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“Gender, Power, Belonging and Justice”

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26–27 March 2026

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DIVERSITY AND EQUALITY IN THE GEORGIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM: A GENDER-FOCUSED ANALYSIS	4
EKATERINE GULUA	
PROFESSIONAL BURNOUT AMONG SOCIAL WORKERS AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE	27
ALISA BIÇOKU ¹ , SABINA BELSHAKU ¹	
GENDER EQUALITY IN EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER	34
ALISA BIÇOKU	
COURT BACKLOGS AND JUDICIAL EFFICIENCY: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF REFORM MEASURES IN SELECTED JURISDICTIONS.....	42
NAUREDA LLAGAMI	
THE ALBANIAN JUDICIAL REFORM: VETTING AND THE REORGANISATION OF JUDICIAL GOVERNANCE	66
NAUREDA LLAGAMI	
ASPECTS AND THEORIES OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT: THE CASE OF TIRANA	81
ERJONA FUSHA	
JUDICIAL VETTING AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM IN TRANSITIONAL DEMOCRACIES: GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES AND THE CASE OF ALBANIA	88
BRUNELA KULLOLLI	
GENDER, LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY, AND INCLUSION IN SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING: TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES IN MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS	102
^{1*} ARSENA SHKURTI, ¹ LINDITA LUTAJ	
EVALUATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES FOR WOMEN SURVIVORS OF DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN ALBANIA: A QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT OF REINTEGRATION MECHANISMS	109
SABINA BELSHAKU	
YOUTH, DIGITAL INFLUENCE, AND ETHICAL VULNERABILITY: BELONGING AND SELF-PERCEPTION IN INFLUENCER CULTURE	124
SHEFQET SUPARAKU	
A PROFESSION WITHOUT GENDER": EXPERIENCES OF MALE SOCIAL WORKERS IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF SHKODËR	143

BUJANË TOPALLI^{1*}, ARNISA BUSHATI²

WHEN SHE IS CONFIDENT, "SHE IS A LEADER"; WHEN SHE IS HELPFUL, "SHE SHOULD BECOME ONE:" THE EFFECTS OF SEX AND GENDER STEREOTYPES ON LEADERSHIP FEEDBACK 152

INMACULADA MACIAS ALONSO

ASSIGNED PLACES, CHOSEN FUTURES: HOW AUSTRIAN WOMEN FORGE PATHS TO LEADERSHIP POSITIONS DESPITE SYSTEMIC BARRIERS - AND THEIR BROADER SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT 191

LISA-MARIE STAUFFER

DIVERSITY AND SOCIAL IDENTITY LEADERSHIP WITHIN THE AL-AMARA TRIBES (EGYPT)..... 195

MARINA APAYDIN

THEORIZING ORGANIZATIONAL GENDERING: UNRAVELLING ACKER'S THEORY OF GENDERED ORGANIZATIONS..... 197

PAYAL KUMAR

BEYOND INTEGRATION: A FRAMEWORK FOR INCLUSIVE HIGHER EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PARTICIPATION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES..... 199

VALENTINA CHKONIYA

HAVING A SEAT, HAVING A SAY: HOW WOMEN EXECUTIVES EXPERIENCE STRATEGIC VOICE IN TOP LEADERSHIP TEAMS 201

JANINE GOESCHL

DOES PERCEIVED DISCRIMINATION MODERATE THE IMPACT OF DIVERSITY STATEMENTS ON PRO-DIVERSITY ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIOURS? 203

OTTILIE TILSTON¹, JULIA OBERLIN², SOHA ABBOD²

QUEERING MASCULINITIES: HOMOSOCIAL DESIRE AND MEN'S SELF-FASHIONING IN INDIA.. 204

MARIUS JANUSAUSKAS

GENDER-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES IN STARTING A BUSINESS IN VIENNA: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS BASED ON BOURDIEU'S THEORY OF CAPITAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT..... 205

¹ANETT HERMANN

THE ROLE OF NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS IN ENHANCING PERFORMANCE AND RECOVERY IN INDIVIDUAL-SPORT ATHLETES:..... 207

A COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW 207

NARVINA SINANI

WHO GETS TO LEAD, WHO GETS TO BELONG? WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN AUSTRIAN EXPORTING SMES 208

ANA NESTOROVIC

GENDER-INCLUSIVE BOARDS AND FIRMS' FINANCIAL PERFORMANCE: EVIDENCE FROM UAE 209

¹NARJES KHATOON MORADI, ²MARIE-THERESE CLAES, ³AMALIA CARRASCO GALLEGO

PROFESSIONALISING GENDER EQUALITY: GENDER CONTROLLING BETWEEN RESISTANCE AND TRANSFORMATIVE POTENTIAL..... 211

ELISABETH WIESNET

AN INTERACTIVE JOURNEY INTO OPEN DIALOGUE WITH THE UNESCO STORY CIRCLE APPROACH 213

VINCENT MERK

FLEXIBILITY OR ADDITIONAL WORK? RETHINKING GENDER EQUALITY IN VIRTUAL COLLABORATION 215

KATUL YOUSEF

EARLY INDICATORS OF GENDER EQUALITY PROGRESS IN MULTINATIONAL ORGANISATIONS: A PRACTICE-BASED ACCOUNT AND AN ANALYSIS BLUEPRINT FOR SELECTED ASIAN CONTEXTS 216

ZSUZSANNA TUNGLI

Diversity and Equality in the Georgian Education System: A Gender-Focused Analysis

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Abstract

A fair education system, equal access to education, respect for diversity, and the elimination of all forms of discrimination—moving beyond tokenism toward the genuine experience of equality—constitute core objectives of education. These principles have a cascading effect on the preservation of values within society and other institutions, playing a significant role in shaping a country's overall profile. In Georgia, the right to education and equality are constitutionally guaranteed, and the Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination is in force. This study aims to examine the education system of Georgia from the perspective of protecting diversity. Particular attention is devoted to issues of specific relevance to Georgia, namely the state of equality within the education system with respect to gender. The study identifies existing challenges, examines successful practices, and formulates appropriate recommendations. The study is based on a secondary desk review. Drawing on diverse theoretical and methodological approaches, it examines academic literature, official data from authoritative international and national organizations (The World Bank, the European Union, the National Statistics Office of Georgia, among others), and analytical reports, forming the basis for both quantitative and qualitative analysis. Additionally, two focus group discussions were conducted. The paper also proposes a diversity management model for educational institutions, alongside recommendations.

Keywords: Diversity, Equity, Discrimination, Gender, Georgia's Education System

Introduction

The establishment of a culture that supports diversity within the education system constitutes a fundamental basis for the development of a tolerant society. The dominance of humanistic values promotes the formation of people-centred systems, which in turn contributes to the development of both human and social capital.

Any society is inherently diverse in terms of age, gender, and social status. Globalisation and migration processes further intensify ethnic diversity. However, social groups and organisations differ significantly in their attitudes towards various forms of difference.

The dominant ideological orientation of the education system towards diversity determines the degree of social cohesion that will characterise society in the future. A rational and well-managed system of diversity acceptance within education, together with behavioural patterns modelled by teachers and lecturers, and the attitudes developed by pupils and students towards those who are different, collectively shape the future social order.

Georgia is an ethnically and religiously diverse country. Ethnic Georgians, Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Russians, Greeks, and other groups coexist with varying degrees of frequency. Religious diversity is also evident, with Orthodox Christians, Catholics, Gregorian Armenians, Muslims, and Jews forming the main religious communities. These groups are required to coexist and to address both shared and group-specific challenges.

Schools and universities represent key spaces where young people gather and where integration and social consolidation can be fostered around common humanistic values and respect for diversity in all its forms. The significance of diversity management within the education system lies in its capacity to promote social cohesion, mutual respect, and inclusive citizenship.

Literature Review

To investigate diversity and equality, this study examines three main aspects:

1. Identification of Types of Diversity

In the study by Cho Hyun Park, Sunyoung Park, and Bora Kwon (Park, Cho Hyun; Park, Sunyoung; Kwon, Bora; 2025) which analyses 725 articles published between 1976 and 2022 in SSCI-indexed management journals, it is reported that scholarly research on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) management predominantly focuses on the following dimensions: gender, age, race (ethnicity), culture, and multinationality, among others.

A. M. Janani and N. Madhan (JANANI & MADHAN, 2024) conceptualise diversity through four main dimensions: **Personality dimension; Internal; External and Organisational dimensions** (Velasco et al., 2016).

The traditional approach to diversity focuses on characteristics such as race, gender, age, and physical ability, which are largely determined at birth. In contrast, the contemporary approach to diversity encompasses all factors that make individuals different, including those that may be acquired or modified over time. These include

employment history, income level, marital status, military experience, political views, geographical location, and educational background (Luis et al., 2012, p. 129; Meric, Er, & Gorun, 2015).

Based on a review of the scientific literature, diversity may be classified into the following categories: Demographic, Social and economic; Cultural and value-based diversity, Psychological diversity; Organisational and professional diversity, and Intersectional diversity.

2. Determinants of Diversity Perception

Human evolutionary development and social interactions naturally predispose individuals to notice differences, subsequently guiding the selection of behavioural responses towards those perceived as different. The determinants of diversity perception can be broadly categorised as follows:

Biological factors: a) Evolutionary mechanisms (Öhman, 2005); b) Neurocognitive (Lieberman et al., 2003).

Psychological factors: a) Need for identity (Verkuyten, 2021); b) Fear of strangers (Rodriguez, Jaclyn, 2024) c) Cognitive schemas and stereotypes (Hewstone et al., 2002);

Social factors: a) Social norms and group membership (Zhang et al., 2023) (Wenzel & Woodyatt, 2025);

b) Power and hierarchy (Gobel & Miyamoto, 2024) (Simons et al., 2025) c) Socialisation (Seaborn, 2025);

Cultural context: a) Values and traditions – (Schwartz, 2012); b) Language and narratives (Rigoli & Lennon, 2025). (In Georgia, for example, the Georgian ethnic group uses three distinct languages and several dialects, while other ethnic groups maintain their own languages.);

Emotional and experiential factors: a) Personal experience (Paolini et al., 2024) (Lim et al., 2024); b) Empathy and emotional intelligence (EI) (Lim et al., 2024), (Dolev & Shapira, 2026) (Seitova & Kovacs, 2024);

Institutional influence: a) Media and politics (Ismaili, 2024), (Arendt, 2023) b) Education system – schools and universities can either diminish or reinforce perceptions of “otherness” (Weiss et al., 2023a).

3. Mechanisms for Managing Equality

Attempts to manage equality can produce both positive and negative outcomes. On the one hand, effective equality management can enhance: labour relations with talented employees, customer relations, creativity, flexibility, and innovation, as well as sustainable development and organisational competitiveness. Additionally, it can

reduce recruitment-related absenteeism and the costs of legal disputes (Meric et al., 2015)

On the other hand, the process of managing collaboration presents several challenges, including: assessing employee diversity and providing equal opportunities for all; balancing individual needs with team fairness; overcoming resistance to change and managing dissatisfaction and negative reactions; achieving group cohesion and maintaining open communication; and simultaneously recognising and retaining professional talent (Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2021). (Meric et al., 2015), (Wiggins-Romesburg & Githens, 2018).

Research in business organisations has demonstrated that the effective management of workforce diversity positively impacts organisational outcomes (Sayers, Janet, 2012):15; (Borrego & Johnson, 2017):198; In public administration, similar approaches are considered justifiable on moral, social, and legal grounds; 1). Harassment of minorities and women generates moral and social problems; therefore, reducing discrimination, poverty, and inequality benefits not only organisations but society as a whole. (Borrego & Johnson, 2017);

On the basis of the above, diversity management policies must be carefully planned. In both theory and practice, the management of diversity and equity (Park et al., 2025) recognises two primary ideological approaches (Rios & Cohen, 2023): a) **Identity-aware** – focusing on differences between groups; and b) **Identity-blind** – focusing on similarities between groups (Hahn et al., 2015); (Leslie & Flynn, 2024); In other sources, these approaches are also referred to as **multiculturalism** and **colour-blindness** (Plaut, 2010a; Rios, 2022).

The identity-aware or multiculturalism approach emphasises the recognition, acknowledgement, and deliberate management of diversity. By contrast, the identity-blind or colour-blindness approach entails ignoring differences between individuals and groups, managing instead by focusing on shared characteristics (Rosenthal & Levy, 2010; Whitley & Webster, 2019). The importance of acknowledging both similarities and differences across various forms of culture, such as diversity, has been highlighted in the literature (Cohen, 2009, 2010; Overstreet et al., 2020; Plaut, 2010).

A central challenge in this context is determining how best to address diversity in the education system: whether differences should be ignored, or explicitly acknowledged and valued. Educational programmes that encourage the interpretation, reflection, and discussion of perspectives different from one's own have been shown to effectively reduce pre-existing biases and foster positive, diversity-affirming behaviours (Weiss et al., 2023b). Integrating culturally diverse approaches into the teaching process promotes positive intergroup contact among young people and reduces negative attitudes towards those who are different (Karataş et al., 2023).

Interventions in the education sector—such as providing accurate information, correcting misconceptions and stereotypes, and demonstrating the actual characteristics of members of other groups—have been found to effectively reduce stigmatizing attitudes and biased perceptions among children (Nasie, 2025). Awareness of students' and teachers' attitudes towards diversity influences accurate perception and contributes to the successful creation of inclusive environments in schools (Selisko et al., 2024).

Research indicates that incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) into curricula leads to positive changes in students' attitudes and values (Gurin et al., 2002). Inclusive classrooms also provide broader academic benefits, including improved critical thinking skills (Bowman, 2010) and higher overall achievement for both majority and minority group members (Elicker et al., 2010). Furthermore, when students have positive experiences of diversity, their empathy and interest in improving the lives of others increase (Bowman, 2011) (Kite, Mary E; Clark, Patricia; 2022).

Organisations that effectively manage a diverse workforce benefit from increased innovation and creativity, greater customer engagement, and higher profitability, thereby gaining a competitive advantage. Consequently, there is a growing demand among employers for employees with intercultural communication skills and an awareness of cultural diversity. Educational institutions not only foster cultures that support diversity but also prepare a workforce capable of working in and managing diverse environments, skills that are becoming increasingly essential (Meric et al., 2015).

The literature also highlights the importance of developing organisational policies to manage diversity and equity (Abaker et al., 2019; Jin et al., 2017) and of institutional support (Allen & Montgomery, 2001), alongside the positive impact of targeted training programmes (Sanchez & Medkik, 2004).

Methodology

To assess the state of diversity within the Georgian education system, this study drew upon official data from the National Statistics Office of Georgia and the World Bank. In addition, the legal framework ensuring equality in Georgia was examined, including the Constitution and relevant legislation.

The study employs empirical analysis, combining qualitative and quantitative research based on a secondary desk review, as well as focus group research involving two target groups: (1) ten female staff members employed in a higher education institution and (2) eight female students (six undergraduate and two postgraduate) who are also representatives of ethnic minorities.

Based on these sources, a model for the implementation of diversity within educational institutions was developed, providing practical guidance for fostering equitable learning environments.

Results

In Georgia, equality is constitutionally enshrined as a fundamental right. Article 11 of the Constitution guarantees the **Right to Equality**, Article 27 addresses the **Right to Education and Academic Freedom** (Parliament of the Republic of Georgia, 1995). Additionally, the **Law of Georgia on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination** prohibits all forms of discrimination within the country (Article 2.1) (Parliament of Georgia, 2014). **The Organic Law of Georgia (Labour Code)** prohibits discrimination in labour and pre-contractual relations, including recruitment and selection, on any grounds (Chapter I, Article 2/3). Since 2020, this law has been significantly strengthened in this area through multiple chapters and articles. (Parliament of Georgia, 2010).

In Georgia, there are 2,295 general education institutions, including 209 private schools and 2,086 public schools (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia., 2025). Vocational education institutions comprise 19 authorised state community/vocational colleges, 7 colleges established with government participation, and 40 authorised private vocational/community colleges (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2025). According to the Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia (2025), in 2023, there were 57 higher education institutions, including universities, 2 colleges, and 7 Orthodox Divinity Higher Educational Institutions (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia., 2025). Additionally, there are six scientific academies and scientific research institutions (Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia, 2025).

According to World Bank data, Georgia's Human Capital Index stands at 0.57. Gender differences in human capital and its utilisation can be seen in Table 1 (World Bank, 2023) (See Table 1)

Table 1	Boys	Girls	Overall
Human Capital Index	0.53	0.61	0.57
Utilization-Adjusted HCI	0.35	0.33	0.35

In 2020, 25% of youth aged 15–24 in Georgia were not in employment, education, or training (World Bank, 2023).

Since 2010, the Law of Georgia on Gender Equality has been in force, emphasising the promotion of equality between men and women (Parliament of Georgia, 2010). According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the distribution of graduates from general education institutions by sex is as follows (see Table 2) (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

Table 2. Graduates from Primary, Basic, and Secondary Schools, 2024 (SDG 4.1.1): Number in 1,000s, Sex Distribution (%)

Table 2	Percent		Sex Distribution	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Graduated from:				
Primary education	27	29	48	52
Basic education	22	24	48	52
Upper secondary education	20	22	48	52

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia.

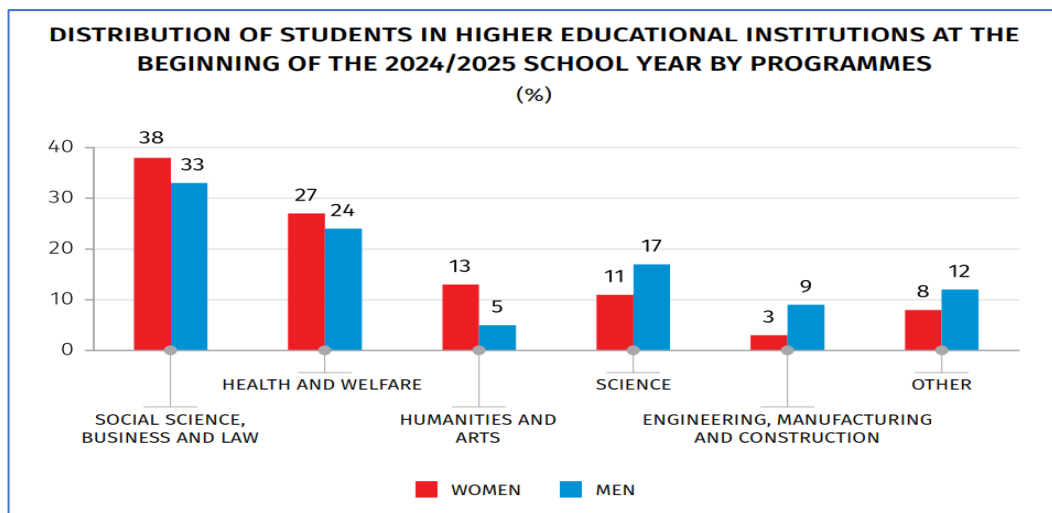
Gender parity in the distribution of students is evident across general, vocational, and higher education institutions. (see Table 3) (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

Table 3. Pupils/Students at the Beginning of the 2024/2025 School Year (SDG 4.3.1): Percentage Distribution, Number in 1,000s, and Sex Distribution (%)

Table 3.		Percent		Sex Distribution	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Pupils,	total				
Public general education schools		89	89	48	52
Private general education schools		11	11	47	53
Total	Percent	100	100	48	52
	Number	310	331		
Public vocational educational institutions		52	74	39	61
Private vocational educational institutions		48	26	63	37
Total	Percent	100	100	48	52
	Number	5	5		
Public vocational educational institutions		58	57	53	47
Private vocational educational institutions		42	43	53	47
Total	Percent	100	100	51	49
	Number	99	89		

Female students are predominantly enrolled in programmes in Social Sciences, Business and Law, Health and Welfare, and Humanities and Arts, whereas male students are primarily enrolled in Science, Engineering, Manufacturing, and Construction (see Diagram 1) (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

Diagram 1. Distribution of Students in Higher Educational Institutions at the Beginning of the 2024/2025 School Year by Programmes (%).



The admission of doctoral students and the distribution of doctoral graduates by sex are as follows (see Table 4) (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

Table 4. Admission for Doctoral Degree and Doctoral Graduates by Field of Science, 2024: Percentage Distribution, Number, and Sex Distribution (%)

Table 4.	Admission for Doctoral Degree				Doctoral Graduates			
	Percent		Sex Distribution		Percent		Sex Distribution	
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men
Education	3	0	92	8	5	1	94	6
Humanities and arts	19	11	66	34	16	9	76	24
Social sciences, business and law	41	44	53	47	45	52	60	40
Science	13	20	44	56	8	11	56	44
Engineering, manufacturing and construction	4	11	28	72	7	10	54	46
Agriculture	1	3	18	82	3	1	82	18
Health and welfare	20	8	76	24	13	12	65	35
Services	1	3	29	71	1	4	22	78
Total	Percent		100	100	55	45	100	100
	Number		383	317			275	163

Regarding teachers, the total number is 66,328, with 88% employed in public schools. In public schools, 87.6% of teachers are female, whereas in private schools, 87.2% are female (see Table 5) (National Statistics office of Georgia, 2026).

Table 5. Number of General Education School Teachers (At the Beginning of the School Year, Persons)

Table 5.	2006/2007	2011/2012	2019/2020	2025/2026
Teachers, total	76 339	69 955	63 780	66 328
of which:				
In Public schools	69 718	61 403	55 946	58 802
of which females	61 344	51 999	48 513	51 538
In Private schools	6 621	8 552	7 834	7 526
of which females	5 962	7 468	6 863	6 567

Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia.

According to 2020 data, the total number of teachers in general schools in Georgia was 58,815. Among them, 38,097 held the status of senior teacher, 2,912 were lead teachers, 262 were mentors, and the total number of practising teachers in the system was 12,211 (Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre [EMC], 2020). In 2024, the percentage distribution of teachers and professors by sex is as follows (see Table 6). (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

Table 6. Teachers/Professors at the Beginning of the 2024/2025 School Year: Percentage Distribution, Number, and Sex Distribution (%)

Table 6.		Percent		Sex Distribution	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
In public general education schools		88	87	88	12
In private general education schools		12	13	87	13
Total	Percent	100	100		
	Number	57766	8244		
In public vocational educational institutions		49	64	65	35
In private vocational educational institutions		51	36	77	23
Total	Percent	100	100		
	Number	4145	1719		
In public Higher educational institutions		43	45	58	42
In private Higher educational institutions		57	55	60	40
Total	Percent	100	100		
	Number	6795	4660		

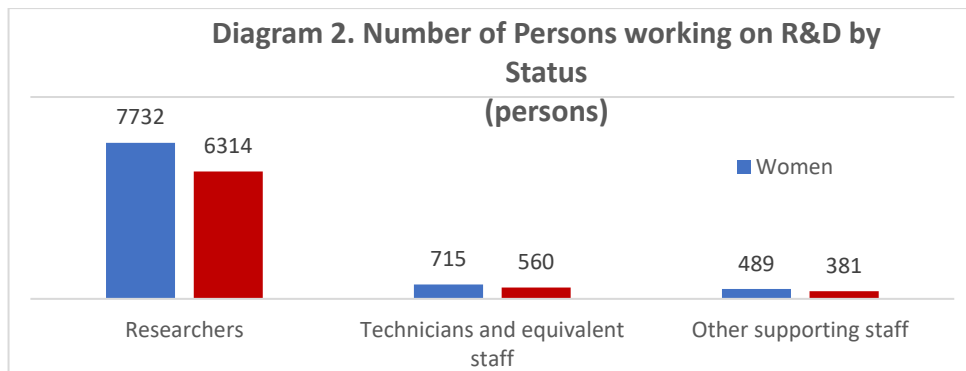
In 2024, the percentage distribution of academic staff, contract-based lecturers, and scientific advisers of doctoral students by sex is as follows (see Table 7) (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

Table 7. Professors in Higher Education Institutions at the Beginning of the 2024/2025 School Year and Scientific Advisers of Doctoral Students, 2024: Percentage Distribution, Number, and Sex Distribution (%)

Table 7.		Percent		Sex Distribution	
		Women	Men	Women	Men
Main Staff:					
Professor		17	32	44	56
Associate professor		38	36	61	39
Assistant professor		16	12	66	34
Teacher		17	12	67	33
Other		12	8	67	33
Total	Percent	100	100	59	41
	Number	6795	4660		
Contracts:					
Professor		2	4	47	58
Associate professor		5	6	61	39
Assistant professor		2	2	61	39
Teacher		38	37	64	36
Other		53	50	64	36
Total	Percent	100	100	63	37
	Number	8290	4794		
Scientific Advisers of Doctoral Students				48	52
Total	Number	1922			

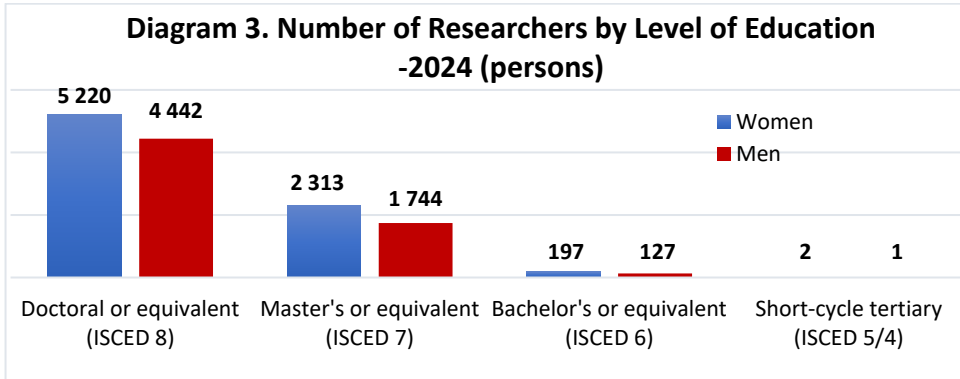
According to the National Statistics Office of Georgia, the gross average monthly wages and salaries in the education sector in 2024 amounted to 1,233.3 GEL. The average monthly wage by sex in education was 1,287.5 GEL for men and 1,218.2 GEL for women, while in other sectors, this difference is more pronounced. In education, the ratio of gross average monthly wages and salaries to the average wages and salaries across all sectors is 62.6% (43-46 pages (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2025).

In Georgia, the total number of personnel employed in research and development is 16,191, of whom 14,046 are researchers, 1,275 are technicians and equivalent staff, and 870 are other supporting staff (see Diagram 2) (Geostat, 2025).

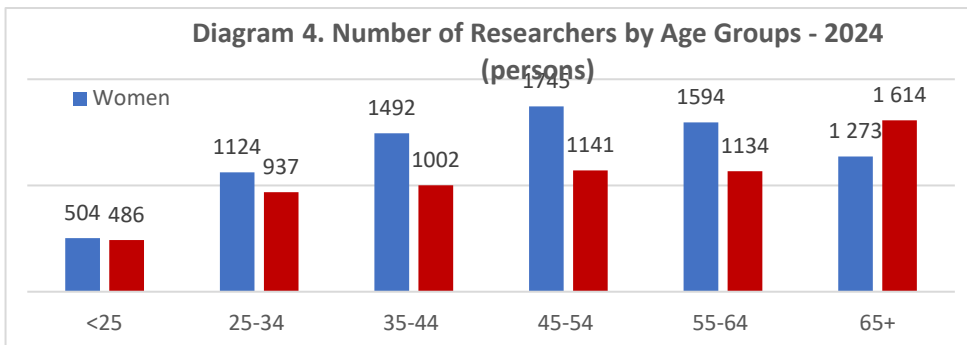


Source: Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia.

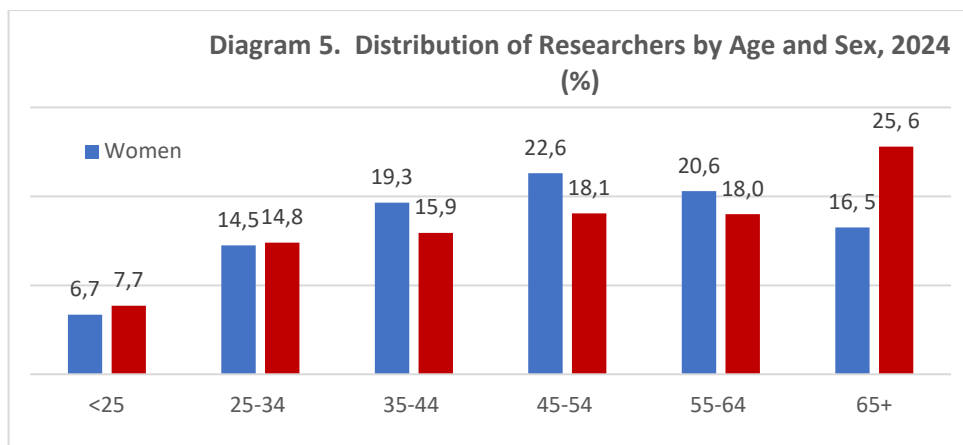
Among researchers, 9,662 hold a Doctoral or equivalent degree (ISCED 8), 4,057 hold a Master’s or equivalent degree (ISCED 7), 324 hold a Bachelor’s or equivalent degree (ISCED 6), and 3 hold a short-cycle tertiary qualification (ISCED 5/4) (see Diagram 3; (Geostat, 2025).



The distribution of researchers in Georgia by age and gender is presented in Diagram 4. The largest male group comprises those aged 65 and over, while the largest female group comprises those aged 45 to 54 (see Diagram 4) (Geostat, 2025).



Similar data are presented in Diagram 5, showing the age-wise percentage distribution within the female and male groups (see Diagram 5). (National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024).



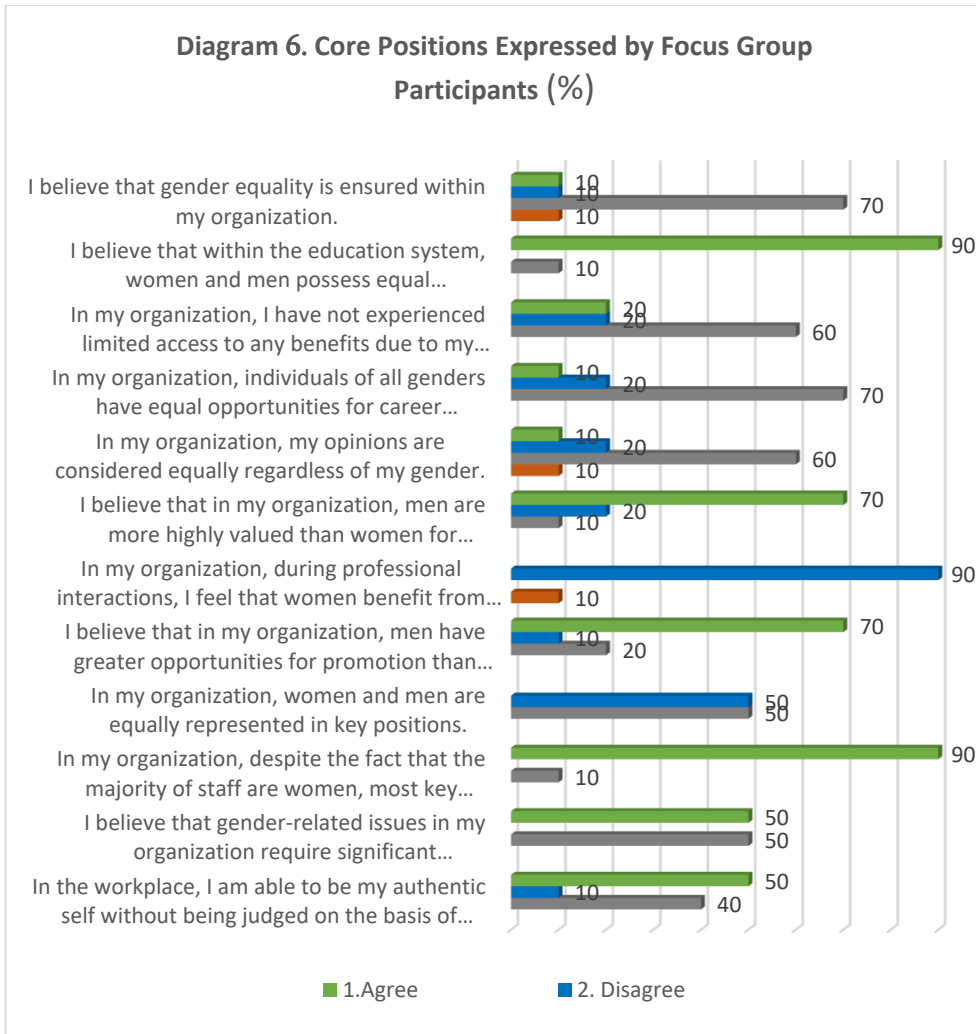
An analysis of the distribution of researchers by Fields of Science and gender in 2024 shows that women predominantly choose Social Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts, while men are mainly represented in Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, and Engineering and Technology. A similar trend was observed in 2019 (see Table 8) Invalid source specified.

Table 8. Number of Researchers by Fields of Science (persons)

Table 8.	2019			2024		
	Total	Women	Men	Total	Women	Men
Researchers total	10 191	5 339	4 852	14 046	7 732	6 314
Of which:						
Natural sciences	2 398	1 137	1 261	2 900	1 428	1 472
Engineering and technology	1 781	580	1 201	2 278	839	1 439
Medical and health sciences	1 369	910	459	2 202	1 412	790
Agricultural and veterinary sciences	442	242	200	484	261	223
Social sciences	2 324	1 216	1 108	3 491	1 958	1 533
Humanities and the arts	1 789	1 213	576	2 691	1 834	857
Not identified	88	41	47	-	-	-

Source: 2019 - GeoStat; From 2020 - Ministry of Education, Science and Youth of Georgia.

A focus group survey was conducted on January 31, 2026, with 10 female participants who provided informed consent to take part in the study. Nine participants had more than 10 years of experience working in higher education institutions, while one participant had between 5 and 10 years of experience. Participants completed a closed-ended questionnaire and were also able to provide their own opinions on the topic. Responses to the closed-ended questions can be presented in Diagram 6 (see Diagram 6).



Group members were given the opportunity to assess the state of gender equality on a scale from 1 to 5, where 1 indicated poor and 5 indicated excellent. Among the participants, three rated it 2, five rated it 3, and two rated it 4 (see Table 9).

Table 9. Assessment of Gender Equality (1 represents poor, and 5 - represents excellent)

Position:	Participants:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
In my organization, gender equality can be assessed:		3	3	4	3	3	2	2	3	4	2

Group members also provided comments and expressed their attitudes towards the issue (see Table 10).

Table 10. Opinions and Recommendations Expressed by Group Members

Participant Number	Opinions and Recommendations:
1	„In my organization, under equal conditions, men tend to achieve career advancement more quickly than women “.
5	„It is necessary to conduct an in-depth examination of the situation, including the gender distribution in academic and administrative positions, decision-making roles, programme leadership, heads of administrative units, publications, and other activities“.
6	„Unfortunately, Georgia still faces challenges in this regard, and prevailing cultural attitudes act as a barrier. There is a need for explicit directives to ensure proportional representation (quotas) in senior positions, at least in the public sector“.
9	„With respect to gender equality, the situation in my organization is certainly not poor; however, I would welcome further improvement “.
10	„Greater transparency in the management system would enable women to objectively assess their role and rightful place within the organization“.

A focus group study was also conducted with a target group of female students from a national minority. It took place on 26 December 2025. Students were contacted in advance to agree on a convenient time, and informed consent for participation was obtained. Homogeneous group members of the same nationality were selected to ensure open and less restricted interaction and discussion among students. **Duration:** 90 minutes; **Agenda:** The session included a welcome and introduction, a brief overview of the discussion topic, completion of questionnaires [two types were distributed: 1) a general statistics questionnaire, and 2) a closed questionnaire consisting of five questions], an open discussion on the issues addressed in the questionnaire, expression of gratitude, and closing remarks. Focus group results - general statistical characteristics of the participants are presented in tabular form (see Table 8).

Table 8. General statistical characteristics

	Age	Education Level	GPA	Sex	Ethnic Background	Proficiency in State Language	Origin
1	18-20	Bachelor	> 3.0	female	same	B2	Region
2	21-23	Bachelor	< 2.0	female	same	B1	Region
3	21-23	Bachelor	[2.0 – 3.0]	female	same	B2	Capital
4	18-20	Bachelor	> 3.0	female	same	C1	Region
5	18-20	Bachelor	> 3.0	female	same	C1	Capital
6	18-20	Bachelor	[2.0 – 3.0]	female	same	B2	Region
7	24-26	Master	[2.0 – 3.0]	female	same	C1	Capital
8	24-26	Master	[2.0 – 3.0]	female	same	B2	Region

Participants responded to closed-ended questions using the following options:

1. Yes; 2. No; 3. To some extent; 4. Prefer not to answer; 5. Other.

Table 9. Closed-Question Responses

	Closed-Ended Survey Questions:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	Do you find it difficult to communicate with students of other nationalities?	3	1	3	3	2	1	2	2
2	Do you find it difficult to communicate with lecturers?	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2
3	Have you ever felt discriminated against because of your ethnicity?	2	5	2	2	2	2	3	4
4	Have you ever felt that students of other nationalities treat you differently because of your ethnicity?	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	1
5	Have you ever felt that a lecturer treats you differently because of your ethnicity?	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	5
6	Do you believe that your gender creates barriers to your education?	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2
7	Have you encountered any challenges at university related to your gender	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2

Following the completion of the questionnaires, an open discussion was held on the topics addressed. During this discussion, students expressed several significant statements and observations (see Table 10).

