Restricted Voices:

The Impact of Shrinking Civic Space on Gender-Based Violence and Human Rights Advocacy in Albania

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Table of contents

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Executive summary

In recent years, Albania has experienced a troubling contraction of civic space, defined as the set of conditions that allow individuals and organizations to freely associate, express opinions, assemble peacefully, and engage in advocacy. This space is not only vital for democracy and public accountability but also serves as the foundation upon which civil society actors, particularly those defending human rights, promote gender equality and provide essential services to marginalized communities.

This report, commissioned by the Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN), investigates the scope and impact of shrinking civic space on civil society organizations (CSOs) and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) in Albania. The research specifically focuses on organizations and individuals working at the intersection of gender-based violence (GBV), human rights (HR), LGBTQI+ inclusion, and equality advocacy. These actors have increasingly found themselves at the frontlines of public hostility, institutional neglect, and ideological backlash, yet remain vital to the protection of democratic values and human dignity.

The report explores how civic space restrictions—legal, financial, digital, and cultural—are shaping the landscape in which Albanian civil society operates. It documents not only the challenges but also the resilience, innovation, and continued impact of CSOs and WHRDs. The findings provide a foundation for urgent and actionable recommendations for the Government of Albania, donors, oversight bodies, and civil society itself.

The shrinking of civic space is a global trend that has taken on specific dimensions in Albania, shaped by both international political currents and domestic developments. CSOs working on women's rights and human rights report rising levels of public hostility, smear campaigns, funding insecurity, and exclusion from decision-making processes. Meanwhile, the anti-gender movement, conservative backlash, and state disengagement have contributed to the delegitimization of feminist and rights-based organizations.

The purpose of this research is to:

- document and analyze the lived experiences of CSOs and WHRDs working in GBV and HR fields.
- assess the impact of shrinking civic space on their operations, safety, and advocacy.
- identify patterns of risk, sources of pressure, and institutional responses.
- provide evidence-based recommendations to improve the enabling environment for rights-based civil society in Albania.

The research utilized a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic.

A survey was distributed to organizations working in GBV, women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights, and broader human rights. Responses were collected from 22 CSO representatives across urban, suburban, and rural areas. The survey explored organizational profiles, experiences of harassment or threats, operational constraints, advocacy effectiveness, and views on institutional support and accountability.

Two focus group discussions were conducted with WHRDs and feminist organizations, capturing deeper reflections on intersectional risks, public backlash, and resilience strategies.

The research also included a literature review, drawing from national and international sources, including reports by Kvinna till Kvinna, European Parliament, CIVICUS, and Council of Europe, etc. as well as recent monitoring data on civic space and gender equality in Albania.

The combination of quantitative scale and qualitative depth ensures that the findings are not only statistically grounded, but also reflective of the complex realities faced by defenders on the ground.

Key findings:

Shrinking civic space is multidimensional and intensifying. Civic space in Albania is shrinking through a combination of legal, financial, social, and ideological pressures. While there is no single policy that curtails civil society, the cumulative effect of bureaucratic obstacles, public hostility, regulatory ambiguity, and chronic underfunding has significantly limited the operational capacity and public visibility of rights-based organizations.

- 95.45% of respondents reported reduced access to funding as a major challenge, especially for grassroots, rural, and women-led CSOs.
- over 59% cited excessive bureaucratization and online smear campaigns as significant barriers to their work.
- legal ambiguity and fear of criminalization (reported by 18.18%) contribute to self-censorship and organizational retreat from public advocacy.

These challenges are interconnected and mutually reinforcing, creating an environment where civil society is pressured to depoliticize, professionalize, or remain silent.

GBV and human rights advocacy is increasingly high-risk. Organizations working on GBV and human rights face disproportionate risks. These groups are perceived not only as service providers but also as symbols of broader social transformation, which draws public and political backlash.

- ✓ 50% of respondents reported experiencing harassment or threats because of their work.
- ✓ 22.73% had received death threats, with LGBTQI+ rights defenders and feminist advocates being particularly targeted.
- ✓ The most contentious advocacy areas included anti-gender rhetoric opposition (63.64%), freedom of expression (54.55%), and LGBTQI+ rights (40.91%).

The intersectional nature of this hostility—where gender, sexuality, and advocacy converge—makes WHRDs especially vulnerable to reputational attacks, isolation, and emotional burnout.

Threats come from a diverse and diffuse range of actors. The sources of threats reported by respondents reflect both institutional and societal hostility. Harassment does not come from a single entity, but rather from a range of state and non-state actors, including:

- ✓ Internet trolls (18.18%) and family or community members (22.73%), particularly in rural or conservative settings.
- ✓ Anti-gender movements, political parties, and religious actors, all identified by more than 9% of respondents as active contributors to the shrinking space.
- ✓ Government institutions, cited by some as unresponsive or even complicit in creating a hostile environment through selective enforcement, inaction, or smear campaigns.

This fragmentation of threat sources makes accountability difficult and further erodes the sense of protection for WHRDs and CSOs.

Advocacy remains resilient but under strain. Despite the hostile context, CSOs and WHRDs continue to engage in impactful advocacy. Many have adapted their strategies to ensure safety and sustainability:

- ✓ 77.27% of respondents report using capacity-building, digital tools, and public campaigns to raise awareness.
- ✓ Over 68% collaborate with international organizations, and nearly 73% participate in peer support networks, creating informal safety nets and solidarity structures.

- ✓ Impact areas included increased public awareness of rights (68.18%), empowerment of marginalized groups (63.64%), and community-level transformation (50%).

However, these efforts are often made without adequate institutional backing or legal protection, resulting in chronic fatigue, staff turnover, and limited long-term impact.

Impact on survivors and marginalized communities. Perhaps the most severe consequence of shrinking civic space is the diminished support and visibility for survivors of GBV and marginalized groups. As organizations scale back their outreach and services due to fear, underfunding, or stigma, critical needs go unmet.

- ✓ Survivors may refrain from seeking help due to fear of exposure or lack of trust in the system.
- ✓ Rights violations—particularly against Roma women, LGBTQI+ people, and women with disabilities—are increasingly underreported and unchallenged.
- ✓ Service fragmentation has weakened referral mechanisms, delayed case resolution, and diminished coordination between CSOs and public institutions.

These findings emphasize that shrinking civic space is not an abstract policy issue—it has immediate, material consequences for people's lives, safety, and dignity.

Civic space erosion is deeply gendered and culturally rooted. The shrinking of civic space in Albania is not only institutional—it is heavily influenced by cultural, ideological, and gender-based resistance to rights work. The anti-gender discourse, often amplified by political and religious actors, frames gender equality and LGBTQI+ inclusion as threats to national identity, traditional values, or family norms.

- ✓ 63.64% of respondents identified anti-gender movements as a primary driver of civic space restrictions.
- ✓ Feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations are not only delegitimized as "foreign agents" or "Western-funded," but also increasingly subjected to narratives of moral panic and public scapegoating.
- ✓ This framing fosters a hostile public climate, where civic activism is treated as deviant or dangerous, particularly when led by women or sexual minorities.

