

Strengthening Gender-Based Violence Protection for LBQ¹ Women in Serbia

Gaps, challenges and policy
recommendations for inclusive responses

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Executive Summary

In Serbia, LBQ women are targeted by both gender-based and identity-based violence, yet receive little institutional recognition or support. Legal protections against discrimination and domestic violence exist on paper, but they fail to acknowledge the specific risks LBQ women face in their homes, healthcare settings, and public institutions.

Same-sex intimate partner violence is not defined in law or policy, and survivors face widespread stigma, family rejection, and violence without any guarantee of protection. The rise of anti-gender and anti-LGBTI rhetoric in public discourse, often driven by political actors, has contributed to fear, silencing, and social hostility toward LBQ communities.

The system's lack of inclusion, combined with unregulated healthcare practices, discriminatory service provision, and the absence of disaggregated data, creates a hostile environment for survivors.

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.

Legal Frameworks without Protection

Serbia's Law on Gender Equality, Law on Prohibition of Discrimination and Law on Prevention of Domestic Violence all contain general protections, and sexual orientation is a recognized ground under anti-discrimination law. However, these laws do not explicitly recognize violence in same-sex relationships.

As a result, LBQ survivors are denied protective measures, such as emergency barring and restraining orders, which are available to heterosexual women. Survivors may be excluded from shelters or their cases may be misclassified by police and prosecutors.

National strategies on gender equality and gender-based violence do not include LBQ women in their goals, indicators, or budgets. While the Istanbul Convention has been ratified, compliance efforts remain formalistic, and inclusive implementation mechanisms are lacking.

Institutional Violence and Unsafe Services

LBQ women in Serbia face violence in both private and public spheres, including family rejection, psychological abuse, and forced outings. Participants in the research described cases of women being expelled from shelters after disclosing their sexual orientation, or being advised by professionals to "stay silent" to avoid conflict.

In healthcare and mental health systems, discriminatory behavior is widespread. So-called conversion practices are still recommended by some providers, and no regulatory body prevents this. Civil society reports confirm that many survivors avoid medical support out of fear of mistreatment or institutional betrayal.

Social workers and police often minimize or ignore same-sex violence, with some dismissing cases as "unprovable" or "not serious." Training remains inconsistent and SOGIESC issues are not meaningfully integrated into institutional protocols.

Normalizing Stigma and Silencing Survivors

The normalization of anti-LGBTI rhetoric in political discourse in Serbia fuels violence and undermines institutional accountability. Hate speech, including from high-level officials, contributes to fear among survivors and restricts civil society's ability to advocate publicly.

Survivors rarely report violence, fearing disbelief, exposure, or retaliation. Participants in the research shared that even serious cases often result in symbolic sentences or alternative measures with no protective effect. The lack of specific services for LBQ women means that survivors often fall through institutional cracks.

Serbia does not collect data on gender-based violence disaggregated by sexual orientation or gender identity. This institutional invisibility leads to policy gaps, funding exclusions, and a lack of targeted action.

Recommendations for Inclusive Protection

Serbia must take clear and immediate steps to bridge the gap between legal commitments and lived experiences of LBQ women, ensuring protection that is inclusive, survivor-centered, and free from discrimination.

1. Legal and Policy Reform

As an immediate priority, amend domestic violence laws and protocols to include same-sex intimate partner violence and ensure all protective measures, including restraining orders, are equally accessible regardless of gender or marital status.

Ensure that national strategies on gender equality, anti-violence, and human rights include specific, budgeted, and measurable actions for LBQ women, with clearly defined accountability mechanisms.

In the medium term, introduce legislation that prohibits all forms of conversion practices in healthcare and mental health services, with enforcement oversight by independent bodies.

Advance legal recognition of same-sex partnerships to enable access to protections and services currently reserved for heterosexual families.

2. Inclusive and Accessible Services

All shelters and support services should be required to implement inclusive intake procedures and non-discrimination protocols for LBQ women.

As an immediate step, develop formal cooperation agreements between crisis services and LGBTIQ organizations to facilitate safe referral procedures for survivors.

In the medium term, establish at least one publicly funded, specialized LGBTIQ shelter and crisis support center.

Healthcare and psychosocial services must be equipped to provide trauma-informed, affirming care for LBQ women, free from bias and coercion

3. Institutional Capacity and Training

Mandatory training should be introduced for police officers, social workers, prosecutors, judges, and health professionals on SOGIESC-sensitive and trauma-informed approaches to gender-based violence.

In the medium term, training modules should be institutionalized through public sector education systems and linked to professional performance evaluation.

Protocols must be developed to guide safe, identity-sensitive cooperation between institutions and civil society, particularly for survivor referrals and case follow-up.

4. Data Collection

Integrate LBQ-specific indicators into national gender-based violence monitoring tools and state reports aligned with Istanbul Convention obligations.

Formally include civil society data in state reporting frameworks and policy development processes.

5. Partnerships and Public Awareness

Establish formal partnerships with civil society organizations that provide support to LBQ women, ensuring their participation in policy design and service delivery.

Secure public funding for the long-term operation of CSOs offering crisis services, legal aid, and psychosocial support for LBQ communities.

Launch public campaigns to promote diversity, bodily autonomy, and zero tolerance for hate speech, especially within state institutions and political discourse.

Public officials must be held accountable for hate speech or discriminatory behavior through legal, institutional, and disciplinary mechanisms.

A Call to Action

The Serbian government must fulfill its human rights obligations by ensuring protection from violence for all women, including LBQ women. This means not only amending laws, but transforming institutions to become inclusive, responsive, and accountable. Denial of access to justice and safety on the basis of identity is a form of institutional violence.

We call for coordinated action from the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, the Ministry of Justice to implement inclusive GBV responses, prohibit conversion practices, and support survivor-led pathways to justice.

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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