Table 10 Significant Statements from the Open Discussion (Focus Group, 26 December 2025)

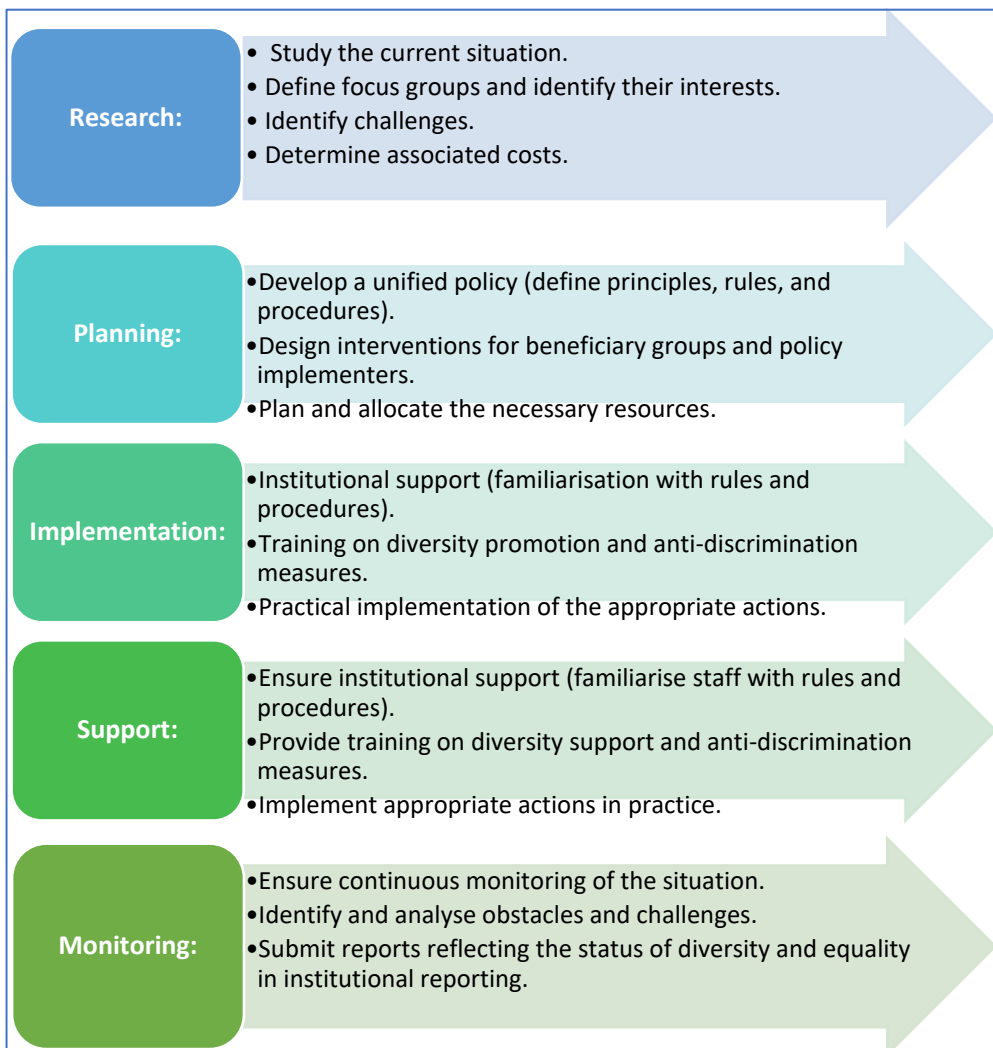
	Statements:	Participants Who Agreed
1	I could improve relationships; participation in various activities is necessary.	2, 3, 4, 5, 6
2	● I have often felt that the lecturer does not notice my mistakes and tries to help me. ● Problems related to gender are primarily caused by ethno-cultural factors rather than by the situation within the university."	● 1,3,6,8 ● All participants
3	When we work on group projects, it turns out that everyone in the group, with rare exceptions, is of my ethnicity.	1,2, 3,4,6
4	● My ancestors lived in this country, I consider myself local; my relationships would be better if I were more communicative. ● I think that the situation regarding gender equality is better at the university, than in the country as a whole.	● 2, 3, 6 ● 1,5,7,8
5	Among people of my ethnicity in the capital and regions, there is a linguistic barrier because the dialects of my language differ significantly.	All participants
6	● For a regional student, it is generally not easy to adapt to a new environment. ● We are distinguished primarily by language and traditions; attitudes and habits vary slightly among different ethnicities. I prefer some things from my ethnicity, some from another.	● 2, 4, 8 ● 1,4,5,7
7	I think that students generally, not only within our ethnic group, have less communication with each other. I am employed and do not have the opportunity to spend free time at the university; I interact only when necessary.	8, 2,3,6
8	Relationships depend on individual characteristics. It is important that incorrect treatment occurs very rarely, and anyone could encounter it. I feel part of a separate group, but this is not due to ill intentions. We simply know each other less, and interacting with someone different is more difficult.	All participants

Discussion

Based on the literature review and research results a diversity management model has been developed (see scheme 1). The proposed diversity management model provides a structured, step-by-step framework for promoting equality and inclusion

within educational institutions. It encompasses five interconnected phases—Research, Planning, Implementation, Support, and Monitoring—designed to guide institutions from initial situational analysis through the development and execution of targeted interventions. The model emphasizes evidence-based decision-making, institutional support, staff training, and continuous monitoring to ensure effective promotion of diversity, equitable participation, and accountability within organizational processes. It ensures coordinated efforts and fosters a sustainable, inclusive environment with measurable improvements in equity and participation.

Schema 1. Diversity Management Model



Note: It is not necessary to establish a separate functional unit to carry out diversity management. What is crucial is that the principles and rules supporting diversity are incorporated into all processes and procedures implemented within the educational system. This creates the need to review management mechanisms, curricula, syllabi, activities, and events to ensure that diversity is adequately supported.

Limitations of the Study

The statistical analysis was limited in scope with regard to the study of equality by age and ethnicity, as relevant statistical data are not publicly available. The focus group was conducted with only two groups; therefore, the results do not allow for generalisation or for broader conclusions regarding the attitudes of different groups within Georgia's education system.

The manuscript was originally written in Georgian and subsequently translated into English using artificial intelligence tools. It has not been published elsewhere and represents the author's original work.

Summary

Research indicates that targeted organizational strategies and policy interventions are crucial for promoting gender equality and increasing women's participation in leadership positions. Institutional and structural barriers remain relevant, with men often advancing more rapidly in their careers than women under similar conditions. Data-driven assessment is critical, particularly regarding gender representation in leadership roles, decision-making positions, and academic responsibilities. Continuous monitoring and transparent management practices are essential to support equality.

Although students perceive the university as relatively fair in terms of gender equality compared with the broader society, cultural barriers continue to contribute to persistent gender disparities. Students' employment and other responsibilities, as well as linguistic differences, represent significant obstacles to intensive and positive interpersonal interactions. The findings highlight the importance of implementing clearer policies. Mandatory participation in heterogeneous group activities may foster a more equitable environment. It is noteworthy that opportunities for improvement exist even in organizations where gender equality is comparatively satisfactory.

Overall, the study underscores the need for targeted interventions in educational institutions to promote equality, enhance communication opportunities, and encourage inclusive participation in institutional activities.

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Professional Burnout among Social Workers and Gender-Based Violence

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Abstract

Burnout, a form of psychological and emotional exhaustion, is a significant concern for social workers, particularly those working with female survivors of gender-based violence. Exposure to the traumatic experiences and histories of survivors can lead to emotional strain, reduced job satisfaction, and diminished professional effectiveness. Preventive supervision and structured reflective practices are essential for mitigating burnout and supporting social workers' well-being. This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore how public institutions in Albania monitor and manage burnout among social workers in women's shelters. The National Center for the Treatment of Victims of Domestic Violence, the only state-run shelter for abused women in Albania, was selected as a case study. A purposive sample of 25 participants, including social workers and shelter staff, engaged in focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and case study assessments. Findings highlight the impact of personal, organizational, and social factors on professional burnout and emphasize the importance of proactive support mechanisms. Results indicate that ongoing training, reflective supervision, and structured professional development activities enhance staff awareness, improve skills, increase resilience, and strengthen capacity to provide effective services to survivors. The study also underlines the broader implications for institutional policies, demonstrating that supporting social workers directly contributes to improved outcomes for service users. These insights are relevant for policymakers, social work practitioners, and institutions aiming to improve the quality, sustainability, and impact of services for victims of gender-based violence in Albania and similar contexts. By prioritizing professional well-being and structured support, organizations can better ensure the safety, empowerment, and reintegration of survivors while maintaining a healthy and effective workforce.

Keywords: *professional burnout, gender-based violence, social work, survivors, shelters*

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) represents one of the most pervasive human rights violations globally and continues to affect millions of women across different social, cultural, and economic contexts. Violence against women includes various forms of abuse such as physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence, often leading to severe social and psychological consequences (World Health Organization, 2019).

Social workers play a critical role in responding to the needs of survivors of gender-based violence by providing emotional support, crisis intervention, case management, and reintegration services. However, working with survivors of violence exposes social workers to emotionally intense experiences that may affect their psychological well-being and professional performance.

One of the most common challenges experienced by professionals in helping professions is burnout. Burnout is a psychological syndrome characterized by emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Social workers working in shelters and crisis centers are particularly vulnerable due to the emotional intensity and complexity of their work.

Exposure to traumatic narratives and continuous interaction with survivors experiencing distress may lead to secondary traumatic stress and compassion fatigue (Figley, 1995). These conditions may negatively influence both professional well-being and the quality of services provided to survivors.

In Albania, institutional responses to gender-based violence have gradually strengthened through national legislation and the development of specialized services. Women's shelters represent an essential component of this support system, providing safe accommodation and multidisciplinary services for survivors.

Despite the importance of these institutions, limited research has focused on the well-being of professionals working within them. Understanding the factors contributing to burnout among social workers is essential for developing institutional strategies that promote professional resilience and ensure the sustainability of services.

This study therefore aims to explore professional burnout among social workers working with survivors of gender-based violence in Albania, focusing on the experiences of staff members working in the National Center for the Treatment of Victims of Domestic Violence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Burnout in Social Work

Burnout was first introduced by Freudenberger (1974) to describe emotional exhaustion experienced by professionals working in helping professions. Later, Maslach and Jackson (1981) conceptualized burnout as consisting of three

dimensions: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment.

Social workers frequently work with individuals experiencing trauma, poverty, abuse, and mental health challenges. Such conditions may expose professionals to high levels of emotional stress, increasing the risk of burnout (Lloyd et al., 2002).

Research indicates that burnout may result in decreased job satisfaction, reduced empathy toward clients, and increased turnover rates among social workers (Kim & Stoner, 2008).

2.2 Secondary Trauma and Compassion Fatigue

Professionals working with survivors of violence are particularly vulnerable to secondary traumatic stress. Secondary trauma occurs when individuals experience trauma-related symptoms due to indirect exposure to the traumatic experiences of others (Bride, 2007).

Compassion fatigue refers to the emotional exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to others' suffering (Figley, 1995). Studies indicate that social workers working in domestic violence shelters frequently experience compassion fatigue due to the emotionally demanding nature of their work (Dombo et al., 2013).

2.3 Organizational Support and Burnout Prevention

Organizational support plays an important role in preventing burnout. Access to professional supervision, peer support, and training opportunities has been shown to enhance resilience among social workers (Newell & MacNeil, 2010).

Supportive organizational environments also contribute to improved job satisfaction and professional well-being.

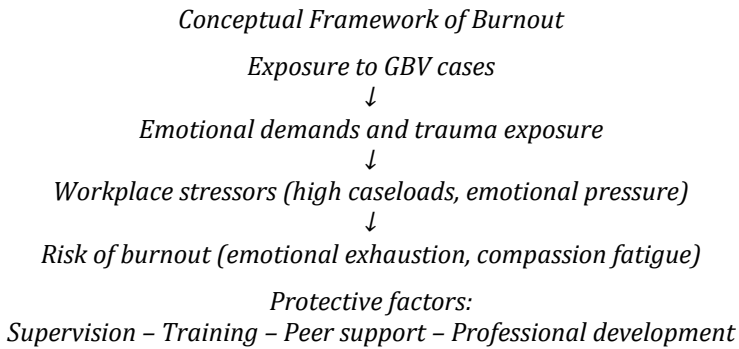
2.4 Conceptual Framework

This study adopts an ecological perspective on burnout, recognizing that professional well-being is influenced by interactions between individual, organizational, and institutional factors (Newell, 2020).

Social workers working with survivors of gender-based violence experience high emotional demands due to exposure to traumatic narratives, crisis situations, and complex social dynamics. Without adequate support mechanisms, these demands may lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Institutional support mechanisms, such as supervision, professional training, and peer collaboration, serve as protective factors that help professionals manage stress and maintain resilience.

Figure 1



3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative ethnographic approach to explore the experiences of social workers working with survivors of gender-based violence.

3.1 Research Setting

The research was conducted at the National Center for the Treatment of Victims of Domestic Violence in Albania, the only state-run shelter providing services for women experiencing domestic violence.

3.2 Participants

A purposive sample of 25 participants was selected.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Professional Role Number

Social workers	12
Psychologists	5
Shelter staff	8
Total	25

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected using:

Semi-structured interviews

Focus group discussions

Institutional case study analysis

4. Results

The analysis identified several themes related to professional burnout.

Participants frequently reported emotional exhaustion resulting from continuous exposure to traumatic narratives and crisis situations. Many social workers emphasized that supporting survivors requires high emotional engagement.

Peer support and supervision were identified as important protective mechanisms that help professionals process emotional experiences and maintain professional balance.

Table 2. Factors Contributing to Burnout

Category	Factors	Impact
Personal	Emotional involvement	Emotional exhaustion
Organizational	High workload	Stress
Work environment	Exposure to trauma	Secondary trauma
Institutional	Limited supervision	Reduced resilience

Table 3. Institutional Strategies for Burnout Prevention

Strategy	Purpose	Outcome
Reflective supervision	Emotional reflection	Reduced burnout
Professional training	Skill development	Increased competence
Peer meetings	Experience sharing	Emotional support
Workload management	Balanced caseloads	Reduced stress

Table 4. Qualitative Themes from Interviews

Theme	Description
Emotional exhaustion	Emotional fatigue from repeated trauma exposure
Secondary trauma	Psychological impact of survivors' stories

Theme	Description
Workload pressure	High caseloads and administrative tasks
Supervision importance	Emotional and professional support
Peer collaboration	Sharing experiences within teams

5. Discussion

The findings confirm that social workers working with survivors of gender-based violence experience significant emotional demands that may contribute to burnout. Emotional exhaustion emerged as the most commonly reported challenge.

Consistent with previous research (Maslach et al., 2001), burnout appears to be influenced by both individual and organizational factors. Institutional support mechanisms such as supervision and training play a crucial role in reducing emotional stress and strengthening professional resilience.

6. Policy Implications

The study highlights the importance of strengthening institutional support systems for social workers working with survivors of violence.

Organizations should prioritize supervision programs, continuous training opportunities, and manageable workloads.

7. Conclusion

Professional burnout represents a significant challenge for social workers assisting survivors of gender-based violence. The emotionally demanding nature of this work requires strong institutional support mechanisms.

By promoting professional supervision, training, and supportive work environments, institutions can enhance the well-being of professionals and improve services provided to survivors.

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Gender Equality in Education and the Role of the Social Worker

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Abstract

Gender equality is a fundamental pillar of democratic and social development. Although Albania has made significant progress toward strengthening democratic values in recent years, gender inequalities between women and men persist, including within the educational system. This study examines the role of school textbooks in shaping gender roles and identities, focusing on materials currently used in Albanian schools. The aim is to identify and analyze gender representations and disparities embedded in educational content, particularly in relation to career aspirations and academic achievement. The research employs a qualitative methodology based on content analysis of selected textbooks across different grade levels. Textual narratives, visual representations, professional roles, and language patterns were systematically examined to identify implicit and explicit gender messages. Thematic coding was used to categorize recurring patterns of representation. Findings reveal that textbooks continue to reproduce traditional gender stereotypes, with men more frequently portrayed in leadership, professional, and decision-making roles, while women are often depicted in domestic or supportive positions. Such representations reinforce conventional gender norms and may influence students' perceptions of their academic potential and career opportunities. The study highlights the essential role of social workers in education as advocates for equality, promoters of inclusive practices, and agents of social change. By addressing discriminatory narratives, supporting students affected by gender bias, and collaborating with teachers and families, social workers can contribute significantly to fostering a more equitable educational environment.

Keywords: Gender equality; School textbooks; Gender stereotypes; Education; Social work.

1. Introduction

Gender equality in education is globally recognized as a prerequisite for democratic consolidation and socioeconomic development (UNESCO, 2020). Educational institutions function not only as transmitters of knowledge but also as sites of

socialization where norms, identities, and power relations are reproduced (Apple, 2004). In transitional societies such as Albania, educational reform has been central to modernization efforts and European integration processes. However, structural reforms do not automatically transform the symbolic order embedded within curricular materials.

Textbooks remain among the most authoritative pedagogical tools in formal education. Beyond providing academic content, they shape students' perceptions of gender roles, social hierarchies, and professional possibilities (Blumberg, 2008). The hidden curriculum—implicit values and messages conveyed through educational materials, often perpetuates subtle forms of inequality (Jackson, 1968).

Research consistently demonstrates that stereotypical gender portrayals in textbooks may influence children's academic confidence, subject preferences, and occupational aspirations (Eccles, 2011). When boys are repeatedly represented as scientists, leaders, and innovators while girls are depicted in caregiving roles, educational materials reinforce occupational segregation and unequal power structures.

Although Albania has adopted legal frameworks supporting gender equality, empirical studies assessing textbook representation remain limited. This research seeks to address this gap by systematically analyzing gender portrayals in current Albanian textbooks and examining the potential role of social workers in promoting transformative change within educational institutions.

The study is guided by two central research questions:

How are gender roles represented in Albanian pre-university textbooks?

What role can school social workers play in addressing gender bias and promoting inclusive educational practices?

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Social Role Theory

Social role theory posits that gender differences arise from historically constructed divisions of labor, which become internalized through socialization processes (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Educational materials often reflect and reinforce these divisions by associating masculinity with leadership and femininity with caregiving.

2.2 Gender Performativity

Butler (1990) conceptualizes gender as performative, constructed through repeated acts and representations. Textbooks contribute to this performativity by normalizing specific behaviors and expectations associated with gender.

2.3 Hegemonic Masculinity

Connell (2009) argues that institutions reproduce hegemonic masculinity by privileging male dominance in symbolic and material domains. Educational discourse often situates male characters in positions of authority, reinforcing gender hierarchies.

2.4 Global Evidence on Gender Bias in Textbooks

Comparative studies demonstrate that gender imbalance in textbooks is a persistent global phenomenon (Brugeilles & Cromer, 2009; Stromquist et al., 2017). Blumberg (2008) identifies textbook bias as a "hidden obstacle" to gender equality, noting that underrepresentation of women in professional roles restricts aspirational horizons.

In post-socialist and transitional contexts, research indicates that reforms frequently overlook symbolic inequalities embedded in curricula (Silova, 2010). Similar patterns have been observed in Southeast Europe, where traditional gender norms continue to influence educational narratives.

2.5 The Role of Social Work in Educational Settings

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2014) emphasizes social justice and anti-discriminatory practice as foundational professional values. School social workers operate at the intersection of students, families, and institutions, positioning them as critical agents in promoting gender-sensitive reforms (Allen-Meares, 2013).

Their interventions may include advocacy, counseling, awareness programs, and policy-level engagement. Addressing gender bias aligns directly with the profession's commitment to human rights and equality.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs qualitative content analysis following Krippendorff's (2018) framework. Content analysis enables systematic examination of textual and visual materials to identify patterns, themes, and ideological constructs.

3.2 Sample Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was applied. Twelve textbooks currently used in Albanian primary and lower secondary education were selected across four subject areas:

Language and Literature

History

Civic Education

Social Sciences

Selection criteria included grade diversity, subject relevance, and national circulation.

3.3 Coding Framework

A structured coding matrix was developed based on prior gender-analysis research.

Table 1

Coding Categories and Indicators

Category	Indicators	Analytical Focus
Character Visibility	Frequency of male vs. female characters	Numerical representation
Occupational Roles	Leadership, STEM, caregiving, domestic roles	Professional hierarchy
Activity Type	Active/decision-making vs. passive/supportive	Agency
Linguistic Usage	Generic masculine terms	Symbolic centrality
Visual Positioning	Foreground vs. background placement	Power symbolism

3.4 Data Analysis Procedure

Each textbook was independently coded. Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring representations. Frequency counts supported qualitative interpretation.

Intercoder reliability was ensured through double coding of 25% of the sample, achieving 0.87 agreement (Cohen's Kappa), indicating strong reliability.

4. Findings

The analysis revealed systematic gender asymmetries across textual narratives, occupational depictions, visual representations, and linguistic structures.

4.1 Character Visibility and Numerical Representation

Across the 12 textbooks analyzed, 1,248 identifiable human characters were coded. Of these:

67% were male

33% were female

Overall Gender Distribution of Characters

Male: 67%
Female: 33%

This imbalance reflects symbolic marginalization of female presence in educational narratives. Male centrality was particularly pronounced in history and civic education textbooks, where national heroes, political figures, and scientists were overwhelmingly male.

4.2 Occupational Representation

Professional roles were categorized into leadership, STEM-related professions, education, healthcare, and domestic roles.

Table 2

Distribution of Occupational Roles by Gender

Occupational Category	Male (%)	Female (%)
Political Leadership	82	18
STEM Professions	76	24
Education	41	59
Healthcare	38	62
Domestic Roles	21	79

Men were predominantly depicted as political leaders, inventors, engineers, and decision-makers. Women were more frequently associated with caregiving professions such as teaching and nursing, and with domestic activities.

These patterns reinforce traditional gender divisions of labor and limit aspirational diversity for students.

4.3 Activity Type and Agency

Male characters were portrayed in active, decision-making roles in 72% of cases, compared to 39% for female characters. Female figures were more often shown in supportive or passive positions.

Active vs. Passive Role Distribution

Male	Active:	72%
Male	Passive:	28%
Female	Active:	39%
Female	Passive:	61%

Such depictions align with global findings indicating that agency is frequently masculinized in educational materials (Stromquist et al., 2017).

4.4 Linguistic Patterns

Masculine generic pronouns were used in 64% of neutral references to professions or authority positions. Feminine forms were often marked as exceptions, reinforcing male normativity.

For example, terms equivalent to “scientist,” “leader,” or “citizen” were linguistically framed in masculine forms, subtly positioning masculinity as the universal standard.

5. Discussion

The findings indicate that despite formal commitments to gender equality, symbolic inequalities persist within Albanian educational materials. The dominance of male figures in leadership and intellectual domains reflects what Connell (2009) describes as institutionalized hegemonic masculinity.

From a social cognitive perspective, repeated exposure to stereotypical representations may influence self-efficacy beliefs and educational aspirations (Bandura, 1997; Eccles, 2011). Girls may internalize constrained professional horizons, particularly in STEM fields, where representation remains limited (OECD, 2019).

The hidden curriculum embedded within textbooks operates as a mechanism of subtle social reproduction (Apple, 2004). Even when explicit discriminatory content is absent, unequal visibility and symbolic hierarchies shape students’ perceptions of competence and authority.

In transitional contexts, symbolic reform often lags behind legislative reform (Silova, 2010). Therefore, textbook revision must be understood not only as a pedagogical adjustment but as a broader sociocultural transformation.

6. Implications for Social Work Practice

School social workers occupy a strategic position within educational institutions. Their professional mandate includes advocacy, empowerment, and the promotion of social justice (IFSW, 2014).

6.1 Micro-Level Interventions

At the individual level, social workers can:

Provide counseling to students experiencing gender-based discrimination

Encourage girls’ participation in STEM activities

Support boys in challenging restrictive masculinity norms

6.2 Mezzo-Level Interventions

At the school-community level, social workers may:

Organize gender-sensitivity workshops

Collaborate with teachers to promote inclusive classroom practices

Facilitate critical discussions about gender stereotypes

6.3 Macro-Level Advocacy

At the policy level, social workers can:

Advocate for gender-sensitive curriculum reform

Participate in textbook evaluation committees

Contribute to national educational policy debates

By integrating anti-discriminatory principles into daily practice, social workers can function as agents of structural and cultural transformation.

7. Conclusion

This study confirms the persistence of gender asymmetries in Albanian pre-university textbooks. Male dominance in leadership, scientific, and decision-making roles contrasts with the limited and stereotypical representation of women.

Such patterns may influence students' academic self-concept and professional aspirations, contributing to long-term gender disparities in the labor market.

Addressing gender bias in educational materials requires systemic commitment. Social workers, positioned at the intersection of policy and practice, hold a vital role in promoting inclusive educational environments and advocating for curriculum reform.

Future research should incorporate mixed-method approaches, student perception surveys, and cross-national comparative studies to deepen understanding of gendered educational representation.

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Court Backlogs and Judicial Efficiency: A Comparative Study of Reform Measures in Selected Jurisdictions

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Abstract

This article examines the legislative, institutional, and procedural reforms undertaken in Germany, France, and the Netherlands in response to the persistent challenge of court backlogs and excessive length of judicial proceedings. Situated within the supranational framework established by Article 6(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union, the analysis interrogates the extent to which domestic reform trajectories have aligned with the standards elaborated by the European Court of Human Rights and the Court of Justice of the European Union, including through the pilot judgment procedure and the principle of effective judicial protection. Drawing on a comparative legal and doctrinal methodology, the study evaluates convergent and divergent tendencies across the three jurisdictions with respect to procedural streamlining, digitalisation, case flow management, and the institutionalisation of alternative dispute resolution mechanisms. The analysis further considers the methodological contribution of the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ), whose 2023 Backlog Reduction Tool provides a structured, evidence-based framework for addressing systemic judicial inefficiency. The article concludes that, while meaningful progress has been achieved across the jurisdictions examined, the effective reduction of court backlogs requires a sustained, multi-layered approach that integrates legislative reform, adequate institutional resources, technological capacity, and robust mechanisms for supranational monitoring and cross-jurisdictional learning.

Keywords: judicial efficiency; court backlogs; comparative judicial reform; effective judicial protection

Introduction

Court backlogs and delays continue to pose a systemic challenge for European judicial systems. The efficiency and public confidence in national judiciaries are directly affected by excessive length of proceedings, which weakens the right to a fair trial enshrined in Article 6(1) of the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 47

of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Diminished access to justice, also increased litigation costs, together with weakened trust in public institutions are each associated with persistent case backlogs. Addressing these issues has therefore become a pressing priority, to which both supranational and national legal frameworks are increasingly directed.

In recent years, a wide-ranging body of jurisprudence has been developed by both the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) and the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) concerning undue delays, procedural efficiency, the availability of effective judicial remedies, and state liability for systemic deficiencies. These judicial developments have been complemented by legislative action at the EU level, particularly under Articles 81 and 82 TFEU, which provide the legal basis for establishing minimum standards in civil and criminal procedure. Such initiatives are especially significant in the context of cross-border disputes, where procedural harmonisation is essential for safeguarding fundamental rights and ensuring mutual trust among Member States' judicial authorities.

At the national level, Member States have simultaneously pursued structural reforms designed to modernize their judicial systems. These efforts have concentrated on procedural streamlining, the enhancement of case management practices, the digitalisation of judicial services, and the promotion of alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms. Together, these measures reflect a broader strategy to improve judicial efficiency, strengthen access to justice, and align domestic systems with supranational standards.

This study analyzes how legislators and judicial authorities in Germany, France, and the Netherlands have implemented measures and amended their legal frameworks to address court inefficiencies. Differences in procedural traditions, institutional arrangements, and reform trajectories provide a relevant comparative framework, while certain common features can be observed across all three jurisdictions.

Germany has pursued a federal coordination strategy, introducing specific legal remedies for undue delays. France has focused on performance-based court management and undertaken structural reorganization, whereas the Netherlands has emphasized broad digitalisation and comprehensive process management reforms.

The paper seeks to identify both jurisdiction-specific solutions and converging tendencies in tackling court backlogs through a comparative approach. It further examines the interaction between national reforms and supranational obligations, particularly the influence of the ECtHR's pilot judgment procedure and the CJEU's standards on effective judicial protection. In so doing, the analysis explores how judicial systems seek to balance the need for procedural efficiency with the imperative of safeguarding fundamental rights guarantees.

2. Methodology

This study employs a comparative legal as well as a doctrinal research methodology, complemented by a qualitative analysis of legislative, jurisprudential, and institutional developments.

In the doctrinal analysis of EU and ECHR standards, the supranational framework governing judicial efficiency and remedies for undue delay is first examined, with a focus on key provisions of the ECHR, the Charter of Fundamental Rights (CFR), and EU primary and secondary legislation. Through systematic analysis, the normative baseline for Member States is established. The standards of judicial independence, the "reasonable time" requirement, and the scope of effective remedies are defined in particular by relevant ECtHR and CJEU judgments.

Then, we examine national reforms comparatively. Over the past two decades, Germany, France, and the Netherlands have undertaken significant legislative and procedural reforms. These include statutory amendments such as Germany's Law on Judicial Remedies of 2011, France's 2019 creation of *the Tribunal Judiciaire*, and the Netherlands' KEI digitalization program; policy initiatives such as the introduction of judicial self-government mechanisms and performance-based budgeting; as well as institutional innovations such as the integration of ADR and enhanced case flow management.

The review relies on primary legal texts, parliamentary records, and government policy documents, together with findings of the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ). In addition, case law addressing judicial delay, remedies, and procedural efficiency is examined in order to assess reform implementation and effectiveness, with a focus on both jurisprudential developments and impact assessments at the national and supranational level.

The analysis further considers whether these reforms have reduced case backlogs, better aligned domestic practice with ECtHR and CJEU standards, and improved public access to justice. Finally, scholarly commentaries and empirical studies—including CEPEJ reports and national audit office assessments—are used to contextualize the findings.

The study adopts a functional comparative approach in order to identify structural similarities and differences across the selected jurisdictions. Political dynamics shape both the design and the success of judicial reforms, and this method allows their evaluation within the framework of constitutional traditions and institutional contexts.

The scope of the analysis is confined to reforms aimed at improving judicial proceedings, specifically those that address efficiency and timeliness. Broader issues

such as judicial independence, financing, and substantive law reform are considered only insofar as they affect procedural efficiency.

This study evaluates the extent to which national reforms have improved judicial efficiency, while at the same time ensuring the preservation of fundamental rights guarantees.

EU-Level framework on court backlogs and judicial efficiency

As interpreted by the European Court of Human Rights, the obligation to ensure trials within a reasonable time under Article 6(1) ECHR legally establishes the right for a fair trial. Limitations may subject this right, which is not absolute, provided proportionality is maintained as a legitimate aim is pursued (Jones, 2003). The ECtHR has developed some standards that allow assessment of remedies for the excessive length that proceedings can involve. These standards help in determining effectiveness (Kamilovska, 2021). National legal systems must establish effective remedies, as Italy's Pinto Law exemplifies (Sabbi, 2018). Tax proceedings are also subject to criminal and civil cases in also including the "reasonable time" concept (Sabbi, 2018). Fair trial rights' protection is strengthened even further by the development of the "established by law" criterion for judicial appointments (Karlsson, 2022). The caseload before the ECtHR includes complaints regarding excessive length for proceedings. This important issue remains, according to Ovádek (2017).

Recent landmark judgments established new criteria for protecting fundamental rights and reviewing judicial appointments in Europe. Judges are appointed in accordance with legal frameworks because the "established by law" criterion emerged (Karlsson, 2022). The European Court of Human Rights defined fundamental rights now. Balancing individual protection and public authority's accountability, the Court of Justice of the European Union refined Member State liability criteria (Dougan, 2017). The **CILFIT criteria** concerning the **acte clair doctrine** have been critically examined, particularly in direct tax cases (Vukčević, 2012). The **extraterritorial application** of the **European Convention on Human Rights** has been clarified by judgments such as *Al-Skeini* and *Al-Jedda* (Milanović, 2012). Additionally, the **CJEU** has addressed issues of **EU citizenship** and **family reunification rights**, and it has established a new jurisdictional test based on the severity of Member States' interference with EU citizenship rights (Elsuwege & Kochenov, 2011).

Member states' responses that relate to systemic issues especially court delays have been influenced by the European Court of Human Rights' pilot judgment procedure. The PJP allows for the ECtHR to address structural problems through by indicating general measures. Its judgments indicate these measures (Glas, 2016; Sadurski, 2009). This approach has shifted the Court's role beyond individual cases so it can highlight systemic legal issues (Sadurski, 2009). The Court's remedial practice has

evolved so as to include specific non-monetary individual or general remedies, and this impacts on the execution of judgments (Donald & Speck, 2019). This procedure succeeds if states are capable and willing to adopt. (Voeten, 2014). Even as it seeks efficient handling of systemic issues, the PJP still raises individual justice worries especially when states fail to implement pilot rulings (Kindt, 2018). The procedure keeps developing. It addresses structural problems with maintaining the principle of subsidiarity (Bombay, 2024).

The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has increasingly stressed the right of access to timely justice under Article 47 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights, and this also complements the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights on Article 6 ECHR. Because preliminary references connect more closely to individuals' rights (Lacchi, 2016), the CJEU has developed an autonomous, coherent, and composite standard of effective judicial protection (Safjan & Dusterhaus, 2014). By this approach, the enforcement of EU labor law (Adams-Prassl, 2019) and of environmental protection (Ankersmit, 2017) has been made stronger. The Court addressed also excessive length of proceedings (Ovádek, 2017) when it stressed the right to effective remedy and fair trial (Gutman, 2019). The right to effective remedy still encounters difficulties with balancing strict procedural rules (Barents, 2014). Especially jurisprudence from CJEU and ECtHR converges in third-country nationals' cases. This convergence may further improve fundamental rights protection throughout Europe (Morano-Foadi & Andreadakis, 2011).

Several EU secondary legislation requires improved procedural efficiency in judicial cooperation across borders. Article 81 TFEU (Hau, 2020) grants the EU competence for harmonizing procedural rules in cross-border civil matters. Explicit procedural competences now have increased. However, their scope remains limited still (Eliantonio & Muir, 2015). New obligations include consulting with EU institutions on national draft laws (Skowron-Kadayer, 2020) and there are rules on case management, pleading, and settlement efforts (Uzelac, 2017). Article 81(2)(e) TFEU permits approximation of national civil procedure laws to ensure justice (Vernadaki, 2013). The EU has adopted minimum standards in the area of criminal procedure. This was done in accordance with Article 82(2) TFEU (Mitsilegas, 2019). The Court of Justice has increasingly affected national mechanism through its case law. (Cleynenbreugel, 2012). These developments aim toward balanced procedural rights. Another aim involves shortening cross-border cooperation delays (Frąckowiak-Adamska, 2021).

Comparative legislative and procedural reforms in Germany, France, and the Netherlands

The research literature examines various aspects of remedies and judicial efficiency in the **EU context**. To comply with **EU and ECHR obligations**, Germany enacted in 2011 the **Law on Legal Protection in Excessively Long Court Proceedings and**

Criminal Investigations (Ovádek, 2017). Numerous cases concerning the excessive length of proceedings have been addressed by the **European Court of Human Rights** (Ovádek, 2017). To promote compliance, courts often rely on **interpretative judgments** (Stiansen, 2019).

The **CJEU** has emphasized that the implementation of EU law imposes wide-ranging obligations on national judges (Luísa & Esteban, 1997). **Effective judicial protection** is a general principle of EU law, derived from constitutional traditions of the Member States and reinforced both by the **Charter of Fundamental Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights** (Eliantonio, 2014).

Economic crises have contributed to increased caseloads as well as budgetary constraints for national judiciaries, thereby driving reforms that prioritize **efficiency** (Dijk & Dumbrava, 2013). Meanwhile, **CJEU case law** continues to evolve. As Gutman (2019) has demonstrated, this development goes to the very **essence of the right to an effective remedy**.

Significant reforms were enacted within the French judicial system itself. These were enacted to comply with EU and ECHR obligations regarding efficiency. Courts in France use performance-based management along with budgeting (Kirat, 2010). The European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) also works in order to improve justice systems all across Europe (Johnsen, 2012). To improve criminal justice cooperation France has adapted EU Framework Decisions, and this addresses challenges like prison overcrowding (Danglades & Laudic-Baron, 2024). The new French arbitration law stresses procedural efficiency and also good faith. This is according to Darwazeh and also Rigaudeau (2011). The influence of the Constitutional Council upon the legislative process has now increased. Parliament might be under a judicial oversight because of this increase (Stone, 1989). Communication strategies became important for managing courts as well as for building public trust within the justice system (Jeuland & Sotiropoulou, 2012). These reforms aim to balance national sovereignty with EU law and to improve human rights protection (Bossuyt & Verrijdt, 2011).

Various measures were implemented throughout the Netherlands to improve judicial efficiency in compliance with EU and ECHR standards. These include managing case flow, digitalizing courts also procedural law reform so they reduce formality and increase efficiency (de Weers, 2016; Dijk, 2014). Even though social demands with respect to timeliness and digital access keep on increasing (Dijk, 2014), the Dutch judiciary greatly progressed when it did reduce court delays then cost savings. Extensive **statutory interpretation** (Koppen, 1992), together with the adjudication of **climate change issues** on the basis of human rights treaties (Meguro, 2020), reflects the significant **policy-making influence** exercised by Dutch courts. The **economic recession** increased caseloads and reduced judicial budgets, prompting reforms focused on **efficiency** (Dijk & Dumbrava, 2013). When the **EU** implements

measures such as the **European Arrest Warrant**, it must balance the protection of **fundamental rights** with the need for **system efficiency** (Kleizen et al., 2024). In the Netherlands, there is also a growing **judicialisation of politics**, a trend illustrated by developments such as those discussed by Kate & van Koppen (1994).

The European Union has introduced various innovations for improving cooperation and judicial procedural efficiency. Also included are simplified extradition procedures (Warbrick et al., 1997) and Brussels I Regulation reforms improving cross-border litigation (Hess, 2012). The Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) has implemented special procedures in cases that are time-sensitive because it balances judgments that are swift with trials that are fair (Lenaerts, 2010). In order to evaluate potential reforms designed for the reducing of case backlogs at the CJEU, computational simulations have been used (Fjelstul et al., 2022). The EU also did reform judiciaries in Southeastern European countries because effectiveness varied based on domestic factors as well as EU conditionality (Dallara, 2016). Some argue the European procedural tradition has been misinterpreted by the European Court of Human Rights (Field, 2009). Overall, these are innovations reflecting EU-level recommendations. These recommendations aim to improve judicial efficiency and cooperation across Member States.

France, Germany, and the Netherlands have undertaken judicial reforms that reflect different approaches to legal system modernization. In France, the creation of the *Tribunal Judiciaire* in 2019 marked a shift toward decentralization and network governance, moving away from the traditionally hierarchical structure of its judiciary. (Vauchez, 2018; Gestel & Herbillon, 2007). Germany's *Pakt für den Rechtsstaat*, which focuses on increased judicial hiring, aligns with its federal structure and decentralized judiciary (Kelemen & Pavone, 2018). After the suspension of *KEI*, the Netherlands' administrative reorganization emphasized **judicial self-government** and **autonomy**, combining **rule-of-law values** with **New Public Management** principles (Mak, 2018). Each country's **institutional context** and **historical trajectory** shapes the course of these reforms, a point already noted by Bezes and Parrado (2013).

While tendencies converge across European judicial reforms, **institutional constraints** and **political dynamics** continue to produce lasting national variations (Block & Bonjour, 2013; Coman, 2014). The reforms aim not only to strengthen **judicial independence** and **accountability**, but also to enhance **efficiency** within the framework of their respective legal traditions (Caenegem, 2006).

Germany has been increasingly adopting mediation especially Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms for improving judicial efficiency and reducing court backlogs. In 2000, lawmakers introduced a federal law then. This law did let German states implement mandatory court-connected mediation in regard to certain civil disputes (Funken, 2002). The EU Mediation Directive of 2008, which seeks after a consistent European mediation framework, aligns fully with this (Hillig & Huhn,

2010). Meaningful impacts as from this directive are likely within the German construction sector (Hillig & Huhn, 2010). ADR presents speedier, more affordable answers, notably for conflicts across borders (Haertling, 2012), but its power within law enforcement has ignited concerns (Wagner, 2014). We can integrate ADR into our judicial system because it presents both some opportunities and some challenges. Careful design is needed because it has to preserve access for public adjudication while it is also maintaining ADR's flexibility (Ryan, 2006). For public administrators, reconciling ADR with customary norms and with procedures may pose some difficulties (Manring, 1994).

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms prominently gain as a strategy to reduce court backlogs also improve judicial efficiency. Directive 2008/52/EC about mediation (Kaeding, 2007) has encouraged France to incorporate ADR into its legal system like other EU countries. Compared to customary court procedures, especially for cross-border conflicts (Haertling, 2012), ADR offers solutions that are faster, cheaper, also more flexible. Effectiveness has been shown by mediation, in particular, through resolving commercial along with civil disputes (Sherman & Momani, 2024). ADR's effects on public adjudication access and law enforcement are causes for concern (Wagner, 2014; Ryan, 2006). ADR's integration within the judiciary presents opportunities and challenges, and careful design is required to preserve fundamental fairness and procedural norms (Ryan, 2006; Wald, 1997). ADR is now becoming more and more institutionalized, and also a rights-based approach is now needed. Justice standards that are clear for these mechanisms must be established (McGregor, 2015; Manring, 1994).

