

# Policy Brief: Gender Equality on the Local Level in North Macedonia

## Introduction

Gender equality is a critical aspect of social development and progress. This policy brief examines the state of gender equality at the local level in North Macedonia based on the Gender Equality Index developed for this purpose. This policy brief embarks on a journey through three distinct domains—gender gaps, enabling conditions, and gender-sensitive governance—within North Macedonia's municipalities. Each domain weaves a tapestry of complexities, revealing the intricate challenges and opportunities on the path to achieving comprehensive gender equality.

## Key points:

- Most municipalities in North Macedonia exhibit low sensitivity to gender equality, with none achieving a high rank (score of 75 or above).
- 17 municipalities fall within the mid rank (score between 50 and 75), and 64 municipalities are categorized as low rank (score below 50).
- Across municipalities, employment ratios reveal that, on average, only 7 women are employed for every 10 employed men, with only 3 municipalities exceeding the reverse.
- Gender gaps persist in monthly pensions (women receive 84% of men's) and net salaries (women earn 89% of men's), with increasing wages associated with widening disparities.
- Women's advantage is notable in education, as most municipalities report more women with higher education than men.
- The quest for gender parity in politics persists, evidenced by the presence of female mayors in only 11 municipalities over the last five mandates (from 2005 to 2021). Additionally, a persistent gap in municipal councils poses a challenge to the effective implementation of gender representation policies.
- Availability of childcare varies widely across municipalities, with 21 rural areas lacking public institutions like kindergartens. Calculations reveal an average of 1.3 kindergartens per 1000 preschool-age children.
- Reproductive health services also vary, with an average of one gynecologist per 8333 women aged 15 and above.
- Among municipalities, most attribute delays in preparing documents outlining gender equality measures to pre-election commitments, highlighting the challenges of prioritizing gender equality.
- Only 9 out of 33 municipalities allocate more than 0.05% of their 2021 Municipal Budget for gender equality initiatives.
- Amidst challenges, the need for coherent strategies, clear guidelines, and transparent reporting is evident.

## Gender Gaps in Municipal Employment, Wage and Representation: A Tale of Uneven Participation

This section delves into gender gaps in employment and representation across municipalities in the Republic of Macedonia, presenting a snapshot of disparities that warrant immediate attention.

The employment landscape in municipalities reveals significant gender disparities. Based on data from the Census 2021, in the average municipality for every 10 employed men, only 7 women are employed. A mere 3 out of 81 municipalities exhibit a higher count of employed women than men. In the Eastern region of the country during 2021, an interesting contradiction arises: while the overall employment rate is low, women experience a greater diversity of job opportunities compared to men. This anomaly can be attributed to the region's association with the unstable textile industry. This industry is notorious for exploiting workers' rights, leading to frequent job shifts among employees. However, a more concerning trend emerges – employers seem to manipulate employment records, removing and re-registering workers to avoid granting benefits tied to prolonged employment. This discrepancy is evident in the annual employment ratio, based on administrative data from the Employment Agency, with women annually holding 12 jobs registered for every 10 registered by men in municipalities connected to the textile sector, suggesting that women might be exposed to more uncertain work conditions.

Monthly pensions and salaries reflect deep-rooted gender inequalities. The indicator based on the Pension and Disability Insurance Fund administrative data, suggests that the average municipality, women receive monthly pensions that are 84% of those received by men. The average monthly net salary of women stands at 89% of that earned by men, as suggested by the indicator calculated on data from the Public Revenue Office. Interestingly, as wages increase, the gender salary gap widens, signifying a concerning correlation between high wages and increased inequality.

This is very interesting considering that education appears to be a realm where gender disparities tilt in favor of women. The education equality indicator, derived from the 2021 Census, reveals that in most municipalities, more women attain higher education than men. This marks a notable shift in favor of women, as 46 municipalities showcase a higher count of women with higher education, and 6 municipalities exhibit an equal ratio.

The arena of political representation remains a formidable challenge for women. Of the municipalities analyzed, only 11 have been led by female mayors in one of the last five mandates. Progress, while visible, is sporadic. From 2005 to 2021, the number of female mayors oscillated, reaching its peak at 6 in 2017, only to decline to 2 by 2021. Similarly, the gender gap persists in municipal councils, where the average count of female councilors stands at 6 for every 10 which seems to uphold the legal requirement mandating a minimum of 40% female candidates on electoral lists when looked at in total. However, on a municipal level, the representation gap endures in many municipalities.

In summary, the examination of gender disparities within employment, wages, representation, and education across municipalities underscores the need for targeted interventions. Policymakers should address imbalances in employment opportunities, particularly in female-dominated industries like textiles where worker rights are often overlooked. Strategies to rectify financial disparities require comprehensive pay equity policies to counter the gender salary gap. In education, sustained support for women's progress is vital, along with fostering leadership aspirations. To enhance political representation, establishing

female candidate quotas where lacking and promoting an inclusive political environment are crucial steps. Collectively, these measures can pave the way for a more equitable and just society.