This trend is especially alarming because it both normalizes hate speech and undermines long-standing human rights frameworks by portraying equality as a threat rather than a constitutional guarantee.

Inadequate support systems for WHRDs and at-risk CSOs. A cross-cutting concern across the survey and focus group findings was the limited and fragmented nature of support mechanisms for WHRDs and vulnerable CSOs.

- ✓ Only 4.55% of respondents rated existing support mechanisms as "very adequate."
- ✓ While peer networks and community solidarity were strong, formal mechanisms—such as public funding, emergency protection, or psychosocial support—were described as inaccessible, unsustainable, or overly bureaucratic.
- ✓ Organizations under threat often must rely on informal networks, personal relationships, or international support rather than state protection.

Key recommendations

To the Government of Albania:

- Enact a national legal framework for the protection of human rights defenders.
- Institutionalize meaningful participation of CSOs in policy-making and legal reform.
- Respond promptly to threats, investigate hate campaigns, and sanction perpetrators.
- Improve public funding access for grassroots and women-led CSOs.
- Actively counter disinformation and hate speech through public education and media regulation.

To donors and development partners:

- Provide flexible, core funding that supports long-term advocacy and care infrastructure.
- Fund integrated protection services (e.g., digital security, psychosocial support, emergency aid).
- Elevate civic space concerns in dialogue with the Albanian government and EU institutions.
- Design intersectional and inclusive programs for marginalized and at-risk CSOs.

To Civil Society Organizations and networks:

- Build cross-sectoral alliances to amplify advocacy and public visibility.
- Share resources and develop mutual protection protocols within and across networks.
- Monitor and publish data on shrinking space trends, linking them to survivor outcomes and democracy indicators.
- Engage communities and media in framing gender equality and rights as national, not foreign, priorities.

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and rationale

Across the globe, civil society organizations (CSOs) are increasingly confronting a complex and hostile environment marked by legal restrictions, bureaucratic burdens, public discrediting, and, in some cases, direct threats to their safety and work. This global phenomenon, often referred to as the shrinking of civic space, poses serious risks to democratic governance, inclusive development, and the protection of fundamental human rights.

Shrinking civic space refers to the progressive restriction of the rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly—the foundational freedoms that allow CSOs and individuals to participate freely and safely in public life. These restrictions may manifest through legislation, administrative obstacles, funding limitations, disinformation campaigns, surveillance, or even violence—often targeting those engaged in sensitive work, such as promoting gender equality, defending LGBTQI+ rights, or advocating for marginalized communities[1].

This complex trend has triggered global concern, especially in Europe. According to the European Parliament's report on the shrinking space for civil society, civil and political rights have been increasingly constrained in some Member States, particularly under the pretext of combatting disinformation, terrorism, or hate speech. Such measures have led to strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), burdensome administrative processes, restrictions on advocacy, and efforts to delegitimize CSOs through smear campaigns and hostile rhetoric. The report highlights that organizations working on women's rights, LGBTIQ+ issues, rule of law, anti-corruption, and minority protection are especially exposed to harassment and shrinking access to public resources[2].

Throughout the past year, civil society in the Western Balkans has operated in a narrowing civic space, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.[3] Across the region, SLAPP cases targeting journalists and activists have risen, posing a further threat to freedom of expression. Anti Money Laundering and counter terrorist financing (AML/CFT) legislation and practice still creates major administrative burdens for CSOs, while the inconsistent implementation of tax and fiscal legislation poses limitations to the operations and development of civil society, starting from dysfunctional tax incentives to non-transparent and ineffective public funding systems. The deteriorating relationship between governments and civil society across the region poses a threat to democracy and limits CSOs' involvement in public dialogue and policymaking processes. [4]

In Albania, this trend is becoming increasingly visible and has had a particularly detrimental impact on organizations and activists working in the fields of gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights (HR). While Albania's legal framework guarantees civil liberties and recognizes the role of civil society, the enabling environment has weakened due to insufficient consultation, legal uncertainty, funding insecurity, and growing public hostility—especially toward feminist, LGBTQI+, and rights-based advocacy. On the other hand, in Albania, the lack of independent media has been a significant human rights issue, with political pressure, corruption, and self-censorship hindering freedom of speech.

Women-led organizations, including those advocating for LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive justice, anti-discrimination, and survivor-centered responses to GBV, have come under mounting pressure. These groups often challenge entrenched power structures and dominant social norms, making them more susceptible to conservative backlash, anti-gender rhetoric, and political resistance. As a result, they face increasing obstacles in

[1] United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), "Civic Space", https://www.ohchr.org/en/civic-space

[2] REPORT on the shrinking space for civil society in Europe, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-9-2022-0032_EN.html

[3] According to the CIVICUS Monitor ratings: Albania is rated as "narrowed", Bosnia and Herzegovina is rated as "Obstructed", Kosovo is rated as "narrowed", Montenegro as "narrowed", North Macedonia is rated as "narrowed" and Serbia is rated as "Obstructed", see more: https://monitor.civicus.org/

[4] Civic Space Report 2024. WESTERN BALKANS, available at: CIVIC-SPACE-REPORT-2024-WESTERN-BALKANS-1.pdf

conducting outreach, engaging in public discourse, and delivering essential services to survivors and vulnerable groups.

CSOs working on GBV and HR report shrinking civic space across multiple dimensions. Barriers to accessing public information remain widespread ranging from unresponsive institutions and unclear calls for funding, to information being withheld or delivered in non-accessible formats. In addition, these organizations are often targeted by smear campaigns from political actors, pro-government media, or government-organized NGOs. Such attacks not only undermine their credibility, but also expose individual staff and activists to harassment, hate speech, and discrimination. Some groups have reported that official statements are distorted by the media, while others have noted the creation of preferential funding schemes that benefit "loyal" organizations while penalizing critical ones. In extreme cases, youth-led or rights-based organizations have expressed fear of being banned, surveilled, or attacked by militant groups.

These experiences reflect broader findings from reports such as *the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation's 2023 report, "The State of Women Human Rights Defenders 2023"*[5], which document how women's rights defenders across the Western Balkans face shrinking space not only from state actors but also from a hostile cultural and political climate. Similarly, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders highlights that many women human rights defenders operate in environments where, in addition to facing violence, legal restrictions, physical attack, intimidation and criminalization as a result of their human rights work, they must also battle against deeply embedded patriarchal values that do not see them as equal or legitimate actors. Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) are often subjected to gender-specific threats, including defamation, online abuse, and attempts to discredit their activism through patriarchal narratives. [6].

In Albania, the consequences are already evident. Feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations report harassment, disinformation, a lack of sustainable funding, and limited engagement from institutional actors. These constraints not only jeopardize the safety and effectiveness of rights defenders but also undermine access to justice, protection, and participation for those they represent—especially survivors of GBV, women in rural areas, Roma and Egyptian communities, and LGBTQI+ individuals.