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) mechanisms prominently gain ground among strategies that reduce court backlogs also improve judicial efficiency. Directive 2008/52/EC on mediation (Haertling, 2012) has influenced the Netherlands, along with other EU countries. ADR offers more fast, more cheap solutions in cases of conflicts, especially in cases of cross-border disputes because parties have more great control and confidentiality like (Haertling, 2012) said. ADR programs attached to courts are more common now. The judiciary now faces opportunities and concerns on account of them (Ryan, 2006). Mediation resolves disputes in an effective manner. It saves time and costs, as well (Sherman & Momani, 2024). Some scholars argue about how ADR may inadequately enforce consumer law. Wagner did raise this very point back in 2014. ADR's integration into the legal system sparks inquiries about administrative responsiveness and the capacity of public officials to participate effectively (Manring, 1994). Even with challenges, ADR keeps developing, and this requires that we approach it with rights in order to ensure justice and fairness in its implementation (McGregor, 2015).

Judicial compliance and supranational dialogue

The European Court of Human Rights has encountered difficulties in ensuring compliance with its judgments on remedial approaches so implementation would improve (Stiansen, 2019; Donald & Speck, 2019). The German Constitutional Court has adopted a restrictive approach regarding the binding effect of ECtHR judgments (Hartwig, 2005; Weeramantry, 2006; Tomuschat, 2010). To address this, the ECtHR has begun indicating specific remedies in selected judgments which has shown promise in expediting implementation especially when actors advocating for compliance can hold governments accountable (Stiansen, 2019). However, the Court's remedial practice remains evolving. Differing views from different judges can be present (Donald & Speck, 2019). German criminal courts that are overloaded are encountering the most significant challenges. About the implementation of human rights judgments is one complication (Krey & Windgätter, 2012).

France supreme courts have gradually aligned their jurisprudence with EU law principles and the Conseil d'État's Perreux ruling recognizes the direct effect of directives (Mehdi, 2011). The Conseil d'État has played a key role because it developed French administrative law through its own jurisprudence (Langrod, 1955). Recent constitutional reforms have allowed constitutional principles be invoked in ordinary litigation (Hunter-Henin, 2011) so citizens' rights are now better protected. Even as the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) gains importance within national legal systems, domestic courts still do not accord the ECHR the same hierarchical status as EU law (Martinico, 2012). The European Court of Human Rights' primary focus is ensuring member states' compliance with Convention standards instead of providing individual remedies (Greer, 2003). France and European institutions increasingly constitutionalise adjudication by strengthening fundamental rights protection.

The Dutch courts specifically the Hoge Raad have significantly addressed judicial delay. They provided remedies also in accordance with Article 6 ECHR. Dutch criminal proceedings were transformed by the European Convention on Human Rights. This transformation made these proceedings to be more rights-oriented and did align them with international fairness standards (Swart, 1999). The right of access to courts is not absolute, and also its essence must not be impaired via limitations (Jones, 2003). Dutch courts' demonstrated willingness to enforce general policy objectives appears in the Urgenda case (Besselink, 2022). In Dutch politics the judiciary has become quite an increasingly important policy-maker, by interpreting vague statutory provisions (Koppen, 1992). Courts employ various strategies so they can promote compliance for their judgments, like remedial indications, and these have been found to expedite implementation (Stiansen, 2019). Due to the Netherlands' monistic constitutional tradition, domestic courts can directly apply international law within the Dutch legal system (Fleuren, 2010).

An increasing number of preliminary questions have been referred to the CJEU from national courts, particularly in relation to judicial efficiency. The preliminary reference procedure plays a central role in the EU judicial system. The CJEU is in this way enabling it to develop constitutional doctrine and ensure uniform application of EU law (Tridimas, 2002). Recent trends show stricter assessment of jurisdictional and admissibility requirements (Wahl & Prete, 2018) though it was customarily interpreted broadly to encourage its use. For Article 47 individuals' rights, more closer links should exist between Article 47 rights and preliminary references (Lacchi, 2016; Gutman, 2019). Member states' constitutional courts assess if national courts should refer questions (Lacchi, 2015). Bonelli and Claes (2018) highlighted the importance of the procedure for judicial protection in the cases that are concerning judicial independence. Regularly updated recommendations (Lamprecht, 2010) clarify for national how to engage with the CJEU's preliminary reference procedure.

Current studies have explored key domestic decisions, and they explored process changes in European nations that handle online lawsuits and court delays. In Germany, the COVID-19 pandemic challenged criminal procedure principles, with this prompting discussions on further digitalization of proceedings (Bühner & Rank, 2022). The European Court of Human Rights has affected law in France, Germany, and the Netherlands though its impact varies (Guiraudon, 2000). Protocol No. Advisory opinions for ECHR to manage case backlog may makure national courts more burdened (Lemmens, 2019).

National criminal justice was centrally reformed by the European Court of Human Rights as *Salduz v Turkey* shows. Systems in several countries then changed (Giannouloupoulos, 2016). Criticism exists in regard to the Court's judgments for potentially marginalizing national fundamental rights protection (Jhr & Lb, 2013). Its effectiveness is what has caused the questioning of proportionality's use in internet disputes. This issue is one that Fontanelli's 2016 study highlights. Some judgments have certainly provided opportunities for some nationalist politicians. Agendas in conflict with human rights principles have been promoted as a result (Henrard & Vermeersch, 2020). France's constitutional reforms have intended for improved protection of citizens' rights (Hunter-Henin, 2011). Reforms that are similar have occurred in other countries as well. National courts with the Strasbourg court have a complex interplay. Active debates do concern who interprets fundamental rights in Europe ultimately (Sarmiento, 2013). Though its effectiveness and its efficiency are debated, the Article 267 TFEU preliminary reference procedure plays a major role in EU judicial cooperation. It eases dialogue between national courts with the CJEU (Pivoda, 2023; Wahl & Prete, 2018). Some worries arose from likely delays and complex procedures however (Hübner, 2018; Passalacqua & Costamagna, 2023). Judicial independence assessments (Monciunskaitė, 2024) also constitutional review (Lacchi, 2015) exist now within the procedure's expanded scope. Judicial protection is now improved, some do argue (Lacchi, 2016), while others highlight national

procedural autonomy's limitations (Butler & Cotter, 2020). Assessment of admissibility criteria by the CJEU has become more stringent (Wahl & Prete, 2018), potentially affecting application of uniform EU law. Directive complexity and implementation flexibility influence reference likelihood as factors (Hübner, 2018). Questions remain about how the procedure works within the EU legal system because its impact on judicial efficiency is debated.

The pilot judgement's procedure and Protocol Number. Sixteen mechanisms aim to address systemic human rights violations in addition to reducing the European Court of Human Rights' backlog (Leach et al., 2010; Czepek, 2018). Because the pilot procedure allows the Court to identify structural problems and suggest remedies, dialogue between the ECtHR and national authorities is promoted (Gerards, 2011). About these procedures' effectiveness debates remain (Sitaropoulos, 2011). Resolving systemic issues, like delayed justice in administrative courts, is the heart of that debate. The alignment of the pilot procedure with the European Convention on Human Rights is subject to some question. Critics such as Haider (2013) have voiced this type of concern. For addressing the docket crisis, some propose that we recognize "embeddedness" structurally, stressing a need that we strengthen domestic remedies and rely less on supranational relief (Helfer, 2008). In this context, the European Commission for the Efficiency of Justice (CEPEJ) adopted in 2023 a dedicated Backlog Reduction Tool, providing judicial and state authorities with a structured four-step methodology—encompassing analysis, strategy development, monitoring, and the creation of sustainability—for systematically identifying, addressing, and preventing the accumulation of case backlogs. This instrument operationalises the supranational standards articulated under Article 6(1) ECHR by offering adaptable frameworks for statistical data collection, efficiency measurement through indicators such as the Clearance Rate and Disposition Time, and context-specific reform planning calibrated to the particular circumstances of individual judicial systems. As a dynamic and evolving resource, the CEPEJ Backlog Reduction Tool represents a significant institutional contribution to the broader effort of aligning domestic judicial practice with the reasonable time requirement and the principle of effective judicial protection across Council of Europe member states. (CEPEJ 2023).

Conclusion

The analysis shows that European jurisdictions face complex challenges relating to delays in judicial proceedings and court backlogs. These standards' effectiveness depends greatly on national implementation though the supranational legal framework specifically Article 6(1) ECHR and Article 47 CFR clearly requires Member States to guarantee the right to a fair trial within a reasonable time. The scope of this obligation has been addressed through the jurisprudence of the ECtHR's and CJEU's, notably including the development of pilot judgment procedures, the "established by law" criterion for appointments, also enhanced judicial scrutiny of remedies for

excessive length of proceedings. However, the persisting volume of cases before the ECtHR concerns excessive length of proceedings. Many national systems still have structural deficiencies, as reflected in case law.

Comparing Germany, France, and the Netherlands depicts that judicial reform trends converge around digitalization, managing case flow, and expanding alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms yet institutional traditions and constitutional frameworks continue to define national approaches. Germany responded through legislative measures such as the 2011 Law on Judicial Remedies, which emphasizes federal coordination and the recruitment of additional judges. CEPEJ-led initiatives complement France's structural reorganization efforts through performance-based court budgeting and management as well as the Tribunal Judiciaires' creation. Budgetary constraints as well as increasing societal demands continue to pose challenges to the accessibility of justice.

Similar efforts have been undertaken in the past. However, national reforms show an uneven success. Digitalization initiators have faced technical and organizational obstacles, while stakeholders integrating ADR mechanisms have expressed concerns regarding access to public adjudication and the enforceability of rights. However, their effectiveness depends on the political will and administrative capacity of member states to implement the required reforms and administrative capacity of Member States to execute the required reforms.

The study does highlight also that supranational judicial dialogue is becoming increasingly important in order to address judicial inefficiencies. For preliminary references, national courts increasingly interact with the CJEU under Article 267 TFEU through preliminary references. This interaction shapes how they protect procedural rights, particularly when national courts independently ensure effective remedies. The procedural complexity and delays associated with these mechanisms remain a concern.

A multi-layered approach is required to reduce court backlogs and ensure the timely administration of justice. Legislative reforms must have accompanied by adequate judicial resources, institutional accountability, and technological capacity. National solutions must address caseload pressure, budgetary constraints, and public trust in the judiciary, but domestic reforms must also align with EU and ECHR standards, taking national contexts into account. Future reforms would benefit from more stronger monitoring mechanism, enhances cross-border learning among member states, and further development of supranational standards on judicial efficiency.

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The Albanian Judicial Reform: Vetting and the Reorganisation of Judicial Governance

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Abstract

The Albanian justice reform of 2016 represents one of the most complex constitutional redesigns of contemporary post-transition Europe, undertaken through the simultaneous constitutional amendment and the adoption of the package of laws of primary importance, Law No. 115/2016 on the governing bodies of the judiciary (Law on the Judiciary), 96/2016 on the status of judges and prosecutors, Law No. 98/2016 on the organization of judicial power. The latest amendment Law 84/2016 for the transitional re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors, and the amended Law No. Law 8577/2000 on the Constitutional Court, were designed to abolish systems of judicial dependence by recreating an independent, responsible and constitutionally based judiciary system. This article examines the normative design of the reform in three, interlocking dimensions: (1) the constitution as a prerequisite for the judicial reform, (2) the design of the self-governance system of the judiciary in the High Judicial Council, and (3) the vetting process as an extraordinary form of transitional accountability. Based on an analysis of the legal substance of the reform, this article argues that while the constitutional and legislative structure was both necessary and normatively coherent, the Albanian experience shows that legalism has intrinsic limits as a tool for reconstructing institutional legitimacy. Constitutional change can structure reform and constrain regression, but cannot, in and of itself, resolve the cultural, professional, and social issues on which judicial legitimacy rests.

Keywords: Albanian justice reform; constitutionalism; judicial independence; High Judicial Council; vetting process; transitional accountability; rule of law

1. Introduction

The justice reform undertaken in Albania since 2016 is the largest structural reform of the organization and functioning of the justice institutions since the adoption of the Constitution of 1998. The main motivation that served as the impetus for the reform was the well-known institutional legitimacy crisis, expressed in systemic corruption, constant political interference and low public confidence in justice institutions. These

deficiencies were not incidental and they could not be easily remedied because, as mentioned, they were structural in the post-transition state, which had inherited institutional weakness and a legal culture only partially rooted in the foundation of the rule of law.¹

It became clear that justice reform was not a technical exercise in improving the efficiency of court procedures and the administrative performance of the court system, but a matter of re-establishing the foundations of judicial power and restoring the credibility of justice as a core public function. The choice of constitutional reform and a thorough reform package was therefore a clear recognition that customary legal instruments were not adequate to address the depth and systemic character of the crisis. To this end, the reform agenda sought to draw the wide-ranging transition period to a close by removing the structural causes of judicial dependency, and re-establishing justice institutions as independent, responsible and constitutionally enshrined actors within a system of separated powers.²

The article studies justice reform in Albania as an exercise in constitutionalism in practice, analyzing the normative framework of justice reform, the reorganization of judicial governance, and the application of extraordinary accountability measures (in particular, transitional vetting of judges and prosecutors). As such, this analysis focuses on the content of the reform legislation, and does not, at least at this juncture, seek to raise any external theoretical or comparative lens.³

In short, the constitutionality and legality of the reform were necessary and normatively justified, but the actual implementation of the reform showed that legal engineering as the main tool of restoring institutional trust has its limits. As for the Albanian case, it confirms a well-established proposition: constitutional change can structure and enable institutional reform, but cannot by itself create politically sufficient conditions for judicial legitimacy in the political, professional and social dimensions.

2. Constitutional Foundations and the Reconfiguration of Judicial Authority

¹ See generally Robert C Austin and Jonathan Ellison, "Post-Communist Transitional Justice in Albania" (2008) *East European Politics and Societies*; Beverly K Blitz, "Post-socialist Transformation, Penal Reform and Justice Sector Transition in Albania" (2008) 8(4) *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies* 345; Elvin Gjevori, *Democratisation and Institutional Reform in Albania* (2018); Malina Lika, "Democracy in Albania: Evolution, Challenges, and Prospects" (2024) SSRN.

² See also Aurela Anastasi, "The Albanian Justice Reform in the Framework of the European Integration Process" (2021) 2 *Euro-Balkan Law and Economics Review* 1; Steven Blockmans and Arbjan Hackaj, "Building on Core Strengths: Lessons from Justice Sector Reform in Albania" in *Solidarity and Rule of Law* (Springer 2023); Klodiana Beshku and Orjana Mullisi, "The European Union as a Reforming Power in the Western Balkans: The Case of Albania" (2018) 2 *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 40.

³ For a broader overview of the reform, see Megi Bakiasi, *Albanian Judiciary under Construction*; Enkeleida Pulaj, "Justice System Reform in Albania: Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Forward" (2025) 12(1) *S1 International Journal of Research and Development*.

The justice reform is based on the concept of constitutionalism in which democracy is based on the limitation of power by law. Constitutionalism understood in this way implies that government power derives from its exercise in accordance with rules determined by law and under conditions of accountability. This principle applies equally to the courts. The independence of the courts does not mean that they are not bound by the provisions of the constitution.¹

Judicial independence, guaranteed by the constitution before the reform, occurred in the context of political interference, informal pressure, and networks with objective influence on the judiciary's impartiality, which showed that independence in the normative plan does not mean independence in practice. Where institutional arrangements, governance mechanisms, and professional culture are weak, constitutional guarantees are not genuine, and would constitute no more than proclamations of independence in principle, without guarantees of independence in practice.

Yet the whole reform was not geared to constitutionalism as a statement, but rather as structural reform. Such an intervention in the constitutional domain had not been deemed necessary because it issued a statement, but rather because such structural deformation could not be remedied by ordinary law. As such, only constitutional reform gave the necessary normative force and institutional durability to effect the reshaping of the role of the judiciary and its place in the political establishment.²

One of the primary goals was to put an end to the functional subordination of justice institutions. In Albania the judiciary was considered prone to political and to informal interference, both by the institutions and by the public, weakening the credibility of judicial decisions, and the judiciary's potential to act as an effective guarantor of constitutional rights and legal certainty. The amendments to the Constitution, which are to support the reform, aim to strengthen the independence of justice institutions by closing any legal loopholes that might be exploited politically, and to create a constitutional framework for the establishment of control mechanisms to ensure that judicial power is exercised in line with the principles of legality, proportionality and professionalism.³

¹ For further discussion, see Monika Meça, "The Evolution of Administrative Law in Albania and the Impact of the Decisions of the European Court of Justice in the Albanian Legal Reforms" (2014) 8 *Tribuna Juridică* 182; Aurela Anastasi, "The Albanian Justice Reform in the Framework of the European Integration Process" (2021) 2 *Euro-Balkan Law and Economics Review*.

² See Evis Garunja, "The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting" (2022) 11(1) *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 104; Julinda Beqiraj, "Impacts of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance on the Rule of Law in Albania" in *EU Accession and the Rule of Law* (Routledge 2026); Irena Tafani, "Albanian Judicial Cooperation with the European Union" in *Solidarity and Rule of Law* (Springer 2023).

³ See also Ela Elezi, "Recent Developments in Albanian Constitutional Justice" (2021) 2 *Revista de Drept Constituțional* 81; Arjana Llano (Kasaj), "Access to Justice in Albania and EU Policies" (2024) 8(3)

Judicial independence was not conceived by the reform law as an absolute, general principle, but as an institutional state to be achieved through a series of detailed regulations, concerning appointments, career, evaluations and disciplinary processes. The independence of judges is guaranteed by Law No. 96/2016, which states that magistrates exercise their functions independently, that is, evaluate the facts and interpret the law according to their own reasoned conviction, free from any direct or indirect influence from any party and for any reason. Law 98/2016 provides that judges, in the exercise of their functions and decision-making, shall be independent and impartial. The judicial administration must respect judicial independence and may not interfere in the functioning of the judicial system. Law 98/2016 guarantees that everyone shall have equal access to court and the right to approach the court for the protection and enforcement of their legal rights, and that the courts shall function in a transparent, expeditious and efficient manner, guarantees which are directly weakened by the very structural inequities that the reform was ostensibly designed to address.

The reorganization of the power of the judiciary carried out by the reform fits into the constitutional task of restoring the balance of the separated powers: the judiciary is a proactive constitutional power, whose task is the promotion of the rule of law and the safeguarding of fundamental rights. This is illustrated by the structure of the courts created by Law No. 98/2016, which includes the Supreme Court, appellate courts and first instance courts of general jurisdiction, and specialist courts such as the administrative courts and the Special Court for the Prosecution of Corruption and Organized Crime. Each level shall exercise the judicial power in the name of the Republic, in conformity with the Constitution and with the law.¹

The experience of Albania shows that constitutional change is necessary to reform institutions but that such change is not itself sufficient. The only successful way forward for structural change is to internalize constitutional provisions by the institutions and the actors establishing a constitutional legal culture step by step. Thus, the reform was characterized by a tension between its normative emphasis and institutional realities, which has shaped its implementation and long-term outcomes.²

3. Institutional Architecture of Judicial Self-Governance

For the first time, judicial self-governance is to be institutionalized through the establishment of newly created institutions such as the High Judicial Council (Këshilli

European Journal of Economics, Law and Social Sciences; Luljeta Ikononi, "Whose Justice? The Agrarian Reform in the Post Communist Albania and Its Impact on the Right to Property" (2012) SSRN.

¹ Law no. 96/2016 "On the status of judges and prosecutors in the Republic of Albania", as amended, art 3(1).

² For further discussion, see Elvin Gjevori, *Democratisation and Institutional Reform in Albania* (2018); Klodiana Beshku and Orjana Mullisi, "The European Union as a Reforming Power in the Western Balkans: The Case of Albania" (2018) 2 *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 40.

i Lartë Gjyqësor), which would no longer have judges' careers and court operation governed by varying degrees of executive and presidential control as before. Under this new framework for judicial administration, a constitutionally independent body will have primary responsibility, free from political influence, for this area.¹

3.1 Composition and Constitutional Mandate

Law No. 115/2016 on the governance of the justice system provides that the justice system in the Republic of Albania shall be governed by the principles of independence, accountability, transparency and efficiency. They are elected by judges at all levels sitting in the General Assembly of judges.² The other five members, who represent the legal profession, are elected among advocates, law professors, the staff of the School of Magistracy and civil society representatives, by the General Assembly of judges, following a prior assessment procedure. Members serve a term of five years without the right to any immediate re-election.³ Members serve a term of five years without the right to any immediate re-election.⁴

Thus, this mixed nature is not only a question of technical design, but also a conscious constitutional answer to the corporatist closure that a professional monopoly over judicial governance would create, re-instating the internal hierarchies, informal networks and mutual protection from public scrutiny that proper accountability would preclude. The aim of this reform is to introduce non-judicial members into the governance of the judiciary while at the same time excluding representatives of the executive and legislative branches from direct participation in the governance of the judiciary, thus situating the self-governance of the judiciary within the wider domain of society as a whole, while at the same time protecting the judiciary from political interference. The Assembly elects non-judicial members on the basis of conditions and relevant eligibility criteria established by Law No. 115/2016.⁵

Members of the High Judicial Council are magistrates within the meaning of the law regulating the status of judges and prosecutors, save for the provisions otherwise provided for by that law.⁶ The work of judicial members of the Council shall not be subject to a code of conduct and ethical and professional assessment during their term of office, except when transferred or promoted.⁷

¹ See also Denitsa Dimitrova, "Judicial Reform and Process of Vetting in Albania: an Effective Project or an Unsuccessful Experiment" in *The Balkans and Europe between Integration and Particularism* (2019) 299; Ardita Abazi Imeri, "Deliberating in the Gray Zone: North Macedonia's Hybrid Regime and Deliberative Democracy Exercise" (2023).

² Law no. 115/2016 "On the governance bodies of the justice system", as amended, art 2.

³ *Ibid.*, Art. 3(1).

⁴ *Ibid.*, Arts. 3(2)–(3).

⁵ *Ibid.*, Art. 3(4).

⁶ *Ibid.*, Art. 4(1).

⁷ *Ibid.*, Art. 4(3).

3.2 Functions, Powers, and the Framework of Accountability

The appointment, promotion, evaluation, discipline and transfer of judges, as well as the organization and operation of the courts are matters entrusted to the High Judicial Council, which are of decisive importance for the professional career of judges and the efficiency of the justice system as a whole. The principle behind removing these powers from the political arena and vesting them in a constitutionally independent body is that career decisions must be based on professional or institutional considerations, and not political expediency.

The status of magistrates is regulated by the consolidated provisions of the law, according to Law No. 96/2016, in terms of their rights and duties, admission and appointment, career and termination of mandate, ethical and professional assessment, as well as their disciplinary, criminal and civil liability.¹ This framework thus sought to make judicial careers fully legible to formal norms, thereby removing the informal discretionary space that had historically provided channels for political influence. Law No. 98/2016 further provides that the administration of the courts is a joint obligation of the HJC, the Court Council, the presidents of courts, the chancellery of the courts, and judicial civil servants of various profiles, in a way to cooperate with one another and promote the independence, efficiency, trustworthiness, and transparency of the judicial power.²

By the reform, a special procedure was determined for members of the HJC, who committed a disciplinary offense, intentionally or through negligence, when he performs acts or omissions constituting a failure to fulfill his duties, unprofessional or unethical conduct during or outside the exercise of his functions, conduct that discredits the position of a member of the Council or damages public confidence in the judicial system, or when he fails to apply the law or the facts intentionally or through gross negligence.³ Particularly, illegal non-recusal from a plenary meeting or committee meeting in cases where the law requires it, illegal interference with or undue influence on the exercise of the function of another member, unjustified or repeated non-fulfillment of functions, repeated delay with severe consequences, illegal conduct creating unjust benefit or detriment for the subject of administrative proceedings, serious, or repeated violation of legal and sub-legal acts that regulate the work and organization of the Council.⁴ Therefore, this provision attempts to create a

¹ Law no. 96/2016 "On the status of judges and prosecutors in the Republic of Albania", as amended, art 1(1)(a)–(e).

² Law no. 98/2016 "On the organisation of the judiciary in the Republic of Albania", as amended, arts 7(1)–(2).

³ **Law no. 115/2016 "On the governance bodies of the justice system", as amended, art 5(1)(a)–(b).**

⁴ *Ibid.*, Art. 5/1(a)–(gj).

mechanism of internal responsibility, so that the self-governance does not turn into unaccountable authority.

3.3 Institutional Fragility and the Limits of Self-Governance

The Albanian experience has illustrated that judicial independence is far from merely a legalistic concept; rather, it draws considerable legitimacy from the governing power's exercise of discretion, the logical and coherent arguments for its decisions, and its ability to confront systemic attacks against democracy. It will take a long time and concerted effort for the judicial system to show these characteristics. The requirement for judicial self-administration along with vetting, at a time of mass judicial turnover, meant that the governing bodies were given demanding constitutional functions, in a context of severe judicial personnel shortages, and with virtually no institutional capacity, which made it plain that they could not work as intended.

Judicial self-governance nonetheless represents an important constitutional break with the past. Self-governance reflects a commitment to treating the judiciary as a mature institutional actor capable of regulating its own affairs within a framework of constitutional accountability and to reconceiving judicial independence not merely as passive insulation from improper interference, but as active responsibility for upholding professional standards, institutional integrity, and public confidence.¹

4. The Vetting Process as an Extraordinary Constitutional Mechanism

The vetting of judges and prosecutors is the most extraordinary and intrusive element of the (albeit belated) reform of justice in Albania. Indeed the extraordinary, temporary and contingent nature of the vetting can be identified in the addition of Article 179/b of the Constitution of the Republic of Albania. Its adoption was obviously necessary because the existing disciplinary and accountability ecosystem lacked the structural capacity to resolve a series of systemic integrity gaps that had developed within the justice system over years.²

4.1 Legislative Framework and Purpose

¹ See Evis Garunja, "The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting" (2022) 11(1) *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 104; Gentjan Skara, Bojana Hajdini and Najada Kilic, "The Role of the EU as a Promoter of Judiciary Reform in Candidate Countries: The Case of Vetting Process in Albania" (2024) 8 *EU at the Crossroads*; Arnisa Tepelija and Teodora Miljojković, "Vetting as a Judicial Integrity Enhancement Tool" in *Accountability of Judicial Power* (Routledge 2025).

² See also Eda Cela, "The Re-evaluation of Constitutional Court Judges in Albania" (2019) 1 *Euro-Balkan Law and Economics Review*; Arben Cara and Mimoza Margjeka, "Vacancy in the Constitutional Court after the Vetting Process and Problematics of its Members' Election" (2020) 7(1) *International Journal of Research and Development*.

Law No. 84/2016 on the transitional re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors ('the Vetting Law') states that its purpose is the determination of special rules for the transitional re-evaluation of all subjects of re-evaluation, with the objective of guaranteeing the functioning of the rule of law, the independence of the justice system, and the restoration of public confidence in the institutions of that system, in accordance with Article 179/b of the Constitution.¹ The Vetting Law establishes the institutional framework of re-evaluation, designating the Independent Qualification Commission (*Komisioni i Pavarur i Kualifikimit*), the Special Appeals College (*Kolegji i Posaçëm i Apelimit*), and the public commissioners as the institutions of re-evaluation.

The Vetting Law prescribes the legal and procedural framework for the institutions of re-evaluation, the Independent Qualification Commission (*Komisioni i Pavarur i Kualifikimit*), the Special Appeals College² (*Kolegji i Posaçëm i Apelimit*) and the public commissioners³. Cases against members of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court and the Prosecutor General are given priority⁴.

By constitutionalising the vetting process, the legislature has both recognized the profundity of the crisis facing the reform and chosen not to attempt to make use of the existing institutional infrastructure, the very failings of which had given rise to the case for reform in the first place. Instead, it has provided for a constitutionally mandated reconsideration of the entire body of judges and prosecutors, based on the recognition that systemic corruption, unaccounted wealth and degraded professionalism had so corrupted institutional integrity that incremental reforms could no longer suffice.⁵

4.2 Criteria, Definitions, and Methodology

The re-evaluation takes place in the light of the requirements established for assessment of assets, background check (*kontrolli i figurës*) and assessment of professional competence.⁶ The Commission and the Appeals College may take into account one or more of the criteria, the overall assessment of all three criteria or the overall assessment of the procedures as a whole.⁷ The notion of judicial independence

¹ **Law no. 84/2016 "On the transitional re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors in the Republic of Albania", art 1.**

² *Ibid.*, Art. 3(4).

³ *Ibid.*, Art. 4(3).

⁴ *Ibid.*, Art. 4(4).

⁵ For further discussion, see Eda Cela, "The Re-evaluation of Constitutional Court Judges in Albania" (2019) 1 Euro-Balkan Law and Economics Review; Arnisa Tepelija and Teodora Miljojković, "Vetting as a Judicial Integrity Enhancement Tool" in *Accountability of Judicial Power* (Routledge 2025).

⁶ *Ibid.*, Art. 4(1)(a)–(c).

⁷ *Ibid.*, Art. 4(2).

also includes an expectation of judicial behavior and judicial competence beyond the mere requirement of legality.

A set of definitional provisions has been strategically included in the Vetting Law and form the legal basis of the process. Under the Law, 'Assets' shall include all the moveable and immovable property of the subject of re-evaluation, in the Republic of Albania or abroad, within the meaning of the law on the declaration and control of assets.¹ The 'lawful income' of the subject and persons related to the subject is defined in the Law on income tax.² 'Inappropriate contact' is any meeting, e-mail, or any other intentional contact inconsistent with the proper exercise of the duties of the subject of re-evaluation (even if the contact is made in order to establish business or other relations).³ For the purposes of this Convention 'persons involved in organized crime' means persons who have been convicted or otherwise judicially dealt with or against whom judicial proceedings have been instituted, or whose judicial proceedings have been terminated because of the death of the person or a lack of capacity to be tried, or who have been acquitted of the offense on the ground that it was committed by a person who could not be charged.⁴

4.3 Procedural Safeguards and International Monitoring

When confronted with such an outstanding remedy, procedural guarantees were attached to the vetting process under the principle that the Commission and the Appeals College should exercise their function as independent and impartial bodies, on the basis of the principles of equality before the law, constitutionality and legality, and proportionality, as well as other principles guaranteeing the right to due process for all subjects of re-evaluation.⁵

The existence of an international monitoring mechanism is one of the key features of the Albanian vetting model. The Law on Vetting includes the International Monitoring Operation as an institutional element of the Law, including the definition of the status and the role of the international observers, as an element established by the constitutional provisions of Annex B to the Constitution.⁶ That it was so structured underlined the seriousness afforded to the reform, and the recognition that, given the

¹ Ibid., Art. 3(11).; see also Luljeta Ikonimi, "Whose Justice? The Agrarian Reform in the Post Communist Albania and Its Impact on the Right to Property" (2012) SSRN.

² Ibid., Art. 3(19).

³ Ibid., Art. 3(6).

⁴ Ibid., Art. 3(15).

⁵ Ibid., Art. 4(5).; see also Entela Cukani, "Il processo di Vetting davanti alla Corte EDU" (2023) 57(1) DPCE Online; Heliona Miço and Bojana Hajdini, "Combating Corruption in the Albanian Judiciary: Promoting Due Process" (2025) 1 EUWEB Legal Essays 57.

⁶ Ibid., Arts. 2(4), 3(21).; see also Gentjan Skara, Bojana Hajdini and Najada Kilic, "The Role of the EU as a Promoter of Judiciary Reform in Candidate Countries: The Case of Vetting Process in Albania" (2024) 8 EU at the Crossroads; Julinda Beqiraj, "Impacts of the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance on the Rule of Law in Albania" in EU Accession and the Rule of Law (Routledge 2026).

particular circumstances in Albania, the mechanisms for internal control and supervision were insufficient to ensure the legitimacy and integrity of a process of such common implication.

4.4 Constitutional Tensions and Systemic Consequences

At constitutional level, it raises the question of the tension between an appointed judge's security of tenure, protected against arbitrary removal and external criticism, and institutional purification, a tension that the reform expressly recognized and justified on the basis of extraordinary circumstances and the overriding requirements of public interest in restoring confidence in the administration of justice.¹

The process of vetting had common implications. For the justice system it meant unprecedented turnover and institutional discontinuity, in terms of the level of dismissal and resignation in the senior levels of the judiciary. As a result of the personnel shortages in courts and prosecutorial offices, the system experienced delays, backlogs, and problems of continuity in the administration of justice. This was not only an administrative inconvenience, but also a restriction on access to justice, a right guaranteed under Law No. 98/2016 provides that every person shall be treated equally and without discrimination by the courts and shall have equal access to court for the protection and enforcement of their legal rights and that the courts shall function in a transparent, expeditious, and efficient manner.

Nevertheless, replacing and dealing with many cases of illicit enrichment and breaches of integrity, the vetting process made clear that impressive a balance between transformative accountability and the system's stability was hard. Removing compromised individuals was a pre-condition for restoring legitimacy, but this had to be coupled with the human capacity to underwrite the system. This both highlights the structural costs of large-scale corrective measures and stresses the need to consider order and resource planning when designing ad hoc transition measures.²

Understood thus, it must be a transitional mechanism, not a permanent model of accountability. The outstanding nature of the process is a function of its unique features and of its relation to the wider constitutional project to reshape the justice system. Following this vetting, typical disciplinary and governance measures should apply, as prescribed by the High Judicial Council and the High Justice Inspector under Law No. 115/2016 and the evaluation tool established under Law No. 96/2016,

¹ See Denitsa Dimitrova, "Judicial Reform and Process of Vetting in Albania: an Effective Project or an Unsuccessful Experiment" in *The Balkans and Europe between Integration and Particularism* (2019) 299; Enkeleida Pulaj, "Justice System Reform in Albania: Achievements, Challenges, and the Path Forward" (2025) 12(1) *S1 International Journal of Research and Development*.

² See also Malina Lika, "Democracy in Albania: Evolution, Challenges, and Prospects" (2024) SSRN; Megi Bakiasi, *Albanian Judiciary under Construction*; Aurela Anastasi, "The Albanian Justice Reform in the Framework of the European Integration Process" (2021) 2 *Euro-Balkan Law and Economics Review* 1.

therefore, were capable of sustaining the standards identified in the context of extraordinary intervention.¹

5. The Structural Limits of Legal Reform: Legalism, Trust, and Institutional Culture

The Albanian justice reform is a clear example of the strengths and limitations of legalism as a mode of institutional change. Designed and implemented through the adoption of a constitutional amendment and an accompanying primary law package, the reform relied on the promise of legal norms to restore systemic functionality, to restore institutional legitimacy. Such reliance was neither inopportune nor innocent, for only a legally capable and constitutionally encased arrangement could hope both to dismantle secured habits and withstand the pressures of contestation.

At the same time, the experience of implementation reveals a structural dilemma intrinsic in reform of this character. Law can create institutions, define competences, and provide procedural guarantees. It cannot, by itself, produce the confidence, internalized legitimacy, or professional ethos upon which the sustained effectiveness of justice institutions ultimately depends. They cannot be simply given, but must be continually generated and confirmed by institutional practice, public deliberation, and a perceived fair, skilled and impartial justice.²

Law No. 96/2016 established a series of principles that sought to inspire and impose a higher standard on magistrates. A magistrate shall discharge his duties in accordance with the Constitution and the law, and shall be independent and free from improper external influences. A magistrate shall not have informal contacts and shall not be influenced, directly or indirectly, by the executive or legislative power. He shall take all necessary measures to be and to appear to be outside any such influence, and shall promptly inform the Council and his president of any interference or undue pressure of which he is aware.³ Their internalization takes time, is not always linear, can be and often is fulfilled formally while still being resisted informally and quite simply cannot be eliminated by any legislative text.

The reform process also exposed an important risk: that of overestimating the constitution's role in solving governance and social problems. While it is

¹ Law no. 84/2016 "On the transitional re-evaluation of judges and prosecutors in the Republic of Albania", art. 4(3).; see also Art. 4(4) on the priority treatment of cases concerning members of the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, and the Prosecutor General.

² See also Evis Garunja, "The Effects of Constitutional Changes on the Judiciary System in Albania: The Process of Vetting" (2022) 11(1) *Academic Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 104; Steven Blockmans and Arbjan Hackaj, "Building on Core Strengths: Lessons from Justice Sector Reform in Albania" in *Solidarity and Rule of Law* (Springer 2023); Heliona Miço and Bojana Hajdini, "Combating Corruption in the Albanian Judiciary: Promoting Due Process" (2025) 1 *EUWEB Legal Essays* 57.

³ Law no. 96/2016 "On the status of judges and prosecutors in the Republic of Albania", as amended, art 3(1)–(3).

constitutionally permissible to amend the constitution frequently, there are certain laws and instruments of governance that lie outside the proper ambit of constitution-making. In this sense, an absolute faith in constitutionalism as a universal panacea may distract from the difficult work of judicial training, administrative capacity, institutional leadership, and public communication that no text can provide.

The justice reform therefore reveals a fundamental distinction between legality and legitimacy. While legality means compliance of constitutional processes and legislative rules, legitimacy is based on the intrinsic worth of the reform and depends upon sustained institutional performance and acceptance amongst the society. Having achieved a new legal order for the institutions of justice through a thorough normative architecture, the consolidation of legitimacy can only take place through the capacity of reconstituted institutions to show, over time, consistency, impartiality and responsiveness. These principles of independence, accountability, transparency and efficiency proclaimed in Law No. 115/2016¹ can only be given substantive content through the practice of institutions that do not simply recite but rather internalize them.

The Albanian experience shows how the period following transformative legal reform is paradoxically characterized by a consolidation of public perceptions of judicial dysfunction. Legislative reforms designed in the long term to restore legitimacy and credibility may have short- and medium-term consequences further securing public mistrust, for example, through judicial vacancies, procedural delays and transition periods even where these are a by-product of necessary corrective reform. Yet justice so conceived is not easily reconciled with normative ambition in contexts of deep distrust, both individual and institutional. Trust once set at naught is not easily restored, and cannot be restored completely by means of law, but must be repaired in practice.

6. Conclusion

The Albanian justice reform of 2016 is one of the most important constitutional interventions undertaken in the field of justice of the country, born out of the need to solve problems caused by structural and cultural deficiencies of the judiciary, with far-reaching, with constitutional weight and ambition. The High Judicial Council is an independent body, as defined by Law No. 115/2016 created a self-managed judiciary along with the vetting process under Law No. 84/2016, and not as policy preferences but as perceived constitutional necessities following a systemic collapse.

The statutory framework of the Constitutional Court, the centerpiece of the reform, as amended by Law No. 99/2016, is the highest level of ambition. Constitutional

¹ Law no. 96/2016 "On the status of judges and prosecutors in the Republic of Albania", as amended, art 3(2)–(3); Law no. 115/2016 "On the governance bodies of the justice system", as amended, art 2.

judges are appointed for a single non-renewable term of nine years.¹ They should have no pending or final criminal proceedings, not be either subject of or have been subjected to disciplinary removal from a public office, and successfully undergo asset scrutiny.² Together with the provisions to which they give effect, these criteria operationalise, at the apex of the judiciary, the principle that integrity is a prerequisite for the exercise of judicial power.

