

# magDA

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We give voice to the stories that **shape** our future



# From MagDA to you

Dear reader,

Welcome to the second edition of MagDA – the Magazine of Dialogue Academy. Released during the **16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence**, this edition takes a stand against the many forms of violence affecting women and men across our communities.

Together, we tackle the physical, psychological, social, structural, and institutional forms of violence and challenges encountered by both women and men. In addition, we explore how norms and structures can both fuel and sustain gender-based violence, and how, by understanding these layers, we can collectively work toward change.

In this edition, through articles, illustrations, and poetry, we present the work of young people from both societies on topics from societal expectations and body image to the systemic barriers in laws and policies meant to protect.

We hope this edition inspires reflection and solidarity, reminding us of the power we hold to challenge gender-based violence and to build a more just, compassionate world for everyone.

In solidarity and strength,  
The **MagDA** Team

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This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

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# How do self-defence laws affect women in Western Balkans?

Vuk Tripković

From one news article to another, from year to year, the problem of gender-based violence is not a new occurrence. We are always surrounded by yet another tabloid headline about the death of another woman, for which **in a large number of cases there is no adequate responsibility of the perpetrators**, but the worst thing is that the police and the prosecutor's office do not react adequately in many cases. In Serbia in 2023 there were reported 28 cases of femicide[1], while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, according to OSCE data[2], every second woman has experienced some sort of violence since the age of fifteen.

**Trust in public institutions varies across the region:** in Serbia, 27.2% of women fully trust the police, compared to 11.9% who fully trust the prosecutor's office, whereas in Kosovo\*, 49% of all respondents fully trust the police, and only 13% trust the prosecutor's office[3]. All people, but especially women, are bound to trust these institutions, but when they fail do, they have the right to take their own security in their own hands. In this article **we will explore how the self-defence laws affect women, the laws and women's perception of their own security**. In Serbia the criminal law does not have the term self-defence, but something that is called necessary defence.

The law states[4]: **"An act committed in necessary defence is not a criminal act. The perpetrator who exceeded the limits of necessary defence may have his sentence reduced. If the perpetrator exceeded the limits of necessary defence due to strong irritation or panic caused by the attack, he can be released from punishment"**. [5] This appears reasonable, but I believe there are two key issues with this law that could particularly impact women. First you have to carefully choose a method of self-defence.

For example, if somebody attacks you with a hammer and you try to protect yourself with a firearm, you would also be liable for prosecution, because the law states that the weapon of defence must be of equal or lesser strength than attackers[6]. Second one, self-defence is really hard to prove and court cases can be excruciatingly long and take years. Also, there is a big problem tracking these cases, because **there is no publicly known data for how many people are convicted or acquitted for self-defence**.

To understand a woman's perspective on the issue I talked with TV host and an activist Ana Mihajlovski, who has recently been raising awareness about obstetric violence in Serbian society. When asked how she thinks this law affects women she remarked: "The law on self-defence is not even discussed in public. In Serbia, there is no known case in which a woman decided to defend herself from a violent husband, so I am not sure that women even think about the fact that they might be able to defend themselves from a violent man". She continues: "Women in the Balkans are so afraid of their abusers that the vast majority do not even report the violence". In addition to the fear of abusers, the low number of reports of violence is certainly influenced by distrust in institutions that repeatedly fail to protect all those women who have actually reported abusers.

**The number of femicides and violence against women in the Balkans** shows that it is necessary for governments to get to grips with this burning problem. Changing the law on self-defence could be a crucial step in empowering women to respond in various ways, not just through self-defence.

[1] Gočanin, S., & Manojlović, M. (2024, March). Chain of Women's Murders in Serbia Continues This Year: How to Prevent It? Radio Free Europe. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/femicid-srbija-propusti-institucije/32863192.html>

[2] Augustinović, M. (2024, July 2). Femicides: Law in BiH and Women's Murders. Radio Free Europe. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/femicid-zakoni-bih-ubistva-zene/33018807.html>

[3] World Bank. (2022). Kosovo: Country Gender Assessment. [https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/WBSB\\_2022\\_Kosovo\\_Report\\_1\\_Dec\\_2022\\_ENG.pdf](https://qkss.org/images/uploads/files/WBSB_2022_Kosovo_Report_1_Dec_2022_ENG.pdf)

[4] Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia. (2019). Paragraf.rs. <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni-zakonik-2019.html>

[5] Criminal Code of the Republic of Serbia. (2019). Paragraf.rs. <https://www.paragraf.rs/propisi/krivicni-zakonik-2019.html>

[6] Increased Penalties for Traffic Violations. (2018). Paragraf.rs. <https://www.paragraf.rs/dnevne-vesti/220118/220118-vest3.html>



I personally believe that a better law on self-defence would not only empower women, but also make abusers think twice before they decide to take monstrous steps.

Institutions must first and foremost fulfil their duty by responding to women's reports with clarity, decisiveness, and concrete action while they are still alive.

Women need empowerment in the form of good social support, a good education system, equal business opportunities as well as strong laws that are implemented to ensure their protection and rights. **There are many steps that must be taken to protect women from such a large number of abusers**, and the improvement of the law on self-defence as well as public debates on the subject can be one of the small steps towards the protection of women in the Balkans.

To understand more about the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina I talked with young feminist activist Tea Kljajić.[7]



ILLUSTRATION BY SUKIS.ART

Self-defence laws in Bosnia and Herzegovina do vary between different levels of government, such as entities and cantons. However, they have in common that self-defence is considered legitimate only if there is an immediate threat to life, and that the response to an attack must be proportionate to the threat[8]. Kljajić adds: "For example, if someone attacks you with a cucumber in your home, you do not have the right to overreact physically because you could be held criminally liable for exceeding necessary defence." Since 2015, women have been allowed to carry pepper spray, and later this right was extended to men as well. Also, the Law on the acquisition, possession and carrying of weapons allows the possession of electric stun guns of less than 10,000 volts.