Recognizing the urgency of these challenges, the Albanian Women Empowerment Network (AWEN) commissioned this research to explore the impact of shrinking civic space on CSOs and WHRDs engaged in GBV and human rights work. The research also aims to assess the effectiveness of advocacy strategies in navigating and resisting these restrictions and to provide evidence-based recommendations for strengthening the enabling environment for civil society in Albania.

1.2 Purpose and objectives of the research

The *primary purpose* of this research is to contribute to the documentation and analysis of how civic space restrictions are shaping the landscape of gender and human rights advocacy in Albania. *Specifically*, the study aims to:

- assess the manifestations and patterns of shrinking civic space as experienced by CSOs and WHRDs working on GBV and HR issues;
- examine the effects of these restrictions on their ability to carry out advocacy, mobilize communities, and deliver essential services;
- identify successful and emerging advocacy strategies that have proven effective in restrictive environments;
- generate recommendations for national authorities, international stakeholders, and civil society actors to protect and expand civic space and support women-led advocacy.

[5] https://kvinnatillkvinna.org/publications/the-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023/
[6] UN Special Rapporteur (2023) "*Situation of human rights defenders,* available at: **https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/4017738?ln=en&v=pdf**

1.3 Scope of the report

The report focuses on the experiences of women's rights organizations, WCSOs, LGBTIQ+ organizations, and individual WHRDs in Albania, with particular attention to those working at the intersection of gender, human rights, and marginalized identities. The analysis integrates both quantitative data—collected through a structured national survey—and qualitative inputs, including open-ended responses and examples shared by CSOs on their experiences.

While the data collection tool was designed to also inform a complementary report on Women as Human Rights Defenders, this report maintains a specific focus on the impact of shrinking civic space and the effectiveness of advocacy interventions related to GBV and HR.

1.4 Structure of the report

Following this introduction, the report is organized into nine core sections and annexes, each contributing to a comprehensive understanding of the shrinking civic space in Albania—particularly as it affects women's rights organizations, LGBTI+ activists, and those working on gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights (HR):

- **Section 2: Methodology**. This section describes the research design and approach, including the use of a mixed-methods framework that integrates both quantitative and qualitative data. It outlines the development and distribution of the national survey, the collection of open-ended responses, and the process of engaging participants from CSOs, WCSOs, LGBTI+ groups, and individual WHRDs. It also details the ethical considerations applied to ensure confidentiality, informed consent, and the protection of participants involved in sensitive and potentially high-risk work.
- **Section 3: The context of civic space in Albania**. This section presents the broader political, legal, and social environment in which civil society operates. It analyzes recent legislative developments, the role of government - CSO relations, public funding mechanisms, and shifts in public discourse. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding how political rhetoric, policy changes, and conservative backlash have contributed to an increasingly challenging operating environment for rights-based organizations.
- **Section 4: Findings.** This section summarizes the major findings of the research, drawing on survey data, focus group discussions, and open-ended qualitative responses from civil society organizations (CSOs), WHRDs, and advocacy groups across Albania. The central findings of the research are presented across five interlinked sections, each addressing different dimensions of shrinking civic space and its implications for gender justice and human rights, including: manifestations of shrinking civic space; impact on GBV and HR work; advocacy under pressure and state response and accountability.
- **Section 5: Conclusions**. Summarizing the key insights from the previous sections, this part of the report synthesizes the main patterns of civic space restriction and their implications for democracy, gender equality, and rights-based work in Albania. It also highlights the intersectional risks faced by WHRDs, LGBTI+ groups, and marginalized communities.
- **Section 6: Recommendations**. This section offers targeted and actionable recommendations tailored to different stakeholder groups, including the Albanian government, international donors, civil society networks, and independent oversight bodies. The recommendations focus on enhancing legal protections, ensuring meaningful CSO participation in policymaking, addressing gendered risks, and improving access to sustainable funding and protection mechanisms.
- **Annexes**. The annexes provide supplementary materials that support the main report. These include the survey tool used in the research, a glossary of key terms, a bibliography of literature and sources consulted, and acknowledgments to those who contributed to the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research approach

This research adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data to provide a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of how the shrinking civic space in Albania affects the work of CSOs, WCSOs, LGBTI+ organizations, and WHRDs engaged in GBV and HR advocacy.

The methodology was designed to balance coverage and nuance—generating empirical evidence on the frequency and forms of restrictions (quantitative) while also capturing the lived realities, challenges, and coping strategies of those operating within constrained civic environments (qualitative). This approach enabled the research to examine not only *what* is happening, but *how* and *why* civic space is experienced as shrinking, particularly by those working on sensitive and marginalized issues.

The *quantitative component* was based on a structured survey distributed to representatives of CSOs, WCSOs, and LGBTI+ organizations across Albania. The survey included:

- Closed-ended questions to collect measurable data on:
    - Types and frequency of civic space restrictions (e.g., online/offline harassment, smear campaigns, legal or financial barriers);
    - Impact of restrictions on advocacy, service provision, and organizational sustainability;
    - Effectiveness of advocacy strategies under pressure;
    - Availability and perceived adequacy of institutional support and protection mechanisms;
    - Experiences with public authorities, access to funding, and exposure to hate speech or disinformation.
- Demographic and organizational profile questions to allow for disaggregation by geographic location, type and focus of organization, and years of experience in human rights and gender advocacy.

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistical methods to identify trends, commonalities, and regional or thematic differences among respondents.

To complement the survey data and provide greater context and depth, the research also included a *qualitative component*, which consisted of:

- *Open-ended survey responses*, where participants were invited to elaborate on specific experiences, describe concrete incidents of restriction or harassment, and share perspectives on coping strategies and resilience.
- *Two focus group discussions*, which were conducted with a diverse group of WHRDs, WCSO members, and LGBTI+ activists. These sessions created a space for collective reflection and dialogue, allowing participants to share:
    - in-depth accounts of shrinking civic space and its impact on their work;
    - observations about shifts in public attitudes and institutional behavior;
    - experiences with funding restrictions, legal pressures, and public delegitimization;
    - strategies they have used to resist, adapt, or continue their advocacy under pressure;
    - suggestions for collective action, solidarity, and institutional reform.

Thematic analysis was applied to qualitative data—both from survey responses and focus group transcripts—to identify recurring patterns, key challenges, and examples of resilience. This helped to validate and enrich the quantitative findings while grounding them in lived experience.

The research design was informed by international frameworks on civic space, human rights, and gender equality, including those developed by the Kvinna till Kvinna, United Nations (UN), European Union (EU), Council of Europe,

and CIVICUS, as well as by AWEN's extensive field-based experience working with women's rights organizations and feminist advocacy networks throughout Albania. This combination of global standards and local insight ensured that the research remained both methodologically robust and contextually grounded.

2.2 Data collection methods

The following methods and tools were used to collect the data:

a. Survey

The primary method for data collection was a structured questionnaire distributed to representatives of AWEN member organizations, as well as other CSOs working in the fields of women's rights, GBV, human rights, and LGBTI+ rights. This targeted sampling approach aimed to capture a focused and relevant dataset, reflecting the experiences of organizations at the forefront of advocacy and service provision in Albania.
The survey included both closed and open-ended questions and was designed to collect data on demographic and organizational characteristics, areas of focus, direct experiences with threats or restrictions, the impact of shrinking civic space on advocacy effectiveness, and strategies for organizational resilience and institutional engagement. Specific modules also addressed the experiences of Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), allowing the results to be used in two interrelated research streams.

