

GREVIO Shadow Report: Rights and Realities of LGBTIQ+ Women and Non-Binary Persons in Serbia

Executive Summary

This GREVIO Shadow Report presents a comprehensive overview of the systemic challenges faced by lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer women, and non-binary persons (LGBTIQ+) in Serbia in relation to the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. Drawing on original research, including a national community survey and desk research, the report reveals critical legal, institutional, and social gaps that undermine protection from gender-based violence (GBV) and limit access to justice and support services for LGBTIQ+ individuals.

The findings show that LGBTIQ+ women remain legally invisible and unrecognized within national anti-violence frameworks, despite experiencing high rates of discrimination and violence. A significant number of respondents reported fear for their safety in both public and private settings, yet very few chose to report incidents to institutions, citing distrust and prior negative experiences. National strategies on gender equality and violence prevention largely ignore the specific vulnerabilities of LGBTIQ+ communities. There is no integrated public policy approach that acknowledges the intersectionality of gender, sexuality, and other factors such as migration status or socio-economic marginalization. LGBTIQ+ organizations are excluded from coordination bodies and rarely are invited to participate in working groups for specific policies development. [Law on Gender Equality, Official Gazette of RS, no. 52/2021.]

The formal education system in Serbia fails to provide inclusive content on gender and sexuality diversity, while service providers, such as police, judiciary, medical and social workers, are inadequately trained to support LGBTIQ+ women. These gaps result in secondary victimization and denial of services. The state does not offer any specialized shelters or safe spaces for LGBTIQ+ women, and existing general support services often apply discriminatory screening practices, especially against trans and lesbian individuals. In this context, informal networks and community organizations remain the primary sources of support, although they operate with limited resources.

Protection and justice mechanisms are also weak. There is a lack of standardized risk assessment tools adapted to hate crime, partner violence survivors, and protective orders

are rarely issued. Legal frameworks do not recognize same-sex partnerships, which affects the ability of LBTIQ+ individuals to access rights related to custody, visitation, and compensation. Migrant and asylum-seeking LBTIQ+ persons face compounded risks, and Serbia has no clear protocol for identifying or assisting them adequately in asylum procedures. [Same-sex unions are not legally recognized under Serbian law as of 2025.]

This report concludes that Serbia is falling short of its commitments under multiple GREVIO articles, including but not limited to Articles 4, 5, 7, 11, 12, 14, 15, 18, 20, 22, 31, and 33. It calls for urgent legal reform, the integration of intersectional approaches in policy and service delivery, comprehensive data collection, and mandatory training for service providers. Without these measures, the principles of safety, dignity, and equality embedded in the Istanbul Convention will remain out of reach for one of Serbia's most vulnerable and excluded populations. [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, 2022–2030.]

Chapter I – Purposes, definitions, equality and non-discrimination, general obligations

Article 4 – Fundamental rights, equality and non-discrimination

Serbia's legal framework recognizes anti-discrimination broadly, but fails to explicitly protect on the grounds of sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics in the Istanbul Convention's implementation laws. This legal invisibility leaves LBTIQ+ women vulnerable to systemic and institutional exclusion. Community survey data confirms this gap: over 6.7% of respondents fear for their safety in public and private spaces because of their identity, while less than 5% report violence or discrimination to institutions. [Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, Official Gazette of RS, no. 22/2009, 52/2021.]

Article 5: State Obligations and Due Diligence

Despite commitments to gender equality, Serbia lacks dedicated mechanisms ensuring that LBTIQ+ women can access services free from bias. GREVIO standards demand states exercise due diligence to prevent violence, protect survivors, and prosecute offenders. However, Anketa responses reflect institutional distrust: less than 10% of those experiencing discrimination or violence sought institutional help. [Law on Gender Equality, Official Gazette of RS, no. 52/2021.]

Chapter II – Integrated policies and data collection [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, 2022–2030.]

Article 7 – Comprehensive and coordinated policies

There is no integrated strategy that includes LGBTIQ+ persons in Serbia's gender equality or violence prevention frameworks. Strategic plans often focus on cisgender heterosexual women, ignoring intersecting vulnerabilities. Respondents report fragmented support and invisibility in national action plans. [Law on Gender Equality, Official Gazette of RS, no. 52/2021.]

Article 9: Non-governmental Organizations and Civil Society

LGBTIQ+ organizations are systematically excluded from official coordination bodies or funding streams, undermining grassroots responses. They often operate without sustainable financial support and are rarely consulted in national strategies, despite being on the frontlines of support provision.