When asked if more liberal self-defence laws would benefit women, she said the following:

**"I believe that many women in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not sufficiently informed about their rights regarding self-defence, especially when it comes to carrying pepper spray and electric stun guns. There is very little information available on the internet, and often the only way to get accurate information is to read the law. Although enabling the use of these devices is a big step forward, much work still needs to be done to educate and inform women about their rights. The definition of proportionality in self-defence is also a problem—if I live alone and a man breaks into my house, how do I know if he just wants to steal something or harass me?"**

In Kosovo\*, there's no specific law on self-defence, but the idea is included in Article 12 of the Criminal Code under necessary defence. Like in the other part of Western Balkan region, necessary defence means acting to stop an unlawful, real, and imminent attack on a person or their rights. The defence must be proportional to the threat. **If too much force is used, the defender could face criminal charges.** However, if the person acted out of extreme fear or confusion, the punishment could be reduced or even dismissed, depending on the circumstances.

There are some notable cases where woman defended herself, but not necessarily considered clear cut cases of self-defence. Such as the case of **Mrika Nikqi and the case of Suzana Zogëjani Sekiraqa.**

[7] Tea Kljajić. (n.d). Learn Liberty. Gočanin, S., & Manojlović, M. (2024, March). Chain of Women's Murders in Serbia Continues This Year: How to Prevent It? Radio Free Europe. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/femicid-srbija-propusti-institucije/32863192.html>  
[8] Criminal Code of Bosnia and Herzegovina. (2023). Paragraf.ba. Gočanin, S., & Manojlović, M. (2024, March). Chain of Women's Murders in Serbia Continues This Year: How to Prevent It? Radio Free Europe. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/femicid-srbija-propusti-institucije/32863192.html>



Mirka Nikqi is the youngest climber to climb highest peaks of the seven continents of the world, sexually assaulted on the street while walking. Her assault was fortunately captured by security cameras, and later **served as key evidence in court** [9]. Although it was not considered a clear case of self-defence, as no injuries were caused to the perpetrator, the footage clearly shows Mrika struggling for some time before managing to escape the abuser's grip.

Without the security camera footage, it's possible that eyewitnesses might have come forward to testify, but in the absence of any witnesses, it is uncertain whether the court would have believed Mrika's testimony and held the abuser accountable. While this reflects a correct institutional reaction, many situations might occur where the circumstances are at a disadvantage to the victim and the abuse cannot be properly evidenced, such as ongoing violence that occurs at home or closed environments.

Such is the case of **Suzana Zogëjani Sekiraqa**, a survivor of domestic violence for 11 years, sentenced to 25 years for the murder of her husband, after enduring continuous abuse. Suzana reported the violence to French and Kosovo\* authorities, but during the court proceedings, she was not recognised as a victim of persistent and ongoing domestic violence.

Her case was ultimately brought before the Constitutional Court, which found violation of Article 31 (Right to a Fair and Impartial Trial) of the Constitution.

To get more of a woman's perspective of the situation in Kosovo\* I talked with researcher Mjellma Kallaba. When asked if the more liberal self-defence laws would help women she replied:

**“I think that while we are in this situation, more liberal self-defence laws would potentially provide women with a stronger legal protection, but more importantly, with a stronger feeling of security. Not having proper rehabilitative programs for the abusers, women remain at risk of repetitive abuse, hence it is important to have the opportunity to protect ourselves without having to worry about the legal repercussions or living with the traumatic experiences (any act of violence brings) due to the inability of the state to protect women.”**

She continues

**“It is important to also recognise that self-defence laws alone may not fully address the situation we are dealing with in its core**

**Especially the broader issues contributing to violence against women, such as patriarchal societal norms – cultural attitudes and gaps in institutional response. However, broader self-defence protection, such as the legal use of pepper spray or other non-lethal means of protection, can have a significant impact by empowering women to defend themselves in dangerous situations”.**

In Kosovo\* there are active NGOs that fight and advocate for women's rights, and many have already pushed for broader self-defence protections. These organizations recognize that **self-defence laws, while crucial, are only one part of the solution**. They continue to emphasize the need for stronger institutional responses, such as improved law enforcement training, faster judicial processes, and the implementation of rehabilitation programs for abusers. Reducing stigma and bias against victims of gender-based violence is essential, along with raising awareness about the challenges women face and providing education in communities from an early age.

Additionally, we should **encourage reporting of violence cases**, ensuring victims feel supported throughout the process. It is crucial to track these cases from start to finish, holding institutions accountable and ensuring justice is achieved.

In conclusion, the issue of self-defence in the Western Balkans reveals **significant gaps in the legal framework when it comes to protecting women from violence** and shows the lack of understanding and acknowledgment of gender-based violence in the judicial process exacerbates the problem. Liberalizing self-defence laws could provide women with stronger legal protection and a greater sense of security, but legal reform alone will not solve the problem.

There must be broader societal changes, including **better education, stronger institutional support, and effective enforcement of existing legal protections**. Empowering women to defend themselves, both legally and socially, is a critical step forward.

However, as pointed out by the activists interviewed, a comprehensive approach is necessary—one that addresses the root causes of violence, challenges patriarchal norms, and ensures that the legal system upholds justice for victims of abuse. Public debates and institutional accountability are vital in creating a safer and more equitable environment for women in the Balkans.

[9] Vatovci, I. (2022, August 30). Suspicions of Sexual Assault: Video of the Attack on Mountaineer Mrika Nikqi in Peja Published. Kallxo. <https://kallxo.com/lajm/dyshime-per-sulm-seksual-publikohet-videoja-e-sulmit-ndaj-alpinistes-mrika-nikqi-ne-peje-video/>

# Redefining Masculinity: A Different Paradigm for Gender Equality

## Edona Shala

Throughout history, men have defined themselves mainly by being different from women, avoiding anything associated with femininity or homosexuality, and sticking to their traditional roles in a male-dominated society.

As these old structures start to change, men are starting to feel insecure. Their identities, once firmly rooted in outdated patriarchal notions, are now being questioned, revealing that these concepts lack substantial foundation.

This confusion often turns into frustration, which is sometimes directed at women and queer people.

