



Knowledge, evidence
and learning for
development

Gender and the media in the Western Balkans

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Question

What does the evidence tell us on the media's role in promoting gender equality or exacerbating gender inequalities in the Western Balkans? Based on available literature, please include an analysis of:

- *Gendered differences in access to different forms of media;*
- *How women, men, and sexual and gender minorities are portrayed in the media (including gender norms and stereotypes, and the portrayal of equality issues such as gender-based violence);*
- *Barriers to strengthening equality within media professions and institutions (or general weaknesses in the media);*
- *Examples of actions taken or good practice within the region to promote gender equality within the media sector (or other inventions to improve the media sector more generally).*

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1. Summary

This rapid literature review explores the role that media in the Western Balkans plays in issues of gender (in)equality. The countries discussed are Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Croatia¹, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia.

After the liberalisation of gender norms during the Yugoslav period (1945–1991), the Wars of Succession (1991–1999) incited resurgent nationalisms and a re-traditionalisation of society (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017; Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Gender relations have since continued to be largely patriarchal and gender stereotypes have persisted, undermining movement toward gender equality (see Haider, 2017). The post-socialist landscape is one in which women are largely absent from the public sphere (Majstorović, 2016). These changes, developments and continuities are reflected in the media. How the mass media represent women, in turn, greatly influences opinion making processes about gender roles in everyday life (Kosho, 2019; Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). The media cannot be balanced and constructive toward gender issues if, behind the scenes, women journalist are paid less and/or routinely occupy lower status positions than men (Kosho, 2019).

The media sector in Western Balkan countries is very fragmented. Neo-liberal philosophies are evident in the emergence and popularity of particular commercial television stations and content. Commercial television, in particular reality and entertainment TV, legitimises ethno-nationalistic policies that emphasise patriarchal norms (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013). While women are seen to possess active agency, the main place where this agency is justifiably expressed is within consumption lifestyles, rather than political spaces (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Public broadcasting services (PBS) have in many cases followed suit with their programming, in order to compete with private media (Marko, 2017b). This has produced public dissatisfaction in PSBs for failing to meet their obligation to produce informational programming and foster cultural pluralism (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Marko, 2017a and 2017b). A comprehensive analysis of media integrity protection in South East Europe finds a complete absence of public radio and television broadcasters, or commercial broadcasters, identified among examples of good practice. Instead, good examples of media practices originate from the non-governmental, non-profit sector, which remains beyond the reach of influential political and business networks (Petković, 2016).

While there is a body of literature that discusses access of men and women to media spaces (e.g. airtime and news headlines) and moreover media portrayals of gender groups within the region, there is very limited research on barriers to gender equality within the media sector itself and on media initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality. As such, the barriers section in this report also draws on discussion of gender equality in the region generally; and on issues with the media in the region generally. There are implicit linkages that can be made, however. For example, the persistence of gender inequality and traditional patriarchy throughout the region influences how the media operates and in turn is reflected in the media. In addition, political influence and control over the media, discussed as a barrier to effective media, can be

¹ Although Croatia is no longer called a Western Balkan country since its integration into the EU, it shares many patterns with its neighbours in terms of the media and gender relations (see Stojarová, 2020), and is thus included in this report.

considered problematic for gender issues, given that the dominant ethno-political narrative in the region supports patriarchy. The section on initiatives in this report also draws on some general improvements related to the media sector as a whole. These have the potential to affect gender issues. More effective investigative reporting, for example, could allow for better coverage of political and social issues, including gender equality.

Access to media

Media consumption: how citizens in the Western Balkans access their media

Most households in the Western Balkans have a television set and public broadcasters are viewed as the main source of information (see Stojarová, 2020). There is no significant gender difference in watching television, based on a 2012 survey on media consumption patterns in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia (Vesnić-Alujević & Bajić, 2013). The internet has become the second most important medium for obtaining information (Stojarová, 2020). While there is a sharp division regarding internet usage in the Balkan countries between urban and rural regions, the gap in usage is much lower between genders (see Balas et al., 2011).

(In)visibility: access to airtime and headlines

Gendered access to the media in the Western Balkans is much starker when it comes to access in terms of air-time or headlines. The underrepresentation of women on the air (e.g. as experts and news sources) and in news headlines and front page images falsely implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or less valuable (Kosho, 2019). Female politicians are also given less access to the media (see Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). There is also a notable underrepresentation of LGBTQ populations and issues in all forms of media, which has the effect of making the existence of these identities appear insignificant to society (Srbinovska, 2015).

Media portrayals of gender groups and gender issues

Gender norms and stereotypes

Alongside the underrepresentation of women, media throughout the Western Balkans continue to engage in gender stereotyping of women and men, thus acting as gatekeepers of patriarchy (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018; Majstorović & Vilović, 2017; Abazi, 2014). Much research finds that media presents women primarily as objects and sex-symbols; as devoted mother/wife/girlfriend; as 'slim, fat, old young' and/or as victims of violence (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018; Turčilo & Masnica, 2016; Abazi, 2014; Volčič & Erjavec, 2013). Such harmful stereotypes about women contribute to their disadvantaged position, while undermining their capacities (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018). They influence the audience's perceptions of appropriate roles for women and men (Kosho, 2019).

Representation by sector: Media throughout the Western Balkans tend to underrepresent women in political and economic sectors, while over-representing them in entertainment and lifestyle sectors. This is in terms of the topics that women and men cover in news reporting and talk show discussions, and in terms of their representation in stereotypical jobs. Any cross-overs in professions are portrayed as anomalies (see Majstorović & Vilović, 2017).

Trivialisation of women's contributions: Portrayals of women often involve promotion of insignificant aspects, while trivialising the significant. An analysis of magazines produced in the

region finds, for example, that even if stories occasionally feature university professors or top sportswomen, they tend to focus on trivial details, such as what they are wearing, rather than information unrelated to their professional lives (Majstorović, 2016).

Emphasis on women's private lives: The portrayal of women in the media as exclusively mothers, caregivers, wives or girlfriends, or in the context of home life, is connected to the re-contextualisation of women in terms of the private sphere (Kosho, 2019; Majstorović & Vilović, 2017; Majstorović, 2016). Regardless of what women have achieved in their work/career, the main focus of texts remains their private life.

Sexualisation and commercialisation: The post-socialist, commercial media landscape in the Western Balkans has promoted a particular version of ethno-national femininity that resonates with the celebration of the body and self-branding (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). The sexualised and glamorised female body has become a symbol of sexual and political empowerment. In this context, the available public roles for women changed from 'communist worker/activist/mother' to 'post-communist slut/sex kitten/housewife' (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015). 'Gender equality' under this system is based on the ability to capitalize on one's own sexualised ethno-self-exoticisation (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013).

Masculinities: Rigid perceptions of masculinity often come to the fore in reporting on LGBTQ communities. In Serbia, for example, any texts that actually referenced the Pride Parade largely managed to discuss other topics usually juxtaposed to it, many of which have hyper-masculine elements (Igrutinović, 2015). Media in Serbia have also often portrayed President Aleksandar Vučić as a 'real man' and those who stand alongside him also as 'real men' (Jovanović, 2018).

Gender equality issues

Gender-based violence (GBV): The media tends to reproduce patterns of marginalisation and discrimination against women, through a focus on masculinity and the systematic portrayal of women as victims, which can further their victimisation (Radak, 2018; Dekić, 2017). Mainstream media also tend to reinforce the blaming of individual perpetrators and victims, leaving out structural analysis and social explanations for GBV (Radak, 2018). Coverage of GBV also tends to be sensationalistic, focusing on the most brutal cases, in the crime sections, further undermining its perception as a social problem (Dekić, 2017; Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). Journalists frequently lack specialised training in reporting on GBV and/or follow the agenda set by politicians, who are often insensitive toward victims and not proactive in supporting and promoting the rights of victims (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). While responsible media coverage cannot resolve the issue of violence against women, it can be instrumental in recognition of GBV as a social phenomenon and in greater attention to prevention activities (Dekić, 2017).

LGBTQ communities: Representatives of gender minority groups are rarely and misleadingly presented in the media (Koteska, 2015). The stark media silence creates the detrimental public impression that such minorities do not actually suffer from discrimination, exclusion, violence and hate speech (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). Advocacy in support of these minority groups then come to be seen as ungrounded and irrational (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). There are also concerns, such as in BiH, that where the media does report on LGBTQ topics, they do so in a sensationalist and homophobic manner (Pisker, 2019). In Serbia, the views of various violent right-wing groups and their anti-gay activities are given more media space than LGBTQ activists and their activism (Igrutinović, 2015). Croatia presents a different case where the media do not

tend toward discrimination of LGBTQ groups and where Gay Pride manifestations are routinely held without incident (Sremac et al., 2015).

Barriers to equality and other weaknesses within the media sector

Gender inequality in the Western Balkans

Instead of ushering in greater political participation, economic independence, and media presence of women, the post-socialist, post-war period in the Western Balkans has witnessed a decline in women's participation and gender inequality in economic life (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013). 'Gender equality' has come to be based on the ability of women to capitalise on particular sexualised and commercial representations and to achieve coveted consumption lifestyles, rather than attention to political roles and spaces (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015).

Challenges and opportunities within the media sector

Representation at the managerial level: Gender inequality throughout the Western Balkans has translated into problematic situations and experiences for females within the media sector (Momčinović, 2020). In Serbia, for example, women comprise only a small percentage of managerial positions in public broadcasting stations (Surculija Milojevic, 2018). Similarly, in North Macedonia, the highest executive positions in the public service broadcasting station are all held by men (Trpevska & Micevski, 2018). These imbalances are mirrored in the private media sector. The lack of women in managerial positions can result in female journalists feeling less empowered to report on various forms of pressure and threats to their media freedom (Momčinović, 2020).

'Feminisation' of journalism: While Kosovo has a low percentage of female journalists at 35.5 percent, other countries in the region (e.g. Albania, Croatia and Serbia) have over 50 percent female journalists (Andresen et al., 2017, 621). While the greater representation of females in the profession of journalism is a positive development, some research emphasises that the poor position of journalists is often connected with the '*feminisation*' of the profession - with job insecurity, reduced wages and/or, the decline of 'reputation' of the profession (Momčinović, 2020). Women are often doubted from the start, with neglect of their qualifications (Kuduzović et al., 2019). In addition, a study of journalism studies in Croatia finds that while females comprise the vast majority of students (79.2 percent), male students gain more work experience during their studies (Car & Bukvić, 2016).

Digital media: Social media increasingly provides an opportunity for journalist and other citizens to exchange information that is not subject to censorship (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). However, journalists, newcomers in the newsroom, and educators throughout the region lag behind in developing multimedia and digital storytelling skills (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019; Londo et al., 2017). The growing need for digital media literacy can contribute to issues related to gender imbalance. In BiH, for example, the proportion of women in the IT sector is only 25 percent (BHIGF, 2018).

Political influence and lack of media freedom

Political interference with the media and in their editorial policies is a major concern related to media freedom throughout the Western Balkans, stemming in large part from financial dependencies of media outlets on state funding and advertising (Stojarová, 2020; Brogi et al.,

2014). Media outlets that do not toe the political line face various obstacles (Kuduzović et al., 2019).

Public service broadcasting: Political influences on public media broadcasters are particularly problematic as public stations can play an important role in shaping public discourse (Kmezić, 2020; Stojarová, 2020). The absence of strong self-regulatory bodies, combined with financial weaknesses, render the PSB systems vulnerable to direct political interference when it comes to the appointment of managing boards, editors and even journalists (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017; Brogi et al., 2014). A cross-national study of PSBs in seven Western Balkan countries finds that there is a widespread failure to produce independent, impartial and quality programming in the public interest, with minimal airtime given to critical programming, analysis, and alternative voices (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017).