Article 10: Coordinating Body

The absence of a designated coordinating body that integrates LGBTIQ+ perspectives limits Serbia's ability to effectively implement and monitor Istanbul Convention obligations. Coordination responsibilities are fragmented across institutions with no centralized mandate, and queer organizations are not represented in intersectoral bodies responsible for GBV prevention and response.

Article 11: Data Collection and Research

Official statistics on gender-based violence in Serbia continue to lack disaggregation by sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics, rendering LGBTIQ+ individuals largely invisible in national data systems. This absence of inclusive data collection prevents an accurate assessment of the prevalence, forms, and impact of violence on LGBTIQ+ persons. Without systematic and intersectional data, state institutions cannot develop, implement, or evaluate effective prevention and protection measures. While the state reports collecting gender-based violence statistics, these remain non-disaggregated, excluding LGBTIQ+ persons and thus failing to meet the Istanbul Convention's Article 11 obligations on intersectional data. The failure to collect such data perpetuates institutional

neglect and signals a broader unwillingness to recognize and address the unique realities of LGBTIQ+ communities in Serbia. [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, 2022–2030.]

Chapter III – Prevention

Article 12 – General obligations

State prevention measures rarely target harmful norms affecting LGBTIQ+ women. Reports from several LGBTIQ+ organizations are noting how misogynistic and heteronormative discourses dominate, further entrenching stigma. Survey on the needs and challenges of LGBTIQ+ community narratives reveal community fears of public backlash, outing, and invisibility.

A particularly harmful and unregulated practice that is becoming prevalent in Serbia is conversion therapy. Although not formally sanctioned by the state, there are no laws prohibiting the use of psychological or spiritual interventions aimed at changing a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression. According to community survey responses, approximately 14% of LGBTIQ+ women reported being subjected to or pressured into conversion efforts by family members, religious leaders, or health professionals. These experiences included spiritual rituals, forced psychotherapy, and emotional manipulation. Victims of conversion practices often suffer from long-term trauma, including depression and self-harm. The state's failure to prohibit or monitor these practices constitutes a breach of Article 12/5 and contributes to an environment where such violence is normalized rather than challenged. Although state campaigns address general GBV awareness, they omit LGBTIQ+ specific risks. Government documents do not mention conversion practices or targeted interventions, despite community survey data showing 14% have faced such abuse. [There is no law prohibiting conversion therapy in Serbia as of 2025.]

Article 15 – Training of professionals

Police, judiciary, medical and social workers lack adequate training to support LGBTIQ+ women and specificity of providing services for them. Survey respondents frequently note being ignored or re-traumatized when attempting to access legal or health services.

GREVIO mandates proactive training, which remains sporadic and donor-dependent in Serbia. The state reports general GBV trainings for professionals. However, these lack LGBTIQ-specific content, as confirmed by community feedback describing re-traumatization and misrecognition during service provision.

Chapter IV – Protection and support

Article 18 – General obligations

State institutions fall short in providing equal, accessible, and sensitive support services. Less than 5% of GBV violence survivors report receiving support from a public institution. Most rely on informal networks or services provided by civil society organizations.

Article 20: General Support Services

There are no dedicated safe houses for LGBTIQ+ women survivors of GBV. General support services often fail to meet the needs of queer individuals due to systemic discrimination, lack of training, and exclusionary practices. Trans women and lesbians in particular face discriminatory screening and denial of access. Informal peer support remains the most reliable option, despite its resource limitations. While the state claims general accessibility to shelters and helplines, our research shows LGBTIQ+ women are regularly screened out or denied entry, particularly trans and lesbian individuals. No specialized services exist for LGBTIQ+ survivors.

Article 22: Specialist Support Services

Serbia lacks any specialist support services tailored to the experiences of LGBTIQ+ women affected by violence. No state-funded programs exist to offer psychological, legal, or medical assistance that addresses their specific vulnerabilities. The burden of care falls largely on underfunded civil society organizations, most of which operate without stable institutional backing. This absence of specialist services constitutes a critical failure to uphold Article 22 obligations of the Istanbul Convention. for LGBTIQ+ survivors. Trans women and lesbians face discriminatory screening at general shelters. Peer support groups and civil society organizations remain the only consistent source of specialized assistance.

Chapter V – Substantive law

Article 27: Reporting Mechanisms

Survey data shows underreporting is the norm, and concerns are exacerbated by the fact that LBTIQ+ women are not officially recognized as a specifically vulnerable group within Serbia's reporting or protection systems. LBTIQ+ realities are routinely omitted from state and other civil society organizations GREVIO reports, leading to institutional invisibility. Reporting mechanisms must be reformed to ensure inclusion of LBTIQ+ women in their scope and design.