### **Why do these insecurities happen? How can society deal with them?**

The idea of "positive masculinity" is important here. It focuses on the good qualities traditionally linked to being a man, like strength, courage, and determination, while rejecting harmful traits like aggression and dominance.

This definition of masculinity aims to encourage empathy and support gender equality. It encourages men and boys to adopt behaviours that empower women and actively fight against violence toward them.

### **However, what defines masculinity? Whose interests does it serve, and how can it be reshaped to reflect inclusive and equitable values?**

The transition towards positive masculinity is not only about changing behaviours but involves a profound shift in societal expectations and norms. By addressing these questions, society can move towards a more inclusive understanding of gender roles, ultimately benefiting individuals of all genders.

### **Gender as a Social Construct**

Gender is a social construct, not a biological fact. Social theorists like Judith Butler,



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who argue that gender identity is performative. It is shaped by societal norms and expectations rather than being based on inherent traits.

The terms "sex" and "gender" are often used interchangeably, but they are not synonymous. While sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define men and women, gender includes a broader spectrum of identity, expression, and social roles related to masculinity and femininity. Gender is shaped by social, cultural, and individual factors. Gender roles and expectations are influenced by family, friends, media, and education and can vary widely from one society to another.



In Kosovo\*, for example, traditional gender roles have been deeply rooted in patriarchal structures. Men typically held decision-making power and provided for their families, while women were confined to domestic and care duties. Violence is often normalized as a method of discipline and problem-solving. Although educational advancements have started to shift these dynamics, the legacy of such upbringings still influences contemporary gender relations, with men often bearing the financial burden and women managing household chores.

This societal backdrop reveals the power dynamics at play in defining masculinity and underscores the need for redefining gender norms to promote equality. Given this understanding, the challenge becomes how to redefine and reinterpret concepts like masculinity in a manner that deconstructs patriarchal influences and promotes equality.

### **Patriarchy and Masculinity Go Hand in Hand**

Patriarchy, as a system of social organization, privileges men and enforces rigid gender roles that uphold male dominance and female subordination. This system has historically defined masculinity in terms of power, control, and suppression of emotions—traits that reinforce male dominance and perpetuate inequality.

The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love by bell hooks emphasizes that even men who resist patriarchal norms still operate within a system that sustains male privilege. Therefore, dismantling patriarchy requires redefining masculinity in ways that do not rely on domination or violence.

Hegemonic masculinity, as described by R.W. Connell, reinforces the dominant social position of men and the subordination of women. This form of masculinity is characterized by traits such as aggression, dominance, and emotional suppression, which are often linked to patriarchal values. Feminist theorists argue that these traits are not inherent to men but are imposed by a patriarchal society that seeks to maintain male privilege.

Angela Saini's book "The Patriarchs: How Men Came to Rule" provides a historical perspective that challenges the idea that patriarchy is a natural part of human evolution. Saini explores how early state societies in Mesopotamia began categorizing people strictly by gender, which led to the oppression of women and the reinforcement of male dominance.

This transition from more egalitarian societies to patriarchal ones was driven by the elites' desire to maintain power and control. Their strategies included subjugating women to ensure a stable population. She highlights examples of matrilineal societies and archaeological findings that indicate more egalitarian social structures in the past, supporting the argument that patriarchy is a social construct that can be dismantled.

### **The Societal Context of the Western Balkans**

In the Western Balkans, deeply rooted patriarchal norms have historically shaped family dynamics, where men typically assume decision-making roles while women are often relegated to domestic responsibilities. Societal structures have been organized in a way that assigns specific roles strictly to men and others to women, reinforcing gender disparities.

Violence against women is pervasive and often seen as a normalization of disciplinary practices within households. Men in the region grow up witnessing violence against their mothers or other female family members, which extends to broader social environments such as schools and neighbourhoods. These formative experiences have significantly influenced contemporary gender relations, with power dynamics in households remaining largely unchanged from those of previous generations.

In many families across the region, women are still expected to **juggle household chores alongside their employment**, while men typically retain the financial burden. Although decision-making is sometimes shared, women rarely have exclusive authority in this regard. Childcare responsibilities continue to be predominantly viewed as a woman's domain, with men often participating only as secondary caregivers. Paternity leave is frequently perceived as supplementary to maternity leave, rather than as an opportunity to foster greater paternal involvement in child-rearing.

Moreover, deeply rooted gender norms shape societal expectations of behaviour and roles. Homophobic attitudes are prevalent, with many in the region considering homosexuality to be unnatural and unwelcome. Elements of rape culture persist, with victim-blaming commonly occurring in cases of sexual violence. While sex work is largely viewed as immoral, many men acknowledge engaging in transactional relationships.

The **Gender Equality Index** highlights significant disparities in various domains, particularly in economic power and violence against women. Countries in the Western Balkans are making strides in political representation, largely due to legal quotas for women in governance. However, challenges such as lower income levels and pervasive violence against women hinder overall progress toward genuine gender equality.

### **The Influence of Media**

The role of mass media in shaping societal norms and stereotypes about masculinity cannot be understated. Historically, the media has perpetuated harmful stereotypes about what it means to be a man.

However, the media also plays an important role in challenging and changing these stereotypes. In recent years, there has been a noticeable shift in how men are portrayed in the media, with an increasing focus on diverse and positive representations of masculinity. This evolving portrayal helps to challenge traditional norms and encourages a broader understanding of what it means to be a man.

This evolving portrayal is essential for promoting genuine gender equality rather than reinforcing existing hierarchies.

### **Performing Positive Masculinity: The other side of the story**

As societal norms evolve, men have come to understand positive masculinity as something that earns them "positive tokens" in society.

This performative aspect can be an issue because it may not show a real understanding of positive masculinity. Instead, it can lead to a shallow agreement with gender equality while hidden sexist attitudes stay the same.

It's important to make the difference between genuine efforts to adopt positive masculinity and actions done just for social approval. Real progress needs deep, personal changes in attitudes and beliefs, not just a surface-level fit with what society expects.