AWEN disseminated the questionnaire electronically to 22 organizations—its own members and selected CSOs active in women's and human rights issues across Albania, including rural and suburban contexts. Each organization was given two weeks to complete the survey, and all 22 organizations responded, returning the completed questionnaires electronically.

b. Qualitative Inputs

In addition to survey responses, two small focus group discussions were organized with 5–6 participants each. These discussions provided deeper insight into some of the emerging themes and allowed participants to share contextualized experiences in a more interactive format.
While no standalone interviews were conducted, the survey's open-ended questions yielded rich qualitative data. Respondents shared detailed examples of human rights violations, advocacy challenges under pressure, perceived failures and good practices in institutional responses, and their own recommendations for improving civic space and state accountability. These qualitative insights complemented the quantitative data, contributing to the identification of recurring themes, compelling quotes, and key contextual dynamics.

Sample profile

The research sample was composed of 22 civil society organizations (CSOs) across Albania, selected through a targeted sampling approach. The sample was designed to ensure the inclusion of diverse organizational profiles that are actively engaged in the protection and promotion of women's rights, gender equality, and broader human rights. AWEN disseminated the structured questionnaire electronically to its member organizations as well as to other partner CSOs known for their work in areas such as GBV prevention and response, feminist advocacy, legal assistance, and LGBTI+ rights. All 22 organizations responded within a two-week window, returning the completed surveys electronically.
The sample reflects a broad spectrum of civil society actors, including:

- women-led and feminist organizations, with a long-standing presence in grassroots mobilization, policy advocacy, and service delivery;
- organizations specializing in GBV prevention and survivor support, including provision of shelter, psychosocial services, and legal aid;

- CSOs working on LGBTI+ rights, offering legal counseling, awareness-raising, and advocacy for anti-discrimination policies;
- human rights advocacy activists, addressing civic freedoms, democratic governance, and the rule of law;

Respondents were asked to self-identify based on their organizational mission, geographic coverage, and thematic focus. This allowed for nuanced data analysis that could differentiate between the types of organizations, the regions they operate in, and the specific threats or challenges they face in a context of shrinking civic space.
Geographically, the sample included organizations from both urban centers and more remote or underserved regions, ensuring a balanced perspective that captures variations in the enabling environment for civil society. The inclusion of LGBTI+ organizations and CSOs from rural and suburban areas was particularly important in understanding intersectional vulnerabilities and the differentiated impact of civic space restrictions.
The selected organizations also varied in size and structure, ranging from small organizations to more established entities with multi-year programs and institutional partnerships. This diversity provided a comprehensive picture of how shrinking civic space is experienced across different organizational capacities, roles, and constituencies.

2.3 Data analysis

Data were analyzed through a combination of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative responses were processed using descriptive statistics to explore the frequency and distribution of reported challenges and patterns related to civic space restrictions. Cross-tabulations were employed to examine differences across types of organizations and geographic areas.

Qualitative data from open-ended responses and focus group discussions were analyzed using thematic coding. This enabled the identification of key issues, including harassment types, institutional (in)effectiveness, and strategies for resilience. Selected quotes and examples are included in the report to illustrate prominent trends and lived experiences.

2.4 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the vulnerability of WHRDs, LGBTI+ groups, and other CSO representatives working in politically or socially challenging contexts, the research process adhered to strict ethical protocols.
Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were made fully aware of the research purpose, their rights, and how their data would be used. Participation was voluntary, and respondents could skip any questions or withdraw at any time. No personally identifying information was collected; all responses were anonymized and securely stored to ensure confidentiality.

A strong emphasis was placed on the “do no harm” principle, particularly in relation to participants operating in areas with more limited civic space. The research design prioritized minimizing potential risks and ensuring that participation would not compromise the safety or standing of individuals or organizations.

3. The context of civic space in Albania

3.1 Civic space: Definition and global trends

Civic space refers to the environment in which individuals and civil society organizations (CSOs) can freely exercise their fundamental rights to freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. It forms the foundation of democratic governance and inclusive development. An open civic space enables people to organize, participate in public life, advocate for social justice, and hold authorities accountable. It is especially critical for marginalized and underrepresented groups—such as women, LGBTI+ communities, youth, and ethnic minorities—who rely on civic engagement to voice their concerns and influence decision-making processes.

In recent years, however, civic space has been increasingly restricted across the globe. Both authoritarian regimes and democracies have adopted legal and extralegal strategies that constrain civil society activity, suppress dissent, and limit public participation. According to the CIVICUS Monitor 2024, only 40 out of 198 countries and territories have an open civic space rating, indicating widespread respect for civic freedoms. In comparison, 81 countries and territories are rated in the worst two categories of having restricted and closed civic space, indicating widespread and routine repression of fundamental freedoms. Some 72.4 percent of the global population lives under these repressive conditions. Almost 30 percent lives in countries where civic space is completely closed[7].

The CIVICUS report documents a growing pattern of bureaucratic and legal restrictions imposed on CSOs, such as complex registration procedures, excessive reporting requirements, and ambiguous laws that criminalize activism or public protest. In 2023 alone, more than 100 countries passed or amended laws affecting the operations and independence of civil society organizations. These legislative changes often target groups working on human rights, gender equality, and LGBTI+ issues—areas considered "sensitive" or "politically contentious" by governments seeking to maintain control over public discourse.

Restrictions on access to funding, especially foreign funding, have also intensified. Many governments have introduced laws requiring CSOs to register as "foreign agents" or disclose their international donors, stigmatizing their work and threatening their financial sustainability. According to data from the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC), a growing number of aid recipient countries have adopted restrictive measures on the cross-border flow of resources to civil society, which has had a chilling effect on the ability of human rights organizations to operate freely. Harassment, intimidation, and violence against civil society actors are becoming increasingly widespread. Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis 2023/24 highlights the risks and threats faced by human rights defenders (HRDs) worldwide. According to Front Line Defenders, at least 300 HRDs were killed in 28 countries in 2023. Globally, HRDs cited arbitrary arrest/detention (15%) as the most common right violation, followed by legal action (13%), continuing an ongoing trend of criminalization as the most reported risk[8]. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs), in particular, face gender-specific threats, including online abuse, sexual violence, and smear campaigns aimed at discrediting their work. The LGBTI+ community is likewise subject to targeted attacks—both by state authorities and non-state actors—in a growing number of countries where advocacy for equality is branded as immoral or illegal.

Public discourse has also become more hostile. Negative rhetoric from political leaders, media outlets, and religious institutions is increasingly used to delegitimize civil society, portraying activists as threats to national security, cultural values, or public order. This stigmatization fuels social polarization and incites public hostility against organizations working on gender rights, migration, environmental justice, and sexual and reproductive health.