Nevertheless, the experience of implementation reveals that constitutionalism is not self-sufficient in this regard, for legal norms cannot substitute for trust, professionalism, and institutional maturity, even as they ease reform. Constitutional change can structure reform and constrain regression; it cannot, in isolation, resolve the cultural, professional, and social dimensions upon which judicial legitimacy ultimately depends.

The reform will be successful if, in addition to the realization of its legislative goals, it serves the purpose of transforming the judiciary into a stable, credible and respected participant of the constitutional order, where the ordinary application of constitutional principles, the responsibly exercised autonomy of its institutions, and the expected functioning of ordinary and extraordinary mechanisms of accountability consolidated, restore the administration of justice to its rightful place as a public authority under a democratic constitution.

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Aspects and Theories of Urban Development: The Case of Tirana

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Abstract

Urbanization is not only a modern phenomenon; it represents a rapid and historical transformation of the fundamental aspects of human social life on a global scale, where a predominantly rural subculture is swiftly replaced by a dominant urban subculture. Close-knit relationships among residents characterize the rural subculture, while more impersonal interactions and competitive behaviors define the urban subculture. Throughout the urbanization process, significant social, economic, and environmental changes unfold, creating opportunities for sustainability through the efficient use of resources. Through the method of literature review, this paper aims to highlight and emphasize specific issues of urban development because of urban processes, while also analyzing active participation in city life. The study focuses on the causes of urban development, migration, and the importance of active participation. The valuable perspectives of Louis Wirth on urban development and urban life will be essential to this paper.

Keywords: urbanization, city, active participation, migration, and civil society.

Introduction

One of the most significant phenomena influencing the urbanization of Albanian society after 1990 is internal migration. The political and economic transformations that occurred in Albanian society during 1990 - 1991 were accompanied by a series of demographic, social, and cultural phenomena. Internal migration in the Republic of Albania has stimulated an uncontrolled process of urbanization and the development of informal areas. In an urban area, diverse individuals live together, some of whom are students, artists, intellectuals, professionals, single individuals, and married couples with or without children, who choose to live within the city because they find it highly attractive (George Ritzer; Kenneth Kammeyer; Norman Yetman, 1979:277). According to the latest data from the World Bank, the urban population in Albania in 2024 is 59 percent (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.URB.TOTL.IN.ZS>).

Referring to Albanian society, a particular historical background of migratory movements within the country is evident. In the book *Rural Sociology* by Elidiana

Canaj, it is written that during the years 1923 - 1945, there were massive internal population movements from isolated areas toward the coastal regions (Canaj, E.; Mazniku, L., 2008:338).

After 1946, there was a change in the direction of population movement within Albania's borders, a trend that also determined the percentage of its urban population. During the years 1947 - 1964, according to sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi, in addition to the 24 cities founded in the first millennium BC through the end of the 19th century, 26 new industrial cities were added. Meanwhile, during the 1970s and 1980s, the party state's policy on population movement changed radically. The respective party and state structures not only ceased to encourage the relocation of the population from rural to urban areas, but also strictly restricted and controlled such movements (Dervishi, Z., 2001:34).

Artan Fuga argues that substantial population growth also harms the metropolitan population, as the labor force increases at staggering rates while the economic structure remains overwhelmingly service oriented. There are not enough jobs; people crowd together, the city becomes overcrowded, loses its green spaces and landscape, noise levels rise, and social tensions and stress intensify (Gazeta Standard, 2009:15).

Thus, population migration from all cities and regions of the Republic of Albania toward the metropolis would be accompanied by a wide range of problems, beginning with urban infrastructure, roads, sewage systems, and drinking water supply and extending to increased construction, the demolition of old buildings, shortages of kindergartens and schools, unemployment, rising crime, and so on. The city, as a historical developmental process, has been formed by individuals who are not necessarily united by blood ties, but by the temple where they gather to perform spiritual practices and other shared activities. The temple conveys the presence of a particular spiritual and cultural orientation. As Johan Pelushi writes, no civilization exists without experience expressed in its culture (Pelushi, J., 2000:5).

Jacques Ellul (1970:9) argues that the city exerts a spiritual influence capable of transforming a person's life. It uses its power to hold the individual within its sphere and reshape not only their dwelling, but their entire way of life. Saskia Sassen, analyzing the contemporary development of the global economy, highlights the new strategic role of major cities such as New York City, London, and Tokyo. These cities, once primarily international commercial centers, have acquired new characteristics. They have become key sites for shaping global economic policy, major locations for financial firms and specialized service companies, hubs of production and innovation within these newly expanded industries, and markets where financial and service sector products are bought and sold. The distinctive feature of the global city lies not in the production of material goods, but in the creation of specialized services

demanded worldwide, as well as in the development of financial innovations and markets (Sassen, S., 1991:10–12).

Urbanization According to Louis Wirth

The article *Urbanism as a Way of Life* by Louis Wirth, published in 1938, is one of the most influential works in sociology. In it, Wirth outlines a research program aimed at examining how cities generate forms of social interaction distinct from those found in rural areas, and more broadly delineates the differences between urban and rural ways of life. Wirth wrote this article at a time when the dominance of the Chicago School was particularly evident. He sought to analyze urban culture through three independent variables, such as size, population density, and heterogeneity which he regarded as key determinants of urban life (Savage, Warde, Ward, 2003:108). Since then, global urbanization has undergone profound transformations across nearly every sphere of social life. In recent decades, the accelerating pace of urbanization has exposed the severity of urban problems and the persistent lack of adequate awareness and preparedness in addressing them. Approximately eighty years ago, Wirth described global urbanization at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century as one of the "most impressive facts of modern times," emphasizing the profound changes it brought to the social and economic life of cities and states (Wirth, L., 1938:4).

According to Wirth, urbanization was not defined only as the process of living in an urban environment, but as the development of a broader system of social relationships emerging in response to the overall emphasis of urban conditions. Urbanization, in Wirth's view, should not be confused with physical (spatial) processes or with the local administrative organization of cities. Wirth's ideas have been widely used and remain highly relevant. In cities, there are many examples of indifference and a lack of cooperation among residents. Everyday indifference in modern cities is undeniable, and, to some extent, this also applies to social life in modern societies in general. Wirth's theory is important for recognizing that urbanization is not only a part of society but often influences the nature of the broader social system itself. The aspects of the urban way of life are characteristic of social life, not simply the activities of those who reside in cities.

Louis Wirth observes that the extent to which the contemporary world can be described as urban is not fully and accurately measured by the percentage of the total population living in cities. The influences cities exert on human social life are greater than what urban population ratios alone would suggest. The city is not only increasingly the dwelling place and workplace of modern individuals, but also the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life. It has drawn even the most remote communities of the world into its orbit and woven diverse regions, peoples, and activities into a single cosmos (Wirth, L., 1938:8).

His theory is important for recognizing that urbanization is not only a part of society but also expresses and influences the nature of the broader social system. The aspects of the urban way of life are characteristic of social life, not simply the activities of those who reside in cities. He explains several typological characteristics that distinguish urban life from rural life.

This does not mean that residents of urban areas possess less knowledge than those in rural areas; indeed, the opposite may be true. Rather, it means that, in terms of the number of people they see and meet in daily life, they know a smaller proportion of them and their knowledge of others is less intensive (Wirth, 1964:57). Characteristically, people living in urban areas encounter one another in highly segmented roles. They generally depend on a greater number of people for the satisfaction of their life needs than those living in rural areas and are therefore connected to a larger number of organized groups. On the other hand, they are less dependent on specific individuals, and their dependence on others is limited to highly fragmented aspects of the other person's activities (Wirth, 1964:12). The superficiality, anonymity, and transitory character of urban social relationships also make more understandable the complexity and rationalization generally attributed to city dwellers.

Contemporary sociologist Zyhdi Dervishi, in the article *"Urbanization of Rural Population Life or the Ruralization of Cities? The Case of Tirana,"* argues that such indifference is not only an expression or consequence of the gradual increase in individualism in urban lifestyles. Rather, it is largely imposed by the rise in highly dangerous violent crimes, and especially by the transfer of many sharp conflicts, acts of revenge, and blood feuds from villages to the city of Tirana (Dervishi, Z., 2001:39).

Louis Wirth writes that urbanization is a form of social organization that can be detrimental to culture. According to him, in the city, kinship ties weaken, primary contacts are replaced by secondary contacts, the influence of the family declines, and social solidarity is reduced. Wirth was concerned that urban living weakens family unity, contributing to lower birth rates. Families in cities tend to have fewer members, the age of marriage is increasingly postponed, leading residents toward greater isolation, and daily interactions become less frequent (Wirth, L., 1964:85). Families are smaller in size.

The family, as a unit of social life, becomes emancipated, and the individuals within these families are more individualistic in their relationships with relatives. The urban family differs from the large kinship groups that dominate rural communities, as individual members pursue their distinct interests in professional, educational, religious, recreational, and political life.

Active Participation in the Socio-Cultural Life of Tirana

For residents who settled in Tirana after 1990, it is evident that after assessing the infrastructure and the socio-economic conditions in which their families would live, they chose their new place of residence, although at times memories of their previous home may return, since complete detachment from one's birthplace is impossible. People begin to adapt to the conditions and subculture of the new settlement, engaging in mutual exchange with neighbors, friends, and acquaintances from different regions. In this process, involvement in the public life of the city also emerges.

The importance of social problems in the life of every society has encouraged many sociologists to seek the causes of these phenomena and the paths toward their resolution. This occurs because sociology "is a general social science whose subject is the study of society and its general laws" (Dida, A., 1997:21).

Civil society represents the sphere of organized social life that is voluntary, largely self-sufficient, and autonomous from the state. According to UNESCO, civil society refers to the self-organization of society outside the framework of the state or the market, that is, a set of organizations or groups formed more or less formally that belong neither to the government nor to the commercial sphere. The role of civil society in a decentralized governance system encompasses four functions: the advocacy function, representing the interests of their communities; the service-delivery function at the local level in areas such as education, health, and sanitation; the partnership function with government in development planning, resource mobilization, and the promotion of better understanding of decentralization; the oversight function of monitoring governmental activity.

City residents may differ from one another in their opinions on public and common issues. Publications on democratic civic education also emphasize the importance of cultivating a critical social consciousness, namely, an awareness that embraces belonging to the wider world and a concept of citizenship that implies a citizen who is conscious of all their responsibilities and capable of distancing themselves from purely personal interests when necessary. To live means to think and to act (Audigier, F., 2000, p. 31).

According to academic Artan Fuga in his book *Shoqëria periferike* ("Peripheral Society"), cities have recently received a rural population arriving from peripheral areas. In most cases, this population has descended from remote parts of Albania, from mountainous or hilly regions, from villages in the North or the South of the country. The newcomers are highly dynamic individuals, actively seeking employment, full of physical and moral energy. They strive at all costs to find their place in the social life of cities, precisely within a reality that is often hostile and oppressive toward them (Fuga, A., 2004:32–33).

By encouraging active participation in democratic developments, education for democratic citizenship simultaneously fosters citizens' responsibilities for social sustainability, which today is closely linked to peace at the global level. A culture of rights and responsibilities and a culture of peace mutually reinforce one another (Audigier, F., 2000:44).

Citizens must participate actively in shaping political opinion. In other words, a fundamental distinction between totalitarian or authoritarian states and democracy lies in the fact that democracy cannot function without interaction between citizens and their elected political representatives. When many individuals agree on a common goal, they possess the power to influence political discussions. Democratic states that value the work of interest groups make public financial resources available for this purpose, without conditioning the content or political orientation of these groups.

Durkheim argued that primitive societies possessed a stronger collective consciousness. In contrast, modernization and social development make individuals more individualistic. At this stage, members of each social group perform a more limited number of tasks, unlike earlier stages of socio-economic backwardness when primary activities were largely similar. As a result, they need to cooperate with many others in order to live normally (George R.,; Douglas J. G., 2008:82–89). In sociological studies of social movements, collective action is also given priority. Collective action is carried out by a group of people and aims to promote or prevent specific social changes (Dervishi, Z., 2024:488).

Conclusions

In the neighborhoods of the capital, all public and private educational institutions are present across all levels, from nurseries to high schools. With the expansion of the city's urban boundaries in recent years, the number of educational institutions has increased. However, as the number of apartment buildings and consequently residents has grown in several areas of Tirana, existing schools conduct classes in two shifts and accommodate a large number of students per classroom.

A similar issue appears in kindergarten groups, compelling many parents to choose private institutions so that their children can be placed in smaller groups, especially since the time a child spends in kindergarten is often longer than the time spent in school.

In the capital, the dominant family model is the closed nuclear family, typically consisting of a small number of members. However, there are also families with two or three married couples living in the same dwelling, whether in limited-space apartments or in two or three-story houses.

The development of civil society is still viewed with a degree of skepticism, and it remains unclear whether a consolidated civil society is fully present. Urbanization is not a process connected solely to a change of residence, but also to significant processes that primarily involve culture and its characteristics.

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Judicial Vetting and Institutional Reform in Transitional Democracies: Governance Challenges and the Case of Albania

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Abstract

Judicial reforms aimed at strengthening the rule of law and combating corruption have become a central component of governance reforms in many transitional democracies. However, large-scale institutional interventions in the justice sector may also generate unintended structural and social consequences that affect the efficiency, stability and legitimacy of judicial institutions. Examining these effects is therefore essential for understanding the broader impact of justice reforms on institutional governance and public trust. This study analyses these challenges through the empirical case of the judicial reform implemented in Albania following the 2016 constitutional amendments, which introduced a comprehensive vetting process for judges and prosecutors. Using a qualitative institutional analysis of reform outcomes and decision-making practices, the paper examines the structural and functional consequences of the re-evaluation process within the judicial system. The findings indicate that the large-scale removal of judicial officials contributed to the shrinkage of courts, the creation of structural gaps and a significant increase in the backlog of cases, placing considerable pressure on the remaining judicial capacity. The study also identifies inconsistencies in the application of evaluation standards, particularly in asset assessment and disciplinary measures, which have contributed to perceptions of unequal treatment and weakened legal certainty. By analysis the Albanian experience, the paper contributes to broader debates on the governance of judicial accountability mechanisms and the institutional risks associated with large-scale justice reforms in transitional democracies.

Keywords; *judicial reform, vetting process, rule of law, traditional democracies , shrinkage, delays, domino effects, institutional governance*

Methodology

To evaluate the outcomes of large-scale judicial reform in transitional democracies, this study adopts a legal-analytical and critical approach, integrating elements of comparative and empirical analysis. The research combines normative assessment, case-based evaluation, and institutional data analysis to examine the structural, procedural, and functional consequences of the reform. Normative analysis reviews the constitutional and legislative framework governing the 2016 Albanian judicial reform and the transitional reassessment (Vetting) process, identifying the standards and objectives intended to guide judicial accountability. Case-based evaluation examines specific reassessment decisions, focusing on the interpretation of the asset and "double wealth" criteria, the proportionality of disciplinary measures, compliance with procedural deadlines, and transparency in decision-making. Institutional analysis incorporates data on court functioning, including reductions in judicial staff, backlog increases, and procedural delays, evaluated against the standard of a trial within a reasonable time. This methodology ensures a rigorous, evidence-based assessment of whether the reform has strengthened the rule of law, or produced institutional and procedural challenges that undermine judicial effectiveness, legal certainty, and public trust.

Introduction

Judicial reform is a central instrument in the consolidation of rule-of-law principles in transitional democracies, where state institutions often face historical legacies of inefficiency, corruption, or political interference. Large-scale reforms targeting judicial independence and accountability are designed to strengthen public trust, ensure impartiality, and align national practices with international standards (Cameron, 2019; Popova, 2020). However, these interventions often produce unintended structural, procedural, and social consequences, including operational disruptions, extended delays in case processing, perceptions of selective justice, and erosion of public confidence. Understanding these effects is essential not only for evaluating policy effectiveness but also for assessing broader social outcomes such as institutional legitimacy, social cohesion, and professional identity within the legal system (Gramatikov, 2021; Tyler, 2006).

Albania represents an illustrative case within this global context. Following the 2016 constitutional amendments, Albania implemented an ambitious judicial reform program, including a comprehensive transitional re-evaluation process known as Vetting. The reform aimed to ensure the integrity, independence, and accountability of judges and prosecutors by reviewing their professional conduct, financial declarations, and ethical compliance. Officially, the reform was intended to eliminate corruption, restore public trust, and harmonize national standards with European Union and Council of Europe benchmarks (Laze, 2025; KPA Decisions, 2018–2023). Despite its intended goals, the reform has produced significant operational and

institutional challenges, including a substantial reduction in judicial personnel, court shrinkage, accumulation of case backlogs, procedural delays, and inconsistent application of evaluation criteria.

Theoretical frameworks on transitional judicial reform highlight the phenomenon of a "reform shock effect," whereby rapid removal or reassessment of judicial personnel generates systemic disruptions (Ackerman, 2017; Garoupa & Ginsburg, 2018). These disruptions are reflected in uneven workloads, temporary paralysis of smaller courts, and delayed adjudication, which can affect citizens' access to justice. Comparative studies of post-communist and transitional contexts indicate that ambitious vetting programs, while intended to strengthen institutions, often temporarily destabilize judicial systems, undermining the very legitimacy reforms seek to enhance (Friedman, 2016; Stepina, 2020). In this respect, Albania provides a unique empirical case to examine both the operational and social dimensions of judicial reform.

Operational consequences in Albania have been profound. The mass dismissal of judges and prosecutors led to the shrinkage of courts, creating functional gaps and delaying hearings across civil, criminal, and administrative jurisdictions. Small districts were particularly affected, experiencing temporary functional paralysis, which exacerbated case backlogs and delayed proceedings. These delays have had tangible social effects, impacting contractual, property, and criminal matters, creating uncertainty for citizens, businesses, and public institutions, and weakening public trust in the justice system (Laze, 2025). Beyond operational disruption, the reform exposed non-uniform application of evaluation criteria. The asset and "double wealth" standards, as well as disciplinary measures, were inconsistently applied, creating perceptions of double standards, selective enforcement, and unpredictability in decision-making (IQC & SAC Decisions, 2017–2023). High-profile cases often progressed rapidly or received favorable interpretations, whereas less visible subjects faced prolonged scrutiny and stricter penalties. These practices undermine legal certainty, violate equality before the law, and challenge public confidence in institutional integrity (European Court of Human Rights, 2019; Ruiz Torija v. Spain, 1994; Baka v. Hungary, 2016). From a social science perspective, the implications of these judicial disruptions extend beyond the courts. Public perception of fairness and procedural justice is a critical determinant of institutional legitimacy, social trust, and compliance with law (Tyler, 2006). Prolonged delays, inconsistent standards, and selective enforcement can contribute to social disengagement, eroding confidence in governance and weakening broader societal adherence to legal norms. Therefore, examining judicial reform through a social and policy lens is essential to understanding both its immediate institutional impact and its longer-term consequences for citizens, professionals, and governance structures.

This study adopts a legal-analytical and critical approach, combining normative, case-based, and institutional analyses to evaluate the structural, procedural, and social

effects of Albania's judicial reform. Normative analysis examines the constitutional and legislative frameworks guiding the Vetting process, identifying the intended standards and objectives. Case-based evaluation analyzes individual reassessment decisions, focusing on the interpretation of asset and "double wealth" criteria, proportionality of disciplinary measures, compliance with procedural deadlines, and transparency of decision-making. Institutional analysis incorporates empirical data on court functioning, judicial staffing, and case backlogs, benchmarked against the standard of a trial within a reasonable time. This methodology allows for a rigorous, evidence-based assessment of whether the reform strengthened rule-of-law principles or generated systemic and social challenges undermining judicial effectiveness and public trust. By situating Albania as a case study within the broader literature on transitional judicial reforms, this study contributes to international scholarship on governance, judicial accountability, and the social consequences of institutional interventions. The analysis highlights the need for reforms that balance ambitious integrity objectives with procedural coherence, uniform standards, transparency, and institutional resilience. Insights from this case provide lessons for other transitional democracies, demonstrating the importance of integrating operational, social, and policy dimensions into the design and implementation of judicial reform programs.

1. Shrinkage of courts and functional gaps

One of the most obvious and immediate consequences of the transitional re-evaluation process (Vetting) was the drastic shrinkage of courts, as a result of the removal of a significant number of judges and prosecutors¹. This phenomenon not only reduced the operational capacity of the courts, but also created functional gaps that were reflected in massive delays and an increase in the stock of files.² Practical effects of the shrinkage Reduction of the functioning of courts with high workload The removal of judges directly affected the capacity of sessions and the pace of reviewing cases. Many courts were forced to postpone scheduled sessions, creating long waits for the parties.³ This led to a backlog of files, while the number of decisions taken each week was significantly reduced. Temporary paralysis of functioning in small courts. The judiciary of small districts was most strongly affected by the shrinkage. In the absence of immediate replacements, courts often did not have enough judges to hold hearings. ⁴This caused temporary functional paralysis, where no case could be reviewed for long periods, increasing waiting times and hindering the resolution of existing cases. Domino effect: stockpiling of files and delaying proceedings. The shrinkage of courts produced a domino effect on the entire judicial system. Files that

¹ Annual Report of the Independent Qualification Commission, 2021

² Observations of the People's Advocate on the Impact of Vetting, 2022.

³ INSTAT Report on Courts and the Length of Trials, 2023.

⁴ Monitoring of the Bar Association, 2022

could not be reviewed in one court were piled up and postponed to other courts, increasing the workload and delays.¹ This phenomenon led to significant delays in civil and criminal proceedings, often exceeding the legal deadlines for review.

Institutional shock and impact on public trust. Beyond the operational effects, the shrinkage of courts and functional gaps caused an institutional shock, which weakened the basic capacity of the judicial system. ²Increased waits and delays affected the public's and lawyers' perception of the system's efficiency. Shrinkage of courts and functional gaps One of the most obvious and immediate consequences of the transitional re-evaluation process (Vetting) was the drastic shrinkage of courts, as a result of the removal of a significant number of judges and prosecutors. This phenomenon not only reduced the operational capacity of the courts, but also created functional gaps that were reflected in massive delays and an increase in the stock of files.³Institutional shock and impact on public trust. Beyond the operational effects, the shrinkage of courts and functional gaps caused an institutional shock, which weakened the basic capacity of the judicial system. Increased waits and delays affected the public's and lawyers' perception of the system's efficiency⁴.

2. The backlog of cases and the increase in delays in judicial processes

As a result of mass dismissals and the shrinkage of courts, the backlog of cases increased significantly, creating a phenomenon known in the literature as the "reform shock effect".⁵ This phenomenon directly affected the functioning of the judicial system and the right of the parties to a fair and speedy trial. Main effects Increased length of court proceedings. The backlog of cases caused significant delays In the examination of cases, often exceeding the legal deadlines set for adjudication.⁶ This affected the time taken to render decisions in civil, criminal and administrative cases, creating an additional burden on the remaining judges and limiting effective access to justice for citizens and legal entities.⁷

Failure to issue decisions within legal deadlines. The increase in the backlog affected the failure to issue decisions within legal deadlines, violating the right to a trial within a reasonable time, a standard recognized by the jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights.⁸ For example, in some courts, civil or criminal cases remained pending for periods exceeding 6–12 months, increasing legal uncertainty for the

¹ Ministry of Justice Statistics on Case Stock, 2022.

² Raporti i OSBE mbi sistemin gjyqësor në Shqipëri, 2022

³ Observations by Justice Monitoring Organizations, 2022

⁴ Analysis of Legal Experts on Vetting and Structural Effects, 2022.

⁵ Report of the Independent Qualification Commission on the Operational Effects of Vetting, 2021

⁶ Ministry of Justice Statistics on the Duration of Court Proceedings, 2022.

⁷ Ombudsman's Observations on the Impact of Vetting, 2022.

⁸ Jurisprudence of the European Court of Human Rights, decision "Achour v. France", 2020.

parties.¹ Increasing pressure on the remaining judges. The increased workload on the remaining judicial bodies affected the quality of decisions and made it difficult to comply with the standards of justice and equality before the law.² Judges were forced to deal with a large volume of cases, often without sufficient time to review the documentation and evidence in detail, increasing the risk of errors or unreasonable decisions. Impact on citizens and legal entities. This accumulation of files created a situation where citizens and legal entities faced long delays and uncertainty about the time of resolution of their cases.³ This affected contractual relations, property issues and criminal proceedings, increasing the feeling of legal uncertainty and weakening public confidence in the judicial system. The increase in the stock of files and the delay in proceedings are a direct consequence of the shrinkage of the courts and the mass departures of judges. This phenomenon highlights the need for compensatory mechanisms, institutional reorganization and policies that guarantee the normal functioning of the courts, respect for the fundamental rights of the parties and the preservation of the credibility of the judicial system.⁴

Quality and non-uniform application of standards – application of double standards (extended treatment) One of the most problematic elements of the reform is the non-uniformity in the interpretation and application of legal standards, which has affected the perception of justice and public trust in the judicial system.⁵ This non-uniformity is visibly manifested in the application of the asset criterion and disciplinary measures, creating the perception of a double standard.

a) Application of the asset criterion – “double standard”. For many reassessment subjects, the asset element was treated with different standards.⁶ This phenomenon was mainly evidenced in cases where: Expenses or declared resources were considered justified in one case, while in other cases they were penalized without a clear criterion basis; Comparison of assets in similar factual situations led to disproportionate decisions. Some judges or prosecutors were penalized for lack of transparency in asset declarations, while in other similar cases no measures were taken. This double standard is interpreted as different treatment of the same legal fact, without a clear legal justification, violating the principle of equality before the law and proportionality in decision-making.⁷ In addition to the legal effect, this practice has brought uncertainty to other subjects of reassessment, making financial and professional planning difficult.

¹ OSCE Report on Public Perception of the Judiciary in Albania, 2022

² Monitoring of the Bar Association on Pressure on Judges after Vetting, 2022

³ Ombudsman's Report on Delays in the Review of Cases, 2022.

⁴ KPK and KPA Reports on the Operational Effects of Vetting, 2022

⁵ OSCE Report on the Effects of Vetting on Albanian Justice, 2022

⁶ Decisions of the Independent Qualification Commission on the Asset Criterion, 2021.

⁷ Analysis of Legal Experts on Double Standards in the Application of Assets, 2022

b) Application of disciplinary measures – non-uniformity of proportionality .Non-uniformity was also evident in the application of disciplinary measures.¹For example: Some subjects faced harsh measures, including dismissal or suspension from office, for violations that were essentially similar to other cases; Others were confirmed in office using similar factual arguments; In some cases, prolonged delays in the review of disciplinary measures were evident, increasing uncertainty and the perception of injustice .This phenomenon created the perception of unstable and unpredictable decision-making, undermining trust in the judicial system and standards of administrative and disciplinary justice.²The non-uniformity in the application of standards, especially in the asset criterion and disciplinary measures, shows that the reform intervention has not always been balanced and transparent. This highlights the need for: Clearer guidelines for the interpretation of standards . Harmonized standards to be applied uniformly to all subjects; Control and monitoring mechanisms to guarantee equality, proportionality and fairness in the re-evaluation processes. The implementation of these measures is essential to repair public perception and restore trust in the judicial system, ensuring that legal standards are not interpreted selectively or unfairly.³

3.Application of Double Standards and Concrete Cases

A critical problem of the reform is the application of double standards in concrete cases, which has reflected not only interpretative issues, but also a tension between the reformist goal and the fundamental guarantees of the rule of law.⁴ Analysis of decisions and procedural practice has identified several forms of this phenomenon. Asset assessment and the “double wealth” criteries some decisions, an unequal assessment of financial resources has been found, especially in the application of the financial analysis methodology for the balance between income and expenditure.⁵ In similar factual cases: Minor financial discrepancies have been considered as sufficient evidence of a breach of public trust and have led to dismissal; In other cases, comparable discrepancies have been treated as administrative inaccuracies without disciplinary consequences. The failure to comply with a consistent criterion for the financial tolerance threshold has created the perception that the “double wealth” or economic disproportionality has not been applied uniformly.⁶The conflicts with the requirement for legal certainty and decision-making coherence.

¹ *Decisions of the Special Appeals Chamber on Disciplinary Measures, 2021–2022*

² *Observations of the Bar Association on the Non-Uniformity of Disciplinary Decisions, 2022.*

³ Report of the People's Advocate on the Need for Harmonized Standards in Vetting, 2022.

⁴ Doctrinal analysis on the impact of the re-evaluation process on the principles of the rule of law, 2023.

⁵ Decisions of the Independent Qualification Commission on the financial analysis and the asset criterion, 2019–2023

⁶ Comparative study on the financial tolerance threshold in the re-evaluation process, 2022.

Proportionality of disciplinary measures .Another dimension of double standards is related to the proportionality of disciplinary measures. The principle of proportionality requires that the measure taken be in fair proportion to the gravity of the violation and its consequences.¹However, a comparative analysis of some decisions shows: Application of the measure of dismissal in situations where the violations were of a formal or procedural nature; Confirmation in office in cases with similar factual elements, relying on a more favorable interpretation of the evidence. This variable approach has created the perception of unpredictable decision-making, violating the standards of administrative and disciplinary justice.²

Selectivity and the treatment of high-profile cases. Another problematic dimension is the perception of selectivity in the treatment of high-profile or politically influential cases.³ In some cases with high public exposure, the procedures have developed at an accelerated pace and with an emphasis on institutional integrity. Meanwhile, similar cases for subjects without a public profile have encountered: Prolonged procedural delays ;More severe interpretation of financial or ethical elements ;Stricter penalties for comparable violations. In the absence of evidence of direct interference, this difference in treatment has produced a perception of bias, which undermines public confidence in the process.

These differences in treatment create the image of a system where equality before the law and the principle of predictability are not consistently respected in practice. In a state governed by the rule of law, the coherence of jurisprudence and the uniform application of standards are essential elements of institutional legitimacy.⁴

Reference to concrete practice and European standards .Analysis of several decisions of the Independent Qualification Commission (IQC) and the Special Appeals Chamber (SAC) highlights significant differences in the reasoning on financial analysis and the level of tolerance for declaratory inaccuracies.⁵ In some cases, relatively limited financial discrepancies have been considered as a serious breach of public trust and have led to dismissal, while in other cases they have been treated as negligible inaccuracies, not affecting confirmation in office. These divergences are not only related to the size of the financial difference, but also to the methodology followed in

¹ The principle of proportionality in Albanian constitutional and administrative jurisprudence

² Observations of monitoring organizations on disciplinary measures in the Vetting process, 2022–2023

³ Analytical reports on the handling of high-profile cases in the justice system, 2023.

⁴ Doctrine on legal certainty and coherence of jurisprudence in the rule of law.

⁵ See, inter alia, various decisions of the Independent Qualification Commission and the Special Appeals Chamber on the asset criterion, where different approaches are observed in the methodology of financial analysis and in the treatment of negative differences (decisions published on the official websites of the respective institutions).

the analysis of legitimate sources, including the standard of proof, the burden of proof and the assessment of supporting documentation.

In the jurisprudence of the KPA, there are also differences in the way the subjective element is assessed (intent, negligence, transparency of the subject), where in some cases the importance of cooperation and transparency is emphasized as a mitigating element, while in other cases these elements have not influenced the disciplinary measure.¹ This fluctuation in the assessment of subjective factors raises issues regarding the coherence of practice and the criteria of proportionality in imposing a disciplinary measure. These differences should be analyzed in light of the standards of the European Court of Human Rights, which in its jurisprudence has emphasized the necessity of foreseeability of the law and coherence of judicial practice as essential elements of Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights.² In cases such as *The Sunday Times v. the United Kingdom* and *Baka v. Hungary*,³ the Court has stressed that interventions in the career of judges must be based on clear, foreseeable and uniformly applied standards.⁴ In this sense, any unexplained deviation from established practice or selective application of criteria may be considered a breach of legal certainty and the principle of equality before the law. Therefore, harmonizing the practice of review bodies with European standards remains a necessity for strengthening the legitimacy of judicial reform.

4. Non-disclosure of decisions and lack of transparency: the problem of delays in specific cases

One of the most prominent problems in the practice of review bodies has been the failure to disclose decisions within reasonable deadlines, especially in cases with high institutional or public impact. In some specific cases, publicly announced decisions have been accompanied by significant delays in the publication of the full reasoning, creating a time gap between the enacting clause and the legal argumentation.⁵ This situation has direct consequences both at the individual level (for the subject of the review) and at the systemic level. In the practice of the Independent Qualification Commission (ICC) and the Special Appeals Panel (SAP), cases have been identified where the reasoning of the decision has been published several weeks or months after

¹Analysis of the reasoning on the subjective element in the jurisprudence of the KPA.

² Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights; see also the case-law of the European Court of Human Rights on the principle of legal certainty and the requirement of foreseeability of the law.

³ *The Sunday Times v. the United Kingdom* (No. 1), 26 April 1979, § 49; *Baka v. Hungary* [GC], 23 June 2016, §§ 117–121

⁴ Compare decisions of the Special Appeals Chamber regarding the assessment of the subjective element and the impact of the subject's cooperation in determining the disciplinary measure.

⁵For specific issues on delays in the publication of decisions, see the decisions published on the official websites of the Independent Qualification Commission and the Special Appeals Chamber, where a time difference is noted between the announcement of the enacting clause and the publication of the full reasoning.

its announcement. In cases involving the dismissal of high-ranking judges or prosecutors, this delay has limited the possibility of a prompt analysis of the standards applied and their coherence with previous practice.¹ In such cases, the lack of timely full reasoning has also affected the effective preparation of the appeal, directly affecting the right to a defenses.

The consequences of these delays are multiple. First, they reduce the transparency of the judicial system, as the public is only informed of the formal outcome of the decision, but not of the legal reasoning that supports it. Second, they limit the effective control of the public, the media and civil society organizations over the exercise of judicial power.² Third, they create a perception of lack of uniformity and possible selectivity, especially when delays are not explained in a transparent manner or when they are presented unevenly across different cases. In the European dimension, the European Court of Human Rights has emphasized that the right to a fair trial, under Article 6 of the European Convention on Human Rights, includes not only the conduct of a trial within a reasonable time, but also the obligation to issue a reasoned and accessible decision.³ In the case of *Ruiz Torija v. Spain*, the Court emphasized that sufficient reasoning is an essential element of a fair trial, while in *Hirvisaari v. Finland* the importance of transparency and comprehensibility of the decision was underlined in order to guarantee public confidence in justice.⁴

If decisions are not made public within a reasonable time and are not published in a complete and structured manner, the principles of legal certainty and accountability are directly violated. The principle of the rule of law requires not only the existence of formal procedures, but also their effective and transparent functioning.⁵ The lack of a uniform practice in the announcement and publication of decisions weakens the mechanisms of institutional and democratic control and risks undermining the legitimacy of the reevaluation process as a whole.

5.The Failure of the Re-Evaluation Commissions: The Impact of Composition and Political Influences

One of the greatest challenges of the transitional re-evaluation process is the failure of the respective bodies – the Independent Qualification Commission (IQC) and the

¹ Compare different practices of the KPA in high-profile cases, where the full reasoning was published late compared to other cases of similar complexity

² See reports of judicial reform monitoring organizations and the European Commission's progress reports on Albania, which emphasize the importance of transparency and access to decisions of vetting bodies

³ Article 6, European Convention on Human Rights; on the concept of "reasonable time" and reasoning of decisions, see the relevant case law of the ECtHR

⁴ *Ruiz Torija v. Spain*, 9 December 1994, § 29; *Hirvisaari v. Finland*, 27 September 2001, § 30

⁵ European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission), Rule of Law Checklist, CDL-AD (2016)007, in particular the section on legal certainty and transparency of judicial decision-making

Special Appeals Panel (SAP) – to guarantee a fair, uniform and impartial process. This failure is closely linked to their composition and the manner in which members are appointed.¹ Most of the members of the IQC and SAP come from the executive branch or are selected with political support. Before they took office, no independent vetting of the members themselves had been applied, creating the risk of a pre-prepared political or professional influence on decision-making.² This fact has produced a marked uniformity in the decisions reviewed, where the standards of implementation have been interpreted similarly selectively, often favoring individuals with political connections or penalizing more independent entities.³

Moreover, political support has served as a selection criterion for members of the review bodies, consolidating a practice where the confirmation or condemnation of the subjects of the review was linked not to the factual circumstances or objective criteria, but to the political orientation and previous connections of the individuals.⁴ Another problem has been the influence of the members' previous affiliation with the executive on the decision-making process. In some cases, individuals who had served in the executive branch or had strong political connections made decisions that favored certain policies, violating the standard of impartial justice and creating a perception that the decision-making was biased.⁵ This structure has also led to problems in disciplinary and criminal procedures. Individuals who were re-evaluated have often been convicted or penalized for violations that were not the same as those faced by high-profile or politically supported individuals. Moreover, criminal proceedings against the members of the KPC and KPA themselves have been initiated after they left office, raising questions about accountability and effective control during the exercise of their duties.⁶ In summary, the failure of the KPC and KPA cannot be understood without analyzing their composition, the influence of political orientations, and the lack of independent vetting of their members. This has produced selective decision-making, perceived bias, and a weakening of public trust in the legitimacy of the re-evaluation process.

Conclusions

Conclusions on the incorrect implementation of the re-evaluation process and the consequences for the justice system
The analysis of the composition of the re-

¹ OSCE Report on Vetting in Albania, 2022, pp. 35–40; notes the impact of the composition of the KPC and KPA on decision-making standards

² Law No. 84/2016 "On the Assessment of the Assets, Integrity and Professionalism of Judges and Prosecutors" did not provide for a prior vetting of members of the review bodies

³ Analysis of KPA and KPC decisions, 2019–2023; comparison of disciplinary measures and asset criteria shows non-uniform treatment in similar factual cases

⁴ Report of the People's Advocate, Transparency and Independence in Vetting, 2022, pp. 12–15.

⁵ Comparative analysis of high-profile vs. low-profile decisions, KPA, 2021–2022.

⁶ Regarding criminal proceedings against former members of the KPA and KPC after the end of their mandate, see Supreme Court reports and public investigative materials, 2022.

evaluation bodies, the implementation standards and the concrete cases of investigations and criminal proceedings against members of the KPK and KPA evidences a high seriousness of the structural and institutional problems. Some of the main conclusions are: Incorrect implementation of the re-evaluation standards. The re-evaluation process has not always been uniform and predictable. The standards for wealth, ethics and professionalism have been interpreted selectively, creating "double standards" in the treatment of different subjects. Politically connected entities often received more favorable treatment, while more independent individuals faced stricter measures for similar violations.¹Lack of vetting and internal control over KPK/KPA members . Selected members were not subject to independent vetting before taking office, which increased the risk of pre-arranged political and professional influences. The concrete cases of Luan Daci and Ardian Hajdari show that the lack of independent control has facilitated deviations from standards of integrity and the law, weakening institutional legitimacy.²

Selectivity and bias in decision-making Analysis of KPK and KPA decisions shows that some entities were favored due to political support, while others were penalized for similar violations, creating a perception of institutional bias and violation of equality before the law.³Weakening public trust in justice. The erroneous and selective implementation of the process has created legal uncertainty and a perception of a lack of transparency. Failure to disclose decisions within legal deadlines and deviations from consolidated practice have damaged citizens' trust in the judicial system and in the legitimacy of review bodies.⁴Structural consequences for the justice system. The consolidation of selective decision-making increases the risk of corruption and political influence in the system. Unstable standards create pressure on judges and prosecutors, fostering a practice where decision-making is not always based on objective criteria of the law.Criminal proceedings against members of the KPK/KPA themselves after the end of their term demonstrate the need for clear accountability mechanisms and internal controls. The misapplication of the re-evaluation process has created a domino effect in the justice system, undermining equality before the law, the predictability of decisions, and public trust in the judiciary.