### **Towards Gender Equality**

To achieve gender equality, we must redefine masculinity by rejecting patriarchal values and embracing qualities like justice and freedom. Understanding the difference between gender and sex is key to discussing masculinity.

Everyone should support positive masculinity to create a society where everyone is respected. Addressing the high rates of gender-based violence is also essential, as it often stems from rigid gender expectations.

Changing how men are portrayed in the media is a vital step toward this goal. To make real change, we need to engage leaders from various sectors to challenge outdated views on gender roles. It is also essential to involve men in supporting women's rights, as many already back equality laws. Finally, changing how boys and girls are raised is essential for positive behaviour in adulthood. By working together, we can create a more equal world for everyone.



# Am I up to your standards?

Eralda Brahim, Erionita Deliu, Rina Fetiu  
and Eliza Ratkoceri, Girls Talks'  
participants

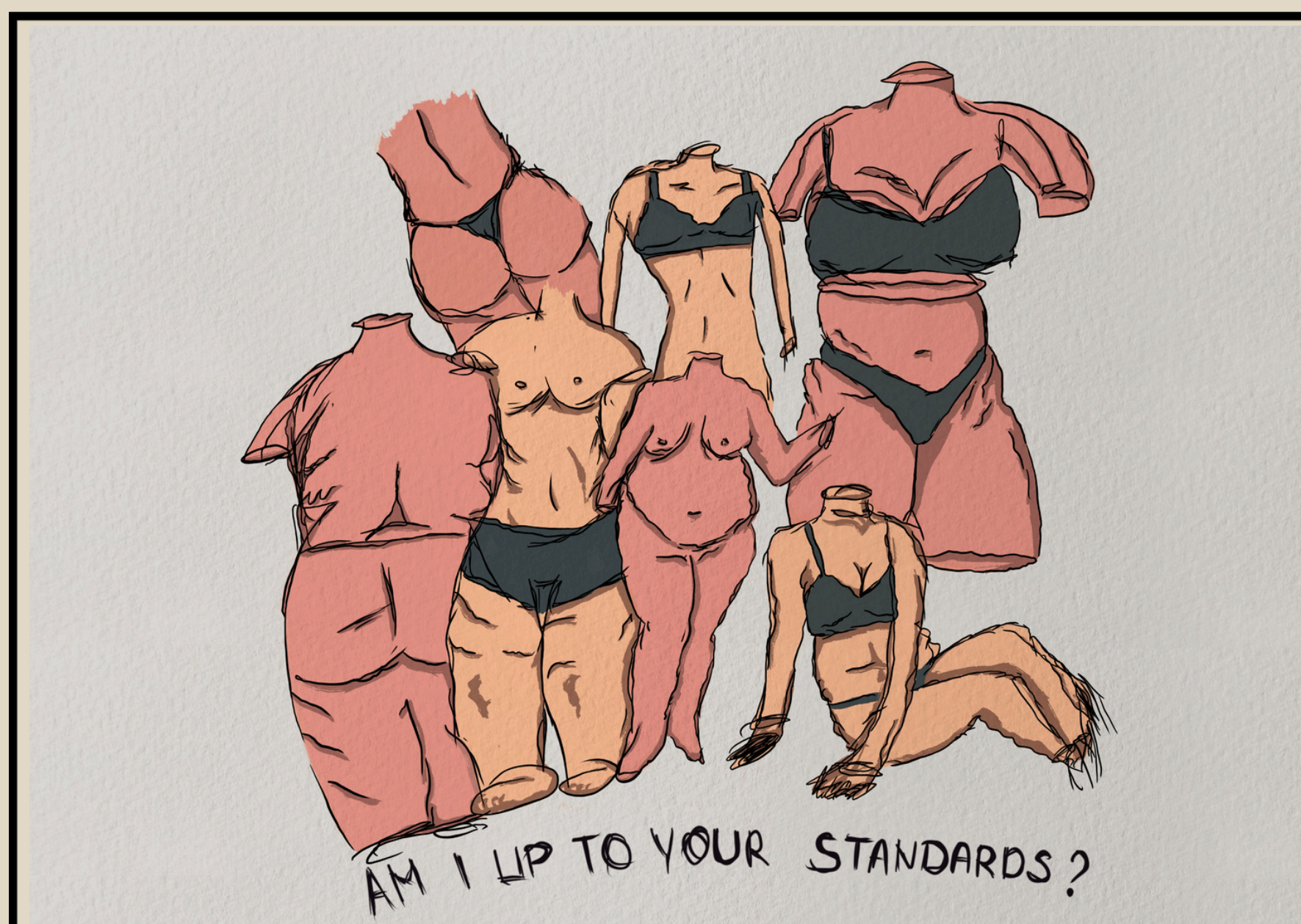


ILLUSTRATION BY SUKIS.ART

Gain some weight, you're too skinny.  
Lose some weight, you've gained too much.  
Why are you dressing so tight, trying to get the boys' attention?  
Don't dress so loose, you look like a boy.  
Who are you getting so dressed up for?  
What's wrong with you that you're not wearing makeup—are you sick?  
Don't talk too much, it does not suit you.  
Speak up more, no one is taking you seriously.  
Go out sometimes, or else you'll end up staying home forever.  
Don't go out too much, people will talk.  
Quit school, you're not cut out for studying; better find a husband and settle down.  
Focus on school, because you won't get anywhere with men.  
Don't act crazy, no one will take you seriously like that.  
Smile a bit, you look too harsh.  
Don't smile too much, it attracts the wrong kind of attention.  
Of course, anything to meet your expectations.



To you

Mifeta Buhiqi



ILLUSTRATION BY SUKIS.ART

The gloss shines on your lips  
 Black eye shadow  
 Beautifully groomed hair  
 And you look in the mirror  
 Silence doesn't suit you at all  
 Not even that upside down half moon  
 The volcano inside you burns  
 The spark becomes the sun,  
 The earth catches fire  
 Let your voice be heard everywhere  
 To cross all the skies  
 The power you possess  
 Since ancient times, you are a goddess.  
 I think you forgot  
 You have the courage of your mother  
 You are strong, you are beautiful  
 Even more than the moon  
 Let the last crystal come out  
 Out of your beautiful eye  
 And then rush back  
 You are an individual, above all.