Economic pressures: Many reports on the media find that outlets are pressured to take an expected editorial course in order to get or keep the advertising contracts (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). The state remains the main advertiser and also provides revenue in the form of subsidies, discriminating between outlets (Stojarová, 2020). Governments also find ways to arbitrarily punish non-obedient media outlets by freezing their bank assets or placing them under harsh financial control (Stojarová, 2020).

Smear campaigns, violence against journalists and impunity: Journalists throughout the Western Balkans often face physical or verbal assaults and smear campaigns, conducted by politicians or by pro-government public and tabloid media. Verbal assaults on journalists, in particular, have become normalised (Stojarová, 2020). These attacks are often directed against journalists who write stories implicating powerful business or political elites, leading to self-censorship (Stojarová, 2020; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Gall, 2015). Female journalists in the Balkans face not only the general disdain for journalists but are also subjected to widespread misogyny (Jeremic et al., 2019). They are targeted in specific ways, often by politicians, that differ from their male colleagues, with comments relating to their appearance, vulgar imagery and explicit sexual references about their private lives (Momčinović, 2020; Gall, 2015). This reinforces the view that politics is a male domain (Momčinović, 2020). Women journalists in the Balkans also experience online abuse on a daily basis (Jeremic et al., 2019). Many women see little point in reporting in-person or online incidents to employers or the police given a systematic failure to punish perpetrators (see Jeremic et al., 2019). Women's non-governmental organisations also tend to leave the situation of female journalists out of their reports of violence against women (Momčinović, 2020). Most of the attacks on journalists remain unsolved (see Stojarová, 2020).

Initiatives that address gender inequalities and other weaknesses in the media

The media has the potential to play a transformative role in working toward gender equality by engaging in long-term changes to the portrayal of women (Kosho, 2019; Abazi, 2014). Gender equality also needs to exist within the media sector, such as with regard to senior positions and decision-making roles (Kosho, 2019).

Investigative reporting

Investigative reporting allows media to serve as watchdogs and can expose issues that need to be addressed in politics and society. Investigative journalism requires funding and training to develop the necessary skills-set, particularly in the Western Balkans, which does not have a

history or tradition of such kind of journalism (Lani, 2011). Currently, the most widespread form of investigative journalism comprise centres established by journalists themselves (Popović et al., 2014). These non-profit media outlets are dedicated to addressing social issues in a way that serves the public interest (Popović et al., 2014). They are reliant on donations, however, which undermines their sustainability (Popović et al., 2014). Croatia stands out in the region for having established financial mechanisms in support of non-profit and minority media, such as through the media pluralism fund and allocation of a portion of lottery revenues (Petković, 2016).

Training for journalists and students of journalism

Opportunities to work in student media, such as at the University of Zagreb, help to address the disadvantage present in many other journalist training programmes, whereby students graduate with little practical experience (Car & Bukvić, 2016). It is important to also improve cooperation between higher education institutions and media outlets and to develop in-house mentoring (Car & Bukvić, 2016). Special support should be provided to increase the skills and leadership abilities of women through mentoring and development programmes, such that they can have a better chance of gaining higher positions within the media sector (see Kosho, 2019). Specialised education and training is also necessary for journalists who cover GBV (Dekić, 2017). Allowing journalists to specialise in the topic of GBV enables them over time to become sensitive to the issue (Dekić, 2017). There are also handbooks for media professionals aimed at improving coverage of GBV, published for example by UN Women. Guidance given include tips on what to and what not to do when writing about violence against women (Dekić, 2017).

Media and digital literacy

The ability to engage in media literacy is relevant not only for those working in the media sector but also for the general population. In Serbia, for example, NGO projects have targeted young populations such that they develop the ability to critically analyse media content from an early stage (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019). This is considered particularly necessary since media content concerning daily political and current issues (e.g. LGBTQ communities, the position of women in society, religious issues) are taboo topics in school (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019).

Digital media literacy: High levels of political control of media throughout the Western Balkans has resulted in the tendency of independent journalists and media outlets to relocate to online media, where they can retain professional independence (Petković, 2016; Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). Given the unequal presence of women in the digital sector and in information technology, programmes aimed at addressing this imbalance are essential (Kosanović et al., 2019; BHIGF, 2018). The project IT Girls in BiH, for example, offers training workshops on the basics of website development for girls throughout the country (Kosanović et al., 2019). Bloggers are also considered to be a key resource in sharing personal experiences and spreading messages about GBV. The more discussion there is about the topic, the more likely it is to be seen as a social problem (Dekić, 2017). There are a growing number of women across the region who are now also using the internet to combat sexism, calling out and publicly condemning those who engage in sexist remarks and harassment (Pisker, 2018). A website in Croatia, for example, entitled *Stup srama* (Pillar of Shame), spotlights sexist statements by Croatian politicians (Pisker, 2018). Social media has also been used to raise awareness more generally of the importance of gender equality in and through the media. Women in BiH have created an online campaign, *zeneBiH* (Women of BiH), to teach internet users about notable Bosnian women, such as scientists, writers and filmmakers, who are rarely profiled in mainstream media (Pisker, 2018). There has

also been an emphasis on fostering a more inclusive and equal portrayal of women in media, through profiles of various journalists and their viewpoints on these issues (BH Journalists Association, 2020).

2. Introduction

Patriarchy and ethno-nationalism in the Western Balkans

After the liberalisation of gender norms during the Yugoslav period (1945–1991), **the Yugoslav Wars of Succession (1991–1999) incited resurgent nationalisms and a re-traditionalisation of society** (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017; Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). The discourse of the nationalist regimes portrayed women's emancipation as an 'unnatural' effect of the socialist system, reverting to reductionist conceptualisations and portrayals of gender roles (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017; Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015; Haug, 2013-my prior HDR). The concept of 'militant masculinity' placed males in the role of violent warrior, capable of fighting ethno-national wars, and women in the role of biological reproducers or nurturers of the nation (see Haider, 2017).

The post-socialist landscape in the former-Yugoslavia is one in which women are largely absent from the public sphere (Majstorović, 2016). The post-war period generated instability stemming from a tenuous 'peace', new market economies and post-war democratic transition. The combination of these destabilising factors has created a space in which national gender norms have entered a state of flux. The attitude toward masculinity has become increasingly ambiguous and multivalent—nonetheless, traditional norms retain primacy in public life (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017). **Gender relations have continued to be largely patriarchal and gender stereotypes have persisted, undermining movement toward gender equality** (see Haider, 2017).

These changes, developments and continuities are reflected in the media. With the destruction of 'women's emancipation', different forms of women's identities have emerged in the context of re-traditionalisation and conservatism, coinciding with the emergence of free market ideology (Majstorović, 2016). At the same time, **ethno-national, heterosexual femininity remains a dominant frame of reference** in this post-socialist, post-war, neo-liberal, commercial media landscape (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Such gendered stereotypes have been appropriated, accepted, and commercially exploited by producers, participants and viewers (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). In so doing, commercial television, in particular reality and entertainment TV, legitimises ethno-nationalistic policies that emphasise patriarchal norms (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013).

Neo-liberalism and an emphasis on consumer capitalism has elevated identities based on the things we buy (Majstorović, 2016); and on the promotion of the self for fun and profit (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). This has led to the prevailing belief that while women possess active agency, the primary place where this agency is justifiably expressed is within individual consumption lifestyles, rather than within political spaces (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). For further discussion, see the section on [Sexualisation and commercialisation](#) under Media portrayals.

Gender and the media

Numerous research studies on the inter-relationship of gender and media over the past 50 years have demonstrated **persistent problems with disrespectful representations of women;**

routine inequalities within the workplace; and unequal gendered power relations in management structures (see Padovani & Ross, 2018). Across the world, women are underrepresented in the media, often portrayed in a sexualised and subordinated way, and shown in stereotyped feminine roles (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017).

Global studies and monitoring demonstrate a **strong link between the status of women in and through media and the way society treats women** (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). How the mass media represent women greatly influences opinion making processes about gender roles in everyday life (Kosho, 2019). In particular, data shows that gender stereotyping in the media and advertising can propagate harmful attitudes about masculinity and femininity, gender roles and the status of women, which in turn can perpetuate discrimination, sexual objectification and gender-based violence (Kosho, 2019). Limiting or positive messages and role models conveyed in the media also influence girls' and boys' perceptions of their own abilities and roles (Kosho, 2019).

The media cannot be balanced and constructive toward gender issues if, behind the scenes, women journalist are paid less and/or routinely occupy lower status positions than men (Kosho, 2019). If there are more men than women in the media hierarchy and if we see more male experts and successful men than female counterparts through media, this creates a false perception about gender roles and perpetuates gender stereotypes (Kosho, 2019). These issues, and how they play out, can serve to enable or constrain societal progress toward gender justice (Padovani and Ross, 2018). **How the media addresses gender issues is thus a model that reflects the way society views and stands for gender equality** (Kosho, 2019).

The media sector in the Western Balkans

The media sector in Western Balkan countries is very fragmented. In Albania, for example, with less than three million people, there are around 21 daily newspapers, one national public TV station and three national privately owned TV stations, three radio stations and a significant number of local TV and radio stations (Stojarová, 2020). In North Macedonia, the number of TV and radio stations per capita is even higher, with over 60 commercial TV channels and over 80 radio stations, reflecting in part, the multi-lingual structure of the society (Stojarová, 2020). The Serbian media landscape is also over-saturated, with 818 print media, 284 radio stations, 175 television stations, and 334 internet news portals (Marko, 2017a).

Neo-liberal philosophies are evident in the emergence and popularity of particular commercial television stations and content. Serbian commercial television channel, Pink TV, for example, has emerged in the post-Yugoslav war period as one of the most popular media spaces throughout the region (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Despite connections of the owner to ultra-right masculinist nationalism in Serbia, Pink TV has become one of the region's most popular entertainment broadcasters. It has translated into further highly popular national television channels: TV Pink BiH (Bosnia and Herzegovina), TV Pink M (Montenegro), TV Pink SI (Slovenia), and Pink International (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Pink TV was the first station to produce reality TV shows in the region, in which **reality TV celebrities are created and gain popularity by continually selling themselves** (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015).

Public broadcasting services have in many cases followed suit, in terms of their programming, in order to compete after the arrival of commercial competitors at the national level (Marko, 2017b). While PBS Serbia has become a popular media institution, for example, its

editorial policy has received public criticism for its commercialised and sensationalised content, including popular TV series, reality shows, and sports and entertainment programmes (Marko, 2017a). While management has defended its content which has helped it to become a popular TV station, others point out that the PBS should not be competing with commercial TV broadcasters on the basis of programme and ratings. Instead, it should cover a range of topics, genres and issues, including those that may be deficient in the private market (e.g. children's programmes, documentaries, and programmes in minority languages) (Marko, 2017a).

Public dissatisfaction with the Croatian Radio-Television (HRT) public service also stems in large part from issues with programme quality, the commercialisation of its content and termination of several informative programs (Marko, 2017b). Croatian public television HTV also reduced its production of news, documentaries and children's programmes, and increased entertainment programming, in order to align with commercial broadcasters (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). In BiH, analysis of PSB programme profiles demonstrate that cultural and educational programmes are not a priority, leading to concerns that the public interest is poorly addressed (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). The situation is similar in Albania, Montenegro and North Macedonia, with **concerns of PSB programming falling into the trap of tabloidization and broadcast of entertainment and sports, neglecting the obligation to produce informational programming and foster cultural pluralism** (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018).