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[7] https://monitor.civicus.org/globalfindings_2024/innumbers/

[8] Front Line Defenders' Global Analysis 2023/24. https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/1578_fld_ga23_online_u03.pdf?eType=EmailBlastContent&eId=2014dfc6-80be-4a78-a471-6945c6ef9434

The online space—once a vital platform for activism and mobilization—has also seen increased surveillance, censorship, and regulation. According to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net 2023 report[9], internet freedom declined globally for the 13th consecutive year, with governments using digital tools to silence critics and restrict civic engagement online. Online attacks, doxxing, and hacking of activists' social media accounts have become common tactics used to undermine civic voices and discourage digital organizing.

These global developments are not isolated but rather interconnected components of a broader backlash against democratic values, human rights, and gender equality. In many countries, feminist movements and organizations working on gender-based violence and LGBTI+ rights are explicitly targeted by conservative or authoritarian governments who frame such activism as a threat to "traditional values" or national identity. The rise of anti-gender movements in Europe, Latin America, and parts of Africa and Asia has created additional pressure on civil society actors defending sexual and reproductive rights.

International institutions have recognized this growing crisis. The European Union's 2023 Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy emphasized the importance of protecting civic space as a precondition for democratic accountability and sustainable peace[10]. Similarly, the United Nations has issued multiple calls through its Special Rapporteurs on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association to safeguard civic space as essential to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals—particularly SDG 16 on peace, justice, and strong institutions.

In sum, the global contraction of civic space is not only a democratic concern but a development, security, and human rights crisis. The voices of civil society actors—especially those representing marginalized communities—are indispensable to inclusive governance and social transformation. Ensuring that these actors can operate freely and safely is a collective responsibility that demands urgent attention from governments, donors, and multilateral organizations alike.

3.2 Civic space in Albania: current status

In Albania, civic space remains formally protected under the Constitution, which guarantees freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly. However, in practice, this space has become increasingly fragile between 2019 and 2024. Legal ambiguities, restrictive policies, weak institutional support, and growing hostility toward rights-based organizations—particularly those working on gender, LGBTI+ rights, and anti-corruption—have contributed to a constriction of the civic environment. While civil society continues to play an essential role in service provision, advocacy, and accountability, its ability to operate independently and influence policymaking is under mounting pressure.

A key concern among civil society actors in Albania has been the adoption of laws and policies that increase administrative burdens or limit organizational freedoms. One of the most contentious examples is the 2021 Law "On the Registration of Non-Profit Organizations," introduced under the justification of aligning with anti-money laundering frameworks. While the law sought compliance with international standards, over 120 CSOs publicly criticized it for imposing coercive measures that could restrict freedom of association, such as mandatory registration of informal groups and overlapping reporting obligations. Excessive fines and steep administrative penalties, as outlined in the law, have been flagged as potentially "crippling" for small or grassroots organizations that cannot afford legal or financial compliance costs[11][12].
At the same time, the legal framework for freedom of assembly saw a rare positive development. In May 2021, the Constitutional Court ruled as unconstitutional a Penal Code provision that had criminalized protests lacking

[9] https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2023-10/Freedom-on-the-net-2023-DigitalBooklet.pdf
[10] 2023 Annual Report on Human Rights and Democracy in the World | EEAS
[11] monitor.civicus.org
[12] https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/62-3-MM-Regional-Report-2022.pdf

police permission. This landmark decision removed a significant legal barrier to peaceful assembly[13]. However, broader legislative efforts have trended toward restriction. An "anti-defamation" package introduced in 2019 aimed to regulate online media was widely criticized by civil society and international observers, including the Venice Commission, as a threat to free speech. While the government pledged revisions in 2021, concerns about its potential revival persist[14].
International watchdogs such as Freedom House have warned about the misuse of anti-terrorism and anti-money laundering legislation to monitor, intimidate, or restrict NGOs and media organizations under the pretext of national security. While these laws have not resulted in widespread closures or bans, their chilling effect has prompted many organizations to limit their advocacy or adjust their programming to avoid political backlash.

The relationship between government institutions and civil society in Albania is characterized by a formal commitment to dialogue but limited substantive engagement. Mechanisms such as the National Council for Civil Society (NCSC) and the Law on Public Consultation exist on paper, but their impact is weak. According to the European Commission's 2023 Albania Report, the NCSC remains under-resourced and its influence in policymaking minimal[15]. The government's Roadmap for an Enabling Environment for Civil Society (2019–2023) has largely remained unimplemented[16].

Several legislative processes between 2020 and 2023, including reforms related to NGO financing and judicial restructuring, were pushed through without genuine consultation with civil society. For example, the judicial territorial reform in 2021 was adopted with minimal CSO input, despite warnings that the closure of local courts would significantly reduce access to justice. Likewise, the government invoked COVID-19 restrictions to justify bypassing standard consultation procedures on new laws affecting NGOs and public access to funding[17].
This superficial approach to consultation has eroded trust. Civic actors frequently report that public participation is reduced to a box-ticking exercise, with little evidence that CSO feedback influences final decisions. Polarization further undermines cooperation, with authorities often favoring select "friendly" NGOs while discrediting or ignoring critical voices[18].

One of the most significant structural challenges facing Albanian civil society is financial instability. Although more than 11,000 NGOs are formally registered, only a fraction remain active due to limited access to funding. The sector is heavily reliant on foreign donors, with minimal public or private domestic support. According to Freedom House, the COVID-19 pandemic and 2019 earthquake led to a sharp drop in available resources, with many donors redirecting funds to emergency response and pandemic relief. This left organizations—especially women's rights and grassroots human rights groups—struggling to retain staff or maintain critical services[19].
Public funding remains limited and fragmented. The Agency for the Support of Civil Society (ASCS) offers small-scale grants, but its annual budget is insufficient to meet the sector's needs. Promised reforms such as VAT reimbursement for donor-funded projects and tax incentives for philanthropy remain unimplemented, further weakening the financial sustainability of CSOs[20].

For organizations working on issue such as LGBTQI+ rights, reproductive health, and anti-corruption—funding opportunities are even more constrained. Donor fatigue, shifting priorities, and short-term project cycles make it difficult for these groups to plan for the long term or invest in organizational development. Although government

[13] https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/protests-over-gender-based-violence-media-banned-parliamentary-sittings/#:~:text=In%20a%20major%20positive%20ruling%2C,revise%20the%20country%27s%20penal%20code
[14] https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/fight-environmental-rights-continues/#:~:text=Following%20a%20visit%20to%20Tirana,for%20amendments%20to%20the%20package
[15] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf
[16] Ibid
[17] Albania: Nations in Transit 2022 Country Report | Freedom House
[18] https://balkancsd.net/novo/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/62-3-MM-Regional-Report-2022.pdf#:~:text=society,case%20of%20BiH%2C%20the%20latest
[19] Albania: Nations in Transit 2022 Country Report | Freedom House
[20] https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2023-11/SWD_2023_690%20Albania%20report.pdf

funding for shelters and victim services has increased slightly in recent years, delays in disbursement and bureaucratic hurdles continue to undermine program delivery[21].