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¹ OSCE Report on Vetting in Albania, 2022, pp. 35–40.

² OSCE Report on Vetting in Albania, 2022, pp. 35–40.

³ Legal experts' analysis on the selection of members and political influence on decision-making, 2022.

⁴ Bar Association of Albania, Report on the transparency and accountability of Vetting bodies, 2022

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Gender, Linguistic Diversity, and inclusion in Second Language Teaching: Teachers' Perspectives in Multicultural Classrooms

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Abstract

As global mobility continues to reshape European societies, classrooms have become increasingly diverse in terms of language, culture, and gender. In this context, second language (L2) teachers play a central role in ensuring that multilingual and multicultural learners—girls and boys alike—receive equitable opportunities for linguistic and academic development. This paper examines how linguistic and cultural diversity intersects with gender dynamics in L2 learning environments, focusing on teachers' perceptions, challenges, and inclusive pedagogical strategies. The study aims to contribute to the broader discourse on gender and diversity promoted by the International Conference on Gender and Diversity (ICMS 47, Brussels). The research identifies key factors influencing L2 learning, including students' prior language knowledge, cultural identity, gendered participation patterns, and classroom interactions shaped by social norms. A **qualitative methodology** was adopted, using semi-structured interviews with L2 teachers working in multilingual schools, combined with observational notes taken during classroom sessions. This approach enables a nuanced understanding of the interplay between linguistic diversity, gender, and inclusive teaching. Preliminary findings show that teachers encounter challenges such as cultural misunderstandings, gendered communication styles, unequal participation among male and female learners, and the difficulty of differentiating instruction. Yet, teachers also highlight that diversity enriches the learning process when culturally responsive pedagogy, gender-sensitive approaches, and the strategic use of students' home languages are applied. The study concludes that institutional support, targeted training, and inclusive policies are essential for empowering teachers and promoting gender-just and culturally responsive L2 classrooms.

Key Words: Learning dynamics, linguistic diversity, inclusive teaching, multilingual environments.

Introduction

Globalization and increasing cultural mobility have made linguistic diversity a central feature of contemporary classrooms. Second language (L2) teaching is not only crucial for linguistic competence but also for fostering social inclusion, intercultural understanding, and students' active participation in multicultural communities (Cummins, 2000; Norton, 2013). Teachers' beliefs, pedagogical approaches, and professional preparation shape how linguistic and cultural diversity is addressed (Borg, 2006). Research indicates that learner-centered, interactive, and culturally responsive methods support inclusive learning environments and enhance student engagement (Gay, 2018; Banks, 2015). Gender and professional experience may further influence teaching practices, openness to innovation, and perceptions of inclusion (Skelton et al., 2019; OECD, 2019). Participation in continuous professional development strengthens teachers' awareness of intercultural competence and the social impact of L2 learning, promoting more inclusive pedagogies (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Deardorff, 2006).

Despite growing research on multilingualism and inclusion, limited studies explore teachers' perspectives at the intersection of gender, linguistic diversity, and inclusion in L2 teaching. This study addresses this gap by examining how teachers' professional experience, gender, and participation in professional development relate to their pedagogical practices and perceptions of the social role of second language learning. Specifically, it investigates: How does professional experience relate to engagement in L2-focused training? How does training participation influence teachers' perceptions of L2's social and inclusive role? How do experience and training affect the use of interactive and personalized methods? What barriers to inclusion do teachers identify? And how do teachers evaluate the role of L2 competence in students' social integration and community participation?

Literature Review

Research highlights the importance of linguistic diversity and inclusion in second language teaching. Scholars such as Cummins (2000) and Norton (2013) emphasize that students' language identity and motivation significantly influence learning and participation. Gay (2018) and Banks (2015) argue that culturally responsive teaching approaches enhance both academic performance and social integration. Borg (2006) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) stress the role of teacher professional development in implementing interactive methods and fostering inclusive classrooms. Deardorff (2006) underscores the necessity of intercultural competence for teachers working in multicultural settings. Together, these studies provide a theoretical foundation for exploring teachers' perspectives on second language teaching, linguistic diversity, and inclusive practices in multicultural classrooms, forming the basis for this study's focus on professional development, teaching strategies, and social outcomes for students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to examine teachers' perspectives on professional development, teaching strategies, and inclusion in second language classrooms. A quantitative approach was considered appropriate to identify patterns and associations between teaching experience, participation in professional development programs, and instructional practices across a larger sample.

3.2 Participants

The participants consisted of 100 in-service teachers from multilingual classrooms, with teaching experience ranging from 1 to over 20 years. Participants were categorized into four groups based on experience (1–5, 5–10, 10–20, and over 20 years) to analyze variations in professional development participation, use of interactive methods, and perceptions of barriers in teaching.

3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire combining Likert-scale and open-ended items. The survey addressed teachers' participation in foreign language training, national and international professional development programs, interest in ongoing professional development, adoption of interactive and personalized teaching methods, and perceptions of classroom challenges.

3.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and chi-square tests to assess associations between teaching experience, professional development engagement, and pedagogical practices. Statistically significant relationships were identified in multiple areas, including participation in foreign language training ($P = 0.042$, $\chi^2 = 8.215$), interest in professional development ($P = 0.002$, $\chi^2 = 14.851$), and use of interactive methods ($P = 0.012$, $\chi^2 = 16.256$). Open-ended responses were thematically analyzed to provide contextual insights into teachers' perceptions of the social and interpersonal benefits of second language learning.

3.5 Limitations

Limitations of the study include the modest sample size, reliance on self-reported data, and the cross-sectional design, which precludes causal inference.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed. Participation was voluntary, confidentiality was maintained, and data were used solely for academic purposes. Participants were fully informed about the study's objectives.

4. Findings

The findings integrate survey data from 100 EFL teachers and semi-structured interviews with 100 teachers (90 female, 10 male), categorized by teaching experience: 1–5 years (10), 5–10 years (12), 10–20 years (10), and over 20 years (8).

4.1 Professional Development Participation

Teachers with 10–20 years of experience showed the highest engagement in foreign language training, while those with over 20 years participated less frequently. Attendance at national and international programs was more common among experienced teachers, with statistically significant associations between participation and experience ($P = 0.006$, $\chi^2 = 23.299$). Interviewees emphasized the value of diverse professional development for enhancing classroom practice and inclusion.

4.2 Interactive and Inclusive Methods

Younger teachers adopted interactive and student-centered strategies, including group work, personalized tasks, and culturally relevant materials ($P = 0.012$, $\chi^2 = 16.256$; $P = 0.000$, $\chi^2 = 31.979$). Older teachers preferred traditional approaches. Interviews highlighted that integrating students' home languages and cultural experiences fosters confidence and engagement.

4.3 Cultural Diversity and Classroom Challenges

Teachers reported diverse student backgrounds in language, traditions, and family practices, as determined through class composition and survey graphics (Tables 28–30). Key challenges included addressing varied proficiency levels, balancing cultural expectations, and managing gendered participation. Experienced teachers were more aware of institutional constraints ($P = 0.034$, $\chi^2 = 22.324$).

4.4 Impact of Training on Inclusion

Participation in professional development strongly correlated with recognition of the social and interpersonal benefits of second language learning ($P = 0.000$, $\chi^2 = 23.204$). Teachers attending both national and international programs reported greater student inclusion in community life ($P = 0.03$, $\chi^2 = 17.859$; $P = 0.034$, $\chi^2 = 13.633$).

4.5 Gendered Participation Patterns

Open-ended interviews indicated that female students were more engaged in collaborative tasks, while male students participated more in oral activities. Teachers stressed the importance of inclusive strategies accommodating both gender and cultural norms.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study align with and extend prior research on multilingual and multicultural EFL classrooms. Consistent with García and Wei (2014), teachers reported that leveraging students' home languages and cultural backgrounds enhances engagement and confidence, confirming the importance of translanguaging and culturally responsive pedagogy. Younger teachers' higher use of interactive methods supports the observations of Li and Zhang (2020), who noted that early-career educators are more likely to adopt student-centered approaches. Conversely, more experienced teachers' reliance on traditional strategies mirrors findings by Hornberger and Link (2012), suggesting that established teaching habits can persist despite exposure to professional development.

Professional development participation was a key factor in fostering inclusive practices. Teachers attending both national and international training recognized the social and interpersonal benefits of second language learning, echoing results from Cummins (2000) and Freeman and Johnson (2016) on the link between teacher training and inclusive pedagogy. Moreover, the observed gendered participation patterns—females engaging more in collaborative tasks and males in oral activities—reflect trends reported by Enever et al. (2018) in multicultural EFL contexts.

The study further highlights the role of teacher experience in perceiving institutional support and classroom challenges, paralleling the findings of Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) regarding the interplay between experience and professional agency. Cultural diversity in classrooms, as quantified in the survey graphics, underscores the necessity of context-specific strategies, reinforcing the conclusions of Nieto (2017) about culturally responsive teaching in heterogeneous settings.

Overall, these findings confirm that teacher experience, professional development, and awareness of cultural and gender diversity interact to shape inclusive second language instruction, contributing empirical evidence from the Albanian EFL context.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study provides empirical evidence on the interplay between teacher experience, professional development, and culturally and linguistically responsive practices in multicultural EFL classrooms. Findings indicate that younger teachers are more likely to adopt interactive and student-centered strategies, while more experienced teachers rely on traditional approaches but demonstrate heightened awareness of institutional challenges and the need for support. Participation in national and international training significantly enhances teachers' capacity to implement inclusive practices and recognize the social benefits of second language learning.

Cultural diversity, as identified through survey data, emphasizes the importance of context-specific strategies that draw on students' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Gendered participation patterns suggest that instructional approaches must be tailored to engage all learners effectively. These results align with prior research on translanguaging, culturally responsive pedagogy, and the impact of professional development on inclusive teaching.

Implications for practice include prioritizing continuous professional development, promoting culturally and linguistically responsive instructional strategies, and providing institutional support that addresses both experience-related and gendered classroom dynamics. Policymakers and school leaders should ensure targeted training opportunities and resources that enable teachers to foster inclusive and equitable second language learning environments in diverse classrooms.

7. Limitations and Future Research

Despite providing valuable insights, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size for interviews was limited to 40 teachers, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study focused on EFL classrooms in a specific urban context, limiting the applicability to other regions or educational settings. Third, self-reported data on professional development participation and instructional practices may be influenced by social desirability bias.

Future research should include larger and more diverse samples across multiple regions to enhance generalizability. Longitudinal studies could examine how teacher experience, training, and classroom strategies evolve over time. Additionally, incorporating student perspectives would provide a more holistic understanding of the impact of linguistic and cultural diversity on learning outcomes. Investigating interventions that support gender-sensitive and culturally inclusive practices would also be beneficial.

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Evaluation of Social Services for Women Survivors of Domestic Violence in Albania: A Qualitative Assessment of Reintegration Mechanisms

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Abstract

Domestic violence against women remains a pervasive human rights violation worldwide. In Albania, the phenomenon is deeply embedded in patriarchal traditions and socially constructed gender hierarchies that reinforce women's dependence and normalize male authority. Although legislative reforms have strengthened the national framework for the protection of survivors, limited research has evaluated the effectiveness of public social services from the perspectives of both beneficiaries and service providers. This qualitative study explores and evaluates social services offered to women survivors of domestic violence, focusing on needs assessment, perceived quality of services, and reintegration preparedness. A purposive sample of 50 participants was divided into three focus groups: survivors residing in shelters, shelter staff members, and institutional representatives (ministries, municipalities, police). Data were collected through structured and semi-structured interviews, case studies, and secondary data analysis. Findings indicate that while protection services are functional, reintegration mechanisms remain fragmented, underfunded, and insufficiently coordinated. Survivors require not only trauma recovery and protection but also long-term economic empowerment and social inclusion strategies.

Keywords: violence against women; domestic violence; social services; reintegration; shelter; qualitative research

1. Introduction

Violence against women constitutes a global public health and human rights crisis. According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 2013), approximately one in three women worldwide has experienced physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence during her lifetime. Domestic violence transcends cultural, economic, and political boundaries, yet its forms and responses vary across societies.

In Albania, domestic violence is strongly influenced by patriarchal norms that define gender roles within a hierarchical family system. Concepts such as honor, shame, obedience, and male authority continue to shape social expectations. These norms contribute to underreporting and normalization of abuse.

Over the past two decades, Albania has adopted significant legal reforms aligned with international standards, particularly following the ratification of the Istanbul Convention of the Council of Europe. Despite progress in legal frameworks, systematic evaluation of social services for survivors remains limited.

This study addresses this gap by evaluating public social services for women survivors of domestic violence, with particular attention to reintegration mechanisms.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Feminist Theory

Feminist theory conceptualizes domestic violence as a manifestation of structural gender inequality. Patriarchal systems institutionalize male dominance, legitimizing control over women in both private and public spheres.

2.2 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory argues that violent behavior is learned through observation and reinforcement. In contexts where violence is normalized within family structures, intergenerational transmission becomes likely.

2.3 Ecological Model

The ecological framework integrates individual, relational, community, and societal factors (Heise, 1998). This model is particularly relevant in Albania, where cultural norms intersect with economic vulnerability and institutional limitations.

3. Domestic Violence in Albania

Research indicates that domestic violence in Albania is influenced by:

Traditional gender roles

Economic dependency

Rural-urban disparities

Limited employment opportunities for women

Social stigma

National strategies and action plans have improved institutional responses. However, implementation gaps persist due to insufficient funding, fragmented coordination, and limited monitoring mechanisms.

4. Social Services Framework

Public services available to survivors include:

Emergency protection orders

Shelters and safe accommodation

Psychological counseling

Legal assistance

Social and economic aid

Employment training programs

Despite these provisions, challenges remain in sustainability and long-term reintegration.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design aimed at capturing the lived experiences of women survivors of domestic violence and the institutional perspectives of service providers responsible for their protection and reintegration. A qualitative approach was considered the most appropriate methodological framework because the research seeks to explore perceptions, meanings, and experiences rather than measure prevalence or quantify variables. Domestic violence is a complex social phenomenon shaped by cultural norms, gender relations, institutional practices, and individual trajectories. Understanding how survivors perceive services and how professionals interpret their roles requires an in-depth, interpretative methodology capable of uncovering nuanced realities.

The qualitative design allows for a contextualized understanding of domestic violence within the socio-cultural environment of Albania, where patriarchal traditions and hierarchical family structures significantly influence gender relations. By focusing on narratives and professional reflections, the research aims to generate rich, detailed data that illuminate both systemic strengths and structural gaps in service provision. Rather than testing hypotheses, the study seeks to build an analytical understanding grounded in participants' experiences. This exploratory orientation is particularly relevant given the limited number of prior evaluations assessing state-provided social services from both beneficiaries' and service providers' perspectives.

The research design integrates multiple qualitative techniques to ensure depth and credibility. It is informed by an interpretivist paradigm, which assumes that social reality is constructed through interaction and shared meanings. Within this framework, survivors' voices are treated as central sources of knowledge, while

institutional representatives' accounts provide insight into organizational practices, policy implementation, and operational constraints. The use of triangulation—combining interviews, case study analysis, and secondary data review—enhances the reliability and validity of findings by cross-verifying information from different sources.

Ethical sensitivity was fundamental to the research design. Domestic violence research requires particular attention to confidentiality, emotional safety, and voluntary participation. Interviews were conducted in secure environments, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities, and any potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts. The researcher adopted a trauma-informed approach, ensuring that questions were posed in a respectful and non-retraumatizing manner.

5.2 Sample

The study employed purposive sampling to select participants who possessed direct knowledge and experience related to domestic violence services. Purposive sampling was chosen because it enables the identification of individuals who can provide rich and relevant information aligned with the objectives of the study. Rather than aiming for statistical representativeness, the research sought depth and diversity of perspectives within key stakeholder groups.

A total of fifty participants were included in the research. The largest group consisted of twenty-five women survivors of domestic violence residing in shelters. These participants were selected because they were direct beneficiaries of public social services and were able to reflect on their experiences within shelter systems, the quality of support received, and their expectations regarding reintegration. The inclusion criteria required that participants be adults who had experienced domestic violence and had been residing in a shelter long enough to engage meaningfully with available services. The diversity of participants in terms of age, educational background, marital status, and number of children enriched the data and allowed for the identification of varied reintegration challenges.

The second group comprised fifteen shelter staff members, including social workers, psychologists, administrators, and support personnel. Their professional roles positioned them as frontline actors in the provision of protective and rehabilitative services. Including staff members enabled the research to examine institutional practices, resource limitations, coordination mechanisms, and perceptions of survivors' needs from a professional standpoint. Their insights contributed to understanding operational challenges and structural constraints within service delivery systems.

The third group consisted of ten institutional representatives, including specialists from relevant ministries, municipal social service units, and police structures. These

participants were selected due to their involvement in policy implementation, coordination, and enforcement of protective measures. Their perspectives provided a broader institutional context, highlighting systemic issues such as inter-agency collaboration, funding mechanisms, monitoring processes, and legislative implementation. By incorporating these three distinct but interconnected groups, the study ensured a multi-layered analysis that captures both micro-level experiences and macro-level institutional dynamics.

The sample size of fifty participants was deemed sufficient to reach thematic saturation, meaning that recurring patterns and themes emerged consistently across interviews. The decision to limit the study to this number was guided by the principle of depth rather than breadth, ensuring that each participant's account was explored comprehensively.

5.3 Data Collection

Data collection was conducted through a combination of semi-structured interviews, structured interviews, case study analysis, and secondary data review. The integration of multiple qualitative methods strengthened the analytical robustness of the research and enabled triangulation of findings.

Semi-structured interviews constituted the primary method of data collection. This approach allowed the researcher to prepare guiding questions while maintaining flexibility to explore emerging themes and follow participants' narratives. For survivors, interviews focused on their experiences with domestic violence, their interaction with social services, perceived strengths and weaknesses of shelter support, and expectations regarding reintegration. The open-ended format encouraged participants to articulate their personal journeys, emotional challenges, and aspirations for independence. The conversational nature of semi-structured interviews fostered trust and facilitated the disclosure of sensitive information.

Structured interviews were conducted primarily with institutional representatives and certain shelter staff members in order to ensure comparability of responses regarding institutional procedures, coordination mechanisms, and policy implementation. Structured questions addressed topics such as service protocols, resource allocation, referral systems, and monitoring practices. This format enabled the researcher to systematically examine institutional consistency while still allowing space for clarifications and elaboration.

Case study analysis complemented the interview data by providing in-depth examination of selected individual trajectories. These case studies traced survivors' experiences from entry into shelter services through various stages of support and attempted reintegration. By reconstructing individual pathways, the researcher was able to identify recurring barriers, turning points, and outcomes. Case studies offered a holistic perspective, demonstrating how institutional policies intersect with

personal circumstances such as employment status, childcare responsibilities, housing availability, and family support networks.

Secondary data review was also incorporated to contextualize primary findings within existing legal and policy frameworks. This review included national strategies on gender-based violence, legislative provisions, statistical reports, and institutional guidelines. Examining official documents allowed the researcher to compare policy intentions with practical implementation as described by participants. The review also helped identify gaps between formal standards and lived realities.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim. Data analysis followed a thematic approach, involving systematic coding and categorization of recurrent patterns. Initial open coding identified key concepts related to service accessibility, quality of support, coordination challenges, and reintegration barriers. These codes were then grouped into broader themes that structured the findings section of the study. Analytical rigor was ensured through repeated reading of transcripts and cross-checking of interpretations to minimize researcher bias.

Overall, the methodological strategy adopted in this study provided a comprehensive and in-depth understanding of social services for women survivors of domestic violence. By integrating survivors' lived experiences with institutional perspectives and documentary analysis, the research offers a nuanced evaluation of service effectiveness and reintegration mechanisms within the Albanian context.

5.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of domestic violence research, strict ethical standards were applied throughout all stages of the study. The safety, dignity, and emotional well-being of participants were prioritized above all research objectives. Confidentiality was rigorously maintained by anonymizing all data, removing identifying details from transcripts, and using pseudonyms in reporting findings. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored and accessed only by the researcher.

Participation in the study was entirely voluntary. Each participant received clear information about the purpose of the research, the procedures involved, and their right to withdraw at any stage without consequences. Informed consent was obtained prior to conducting interviews. Survivors were assured that their decision to participate or decline would not affect the services they received from shelters or institutions.

A trauma-sensitive interviewing approach guided the interaction with survivors. Questions were formulated carefully to avoid re-traumatization, and interviews were conducted in private, safe spaces within shelter facilities. The researcher remained attentive to signs of emotional distress and allowed participants to pause or skip

questions whenever necessary. Emotional support from professional staff was available if needed following interviews.

Ethical responsibility also extended to institutional representatives and shelter staff. Their participation was confidential, and their professional perspectives were reported in a way that avoided institutional stigmatization while still allowing critical analysis of systemic gaps. By integrating confidentiality, voluntary participation, and trauma-informed practice, the study adhered to core ethical principles of respect, beneficence, and non-maleficence.

6. Findings

6.1 Survivors' Needs

The findings reveal that survivors' needs extend far beyond immediate physical protection. While safety is the first and most urgent requirement upon entering a shelter, participants emphasized that recovery from domestic violence is a multidimensional and long-term process. Women consistently described their experience not only as exposure to physical harm but also as prolonged psychological trauma, social isolation, and economic dependency.

Psychological recovery emerged as a fundamental need. Many survivors reported experiencing anxiety, depression, fear, low self-esteem, and feelings of guilt or shame. Emotional abuse and controlling behaviors had often persisted for years before physical violence escalated. Participants highlighted the importance of regular counseling sessions, therapeutic support, and a stable environment that fosters trust and self-confidence. Psychological recovery was described not as a short-term intervention but as a gradual rebuilding of identity and autonomy. Several women emphasized that emotional empowerment was a prerequisite for making independent life decisions.

Economic independence was identified as the most critical factor influencing long-term reintegration. The majority of participants had limited work experience, low educational attainment, or interrupted employment histories due to controlling partners who restricted their access to the labor market. Without stable income, many women felt vulnerable to returning to abusive environments. Financial dependency was repeatedly described as the primary mechanism through which perpetrators maintained control. Participants expressed the need for vocational training, employment placement programs, and entrepreneurship opportunities. Some suggested that partnerships between shelters and local businesses could facilitate transitional employment pathways.

Secure housing represents another central challenge. Although shelters provide temporary accommodation, participants expressed anxiety about where they would live after leaving the facility. The shortage of affordable housing options and limited

access to long-term housing programs significantly undermined reintegration efforts. Several women feared homelessness or being forced to return to abusive households due to the absence of viable alternatives. Housing insecurity was closely linked to economic vulnerability, as insufficient income restricts access to rental markets. Survivors emphasized that transitional housing schemes or subsidized rental programs would substantially enhance their ability to rebuild independent lives.

Childcare support was also a recurrent theme among participants, particularly for single mothers. Many survivors were responsible for multiple children and faced difficulties balancing employment opportunities with caregiving responsibilities. Limited access to affordable childcare services reduced their ability to seek or maintain employment. Additionally, children themselves often required psychological support after witnessing or experiencing violence. Participants stressed that integrated services addressing both mothers' and children's needs are essential for sustainable reintegration.

Long-term protection mechanisms were considered vital for ensuring continued safety. Although protection orders and police interventions exist, survivors expressed concerns about enforcement and monitoring. Fear of retaliation remained strong, particularly in smaller communities where anonymity is difficult to maintain. Women highlighted the need for stronger follow-up mechanisms and coordinated institutional oversight to prevent repeated abuse.

Across all themes, economic vulnerability emerged as the most significant barrier to independence. Without financial stability, psychological recovery remains fragile, housing insecurity persists, and long-term safety cannot be guaranteed. The findings demonstrate that protection services alone are insufficient. Sustainable reintegration requires integrated support systems that simultaneously address psychological healing, economic empowerment, housing stability, childcare provision, and effective legal protection.

6.2 Quality of Shelter Services

The evaluation of shelter services revealed a complex picture characterized by both significant strengths and structural limitations. Survivors consistently acknowledged that shelters play a vital and often life-saving role at the most critical moment of crisis. Immediate safety was identified as the most valuable aspect of shelter services. For many women, entering a shelter represented the first environment free from fear, intimidation, and physical threat. The secure location, restricted access, and confidentiality protocols provided a sense of protection that allowed survivors to regain a basic level of emotional stability. Several participants described the shelter as a "turning point" in their lives, marking the transition from survival mode to the possibility of rebuilding their future.

Professional counseling services were another strongly appreciated component of shelter support. Psychologists and social workers were described as empathetic, patient, and supportive. Regular counseling sessions enabled survivors to process traumatic experiences, rebuild self-esteem, and gradually develop coping strategies. Emotional validation and the opportunity to speak openly about abuse without judgment were considered transformative experiences. Survivors particularly valued individual counseling tailored to their personal circumstances, as well as group sessions that fostered solidarity and mutual encouragement among residents. The presence of trained professionals contributed significantly to emotional stabilization during the initial phase of recovery.

Legal guidance was also regarded as an essential service provided by shelters. Many survivors entered the shelter system without clear knowledge of their legal rights, protective measures, or judicial procedures. Legal advisors assisted women in obtaining protection orders, filing criminal complaints, initiating divorce proceedings, and securing child custody arrangements. This guidance reduced feelings of confusion and helplessness within complex legal systems. Access to legal information strengthened survivors' sense of agency and enabled them to navigate institutional structures more effectively.

Despite these positive aspects, several limitations were identified. One of the most significant concerns relates to the short duration of stay permitted in shelters. Although emergency accommodation addresses immediate safety needs, many survivors expressed anxiety about their future once their stay ended. The limited timeframe often does not allow sufficient opportunity to achieve financial independence, secure stable employment, or arrange long-term housing. As a result, the transition from shelter to independent living remains abrupt and precarious. Participants emphasized that recovery and reintegration require more time than currently allocated within shelter programs.

Another limitation involves the restricted availability of vocational and employment-oriented programs. While some shelters offer basic skills training or short workshops, survivors reported that these initiatives are often insufficient in scope or duration to produce sustainable economic outcomes. Without comprehensive job placement assistance, professional certification opportunities, or partnerships with employers, women remain vulnerable to unemployment or low-paying informal work. This gap directly affects reintegration prospects and contributes to continued financial dependency.

Insufficient post-shelter follow-up was identified as an additional structural weakness. Once survivors leave the shelter, systematic monitoring and continued psychosocial support are often limited. Participants expressed the need for regular follow-up meetings, mentorship programs, or case management services that extend beyond the shelter period. Without structured follow-up, women may feel isolated

when confronting challenges related to housing, employment, childcare, and ongoing legal processes. The absence of long-term support mechanisms undermines the sustainability of initial progress achieved within the shelter environment.

Overall, while shelter services effectively fulfill their protective and crisis-intervention functions, they face structural constraints that limit their capacity to support long-term empowerment and reintegration.

6.3 Institutional Coordination

Interviews with institutional representatives revealed that coordination among agencies remains one of the most significant systemic challenges. Although multiple institutions are formally responsible for addressing domestic violence—including ministries, municipalities, law enforcement bodies, and social service units—their mandates often overlap without clear operational boundaries. This overlap can create confusion regarding responsibility allocation, delay service delivery, and reduce accountability.

Participants from institutional backgrounds acknowledged that inter-agency communication is frequently weak or inconsistent. Information sharing mechanisms between shelters, police, social services, and judicial bodies are not always standardized. In some cases, survivors are required to repeat their testimonies multiple times to different authorities, which may cause additional emotional distress. The lack of integrated case management systems prevents the establishment of coordinated and individualized reintegration plans.

Budget constraints further complicate institutional collaboration. Limited financial resources restrict the hiring of specialized personnel, expansion of housing programs, and development of comprehensive employment initiatives. Representatives highlighted that domestic violence services often compete with other social priorities for funding, resulting in fragmented or short-term programming. Financial instability affects not only service expansion but also the sustainability of existing initiatives.

Another critical issue identified is the absence of a unified monitoring and evaluation system. While data on reported cases and protection orders are collected by various institutions, there is no centralized database that tracks survivor trajectories across services. This fragmentation makes it difficult to assess long-term outcomes, measure reintegration success rates, or evaluate the effectiveness of interventions. Without systematic monitoring, policy adjustments are based on partial information rather than comprehensive evidence.

Despite these challenges, institutional representatives expressed willingness to strengthen collaboration. Many emphasized the need for standardized protocols, joint training sessions, and formalized referral mechanisms. Strengthening coordination

would reduce service duplication, enhance efficiency, and ensure that survivors receive continuous and coherent support across institutional boundaries.

6.4 Reintegration Challenges

Reintegration emerged as the most fragile and complex stage in the recovery process. While emergency protection mechanisms function relatively effectively, transitioning from institutional support to independent living exposes survivors to multiple risks. The findings indicate that reintegration is not a single event but a prolonged process requiring sustained structural support.

Financial dependency remains the most prominent obstacle to successful reintegration. Many survivors lack stable employment opportunities, professional qualifications, or access to credit and financial resources. Without consistent income, women face ongoing insecurity and limited autonomy. In some cases, economic hardship leads survivors to reconcile with abusive partners, particularly when children are involved and alternative resources are scarce. This dynamic illustrates how economic vulnerability directly undermines protective interventions.

Social pressure also plays a significant role. Cultural expectations surrounding marriage, family unity, and community reputation can discourage women from permanently separating from abusive partners. Survivors reported experiencing stigma, blame, or discouragement from extended family members and community networks. In smaller communities, social surveillance and fear of gossip intensify these pressures. Such dynamics may lead women to prioritize social acceptance over personal safety.

The lack of affordable housing further compounds reintegration difficulties. Rental costs often exceed survivors' financial capacities, particularly for single mothers responsible for multiple dependents. Without access to transitional housing programs or housing subsidies, independent living remains unattainable for many. Housing instability increases the likelihood of returning to unsafe environments or entering informal and insecure living arrangements.

Long-term empowerment mechanisms remain underdeveloped. Although psychological counseling and legal support are provided during shelter residence, fewer structured programs focus on sustained economic growth, leadership development, or community integration. Reintegration strategies often emphasize short-term stabilization rather than long-term transformation. Survivors expressed a desire for mentorship programs, peer support networks, and community-based initiatives that would strengthen their social inclusion and professional development.

The findings suggest that reintegration requires a holistic and integrated approach that simultaneously addresses economic empowerment, housing stability, legal enforcement, and social inclusion. Without comprehensive long-term strategies, the

risk of revictimization persists. Sustainable reintegration depends on moving beyond crisis management toward structural interventions that foster independence, dignity, and equal participation in society.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with international evidence indicating that protection alone does not ensure a sustainable exit from violent relationships. Reports from the World Health Organization (2013) and UN Women (2020) emphasize that while emergency responses are crucial for immediate safety, long-term empowerment is the decisive factor in preventing revictimization. The experiences shared by survivors and institutional representatives in this research reinforce this perspective. Protection orders, shelter accommodation, and crisis counseling constitute necessary first steps; however, without structural mechanisms that enable economic autonomy and social inclusion, survivors remain vulnerable to renewed cycles of abuse.

Although Albania has made notable progress in strengthening its legislative framework, particularly through alignment with European standards and international conventions, service delivery practices often remain reactive rather than transformative. Institutional responses tend to focus on crisis management—responding once violence has occurred—rather than on building long-term capacities for independence. This reactive orientation is reflected in the limited duration of shelter stays, fragmented reintegration planning, and insufficient follow-up mechanisms identified in the findings.

A survivor-centered model must move beyond immediate protection and incorporate integrated strategies that address the structural roots of dependency. Economic empowerment emerges as the most critical pillar of sustainable reintegration. The study demonstrates that financial vulnerability functions as both a cause and consequence of domestic violence. Without stable employment, vocational skills, or access to income-generating opportunities, women's autonomy remains constrained. Therefore, empowerment initiatives must include comprehensive vocational training, employment placement programs, access to entrepreneurship funding, and collaboration with private-sector actors.

Community reintegration represents a second essential dimension. Survivors do not reintegrate into a social vacuum; they return to communities shaped by entrenched gender norms and, at times, stigmatizing attitudes. Social reintegration requires awareness campaigns, community-based support networks, and mechanisms that foster social acceptance rather than marginalization. Empowerment cannot be achieved solely within institutional walls; it must extend into the broader social environment where survivors rebuild their identities and relationships.

Multi-sectoral coordination is equally fundamental. Domestic violence intersects with legal systems, social protection mechanisms, employment structures, housing policies, and law enforcement agencies. The absence of synchronized cooperation among these sectors weakens overall effectiveness. A coordinated model would integrate case management systems that ensure continuity of care, shared responsibility, and coherent monitoring across institutions.

Long-term monitoring constitutes another critical component. The research highlights the lack of structured follow-up once survivors exit shelters. Sustainable reintegration requires ongoing evaluation of economic stability, housing security, psychological well-being, and protection status. Monitoring mechanisms not only support survivors but also provide institutions with data to assess program effectiveness and adapt policies accordingly.

Overall, the study confirms that trauma recovery, while indispensable, is insufficient in isolation. Psychological healing must be accompanied by structural support that addresses economic independence, housing security, institutional accountability, and community inclusion. Only through a holistic and transformative approach can domestic violence responses shift from temporary relief to sustainable empowerment.

8. Policy Recommendations

The findings of this research point toward the need for systemic and coordinated policy reforms that strengthen both protection and empowerment mechanisms. First, the establishment of integrated case management systems is essential. Such systems would enable coordinated intervention among shelters, social services, police, judicial authorities, and employment agencies. A centralized case management framework would reduce duplication of services, enhance accountability, and ensure that survivors receive continuous and individualized support throughout the reintegration process.

Second, increasing funding for employment and entrepreneurship programs is crucial for sustainable independence. Economic empowerment initiatives should extend beyond short-term vocational workshops and include certified training programs aligned with labor market demands. Public-private partnerships could facilitate job placement opportunities, while microfinance schemes or small business grants could support women interested in entrepreneurship. Stable employment is not merely an economic issue but a protective factor that significantly reduces the risk of returning to abusive environments.

Third, the development of transitional housing schemes would address one of the most pressing reintegration barriers. Housing instability consistently emerged as a source of anxiety among survivors. Transitional housing programs, rental subsidies, or social housing allocations would provide a secure bridge between shelter

accommodation and full independence. Housing policies should be integrated into national strategies addressing domestic violence, recognizing safe housing as a fundamental element of protection.

Fourth, strengthening inter-institutional data sharing mechanisms would improve coordination and policy evaluation. The creation of a unified database that tracks service provision, protection measures, and reintegration outcomes would enable more effective monitoring and evidence-based decision-making. Data transparency, while respecting confidentiality, would facilitate institutional accountability and strategic planning.

Fifth, continuous professional training for social workers, police officers, legal professionals, and municipal staff is necessary to maintain trauma-informed and survivor-centered practices. Training programs should address gender sensitivity, risk assessment, crisis intervention, and long-term empowerment strategies. Professional capacity building enhances service quality and promotes consistency in institutional responses.

Collectively, these policy recommendations underscore the necessity of shifting from fragmented interventions toward a comprehensive and integrated national response. Sustainable progress requires political commitment, adequate resource allocation, and institutional collaboration across sectors.

9. Conclusion

Domestic violence in Albania remains deeply rooted in patriarchal norms, hierarchical family structures, and persistent gender inequalities. While the country has strengthened its legal and policy frameworks, practical implementation challenges continue to limit the effectiveness of social services. The findings of this study demonstrate that public services, though expanding, remain insufficiently coordinated and under-resourced, particularly in the area of long-term reintegration.

Shelter services play a vital role in providing immediate safety, psychological counseling, and legal guidance. However, the transition from crisis protection to sustainable independence remains fragile. Economic dependency, housing insecurity, social stigma, and limited institutional follow-up contribute to ongoing vulnerability among survivors. Reintegration is not merely a logistical step but a complex social and economic transformation requiring structural support.

A comprehensive response must therefore extend beyond emergency protection toward long-term empowerment and systemic reform. Policies should integrate economic independence initiatives, transitional housing solutions, coordinated case management systems, and continuous monitoring frameworks. Institutional collaboration and adequate funding are indispensable for translating legislative commitments into effective practice.

This study contributes to academic and policy discourse by offering a dual-perspective evaluation that incorporates both beneficiaries' lived experiences and institutional viewpoints. By bridging micro-level narratives and macro-level analysis, the research provides evidence-based recommendations for strengthening service effectiveness and promoting sustainable reintegration. Ultimately, addressing domestic violence requires not only protective mechanisms but also transformative strategies that empower women to rebuild their lives with dignity, autonomy, and equal participation in society.

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Youth, Digital Influence, and Ethical Vulnerability: Belonging and Self-Perception in Influencer Culture

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Abstract

Social media has become an integral part of young people's daily lives, influencing their self-image, social relationships, and where they seek acceptance, as well as their purchases and information. In this context, influencer culture has become a visible and growing force, often combining personal stories, paid promotions, and shared ideas about what is normal or desirable. This article examines how young people interpret the ethical and social aspects of influencer content on social media, focusing specifically on issues of belonging, self-image, and vulnerability. The research is based on data from a survey of 300 people in Albania aged 16 to 30, a country where social media use is widespread but where rules and education on digital ethics are still in their infancy. The survey examined how often they view influencer content, whether they believe advertising is clearly labeled, any social pressure they may feel, their self-perception, and the choices they make. To analyze the connections between these areas, we used reliability analysis (Cronbach's Alpha), Correlation Tests, and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA). What we discovered is that the influence of these figures rarely leads to clear or predictable purchasing decisions. Rather, their effect operates through more subtle channels: comparisons with others, the absorption of unexpressed expectations, and constant exposure to elaborate images of how to look, live, and succeed. Many participants stated that they were often unsure whether what they were seeing was advertising and that they felt constant pressure, affecting both younger and older participants. These findings point to a pervasive digital vulnerability, not limited to specific individuals. The thesis is that influencer culture functions as a form of discrete social influence, slowly shaping how young people judge themselves and where they feel comfortable, both online and offline. By connecting the data to broader conversations about ethics, belonging, and equity in digital spaces, the study argues for the need to do more to support young people's ability to think critically, improve media literacy, and hold platforms accountable in the current social media environment.

Keywords: *Youth and belonging, Influencer culture, Ethical uncertainty, Social pressure and self-perception, Social media power*

Introduction

Digital media is now an integral part of young people's lives, influencing not only how they communicate with each other but also how they interact with the world around them and how they come to understand themselves (Livingstone et al., 2023; Odgers & Jensen, 2020). Platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have gone beyond being simple tools for staying in touch. They now serve as social spaces where ideas about what matters, what is worth desiring, and what others admire are constantly taking shape (Keskin, 2018; Kaye, Chen, & Zeng, 2021). In these spaces, influencers have assumed a prominent role, blending personal stories, advertising, and behaviors in a mix that can be difficult to unravel (Abidin, 2021; Cotter, 2019).