Financial difficulties experienced by PSBs throughout the region, due in part to ineffective license fee models, market fragmentation and shrinking advertising revenues, **has been the biggest driver behind the commercialisation of their contents**. It has also contributed to their vulnerability to political influence and state funding pressure (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Marko, 2017a; Popović et al., 2014). For further discussion, see [Political influence and lack of media freedom](#).

A comprehensive analysis of media integrity protection in South East Europe finds a **complete absence of public radio and television broadcasters – or commercial broadcasters - identified among the various examples of good practice**. This is particularly worrying, given that PSBs are supposed to uphold the idea of journalism and media as a public good (Petković, 2016). Instead, **good examples of media practices originate from the non-governmental, non-profit sector**, which remains beyond the reach of influential political and business networks (Petković, 2016).

3. Access to media

Media consumption: how citizens in the Western Balkans access their media

Countries in the Western Balkans share similar patterns in the use of media. **Most households have a television set and the public broadcasters are viewed as the main source of information** (50-60 percent of households surveyed rely on them) (see Stojarová, 2020). Private broadcasters have comparable and sometimes higher audience ratings but are viewed as entertainment (Stojarová, 2020).

There is no significant gender difference in watching television, based on a survey of media consumption patterns in BiH, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia, conducted in 2012

(Vesnić-Alujević & Bajić, 2013). When it comes to time spent watching television, for example, it is mostly the same: 40.2 percent of males and 37.1 percent of females watch it one to two hours per day). (Vesnić-Alujević & Bajić, 2013, 201). Both genders also tend to watch local and foreign channels to a similar extent (see Chart 1).

See: Chart 1: TV channel consumption (%) according to gender, Source: Vesnić-Alujević & Bajić, 2013, p. 204,,

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274137675_MEDIA_CONSUMPTION_PATTERNS_WATCHING_TV_IN_FORMER_YUGOSLAV_STATES

There have been some changes in recent years in the way in which Western Balkan citizens access their media, due largely to the growing popularity of the internet. **The internet has become the second most important medium for obtaining information** (Stojarová, 2020). A significant portion of the population throughout the region has access to the internet, with approximately 70 percent of the population in all of the Western Balkans countries (including Croatia) online (the highest is Kosovo with 80 percent of internet users) (Stojarová, 2020). The share of internet tends to increase at the expense of television (Stojarová, 2020).

Daily newspapers have experienced the biggest decline in overall consumption in the first decade of the 21st century, resulting in a shift by all daily newspapers in the region to the internet. In most cases, online and offline newspaper components converge (Stojarová, 2020). In terms of social media, Facebook is the top social media resource in the Balkans; the second position varies according to the country, with Pinterest gaining popularity over YouTube (Stojarová, 2020).

While there is a sharp division regarding internet usage in the Balkan countries between urban-rural regions, the gap in usage is much lower between genders, with a slight exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina (which has a 1:2 women/men ratio) (see Balas et al., 2011, 161).

(In)visibility: access to airtime and headlines

Gendered access to the media in the Western Balkans is much starker when it comes to access in terms of air-time or headlines. The underrepresentation of women on the air and in news headlines falsely **implies that men are the cultural standard and women are unimportant or less valuable** (Kosho, 2019).

A study of media in Albania finds that men and boys dominate the expertise on evening broadcasting shows and comprise the vast majority of news sources (79 percent) (Kosho, 2019, 17). On talk shows, women and girls speak only 26 percent of the time, while men monopolise the conversation at 74 percent (Kosho, 2019, 17). In terms of TV news stories, only 12 percent of women and girls are the focus, while men and boys are widely present at 55 percent of the focus (Kosho, 2019, 17). In addition, the images on the front pages of newspapers show women and girls 14 percent of the time, with men and boys represented in images 86 percent of the time (Kosho, 2019, 17). The online media situation is similar, with men and boys relied upon as sources to a much greater extent than women and girls. Online media stories concern women and girls in 13 percent of the cases and men and boys in 43 percent of the cases. In terms of

images in online media, 25 percent of them show women and girls, while men and boys dominate the online media images with 75 percent (Kosho, 2019, 17).

A study of TV news and gender representation in Croatia over five years (2009-2013) finds that, female journalists authored 42.6 percent of analysed primetime news on HTV, Nova TV and RTL broadcasting channels (Car et al., 2017). However, men appear more often in author's roles and appear as news presenters or anchors in 60 percent of primetime newscasts analysed (Car et al., 2017). Men are also three times more likely to have the chance to speak in the news (Car et al., 2017). Women are vastly underrepresented as news main characters, appearing in only 8.3 percent of cases, with men appearing four times more at 33.4 percent (Car et al., 2017). Online news portals also exhibit these imbalances. Recent research by Libela found that only 18 percent of news headlines published by the most popular online news portals in Croatia talked about women, and 4.5 percent of these headlines included explicitly sexist remarks (Pisker, 2018).

A study on gender representation in newspapers in Kosovo finds that women are also less present on front pages (Abazi, 2014). There is a media tendency that when women are sources of information within the text, only one woman is quoted or interviewed (Abazi, 2014). A monitoring of the various media in BiH in 2012 demonstrates that men were also the overwhelming dominant subject of media reports, comprising 75 percent of the stories on TV, 81 percent on radio and 76 percent in the newspapers (see Turčilo & Masnica, 2016, 132).

Female politicians are also given less access to the media. Research conducted by the Association BH Novinari in 2014 on media representation of female candidates in the general elections finds that women are underrepresented in public and political life in BiH (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). Although the number of media features related to the elections increased during the pre-election campaign, this trend was not reflected by a proportional increase in the coverage and representation of female candidates. The print media published articles about only 176 of the total 3,276 female candidates from 98 political parties, representing only 5.37 percent of the women who were candidates (see Turčilo & Masnica, 2016, 130). The underrepresentation of women in the media during the campaign is reflected further in the fact that stories about female candidates were presented mainly in poorer journalistic venues, with drastically less space for candidates' professional and political promotion (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). At the same time, female politicians used part of this limited media space to praise their party leaders and often shifted to auto-stereotyping, justifying their candidacy by the fact that they could balance their family responsibilities with political roles and functions (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016).

There is also a notable underrepresentation of members of the LGBTQ community and discussions of issues relevant to the community in all forms of media throughout the Western Balkans (Srbinovska, 2015). This has the effect of making the existence of these identities appear insignificant to society (Srbinovska, 2015). For further discussion, see [LGBTQ communities](#) under Gender equality issues.

4. Media portrayals of gender groups and gender issues

Gender norms and stereotypes

Alongside the underrepresentation of women, media throughout the Western Balkans continue to engage in gender stereotypes that affect both women and men (Majstorović &

Vilović, 2017; Abazi, 2014). Societies in the Western Balkans are dominated by conservatism, and media throughout the region tend to serve as gatekeepers of patriarchy and stereotypical gender roles, through their gender-biased reporting (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018; Abazi, 2014). How media portrays gender norms and roles influences how individuals view themselves and society and affects how society shapes gender roles (Kosho, 2019; Abazi, 2014). **Much research and analyses finds that media presents women primarily as objects and sex-symbols; as devoted mother/wife/girlfriend; as ‘slim, fat, old young’ and/or as victims of violence** (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018; Turčilo & Masnica, 2016; Abazi, 2014; Volčič & Erjavec, 2013). **Such harmful stereotypes about women contributes to their disadvantaged position, while undermining their capacities** (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018).

A report on media in BiH finds that the main coverage of women comprises of women as victims of violence or so-called ‘successful women’ (usually those married to wealthy men or those who ‘manage to have family and career’) (see Turčilo & Masnica, 2016, 132). Research by Libela in Croatia finds that women’s physical appearances are over-emphasised in the media, along with stereotypical gender roles as mothers, housewives, models or actresses (Pisker, 2018). In Albania, studies and media monitoring find that media depictions of relationships between men and women stress traditional roles and normalise violence against women (Kosho, 2019).

If audiences only see women in discussions about the kitchen, fashion and children, it becomes challenging to perceive women in roles such as managers, directors, politicians and police (Kosho, 2019). While such portrayals can provide a level of satisfaction in terms of access and media representation, they can undermine gender equality (Majstorović, 2016). The lack of feminist or emancipatory content in the media both reflects and is reflected by the lack of choices for women in real life (Majstorović, 2016).

Representation by sector

Media throughout the Western Balkans tend to underrepresent women in political, economic and some social sectors. An extensive monitoring of gender representation in a range of media sources in Albania finds that women and girls on morning broadcasting TV shows tend to talk about education, culture, lifestyle and health; whereas men and boys speak about politics, economy, international issues and infrastructure (Kosho, 2019). **News segments also primarily had women and girls covering topics such as lifestyle, gossip and cultural news; whereas men and boys focused on political, economic and financial news** (Kosho, 2019). In addition, women in these segments were sexualized and used as a tool to attract the audience rather than to promote their success or their expertise (Kosho, 2019). (For further discussion, see [sexualisation and commercialisation](#)). Research on media in Kosovo also finds that women are underrepresented on important topics such as politics, economy, education, health, justice, sports and culture, while they are over-represented in advertisement and in show business news, often in a sexualised manner (Abazi, 2014). Research by Libela in Croatia showed that media coverage about women is prevalent only in show-business and lifestyle sections (Pisker, 2018). Women are portrayed in newspapers primarily in ‘less serious’ entertainment roles, such as TV hostesses, models, actresses and singers (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017; Majstorović, 2016).

In BiH, media rarely present success stories of ‘ordinary’ women who have achieved significant results in the economic, political, or social sphere. Women from Srebrenica, for example, who stepped into the position of family providers after their male family members were killed, amidst

much hardship, are rarely presented in the media as successful women (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). At the same time, media do profile the success of women in arts and culture, particularly if they have received acclaim at the international level (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). Successful women whose stories inspired other women in BiH include film directors Jasmila Žbanic and Aida Begic, whose films *Grbavica* and *Snow* received important international awards (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016).

Gender equality is still largely absent in the region in terms of access to jobs and perceptions of appropriate professions for women and men, which, in turn, is reinforced in the media. The media still present men and women as doing stereotypical jobs and portray any cross-over as anomalies (see Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). Women may attain news headlines when found to be doing work outside of the stereotyped norms of what constitutes male and female jobs (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). There are indications of division of professions into 'male' and 'female' based on research conducted on Croatian newspapers, for example. One analysed text, 'Croatia's 11 most accomplished female chefs' (*Večernji list*, 13 April 2014), for example, refers to women chefs that have 'managed to win the (male) world of cuisine' despite their femininity, thanks to some 'masculine' characteristics (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017).

Trivialisation of women's contributions

Portrayals of women and women's issues often involve promotion of insignificant aspects, while trivialising the significant. This is connected to the emphasis of the private realm in women's lives and to other stereotyped gender norms.

When stories occasionally feature university professors or top sportswomen, among other female professionals, they tend to focus on information and details unrelated to their professional lives. A feature article on Zorica Tomić (*Gloria*, July 16, 2008), for example, introduces this 'charming university professor' with references primarily to what she is wearing, cooking, and her guide to living (Majstorović, 2016). She does not discuss any serious problems faced by real women in Serbia including workplace bullying, unemployment, or women's rights (Majstorović, 2016). In this same magazine issue, a story about the famous Serbian tennis player, Jelena Janković, focuses solely on how she wants to look, where she goes shopping, who her favourite designers are, and how many suitcases she travels with (Majstorović, 2016). Similarly, a story about the director of the Sava Center (a prestigious cultural centre) in Belgrade, Jasna Dimitrijević, focuses not on what the woman running the centre has achieved, but on how her apartment looks (Majstorović, 2016).