In parallel with institutional pressures, civil society in Albania is grappling with increasingly hostile public narratives, particularly targeting feminist and LGBTQI+ movements. Activists have reported growing smear campaigns, online abuse, and verbal attacks in the media. After a Transparency International report on corruption in Albania was released in 2021, pro-government outlets targeted the local researchers behind it, accusing them of political bias and exposing their families to public scrutiny[22]. Gender rights activists have also been the subject of public backlash, with feminist groups portrayed as radical or foreign-influenced. Anti-gender narratives—often amplified on social media and echoed by certain politicians and religious leaders—frame advocacy for gender equality and LGBTQ+ rights as a threat to national identity and family values[23]. These narratives not only reinforce stigma and discrimination but also create a chilling effect on civic participation, as activists report self-censorship and burnout.

CSOs working on sensitive or politically contested issues face disproportionate challenges. Women's rights organizations continue to fill service gaps left by the state, offering shelters, helplines, and legal aid to survivors of domestic violence and trafficking. Yet they do so in an environment marked by inadequate institutional support and pervasive societal resistance. Despite strong legal frameworks and a government with one of the highest shares of women ministers in Europe, gender-based violence remains endemic.

LGBTQI+ organizations, though increasingly visible, operate in a hostile social environment. While Albania's legal framework prohibits discrimination and a National Action Plan for LGBTI People (2021–2027) exists, implementation is weak and public support is minimal. Activists continue to report hate speech, threats, and institutional inaction—especially around events like Tirana Pride. Transgender communities, in particular, face high levels of violence and exclusion, often without adequate protection or recourse.

Advocacy on other sensitive issues—such as environmental protection, Roma and Egyptian rights, and reproductive health—also faces indirect repression. From strategic lawsuits to discrediting campaigns, civic actors in these fields report similar patterns of marginalization and intimidation. While activists are rarely jailed or directly banned, the cumulative effect of administrative burdens, toxic discourse, financial insecurity, and institutional exclusion creates a stifling environment.

3.3 Political and social drivers of shrinking civic space

The contraction of civic space in Albania has been particularly acute for women's civil society organizations (WCSOs) and other rights-based CSOs working on gender-based violence (GBV), LGBTQI+ rights, and broader human rights issues. While formal legal protections for civil society remain in place, the environment in which these organizations operate has become increasingly challenging, shaped not only by legal or financial pressures but also by a broader set of political, cultural, and social forces that actively constrain their influence and legitimacy.

CSOs have reported rising administrative burdens that undermine their operational capacity. The 2021 Law "On the Registration of Non-Profit Organizations," for example, introduced overlapping reporting requirements, mandatory registration for informal groups, and steep fines for administrative violations. While framed as part of anti-money laundering compliance, these measures have disproportionately impacted small, women-led, and

[21] https://freedomhouse.org/country/albania/nations-transit/2022#:~:text=,campaigns%2C%20the%20names%20of%20their
[22] Ibid
[23] https://monitor.civicus.org/explore/protests-over-gender-based-violence-media-banned-parliamentary-sittings/#:~:text=In%20a%20separate%20development%2C%20human,recognised%2C%20as%20a%20single%20mother

grassroots organizations that lack dedicated legal or financial staff. These constraints are not merely bureaucratic—they are experienced as mechanisms of control, especially when enforcement appears selective. A 2022 regional analysis found that over 60% of CSOs in the Western Balkans faced increased scrutiny related to financial transparency and registration, with feminist and human rights organizations reporting that such measures often coincide with their public advocacy efforts[24].

A significant driver of shrinking civic space for WCSOs is the rise of anti-gender rhetoric in public discourse. In Albania, feminist organizations and those working with survivors of GBV or advocating for LGBTQI+ rights have increasingly been targeted by narratives that frame them as "anti-family," "radical," or "Western agents." These narratives are often propagated by political figures, religious leaders, and social media influencers and serve to delegitimize the work of women-led and human rights organizations. Such rhetoric has direct consequences. WCSOs report increased hostility during public campaigns, online harassment, and threats against staff members—particularly when addressing sensitive topics such as femicide, sexual violence, or reproductive rights. These developments are mirrored across the region. According to the CIVICUS Monitor Western Balkans 2023/2024 update, anti-gender narratives have become one of the most effective tools for undermining civic space in Southeastern Europe, with women's rights and LGBTQI+ organizations among the primary targets[25].

The relationship between the Albanian government and WCSOs remains largely superficial. While legal frameworks such as the Law on Public Consultation and the National Council for Civil Society offer formal avenues for engagement, WCSOs often report that their participation in policymaking is symbolic rather than meaningful. Consultations are rushed, feedback is disregarded, and policy decisions—particularly those affecting gender equality, social services, and access to justice—are frequently made without incorporating the perspectives of frontline organizations. This tokenism has led to deep frustration within the women's rights sector. Many organizations note that they are only consulted on high-profile occasions (such as International Women's Day or during donor missions) but are excluded from key legislative and budgetary processes. A 2022 civil society survey found that only 27% of CSO representatives in Albania believe that government institutions are genuinely interested in CSO input, with WCSOs reporting even lower levels of trust.

In a politically polarized environment, WCSOs and human rights organizations are often portrayed not as partners in democratic development but as partisan actors with hidden agendas. Political leaders have accused critical NGOs of working against national interests or acting as tools of foreign donors. This delegitimization tactic is especially harmful for organizations working on GBV and human rights, as it undermines their credibility with the public and can deter survivors or vulnerable groups from seeking their support.

Public perception data further underscores the challenge. According to the RCC Balkan Barometer 2023**[26]**, 59% of Albanians agree that NGOs "serve foreign interests," while only 23% express trust in civil society organizations (RCC Balkan Barometer, 2023). This creates a hostile environment for WCSOs, many of which rely on international support due to the lack of domestic funding mechanisms.

Beyond institutional and political barriers, WCSOs also face resistance rooted in conservative societal norms. Gender roles, family structures, and taboos around sexuality remain deeply embedded in Albanian society. As women's rights and LGBTQI+ organizations advocate for legal reform, sexual education, reproductive health services, or protection from intimate partner violence, they often confront backlash from communities, religious authorities, or local political leaders. This resistance is not limited to rhetoric. It frequently manifests in the form of public protests, misinformation campaigns, and refusal of cooperation from public institutions—particularly in rural or suburban areas. For example, WCSOs operating shelters or legal aid services for survivors of GBV report

[24] BCSDN – Balkan Civil Society Development Network
[25] Civicus Regional Analysis 2023, available at: Home - Civicus Monitor
[26] https://www.rcc.int/balkanbarometer/key_findings/2/

that local authorities often fail to refer cases or provide institutional support due to stigma, disbelief, or cultural minimization of domestic violence.

3.4 Relevance to gender-based violence and human rights work

The shrinking of civic space in Albania has immediate and disproportionate consequences for organizations working on gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights. While civic space restrictions impact all sectors, women's civil society organizations (WCSOs), LGBTQI+ organizations, and other rights-based CSOs face heightened vulnerabilities due to the nature of their work—often addressing systemic inequality, stigma, and abuse in settings where political will and public support remain limited or openly hostile.