As influencers have become so visible, researchers have shown a growing interest in them. Much of this work has examined how influencers influence brand image, people's level of engagement with products, and what makes them persuasive (De Veirman, Hudders, & Nelson, 2019; Hudders & Lu, 2022). More recent studies emphasize that factors such as an influencer's credibility, authenticity, and the type of connection they establish with their followers, especially younger ones, are truly important in determining people's response (Gholil et al., 2025; Lou & Kim, 2019; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). However, taking a more critical view, some researchers argue that limiting their focus to how influencer marketing works risks overlooking the broader social and ethical issues that arise when young people are constantly exposed to the kinds of norms promoted by influencers, especially at a time in life when understanding who they are, where they belong, and their worth is crucial (Marwick, 2021; Nesi et al., 2021; Prinstein et al., 2020).

Growing awareness also indicates that influencers primarily achieve their effect through more subtle means, rather than direct persuasion. Things like habituation to certain ideas or comparison with what they see online slowly shape how young people see themselves and their position in relation to others (Valkenburg, Meier, & Beyens, 2022; George et al., 2021). This relates directly to issues of honesty and transparency. Nowadays, advertising is often embedded in emotionally engaging lifestyle posts and personal stories, making it much more difficult to identify when something is being sold to us and critically analyze it (Boerman & Reijmersdal, 2020; Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2020). For this reason, being unsure of what constitutes advertising has become a normal part of following influencers.

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Although research on influencer culture has grown rapidly, the overall picture remains incomplete, varying greatly depending on the context. Countries with clear advertising regulations, well-developed media education, and monitoring systems have conducted the majority of studies to date (Livingstone et al., 2022). There is much less research on how the phenomenon plays out in countries where digital ethics regulations and related educational efforts are still taking shape. In these contexts, the power gap between platforms, content creators, and young people who view it can become even wider (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Flew, Martin, & Suzor, 2019).

Albania is a good example, where young people spend a significant amount of time online, just like in many other places (Myzeqari, 2023; Shkurti & Shtiza, 2022; Hysi et al., 2025; Veseli & Ruci, 2025), but at the same time, rules on what influencers should do, how advertisements should be labeled, and what young people learn about digital media in schools have not yet been defined or effectively implemented (UNESCO & AMA, 2025; CRCA, 2023; Media Laws in Albania, 2025). This means that influencer content spreads with very little scrutiny, risking exposing young people to increasingly unclear ethical influences. Yet, we lack much research that effectively questions them about their daily experiences (Myzeqari, 2023; Hasanspahić & Begović, 2025).

This article seeks to fill this gap by examining how young Albanians perceive and navigate social media spaces shaped by influencers. Specifically, it focuses on the perception of clearly labeled advertisements, the pressure of what they see, how the phenomenon affects their self-perception, and the small choices they make on a daily basis. Rather than thinking of influence as something that directly induces people to act in a certain way, the study takes a different approach, seeking to consider it as something constructed through everyday interactions, the relationships people form, and the shared understandings that emerge (Couldry, 2012; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

Based on survey data collected from 300 young people aged 16 to 30, the article provides empirically grounded insights from a context that remains underrepresented in the literature, contributing to broader discussions on young people's experiences, digital ethics, power, and belonging in contemporary media settings (Livingstone & Third, 2017; Pitcan, Marwick, & Boyd, 2018).

Literature Review

2.1 The Dynamics of Influence and Digital Power

Influencer content now represents a significant part of today's digital landscape, influencing how information circulates, how values are shared, and how ideas about normality are established online (Abidin, 2021; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Influencers, who are regular social media users, occupy a unique place in these spaces, as they create trends that others notice and promote products or brands. To do this, they often rely on an authentic appearance, which helps them build trust and keep people coming back to see what they post (Duffy & Hund, 2019; Mercier & Abidin, 2025; Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020). Being in this position allows them to convert the attention people pay them into money and social prestige, further strengthening their role as people whose opinions matter when it comes to deciding what is acceptable, what is worth desiring, or what to aim for online (Cotter, 2019; Bishop, 2021).

Analyzing research findings on the type of influence, it appears that influencers usually avoid directly telling people what to do or applying obvious pressure. The feeling of knowing someone, a sense of emotional connection, and the simple act of revisiting their posts over and over again—posts that showcase a lifestyle that seems worth living—all play a major role (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Sokolova & Perez, 2021). This way of thinking about influence connects to broader discussions of "soft power" in digital spaces, where the idea is that persuasion occurs through everyday conversations and interactions, not because someone in a position of authority dictates it (Coudry, 2012; Flew, Martin, & Suzor, 2019). For this reason, influence can seem natural, like something one chooses personally, although it is still tied to commercial interests and the way platforms are structured to encourage certain types of behavior (Abidin, 2021).

From a more critical perspective, it is difficult to discuss influencer culture without also considering the economic aspect of the platforms themselves. These platforms rely on visibility, engagement, and algorithms that promote certain content, which are the main factors where their value derives (Keskin, 2018; Gillespie, 2018). Systems that suggest content to watch next often prioritize content that aligns with prevailing norms about appearance and behavior, perpetuating stereotypes of success, beauty, and a fulfilling life, while simultaneously challenging alternative approaches (Bishop, 2021; Cotter, 2019). In this context, influence isn't so much about who's in control but rather the choices made in designing the platform, how content is categorized, and the rationale behind how money is made, all of which determine what users end up watching most often (Beer, 2019; Zuboff, 2023).

Recent analyses suggest that these arrangements contribute to persistent power imbalances between platforms, content creators, and audiences, especially among

young users for whom engaging with influencer content is an integral part of daily social interaction (Bucher, 2018; Livingstone et al., 2022). Influence in these spaces thus accumulates over time, shaping ideas about what is normal, acceptable, or achievable through repeated exposure rather than isolated messages or events (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Valkenburg, Meier, & Beyens, 2022).

2.2 Transparency, Authenticity, and Ethical Boundaries

When discussing influencer culture today, one of the most recurring themes is transparency, particularly when it comes to sponsored posts, which allow viewers to identify when something is an advertisement and clearly communicate the commercial aspect (Boerman & van Reijmersdal, 2020; Evans & Wojdyski, 2020). A growing body of research reveals that many users struggle to distinguish advertising when it incorporates an influencer's personal narrative. This fact is especially true when promotional elements are embedded in stories of everyday life or posts that showcase a lifestyle people might desire for themselves (Evans et al., 2017; Amazeen & Wojdyski, 2019). When people cannot distinguish between advertisements and non-ads, it becomes more difficult for them to make decisions. This raises broader questions about whether people can truly behave as free consumers online and who is responsible for ensuring clarity (Campbell & Grimm, 2019; Dhondt et al., 2025).

Some recent studies suggest that having rules about disclosure is not enough to address these concerns. The effectiveness of a disclosure depends on factors such as ease of viewing, when it appears, and how it fits into the rest of the content a user is scrolling through (Boerman, van Reijmersdal, & Neijens, 2012; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2020). On platforms where algorithms decide what to display next, disclosures can be small and simple to ignore, or they can get lost among emotionally engaging posts. When this happens, they fail to make people think (Amazeen, 2025; Boerman, Willemsen, & Van Der Aa, 2017). Therefore, even when influencers and platforms technically follow the rules, the transparency perceived by users can vary greatly.

An influencer's perceived authenticity is also crucial, as it affects how their audience views and is influenced by their content. This sense of authenticity often acts as a sort of filter between realizing that something is sponsored and actually being influenced by it (Audrezet, de Kerviler, & Moulard, 2020; Sokolova & Kefi, 2020). Influencers who appear true to themselves, consistent in their postings, and credible can maintain their followers' trust even when they are sincere about collaborating with a brand (Casaló, Flavián, & Ibáñez-Sánchez, 2021; Lou, Tan, & Chen, 2019). This phenomenon leads to a strange situation where knowing something is an advertisement doesn't necessarily make it less convincing, especially when persuasion is tied to feeling emotionally connected to someone and feeling as if one knows them personally.

At the same time, more recent research points to a shift in the types of ethical issues that accompany influencer culture. It seems that what makes users vulnerable is not

so much being directly deceived but rather the fact that commercial influence has become a normal and expected part of spaces that actually revolve around emotional connection and a sense of belonging (Abidin, 2021; Duffy & Sawey, 2022). As interaction with influencers becomes just another part of everyday media use, the commercial aspect of things begins to be perceived as a normal part of social life, not as something that comes from outside and creeps in (Cotter, 2019; Bishop, 2021). Slowly, such behavior makes the boundaries harder to distinguish. It becomes increasingly difficult for users to distinguish between someone genuinely expressing themselves, the kind of recognition one gets from friends, and content that actually serves primarily to sell something.

2.3 Social Comparison, Self-Perception, and Implied Pressure

One way to think about how people judge themselves relative to others is through social comparison theory, a useful tool for thinking, especially now that much of this comparison occurs in digital spaces filled with images and visual cues (Festinger, 1954; Valkenburg, Meier, & Beyens, 2022). Confronting a constant stream of carefully curated images on social media - of friends, people we follow, influencers - can make individuals feel more pressured when thinking about their appearance, how they live, or how they feel internally (Appel, Gerlach, & Crusius, 2016; Burnell et al., 2024).

Upon closer inspection, researchers find a consistent link between time spent on influencer content and what's called upward social comparison. Comparing oneself to those who appear better off, more attractive, or more successful often leads to feelings of lower well-being and inadequacy, particularly among adolescents and young adults (Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020; Schmuck, 2019; Goldberg, 2023). These effects seem most evident on platforms where image is the focus, places where certain ideas about appearance, lifestyle, and success are constantly promoted and made to appear normal (Fardouly & Holland, 2018; Van Der Wal et al., 2022).

Influencers play a particular role in this, as they showcase versions of themselves that seem special and somehow attainable at the same time. This mix can further intensify the pressure to conform to what is expected, how to look, how to be (Abidin, 2021; Cotter, 2019). Unlike old-school celebrities who seem distant, influencers seem accessible, familiar, and often give the impression of being people you might actually know. This makes it easier to identify with them, making comparisons harder when thinking about your own life (Sokolova & Kefi, 2020; Choi et al., 2021; Cocker, 2021). Therefore, the pressure in this case doesn't usually come from someone directly telling you what to do but builds slowly, simply by seeing these things repeatedly.

Recent studies also show that this isn't the same for everyone. The level of pressure a person feels and how they judge themselves depend on factors such as gender and cultural background (Nesi et al., 2021; Manago et al., 2023; Santer et al., 2023). For young women, comparisons often revolve around appearance and body image, while

for young men, it's more about expectations related to success, status, and possessions (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Boutté et al., 2022). These patterns suggest that some ways of being are valued more than others, creating a gap between those who can be seen and those who cannot.

More broadly, the type of social comparison that occurs in influencer culture can lead to a conditional sense of belonging. Feeling accepted can begin to depend on how well one conforms to the norms that dominate online (Marwick, 2021; Livingstone & Sylwander, 2025). In this type of context, how one sees oneself is increasingly shaped by connections with others, feedback received, and constant exposure to platform-based metrics for defining what counts as success or value (Bucher, 2018; Valkenburg & Peter, 2013).

2.4 Youth, Digital Belonging, and Structural Vulnerability

People often discuss adolescence and young adulthood as a crucial time for figuring out who they are and where they belong. Nowadays, much of this exploration happens on social media and other digital spaces (Erikson, 1968; Livingstone, 2024). These platforms offer young people new ways to stay connected, to express themselves creatively, and to participate in social or community life. However, users often find themselves under constant judgment and comparison, as the number of likes, comments, and followers they receive are always visible to everyone (Nesi et al., 2021; Pouwel et al., 2021).

What some recent studies highlight is that a sense of belonging online is often not just something one possesses. Consequences tend to depend on visible signals of approval from others - shares, followers, engagement - and on conforming to what is considered the right way to appear or act (Bucher, 2018; Marwick, 2021). Platforms that use algorithms to decide what to show people end up promoting certain identities, lifestyles, and ways of presenting themselves. In online communities, this determines who garners attention and who fades into the background (Keskin, 2018; Bishop, 2021). Thus, feeling part of a group often has more to do with conforming to what is already considered normal than with being different or bringing something new (Couldry & Mejias, 2019).

In places where there is little media education or clear rules on the subject, these conditions can make young users more vulnerable, both ethically and socially (Livingstone et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). When young people lack a critical and rigorous approach to what they see, they may have a harder time identifying when something is truly an advertisement, understanding how algorithms filter what appears, or noticing the subtle pressures inherent in influencer content (Gagrčín et al., 2024; Stadniczeńko, 2022). Seen from this perspective, vulnerability is less about the weakness of individuals than it is about how digital spaces are structured and managed and how people are expected to use them.

Some new approaches suggest that we shouldn't treat digital vulnerability as something specific to certain age groups but rather might be better understood as something many people share, something that accumulates over time in the current media environment (Odgers & Jensen, 2020; Livingstone & Third, 2017). In spaces shaped by influencer culture, this type of vulnerability arises from being constantly exposed to narrow ideas of what is good or right and from interactions that seem personal but are also tied to commercial goals. Over time, this influences how young people think about their own ability to make choices, how they look for a place to belong, and how they assess their own worth (Abidin, 2021; Valkenburg, 2022). Viewing vulnerability in this way shifts the focus to broader questions of power, platform management, and social inequality, rather than placing the burden on individual users.

Methodology

This study utilizes a quantitative methodology to investigate the engagement of Albanian youth with social media content produced by influencers, building upon the reviewed literature. The analysis focuses on how participants perceive ethical transparency, experience social pressure, evaluate their self-image, and make everyday decisions in relation to influencer content. Rather than examining these dimensions in isolation, the study considers them together, acknowledging that they interact in shaping how digital influence is understood and experienced in daily life. This approach makes it possible to explore how influencer culture relates to feelings of belonging, vulnerability, and personal agency among young users.

Data were collected through an online questionnaire completed by 300 young people aged 16 to 30 living in Albania. Participants were recruited via social media platforms, reflecting the digital settings at the center of the study. All respondents reported regular use of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube and confirmed that they followed at least one influencer. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

The questionnaire included items measuring the frequency of exposure to influencer content, perceptions of ethical transparency (such as the clarity of sponsorship disclosures), perceived social pressure, effects on self-perception, and perceived influence on decision-making. Responses were recorded using five-point Likert scales. The survey instrument was developed with reference to existing research on influencer culture, social comparison, and digital ethics and was adapted to ensure that the questions were clear and relevant to the Albanian context. Reliability analysis showed very high internal consistency across the main scales (Cronbach's alpha = 0.987).

Data analysis combined descriptive statistics with inferential methods. Pearson correlation analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to explore

relationships between levels of exposure, ethical perceptions, social pressure, and self-perception across age groups (Field, 2024). The analysis did not aim to establish direct causal effects but instead sought to identify patterns in how young people interpret and respond to influencer-related content.

Ethical principles guided all stages of the research process. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were analyzed in aggregated form to protect participants' confidentiality and privacy.

Results

This section presents the study's main empirical findings, combining reliability analyses, correlational statistics, and group comparisons to examine the influence patterns of influencer-mediated digital content. To ensure greater transparency and analytical clarity, we have chosen to present the results concisely, with key statistical indicators integrated directly into the text.

4.1 Reliability of Measurements

All multi-item scales used in the analysis demonstrated high internal consistency. As shown in Table 1, Cronbach's alpha coefficients exceeded commonly accepted reliability thresholds for all key constructs, indicating that the measurement instrument was robust and suitable for further statistical analysis.

Table 1. Reliability, correlations, and group differences across key variables

Variable	Cronbach's α	Mean (SD)	Pearson r (Exposure)	F (ANOVA)	Partial η^2
<i>Ethical transparency</i>	0.987	2.34 (0.41)	0.28**	112.45***	0.042
<i>Perceived social pressure</i>	0.91	3.01 (0.68)	0.46***	130.26***	0.068
<i>Self-perception</i>	0.88	2.97 (0.82)	-0.39***	314.62***	0.051
<i>Decision-making</i>	0.84	2.41 (0.66)	0.21*	92.49***	0.016

Notes: Exposure refers to the frequency of engagement with influencer-mediated content.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

4.2 Correlational Models

Correlation analysis reveals differential relationships between exposure to influencer-mediated content and the outcome variables examined. As shown in Table 1, exposure shows a moderate positive association with perceived social pressure ($r \approx 0.46$, $p < 0.001$) and ethical ambiguity ($r \approx 0.28$, $p < 0.01$). These results suggest that greater engagement with influencer content is associated with greater sensitivity to normative expectations and uncertainty regarding ethical transparency.

In contrast, the correlation between exposure and direct outcomes in the decision-making process is relatively weak ($r \approx 0.21$, $p < 0.05$). This pattern indicates that, although influencer content is widely disseminated, its influence on consumers' explicit actions is limited. Stronger associations emerge, however, with respect to perceptual and evaluative dimensions, particularly those related to self-perception.

Specifically, perceived social pressure shows a negative correlation with self-perception ($r \approx -0.39$, $p < 0.001$), suggesting that greater exposure to influencer-mediated norms is associated with less positive self-evaluations. This relationship highlights the role of comparative and normative processes in shaping individual experiences in digital environments.

Summary of Empirical Findings

Taken together, the results of this study point to three key empirical conclusions that help clarify how influence operates in contemporary digital contexts. First, the consistently high reliability scores across the measurement scales indicate that the data are internally coherent and provide a solid basis for further interpretation. More importantly, the findings show that frequent exposure to influencer content does not mainly translate into immediate or direct decision-making. Instead, its effects are more closely linked to changes in how users experience and interpret their social and ethical surroundings, with stronger associations observed in relation to ethical uncertainty, perceived social pressure, and shifts in self-perception.

Although statistically significant differences were identified between groups, these differences were marked by small to moderate effect sizes. This pattern is important because it suggests that influencer influence does not operate through sudden or dramatic changes in behavior. Rather, it develops gradually through repeated exposure that accumulates over time. In this sense, the findings support an understanding of influencer culture not as a form of overt persuasion, but as a more subtle and normalized mode of influence. Within such settings, power is exercised less by directing specific actions and more by shaping how people come to understand social norms and assess their own lives in relation to others in digital spaces.

Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

The findings of this study add to existing research that questions simple, linear explanations of influencer impact. Rather than pointing to strong and immediate effects on consumer decisions, the results suggest that influencer content plays a more significant role in shaping how young people interpret social norms and evaluate themselves. Influence, in this sense, appears to operate through everyday processes such as social comparison, uncertainty about commercial intent, and gradually internalized expectations, rather than through direct persuasion.

The weak relationship between exposure to influencer content and purchasing behavior reinforces this view. Influence does not resemble a straightforward stimulus–response mechanism. Instead, the stronger links observed between exposure, perceived social pressure, and self-perception point to a quieter form of power. Influencer culture seems to affect the social and psychological contexts in which young people assess their own lives and social position, contributing to the normalization of particular ideals related to appearance, lifestyle, and success. This interpretation is consistent with critical accounts that view digital platforms as environments where power is exercised through repeated visibility and the reinforcement of norms, rather than through explicit forms of control.

Ethical uncertainty emerged as a recurring aspect of influencer content across different levels of exposure. The absence of clear differences in ethical perceptions suggests that ambiguity around sponsorship and commercial intent has become part of routine digital experience. From a justice-oriented perspective, this is significant, as it raises concerns about young people's ability to participate in digital spaces with full awareness and agency. When advertising is woven into personal and relatable narratives, users may engage with content without clearly recognizing the commercial structures shaping what they see.

The association between perceived social pressure and self-perception also underlines the importance of belonging as an analytical lens. Influencer culture offers symbolic forms of inclusion by presenting identities that seem attractive and within reach. At the same time, these representations can be exclusionary, as they promote standards that are difficult for many young people to attain. In this context, belonging becomes conditional, tied to conformity with dominant digital norms rather than to meaningful participation or diversity of experience.

Finally, the presence of small to moderate effect sizes is important, as it indicates that influencer influence is not deterministic. Young people are not passive recipients, nor are their experiences shaped in uniform ways. Instead, influence develops gradually through repeated exposure to normative content, affecting how individuals think and feel rather than directly dictating their actions. This perspective shifts attention away

from individual vulnerability and toward the broader social and platform conditions that shape everyday digital interactions.

5.2 Implications for Policy, Practice, and Research

The findings of this study point to several implications for both policy and practice. First, they suggest that approaches focused solely on advertising disclosure are too limited to address the ethical challenges associated with influencer culture. While transparency remains important, ethical responsibility also involves paying attention to how repeated exposure to certain norms and comparisons affects young people's self-perception and sense of belonging. Media literacy efforts should therefore go beyond teaching users how to recognize sponsored content and should also encourage reflection on how social media shapes expectations, comparisons, and everyday judgments about the self.

Second, the results draw attention to the role of platforms themselves. Because algorithmic systems determine which content becomes visible and widely circulated, platforms are actively involved in shaping whose voices are amplified and whose remain less visible. Reducing ethical vulnerability in digital spaces therefore requires closer scrutiny of platform design choices, content moderation practices, and the economic models that support influencer-driven content, rather than placing responsibility solely on individual users.

Finally, this study contributes to current academic discussions by offering empirical insights from a context that is still rarely examined in existing research. Future studies could build on these findings by using longitudinal or mixed-method approaches to better understand how influencer-related norms change over time and how young people respond to them in different ways. Paying closer attention to gendered experiences and to intersectional forms of belonging would further deepen understanding of how digital influence is experienced across diverse social groups.

5.3 Conclusions

This article explored how young people experience and make sense of influencer culture on social media, with particular attention to ethical perceptions, social pressure, self-perception, and everyday decision-making. The findings suggest that influence rarely works through clear or immediate behavioral effects. Instead, it develops through more gradual processes that shape shared expectations, social norms, and the ways young people evaluate themselves over time. Looking at these indirect dynamics helps clarify how digital power operates in subtle and often normalized ways within everyday media use.

By drawing attention to belonging and ethical uncertainty, the study highlights the need to view social media not only as a space for communication or marketing, but as a social environment that has real consequences for youth agency and experiences of

inclusion and exclusion. Responding to these challenges requires combined efforts across research, policy, education, and platform governance. Only through such coordinated approaches can digital spaces move toward supporting more inclusive forms of participation, rather than reproducing vulnerability and marginalization.

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A Profession Without Gender": Experiences Of Male Social Workers In The Municipality Of Shkodër

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Abstract

Since its institutional introduction in Albania in the early 1990s, the social work profession has been characterized by a marked gender imbalance, with men remaining substantially underrepresented relative to women both in higher education programs and across the social services labor market. This persistent disparity constitutes the point of departure for the present qualitative inquiry, which seeks to examine the lived professional experiences of male social workers and to interrogate the extent to which gender membership shapes occupational identity and career progression within the field. The study further aims to critically illuminate the nature and manifestations of gender-based prejudice as encountered and narrated by male practitioners themselves. Data were generated through ten purposively sampled semi-structured interviews conducted with male social workers employed within public and private social service institutions in the Municipality of Shkodër. Thematic analysis of the resulting corpus yielded three principal domains of analytical significance: the structural and interpersonal challenges inherent to social work practice, the relational dynamics governing client engagement, and the pervasive influence of gendered role expectations on professional conduct. The findings indicate that normative gender roles constitute a structuring force in the formation of professional expectations among male social workers, with substantive implications for both individual practice and the broader development of the profession.

Keywords: *gender bias, social work, professional expectations*

1. Literature Review

"Defining Social Work as a feminine profession is considered an attempt to conceal sexism and masculine prejudices." — McPhail (2004)

Social Work is a profession statistically dominated by women, a significant portion of whose contribution to society is linked to issues of gender equality.

In pursuit of this goal, professional efforts have been concentrated on the development of educational curricula and interventions in Social Work practice aimed at identifying needs and empowering women's rights within society. Such an approach was particularly prominent until the mid-1990s, when interest began to emerge among professionals in the field regarding the role of men in this profession. Although limited in number, partly due to feminist influences, studies on the role of men in Social Work are considered highly valuable, given that the marginalization of this group produces new forms of social inequality (Cree & Cavanagh, 2002; Gillingham, 2006; Baum, 2016).

Respect for diversity is considered one of the most distinctive values of Social Work, and the commitment to protecting and promoting it through the empowerment of human rights has been and remains a central concern. It is particularly noteworthy that, despite being fewer in number relative to women, male social workers are typically found in leadership positions (Noble, 2011).

This landscape has drawn scholarly attention to the gender stereotypes that prevail within this profession. Specifically, the low presence of men in Social Work may be interpreted as a social loss in terms of fostering "caring masculinity", which encompasses sensitivity, care, and commitment to equal relationships. Furthermore, a positive practice model for men in Social Work could create more realistic opportunities for greater male participation and contribution to the profession in the future, thereby advancing gender equality across society more broadly (Pease, 2011).

Efforts to understand more deeply the gender imbalance in Social Work can be found in several sociological theories and concepts. With reference to Sandra Bem's gender schema theory, society tends to preserve and reproduce stereotypes. Indeed, the overcoming of gender stereotypes is not straightforward — nor, it appears, does the profession of Social Work constitute an exception. Although possibilities for change exist, as Pierre Bourdieu emphasizes through the concept of habitus (the social shaping of behavior), societal influence shapes individuals' behaviors and actions, demonstrating how society can evolve through new experiences (Dalla Chiara & Faella, 2018). The contribution that Social Work can make — through reflection beyond men's hitherto stereotyped gender role in the profession — may thus influence meaningful social change regarding gender.

Regarding the impact that greater male engagement in the Social Work profession might bring about in terms of social change, studies in the field present highly interesting findings. Researchers do not dismiss the enthusiasm surrounding the inclusion of more men in the profession; however, the fact that certain sectors of social services remain heavily influenced by gender stereotypes cannot be overlooked

(Pantalone, Soregotti & Zanon, 2021). In particular, the involvement of men in child protection services — primarily a female-dominated domain — is considered unusual and inappropriate. According to a Canadian study, male workers in this service type face challenges such as building relationships with female clients and negative perceptions regarding their professional competence; nevertheless, they simultaneously work to challenge stereotypes and promote gender equality (Dionisi & An, 2014). As emphasized in Gillingham (2006), increased engagement by male social workers may be highly beneficial in work with children, as it can offer them a positive reference model free from gender stereotypes. Meanwhile, a considerable body of research agrees that, since social problems differ according to gender and are reflected in social services, the importance of gender balance in social services — in order to meet clients' needs — must be recognized, and gender diversity should be regarded as an opportunity to enrich the profession (Abukar & Wedin, 2016; Khunou, Pillay & Nethononda, 2012; Dalla Chiara & Faella, 2018).

Precisely in light of the rapid development of the social sector in recent years in Albania, as well as the consolidation of the legal basis for the Social Work profession and the establishment of the Order of Social Workers, it is natural that interest in studies addressing specific professional issues should intensify. There is currently a considerable need for research conducted at the local level that can reflect the specific reality of the country, and whose recommendations may serve as catalysts for change and development in Social Work (Dhembo, Akesson & Cheyne-Hazineh, 2019).

The formalization of the Social Worker profession in Albania has also highlighted the fact that it is practiced predominantly by women. More specifically, data provided by the coordinator of Shkodër Region indicate that only six licensed male social workers are registered with the Order of Social Workers — a finding that generates considerable interest in understanding what is occurring within the Social Work profession, particularly given that this situation is present in the Municipality of Shkodër, where the presence of social institutions is substantial and diverse in terms of the types of social services offered (Topalli, 2020).

2. Research Methodology

To conduct this study on the experiences of male social workers in the Municipality of Shkodër, the authors employed a qualitative approach and the instrument of the semi-structured interview. The interview instrument was constructed based on the study's aim and research questions, which seek to deepen understanding of the experience of being a Social Worker in a profession dominated by women. The two research questions of this paper focus on issues of gender stereotypes and their influence on professional practice: What are the professional experiences of male Social Workers? To what extent do they perceive gender identity as influencing the practice of Social Work?

The sample selected for this study was purposive; male Social Workers were chosen who were not necessarily required to hold a license. The study's participants comprise ten male Social Workers practicing their role in the Municipality of Shkodër, within both public and private institutions.

More specifically, the age range of the sample extends from 28 to 50 years. Two participants work in the private sector, two hold administrative (managerial) positions, and the remainder work as social workers in the public social services sector. Each participant has a minimum of two years' professional experience and a maximum of ten years in the role of Social Worker.

The interviews were conducted during February 2025, using the asynchronous email interview format (Mathews & Ross, 2010, pp. 302–304). The duration of interview completion was planned not to exceed 30 to 40 minutes.

The data obtained were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis, which, according to Grbich (2010), involves the division, categorization, and interpretation of data with the aim of identifying similarities, differences, and interconnections among themes, thereby achieving a more thorough understanding of the object of study.

3. Data Analysis and Discussion

Grounded in the specific context of Albania, the male Social Workers of the Municipality of Shkodër were able, through this study, to share several aspects they identify as challenging within the profession. They also highlighted several characteristics related to their gender role and its influence on client relationships and reflected in depth on the implications of being male in a female-dominated profession. Based on the qualitative analysis, three principal thematic domains were identified, expressed through nineteen codes.

Domain	Codes
Challenges in the Social Field	a. Need for support services b. Institutional bureaucracy c. Lack of infrastructure / human / financial resources d. Prejudice e. Burnout f. Emotional management

Domain	Codes
	g. Severe cases
Client Relationships	h. Sensitivity to injustice i. Empathy j. Positive impact on the lives of others k. Integration of families in need l. Building relationships with the community
Gender Roles in Social Work	m. Gender stereotypes n. Gender-based stigmatization o. Positive discrimination (as a challenge to professional balance) p. Shifts in traditional perceptions q. Gender diversity r. Encouragement of men by the professional community s. Role of the media (gender awareness)

3.1 Challenges in the Social Field

Based on interview data, it is evident that social workers encounter a diverse range of social problems, the resolution of which requires a highly integrated approach and a high level of inter-professional collaboration.

"This experience has taught me to be more sensitive, to listen to others without prejudice, to offer practical help, and to collaborate with other professionals in order to contribute to improvements in wellbeing." — **Social Worker 6**

The contribution that social workers make in bringing about desired social change is identified by the interviewees as one of the most important sources of motivation in the exercise of this profession, although the achievement of positive outcomes is far

from straightforward, given institutional obstacles — such as a lack of human resources — and personal challenges.

"I have encountered many challenges, ranging from professional dilemmas to the bureaucracies of various institutions, frustration whenever I could not find the right solution, and distress each time I assisted with a traumatic account. But all of these form part of self-knowledge, professional knowledge, and an opportunity to take a step forward." — **Social Worker 1**

"When you frequently face stories of pain and injustice that demand great sensitivity and sustained commitment, this can lead to emotional exhaustion and burnout — particularly in the absence of institutional support, or when cases are numerous and complex. Emotional management and maintaining a balance between professional and personal life becomes essential to preserving both quality of work and personal wellbeing." — **Social Worker 9**

Nevertheless, notwithstanding these challenges, the overriding aim of every Social Worker is to make a continuous contribution to the enhancement of social wellbeing through support for the individual.

3.2 Client Relationships

The establishment of a positive working relationship with the client is likewise considered one of the most meaningful achievements in this profession. To accomplish this, it is necessary to possess certain essential competencies that every Social Worker must develop — including empathy and active listening — which are foundational to understanding and providing appropriate assistance in response to the difficulties a client or community is experiencing.

"The desire to help others, an interest in social justice, sensitivity, and the ability to listen guide me in this profession." — **Social Worker 8**

"The diversity of the fields of social work fosters sensitivity, deep human understanding, and consequently, work with the community and the building of client relationships." — **Social Worker 10**

According to Pease (2011), the socially critical dimension lies in the way in which care and emotion have traditionally been associated with femininity, thereby excluding men from these roles. This gender distinction influences not only the perception of the social work profession but also contributes to the absence of men from this field and to the avoidance of their emotional engagement.

Meanwhile, the Social Workers participating in the study express the view that help, empathy, and dedication are not gendered — yet they are perceived as such as a consequence of gender stereotypes.

3.3 Gender Roles in the Social Work Profession

The influence of gender stereotypes — which do not associate men with helping roles or professions — has also affected the Social Workers interviewed. With reference to their experience, they consider the presence of men in this profession to be an element that enhances the quality of and access to social services, rendering them more responsive and inclusive about clients' needs. In their view, male Social Workers serve as the most meaningful evidence that gender stereotypes are misguided constructs.

"Helping, empathy, and dedication have no gender." — **Social Worker 2**

"Male Social Workers contribute to the dismantling of gender stereotypes, enrich the professional approach, and are especially valuable in addressing issues of gender-based violence." — **Social Worker 5**

"I believe that the low presence of men is not simply a matter specific to Social Work, as this low presence is observed in other fields of education as well." — **Social Worker 8**

"I believe that a male presence brings a positive perspective to the profession, particularly when working with young men or male figures in patriarchal families who need a different role model." — **Social Worker 4**

"Gender has often become a basis for positive discrimination. I am also aware of cases in which, because of gender stigma in this profession, many young men have become more passive or withdrawn. Personally, however, I have never felt a sense of inadequacy; I have always been very clear about my work." — **Social Worker 3**

Indeed, as noted by Bates and Thompson (2002, cited in Abukar & Wedin, 2016), male Social Workers are not always able to promote positive masculine models within society.

There is also criticism directed at the positive discrimination applied to men in this profession, which is opening pathways for their placement in leadership positions — whereas, it is argued, they should instead be more numerous in frontline, community-based services (Khunou, Pillay & Nethononda, 2012).

"I foresee that, as awareness of gender equality and the need for balanced representation in the social services field grows, increasingly more men will feel encouraged to pursue this profession. However, to achieve this it is necessary for Universities and training programs to promote Social Work as a profession appropriate for both genders. The media and institutions should assist in changing the narrative regarding gender roles, and the professional community itself should create welcoming and supportive spaces for male social workers." — **Social Worker 7**

A clear understanding of what constitutes "good practice" for men in Social Work must be established. Given that gender inequalities persist in our society, care must

be taken to ensure that the growth in the presence of men in Social Work does not result in the transfer of this reality into the profession itself (Pease, 2011).

As the interviewees themselves emphasize, gender roles exert an influence on the practice of the Social Work profession and male social workers experience their effects. Notwithstanding all that has been stated, this has not prevented male social workers from demonstrating their finest competencies in Social Work and from contributing to the construction of new gender realities. Within this profession, they take pride in the fact that they bring and promote diversity as a feature conducive to a more equitable society.

4. Conclusions

Male social workers report that they place considerable importance on the expression of empathy as a fundamental characteristic in the exercise of their professional role.

They affirm that, because of gender roles, they are frequently compelled to adopt a passive stance in certain situations, given that gender stereotypes have been highly dominant.

Positive discrimination is another experience reported by male social workers, whose effect is described as a contribution to diversity — a value of considerable significance in the profession.

The fact that male Social Workers are aware of gender roles, stereotypes, and their impact on the profession encourages them to understand and analyze their clients' social reality with greater quality and depth, thereby better serving social wellbeing.

To address these challenges, it is necessary to develop policies and strategies that promote gender equality in the social work profession, including mentoring programs, training, and awareness-raising campaigns.

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When She Is Confident, “She Is a Leader”; When She Is Helpful, “She Should Become One:” The Effects of Sex and Gender Stereotypes on Leadership Feedback

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Abstract

This research examines how sex and gender stereotypes shape the content of leadership feedback in open-ended peer appraisals, coded as either descriptive affirmations, which recognize leadership as a current, demonstrated quality, and developmental-directive recommendations, which encourage the recipient to display greater leadership in the future. As past research has found a link between males, the masculine stereotype and leadership, we find that being male and masculine is linked with descriptive feedback affirming existing leadership. Nevertheless, as Inmaculada Macias Alonso the increasing relevance of femininity in modern organizations has led to the formulation of the “female leadership advantage,” we find that the female stereotype is linked to developmental-directive feedback, suggesting potential for leadership, while at the same time implicitly framing it as not yet fully realized. We discuss how these results contribute to our understanding how subtle feedback language can reproduce or reconfigure gendered leadership expectations, shedding light on one mechanism behind the persistent gender–leadership gap.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes; sex differences; performance appraisal; feedback; leadership.

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Introduction

Despite decades of governmental and organizational initiatives, the underrepresentation of women in top management positions remains: Women’s chances to rise to positions of leadership are still lower than of those of men (World Economic Forum, 2025) and although the number of women in executive roles has increased – women make 29% of C-suite positions in 2025 compared to just 17% in 2015 – women continue to be underrepresented across the leadership pipeline (Krivkovich et al., 2024). Furthermore, far from being circumscribed to particular

countries, the leadership gender gap is a global phenomenon (Goryunova & Madsen, 2024), as across cultures, men are more likely than women to be associated with the most valued traits in that culture (Cuddy et al., 2015). In this regard, the leadership gap has been explained in terms of both the "think manager, think male" phenomenon (Schein, 1973, 2001), as well as in terms of the link between the male stereotype and leadership (Powell & Butterfield, 1979). Thus, as both sex (being male) and gender (being male stereotyped as having "masculine" attributes) are linked to leadership, women face a disadvantage that affects their emergence, development, and evaluation as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Heilman, 2001; Koenig et al., 2011; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024; Tremmel & Wahl, 2023).

At the same time, the last few decades have witnessed an increased feminization of management (Fondas, 1997) that has narrowed the gap between the prototypes of leaders and the female stereotype (Badura et al., 2018; Feenstra et al., 2023; Powell et al., 2021). In a context characterized by rapidly changing environments and jobs, management functions increasingly require behaviors more closely aligned with the female stereotype, such as the provision of care, coaching, support, and nurturance to employees (Newstead et al., 2021; Parlamis & Monnot, 2019; Rosener, 1990). Thus, the female stereotype has been increasingly considered to be a beneficial trait for leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Feenstra et al., 2023) and fundamental for certain leadership styles, such as transformational leadership (Hsu et al., 2022; Vinkenburt et al., 2011) and servant leadership (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). So much so, that research has even formulated a "female leadership advantage," according to which women are considered to have the right combination of skills that can lead to effective performance as leaders (Eagly, 2007). Finally, a third line of work suggests that neither masculine nor feminine attributes alone may be sufficient; instead, effective leadership may increasingly rely on an androgynous blend of both agentic and communal qualities (Blake-Beard et al., 2020; Powell et al., 2021). This shift implies that the relative value of masculine and feminine traits may depend on how they are combined and expressed.

In order to understand how these different perspectives coexist, this research focuses on how sex and gender stereotypes shape the content of leadership appraisals in open-ended feedback. Past research has shown that feedback is particularly important for leadership development (Day & Thornton, 2018; DeRue & Wellman, 2009), as it fosters leaders' self-awareness and competency generation (Day, Fleenor, Atwater, Sturm, & McKee, 2014). Whether top-down, upward, peer, or 360, feedback affects managers skills and leadership performance (Crans et al., 2022; Walker & Smither, 1999). However, its qualitative content remains largely unexplored (Speer, 2018). This study examines feedback content through two types of leadership appraisals inductively identified in qualitative analyses of open-ended comments from MBA leadership evaluations: descriptive affirmations and developmental-directive recommendations. Specifically, it is hypothesized that sex and gender

stereotypes shape the delivery of these two feedback types, potentially shaping the leadership self-perception of recipients (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008). While descriptive feedback reinforces current competence by affirming that leadership is already demonstrated effectively (e.g., “you *are* a leader”), developmental-directive feedback convey that leadership behaviors could or should be enacted more actively in the future (e.g., “you *should* take on more leadership roles”). These developmental-directive comments may, on one hand, convey encouragement and signal confidence in the recipient’s growth potential; yet, on the other hand, they can also implicitly communicate deficiency or patronizing assumptions about capability (Gervais & Vescio, 2012). This duality is central to understanding how ostensibly supportive feedback may still reproduce subtle bias in leadership evaluations, particularly when the developmental intent is intertwined with gendered expectations about who is seen as a “natural” leader. To isolate these dynamics, the present study focuses on peer-level feedback within teams, an approach that minimizes hierarchical power effects associated with position, title, or authority that often shape feedback provision and evaluation in organizational contexts (Bear, Cushenbery, London, & Sherman, 2017).