## Advancing Enabling Conditions for Gender Equality

This section delves into the realm of enabling conditions for gender equality, focusing on childcare availability and reproductive health services within North Macedonia's municipalities. The analysis uncovers disparities in kindergarten coverage and gynecological services, highlighting the imperative for comprehensive, accessible solutions.

Childcare availability varies considerably across municipalities. Notably, 21 rural municipalities lack public institutions for childcare and education, specifically kindergartens, based on the data from the State Statistical Office. In the municipality of Brvenica, the sole available kindergarten is private, while Konche and Mogila each have a public center for early childhood development. Alarming conditions surface in Studenichani, where over 3000 children lack access to fundamental public services.

Calculations indicate that, on average, there are 1.3 kindergartens per 1,000 preschool-age children. Delving only into municipalities with kindergartens, the average paints a picture of one state kindergarten overseeing 562 children. These figures accentuate the importance of equitable kindergarten distribution and accessibility.

Kindergarten coverage proportions differ widely across municipalities. The municipality of Centar stands as a beacon with 4 public kindergartens, attending to 64.25% of children under 6. However, Shuto Orizari and Lipkovo display significantly lower coverage, with less than 3% of children under care. Across the board, more than half of the municipalities exhibit coverage rates below 30%.

Reproductive health services also exhibit disparities. The average calculation indicates one gynecologist per 8333 women aged 15 and above, with 43 municipalities lacking a gynecologist that works with the national health insurance fund. Butel Municipality's situation is particularly concerning with one gynecologist serving 15770 women in reproductive age. Examining only municipalities that do have gynecologists, the average shifts to one gynecologist per 4166 women aged 15 and above<sup>1</sup>.

In conclusion, the exploration of childcare availability and reproductive health services across North Macedonia's municipalities highlights critical disparities that necessitate urgent attention. The absence of public kindergartens in certain rural municipalities, exemplified by Brvenica and the distressing conditions in Studenichani, underscores the need for a comprehensive approach to ensure accessible early childhood education. The uneven distribution of kindergartens per preschool-age children, as well as varying coverage rates emphasizes the significance of equitable kindergarten access. Similarly, the discrepancies in gynecologist-to-women ratios signal a pressing need for improved reproductive health services. Addressing these disparities requires a strategic implementation of accessible childcare and healthcare services, especially in underserved areas, to pave the way for greater gender equality and well-being.

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<sup>1</sup> Government decrees set a benchmark of 1 gynecology team per 3000 women aged 14 and above. Merely 5 municipalities align with this standard

## Fostering Gender Sensitivity in Municipal Governance

This section unravels the landscape of gender-sensitive municipalities within North Macedonia, scrutinizing their strategies, resource allocation, and transparency.

From the obtained data, 33 local self-government units have a strategic document with measures for gender equality, 44 have allocated funds from the municipal budget for gender programs or measures to advance gender equality, and only 10 have spent funds from the budget for their implementation.

Among the municipalities, 33 have documents outlining measures for gender equality promotion, while 48 attribute delays in preparation to pre-election commitments for the local elections in 2021. This postponement underscores the multifaceted challenges in prioritizing gender equality on the municipal agenda.

An exploration of financial commitments reveals varying degrees of investment. In total, 28 of the 33 municipalities with planned measures divulge data on funds allocation. Alarmingly, only 9 municipalities designate more than 0.05% of their planned 2021 Municipal Budget for gender equality initiatives. The majority dedicate a range between 0.01% and 0.04%, with only 3 allotting 0.05%.

Bogdanci stands out, allocating a substantial amount—2,400,000 denars or 0.86% of the total budget—for gender equality. Intriguingly, discrepancies arise from the official budget and Ministry of Labor and Social Work reports. The divergence highlights ambiguity in capital investments aimed at gender equality promotion, warranting further clarity on the utilization of funds. The city of Skopje emerges as a frontrunner in allocating gender equality funds, utilizing the entire planned sum of 1,150,000 denars (0.15% of the realized budget). These funds originate from subprograms dedicated to social, child, and health care. While the commitment is evident, the lack of a distinct gender equality line item in the budget raises concerns about transparency. Strumica, ranking third in allocation dedication, spends the entirety of the planned 335,800 denars (0.03% of the realized budget) in the gender equality program. However, the distinction between activities advocating gender equality and those under other program umbrellas remains obscure. This underscores the importance of accountable measures, transparent fund allocation, and clear reporting. As municipalities grapple with various challenges, there is a pressing need for coherent strategies, clear guidelines, and unambiguous reporting.