In the case of female politicians, references to their appearances rather than to their experience or platforms is also common (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). There is a positive trend observed from research in BiH, however, where female politicians have increasingly spoken about a significant variety of topics, which indicates a degree of departure from stereotyping (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016).

Emphasis on women's private life

The portrayal of women in the media as exclusively mothers, caregivers, wives or girlfriends, or in the context of home life, is connected to the re-contextualisation of

women in terms of the private sphere, regardless of their achievements in the public sphere (Majstorović, 2016). This is evident, for example, in women's magazines throughout the region, that either exclude powerful, highly-educated women or frame them in these stereotypical private roles (Majstorović, 2016). A study of Albanian newspapers finds that women, including political leaders, were represented as somebody's wives or somebody's relatives (Kosho, 2019). A survey of Croatian newspapers similarly finds that the presentation of women is solely in the function of motherhood, their family and home (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017).

Regardless of what women have achieved in their work/career, the main focus of texts remains their private life. The entire first paragraph of an article in a Croatian newspaper about 'Women in Science: Four young winners of UNESCO scholarship', for example, was solely about the private lives of the young and successful Croatian scientists, including their relationships and children (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). Another text in a Croatian paper had the headline 'Vjekoslava Goričanec from Zadar: I am a single mother who earns by clearing fields of landmines', representing another example of how a woman's private life is not separated from her work even though the text's focus was the work itself (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017). Similarly, in Serbia, the magazine photograph of Jasna Dimitrijević, the director of the Sava Center in Belgrade has her job and profession backgrounded while her domestic life and her family are foregrounded (Majstorović, 2016).

Sexualisation and commercialisation

The post-socialist, commercial media landscape in the Western Balkans has promoted a particular versions of ethno-national femininity that resonates with contemporary ideologies of celebration of the body and self-branding (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Throughout Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), particularly during the early phase of the post-community transition, the available public roles for women changed from 'communist worker/activist/mother' to 'post-communist slut/sex kitten/housewife' (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015). This trend mirrors the influx of global (i.e. Western and neoliberal) influences in the chaotic period of 'transition' (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015).

Women in the Western Balkans are thus commonly objectified and presented by the media solely as sex symbols, in provocative photos, particularly in entertaining and advertising journalism; and women who do not correspond to required beauty norms are ridiculed (Majstorović, 2016; Abazi, 2014). In Albania, for example, a range of media covering topics like lifestyle, gossip and cultural news present women in a sexualised way to attract the audience (Kosho, 2019). In Croatia, newspaper photographs also often show women in 'various stages of undress' (Majstorović & Vilović, 2017).

Female politicians who refused to conform to these 'new' roles have been criticised by the media as unattractive, undesirable and unfeminine (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015). While, the role of successful 'businesswoman' has emerged as an alternative to the housewife, it also tends to be highly sexualised in media representations. Women are often portrayed as gaining independence and social-economic mobility through the use of their 'physical assets' (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015).

The **(patriarchal) commercialisation of television** and its saturation with entertainment programming has also created challenges for women in television production (Volčič, & Erjavec,

2015). Compared to cinema, **there are no significant television productions that have dealt with serious topics of post-socialist condition, femininities, and the ordinary lives of women** (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015). Pink TV stations in Slovenia, Bosnia and Serbia, for example, maintain a predominantly entertainment-oriented profile, with hyper-heterosexual programming, full of scantily clad, young and fit female bodies (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013). **While reality shows, such as The Palace, broadcast on all Pink TV stations in the region, allow for 'ordinary' women to become media objects and celebrities, they are expected to reaffirm specific (ethno-national) stereotypes in order to succeed.** Under such a format, Palace achieved the highest ratings of any commercial production in the region (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015).

'Gender equality' under this system is based on the ability to capitalize on one's own sexualised ethno-self-exoticisation (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013). The emergence of such patriarchal programming, post-socialism, represents a 'capitalist backlash'. The prevailing belief is that women possess active agency; however, this agency is justified primarily within individual consumption lifestyles, rather than within political spaces (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015 and 2013). Success here is viewed through the ability to consume rather than in terms of political citizenship, representing the rise of a new type of a patriarchal ethno-national identity, one that is commercially and sexually driven (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015 and 2013). Research indicates, however, that female viewers in BiH did not endorse the sexualisation of the show's participants or embrace the idea of sexualising themselves to the same extent as Slovene and Serb respondents. This demonstrates that gender constructions depend on the historical, social, and political context (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015).

Online media has also exhibited a tendency to publish sexualised content. A survey of such media in Croatia, for example, finds that stories published on various websites (e.g. sex stories about local celebrities and sports stars) often violate established journalistic ethical standards (Vilović, 2011).

Male bodies have also been commodified to some extent, for example, in music videos. Male pop-folk performers are meticulously styled, with tanned bodies (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017). Pop-folk divas and hip-hop groups have challenged gender norms and stereotypes of Balkan masculinity by objectifying and sexualising the male figure while appropriating for themselves the macho persona (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017). Their songs have achieved widespread popularity in the region (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017).

Masculinities

Rigid perceptions of masculinity often come to the fore in reporting on LGBTQ communities. In Serbia, the 2014 Pride Parade coincided with planning for a military parade in honour of Russian President Putin, resulting in the hijacking and co-option of the word 'parade' for other, more dominantly masculine concerns (Igrutinović, 2015). Research on newspaper texts finds that only 85 out of 252 texts featuring the word 'parade' (34 percent) contained a direct reference to the Pride Parade; and only 21 out of the 252 texts (8 percent) mentioned either a single representative of the LGBTQ communities or a single issue the population faces (Igrutinović, 2015, 75). Instead, the word 'parade' was used primarily in conjunction with elements of traditional Serbian masculinity, constructed around violence, militarism, and power (Igrutinović, 2015). Further, **any texts that actually referenced the Pride Parade largely managed to discuss other topics usually juxtaposed to it, many of which have hyper-**

masculine elements - e.g. a reassertion of 'traditional' heterosexual family values, displays of religious/sexual nationalism, views and activities of various right-wing groups, and football (Igrutinović, 2015).

The parade was announced by then Prime Minister, now **President Aleksandar Vučić**. He has long relied on the media, particularly newspaper dailies, to frame himself as extremely powerful, competent, strong and efficient, while at the same time developing a victimhood narrative (Jovanović, 2018). He is **portrayed as a 'real man'** in a tabloid article, in which he receives accolades from a self-described 'sexy political activist' with a full-frontal nudity picture (Jovanović, 2018). **Those who stand alongside him are also considered 'real men', while those against him are labelled 'bisexuals'** – demonstrating the persistence of a strong patriarchy and positive perceptions of excessive masculinity, with anything other than heterosexuality deemed negative (Jovanović, 2018).

Consumerism plays a significant role in modified perceptions of masculinity. Post-war Balkan masculinity in music videos is often reflected in the context of brands and product placement (e.g. luxury cars, timepieces, eye-wear, clothing, alcoholic beverages, and electronics) rather than patriotic symbolism (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017).

Post-war Bosnian, Croatian, and Serbian film, broadcast on television and in the cinema, is often centred on the question of masculine identity and its relationship to violence (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017). By romanticising the trope of violent masculinity and macho vigilantism, West Balkan filmmakers create a paradox in which they aim to challenge pre-existing perceptions of masculinity but continue to link men with forms of violence (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017). Other research on film in Serbia reveals the feminisation of women and the masculinisation of men (Radak, 2018).

Gender equality issues

Gender-based violence

The media tends to reproduce patterns of marginalisation and discrimination against women, through a focus on masculinity and the systematic portrayal of women as victims (Radak, 2018). Portraying women solely as victims in the media can further their victimization, despite the fact that there are many examples of women who have fought back and broken the cycle of violence (Dekić, 2017). If audiences constantly see women primarily portrayed as victims of violence (often depicted graphically), they are more likely to consider women as inferior, as the 'fragile sex', with little power to change their situation (Kosho, 2019; Dekić, 2017).

Mainstream media also tend to reinforce the blaming of individual perpetrators and victims, leaving out structural analysis and social explanations for gender-based violence (Radak, 2018). Throughout the Western Balkans, media frequently repeat the male side of the story, when reporting on cases of GBV, undermining the gravity of the violence and further stigmatising the victims (Lazarević & Tadić, 2018). In BiH, for example, research finds that stories of GBV are centred more on the perpetrator than the victim (Dekić, 2017). In Croatia, online media outlets have in some cases engaged in hate speech, attacking women on the basis of their gender and blaming them for their behaviour, such as being drunk, rather than on the alleged acts of violence (Pisker, 2018). Interpretations of violence against women in other forms

of media, such as film, are also often based on prejudice regarding gender roles, whereby women who take on traditionally male gender roles are blamed for violence perpetrated against them (Radak, 2018). In such interpretations, the actions of such women lead to men feeling unnecessary and useless, provoking them as perpetrators (Radak, 2018).

Media coverage of female victims of violence in the region also tends to be sensationalistic. They cover only specific cases of violence, usually those that are extremely brutal and/or are fatal, or if actors are known to the general public (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). Thus, while women and girls are subjected to various forms of violence every day, only the most severe cases receive media attention, often appearing in the crime column. Only one-fifth of media content describes violence toward women as a social problem, rather than isolated incidents (Dekić, 2017).

In rare cases, **when sensationalism is not dominant, the media relies on statistical data to show some trends, but pays little attention to raising awareness on prevention of violence** toward women. Female victims of sexual violence are often still treated as ‘numbers’, used to support dominant narratives (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). The media thus tends to adopt a more reactive rather than proactive position on GBV (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). **Journalists also tend to lack specialised training in reporting on GBV**, so levels of professionalism is low. Common mistakes include revealing the identity of victims, lack of sensitivity toward victims, and lack of objectivity for the purpose of sensationalism (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016).

Media tend to follow the agenda set by politicians, who are often insensitive toward victims and not proactive in supporting and promoting the rights of victims (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). There is also usually a lack of discussion of institutions and an absence of follow up. Cases mentioned in the media in BiH, for example, received no follow up, in terms of whether the court tried the case, whether any sanctions were imposed, or if victims are safe and if social work centres are undertaking concrete measures (Dekić, 2017). The number of cases of sexual violence in BiH that have been processed is generally very low and victims of sexual violence are still socially and economically marginalised. The media rarely deal with these kinds of issues, however (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016).

While responsible media coverage cannot resolve the issue of violence against women, it can be instrumental in triggering public responses, recognition of GBV as a social phenomenon, and greater involvement in prevention activities (Dekić, 2017). Reporting must be consistent and comprehensive. Some actions, primarily by the NGO sector on raising awareness about GBV are covered in the media only in short stories (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016). There are, however, some **positive examples of proactive, professional, and well-done stories and documentaries related to this topic**, such as the documentary ‘Bosnia: Unprotected’, made by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting about the suffering of witnesses in war crimes trials, or reports by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), a regional independent news outlet (Turčilo & Masnica, 2016).

LGBTQ communities

In Western Balkan countries, such as in BiH and Serbia, there is a long-established relationship between ethno-national, religious and homo-negative attitudes (Sremac et al., 2015).