# Why Menstrual Equity Matters: The Politics and Economics of Periods

## Tringa Leka

Imagine a world where something as natural and unavoidable as menstruation could be a reason for shame, financial struggle, and political debate. This is not a hypothetical situation for millions of people worldwide—it is their daily reality.

Growing up, I witnessed firsthand how **menstruation was often treated as a taboo topic**. This silence around such a natural bodily function always struck me as odd and unfair. I was lucky to be raised in a household where this topic was discussed openly and I didn't have to hide my experience but was supported through it. But being lucky shouldn't be the case, it should be the standard. Seeing how other girls my age were introduced to this important aspect of our lives, and the shame that came with it, is part of why menstrual equity has become such a significant issue to me today.

Menstruation may seem like a personal matter, but it has far-reaching implications, from access to education to workforce participation. Without addressing this issue head-on, we are missing a critical opportunity to **create more inclusive and fair societies for everyone**.

So, let's talk about the significance of menstrual equity, examining its economic, political, and social dimensions. We'll explore how cultural stigmas, economic burdens, and political inaction shape the menstrual experience and highlight the urgent need for change.

### The Hidden Struggles

The experience of menstruation varies widely from person to person, yet it often carries a common thread of challenge and discomfort. For many, the onset of menstruation is marked by confusion and anxiety, as the topic is seldom discussed openly in families or communities. I have seen friends struggle with their periods, not just physically but emotionally because they had no idea what was happening to their bodies. They were left to figure it out on their own.

A significant aspect of these challenges is the lack of access to reliable information about menstrual health. Many young people learn about menstruation through whispered conversations with peers or misleading information found online. The consequences of misinformation go beyond confusion—they can lead to harmful practices like improper hygiene or emotional isolation.

### Understanding Menstrual Stigma

The stigma surrounding menstruation is deeply rooted in cultural norms and misconceptions. In many cultures, menstruation is seen as something impure or dirty, leading to the isolation of menstruating individuals. This stigma affects not only their self-esteem but also their access to education and employment. **Menstrual stigma** perpetuates inequality by pushing menstruating individuals to the margins of society. Whether it's missing school due to shame or suffering in silence at work, these experiences have real-life consequences, including limiting career development and future success.

Encouragingly, there are signs of progress. In Kosovo\*, two non-profits have begun offering menstrual leave to employees[9], a concept that remains under debate worldwide. Spain recently passed **Europe's first paid 'menstrual leave' law**[10], sparking hope that more countries will follow suit. While these are small steps, they are crucial in creating a more supportive and understanding work environment for all women.

Personally, I experience heavy periods accompanied by back pain and migraines, making it nearly impossible to go to work, even with painkillers. **I often have to use my sick days to rest, which feels unfair**. Menstruation is a natural, recurring function, and it doesn't seem right to deplete sick leave for something so inevitable. This is why seeing companies and countries implement menstrual leave policies gives me hope for a future where menstruating individuals no longer have to choose between their health and their careers.

[10]Gashi, D. (2020, 23 Dhjetor). Time off for women's self-care. Transitions Online. <https://tol.org/client/article/time-off-for-womens-self-care.html>  
 [11]Spain set to become the first European country to introduce a 3-day menstrual leave for women. (2023, February 16). Euronews. <https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/02/16/spain-set-to-become-the-first-european-country-to-introduce-a-3-day-menstrual-leave-for-women>

### The Economic Burden of Menstruation

The economic aspect of menstruation is often overlooked but has a significant impact on individuals and families. The cost of menstrual products can be prohibitive for low-income households, forcing many to choose between buying essentials like food and hygiene products. This is known as "period poverty," [10] a term that describes the financial strain caused by menstruation. I've been fortunate enough to never have to worry about affording menstrual products, but when I first heard about "period poverty," it really hit me. Something so essential should never be out of reach for anyone, yet for millions of people, it is.

The economic burden of menstruation is not just about money; it is about dignity. [11] In Montenegro[12], activists have urged the government to pass legislation that would tackle period poverty by providing free menstrual products in schools and public institutions. When people are forced to use makeshift products or skip school and work because they can't afford proper supplies, it deepens cycles of poverty and inequality, affecting entire communities. A study in North Macedonia [13] revealed that a significant number of girls and women struggle to afford menstrual products, leading to missed school and work. This reinforces how period poverty disrupts education and employment opportunities, further entrenching economic inequality and hindering personal development for those affected.

### Menstrual Products as a Political Issue

The taxation of menstrual products has become a focal point in the fight for menstrual equity. In many countries, menstrual products are subject to a "luxury tax[12]," which treats them as non-essential items. This tax highlights a fundamental misunderstanding of menstruation and places an unnecessary financial burden on menstruating individuals.

Activists argue that menstrual products are essential and should be tax-free or provided for free by the state. Some countries have begun to address this issue. For example, Scotland became the first country to provide free menstrual products [13] to anyone who needs them.

This felt like a huge step forward. It made me wonder why more countries are not following suit. What is stopping them from recognizing menstrual products as essential and eliminating these unnecessary taxes?

In Kosovo\*, activists are pushing to eliminate the tax on menstrual products, framing it as part of a broader fight against the stigma and financial barriers surrounding menstruation. Politicians have repeatedly rebuffed the request, arguing it may trigger a domino effect, such as calls for tax cuts on products such as nappies. The fight to remove taxes on menstrual products is about more than just money—it is about equity. It is about recognizing that menstrual products are essential, not optional. By viewing these products as optional, governments are perpetuating a cycle of inequity, where the needs of menstruating individuals are deprioritized.

### The Role of Education and Advocacy

Education is a powerful tool for combating menstrual stigma and promoting equity. I have seen how a lack of menstrual education impacts people around me—whether it's family members or colleagues who are still uncomfortable talking about periods.