Article 29 – Civil Lawsuits and Remedies

LBTIQ+ survivors of violence in Serbia face systemic barriers in accessing civil legal remedies. There is no specific legal recognition of their rights in cases of discrimination, partner violence, or family-based abuse. Although civil lawsuits are technically available, the process is complicated by a lack of legal aid, fear of being outed, and unresponsive institutions. The survey data confirms that most survivors do not pursue legal action, either due to distrust in outcomes or lack of supportive legal guidance.

Article 30 – Compensation

Legal frameworks in Serbia provide limited pathways for LBTIQ+ survivors of violence to seek compensation. In practice, compensation mechanisms are rarely accessible due to procedural hurdles and non-recognition of same-sex partnerships or queer-specific forms of violence. The absence of disaggregated data and institutional acknowledgement compounds the challenge. Fewer than 5% of survey participants reported any interaction with institutions that could have led to compensation or restitution. [Same-sex unions are not legally recognized under Serbian law as of 2025.]

Article 31 – Custody, Visitation Rights and Safety

Legal systems often deny recognition of same-sex relationships, which severely impacts the ability of LBTIQ+ individuals to assert parental or custodial rights. Survey responses reflect this invisibility, particularly in cases involving hospital visitation, child custody, and protection from abusive former partners. The lack of protective measures for queer parents and families exposes them to additional vulnerabilities and legal uncertainty. of same-sex relationships, undermining custody and visitation rights. Anketa responses reflect this invisibility in parental recognition and hospital visitation. The state outlines

custody policies centered on child welfare but provides no guidance for non-recognized families, effectively excluding same-sex parents from protective custody provisions.

Article 32 – Civil Consequences of Forced Marriages

Forced heterosexual marriages continue to be a reported method of coercion against LBTIQ+ individuals, particularly in rural or conservative environments. Some survey participants recounted familial pressure to marry in order to “correct” their sexual orientation or gender identity. These marriages are often sustained through psychological manipulation or physical intimidation, but civil law fails to recognize these cases as forced marriage, leaving survivors without recourse.

Article 33 – Psychological Violence

Psychological violence—including threats, identity suppression, isolation, and coercive control—emerges as one of the most frequent forms of abuse reported in the survey. Nearly 1 in 5 respondents described experiences of mental harm rooted in family rejection or partner control. This form of violence is rarely acknowledged in legal or service frameworks, yet its consequences are long-lasting and damaging.

Article 34 – Stalking

Although stalking is criminalized, the implementation is weak when applied to LBTIQ+ survivors. Survey narratives include being followed, harassed, or digitally monitored by current or former partners, often without police intervention. The gender-neutral legal framing fails to capture the specific power dynamics and threats faced by queer individuals.

Article 35 – Physical Violence

The survey shows that both familial and intimate partner physical violence remain widespread. One respondent wrote about years of physical abuse from a parent after coming out as lesbian, while others described partner aggression that escalated without legal or institutional response. Underreporting is rampant, with victims citing fear, shame, and distrust.

Article 36 – Sexual Violence, Including Rape

Sexual violence against LBTIQ+ individuals is underreported and rarely prosecuted. Some respondents shared experiences of corrective rape, coercion in relationships, and abuse

by strangers. The survey found that survivors did not trust medical institutions or the judiciary to treat them with dignity or confidentiality, contributing to a cycle of silence.

Article 37 – Forced Marriage

Forced marriages, particularly involving lesbian or trans individuals, are used as a tool of family control and societal conformity. Although GREVIO requires states to address such practices explicitly, Serbia lacks any protocols or protections specific to the forced marriage of LBTIQ+ individuals. Survey respondents described these unions as deeply traumatic, often leading to long-term psychological harm.

Chapter VI – Migration and asylum

Article 59 – Residence Status

LBTIQ+ individuals in abusive relationships, particularly where legal residency depends on a partner, face significant barriers in obtaining independent residence status. Serbian law provides no tailored protections for queer survivors who must leave abusive partners or households. The fear of being deported, combined with economic dependence and social isolation, often forces LBTIQ+ migrants to remain in unsafe or violent situations. Survey and anecdotal data point to a near-total absence of awareness campaigns or accessible legal pathways for securing residence based on gender-based violence claims.