In conclusion, this section unveils the intricate landscape of gender-sensitive municipalities in North Macedonia, revealing their strategies, financial commitments, and transparency levels in promoting gender equality. The delayed formulation of gender equality measures due to pre-election commitments underscores the complexities in elevating gender equality on the municipal agenda. The examination of funds allocation emphasizes significant variations in investment, with a notable disparity between declared intentions and realized budget allocations. The analysis provides additional confirmation that policy planning is not effectively coordinated with the allocation of suitable budgets for implementation. A majority of CSOs have not provided information on the financial resources spent from the municipal budget to implement gender-responsive policies. Furthermore, it is challenging to establish a clear

correlation between the reported funds and the priorities for gender equality outlined in ongoing strategic documents and action plans. In municipalities reporting both allocated and spent funds, some specify funds allocated under the budget program for gender equality, while others consolidate funds allocated under various budget programs, considering them as resources intended to promote gender equality. This lack of uniform reporting complicates the ability to understand and track the financial commitment to gender equality initiatives within municipalities. While standout examples showcase varying degrees of commitment, discrepancies in budget reporting and ambiguity in fund utilization raise concerns about transparency. As municipalities encounter diverse challenges, it is crucial to formulate coherent strategies, establish transparent financial guidelines, and ensure clear reporting mechanisms to tangibly advance gender equality agendas.

## Disclaimer: Contextualizing the Policy Brief within Evolving Realities

It's important to acknowledge that the insights and conclusions presented in this policy brief are grounded in the data available up until 2021. The analysis is based on a landscape prior to the heightened prominence of anti-gender movements that have gained momentum in the subsequent years, particularly in 2023. The evolving dynamics since the data cutoff date necessitate a nuanced consideration of the current context.

As of 2021, the policy brief provides a snapshot of gender equality dynamics in North Macedonia's municipalities. However, it's crucial to recognize that recent events, such as the removal of the term "gender" from documents related to gender equality and the rise of anti-gender movements in various local contexts, have the potential to significantly impact the landscape. These movements have been influential in shaping local narratives and policies, potentially affecting gender-sensitive measures, governance practices, and overall progress in gender equality.

One notable aspect is the shift in Strumica, which achieved a relatively high score in 2021. The municipality's involvement in anti-gender movements serves as a poignant example of how attitudes and priorities can change over a short time. This shift underscores the complex interplay between progress and regression in the gender equality arena.

Given these recent developments, it's anticipated that the gender equality landscape in North Macedonia may have evolved and, in some cases, regressed since 2021. The policy brief's conclusions may therefore not fully reflect the current realities on the ground. For a comprehensive understanding of the current state of affairs, further analysis and insights informed by up-to-date data and information are required.

As the landscape continues to evolve, the need for continued research, advocacy, and action in support of gender equality becomes all the more vital. While the policy brief provides valuable insights into historical trends and potential pathways for progress, it is important to approach the evolving gender equality context in North Macedonia with awareness of the shifting dynamics and challenges.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In conclusion, this comprehensive policy brief meticulously examines the landscape of gender equality at the local level in North Macedonia, presenting a nuanced understanding of the challenges and

opportunities across municipalities. The findings resonate with the complex interplay of historical norms, socioeconomic factors, and evolving perceptions of gender roles.

The analysis of gender gaps in employment, wages, and representation illuminates persistent disparities that demand targeted interventions. Implementing consistent pay equity policies is pivotal to narrowing the wage gap, with a particular emphasis on industries where disparities are exacerbated as wages increase. Encouraging women's entry into leadership positions becomes essential for rectifying the skewed representation, requiring tailored support programs to nurture leadership aspirations.

The educational sphere stands out as a beacon of hope, showcasing women's advancement in higher education attainment. Building on this advantage, fostering mentorship and empowerment programs can channel this momentum towards various professional domains, further contributing to bridging gender disparities.

Childcare availability and reproductive health services represent pressing challenges. The glaring absence of public kindergartens in rural areas underscores the need for a holistic approach that ensures early childhood education and care is accessible to all, regardless of location. Considering that women are still predominantly responsible for early care in families, the lack of accessible public childcare facilities further undermines women's employment opportunities. It is precisely the family responsibilities and caregiving duties that are cited as the primary reasons for women's exclusion from the formal labor market in official statistics. Similarly, bridging the gaps in reproductive health services requires strategic allocation of resources to guarantee that quality healthcare is accessible to every woman, promoting overall well-being.

In the realm of gender-sensitive governance, the varying degrees of commitment and transparency across municipalities underline the necessity for clear guidelines and accountable measures. Instances like Bogdanci and Skopje showcase the potential for robust financial allocation, but the discrepancies in fund utilization underscore the importance of transparency to ensure resources are effectively channeled towards gender equality initiatives.

Although this policy brief provides significant insights drawn from data available until 2021, it's essential to recognize the changing dynamics, particularly the emergence of anti-gender movements. These movements have the capacity to alter perspectives and preferences, potentially impacting initiatives for achieving gender equality. In this context, continued research, proactive advocacy, and adaptable strategies are pivotal to navigating the evolving landscape.

Ultimately, fostering gender equality at the local level in North Macedonia demands a multifaceted approach. Comprehensive policies, industry-specific interventions, transparent governance practices, and ongoing awareness campaigns collectively form the foundation for progress. In a rapidly changing world, the journey towards gender equality must remain resilient, adaptive, and deeply rooted in the principles of justice and inclusion.