By integrating comprehensive menstrual education into school curricula, we can demystify menstruation and empower young people with the knowledge they need to manage their periods confidently.

Advocacy groups and organizations play a crucial role in raising awareness and pushing for policy changes. In Kosovo\*, initiatives like the campaign "Peceta nuk është luks.[14]" (Pads are not luxury.), aim to highlight the injustices faced by menstruating individuals and demand action from policymakers. These campaigns use a combination of public protests, social media activism, and community engagement to drive change.

Whereas in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the UNFPA, and Sarajevo Canton have launched the "Za Naše Dane u Mjesecu[15]" (For Our Days of the Month) campaign, which aims to reduce menstrual poverty by raising awareness and improving access to menstrual products. This initiative also focuses on integrating menstrual education into schools, breaking taboos, and advocating for policy changes that support menstruating individuals.

[11] Kajosevic, S. (2022, 7 Dhjetor). Montenegro govt urged to back law to end period poverty. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/12/07/montenegro-govt-urged-to-back-law-to-end-period-poverty/>

[12] Mileska, T. (2024, 19 Gusht). Period justice for all: The case of North Macedonia. WAVE Network. <https://wave-network.org/period-justice-for-all-the-case-of-north-macedonia/>

[13] Bami, X. (2022, 15 Gusht). Kosovo women seek an end to period poverty. Balkan Insight. <https://balkaninsight.com/2022/08/15/kosovo-women-seek-end-to-period-poverty/>

[14] Scottish Government. (n.d.). Access to free period products. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/poverty-and-social-justice/access-to-free-period-products/>

[15] Gashi, D. (2020, 23 Dhjetor). Time off for women's self-care. Transitions Online. <https://tol.org/client/article/time-off-for-womens-self-care.html>



### Breaking the Silence: Personal Stories of Resilience

Throughout history, advocacy groups have been resilient in the face of menstrual challenges, fighting against stigma and inequality. In Kosovo\*, different organizations have been instrumental in promoting menstrual equity, highlighting the financial burden of menstruation, and calling for policy changes to remove taxes on menstrual products.

Women's movements worldwide amplify voices and demand menstrual equity as a fundamental human right. Sharing personal stories is one of the most effective ways to dismantle stigma. Each story adds to the collective voice calling for change, making it harder for policymakers to ignore the need for menstrual equity. These stories also inspire others to speak up, creating a ripple effect of empowerment.

### Embracing Menstrual Equity for a Better Future

Policies such as eliminating taxes on menstrual products or offering paid menstrual leave can break down financial and social barriers, fostering more inclusive workplaces and communities. By embracing menstrual equity, we work toward a future where no one is disadvantaged by a natural, biological process, ensuring dignity and respect for all.



ILLUSTRATION BY SUKIS.ART

[16] 'Peceta nuk është luks': Qika në aksion simbolik para Qeverisë. (2024, May). Telegrafi. <https://telegrafi.com/peceta-nuk-eshte-luks-qika-aksion-simbolik-para-qeverise-kerkohet-ge-produktet-menstruale-te-lirohen-nga-tarifat-doganore/>  
 [17] UNFPA. (2022, 13 Shtator). UNFPA and Sarajevo Canton work to reduce menstrual poverty: 'Za Naše Dane u Mjesecu' campaign. <https://ba.unfpa.org/en/news/unfpa-and-sarajevo-canton-work-reduce-menstrual-poverty-za-na-na%C5%A1e-dane-u-mjesecu-campaign>

# Hey fella, you're not alone!

Rilind Sadiku



Are you a young man who feels abused by reality, still searching for meaning, feeling hollow and alone? Well, let me tell you, you're not alone!

Everyone is fighting a battle of their own and it's perfectly okay to reach out for help, even if you've been taught that showing emotion is a sign of weakness and vulnerability.

Let's break this stigma and create a community where everyone can be their authentic self.



# Hey Girl, How Safe Do You Feel while Walking on the Streets of Prishtinë/Priština and Petrovac na Mlavi?

## Adea Dobra & Teodora Stojanović

A shared desire for safety united us, leading us to independently and unknowingly research the same topic in 2022, before we even met. In Prishtinë/Priština, Adea conducted six in-depth interviews to explore women's experiences with street harassment and its impact on their well-being. Meanwhile, in Petrovac na Mlavi, Teodora organized workshops with 60 students on gender-based violence, followed by a questionnaire to understand perspectives and the needs of young people in the community.

The purpose of this article is to demonstrate how girls in different communities, such as Prishtinë/Priština and Petrovac na Mlavi, experience street harassment in public spaces. In order to offer you, the reader, a more comprehensive perspective, we combined our findings with other research on the topic. We believe that these shared experiences foster a sense of empathy, recognizing that we face similar challenges as women. At the end of the day, how many times have you faced a harasser and thought to yourself "Oh god, he's such a selak/seljak"? You're not alone; women from both Prishtinë/Priština and Petrovac na Mlavi say the exact same thing.

### **Walking on Guard: How Prevalent is Street Harassment? And why?**

Street harassment is a widespread experience for women across the Balkans. In a 2015 study made by the Kosovo Women's Network. Street harassment is a widespread experience for women across the Balkans. In a 2015 study made by the Kosovo Women's Network [19], it was found that, 64.1% of Kosovar women reported they experienced sexual harassment at least once in their lives.

The most frequently reported form of sexual harassment (31.6%) was when someone makes unwanted sexual remarks, jokes, or gestures towards them, including instances when they were walking down the street. Not so far away, according to Serbian organisation of the Autonomous Women's Center (2018)[20] unwanted physical contact, touching and getting into a woman/girl's face or men masturbating in public, as the most explicit types of sexual harassment, have been experienced by every third girl in Serbia. Data only proves what we already know: Street harassment is something many women encounter everyday, while out in public and private spaces. But why is this happening? Why are women the ones who have to go through this?

