

Strengthening Gender-Based Violence Protection for LBQ¹ Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Gaps, challenges and policy
recommendations for inclusive responses

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Executive Summary

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, LBQ women experience gender-based violence in a legal and institutional landscape that offers general protections but ignores their specific realities. Although BiH has adopted the Istanbul Convention and includes sexual orientation and gender identity in anti-discrimination laws, these protections are not translated into actionable measures for LBQ survivors.

Violence often originates from families and close communities, with survivors facing psychological abuse, forced outings, and economic exclusion. Same-sex intimate partner violence remains legally unrecognized and excluded from protection orders and shelter access. Institutional silence and stigma reinforce under-reporting, while survivors fear mistreatment, disbelief, or exposure by authorities.

This policy brief addresses essential gaps to develop a specific plan that will enhance protection and justice access and support services for women.

This brief draws its findings from the “Analysis on Gender Equality and Prevention of Violence against LBQ Women in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia” which combined a desk review of laws and policies, focus group discussions, and an assessment of compliance with the Istanbul Convention.

When the Law Denies Recognition

Bosnia and Herzegovina's anti-discrimination law formally prohibits unequal treatment based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and the Istanbul Convention has been ratified. However, the legal definition of domestic violence does not recognize same-sex intimate partner violence. Survivors in same-sex relationships cannot access protective measures such as restraining orders or shelters because their relationships are not legally acknowledged.

This legal erasure is compounded by institutional silence. Existing laws and protocols on domestic violence, social protection, and healthcare are implemented through a heteronormative lens, which makes LBQ-specific violence invisible. Reports of violence are often dismissed or misclassified as disturbances or threats, and authorities lack guidance on how to act.

Strategies for gender equality and violence prevention do not include LBQ women in any specific or budgeted way, and coordination among different levels of government further complicates efforts to adopt inclusive measures.

Services that Dismiss or Endanger

LBQ survivors face rejection and outing in both family settings and institutional spaces. State-run shelters often deny access to LBQ women or require them to conceal their identities. Focus group participants described cases where survivors were removed from shelters after disclosing their sexual orientation.

Health services are inconsistent, and some mental health providers recommend "conversion" practices, which are not regulated or prohibited by law. Psychological support is limited, particularly in rural areas or for those without financial resources.

Civil society organizations attempt to fill these gaps, but they operate without systemic support or recognition. Survivors rely on personal trust and informal relationships rather than institutional guarantees. In some cases, even getting a meeting with public officials is difficult once the topic of LBQ rights is raised.

Culture of Silence and Mistrust

Underreporting is widespread among LBQ survivors due to deep mistrust in institutions. Participants in the research described how procedures "go nowhere," and even severe violence is ignored or minimized. The fear of being outed, shamed, or retraumatized prevents survivors from seeking justice.

Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks centralized, harmonized data systems on gender-based violence, and none of the existing systems collect data disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, or relationship status. This institutional invisibility prevents any serious monitoring or policy planning.

While some positive examples exist, such as pathways for accessing hormone therapy for trans individuals in parts of the healthcare system, these are isolated cases, not the result of systemic planning.

Recommendations for Inclusive Protection

To ensure all survivors can access safety and justice, Bosnia and Herzegovina must take coordinated and targeted steps at both the entity and state levels.

1. Legal and Policy Reform

As an immediate priority, domestic violence laws and protocols at the entity level should be amended to explicitly recognize same-sex intimate partner violence and ensure that all protective measures, including restraining and emergency barring orders, are accessible regardless of relationship status.

Legal definitions of family violence should be revised to include psychological abuse, coercion, and rejection based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

All relevant gender equality and anti-violence strategies must include specific, measurable, and budgeted actions for LBQ women, with clear institutional responsibilities and civil society involvement in implementation and monitoring.

In the medium term, legal and policy frameworks should be developed to explicitly prohibit all forms of conversion practices in health and social services.

2. Inclusive and Accessible Services

As an immediate step, all state-funded shelters and crisis centers must adopt anti-discrimination protocols and inclusive intake procedures for LBQ survivors.

In the medium term, each entity should establish at least one publicly supported and adequately resourced LGBTIQ shelter and crisis center to ensure safe and affirming access to services.

Trauma-informed healthcare, mental health support, and reproductive health services should be expanded and adapted to the needs of LBQ women.

The prohibition of conversion practices in healthcare must be accompanied by regulatory oversight and independent complaint mechanisms as a long-term safeguard.

3. Institutional Capacity and Training

Mandatory training for police officers, prosecutors, judges, healthcare workers, and social service professionals on SOGIESC-sensitive and trauma-informed gender-based violence approaches should be introduced as an immediate priority.

In the medium term, these training programs should be integrated into the induction and professional development systems of all relevant public institutions.

Protocols for safe, confidential referrals between public institutions and civil society organizations should be developed in collaboration with LBQ-led and feminist civil society organizations to ensure trust-based and survivor-centered access to support.

4. Data Collection

In the medium term, indicators relevant to LBQ women and non-binary individuals should be added to national and entity-level gender-based violence monitoring and reporting frameworks.

Data and research produced by civil society organizations must be formally integrated into state reporting and policy evaluation processes.

5. Partnerships and Public Awareness

As an immediate measure, formal partnerships should be established with CSOs working with LBQ communities to support survivor referrals, service delivery, and inclusive policy design.

Public funding must be secured for the long-term operation of civil society organizations that provide essential psychosocial, legal, and crisis support to LBQ women.

National and local awareness campaigns should be developed to reduce stigma, promote bodily autonomy and diversity, and challenge SOGIESC-based discrimination.

Public officials and institutions must be held accountable for discriminatory speech and practices through appropriate legal and institutional mechanisms, including disciplinary action.

A Call to Action

Bosnia and Herzegovina must act to protect all women, including LBQ women, by making the invisible visible and rebuilding institutional trust. Survivors should not be left at the mercy of family rejection or hostile systems simply because their identities do not conform to legal or social norms.

We call on entity-level ministries and relevant gender equality bodies to initiate inclusive legal reforms, invest in survivor-centered services, and collaborate with civil society in building a coordinated response to gender-based violence that leaves no one behind.

The full analysis “Analysis on Gender Equality and Prevention of Violence against LBQ Women in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo and Serbia” contains detailed research findings.

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