Representatives of gender minority groups are rarely and misleadingly presented in the

media (Koteska, 2015). Hate speech and similar forms of expression directed at these groups circulate in public discourse, mediated by the mass media (Sremac et al., 2015).

The general stark media silence creates the detrimental public impression that sexual and gender minorities do not actually suffer from any forms of discrimination, exclusion, violence and hate speech (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). The absence of representation of LGBTQ community members and issues undermines the mobilisation of citizens who are part of or would like to support queer activism (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). A public opinion poll conducted in Serbia in 2013, for example, finds that citizens consider the most vulnerable groups in the country to be women, the Roma population, disabled people, poor people and the elderly – with no mention of the LGBTQ community, who are in fact vulnerable (Car & Klačar, 2015). **In the absence of awareness of issues facing the community, human rights activities and advocates in support of these minority groups come to be seen as ungrounded and irrational** (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015).

A survey conducted in BiH of members of the LGBTQ community concerning general media coverage of LGBTQ topics in BiH reveals that close to 35 percent of those surveyed do not believe that the media objectively reports on such topics, while a further 55.8 percent were undecided (Pisker, 2019). There were **concerns that the media do not cover LGBTQ topics sufficiently, which contributes to maintaining a hetero-normative; and that where the media does report on these topics, they do so in a sensationalist and homophobic manner** (Pisker, 2019). Thirty percent of the respondents also found that the media do not present LGBTQ persons in an affirmative manner (while a further 62.8 percent were undecided), indicating that **LGBTQ persons are not portrayed as ordinary citizens equal in society**. Most news stories involve controversy or provide neutral information, without any exploratory or educational content (Pisker, 2019). The vast majority (81.4 percent) of respondents believe that sensationalistic or negative media coverage influence the creation of negative views about the LGBTQ community (Pisker, 2019). Other research conducted in BiH finds that media do not always respect the code of professional reporting ethics where LGBTQ topics are concerned, which contributes to the creation of a homo-negative social climate (Sremac et al., 2015). They constantly interview the same people, for example, and fail to place critical distance between themselves and the source of the (dis)information (Sremac et al., 2015).

In North Macedonia, research demonstrates that the **media tends to report solely on physical violence and hooliganism involving the LGBTQ community, while neglecting to profile any stories about their activisms** (Koteska, 2015). Sexual and gender minorities and activities in the country tend to remain outside of the attention of media, seemingly treated as outside of the public interest (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). Pride Week in 2013, for example, received less than 1 per cent of texts dedicated to the research topic (see Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). Pride Week in 2014 confirmed the popular opposition to the existence of non-normative identities. The media once again relegated the topic of the LGBTQ community to the margins or completely excluded it, with the total number of articles declining to half a percent (Srbinovska, 2015). The silence is deemed even greater taking into account that most of the articles were not related to LGBTQ issues or Pride Week itself, but were either texts about ‘traditional values’ (e.g. birth rates, traditional families, demographics, anti-abortion, etc.) or they were published in the ‘crime sections’ of the newspaper (due to the violence related to Pride Week) (Srbinovska, 2015).

There is even greater silence about LGBTQ activism on television in North Macedonia compared to the print media (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). In all five weeks sampled in 2013, and on all 16 national television stations, Pride Week was directly or indirectly mentioned eleven times (see Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). In only one case, there was a brief interview with an LGBTQ activist, with more discussion of topics related to 'traditional values' and birth-rate statistics and reproduction. In 2014 there was no prime time news coverage of the Pride Week (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015). Similar patterns abound in digital media. In North Macedonia, only 17 percent of articles directly address LGBTQ issues in 2014. Articles relating indirectly to the LGBTQ community tended to cover topics of birth rate and abortion or death with homosexuality through the lens of show business and entertainment (Cvetkovich & Dimitrov, 2015; Srbinovska, 2015).

Similarly, in Serbia, **media reports during the annual Pride Parade centred on reasserting traditional family values and gender roles** (Igrutinović, 2015). In addition, the views of various violent right-wing groups and their anti-gay activities are given more media space than LGBTQ activists and their activism (Igrutinović, 2015). Other research finds, however, that in the coverage of the 2010 and 2015 Pride Parades in Serbia, journalists used civil society actors as sources more often than they used political authorities, including ruling and opposition parties (Vladisavljević, 2020). While media were open to civil society groups, violent, militant groups struggled to attract any press coverage (Vladisavljević, 2020).

Croatia presents a different case where the media do not tend toward discrimination of LGBTQ groups and where Gay Pride manifestations are routinely held without incident (Sremac et al., 2015). Further, in 2013, media outlets demonstrated strong solidarity in opposition to the 'In the Name of the Family' campaign, aimed at defining marriage in the Constitution as an institution between a man and a woman. When initiators of the referendum banned several media from accessing their headquarters, the Croatian Journalists Association condemned their actions and invited all the media to boycott their press conference, which they did (Popović et al., 2014).

5. Barriers to equality and other weaknesses within the media sector

Gender inequality in the Western Balkans

There are various trends evident in the post-socialist environment in Central and Eastern Europe in terms of gender (in)equality, stemming from a resurgence of patriarchal values and policies and of aggressive masculinisation (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015). **The first decade of 'transition' witnessed a widespread increase in poverty, with women losing ground in the labour force** and being forced back into the domestic sphere (see Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015). **Women also experienced dramatic losses in parliamentary seats** across the region, alongside declining access to political power overall (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015). While these trends have begun to reverse, there is a need for continued change (Kaneva & Ibroscheva, 2015).

Women in the Western Balkans are considered a vulnerable category of population, through which various forms of discrimination intersect and overlap (Momčinović, 2020). In line with the trends in the larger CEE region, **the post-socialist, post-war period in the Western Balkans witnessed sexual segregation, a decline in women's participation in public life and gender**

inequality in economic life (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2013). Gender discrimination is evident in the income gap. There has also been a rise in sexist forms of gendered discourse and misogynistic discourses through the media, driven by conservative, nationalist mobilisations during the Yugoslav wars (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015 and 2013).

In the post-socialist, post-war period, **'gender equality' tends to be based on the ability to capitalise on particular sexualised and commercial representations and to achieve coveted consumption lifestyles**, rather than attention to political roles and spaces (Volčič, & Erjavec, 2015).

For further discussion, see the introductory section on [Patriarchy and ethno-nationalism in the Western Balkans](#).

Challenges and opportunities within the media sector

Representation at the managerial level

Gender inequality throughout the Western Balkans also translates into problematic situations and experiences for females within the media sector (Momčinović, 2020). Public service broadcasting stations throughout the region, for example, often lack a gender equality policy (Surculija Milojevic, 2018; Trpevska & Micevski, 2018). Since the public sphere is primarily viewed as a masculine domain, gender imbalances within the profession are reinforced and combine with other aspects of unequal distribution of power (Momčinović, 2020). In Serbia, PSB was established in 2006 and developed into a popular (RTS) and unique⁶¹ (RTV) radio-television broadcaster (Marko, 2017a). Women comprise a small percentage of managerial positions, making up only 17 percent of the RTS Managing board, and with no women on the board of the regional Public Service Media Radio Television Vojvodina (Surculija Milojevic, 2018, 9). Similarly, in North Macedonia, the highest executive positions in the public broadcaster are all men (Trpevska & Micevski, 2018).

This lack of women in managerial roles in the PBS is mirrored in the private media sector.

In North Macedonia, women comprised 17.7 percent of managing positions in private TV companies; and the top five TV companies did not have women in any of the highest managing positions (Trpevska & Micevski, 2018, 9). In Croatia, the share of women among members of management boards of private TV companies was 40 percent (Bilic et al., 2018, 10); while in BiH, they occupy 30 percent of management jobs in the media (Momčinović, 2020, 1).

Unbalanced representation of men and women in managerial positions can result in female journalists feeling less empowered to report on various forms of pressure and threats to their media freedom (Momčinović, 2020). In Kosovo, the head of the Kosovo Association of Journalists, Gentiana Begolli, stated that since management and editorial positions in media outlets were dominated by men, women journalists hesitate to report threats against them given the general approach toward women in Kosovar society (Jeremic et al., 2019). For further discussion, see the subsequent section on [Smear campaigns and violence against journalists](#) under Political influence.

Artistic and cultural productions (e.g. film and music) that are broadcast on television, radio or elsewhere, also comprise of industries that are dominated by heterosexual men (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017). Although a female cohort of filmmakers has begun to emerge in the past decade,

men continue to account for the vast majority of directors, writers, and producers. The situation is similar in the music scene. Although female performers are prominent in the turbo-folk scene, the production side is still run by men (Dumančić & Krolo, 2017).

'Feminisation' of journalism

A study of the socio-demographic backgrounds of journalists in the Western Balkans reveal that **aside from Kosovo, which has the lowest percentage of women journalists at 35.5 percent, the other three countries studied (Albania, Croatia and Serbia) have over 50 percent female journalists** (Andresen et al., 2017, 621)².

In Serbia, 62.5 percent of journalists with a degree in journalism or communications are female and 37.5 percent are male. In addition, hard news specialists are more likely to be female (69.2 percent) than male, to have specialisation in journalism or communications (56.25 percent), and to be a rank-and-file journalist (61.25 percent). **Female journalists in Serbia also cover the news/current affairs, politics and economy more than twice as much as their male counterparts** (40 and 15 respectively), and prevail in culture beats. Male journalists dominate in covering sports and, to an extent, in entertainment. There were **almost two times more female senior editors than male**, while the difference was less significant among news writers (55 and 42 respectively) (Rupar & Seizova, 2017, 16).

In Croatia, a research survey finds that student enrolment in the field of journalism comprised of 79.2 percent female students and 20.8 percent male students, pointing to journalism becoming a female profession (Car & Bukvić, 2016). The survey also finds, however, that **male students gain more work experience while studying** as compared to female students. Thirty-two percent of male students worked full-time alongside their studies, and 24 percent part-time; whereas 52.6 percent of female students stated that they were not working (see Chart 3) (Car & Bukvić, 2016). There were no gender differences in internship experience, regardless of the media outlet. (Car & Bukvić, 2016). Data provided by the Croatian Journalist's Association for 2014 shows that male journalists outnumber their female colleagues. There is thus a disparity between the higher number of women at educational institutions, compared to men, and the number of female members of the Croatian Journalist's Association (Car & Bukvić, 2016).

See: Chart 3: Differences in students' gender and work experience while studying (N=120), Car & Bukvić, (2016, p. 86), https://bib.irb.hr/datoteka/845330.2016._Car_Radojkovi_Zlateva_Requirements_for_Modern_Journalism_Education.pdf

While the greater representation of females in the profession of journalism can be considered a positive development, some research emphasises that the poor position of journalists is often connected with the 'feminisation' of the profession (Momčinović, 2020). The increasing number of women entering the profession is in such cases followed by negative phenomena such as job insecurity, reduced wages and/or, the decline of 'reputation' of the

²Albania: 51.7%, Croatia: 53.9%, Kosovo: 35.5% and Serbia: 53.8%

profession. This stems from the persistence of a misogynist social environment where gender equality remains weak (Momčinović, 2020).

Research conducted in BiH finds that the status of female journalists in the country is perceived negatively, **associated with degradation of the journalistic profession, low salaries, and lack of specific working hours among other aspects**. These trends and perceptions, combined with other gender issues, further aggravate the status of female journalists (Momčinović, 2020). Although women held 60 percent of editorial positions at radio stations around the country, research covering a five year period (2013-2017) finds that they were exposed to various political pressures and attacks (Momčinović, 2020, 1).