From a feminist lens, street harassment is the result of the power division between men and women. In patriarchal societies, such as the Western Balkan, where men hold more power due to their social status and roles, street harassment is viewed as a means for men to assert dominance over women, gaining a sense of social superiority with little regard for women's well-being. An illustration of the Feminist theories, is what D.U (Albanian) from Prishtinë/Priština pointed in her interview:

**"It seems to me that they (men) often see a girl or a woman just as an object that they can sexualize, and throw comments at, and it means nothing to them if they make her feel bad".**

### **The Anxiety of Everyday Harassment: Are we truly safe?**

Imagine you're walking alone in an unlit, unfrequented street at night...

[19] it was found that, 64.1% of [1] Kosovo Women's Network. (2016). Sexual harassment in Kosovo. <https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/20160223185243349.pdf>

[20] Autonomni Ženski Centar (2018, October 10). Protected: Every third girl in Serbia experiences unwanted physical contact. <https://womenggo.org.rs/en/news/1273-protected-every-third-girl-in-serbia-experiences-unwanted-physical-contact>

Feels scary right? Well, you're not the only one who feels this way. Most women Adea interviewed expressed similar concerns. The anxiety they felt differed according to the number of perpetrators, the absence of companions, the number of bystanders, street lighting, and the time of day. As D.M (Albanian) put it **"When it's night, I don't go through areas where there aren't many people, I try to avoid those places."** The vigilance one needs to have to simply cross a random public street is high and violates an essential right - the right to choose the streets women walk on.

The danger women living in the Western Balkans face is undeniable. According to a study by Neziri and Çapriqi (2023)[21]Prishtinë/Priština's safety index is generally low, with Gërmia park, Arbëria park and Central City park rated as the least safe. These data are in line with the experiences shared with Adea during the interviews. So, the data really makes you understand A.S (Albanian) words when she said:

**These forms of harassment plant a sense of insecurity, making you wonder, 'Am I going to be safe the next time I go out like this?'**

Whereas, a 2018 Serbian survey [22] found that public spaces are the most common location of first experiences with sexual harassment, almost 80% of young women and men from Serbia have encountered some form of it. Every second girl in Serbia has experienced wolf-whistling, kissing gestures, or lip licking, raising the question: have we normalized street harassment? How prevalent is the social discourse that frames such incidents as normal, acceptable, or even desirable? Society shapes our understanding of reality and what is 'normal'. Thus, often normalizing violence and making us doubt our own experiences and senses.

### **But Who is to Blame? Victim Blaming and Supportive Circles**

The study by Qosaj - Mustafa and colleagues (2016) [23]showed that around 70.3% of Albanians agree with the statement that "women bring themselves problems with sexual harassment because they dress or behave provocatively". Furthermore, 40.5 % of them believe that "young girls like to be sexually harassed".

While every third young person in Serbia, according to Autonomous Women's Center (2018)[24],

regardless of gender, believes that a girl who wears a short skirt and a tight T-shirt is "herself to blame" if someone attacks her.

The victim blaming nature was also witnessed by Teodora during the workshop that she provided at Petrovac na Mlavi with high school students. For instance, when these students were asked how much they agree with the statement "Tolerance and acceptance of gender-based violence still exists, and victims are often blamed when they suffer violence", 27 of 35 high school students completely agreed.

In cultures where victim-blaming is common, young women tend to have internalized guilt for the harassment they experience. When talking about street harassment, women often get comments like: **"What were you wearing?"**, **"Why did you go out at night"**, **"Why did you put makeup on?"**. So, for women, harassment doesn't stop on the street; the psychological harm continues at home or at school, where the very people who are supposed to make them feel safe are the ones who add salt to their wounds. This is not only related to harassment. This approach is directly related to the violation of the dignity and integrity of women. Women are judged for crimes (harassment) of others, but at the same time their sexual freedom is seen as a crime. For example, due to Teodora's experience in Petrovac na Mlavi, it was found that 35 out of 35 examined students completely disagree with the statement **"A girl who has had sex with 10 people will be treated the same as a man who has had sex with 10 people"**. Or the other statements with which 27 out of 35 agreed with **"It is worse for a girl to have a bad reputation than for a man."** As one can reflect, women's "reputation" always lies at the hands of unjust others, and women are the ones who suffer because of it.

The constant social judgment is just like a distorted mirror- one that replaces the truth with false narratives of victim-blaming. Once women take a look at their reflection, they risk internalizing this distorted view, leading them to see themselves as culprits of the harassment they endure. As a result, innocent women change their behaviour, hoping to avoid further harassment. They stop wearing what they want to wear and begin avoiding public spaces.

[21] Neziri, G., & Çapriqi, D. (2023). SAFOMETER - Assessing safety in public spaces: The urban area of Prishtina. The International Archives of the Photogrammetry Remote Sensing and Spatial Information Sciences, XLVIII-4/W7, 147-153. <https://doi.org/10.5194/isprs-archives-XLVIII-4-W7-2023-147-2023>

[22] Autonomni Ženski Centar (2018, October 10). Protected: Every third girl in Serbia experiences unwanted physical contact. <https://womensngo.org.rs/en/news/1273-protected-every-third-girl-in-serbia-experiences-unwanted-physical-contact>

[23] Kosovo Women's Network. (2016). Sexual harassment in Kosovo. <https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/20160223185243349.pdf>

[24] Autonomni Ženski Centar (2018.) Nulta tolerancija na rodno zasnovano nasilje. [https://www.womensngo.org.rs/images/publikacije-dp/2018/Nulta\\_tolerancija\\_na\\_rodno\\_zasnovano\\_nasilje.pdf](https://www.womensngo.org.rs/images/publikacije-dp/2018/Nulta_tolerancija_na_rodno_zasnovano_nasilje.pdf)



They stop speaking their truth because society uses their truth as a weapon for submission. Yet, despite all of this, harassment doesn't stop...However, with time they realize it was never their fault to begin with. As D.U (Albanian) put it **"If I wanted to wear something, I would always say to myself I shouldn't wear this, what if it provokes someone into harassing me? However, after I reflected on it, I realized that I'm not the one to blame and I don't need to feel bad about myself."**

These internalized beliefs and fears have real-world implications, shaping social expectations and young people's behaviour. For example, Teodora found that 22 out of 35 high school students from Petrovac na Mlavi believe that girls sometimes consent to sex even when they do not want to, highlighting how these narratives influence young people's behaviour and perception. On this topic, A.R. (Albanian) said **"I used to believe that I had to stop myself from doing certain things to avoid provoking others. This belief was influenced by a toxic circle I used to be a part of. However, I later found better friends who reassured me that it was not my fault"**.