This study contributes to research on gender and leadership in several ways. First, it advances understanding of how sex and gender stereotypes may shape in the content of leadership feedback, examining how men and women are differentially described or encouraged as leaders. By distinguishing between descriptive affirmations (feedback recognizing current leadership) and developmental-directive recommendations (feedback urging greater leadership enactment), the study illuminates subtle linguistic mechanisms through which gendered expectations persist within leadership evaluations. These distinctions reveal how men continue to be more readily *recognized* as leaders, while women are more often *encouraged to become* leaders, highlighting how feedback itself may contribute to differential leadership recognition. This extends prior work on leadership development (Day et al., 2014; Hannah et al., 2008) and helps explain how subtle feedback differences may influence future leadership trajectories.

Second, the study addresses the longstanding call to differentiate biological sex from perceived gender attributes in leadership research (Kent & Moss, 1994; Vecchio, 2002). Recognizing that sex and perceived gender attributes do not always align (Bem, 1974, 1975), this research examines their effects separately and jointly. Rather than relying on self-reported gender identity (Schaumberg & Flynn, 2016), the study operationalizes gender stereotypes as perceived by others, using team-based quantitative feedback ratings. This approach captures how gendered perceptions actually work within leadership appraisal processes.

The following sections present theoretical support for the proposed hypotheses regarding the effects of sex and gender stereotypes on the content of leadership

feedback. The methodology was based on a mixed-methods design to collect data, test the predictions, and present results. Finally, the conclusion sums up the findings, limitations of the study, and provide avenues for future research.

Theory And Hypotheses

Feedback, leadership, and sex differences

Feedback, central to organizational and leadership developmental processes (Groves, 2007), refers to "valuable information that enables the employees to learn, develop, and make improvements on the job" (Zhou, 2003; p. 415). It is a helpful resource for individuals throughout their tenure in organizations, as it allows them, not just the opportunity to improve performance (Smither et al., 2005), but also provides important information to develop their leadership identity (Day et al., 2014). Nevertheless, even though organizational feedback tends to include both quantitative ratings and qualitative comments, most research has traditionally focused on the examination of ratings and neglected the impact of qualitative content (Speer, 2018). Therefore, while research has established that the quantitative evaluation of leaders is relevant to leadership development (Atwater, Roush, & Fischthal, 1995; DeRue & Wellman, 2009; Hazucha, Hezlett, & Schneider, 1993), the qualitative content of feedback in terms of leadership assessment remains largely unexplored. Furthermore, as sex and gender differences have been repeatedly found in terms of leadership evaluation (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Heilman & Okimoto, 2007), feedback comments offer an additional arena where sex and gender stereotype effects on leadership assessments should be examined (Bear et al., 2017). Variances in the content of narrative leadership feedback likely affect a person's leadership self-perception or self-schema (Acton et al., 2019), impacting subsequent leadership aspirations and behaviors (Hannah et al., 2009; Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Johnson et al., 2012).

The leadership gap between men and women has often been explained in terms of the fact that people, through socialization and past experiences with leaders, develop Implicit Leadership Theories (ILTs), that is, assumptions about the traits and abilities that characterize an ideal business leader (Epitropaki & Martin, 2004). Given that women in positions of power represent a minority in everyday political, organizational, and social institutions, for most people, the assumptions of what the typical leader prototype is, has become linked to males and the masculine stereotype (Sczesny, 2003). Thus, perceiving someone as a leader initially involves a relatively simple categorization (leader/non-leader) of the target person into preexisting hierarchically organized categories, on the basis of similarity between that person and the category prototype, that is, the abstract representation of the most representative features of category members (Foti, Fraser, & Lord, 1982; Rosch, 1975), which in this case is male and/or masculine. As a result, the lower proportion of women in high-level leadership positions (Bertrand, Goldin, & Katz, 2010;

Krivkovich et al., 2024) and their lower likelihood to emerge and succeed as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995) is explained in terms of the incongruity between leadership prototypes and traditional gender roles (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001, 2012), and affects current prototypes based on majority members' characteristics and behaviors. This incongruity affects the selection of people for leadership roles as well as women's career aspirations to aim and apply for leadership positions.

According to gender role theory (Eagly, 1987), gender stereotypes, as generalizations about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of men and women, follow from social structure, specifically from a gendered division of labor, as well as sex-typed distribution in paid occupations corresponding to high versus low-status roles. People infer traits about others by observing their role-constrained behaviors, so when groups tend to be concentrated in certain roles, they become associated with the behaviors required by these roles. Gender stereotypes thus follow observations of people in their traditional social roles, specifically men's occupancy of higher status authority roles in society's institutions and women's occupancy of lower status supportive roles (Eagly & Karau, 1991, 2002; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000). As a result of these social roles, female stereotype attributes include being "caring", "helpful", and "warm", while male stereotype attributes include being "confident", "ambitious", and "assertive" (Abele & Wojciszke, 2007; Heilman, 2001, 2012). Gender roles and the stereotypes they elicit, represent a pervasive phenomenon: both high- and low-prejudiced individuals have been found to be equally knowledgeable of stereotypes (Devine, 1989; Dunning & Sherman, 1997), similar gender stereotypes are held by men and women (Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016), and have been found to bias the behavior of both (Goldberg, 1968; Heilman, 2012; Snyder, 2014). In addition to being widely shared, gender stereotypes are automatically activated and very impactful, dominating the impressions formed of men and women (Heilman, 2012) and shaping perceived inclusion at work (Fletcher & Lysova, 2025). Therefore, they affect appraisal and evaluation of leadership and are often cited as a potent barrier of women's advancement to leadership positions (Johnson, Murphy, Zewdie, & Reichard, 2008; Koenig et al., 2011).

Finally, although sex and gender stereotypes tend to be associated, these constructs are distinct and may not always overlap (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Williams & Best, 1990). While sex is biologically determined, gender is culturally constructed (Torgrimson & Minson, 2005). Therefore, the content of feedback in terms of leadership may be affected by both the sex of the recipient and their gender. A more feminine or female-stereotyped man might not be perceived as a leader as much as a more masculine or male-stereotyped man. Similarly, a more masculine or male-stereotyped woman might be more likely to be perceived as a leader than a more feminine or female-stereotyped one. In order to operationalize gender as a separate construct from sex,

this study used quantitative feedback from peer team members to build gender stereotypes measures.

Sex, gender stereotypes, and descriptive leadership feedback

As the ideal leader prototype has become linked to males and the male stereotype, two perspectives have emerged to explain sex differences in leadership development: the “think manager–think male” phenomenon and the agency-communion approach.

According to the “think manager–think male” phenomenon, the prototype of a successful manager has historically been associated with individuals who are male, largely because leadership positions were predominantly held by men. As a result, the managerial role has come to be understood as one that aligns with traits assumed to be more typically found on men due to social and organizational norms linking leadership competence to men (Schein, 1973, 1975, 2001). In line with this phenomenon, meta-analytic work has confirmed that women receive less favorable evaluations of leadership and leadership potential (Eagly & Karau, 2002). In these studies, men, compared to women, are more likely to be perceived as competent or successful leaders (Chin, 2016; Cuadrado, García-Ael, & Molero, 2015; Hall, Workman, & Marchioro, 1998; Kunkel, Dennis, & Waters, 2003; Sczesny, 2003; Willemsen, 2002), to emerge as leaders (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Kent & Moss, 1994; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015; Megargee, 1969), and to express desire to be leaders (Powell & Butterfield, 2022; Wood, 1987). Actually, the aspirations of women to top management are not just lower than for men, but they have declined during the 21st century, while those of men have remained stable (Powell & Butterfield, 2022). In parallel, women have been found to have lower leadership motivation and aspirations than men (Schuh et al., 2014), and to see leadership roles as less accessible and more likely to cause them problems in their close relationships (Fritz & van Knippenberg, 2018; Killeen, López-Zafra, & Eagly, 2006; Lips, 2000). Consequently, the leadership assessment of women and men in feedback is likely to be different. Given the connection between sex and leadership, without realizing it, evaluators may be more likely to describe men as leaders in the content of qualitative feedback than women, which leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 1: Men receive more descriptive leadership feedback than women.

Whereas studies following Schein’s (1973) think manager–think male paradigm typically examine the relationship between sex and leadership, they do not explore the specific content of gender stereotypes. Therefore, in these studies sex is equated with gender. Another set of studies, based on Powell & Butterfield’s (1979) agency-communion approach, complements this paradigm examining the relationship between masculine (i.e., agentic) and feminine (i.e., communal) stereotypes and leadership (Koenig et al., 2011). These studies have found leadership to be predominantly associated to task-oriented and male-stereotyped behaviors (Lord,

Brown, Harvey, & Hall, 2001; Sczesny, 2003), as well as masculinity and agentic attributes such as dominance and assertiveness (Badura et al., 2018; Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Feenstra et al., 2023; Fullagar et al., 2003; Marongiu & Ekehammar, 2000; Powell et al., 2002). A meta-analysis that examined the extent to which stereotypes of leaders are culturally masculine, confirmed the link between the stereotypes of males and leaders (Koenig et al., 2011) and another study showed how masculinity has been a stable component of ILTs (Offermann & Coats, 2018). In addition, features such as a lower-pitched masculine voice (Anderson & Klofstad, 2012) and a masculine face (Spisak et al., 2012), are preferred for leaders. Masculine traits are also linked to leadership aspirations: A study found that respondents' display of a gender identity that reflected an abundance of self-ascribed masculine traits was associated with their displaying higher aspirations to top management (Powell & Butterfield, 2022). Thus, a good leader is not just associated with the male sex, but also with the male stereotype linked to it, resulting in a misfit between the female gender role and the perceived requirements of the leadership role (Heilman, Block, & Martell, 1995; Lyness & Heilman, 2006). To sum up, given the connection between gender stereotypes and leadership, without realizing it, assessments of male stereotypes in quantitative feedback may be linked with a descriptive evaluation of leadership, which leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 2: Male stereotype evaluation is positively correlated with descriptive leadership feedback.

Some evidence points to the stability of gender stereotyping over time (Duehr & Bono, 2006; Lueptow, Garovich-Szabo, & Lueptow, 2001), to significant decreases in women's femininity but no significant changes in women's masculinity since the early 1990s (Donnelly & Twenge, 2017), or to the female gender role change being underway but still a future prospect (Lopez-Zafra & Garcia-Retamero, 2011; Wilde & Diekman, 2005). Nevertheless, other studies have reported increases in the perceived masculinity (Mölders et al., 2018; Powell et al., 2002; Twenge, 1997) and male stereotype traits (Bosak & Sczesny, 2011; Diekman & Eagly, 2000; Duehr & Bono, 2006; Sczesny, 2003; Spence & Buckner, 2000; Wilde & Diekman, 2005) of women over time. For instance, a study examining business students' perceptions of gender role stereotypes and requisite managerial characteristics over a 10-year period found that the identification of women as agentic as well as their perceived levels of suitability for the managerial role had increased during the period (Berkery & Ryan, 2023). Furthermore, a study examining evaluations of leadership behaviors across 13 meta-analyses using data from 1970 to 2020, found that women were seen as more agentic than men in newer studies, after 1996, compared to older studies (Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2024). Thus, given that male stereotype traits and behaviors are linked to leadership, we expect that men and women displaying these traits and behaviors will be identified as such, and therefore, the interaction of sex with overall

male stereotype evaluation will provide a similar leadership assessment for men and women. This suggests the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: Males and females with high male stereotype evaluations receive similar descriptive leadership feedback.

Gender stereotypes and developmental-directive leadership feedback

In addition to descriptive assessment of current leadership status, feedback comments can be developmental-directive, encouraging recipients to demonstrate or expand their leadership in the future. In this case, the effects of gender stereotypes might be guided by other considerations. Whereas descriptive appraisals may reflect the established association between leadership, males and masculinity, thereby reinforcing the status quo, developmental-directive appraisals may draw on a more contemporary and aspirational image of leadership, one that increasingly incorporates traits aligned with the female stereotype. However, such feedback can simultaneously (1) signal encouragement for growth and (2) subtly imply that leadership is not yet fully realized, reflecting both the ongoing feminization of leadership ideals and the persistence of gendered assumptions about who is seen as a "natural" leader (Chin, 2016; Cuadrado, García-Ael, & Molero, 2015; Hall, Workman, & Marchioro, 1998; Kunkel, Dennis, & Waters, 2003; Sczesny, 2003; Willemsen, 2002).

A few factors have contributed over the past decades to an increased feminization of management. On one hand, there has been a general feminization of the labor force (Jenson, Hagen, & Reddy, 1988) as well as of traditionally male dominated occupations (Reskin & Roos, 1990), which has deeply altered the sex composition of organizations. This change can influence how leaders are defined. For instance, a study showed that the stereotype of a "good manager" was different for respondents who had a female manager or who worked in an organization with a relatively high percentage of female leaders. These respondents showed comparable preferences for masculine and feminine traits (Stoker et al., 2012). On the other hand, changes in companies' economic, demographic, and competitive environments as well as the nature of work have rendered traditional management functions less effective (Kanter, 1989; Mintzberg, 1991). As a result, leaders started to be expected to re-orient themselves away from the technical focus on planning, organizing, staffing, and directing, towards a new role of coordinating, facilitating, coaching, supporting, and nurturing their employees (Newstead et al., 2021; Parlamis & Monnot, 2019; Rosener, 1990). In this regard, already in the late 90s, a study examining management writings found that characteristics that are culturally associated with females were appearing in descriptions of managerial work and argued that these texts have disseminated and legitimized a feminine ethos in management (Fondas, 1997). Since then, an increasing body of literature has been documenting, indirectly and directly, the relevance of female stereotype dimensions for leadership emergence and effectiveness. For

example, a meta-analysis showing the link between masculinity and the leader stereotype suggested that the masculine construal of leadership has decreased over time, as their review of empirical papers (ranging from 1979 to 2007) showed that the difference between agentic and communal scores was smaller in articles published in later years (Koenig et al., 2011). More recently, a study examining the stability and change in the linkage between gender and managerial stereotypes over a five-decade period with a US sample found that good-manager descriptions exhibited a decreasing emphasis on masculinity and increasing emphasis on femininity over time (Powell et al., 2021). Another study replicated this findings in The Netherlands, showing that, among employees, there was a decreased preference for masculine and increased preference for feminine leadership traits in 2020 compared to 2005 (Feenstra et al., 2023).

Indirectly, the female stereotype has been increasingly theoretically considered to be a beneficial trait for leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2003). In this regard, authors speak of interpersonal skills tied to the female stereotype, such as emotional intelligence, warmth and nurturance, as necessary to be successful in a leadership role (Badura et al., 2018; Bray et al., 2014; Hsu et al., 2022; Lanaj & Hollenbeck, 2015) and fundamental for certain leadership styles, like charismatic and transformational leadership (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; House & Howell, 1992; Hsu et al., 2022; Vinkenburg et al., 2011) and servant leadership (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). Regarding charismatic leadership, House and Howell (1992) conclude that charismatic leaders in complex organizations fit the stereotypical image of supportive, sensitive to follower needs, nurturing, and considerate leaders, rather than the traditional stereotype of aggressive, demanding, dominant, and bold leaders. Interestingly, these studies have led to the formulation of what has been called "the female leadership advantage:" the laudation of women as having the right combination of skills for leadership, yielding superior leadership styles and outstanding effectiveness (Eagly, 2007; Schaumberg & Flynn, 2016). More straightforwardly supporting the feminization of leadership, in some studies leaders' 'femininity' has been found to be similarly (DeRue, Nahrgang, Wellman, & Humphrey, 2011) and even more strongly related to leadership effectiveness than leaders' 'masculinity' (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012). Also, a meta-analysis analyzing perceptions of leadership effectiveness across 99 independent samples from 95 studies, found women to be rated as significantly more effective leaders than men (Paustian-Underdahl, Walker, & Woehr, 2014). Another, more recent, meta-analysis found that the combined effects of emotional intelligence and communion favoring women offset the effects of agency resulting in a female leadership advantage (Hsu et al., 2022). Finally, Duehr and Bono (2006) found that managers in their study viewed successful managers in general as more communal than a sample of managers in a 1989 comparison study. These studies suggest that the female stereotype is gaining weight and relevance in conceptualizations of leadership.

Therefore, although the female stereotype has been found to have a negative effect on perceived leadership (Badura et al., 2018), equivalent to a descriptive appraisal, this study argues that it might have the opposite effect on developmental-directive leadership feedback. The link between leadership, males, and the male stereotype has a negative side that is often neglected. As leaders in general are seen as male and masculine, this results in both "good" and "bad" leaders being seen as male and/or masculine (Powell & Butterfield, 2017). Therefore, men and women with more feminine-stereotyped characteristics may emerge as an ideal leader to counteract the downsides of extremely masculine or only masculine-stereotype leadership practices, behaviors, and styles. To sum up, while being male and possessing male stereotype characteristics may lead to the descriptive identification of leaders in feedback, possessing female characteristics may lead to the developmental-directive encouragement to become a leader in the future. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 4: Female stereotype evaluation is positively correlated with developmental-directive leadership feedback.

It remains unclear whether the relationship between female stereotype evaluations and developmental-directive leadership feedback differs for men and women. Earlier evidence suggested that men may be rewarded for displaying communal or feminine characteristics (Heilman & Chen, 2005; Kark et al., 2012; Petersen, Penner, & Høgsnes, 2014), whereas women are penalized for enacting masculine ones (Amanatullah & Tinsley, 2013; Berdahl, 2007; Rudman & Glick, 1999; Williams & Tiedens, 2016). However, more recent research indicates that the growing alignment between effective leadership and communal, relational, or servant-leadership qualities may advantage women whose behavior is consistent with the female stereotype (Lemoine & Blum, 2021). At the same time, this advantage can be ambivalent: women may be praised for such traits but still evaluated as developing rather than fully realized leaders (Vescio et al., 2005).

Thus, while the feminine leadership ideal is increasingly valued, it may elicit different forms of feedback for men and women. For men, feminine traits may complement an assumed leadership baseline and be interpreted as added relational capacity. For women, the same traits may trigger developmental-directive comments that simultaneously encourage and constrain, confirming potential yet implying that leadership has not yet been fully achieved. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis: Females high in female stereotype evaluation receive more positive developmental-directive leadership feedback than males high in female stereotype evaluation.

Androgyny and leadership feedback

An emerging body of research has documented a gradual shift in the leadership prototype from a predominantly masculine conception toward a more androgynous ideal, combining both agentic and communal attributes (Judge et al., 2004; Kent & Moss, 1994; Koenig et al., 2011; Powell et al., 2002; Sczesny, 2003). More recent longitudinal evidence confirms that the “good manager” stereotype has become increasingly balanced, with declining emphasis on masculinity and growing recognition of femininity, ultimately culminating in an androgynous profile (Powell et al., 2021). Similarly, scholarship on leadership during the COVID-19 crisis underscores the advantages of androgynous leadership, emphasizing flexibility, empathy, and decisiveness as complementary traits (Blake-Beard et al., 2020).

This evolution suggests that effective leaders are expected to integrate behaviors associated with both masculine (assertive, directive) and feminine (caring, relational) stereotypes (Cann & Siegfried, 1990; Kark et al., 2012). Such behavioral flexibility allows individuals to adapt to situational demands, expanding the range of acceptable behaviors (Hackman et al., 1992; Hall et al., 1998) and easing the role incongruity that women face in leadership (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Heilman, 2012). In this regard, androgynous subjects are capable of behavioral flexibility, which allows them to adapt appropriately to each situation by enacting either masculine or feminine qualities (Vonk & Ashmore, 1993). Maybe it is precisely this flexibility which explains the fact that research has found a positive effect of androgyny on both leader effectiveness (Hackman et al., 1992; Judge et al., 2004) and leader emergence (Kent & Moss, 1994). Actually, Kent & Moss (1994) found androgynous leaders to be as likely to emerge as masculine leaders. Therefore, these studies show that a blend of feminine and masculine qualities is increasingly important for both male and female leaders.

However, the growing valuation of communal traits does not fully neutralize gender bias. Instead, it may transform how bias is expressed in feedback. When both masculine and feminine characteristics are desirable, men who display this blend may be recognized as well-rounded leaders (eliciting descriptive feedback), whereas women who embody similar androgynous qualities may still be framed as developing leaders (eliciting developmental-directive feedback)—an interpretation consistent with the double-edged nature of feedback discussed earlier. Therefore, while androgyny may generally be associated with positive leadership evaluations, the type of feedback linked to it may differ by sex. Androgynous profiles are likely to attract recognition of current leadership (descriptive feedback) when embodied by men, and encouragement for future leadership enactment (developmental-directive feedback) when embodied by women:

Hypothesis 6a: Among males, androgyny is positively related to more descriptive leadership feedback.

Hypothesis 6b: Among females, androgyny is positively related to more developmental-directive leadership feedback.

Methods

Sampling and data collection procedures

The study followed a concurrent embedded mixed-methods strategy to collect and analyze quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2009, p. 214). Qualitative methods (content-analysis) were nested in the data collection and analysis process in order to transform qualitative comments into quantitative data so that both types of data collected could be jointly analyzed quantitatively. The data were collected from a top-ranked international business school among full-time international MBA students during the years 2014 to 2016. As part of the program, all students are assigned each semester to peer work groups consisting of 5 to 7 members. These groups work every day on the preparation of cases and assignments for the following day and as a result, students become quite familiar with one another. Peer feedback was provided at the end of the first semester using a multi-source assessment survey. This survey was part of a workshop on feedback and managerial development that was mandatory and an integral part of the curriculum. Students completed this survey online in order to (1) evaluate themselves and each member of their work group on ten managerial competencies and (2) provide open-ended feedback. Firstly, quantitative ratings were collected for each of the ten managerial competencies through three different survey items, rendering a total of 30 items, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), including: self-confidence, self-management, flexibility, interpersonal understanding, communication, persuasion and influence, coaching, strategic vision, authenticity, and effectiveness. Students receive both their averaged 4-6 peer team rating on the 5-point Likert scale as well as their rank on a 1-100, based on the average mean score of their ratings compared to the average mean scores of their cohort. Secondly, students were asked to write qualitative feedback comments for each team member, highlighting a strength and a weakness or area for improvement. This feedback was anonymous, as the data was aggregated for each recipient within the learning team without identifying information. Students received a pass/fail grade based on completion of the survey. When each student receives the report with feedback from their team, there is a special emphasis made on the fact that this information can help them create a plan to develop their leadership potential.

For the analysis, a sample of 321 master's students from 6 different cohorts was used. From these, 4 students did not complete the survey, 10 students did not give their consent to use their feedback data for research purposes, and one 5-member team was composed of just males, so they were dropped from the sample, rendering a final sample of 302 (214 men and 88 women). Thus, women represent 29.14% of the sample. While other demographics are available for about half of the sample, the

groups should be very similar. The average age was about 30 years old ($SD = 3.06$), each person had a minimum of 5 years of experience, and approximately half of the sample had managerial experience. The sample included 58 nationalities, which is consistent with the multinational focus of the program. They were split into 47 teams (1 team with 5 team members, 11 teams with 6 team members, and 35 teams with 7 team members). The number of women in teams ranged from 1 to 3, with most teams (87.1%) having 2 women.

Prior research on similar topics have used MBA samples (Powell & Butterfield, 2022; Schaumberg & Flynn, 2016) for various reasons. First of all, the business school culture closely matches the business culture of many organizations, reflecting the same values and proportion of men to women, both in terms of student body and faculty (Kelan, 2014; Sinclair, 1995). Secondly, in a world in which it is increasingly common to structure work around self-managed teams rather than around individuals (DeShon, Kozlowski, Schmidt, Milner, & Wiechmann, 2004; Sundstrom, McIntyre, Halfhill, & Richards, 2000), peer feedback acknowledging strengths and weaknesses has become a central mechanism for leadership development. Because leadership is a social influence process, much of this development occurs in the context of teams (Erez, Lepine, & Elms, 2002). Moreover, recent research highlights that leadership growth extends beyond formal workplace experiences. Developmental experiences in educational and social contexts can shape leadership expertise through the dynamic interaction of the leader experience-processing system and the leader self-view system (Liu et al., 2021). In this sense, MBA programs represent a formative setting where individuals experiment with and internalize leadership identities through structured yet peer-driven feedback.

Finally, despite the increasing proportion of women earning MBAs (Patterson, Damaske, & Sheroff, 2017), evidence consistently shows that their careers lag behind those of men in pay and long-term advancement (Bertrand et al., 2010; Herr & Wolfram, 2012). Examining peer-level feedback within this environment also removes the confounding effects of positional hierarchy, such as title and rank, that often shape gendered feedback in workplace settings (Bear et al., 2017). For these reasons, feedback collected from this MBA sample provides a theoretically rich and practically relevant lens for studying the intersection of sex, gender stereotypes, and leadership evaluations.

Coding of leadership feedback from qualitative comments

A content analysis was conducted on the qualitative feedback, which allowed for the categorization and quantification of the comments (Berg, 2001; Duriau, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007). To minimize gender biases in the coding process, information associated with students' sex was masked. Specifically, all pronouns "he" / "she" were replaced with 999, "his" / "him" / "himself" / "her" / "herself" with 9999, proper names and nicknames (Chris, Sam, Pam, etc.) with 99999, potentially problematic

words such as “girlfriend” / “boyfriend,” “wife” / “husband”, “woman” / “man” / “girl” / “boy” / “guy,” “businessman” / “businesswoman” with 999999, and finally “mate” / “buddy” with “member”. Nvivo for Mac version 11.3.2 was used for the content analysis.

In order to build a measure for leadership, all feedback comments directed at the 302 feedback recipients were included and coded in this study. The feedback recipient was the unit of analysis. Content coding tracked the frequency of the appearance of the root lead* for each of the recipients, providing a systematic quantification of the qualitative written comments (Simonton, 2003). Two categories inductively emerged in this coding: descriptive affirmations and developmental-directive recommendations. Descriptive affirmations refer to comments that recognize and reinforce leadership as a presently demonstrated quality (e.g., “999 is a genuine leader,” “Natural leader,” or “innate leadership skills”). Therefore, cases in which the feedback recipient is described as showing leadership only under certain circumstances, such as “Leads when needed,” or “can take lead when it’s indispensable” were not coded in this category. Developmental-directive statements, by contrast, highlight leadership behaviors yet to be enacted or strengthened (e.g., “Should work on taking leadership roles,” “should actively lead more,” or “don’t always leave the lead to the 999999... you can do it just as awesome as they do.”). These statements invite the recipient to display leadership in the future or in broader contexts. We acknowledge that developmental-directive comments can carry a dual meaning: on one hand, they may communicate belief in the person’s capacity for growth, but on the other hand, they can also imply a current shortcoming (“you are not yet leading enough”). This ambiguity aligns with prior work showing that feedback directed at women often blends developmental intent with patronizing undertones (Gervais & Vescio, 2012), positioning them as “not yet” leaders. While we considered including statements such as “potential to become a leader” within this developmental-directive category, we decided that they were theoretically distinct. It is different to suggest that someone has leadership potential than to suggest that someone should be a leader. The former reflects an assessment of capability or readiness, whereas the latter expresses a directive to act and thus entails an expectation of behavioral change. Only this second form—feedback that calls on individuals to realize or perform leadership—was coded as developmental-directive feedback.

Measures

Sex. Sex was a dummy variable with 1 signifying men, and 0 women.

Overall female stereotype evaluation. In order to build the measure, three items quantitatively assessed in the competency survey were selected to match the female stereotype described earlier (Heilman, 2012). These items, measured on a 1-100 rank, include: "Puts him/herself in the place of others and has respect for their

opinions", "Is a good listener and adapts his/her style of communication to the situation", and "Is a good listener who spends time helping and coaching others" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .895$). This ranking is based on the average mean score of the ratings provided by 4-6 peer team members on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) compared to the average mean scores of the cohort, usually about 55 MBA students.

Overall male stereotype evaluation. To build the measure, three items quantitatively assessed in the competency survey were selected to match the male stereotype described earlier (Heilman, 2012). These items, measured on a 1-100 rank, include: "Shows confidence in his/her skills to overcome any obstacle", "Takes charge and its influential in the group", and "Manages to change other's people's opinions and behaviors using persuasive arguments" (Cronbach's $\alpha = .895$). This ranking is based on the average mean score of the ratings provided by 4-6 peer team members on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree) compared to the average mean scores of the cohort, usually about 55 MBA students.

Androgyny in overall gender stereotype evaluation. To create an androgyny in rankings score, the sample-based medians for the male and female stereotype overall evaluations were determined. Following Hall et al., (1998), individuals who were above the median on both rankings were coded "1" (androgynous), and all others were coded "0" (other).

Descriptive leadership feedback. In order to build a measure, all qualitative comments for each recipient were coded for the presence of a positive description of the recipient as a leader. For example: "999 is a genuine leader," "Natural leader," or "innate leadership skills." A sum of the frequency counts constitutes the total descriptive leadership feedback measure. The range of counts goes from 0 to 6, with 81.4% of people receiving 0 comments.

Developmental-directive leadership feedback. For this variable, all qualitative comments for each recipient were coded for the presence of prescriptions exhorting the recipient to become a leader. For example: "Should work on taking leadership roles," and "should actively lead more." A sum of the frequency counts constitutes the total developmental-directive leadership feedback measure. The range of counts goes from 0 to 4, with 79.5% of people receiving 0 comments.

Control variables

Analyses included two control variables that may influence the identification of leadership in feedback: authenticity and token status. Given the link between authenticity and leadership (Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004) and as research has found women to be perceived as less authentic than men when engaging in leadership roles (Eagly, 2005), authenticity might differently affect the

leadership evaluations of males and females. Also, given that the gender composition of the team affects leader emergence, with women being less likely to emerge as leaders as the percentage of men increase (Kanter, 1977; Kent & Moss, 1994), we also control for token status. Culture composition of the team was considered as an additional control variable, given that culture has been found to moderate leadership styles, practices, and preferences (Dickson, Den Hartog, & Mitchelson, 2003). Students were placed into each of the 10 distinct regions that the GLOBE project created following various cultural dimensions (Northouse, 2007, p. 308). Nevertheless, as teams were almost identical in terms of number of distinct regions included, cultural composition of teams was discarded as a control variable.

Authenticity. A measure for overall authenticity of each person was based on a single item from the quantitative survey ratings: "Is authentic and shows consistency between what is said and what is done." This item ranges from a score of 1 to 100 and is based on a relative ranking to the total cohort (usually about 55 people). The average mean score from 4-6 peer team members, using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree), was compared to the average mean scores of the rest of the cohort to obtain a percentile ranking, where 100 is the highest level.

Token status. Token status was a dummy variable with 1 signifying the team has one woman, and 0 more than one woman.

Results

SPSS version 22 was used for the analysis. The descriptive statistics and correlations for the variables used in this study are reported in Table 1. The average number of words in each feedback comment was 192.42 (SD=114.19) with a range of 15 to 676 words. There are no significant differences between the average number of words that men and women received ($t(300) = -0.64, p = 0.523$).

To test hypotheses 1 through 6, negative binomial regressions with a log link were used to test the predictions because descriptive and developmental-directive leadership feedback are over-dispersed count variables with variances higher than the means: descriptive leadership feedback (mean=0.30, variance=0.58), developmental-directive leadership feedback (mean=0.26, variance=0.33). Authenticity and token status were used as controls in all the analyses. Hypothesis 1 argued that males would receive more descriptive feedback on their leadership than women. As Table 2 shows, men were found to received 49.9% more comments describing them as leaders than women and this difference was significant ($b = -0.69, p = .034$), so H1 received support. Hypothesis 2 argued that overall male stereotype evaluation would be positively related to descriptive leadership feedback. As Table 3 shows, in support of H2, male stereotype rankings were positively related to descriptive leadership feedback ($b = .06, p = .000$). Next, hypothesis 3 argued that

males and females with high male stereotype rankings would receive similar descriptive feedback on leadership. The interaction between sex and male stereotype rankings was not significant ($b = -.01, p = .528$), and thus, H3 was supported. Both men and women with high rankings on the male stereotype receive similar descriptive leadership feedback.

Hypothesis 4 argued that overall female stereotype evaluation would be positively related to developmental-directive leadership feedback. In support of this hypothesis, as shown in Table 4, an overall female stereotype evaluation was significantly positively related to developmental-directive leadership feedback ($b = .01, p = .009$). Hypothesis 5 argued that sex would interact with overall female stereotype evaluation such that women with higher female stereotype rankings would receive more developmental-directive leadership feedback than men with higher female stereotype rankings. As shown in Table 5, the interaction between sex and female stereotype ranking was significant ($b = -.03, p = .001$). As shown in Figure 1, while at lower levels of overall female stereotype, men received more developmental-directive leadership feedback than women, higher levels of overall female stereotype were associated with more developmental-directive leadership feedback for women compared to men. A spotlight analysis showed that women high in female stereotype rankings were marginally significantly more likely to receive developmental-directive leadership feedback than men with high female stereotype rankings ($\beta = -.17, t = -1.63, p = .100$). However, the differences at low ($p > .19$) or medium ($p > .77$) female stereotype rankings were not significant.

Lastly, hypothesis 6 argued that androgyny in overall gender stereotype evaluations would be positively related to (6a) descriptive leadership feedback for males and (6b) developmental-directive leadership feedback for females. Contrary to expectations, the interaction between androgyny and gender was not significant for either descriptive feedback ($b = -0.003, p = .995$), or developmental-directive feedback ($b = -0.334, p = .450$). The estimated marginal means suggested that descriptive leadership feedback was numerically highest among androgynous men ($M = 0.77$), relative to non-androgynous men ($M = 0.40$), and both androgynous ($M = 0.54$) and non-androgynous ($M = 0.28$) women. For developmental-directive feedback, the means were again directionally consistent with the hypothesis: androgynous women received slightly more developmental-directive feedback ($M = 0.54$) than non-androgynous women ($M = 0.39$), and than androgynous and non-androgynous men (both $M = 0.39$). However, although the means were directionally aligned with the hypothesis these differences were not statistically significant, and Hypothesis 6a and 6b were not supported.

Discussion

This study aimed to understand how the link between males, the male stereotype, and leadership, coexists with the female leadership advantage, by examining the effects of

sex and gender stereotypes on the descriptive and developmental-directive content of leadership feedback. Based on the analyses, most of the hypotheses were supported. Being male and showing male stereotype behaviors was positively linked to descriptive feedback, and both men and women scoring high on male stereotype attributes were similarly likely to receive descriptive leadership feedback, thereby confirming that they currently are perceived as leaders. At the same time, showing female stereotype behaviors was positively linked to developmental-directive leadership feedback, and this effect was found to be stronger for women than for men. So, women who scored higher on female stereotype attributes received more comments prescribing that they "should become leaders" than men who scored higher on the same attributes. Finally, however, the androgyny hypothesis was not supported as neither descriptive nor developmental-directive feedback varied significantly as a function of androgyny by gender, even though the directional means suggested the expected patterns.

Theoretical implications

Regarding descriptive leadership feedback, our findings indicate two parallel pathways to being recognized as "already a leader." First, men received more descriptive leadership feedback than women, evidencing a sex-based recognition advantage consistent with the enduring "think manager–think male" association. Second, higher masculine-stereotyped attributes predicted more descriptive feedback for both men and women, indicating that agentic/masculinized behaviors function as a cross-sex competence signal. Because these effects were additive rather than interactive (i.e., we did not observe a Gender \times Masculinity interaction), the pattern suggests that leadership recognition maps onto being male and/or being perceived as masculine. This underscores the importance of analytically separating sex from gendered behavioral attributions (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Powell & Butterfield, 2017): a status-based male advantage coexists with a prototype-based masculinity advantage, such that the cultural model is not simply "think manager, think male," but "think manager, think male, think masculine."

For developmental-directive leadership feedback, feminine-stereotyped behaviors were positively associated with comments encouraging recipients to *develop leadership in the future*, and this pattern was significantly stronger for women. This requires a more nuanced interpretation. On one hand, it may suggest that communal attributes are now valued in visions of ideal or future leadership, consistent with research on the feminization of contemporary leadership ideals (Newstead et al., 2021; Parlamis & Monnot, 2019)¹. On the other hand, because these comments emphasize *future potential rather than current recognition*, they may also function as

¹ However, if the female stereotype is actually so valuable for leadership, we may wonder why it is not also associated with descriptive leadership feedback (negative binomial regression shows a negative non-significant effect for this relationship: $b = -.01, p = .344$).

a subtle signal of not yet being considered a leader. In this sense, developmental-directive feedback may encode a form of *conditional inclusion*: "you could be a leader, but you are not one yet." This interpretation is consistent with research on paternalistic or benevolently sexist encouragement (Fiske & Glick, 1997), in which women are praised and positioned as promising yet simultaneously marked as lacking (Gervais & Vescio, 2012; Vescio et al., 2005). That is, the same feedback that appears supportive may also reinforce the persistent gap between being valued and being recognized as already exercising leadership authority. The fact that women, compared to men, received more developmental-directive leadership feedback when enacting feminine attributes suggests that the feminine stereotype is welcomed as an aspirational ideal, but not sufficient as evidence of current leadership. Taken together, our findings do not indicate a straightforward "female leadership advantage" (Kark et al., 2012; Koenig et al., 2011), but rather a reframing of leadership expectations that integrates communal qualities while still reserving full leader recognition for those who embody masculinized behavioral signals. This highlights an important contemporary dynamic: feminine traits may be celebrated in discourse yet remain insufficient for leadership status in practice.

Finally, our results did not support the prediction that androgynous individuals, those high in both masculine and feminine stereotyped traits, would receive higher levels of either descriptive or developmental-directive leadership feedback. This contrasts with arguments that the contemporary "ideal leader" has shifted toward an androgynous profile (Powell et al., 2021). Instead, our data suggests that masculine attributes continue to anchor leadership recognition, while feminine attributes are acknowledged primarily in the form of aspirational or developmental suggestions. Thus, rather than signaling the emergence of an androgynous leadership ideal, our findings indicate that the masculine leadership prototype remains culturally dominant, and femininity is still positioned as a complementary, but insufficient, leadership resource. In other words, what may appear to be "openness" to androgyny may actually reflect a layering of expectations: leaders should be agentic first, and communal second, but only if they can do so without compromising the agentic core of the prototype (Mölders et al., 2018). The continued association of leadership with agentic traits undermines the traditional claim that meritocracy operates independently of gender stereotypes (Castilla, 2025). Importantly, truly meritocratic evaluation would require leadership competence to be assessed independently of these gendered associations; yet prior research shows that when organizations explicitly frame themselves as meritocratic, evaluators may actually apply stereotype-based judgments more strongly, favoring men over equally qualified women (Castilla & Benard, 2010). Taken together, our findings and prior work suggest that as long as leadership is implicitly mapped onto traits socially associated with men, claims of meritocracy are likely to mask rather than prevent gender bias in leader evaluation.