One of the most pressing consequences is the reduced ability to access communities and deliver services, particularly in rural or conservative areas where social stigma around GBV remains strong. As civil society legitimacy is eroded through public narratives framing CSOs as foreign agents or "anti-family," communities become more reluctant to engage with feminist or human rights organizations. According to Freedom House, Albanian civil society actors working on gender issues increasingly report that negative rhetoric, surveillance, and disinformation limit their outreach and deter survivors from seeking help. This is especially detrimental for WCSOs running shelters, hotlines, and legal clinics, whose effectiveness depends on trust and accessibility within local communities.

At the same time, the personal risk to activists, caseworkers, and human rights defenders is increasing. Front Line Defenders notes that women human rights defenders (WHRDs) and LGBTQI+ activists in Albania have been subjected to gender-based threats, defamation, and online harassment, particularly when involved in high-profile advocacy or legal cases (Front Line Defenders – Albania). This risk is magnified when defenders challenge entrenched interests or promote "controversial" issues such as same-sex partnership, marital rape, or reproductive rights.

In this environment, mobilizing public support and engaging in collective advocacy becomes increasingly difficult. Social backlash—driven by anti-gender rhetoric, religious conservatism, and political opportunism—creates a chilling effect, where survivors, allies, and community members are discouraged from participating in campaigns, protests, or public debates. According to the Balkan Civil Society Development Network (BCSDN), feminist and LGBTQI+ organizations in Albania report rising self-censorship, increased burnout, and hesitancy to speak out on issues that may provoke backlash or state scrutiny.

This environment also undermines coalition-building, a vital element of GBV advocacy. As political and social polarization deepens, WCSOs face growing difficulties in forging alliances across sectors or engaging constructively with public institutions. As noted in the European Commission's 2023 Albania Report, institutional mechanisms for civil society consultation remain weak and underutilized, limiting opportunities for rights-based CSOs to influence legislation or public policy on GBV, gender equality, and human rights.

Further compounding these pressures is the issue of limited and unstable funding, particularly for organizations working on politically sensitive or socially stigmatized issues. Public funding for WCSOs in Albania remains scarce and insufficient. The ASCS provides small-scale grants, but long-term sustainability relies heavily on foreign donors. This dependency, while vital for survival, exposes organizations to delegitimization and fluctuating donor priorities. As documented by Freedom House and CIVICUS, women's rights and LGBTQI+ groups in Albania report that they often struggle to secure multi-year funding for core work—such as legal aid for survivors, training for service providers, or policy advocacy—and face delays in donor disbursements, particularly during political or economic crises.

When funding is constrained or politicized, organizations are forced to make trade-offs between service provision and advocacy, scale back outreach, or refrain from pursuing sensitive topics like abortion, early marriage, or sexual violence. The BCSDN's Civil Society Pulse 2022 found that over 45% of WCSOs in Albania faced delays or reductions in grant-based support in the previous two years, leading to staff cuts, program interruptions, or closures.

The cumulative effect of these pressures is a chilling effect—a term used in international human rights discourse to describe the withdrawal or silencing of civic actors due to fear of reprisals, public hostility, or lack of support. In Albania, this chilling effect is not theoretical: it manifests in fewer public campaigns, muted reactions to human rights violations, and reduced civic participation, particularly by women, youth, and marginalized communities. As a result, efforts to prevent and respond to GBV—and to promote human rights more broadly—are severely undermined.

In this context, the protection of civic space is not an abstract concern—it is a practical and strategic necessity. Without a safe, enabling, and well-resourced environment for WCSOs and rights-based CSOs, Albania cannot meaningfully address the root causes of violence, inequality, and exclusion. As emphasized by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, defending civic space is an essential part of any effective GBV response or human rights framework. For Albania, safeguarding this space requires not only legislative reform, but also cultural change, institutional accountability, and sustained investment in those who defend the rights of others.

4. Findings

4.1 Manifestations of shrinking civic space

This section presents the findings from the survey administered to CSO representatives, women's rights organizations, LGBTIQ+ organizations and WHRDs working on gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights (HR) in Albania. The data illustrate the multiple and intersecting ways in which civic space is being restricted, while also identifying the actors and root causes behind these constraints.

Experiences of harassment and threats

Approximately 50% of survey respondents reported experiencing some form of harassment or threat, whether online, offline, or both, as a direct result of their work as human rights defenders or advocates for gender-based violence (GBV) and equality-related causes. These incidents range from verbal abuse and defamation to more serious threats, such as death threats or public smear campaigns.

The table below summarizes the types of threats experienced, based on multiple-response options:

Table 1. Types of threats experienced from the respondents

Type of threat	**% of respondents reporting**
Online/offline harassment	27.27%
Smear campaigns and false claims	13.64%
Restrictive regulations and legislations	0%
Death threats	22.73%
Administrative or bureaucratic burdens	9.09%
Criminalization of activism	0%
Other	4.55%

The data shows that online and offline harassment is the most commonly reported form of threat, affecting over a quarter of respondents. This includes cyberbullying, verbal attacks, surveillance, or threats through social media platforms, which disproportionately target those engaging in feminist, LGBTQI+, or anti-violence activism.

Alarmingly, nearly one in four respondents (22.73%) reported receiving death threats, highlighting the serious risks to personal safety faced by WHRDs and activists working in contentious spaces. This figure reinforces earlier findings from regional and global reports that gendered threats—especially threats of violence or harm—are used to silence and intimidate defenders of women's and minority rights.

A notable portion of respondents (13.64%) experienced smear campaigns or false accusations, often portraying them as anti-national, foreign-funded, or morally corrupt. These narratives are especially prominent among activists advocating for LGBTQI+ rights, SRHR, and anti-discrimination reforms. As one respondent explained:

> *"We were falsely accused of promoting foreign agendas and anti-family values, just because we organized a campaign on LGBTQ+ inclusion." — Survey respondent (anonymized)*