She, A.R. teaches us about the importance of having supportive people around you. Safety is what they offer in a society that normalizes harassment. From the interviews, it became clear that many of the girls were able to decode the dominant discourse of victim blaming thanks to the support of their friends and family.

### **Institutional Responses and Challenges**

Since harassment in public spaces poses a danger to our community, we must trust that our public institutions will put an end to it, right? In reality, women don't feel comfortable to report such cases to the police. For example, when asked about reporting harassment, D.M.(Albanian) said:

**"What if it (harassment) happens to me and I go to the police and they don't do anything about it? That would make me feel awful. I would lose trust in our institutions and justice because they're not doing anything, they're not taking any measures...they don't care about me".**

Her words reflect a shared truth about women's perception of institutional response.

The perception that authorities fail to take action perpetuates a paradigm of silence, further discouraging women from speaking up.

In the final workshop, Teodora facilitated with high school students in Petrovac na Mlavi, she worked with the mayor's office to hold public budget consultations, allowing young people to directly voice their concerns. This collaboration revealed critical safety concerns, with over half of the participants expressing fear of walking around the town at night. As many as four participants shared their experiences when they were victims of attempted sexual violence and/or harassment in a public place. The fact that they shared it without fear (and in front of unknown persons and authorities such as municipal representatives) tells us that this number is certainly higher, but it is masked by shame and hidden from condemnation and guilt. As a result, the municipality and police began working together to address these problems.

So please remember, as members of a community, we have the power to make a difference. United by our desire to feel safe, we are the people and the voice of change. We are the system. Together we are making a change.

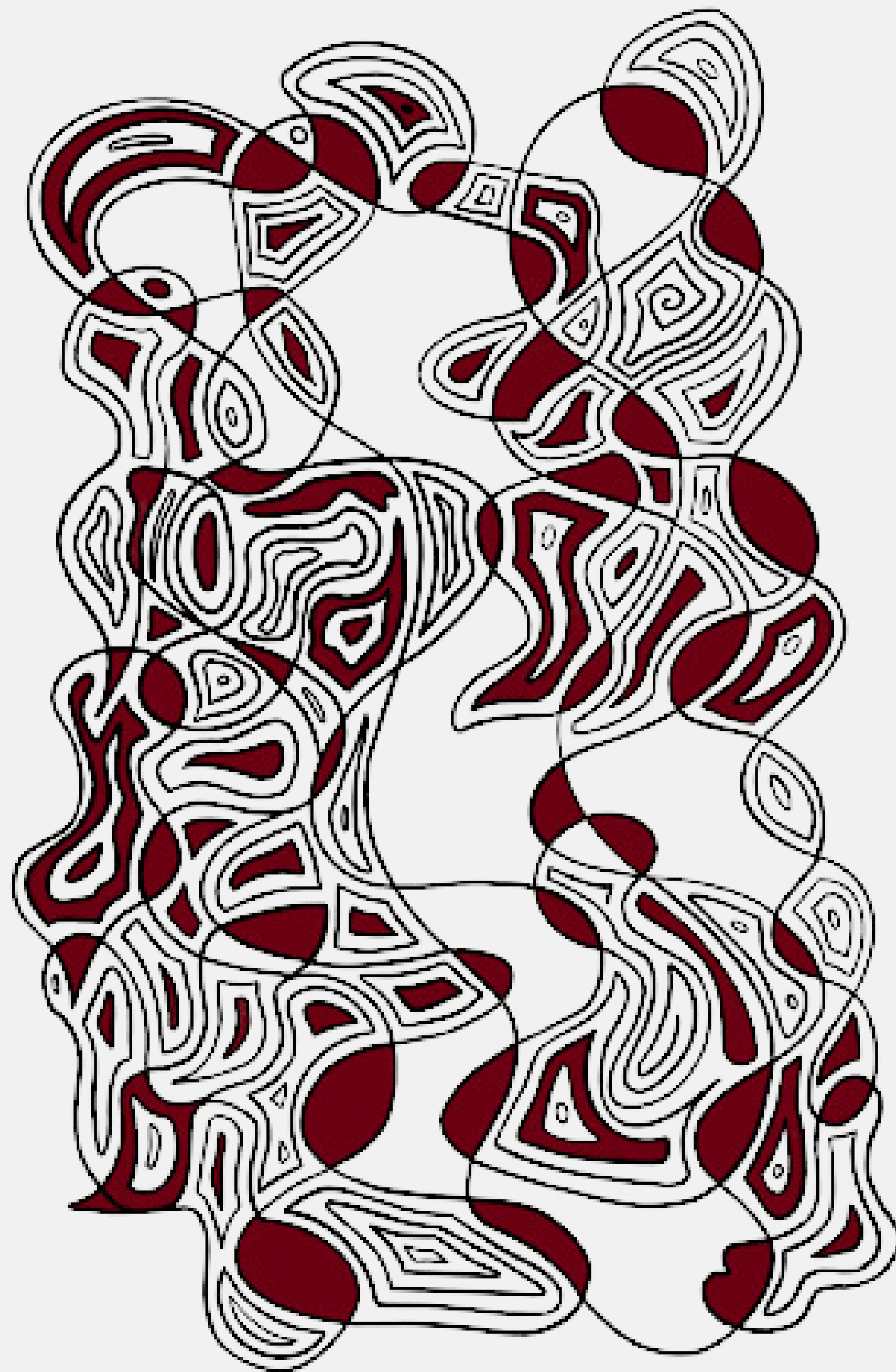


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# Bloodiness

Dardana Fetahu



DOODLE BY DARDANA  
ILLUSTRATION BY SUKIS.ART





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