Practical implications

Organizations aiming to help women advance in the managerial pipeline should examine how sex and gender stereotypes shape the *type* of leadership feedback employees receive. Our results show that descriptive leadership feedback is disproportionately tied to men and to masculine-stereotyped behaviors, whereas developmental-directive leadership feedback is tied to feminine-stereotyped behaviors, particularly among women. On one hand, these findings suggest an important tension in how leadership is socially recognized, as leadership theories reproduce the existing social order and gendered arrangements (Kark & Buengeler, 2024). If women only receive descriptive leadership feedback when they display traits aligned with the masculine stereotype (e.g., assertiveness, decisiveness, dominance), then women are not being recognized as “women”, but rather as approximations of the masculine leadership norm. In other words, rather than feminine attributes gaining legitimacy as leadership-relevant (Pullen & Vachhani, 2023), women are being rewarded for conforming to the historically male model of leadership (Derks et al., 2016). This dynamic reflects a subtle but powerful form of resocialization: women are encouraged to adjust themselves toward the masculine prototype rather than organizations adjusting their understanding of what leadership can look like. Consequently, the apparent progress toward recognizing feminine strengths in leadership may mask the persistence of an underlying standard in which masculinity remains the default, and femininity remains conditionally valued only as developmental potential rather than current leadership competence.

On the other hand, these patterns matter because descriptive and developmental-directive feedback are likely to have different consequences for leadership self-efficacy, defined as confidence in one’s capability to lead others (Hannah et al., 2008). Descriptive feedback can strengthen leadership self-efficacy by affirming others’ recognition of one’s leadership behaviors (Luthans & Stajkovic, 2000), while developmental-directive feedback may provide a weaker efficacy signal, communicating *potential* rather than *present* legitimacy.

Leadership self-efficacy plays a central role in shaping whether individuals pursue, persist in, or value leadership roles. People who believe they can lead set higher goals, persevere longer, and remain more motivated when challenges arise (Bandura, 1991; Bandura & Cervone, 1986; Bandura & Locke, 2003). In contrast, those who doubt their leadership capability are more likely to disengage or opt out (Erkal et al., 2022; Frkal & Criscione-Naylor, 2020). Therefore, employees told they *are* leaders may be more likely to pursue leadership roles, while those told they *should become* leaders may internalize the idea that they are not yet legitimate, potentially weakening leadership aspiration and leadership identity formation. These dynamics are especially consequential given evidence that gender differences in leadership aspirations persist across decades and are amplified in male-dominated professional contexts

(Netchaeva et al., 2022). Research shows that leadership emergence depends not only on skills, but on the activation of a leadership self-schema, a sense of oneself as a leader (Hannah et al., 2009; Lord et al., 2020). Because the activation of this identity is influenced by how others respond to one's leadership attempts (Acton et al., 2019), feedback that positions women as *not yet* leaders may constrain the development of leadership identity and motivation to lead (Johnson et al., 2012; Schyns et al., 2020). Importantly, youth and early career stages are formative periods in which leadership aspirations begin to diverge by gender (Liu et al., 2019, 2021; Powell & Butterfield, 2022), meaning that organizations, especially business schools and early-career employers—are shaping leadership trajectories long before promotion decisions occur.

Taken together, systems that systematically direct women toward “potential” and men toward “recognition” may unintentionally sustain the gender gap in leadership by shaping who sees themselves, and is seen by others, as already occupying the leader role. Interventions that assess and adjust feedback patterns, train evaluators to recognize feminine leadership behaviors as *leadership*, and create structured opportunities for women to practice leadership identity in action may help counteract these long-standing dynamics.

Limitations and directions for future research

This study has several limitations. First, we lacked information on the sex/gender of the feedback provider and therefore could not examine whether men and women give descriptive versus developmental-directive leadership feedback differently. Prior research offers mixed expectations: some work suggests that women and men apply gender stereotypes similarly when judging others (Moss-Racusin, Dovidio, Brescoll, Graham, & Handelsman, 2012; Steinpreis, Anders, & Ritzke, 1999), and that the nomination of leaders is not related to the sex of the incumbent; for example, Virick & Greer (2012) found that the sex of current managers did not influence the likelihood of nominating female successors. However, other studies show sex differences in how leadership traits are evaluated (Brenner, Tomkiewicz, & Schein, 1989; Kark et al., 2012). Although we accounted for team sex composition through token status, further research should investigate whether the provider's sex shapes the type of leadership feedback given.

Second, our content coding of leadership-related feedback was conservative, as it relied exclusively on explicit use of the word “lead.” This ensured a precise operationalization, minimizing conflation with other competence-related descriptors linked to the male stereotype (e.g., “decisive,” “powerful,” “confident”), but it may have excluded comments implying leadership without using the word directly. Future work could expand coding to include semantic or contextual references to leading.

Finally, although we theorized that descriptive leadership feedback communicates current leadership recognition and developmental-directive feedback implies leadership as conditional or aspirational, our study did not measure the downstream psychological consequences of this distinction. Future research should examine how these forms of feedback shape leader self-efficacy, identity development, and career motivation. Such work could clarify whether developmental-directive feedback, although seemingly encouraging, may subtly negatively affect women's leader self-schemas and contribute to persistent gendered patterns in leadership development.

Conclusion

This study examined how the content of leadership feedback varies as a function of sex and gendered perceptions, and how these differences relate to patterns in leadership recognition. By distinguishing between descriptive leadership feedback and developmental-directive leadership feedback, the study offers a more nuanced picture of how leadership is conferred and points to an additional mechanism explaining the under emergence of women as leaders. Whereas descriptive leadership feedback was more closely associated with men and masculine-stereotyped individuals, developmental-directive feedback was more commonly directed toward those associated with the feminine stereotype. This distinction reflects different degrees of leadership recognition and aligns with subtle but persistent messages that women's leadership is still emergent, conditional, or aspirational. Even seemingly supportive calls to "grow into leadership" may reinforce leader self-schemas that position leadership as something women must earn into, rather than something they can already inhabit. This is consistent with research showing that women's aspirations to top leadership roles may decline early in their careers, before they have even "opted in" to organizational life (Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Powell & Butterfield, 2022), in part due to ongoing cultural narratives that women lack ambition or must "lean in" to overcome deficits (Sandberg, 2013).

Our findings demonstrate how everyday feedback practices, particularly in peer settings, may quietly reproduce the leadership gender gap not through overt exclusion, but through differentiated pathways of recognition. Understanding these subtle dynamics is crucial for designing interventions that not only support women's leadership development but also broaden the prototype of what leadership already is.

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TABLE 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations

	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Sex	0.71	0.46						
2. Overall Female Stereotype	47.82	25.40	.07					
3. Overall Male Stereotype	45.32	26.09	.10†	.45**				
4. Descriptive Leadership Feedback	0.30	0.76	.11†	.08	.39**			
5. Developmental-directive	0.26	0.58	.00	.14*	-.11†	-.09		

Leadership
Feedback

6. Authenticity	62.07	28.06	.02	.67**	.62**	.16**	.12*
7. Token Status	0.09	0.28	.09	.20**	.13*	.07	-.12* .08

N = 302. Sex is coded as 1, male; 0, female. † p < .1 * p < .05 ** p < .01

TABLE 2

Results of the Negative Binomial Regression for the Effects of Authenticity, Token Status, and Sex on Descriptive Leadership Feedback

	Descriptive Leadership Feedback		
	Exp (b)	95% CI	p
Authenticity	1.02	1.05-1.03	0.00
Token Status	1.16	0.46-2.95	0.76
Sex	0.50	0.26-0.95	0.03
Omnibus χ^2	12.821**		

N = 302. † p < .1 * p < .05 ** p < .01

TABLE 3

Results of the Negative Binomial Regression for the Effects of Authenticity, Token Status, and Overall Male Stereotype Evaluation on Descriptive Leadership Feedback

	Descriptive Leadership Feedback		
	Exp (b)	95% CI	p
Authenticity	0.98	0.97-1.00	0.01
Token Status	1.03	0.41-2.54	0.96
Overall Male Stereotype Evaluation	1.06	1.04-1.07	0.00
Omnibus χ^2	65.141**		

N = 302. † *p* < .1 * *p* < .05 ** *p* < .01

TABLE 4

Results of the Negative Binomial Regression for the Effects of Authenticity, Token Status, and Overall Female Evaluation Ratings on Developmental-directive Leadership Feedback

	Developmental-directive Leadership Feedback		
	Exp (b)	95% CI	p
Authenticity	1.00	0.99-1.01	0.65
Token Status	0.10	0.02-0.69	0.02
Overall Female Stereotype Evaluation	1.01	1.00-1.03	0.01
Omnibus χ^2	17.105**		

N = 302. † *p* < .1 * *p* < .05 ** *p* < .01

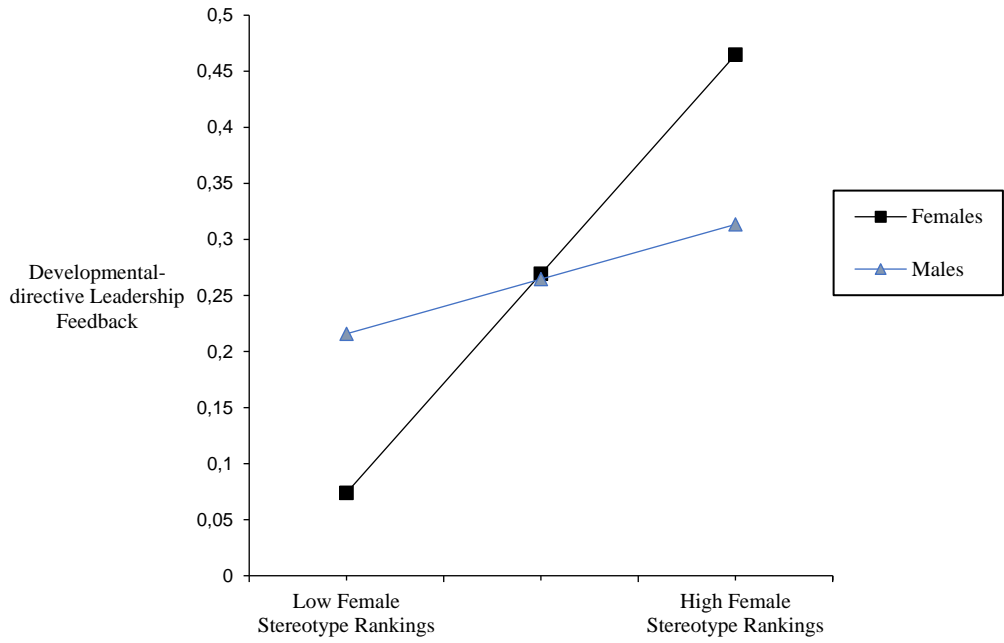
TABLE 5

Results of the Negative Binomial Regression for the Effects of Authenticity, Token Status, Sex, and Overall Female Stereotype Evaluation on Developmental-directive Leadership Feedback

Developmental-directive Leadership Feedback			
	Exp (b)	95% CI	p
Authenticity	1.00	0.99-1.01	0.65
Token Status	0.11	0.02-0.73	0.02
Sex	5.07	1.66-15.46	0.00
Overall Female Stereotype Evaluation	1.04	1.02-1.05	0.00
Sex × Overall Female Stereotype Evaluation	0.97	0.96-0.99	0.00
Omnibus χ^2	22.30**		

$N = 302$. † $p < .1$ * $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

FIGURE 1
Interaction Between Sex and Overall Female Stereotype Evaluation



Assigned Places, Chosen Futures: How Austrian Women Forge Paths To Leadership Positions Despite Systemic Barriers - And Their Broader Socio-Economic Impact

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

Gender equality in leadership remains a persistent challenge in Europe, particularly in

conservative welfare states such as Austria. Despite high levels of female education, women

remain underrepresented in top executive positions. This study examines how female and male leaders in Austria perceive, experience, and navigate gendered career dynamics within the socio-cultural and institutional context of a conservative welfare state. It investigates how

leaders reflect on women's social and economic positioning, and how gendered expectations

shape professional trajectories.

Research significance and purpose

Building on the dissertation's contribution of linking gender studies with cross-cultural

competence, this study demonstrates how navigating entrenched gendered institutional settings parallels managing across national cultural boundaries. By exploring the interplay of individual agency, structural constraints, and cultural norms, it highlights competencies that enable women and men to succeed in environments shaped by inequality. The purpose is twofold: (1) to deepen the understanding of structural, organizational, and individual barriers to women's leadership in Austria, and (2) to identify strategies developed to overcome these barriers, with implications for organizational practice and policy-making.

Methodology

The research draws on 59 in-depth semi-structured interviews with top executives and

politicians in Austria. The interviews were analysed using a qualitative content analysis

approach, combining deductive and inductive coding. A multi-theoretical framework integrates Sen and Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach, Bourdieu's capital theory, and Esping-Andersen's welfare state approach, enabling investigation of the interplay between individual agency, institutional constraints, and cultural norms.

Results

Findings reveal recurring patterns across leaders, showing that those who attained top positions followed similar strategies. These included investing in external childcare, rejecting part-time models, continuing to work during maternity leave, limiting parental leave to a maximum of one year, choosing equal (50:50) partnerships, and proactively applying for leadership positions. At the same time, they had to navigate persistent stereotypes, unequal expectations regarding care responsibilities, and exclusion from influential networks. Success was achieved not through inherent privilege, but through active career planning, building and leveraging social and symbolic capital, and strategically engaging in male-dominated spaces.

Discussion (Findings and Implications)

The results highlight the close parallels between cross-cultural management and navigating

gendered institutional settings. Just as leaders in international contexts must adapt to unfamiliar cultural codes, the Austrian leaders in this study had to adapt to and strategically manoeuvre within rigid gender norms. Developing resilience, cultural adaptability, and the ability to operate across different professional subcultures proved essential. These competencies—often framed as "cross-cultural"—were in fact critical within a national, gendered environment. This suggests that gendered leadership pathways require the same sensitivity to context, negotiation of norms, and boundary-crossing strategies as intercultural management.

Conclusions (Managerial and Policy Implications, Future research directions)

This study extends cross-cultural competence research by demonstrating its relevance within

gendered institutional contexts. For managers, the findings underline the importance of

fostering inclusive organizational cultures, supporting diverse leadership pathways, and

recognizing the strategic competencies required to navigate inequalities. For policymakers, the study emphasizes the need to reform welfare and family policies that perpetuate traditional gender roles and constrain women's career opportunities. Future research could extend this approach to comparative cases across welfare states to examine how institutional contexts shape gendered career pathways and the competencies required for leadership success.

Key words: gender equality, leadership, career barriers, conservative welfare state, cross-cultural competence

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Diversity and Social Identity Leadership within the Al-Amara Tribes (Egypt)

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate dynamics of Social Identity Leadership (SIL) and the management of internal diversity within the Al-Amara tribes. While traditional tribal structures are often perceived as monolithic, the Al-Amara presents a sophisticated case study in balancing ancestral cohesion with the burgeoning diversity of modern socio-economic shifts. This research is grounded in the new theory of Social Identity Leadership (SIL) developed by works of S. Alexander Haslam, Stephen D. Reicher, and Michael J. Platow. According to this perspective, effective leaders must manage social identity through four key dimensions: Being a prototype: Representing the core values and identity of the group (Hogg, 2001). Being an identity entrepreneur: Actively crafting and defining what it means to be a member of the group (Reicher et al., 2018). Advancing the identity: Ensuring their actions and decisions benefit the group's interests. Embedding the identity: Making the identity "real" through physical structures or rituals. The study investigates how Al-Amara leaders utilize "identity entrepreneurship" to foster a sense of shared belonging among members who span across disparate urban and rural environments, varied educational backgrounds, and differing political affiliations. By applying the **Social Identity Approach to Leadership**, we analyze how leaders act as "prototypes" of tribal values while simultaneously adapting those values to remain inclusive of the tribe's evolving demographic.

Keywords: tribal leadership, diversity, social identity

Methodology and Findings

Through qualitative analysis of tribal councils and leadership rhetoric, the research identifies three primary mechanisms used to maintain unity:

Narrative Continuity: Harmonizing historical lineage with contemporary civic contributions.

Conflict Resolution: Utilizing traditional *Sulh* (reconciliation) frameworks to address modern grievances.

Inclusive Representation: The rising role of youth and educated sub-factions in tribal decision-making processes.

Conclusion

The findings suggest that leadership in the Al-Amara tribe is not merely an inherited status but a continuous process of identity negotiation. Successful leaders are those who can navigate the "diversity paradox"—maintaining a distinct tribal identity while embracing the pluralistic identities of individual members. This research contributes to a broader understanding of how traditional social structures in the Middle East adapt to globalization without losing their foundational essence.

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Theorizing Organizational Gendering: Unravelling Acker's Theory of Gendered Organizations

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Acker's theory of the gendered organization posits that organizations are inherently gendered, thus making a radical shift of thought from individual to systemic structural gender bias at the workplace (1990). Her conceptually rich, groundbreaking seminal work has no doubt been highly influential across disciplines, from organizational studies to sociology to feminist theory (Kelan, 2009). However, this theory has also been described as unfinished tapestry (Dye & Mills, 2006)—for example the five processes of gender sub-structure provide descriptive accounts of gendered organizations without reasons as to the specific mechanisms of **how** organizations become gendered (Mooney, 2020).

This paper seeks to answer the following research questions: How do the five gender sub-structures of Acker's theory manifest (division of labour, cultural symbols, gendered interaction, individual identity and organizational logic)? For this, 23 leaders were extensively interviewed over an 8-month period until theoretical saturation point was reached.

Table 1: Summary of methods

Method	Rationale
Semi-structured interviews	Qualitative method for exploratory purposes
Coding for codes and categories	To elicit first & second order themes and also aggregate dimensions
2 focus group discussion	To understand the 'why' behind statements
Post-coding semi-structured interviews	To verify the accuracy of the themes
Analytical memos	To enhance sensemaking of raw data by connecting themes and insights

Source: Author's own

This research provides deep insights in the form of vignettes that reveal discrimination is often present throughout the work life cycle of women, and that it is more hidden than overt. The main gender subtexts that underlie these gendering processes include:-

- i. Gendering structures: Employer benevolent sexism
- ii. Gendering culture: Masculinity contest culture
- iii. Gendering interaction: Exclusionary male networks
- iv. Gendered identities: Double bind
- v. Gendered organizational logic: Family support

Many studies have built on Acker's work by legitimizing that organizations are gendered, rather than empirically tested this (Bates, 2022). To fill this gap this study delves into **how** several top organizations become gendered by deeply analyzing the five processes of gender sub-structure, leading to theoretical refinement of Acker's theory. It is envisaged that the study results can be used to build actionable strategies to dismantle the gendered structures of organizations (Gard & Sangwan, 2021).

Beyond Integration: A Framework for Inclusive Higher Education and Social Participation of People with Disabilities

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Abstract

Despite strong international commitments to inclusive education, people with disabilities remain significantly underrepresented in European higher education. Persistent structural, institutional, and social barriers continue to limit equal access to educational opportunities and full participation in academic life. This situation highlights the gap between formal policy commitments and the practical implementation of inclusive practices within higher education systems. Across Europe, people with disabilities experience higher rates of early school leaving and significantly lower participation in tertiary education compared to the non-disabled population. While many educational policies promote the integration of people with disabilities into mainstream institutions, integration alone does not ensure genuine inclusion. Architectural barriers, insufficient institutional support, and enduring social and psychological obstacles often prevent meaningful participation in educational, cultural, and professional environments. As a result, people with disabilities remain at increased risk of social exclusion, limited employment opportunities, and marginalisation. This paper proposes a conceptual framework to strengthen inclusive practices in European higher education by developing an innovative interdisciplinary professional profile. Moving beyond traditional care-based or administrative approaches, the framework emphasises a holistic model that integrates pedagogical, social, cultural, and digital competences. The proposed professional role functions as a facilitator of inclusive practices, capable of identifying structural barriers, supporting accessible learning environments, and promoting the active participation of people with disabilities in academic and community contexts. The framework also highlights the importance of interdisciplinary knowledge and cross-sectoral cooperation between higher education institutions, vocational training providers, community organisations, and labour market actors. Such collaboration is essential to developing sustainable, transferable models of inclusive education that support autonomy, active citizenship, and lifelong learning. By addressing structural barriers and strengthening professional competencies, the proposed framework contributes to transforming higher

education systems in Europe and advancing dignity, equality, and social participation for people with disabilities.

Keywords: Inclusive Higher Education; Disability Inclusion; Social Participation; Educational Policy; Structural Barriers; Interdisciplinary Professional Competences; European Education Systems

Having a Seat, Having a Say: How Women Executives Experience Strategic Voice in Top Leadership Teams

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Abstract

Although women's presence in executive boards and C-suits has grown, scholarship highlights that reaching the top of corporate hierarchies does not automatically translate into equal power or strategic influence. For instance, studies document that female executives are less often included in strategic decision-making (Mooney, 2022) and link women directors' overall contributions to factors such as board culture, perceptions of equality and chair behavior (Nielsen & Huse, 2010; Wiersema & Mors, 2024). Classic work on tokenism, role congruity and backlash further suggests that women in male-dominated elites occupy a narrower, more fragile space to speak and dissent (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kanter, 1977). At the same time, voice research conceptualizes speaking up as discretionary and risky behavior shaped by leader openness and context, yet this work has primarily focused on non-executive employees rather than top executives (Detert & Burris, 2007). Consequently, relatively little is known about how female executives experience and manage their attempts to articulate and advance positions on high-stakes strategic issues, and under what conditions these efforts are heard, sidelined or sanctioned. This study aims to address this gap by examining how female executives experience and navigate their strategic voice, conceptualized as their discretionary effort to articulate and advance positions on high-stakes organizational decisions. The empirical setting comprises women serving on executive boards of firms listed on the ATX Prime stock exchange in Austria. Semi-structured episodic interviews with approximately 20 – 25 female board members elicit detailed accounts of strategic decisions in which participants felt influential, sidelined or at risk when intervening on major strategic issues. Using reflective thematic analysis, the study develops a grounded theoretical account of strategic voice under gender constraints in elite organizational settings. It aims to advance understanding of how formal authority, interactional conditions and

gendered expectations intersect to shape women's executive opportunities. In doing so, the study clarifies the mechanisms through which strategic voice is enabled, curtailed or rendered conditional in top leadership teams and thereby contributes to broader debates about substantive inclusion and power in corporate governance.

Does Perceived Discrimination Moderate the Impact of Diversity Statements on Pro-Diversity Attitudes and Behaviours?

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Abstract

Diversity statements formally declare an organization's dedication to an inclusive, equitable workplace, often via websites and internal communications. While they can improve perceptions of fairness and prestige, these statements often lack impact on real diversity levels, and pro-diversity behaviours. We propose that an individual's response to diversity statements is moderated by the level of discrimination they perceive and whether they belong to an advantaged or disadvantaged group. Members of disadvantaged groups usually display little opposition to DEI communications while conversely, members of advantaged groups are more likely to react negatively. This may be because advantaged and disadvantaged groups have different understandings of the nature of discrimination against their group, leading them to ascribe different meanings, that have different psychological and behavioural outcomes. Disadvantaged group members perceive more pervasive (i.e., systematic and widespread) discrimination, that is highly detrimental to their psychological wellbeing, and subsequently strengthens their ingroup identification. They tend to help others like themselves, motivated by perceived similarity. In contrast, members of advantaged groups tend to perceive discrimination as less pervasive (i.e., less severe, more context-dependent and easy to avoid), and so consequently experience less psychological impact. They may experience "reverse discrimination" as a result of entitlement, a psychological mechanism to alleviate guilt about social equalities, or to externalise blame and discount personal deservingness. We therefore propose that the attitudes and behaviour an individual shows in response to a diversity statement is moderated by perceived discrimination levels and whether one belongs to an advantaged or disadvantaged group.

Keywords: diversity statements, discrimination, DEI communications, pro-diversity attitudes, pro-diversity behaviour

Queering Masculinities: Homosocial Desire and Men's Self-Fashioning in India

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Abstract

This paper explores how collective men's self-fashioning practices mediate power, social fluidity, and belonging in postcolonial India. Drawing on typological analysis, ethnographic fieldwork, and visual representations of men in Indian films and fashion advertisements, I introduce several interpretive strategies for understanding how sartorial choices in homosocial spaces simultaneously reinforce social hierarchies and foster intimate bonds among men. I argue that such choices both challenge and uphold existing heteronormative ideals. This study then critically examines how alternative masculinities intersect with the caste, class, and sexuality systems. I highlight the significance of the "hard body" masculinity and "new man" figure in fashion, showing how the neoliberal construct of consumer culture advances progressive masculine aesthetics while compelling men to negotiate both conformity and the pursuit of intimacy. By foregrounding the fashioned male body as a site of modernity, this study addresses the potential for Indian men to subvert hegemonic structures, even as they remain entangled within social strata. In this process, I demonstrate the socially fluid, fashioned body escapes stereotypes and evokes new possibilities for non-traditional expressions of masculinity.

Keywords: homosociality, social fluidity, contemporary fashion, modernity, queer

Gender-specific challenges in starting a business in Vienna: A qualitative analysis based on Bourdieu's theory of capital and cultural context

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Abstract

This presentation examines gender-specific challenges in starting a business in Vienna by analyzing how unequal distributions of economic, cultural, social, and symbolic capital shape women's entrepreneurial opportunities. Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of capital and embedded cultural contexts, the study addresses the guiding research question: How do structurally and culturally embedded capital inequalities influence women's ability to found and develop businesses in Vienna? The analysis is based on 40 guided interviews with female founders from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, including migrant entrepreneurs, as well as mentors engaged in local entrepreneurial ecosystems. The material was examined using thematic qualitative analysis within a power-theoretical framework. The findings show that imbalances across all types of capital significantly constrain women's entrepreneurial trajectories. In terms of economic capital, limited access to early-stage financing, the persistent gender funding gap, restricted investor networks, and reduced financial buffers hinder women's ability to start and scale ventures. Deficits in cultural capital emerge through gaps in business literacy, technological skills, administrative knowledge, and, especially for migrant founders, language proficiency and navigation of bureaucratic systems. Social capital remains limited due to the lack of access to influential networks, strategic mentoring, and investor-relevant communities, often reinforced by social homophily and male-dominated ecosystems. At the level of symbolic capital, gender stereotypes, credibility deficits, and biased evaluation practices diminish recognition and legitimacy, particularly in pitching and investment settings. Cultural background and social origin further intensify

these inequalities. Nevertheless, the study identifies resilience-enhancing mechanisms, including empowerment-oriented learning environments, women-centered peer networks, mentoring relationships, and strengthened entrepreneurial self-efficacy. Overall, the study demonstrates that women's entrepreneurial barriers in Vienna arise not from individual deficits but from structurally and culturally embedded capital inequalities, requiring targeted interventions across all capital dimensions.

Keywords: Women Founders, Gendered Entrepreneurial Barriers, Capital Inequalities, Bourdieu

The Role of Nutritional Supplements in Enhancing Performance and Recovery in Individual-Sport Athletes: A Comprehensive Literature Review

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Abstract

Nutritional supplements are frequently used by individual athletes to boost physiological adaptability, accelerate recovery, and enhance performance. However, evidence remains fragmented due to differences in supplement types, doses, and research methods. The purpose of this review is to assess the impact of commonly used nutritional supplements on individual-sport athletes' performance and recuperation, as well as to integrate recent research findings into practical suggestions. A systematic narrative review was performed by searching PubMed, Scopus, and Sport Discus for studies published between 2015 and 2024. After screening for relevance and methodological quality, 52 peer-reviewed articles were chosen. Data were evaluated with an emphasis on supplement processes, performance outcomes, and recovery indicators. The results demonstrated that protein and creatine supplementation regularly improve muscle regeneration, strength, and power output. BCAAs and beta-alanine help to minimize tiredness and enhance tolerance for high-intensity exercise. Caffeine boosts endurance, alertness, and reaction speed, while omega-3 fatty acids and antioxidants aid in inflammation control and recuperation optimization. Despite the positive results, limitations included small sample sizes, inconsistent methods, short intervention durations, and a lack of sport-specific studies. When evidence-based supplements are tailored to training demands and athlete physiology, they can successfully support performance and recovery. Athletes should adhere to scientifically verified regimens, monitor their nutritional intake, and observe all WADA regulations. Future studies should include larger samples, consistent techniques, long-term follow-up, and better representation of female and elite-level athletes.

Keywords: nutritional supplements; individual sports; athletic performance; recovery; creatine; protein; caffeine; BCAAs; beta-alanine; omega-3.

Who Gets to Lead, Who Gets to Belong? Women's Leadership in Austrian Exporting SMEs

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Abstract

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are the backbone of the Austrian economy, driving internationalisation and digitalisation. Yet women remain markedly underrepresented in leadership and export-related decision-making roles. This paper asks: *who gets to belong* in the powerful spaces where export strategy is defined, and under what structural and cultural conditions? Drawing on Austria's contribution to the WOMEX Regional Mapping Study, the paper combines a quantitative survey of exporting SMEs with ten in-depth interviews with women in senior export-related roles (owners, successors, corporate leaders, and founders). While the quantitative dataset is limited—reflecting the structural scarcity of women in such positions—it provides an important backdrop for a rich qualitative analysis informed by Role Congruity Theory and the Push–Pull Theory of Women's Entrepreneurship. Findings show that women's access to export leadership is shaped by intersecting constraints: conservative gender norms, insufficient childcare and full-day schooling, part-time traps, and male-dominated organisational cultures. These conditions restrict women's mobility, delay career progression, and signal that they do not fully "belong" in strategic export spaces. At the same time, internationalisation can act as a counter-space of belonging: global markets sometimes offer more openness, recognition, and room for alternative leadership styles than domestic contexts. Many participants therefore construct belonging through entrepreneurship, family business succession, and transnational networks, rather than through formal corporate ladders. The paper contributes to critical debates on gender, power, and place by conceptualising export governance as a site where economic strategy and social (non)belonging are co-produced. It concludes with implications for policy and practice, arguing that addressing structural barriers to women's export leadership is both a social justice imperative and a competitiveness strategy for highly internationalised SME economies.

Keywords: Women in leadership; Exporting SMEs; Gender inequality; Role Congruity Theory; Women's entrepreneurship; Structural barriers; Internationalisation; Austria; Gender and trade; Organisational culture; Mixed-methods study

Gender-Inclusive Boards and Firms' Financial Performance: Evidence from UAE

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between board gender inclusion and firm financial performance in listed companies in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). The UAE represents a distinctive institutional and managerial context due to recent corporate governance reforms aimed at enhancing women's participation in boardrooms. Using cross-sectional data from 2023, the analysis covers 141 UAE-listed firms across multiple sectors. Board composition data were obtained from corporate disclosures, while financial indicators were collected from publicly available financial reports and stock market records. The study employs correlation analysis to explore associations between women's board representation and key financial fundamentals, including Total Assets, Common Equity, Net Sales/Revenues, Net Income, Return on Assets, Return on Equity, and revenue growth indicators. The findings reveal that firms with higher female representation on boards tend to exhibit significantly stronger financial fundamentals in terms of Total Assets, Common Equity, Net Sales/Revenues, and Return on Assets. These results suggest that gender-inclusive boards are associated with greater firm scale and more efficient asset utilization. However, no statistically significant relationships are observed with Net Income, Return on Equity, or revenue growth rates, indicating that the influence of women's board participation may not be uniform across all performance dimensions. Further analysis highlights the importance of board independence. Independent female directors show significant positive associations with Total Assets and Net Sales/Revenues, implying that independence may enhance women's strategic contribution to firm oversight and resource allocation. Overall, the study provides UAE-specific managerial insights into

how gender inclusion at the board level aligns with core financial performance rather than short-term profitability or growth. The findings contribute to the growing management and governance literature by offering evidence from an emerging market context and by emphasizing the relevance of board composition for financial stability and organizational structure.

Keywords: Board Gender Inclusion, Corporate Governance, Financial Performance, Women Directors, UAE

Professionalising Gender Equality: Gender Controlling between Resistance and Transformative Potential

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Abstract

Gender controlling refers to the systematic integration of gender-related objectives, indicators and monitoring systems into planning, steering and evaluation processes in order to make organisational inequalities visible and to support transformational processes in a targeted way. In higher education institutions, gender equality has long been treated as a marginal field of action. With the introduction of gender controlling, it is increasingly repositioned as a strategic governance task and as a professional field of organisational responsibility. Within the framework of the German Professorinnenprogramm 2030 (PP2030), Munich University of Applied Sciences is currently developing a centralised gender controlling system. Based on the PDCA model (Plan-Do-Check-Act), a closed, structured and transparent control loop is being established to support the continuous development of gender equality goals and to contribute to a more gender-equitable academic culture. However, the implementation process should not be understood as a purely technical exercise. Rather, it constitutes an organisational negotiation process in which questions of responsibility, legitimacy and belonging are renegotiated. This process is accompanied by a range of challenges, including the establishment of sustainable communication and networking structures, questions of how to measure gender equality goals, and organisational resistance to governance-based equality instruments. At the same time, existing experiences indicate that gender controlling can sharpen responsibilities, open up new spaces for reflection, and more firmly integrate gender equality work into central organisational decision-making processes. The paper discusses both the challenges and the transformative potential of gender controlling. It situates gender controlling within the tension between organisational steering, professionalisation and gender equality policy, and analyses its significance for organisational transformation processes in higher education institutions. Drawing on a qualitative organisational case analysis of the implementation process at a German university of applied sciences, the paper aims to critically explore and productively further develop the potential of professionalisation through controlling in the field of gender and diversity.

Keywords: Gender Controlling, Professionalisation of Gender Equality, Higher Education Institutions, Organisational Governance, Resistance to Change, Institutional Transformation

An Interactive Journey into Open Dialogue with the UNESCO Story Circle Approach

Vincent Merk

The **UNESCO Story Circle** is a structured yet flexible methodology for developing cultural awareness, intercultural competencies and inclusion in a variety of global contexts, both formal and informal. The methodology has proven to be effective on a variety of different DEI issues. This interactive approach also addresses several of the UN-SDGs. Key benefits for participants are to acquire strong skills for respect, tolerance, empathy, critical thinking and listening for understanding.

In short:

1. The UNESCO Story Circle brings people together to investigate and challenge their prejudices and biases and hence help develop inclusion and wellbeing. It also provides a space for an open dialogue in a psychological safe environment to share life experiences across cultures and generations.
2. The methodology has proven effective on many DEI issues. Participants acquire strong skills for respect, tolerance, empathy, critical thinking and listening for understanding.
3. Participants are randomly divided into circles of 4 to 6 people.

Step 1: Brief personal introduction

Step 2: Sharing personal memorable experiences with the group

Step 3 Flashback: Reflecting on the most memorable part of each participant's story

4. The general impact is to develop and implement innovative didactic and participative approaches to interculturalism within its current ecosystem by using a DEI process. The workshop will align with ICM's main goals to navigate complex global business environments with cultural intelligence, responsibility and human-centred innovative thinking.

Facilitator: Vincent Merk **Duration:** 1.5h (90 min) **Room:** flat space with mobile chairs only

Vincent Merk holds dual nationality French and Dutch. He worked for 38 years as a senior lecturer in intercultural management, trainer in professional skills and community adviser at Eindhoven University of Technology (TU/e) in the

Netherlands before he retired a few years ago. He still works as an independent intercultural trainer & consultant, speaker and author in these areas and focuses on DEI issues, including innovative educational approaches creating inclusion, belonging and wellbeing. He is an experienced facilitator of the UNESCO Story Circles method and regularly speaks on academic or business topics at academic conferences in Europe and Asia. He is a former president of SIETAR Europa.

Flexibility or Additional Work? Rethinking Gender Equality in Virtual Collaboration

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Abstract

This paper explores the experiences of women in organizations, particularly in the context of virtual collaboration. It examines how virtual teams and flexible working hours have become a platform for women to advance their careers without the traditional disruptions of maternity leave and other familial duties. While women often perceive these flexible arrangements as offering equal opportunities to men, this research reveals a more complex reality: rather than leveling the playing field, virtual work environments may inadvertently lead to women taking on even more roles and responsibilities. The study is based on qualitative research, incorporating 30 in-depth interviews with women in various professional sectors. The findings suggest that while virtual and flexible work arrangements are often viewed as a form of equality, they may paradoxically increase the burden on women, as they are expected to juggle multiple roles both professional and domestic. This paper highlights the unintended consequences of virtual work dynamics and provides a nuanced understanding of how these changes affect gender equality in the workplace. Ultimately, it calls for a reassessment of how flexibility and virtual collaboration are framed in terms of career advancement for women, urging organizations to consider the hidden costs of these arrangements.

Keywords: Virtual Teams, Gender Equality, Flexible Work, Women in Organizations, Career Advancement

Early Indicators of Gender Equality Progress in Multinational Organisations: A Practice-Based Account and an Analysis Blueprint for Selected Asian Contexts

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Abstract

Multinational organisations often commit to gender equality, yet progress can be slow or stall because organisations lack clear data on where inequality builds across the employee journey and because barriers are reinforced through everyday decisions about selection, voice, recognition, and advancement. This presentation combines a practice-based account – drawing on consulting work across multiple organisations – with a proposed study and a practical blueprint that organisations can use to diagnose barriers, track change, and identify early signs of future progress. The presentation summarises key (non-exhaustive) factors that commonly shape outcomes. In some contexts, societal expectations around caregiving and beliefs about who “looks like” a leader can influence assumptions about availability and leadership potential. Within organisations, a major barrier is missing or fragmented gender data, which makes it difficult to pinpoint where inequality builds, where progression slows, and which initiatives are working. Alongside this measurement challenge, recurring pressure points often appear in everyday decision-making routines and talent systems. These include whose input is invited and credited, how hiring and promotion decisions are made, who gains access to senior leadership development, sponsorship, and influential networks, and how pay and recognition are allocated. These patterns can be reinforced by policy–practice gaps, where leave and flexible work exist but aren’t always used, and by the unequal allocation of important but less rewarded “extra” work such as administration, coordination, and emotional support. Individual responses to these conditions – such as under-rating performance and understating achievements – can also contribute to gender gaps, and gaps can be amplified when other aspects of identity or status also affect opportunity (for example local/expat status, ethnicity, age, disability, or LGBTQ+ identity).

Proposed study and blueprint objective:

The proposed study tests whether a small set of practical key questions and measurements can be used as early indicators of an organisation’s likely

future progress on gender equality, using multi-organisation case comparisons and drawing on HR/pipeline data and document review. The blueprint focuses on three measurement inputs, framed as key questions: (1) What do five-year dashboards across the employee cycle show (job adverts and applications through shortlisting, hiring, pay, performance ratings, promotions, and exits)? (2) What do five-year gender patterns in succession planning show? (3) Who has participated over the past five years in senior leadership development and sponsorship programs? The study then compares baseline indicator patterns with follow-up outcomes (for example changes in senior representation, promotion rates, pay gaps, and exit patterns) to assess which indicators are most useful for signalling progress and where action is most needed. This presentation's contribution is a clear, adaptable blueprint that links workplace realities with a focused set of measures that support practical accountability and sustained change.

Keywords: Workplace studies; gender equality; multinational organisations; Asia; talent pipelines; succession planning