While being a journalist generally is considered difficult, it is considered to be much more difficult to be a female journalist (Momčinović, 2020). **Women are often doubted from the start, with questions of ‘who brought you here’ and neglect of their qualifications** (Kuduzović et al., 2019). Detrimental gender stereotypes can hinder female journalists from doing their job. When they go to the field, especially to small towns, people may refuse to talk to female journalists solely because they are women (Kuduzović et al., 2019).

A study conducted by Mediacentre in BiH in 2018 finds that female journalists are often exposed to assaults, insults and discrimination, from colleagues within the editorial staff and the interlocutors, and from the public, with the perception in society is that a woman is easier to humiliate in the public space (see Kuduzović et al., 2019). Often, their appearance is commented on as well as their relationship status (Kuduzović et al., 2019). The young age of female journalists may render them more vulnerable to sexism and at the workplace as their lack of experience and lack of knowledge of their rights can make it difficult to counter these targets. It is essential to educate journalists early on about their rights and how to address violations of these rights (Kuduzović et al., 2019).

For further discussion, see [Smear campaigns and violence against journalists and impunity under Political influence](#).

Digital media

Journalists throughout the Western Balkans often work under tough conditions, lacking media freedom and facing immense political and economic pressures (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). Thus, **social media increasingly provides an opportunity for journalists, as well as other citizens, to offer and receive information that is not instructed or directed by the authorities** – to counter direct censorship (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). In particular, social media is frequently used as a safe haven by sources who want to share information with a particular journalist (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). Social media is also gaining in importance as the media landscape has become largely visual, multiplatform and multimedia, requiring new methods of gathering, analysing big amount of data, and delivering the news and information (Londo et al., 2017).

These opportunities and developments make support for media literacy, particularly digital literacy, important (Londo et al., 2017). **Currently, journalists, newcomers in the newsroom and educators throughout the Western Balkans lag behind** in realising, preparing and aligning with multimedia and other digital storytelling skills (Londo et al., 2017). Despite some efforts by media outlets to adopt new approaches, research conducted throughout the

Western Balkans finds that journalists are not using social networks to promote quality journalism (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). This is considered to be due in large part to inadequate digital media literacy, **particularly lack of skills and training in the use of social networking sites** to share their work and to collaborate (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019). Training, incentives and standards need to be offered by media outlets, as relying on personal initiatives is insufficient (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019).

There is some state support for digital literacy projects, for example in Serbia, however, their integration into existing education systems is weak and unsystematic; and is usually concentrated in large cities (Surculija Milojevic, 2018). **In general, media and educational systems in Western Balkan countries have struggled to keep up with technological advances** and the higher expectation of audiences in terms of new tools and features (Londo et al., 2017). A key problem throughout the region is that university and school educators and professors are rarely practitioners, which reduces the chance for students to learn real-world practice and tips from the profession (Londo et al., 2017). There are, however, many cases of media-education partnerships, such as internships in media outlets and journalist guest-speakers tutoring students in universities (Londo et al., 2017).

The growing need for digital media literacy may contribute to issues related to gender imbalance. In BiH, for example, the proportion of women in the IT sector is only 25 percent. This is attributed to pervasive conservative attitudes in the country (BHIGF, 2018).

Political influence and lack of media freedom

Political interference with the media and in their editorial policies is a major concern related to media freedom throughout the Western Balkans (Stojarová, 2020; Brogi et al., 2014). The Regional Cooperation Council Balkan Barometer 2018 shows that 64 percent of those surveyed totally disagree (32 percent) or tend to disagree (32 percent) with the statement that the media are independent of political influence; whereas only 5 percent totally agree and 22 percent tend to agree with the statement (Stojarová, 2020, 173). The biggest scepticism towards the independence of the media tends to be in BiH, while Montenegro fares the best in the survey in terms of perception of media independence (Stojarová, 2020).

Concerns over political interference and lack of independence **stem in large part from questionable and non-transparent financial dependencies of media outlets**, and the overwhelming share of state aid and/or state advertising in media funding (Brogi et al., 2014). The ownership of the media is also a questionable area, with a general lack of transparency, and often clientelistic relations, or overlaps between political powers and media ownership (Londo; 2018; Brogi et al., 2014). In some cases, editors-in-chief have been politically appointed and serve as brokers in the clientelistic chain (Londo, 2018).

Thus, **although there is plurality of the media, the political and economic pressures that media outlets experience means that in reality, the media fails to serve as a watchdog** that can hold politicians accountable and/or critique governmental policies (Stojarová, 2020). Rather, media outlets tend to engage in self-censorship. There are media outlets close to the government in Western Balkan countries that are relied upon by the government to attack independent media and civil society (Stojarová, 2020). **Citizens, in turn, suffer from twisted and distorted information that helps to keep ruling parties and leaders in power** (Stojarová, 2020).

In BiH, for example, it is very common for media owners and managers to be very closely related to the incumbents, allowing for the development of mutually beneficial relations (i.e. media funding in exchange for media support and propaganda) (Brogi et al. 2014). In contrast, **media outlets that do not toe the political line face various obstacles**. Reporters from the popular website klix.ba, for example, were subject to police interrogation and threats of criminal charges after publishing an audio recording implicating the former prime minister of Republika Srpska, Željka Cvijanović, in a corruption scandal (Kuduzović et al., 2019). Some journalists in BiH have also described situations where they were replaced from their editorial positions after refusing to be politically biased (Kuduzović et al., 2019).

Public service broadcasting

Political influences on public media broadcasters are particularly problematic as public stations can play an important role in shaping public discourse (Kmezić, 2020; Stojarová, 2020). In most Western Balkan countries, public service broadcasters are either used for political purposes or commercialised, or both, undermining their ability to provide impartial news or quality programming (Kmezić, 2020). **The absence of strong self-regulatory bodies, combined with financial weaknesses, render the PSB systems vulnerable to direct political interference** when it comes to the appointment of managing boards, editors and even journalists (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017; Brogi et al., 2014). Media bias is most evident in public broadcasting services that are financially dependent on Parliament and thus more susceptible to political influence (Kmezić, 2020). Some PSBs receive direct funding from the government while others receive funds from state agencies in the form of advertising (Brogi et al., 2014).

The media regulatory bodies throughout the region are generally perceived as weak, unprofessional, biased and dependent on the political powers (Erichsen et al., 2013). **The managing boards of PSBs are rarely independent from ruling politics**, particularly when the organisations are financially weak (Popović et al., 2014). Although laws in the Western Balkan countries stipulate that positions in the management and supervisory bodies of public services should be occupied by competent representatives of various segments of the public and civil societies, in practice they are mainly composed of people with clear affiliations to individual political parties (Popović et al., 2014). In North Macedonia, for example, every government has had its own people in the leading position within the PSB (Popović et al., 2014).

Political influence infiltrates editorial policy and programming (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017). A cross-national study of PSBs in seven Western Balkan countries finds that there is a widespread failure to produce independent, impartial and quality programming in the public interest. Rather, news content is politically biased and programming suffers from commercialisation (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018). A key way in which political influence is observed in editorial policy is the **minimal airtime given to critical programming, analysis, and alternative voices** (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017). Primetime news in BiH, for example, will often use political parties and officials as their sources, but do not invite intellectuals with different opinions to speak to the public. This **gives politicians and their spokespeople an almost unlimited space**, alongside significant airtime, to express their views, without being challenged. Government press releases are also broadcast without reflection of their content (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017). This has the effect of **narrowing the range of opinion and**

failure of the PSBs to fulfil their obligation to provide political pluralism (Ahmetašević & Hadžiristić 2017).

The most notable example of political influence in Serbia is the dismissal of the entire editorial team and several journalists at Radio Television Vojvodina (RTV), which coincided with a change in power in the northern Serbian region following provincial elections (Kmezić, 2020). These actions were condemned in an open letter by 77 journalists and editors from RTV. More recently, protestors in Belgrade stormed the Serbian public broadcaster Radio Television Serbia (RTS) in 2019 to denounce its reporting bias (Kmezić, 2020, 194).

Economic pressures

A complex media environment in all Balkan countries, with high numbers of media outlets, high levels of fragmentation and limited sources of funding, poses tremendous challenges to the independence of the media (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). Despite decades of media reforms, the majority of media outlets are still financially unstable and thus vulnerable to various financial pressures (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). The main sources of private media revenues are advertising, in-house programming production, budget subsidies and revenues from copies sold (Stojarová, 2020). Revenues are scarce, however, and the advertising market has been continuously shrinking throughout the region (Stojarová, 2020; Bieber & Kmezić, 2015).

Major advertisers have much clout and are able to condition their advertising contracts on editorial loyalty. Many reports on the media find that **outlets are pressured to take an expected editorial course in order to get or keep the advertising contracts** (Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). **The state remains the main advertiser and also provides revenue in the form of subsidies** (Stojarová, 2020). This, combined with lack of general transparency and the absence of clear criteria for state advertising funds, contributes to 'media capture' (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019; Brogi et al., 2014). State institutions in Serbia and BiH remain among the largest advertisers in the media (PSBs and private media) (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019; Brogi et al., 2014).

State advertising is not managed in a transparent manner and the allocation of advertising discriminates between media outlets (Stojarová, 2020). Advertising appears to be used as a tool by the state to silence the media, with the state choosing only government-friendly media to advertise government-controlled public companies, such as national telecommunications operators (Stojarová, 2020; Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). Government-friendly media are also often favoured in the case of subsidies (Stojarová, 2020). In Albania, opposition media rarely have state advertisements (Stojarová, 2020).

Governments in the Western Balkans also find ways to arbitrarily punish non-obedient media outlets by freezing their bank assets or placing them under harsh financial control (Stojarová, 2020). Authorities tend to adopt such methods at specific moments in time when coverage of some media becomes intolerably critical (Dragomir, 2018). Media organisations targeted by tax bureaucrats tend to adopt critical editorial line; whereas media outlets not targeted by tax auditors, despite sometimes having even larger unpaid debts to local tax offices, tend to be staunch government supporters (Dragomir, 2018). Small outlets in particular are extremely vulnerable to tax-related pressures (Dragomir, 2018).

Smear campaigns, violence against journalists and impunity

At the level of the individual, journalists' fear of losing their jobs leads to many engaging in self-censorship, refraining from engaging in critical, investigative journalism (Stojarová, 2020; Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019).

Moreover, **journalists throughout the Western Balkans often face physical or verbal assaults and smear campaigns, conducted by politicians or by pro-governmental public and tabloid media** and/or without condemnation by state officials, signalling tacit approval (Kmezić, 2020; Momčinović, 2020; Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Bieber & Kmezić, 2015; Gall, 2015). Such assaults occur on a daily basis, with the worst situations in this regard in Serbia, Croatia and BiH (Stojarová, 2020). Journalists and editors interviewed in an extensive study covering BiH, Kosovo, Montenegro, and Serbia described a difficult media space in which they faced threats, attacks, and other types of intimidation and interference with their work (Gall, 2015). These attacks are **primarily directed against journalists who write stories implicating powerful business or political elites, or report on war crimes, high-level corruption, and radical religious groups** (Milosavljević & Poler, 2018; Gall, 2015). It undermines the ability of journalists to play the role of watchdogs and to engage in investigative journalism (Stojarová, 2020).