Article 60 – Gender-Based Asylum Claims

Although Serbia has incorporated some provisions of EU asylum directives, there is no operational framework that recognizes sexual orientation, gender identity, or sex characteristics as grounds for gender-based persecution. Interview processes, interpretation services, and reception conditions are not designed to ensure confidentiality, dignity, or psychological safety for LBTIQ+ asylum seekers. Participants in community surveys and organizational interviews reported incidents of harassment in asylum centers, including threats, forced disclosure of identity, and physical violence by both residents and staff. None of the known asylum cases involving queer persons have resulted in approved claims on SOGIESC grounds, signaling systemic failure to comply with Article 60 of the Istanbul Convention. [Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, Official Gazette of RS, no. 24/2018.]

Article 61 – Non-Refoulement

In the absence of identity-sensitive procedures and due consideration of country-of-origin risks, Serbia continues to fall short in implementing its non-refoulement obligations. LBTIQ+ asylum seekers face real risks of being returned to countries where their lives or freedom are at risk due to their identity. The lack of individualized risk assessments, combined with procedural opacity and institutional bias, creates a hostile environment for queer asylum seekers. Despite referencing vulnerability assessments, the state fails to detail protocols for LBTIQ+ asylum seekers, mirroring the lived experiences of queer individuals facing discrimination in shelters and procedures, and state has taken no meaningful steps to establish safeguards against refoulement for LBTIQ+ individuals. [Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, Official Gazette of RS, no. 24/2018.]

Recommendations

This Shadow Report calls on GREVIO and the Government of Serbia to take urgent and concrete steps to fulfill the obligations set forth in the Istanbul Convention, particularly as they relate to LBTIQ+ women and non-binary persons. Based on the findings outlined in this report, we offer the following cross-cutting and article-specific recommendations:

1. Legal and Institutional Reform

- Amend existing anti-discrimination and gender-based violence legislation to **explicitly recognize sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)** as protected grounds.
- Legally recognize same-sex partnerships to ensure equal access to custody, inheritance, compensation, and visitation rights. [Same-sex unions are not legally recognized under Serbian law as of 2025.]
- Prohibit so-called “conversion therapy” practices through explicit legislation and ensure accountability for institutions or professionals involved. [There is no law prohibiting conversion therapy in Serbia as of 2025.]

2. Policy Integration and Participation

- Develop and implement national strategies and action plans on gender equality and violence prevention that include LBTIQ+ perspectives and realities. [Law on Gender Equality, Official Gazette of RS, no. 52/2021.]
- Ensure that **LBTIQ+ civil society organizations** are systematically included in all coordination mechanisms, working groups, and policymaking processes related to GBV.
- Establish a **centralized coordinating body** for gender-based violence that includes representatives from marginalized communities, including queer organizations.

3. Data Collection and Monitoring

- Introduce **mandatory disaggregation of all GBV-related data** by sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex characteristics across police, judiciary, social work, health care, and education systems.
- Develop a national protocol for intersectional and inclusive data collection, with safeguards for confidentiality and identity protection. [Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, 2022–2030.]

4. Education and Professional Training

- Introduce comprehensive and inclusive sexuality education in all formal education curricula. [Serbian primary and secondary school curricula do not mandate inclusive sexuality education as of 2025.]
- Mandate systematic training for all service providers (police, judiciary, medical and social workers) that includes modules on LBTIQ+ identities, intersectionality, and trauma-informed care. [Rulebook on Mandatory Training Programs for Police Officers in Cases of Domestic Violence, 2018.]
- Ensure that training materials are **developed in consultation with LBTIQ+ organizations** and based on lived experiences.

5. Protection and Support Services

- Establish **specialized shelters, helplines, and support services** for LBTIQ+ women and non-binary persons facing GBV, including legal, psychological, and medical aid.

- Guarantee **non-discriminatory access** to existing general support services, including by prohibiting exclusionary screening practices against trans and lesbian individuals.
- Ensure that **peer-based and community-run services** are structurally and sustainably funded as part of national support infrastructure.

6. Access to Justice

- Simplify and expand access to legal aid for LBTIQ+ survivors, particularly in rural areas and for migrants or asylum seekers. [Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, Official Gazette of RS, no. 24/2018.]
- Strengthen procedural guarantees for privacy and protection during **reporting, investigation, and court proceedings** involving queer survivors.
- Recognize psychological, sexual, and coercive violence in same-sex contexts as legally prosecutable under GBV frameworks.

7. Migration and Asylum

- Establish **identity-sensitive asylum procedures**, including training for staff, confidential interview spaces, and dedicated protocols for SOGIESC-based persecution.
- Ensure that LBTIQ+ asylum seekers are not subjected to refoulement and are protected from harassment in reception centers. [Law on Asylum and Temporary Protection, Official Gazette of RS, no. 24/2018.]
- Create **independent complaint mechanisms** and oversight of asylum processing that are accessible to queer persons.