are often excluded from mainstream digital or policy consultations due to infrastructural or socio-economic barriers. The interviews reveal a growing awareness of gender equality and a readiness to engage, but also a disconnect between youth aspirations and the structures meant to support them.

Key conclusions include:

- Participation in civic life remains uneven, with limited institutional support and few accessible channels for meaningful engagement.
- Gender equality is embraced in principle, but social norms continue to reinforce inequities in roles, expectations, and opportunities.
- Youth are acutely aware of GBV, particularly in digital contexts, but lack adequate tools and trusted systems for reporting or support.
- Alternative care arrangements may amplify feelings of vulnerability and require tailored support strategies.

Recommendations

1. Expand outreach to digitally excluded and marginalized youth, ensuring participation through alternative formats (e.g., in-person interviews, youth-led community hubs).
2. Strengthen civic education and critical thinking in schools, with a focus on empowering students to question norms, express views, and influence decisions.

3. Design targeted programs to prevent cyber violence, with clear reporting protocols, support services, and accountability measures in schools and digital platforms.
4. Facilitate inclusive youth-led structures, ensuring representation of young people from diverse backgrounds, including those in foster care or rural communities.
5. Integrate parent and caregiver education alongside youth programming to promote consistent support systems within families.

By listening to those at the margins of digital participation, this study underscores the need for inclusive, offline, and context-sensitive approaches in youth empowerment and GBV prevention efforts.



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6. SOURCES

Primary Sources:

The main data was collected through direct research methods, which include:

- Focus Groups guided discussions with different groups where topics such as gender equality, gender-based violence, and youth participation in decision-making processes were discussed.
- Online Questionnaires, were distributed and filled out by a significant number of participants, providing both statistical and qualitative data about their perceptions and experiences.

These primary sources were used to analyze and understand in detail the attitudes and perceptions on these issues, offering direct and fresh information about the reality.

Secondary Sources:

To provide a theoretical and contextual framework, secondary sources were used, including:

- Reports and studies from international and national organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and national reports on gender-based violence and gender equality.
- Academic studies and scientific literature that provide insight into the topic of youth participation and the challenges young people face in decision-making and policymaking processes.

These secondary sources helped to provide a deeper understanding of the issues and to compare the research findings with internationally recognized practices and trends.