Verbal assaults on journalists, in particular, have become normalised through the political narrative, becoming part of daily political and social life (Stojarová, 2020). Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, for example, has been documented calling journalists liars, traitors, enemies and foreign spies (Kmezić, 2020; Stojarová, 2020). Smear campaigns by media close to the government have been conducted against independent journalists and news outlets, commonly in the form of articles depicting journalists as traitors or through humiliating caricatures (Kmezić, 2020; Gall, 2015). In Kosovo, for example, the main journalists' association claims that government officials use verbal threats against journalists and that journalists who criticise public officials are often denounced as traitors or Serbian sympathisers (Stojarová, 2020). **This has led to cases of self-censorship and lack of publishing of stories critical of the government** (Stojarová, 2020).

Female journalists in the Balkans face not only the general disdain for journalists but are also subjected to widespread misogyny (Jeremic et al., 2019). The main initiators of attacks and threats to the freedom of female journalists are politicians, then colleagues (representing censorship that female journalists face in the workplace), and then attacks by individuals (Momčinović, 2020). Women journalists are targeted in specific ways that differ from their male colleagues. Verbal attacks, political pressures and insults toward females have a misogynist and chauvinistic character - with comments relating to their appearance, vulgar imagery and explicit sexual references in offensive stories about their private lives (Momčinović, 2020; Gall, 2015). **Female journalists will be insulted both as a woman and as a person doing her job**, in an effort to destroy her confidence as a woman and a reporter (Momčinović, 2020). There are various reports, for example, of female journalists being referred to as 'prostitutes' (Gall, 2015). Milorad Dodik, President of the Republic of Srpska, BiH, has systematically since 2007 verbally assaulted and threatened journalists during press conferences, particularly female journalists - speaking in vulgar ways about the way they look, while affirming himself as the subject of masculine political power (Momčinović, 2020). **This is reflective of larger issues with gender**

inequality, reinforcing the view that politics is a male domain with which women should not interfere, e.g. by female journalists posing certain questions (Momčinović, 2020).

Male journalists are more exposed to physical attacks than female journalists – however, this also tends to paradoxically and perversely confirm discrimination against female journalists in that they are considered the ‘weaker’ sex, for whom verbal assaults are reserved (Momčinović, 2020).

Attacks on female journalists on the Internet comprise a specific aspect of violation of media freedom and gender-based violence and harassment (Momčinović, 2020). **Women journalists in the Balkans experience online abuse on a daily basis**, with many stating that they are left to suffer alone (Jeremic et al., 2019). Similar to verbal assaults at press conferences and elsewhere, online abuse of female journalists reflect entrenched chauvinistic attitudes in the region, targeting not only their work but their gender, often referencing their appearance, family life and personal relationships (Jeremic et al., 2019). ‘Whore’, ‘slut’ and ‘prostitute’ are among some of the insults women journalists report receiving online every day; along with messages for women to take their own lives or calls for lynching and/or rape (Jeremic et al., 2019). Female journalists, who address important political issues or express their own views on sensitive topics, for example, often face an onslaught of threats, incitement and hate speech calling for the commission of crimes against them (Jeremic et al., 2019).

Tracking online threats, specifically, is challenging as authorities and journalist associations rarely differentiate online threats from other forms of intimidation, such as verbal or physical abuse (Jeremic et al., 2019). It can also be difficult to report on online abuse as there is no central register of webportals in some countries, such as BiH; and online media ownership is much less transparent than other forms of media (Momčinović, 2020). In turn, **inaction from official institutions to address such abuse exacerbates the constant fear among female journalists** (Momčinović, 2020).

Safejournalist.net, a regional platform that advocates for media freedom and the safety of journalists, has documented, as of 2019, 34 attacks in general against women journalists in Bosnia since 2015, 32 in Serbia, 13 in Kosovo, 10 in North Macedonia and eight in Montenegro. (Jeremic et al., 2019). It is presumed that the number of attacks are often higher but unreported due to fear of retaliation (Momčinović, 2020).

Many women say they see little point in reporting incidents to employers or the police given what critics observe as a systematic failure to punish the perpetrators, according to the findings of a BIRN analysis (see Jeremic et al., 2019). State institutions show a lack of interest and/or dedication to investigating or punishing the aggressors (Stojarová, 2020). Journalists who have reported threats and attacks to the police described cursory police investigations; downplaying of violent attacks and threats against journalists; and investigations that rarely lead to identifying and punishing perpetrators (Stojarová, 2020; Gall, 2015). **Most of the attacks on journalists remain unsolved**. A report by Human Rights Action in Montenegro, for example, states that two-thirds of the 55 cases of attacks on journalists in Montenegro during 2004–2016 remain unsolved (see Stojarová, 2020). In Serbia, Reporters without Borders finds that a significant number of attacks on journalists have not been investigated, solved or punished, nor the aggressive smear campaigns that pro-government media have orchestrated against investigative reporters (Guglielmetti & Jukić-Mujkić, 2019).

Impunity is also prevalent with regard to the media industry itself, due in large part to the high level of males in managerial roles, which deters female journalists from reporting attacks and threats against them (Jeremic et al., 2019). In North Macedonia, for example, Kristina Ozimec, chief editor of the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analysis, finds that **threats and harassment directed against female journalists have been unaddressed for too long that they have become an accepted form of professional risk** for women engaged in the profession (Jeremic et al., 2019). Harassment, often on a sexual basis, can come from individuals outside the workplace and from male colleagues in positions of power (see Jeremic et al., 2019). For further discussion, see Representation at the managerial level under Challenges and opportunities within the media sector.

While women may feel unsupported with male dominated managerial boards, **women's non-governmental organisations also tend to leave the particular situation of female journalists out of their reports of violence against women** (Momčinović, 2020). Reports often refer to the laws and the duty of the media to promote gender equality, without adequate reflection on the feminisation of the journalistic profession, the conditions in which female journalists work and the violence specifically targeted at female journalist (Momčinović, 2020). Women's organizations in BiH, for example, often react *ad hoc* in cases of attacks on female journalists, leaving these incidents to be addressed by journalists' associations (Momčinović, 2020).

There needs to be stronger connections between female journalists and women's civil society organisations in order to foster more effective protection and empowerment (Momčinović, 2020). Earlier this year, for example, the BH Journalists Association and the organisation Medicus Mundi Mediterania signed a Memorandum of Cooperation with the Agency for Gender Equality of BiH in the field of prevention of gender-based violence and promotion of gender equality in the Sarajevo Canton. Key goals of this collaboration include the eradication of GBV and improved media coverage of GBV through organised training for journalists (BHNovinari, 2020). The BH Journalists Association also organised a performance and exhibition in 2019 that profiles photographs of female journalists who have been victims of brutal threats and attacks. The aim is to draw attention to violence against female journalists, both professional and gender-based violence (BHNovinari, 2019).

6. Initiatives to address gender inequalities and other weaknesses in the media sector

The media has the potential to play a transformative role in working toward gender equality. By engaging in long-term changes to the portrayal of women, such as routinely showing women in leadership roles and as experts in a range of topics, the media can help to change the perceptions and stereotypes that women face in society (Kosho, 2019; Abazi, 2014). **Gender equality also needs to exist within the media sector**, such as with regard to senior positions and decision-making roles (Kosho, 2019). The media and civil society also need to discuss and react more often to discriminatory cases and gender-based violence, including in relation to female journalists (Abazi, 2014).

Investigative reporting

Investigative reporting allows media to serve as watchdogs and can expose issues that need to be addressed in politics and society. Key constraints to effective investigative reporting include in large part the political pressures and attacks that journalists attempting to engage in such critical journalism experience (see [Political influence and lack of media independence](#)). However, **investigative journalism also requires funding and training** to develop the necessary skills-set, particularly in the Western Balkans, which does not have a history or tradition of such kind of journalism (Lani, 2011). Training courses on investigative journalism have taken place throughout the Balkans, particularly during the 2000s, but in most of the cases, they were not linked to each other, nor was there follow up (Lani, 2011). Studies recommend that investigative journalism should receive special support, such as through a help-line and various forms of training – e.g. summer schools, online distance learning and technical support (Brogi et al., 2018; Lani, 2011). Fundraising support is also important in order to address the economic difficulties of media outlets that could alleviate the related exposure to political influences (Brogi et al., 2018).

Currently, the most widespread form of investigative journalism comprise centres established by journalists themselves - e.g. the Sarajevo-based Centre for Investigative Reporting (Popović et al., 2014). These centres and teams are reliant on donations, however, which undermines their sustainability, particular with reductions in international support. Another less common model involves a small investigative team within a large media company – e.g. Insajder (Insider) at b92 in Serbia, which has subsequently become an independent media outlet. The success of this model relies on the professionalism and enthusiasm of individual journalists that comprise the team, and on the outlet's commitment not to obstruct their work (Popović et al., 2014).

These non-profit media outlets and journalism production centres are dedicated to addressing social issues in a way that serves the public interest and contributes to society. An analysis of good practice in media integrity protection highlights six particular examples: Žurnal, CIN, BIRN, Insajder, Novosti, and Buka (Popović et al., 2014). What they have in common is their dedication to journalism as a profession and as a public service – with many of them excelling in their investigative reporting of issues such as corruption and abuses of power; and their reliance on corroborated facts (Petković, 2016). **In BiH, the examples of good and resourceful journalism and contributions to pluralism can be found especially among online media outlets** – e.g. the online magazines Žurnal and Buka, and the website of the Centre for Investigative Reporting. All three media are dependent on the support of international donors (Popović et al., 2014).

In the case of Insajder, the editor, Brankica Stanković and her team of only two people managed to produce an investigative TV series that documented real causes behind many social problems, including problematic privatisation cases and systemic state corruption and corruption in the judiciary. Some episodes prompted the government to take measures against perpetrators of crimes revealed by Insajder journalists. Stanković faced much harassment and many threats due to these investigative reports (Popović et al., 2014). Nonetheless, she was able to expand the journalistic team and increase her and their knowledge of how to conduct investigative journalism (Popović et al., 2014). Since becoming independent from the television broadcaster B92 in early 2016, Insajder's financial model has been based on a few agreements with

established media ready to purchase their investigative stories or television programmes. (Petković, 2016). They also seek donations through the Insajder citizens association (Petković, 2016).

Croatia stands out in the region for having established financial mechanisms in support of non-profit and minority media, which have contributed to the integrity of the media (Petković, 2016). Media policy measures allow for non-profit media, including non-profit websites, to apply for project funding from the media pluralism fund, which is replenished by three percent of the monthly subscription fees for the public radio and television broadcaster (Petković, 2016). Another set of measures directs a portion of lottery revenues towards the funding of non-profit media and individual investigations conducted by unemployed and freelance journalists (Petković, 2016). Further, in designing these mechanisms, Croatian state authorities consulted with the media community along with other civil society actors (Petković, 2016). Such support to non-profit, independent media outlets and journalists can help to counter the dominant, politicised media system (see Petković, 2016).

Training for journalists and students of journalism

Western Balkan countries experience similar challenges in the education and training of young journalists, such as inadequate cooperation between universities and media outlets, which hinders the possibility of gaining practical skills as part of the curricula (Car & Bukvić, 2016). This is exacerbated by the lack of university and school educators with practitioner experience, alleviated to some extent with journalist guest speakers (Londo et al, 2017).

Some progress has been made, such as with the three-year training programme, offered by the Centre for Croatian Studies (HS) at the **University of Zagreb**. Introduced in 1996, the programme was reformed in 2002, with less emphasis on political science theory and more on practice-oriented courses on journalism (Car & Bukvić, 2016). **The Faculty of Political Science (FPS) offers students the opportunity to work at various students' media**, such as Televizija Student (Student Television), Radio Student (Student Radio), the student newspapers Global, the blog platform Studosfera.net, and the FPS social network profiles on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter (Car & Bukvić, 2016). Such opportunities have **helped to address the disadvantage present in many other journalist training programmes, whereby students graduated with much theoretical knowledge but little practical experience** (Car & Bukvić, 2016).

There are limitations, however, given the high number of students enrolling into journalism programmes in Croatia and the absence of institutionalised cooperation between universities and local or national media outlets. This means that many students are still unable to gain any practical experience during their studies, encountering real journalism only after graduation (Car & Bukvić, 2016). This situation is more problematic for female students who tend to gain less work experience during their studies, compared to male students (Car & Bukvić, 2016).

It is thus important to improve cooperation between higher education institutions and media outlets and to develop in-house mentoring. Only at the public service broadcaster – the Croatian Radio and Television (HRT) – is some funding available for internships and mentoring, with variations in the quality of internships based on the individual editors and journalists tasked with mentoring interns (Car & Bukvić, 2016). Cooperation between universities and media outlets can also allow for the dissemination of information on job openings or additional longer-term internships (Car & Bukvić, 2016).

Special support should also be provided to increase the skills and leadership abilities of women through mentoring and development programmes, such that they could have a better chance of gaining higher positions within the media sector. This would help to improve gender equality in the newsroom (see Kosho, 2019). While talent and on-the-job-experience are success factors, mentoring and development programmes are considered a key way to boost the careers of women whose skills may not yet be fully realised (see Kosho, 2019).

The EU-funded Advancing Gender Equality in Media Industries (AGEMI) project, which includes organisations in Balkan countries, brings students into direct contact with media professionals in order to bridge the education–employment transition in ways which enable mutual learning through knowledge exchange and transfer events, such as summer schools and internships. Students can gain experiences and awareness of good practices that improve their employability (Padovani and Ross, 2018). The project also seeks to develop gender-aware learning and teaching materials relevant to the media, including a Resources Bank of Good Practices. The aim is to provide support to women and men to enter the field of journalism with a concrete and operational understanding of how to challenge gender inequalities (Padovani and Ross, 2018).

Specialised education and training is also necessary for journalists who cover gender-based violence (Dekić, 2017). Lack of financial and human resources in the media sector, such as in BiH, means that newsrooms often employ a small number of people who must cover many different topics. However, allowing journalists to specialise in a topic enables them to maintain contact with their sources efficiently, obtain information and follow up on the situation (Dekić, 2017). This is particularly important in the case of GBV. It enables journalists over time to become sensitive to this specific topic and to know how to approach a victim of violence, which institutions are in charge and of what, and with which NGOs they should build mutual trust (Dekić, 2017).

A handbook for media professionals aimed at improving coverage of GBV in BiH, published by UN Women, states that in order for media to play a more active role in the prevention of GBV, media actors must continually keep in mind the effects of their stories (Dekić, 2017). Reporting should avoid being sensationalistic, for example, and avoid the use of stereotypical portrayals of men and women. There also needs to be better exchange of information between NGOs working on these issues, institutions and media, such as through a system of regular exchanges or through joint trainings (Dekić, 2017).

Guidance given in the handbook include tips on what to do and what not to do when writing about violence against women (see Chart 4) and specific tips for the editorial role (see Chart 5).

See: Chart 4: How to write about violence against women, Source: Dekić, 2017, 16, <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/bosnia/un%20woman%20prirucnik%20nasilje%20nad%20zenama-en-web.pdf?la=en&vs=1226>

See: Chart 5: Tips on the editorial role, Source: Dekić, 2017, 19, <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/country/bosnia/un%20woman%20prirucnik%20nasilje%20nad%20zenama-en-web.pdf?la=en&vs=1226>

Media and digital literacy

The ability to engage in media literacy is relevant not only for those working in the media sector but also for the general population. Research on LGBTQ communities and their perceptions and understanding of media coverage in BiH, for example, emphasises that in addition to working with the media, it is essential to work on raising the media and information literacy of the communities reported on themselves. This will help them to better understand the news that is being marketed and their background (Pisker, 2019). The study also demonstrates that there is interest in such programmes among LGBTQ communities (Pisker, 2019).

In Serbia, there are various NGO project activities aimed at raising the degree of media and information literacy among citizens **by targeting young populations, such that they develop the ability to critically analyse media content from an early stage** (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019). Media content concerning daily political issues and current problems in Serbian society (e.g. **the situation of Kosovo, LGBTQ communities, the position of women in society, religious issues, etc.**) are considered taboo topics in school, with discussions of such issues suppressed. Focus in secondary schools reveal, however, that students expressed the need to learn how to understand and analyse content that addresses these topics (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019). Education workers need to help to develop students' critical thinking such that they can **understand the different types of information they receive outside the classroom**, much of which is in the online sphere, and learn to filter out false information (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019). Despite some progress, such form of teaching remains underdeveloped in schools. NGO initiatives and activities have helped to fill the void to some extent (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019). These projects are limited, however, as they lack a unified focus. Research from Serbia recommends that there is greater advocacy for the systematic inclusion of media and information literacy in the primary and secondary education system; alongside awareness campaigns in the media about the importance of raising the level of literacy among citizens (Nedeljković & Jovanović, 2019).

Digital media literacy

High levels of political control of media throughout the Western Balkans has resulted in the tendency of independent journalists and media outlets to relocate to online media.

Independent media networks such as BIRN or platforms like Buka, Žurnal, Peščanik have been able to retain professional independence online, in many cases highlighted as best practice in media integrity (Petković, 2016; Bieber & Kmezić, 2015). The growth of social media and the opportunities it affords for independent reporting points to the importance for journalists to improve their technical skills in alternative forms of communication (Andresen et al., 2017). For further discussion, see the section on [Digital media](#) under Challenges and opportunities within the media sector.

Given the unequal presence of women in the digital sector and in information technology, programmes aimed at addressing this imbalance are essential (Kosanović et al., 2019; BHIGF, 2018). Driven by a partnership between UNICEF, UNDP, and UN Women in BiH, IT Girls aims to make girls and women more visible in the world of Information and Communications Technology (Kosanović et al., 2019). The initiative began in 2016 with training workshops on the basics of website development for girls aged 13-15 years old in Sarajevo, spreading

subsequently to other parts of the region. Volunteers and students from the Faculty of Electrical Engineering and International University in Sarajevo helped the young girls to explore coding (Kosanović et al., 2019). Successful crowdfunding efforts have raised the funds necessary to continue workshops in at least six different schools for 120 girls (Kosanović et al., 2019).

Programmes that adopt a feminist approach to the Internet are important in empowering women and members of the LGBTQ communities. Specialised programming in BiH introduces girls and young women to programming skills and also teaches them presentation skills and digital safety. Over 130 girls have actively participated in these workshops, and in online challenges of up to 300 girls and young women (BHIGF, 2018).

The UN Women handbook on reporting on GBV outlines how **bloggers, who are free from editorial constraints and political influence, can share personal experiences** in their own way (without sensationalistic headlines adopted in mainstream media). This, in turn, can help to foster important online public discussions about GBV. **While views may differ, the more discussion there is about the topic, the more likely it is to be seen as a social problem,** rather than a sporadic incident that happens in the private realm (Dekić, 2017). The blogging community in BiH, for example, could be a strong ally of organisations and institutions working to end violence against women. If a blogger has 10,000 visits on her blog in one month, this could be a more effective place to put information about helplines than a website of a particular organisation or institution (Dekić, 2017).

The blogosphere has, however, also become a zone for hate speech, with women as the primary targets of bias and online harassment throughout the region (Pisker, 2018). **A growing number of women across the region are also now using the internet to combat sexism, calling out and publicly condemning those who engage in sexist remarks and harassment** (Pisker, 2018). Bosnian science journalist and blogger Jelena Kalinić, for example, publicised comments from a male Bosnian writer, Goran Samardžić that amounted to a sexist intrusion into her private life. After sharing a screenshot of the comments on twitter, another female Bosnian and activist, Masha Durkalić, condemned online sexist harassment in a lengthy Facebook post, which was shared by dozens of Facebook users. Several human rights websites such as Diskriminacija.ba, which focuses on issues of discrimination, and Mreža za izgradnju mira, the online portal of a peace-building network, republished it as an article (Pisker, 2018). Samardžić wrote an apology on Facebook, while at least two writers cancelled book deals with his publishing company (Pisker, 2018).

Another example of employing social media to counter sexism is the feminist Facebook page Sve su to vještice (All of them are Witches), created by Bosnian politics graduate Hana Ćurak, which criticises sexism through satirical memes and has garnered more than 40,000 followers (Pisker, 2018). In Croatia, Nataša Vajagić, a coordinator at Centar za građanske inicijative (Centre for Civic Initiatives) has created a Facebook page, Seksizam naš svagdašnji (Our Daily Sexism), which is now a project of the centre. It identifies and denounces sexist Croatian online media sources with explanations of why they are sexist. Another column published on the Libela website, entitled Stup srama (Pillar of Shame), spotlights sexist statements by Croatian politicians. In Serbia, feminist organisation Autonomni ženski centar (Autonomous Women's Centre) has also relied on the Internet to launch an awareness-raising campaign about violence in young people's relationships (Pisker, 2018).

Social media has also been used to raise awareness more generally of the importance of gender equality in and through the media, with an emphasis on fostering a more inclusive and equal portrayal of women in media (BH Journalists Association, 2020). An online campaign – zeneBiH (Women of BiH), started by a group of women, teaches internet users about notable Bosnian women, such as scientists, writers and filmmakers (Pisker, 2018). Such women are rarely profiled in mainstream media. In situations where they are, the focus is often on their personal life and on trivial details (see discussion on [Gender norms and stereotypes](#) under Media portrayals). BH Journalists Association also joined the Media4Women campaign, as part of an international movement of media organisations and individuals. In connection to this campaign, BHJA published 29 photo messages of journalists, editors in media, journalism professors, non-governmental activists from all parts of BiH on its Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts (see examples below). The aim is to raise awareness of media professionals about the need for greater equal representation of women in media content. These messages were seen by a total of 93,470 people in BiH, garnering ‘likes’, appropriate responses and fostering a larger dialogue on these issues (BH Journalists Association, 2020).

M4W2020



M4W2020

"Javni servisi trebaju biti lideri u rušenju stereotipa o ženama kroz medijske sadržaje. Nas tri idemo zajedno i hrabro u borbu za ženska prava i veću vidljivost u medijima"

Tijana Kecman
novinarka
BHT

Vedrana Mijic
snimateljica
BHT

Arijana Saračević Helac
novinarka
FTV

Arijana Saraceic Helac, journalists of Radio and Television of Federation BiH, **Tijana Kecman**, journalist and **Vedrana Mijic**, cameraman of Radio and Television of Bosnia and Herzegovina said: *"Public service broadcasters need to be leaders in breaking the stereotypes of women through media content. The three of us are moving together and boldly in the fight for women's rights and greater visibility in the media"*

Elvir Padalovic is journalists of portal BUKA from Banjaluka. His message is: *"It is very important for me to promote gender equality in my texts, as well as sensitive language. It's a way of showing that women and men are at least in our texts equal, because in the society in which we live it will be a long time to pass until we reach real equality, if we ever do. Although gender texts do not seem to change many things, every step in the fight for equality is counted."*



Gloria Lujanovic is a journalist of portal Dnevno.ba from Travnik. She said: *"There are no prohibited topics and topics that are not for women. Female journalists can report about everything just as well as men."*

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