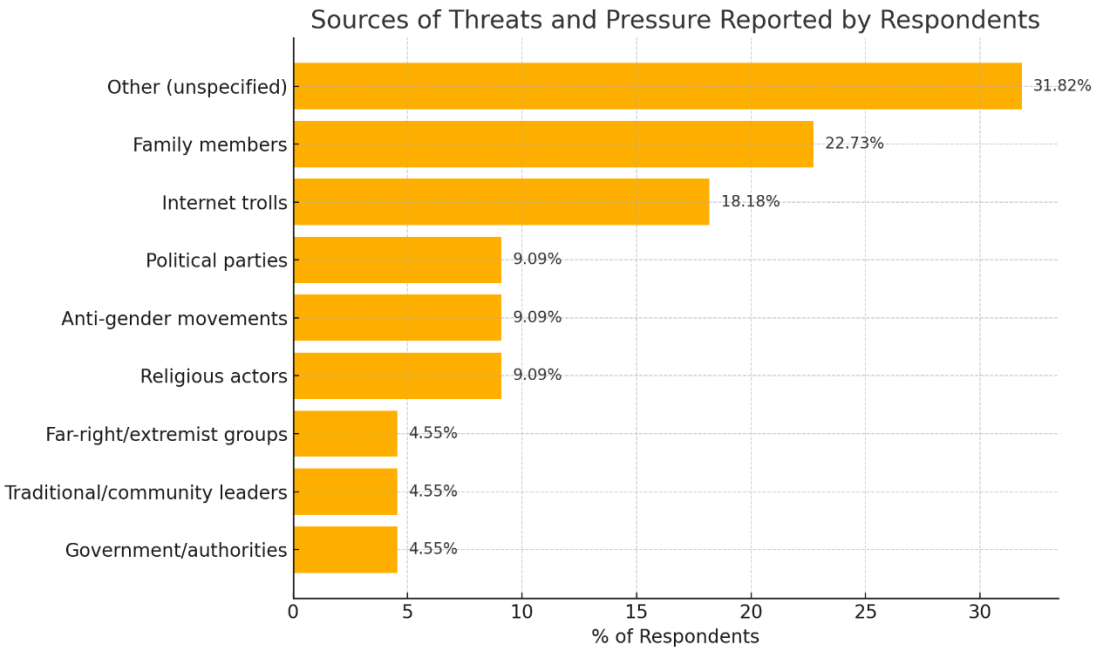
Interestingly, no respondents reported criminalization of activism or punitive legislation at the time of the survey, although administrative and bureaucratic burdens were reported by 9.09%—a finding that aligns with concerns over burdensome NGO registration requirements and lack of institutional responsiveness. These barriers, while less visible than direct harassment, contribute to the gradual erosion of civic space and the operational fatigue experienced by smaller, rights-based CSOs.

The absence of responses under “criminalization” may also reflect early-stage legal constraints that are not yet fully codified as criminal offences, but are nonetheless experienced as restrictive (e.g., proposed regulatory changes, excessive scrutiny of foreign funding, etc.).

Sources of threats and pressure

Respondents identified a diverse set of actors as sources of threats, harassment, and pressure, indicating that civic space restrictions in Albania stem not only from institutional authorities but also from social, political, and even familial sources. The data illustrate how both formal power structures and informal societal dynamics contribute to an increasingly unsafe and delegitimizing environment for advocacy, particularly for those defending gender equality, LGBTI+ rights, and broader human rights.

Figure 1. Sources of threats and pressure reported by respondents



The most frequently reported source of pressure was listed under “Other” (31.82%), indicating that respondents experienced threats from a range of non-specified or context-dependent actors, including potentially local media, private sector entities, or state-linked institutions not directly identified in the list. This suggests a diffuse threat landscape, where risk is not always tied to one easily identifiable group but instead emerges from a complex interplay of actors and attitudes.

Notably, family members (22.73%) were reported as a major source of pressure, reflecting the deeply personal and social costs of engaging in rights-based work—especially for women and LGBTI+ defenders who challenge traditional gender roles or community norms. This type of pressure is often invisible in legal or institutional frameworks but profoundly affects activists’ ability to speak out, organize, or maintain safety.

Internet trolls (18.18%) were another common source, reinforcing the role of digital spaces as arenas of harassment, particularly for women, LGBTQI+ individuals, and younger activists. Online threats, disinformation, and targeted campaigns are often used to shame, discredit, or intimidate human rights defenders—compounding the offline risks they already face.

A smaller yet concerning proportion of respondents cited political parties (9.09%), religious actors (9.09%), and anti-gender movements (9.09%) as active sources of harassment or restriction. These actors frequently fuel or

legitimize narratives that position feminist and human rights advocacy as a foreign, immoral, or destabilizing force. Their role in reinforcing stigmatization—especially in rural or conservative communities—cannot be understated.

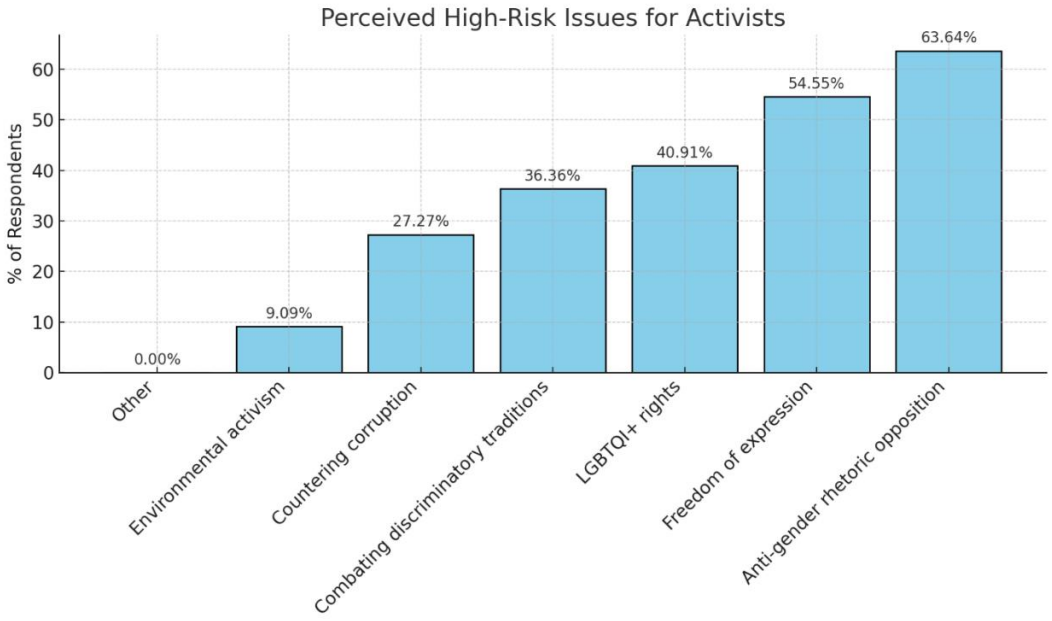
Interestingly, only 4.55% of respondents pointed to government or public authorities as direct sources of threat. However, this figure should be interpreted with caution. Qualitative data from the survey and focus group discussions suggest that while direct confrontation with authorities may be less frequent, their lack of protection, passive endorsement of hostile rhetoric, or failure to act on complaints contributes significantly to the climate of fear and impunity.

This diversity of threat sources reinforces the multi-layered nature of shrinking civic space in Albania, where legal and policy barriers are compounded by societal backlash, institutional inaction, and a culture of delegitimization. It also highlights the need for tailored protection mechanisms that address not only state repression but also gendered and community-based forms of intimidation.

High-risk issues for activists

Respondents were asked to identify the advocacy topics or areas of work that place them at the highest personal or professional risk. Their responses shed light on the types of issues that are perceived as most controversial and likely to attract backlash, harassment, or reputational damage.

Figure 2. Perceived high-risk issues for activists



The data reveals that opposing anti-gender rhetoric was cited as the highest-risk issue, with 63.64% of respondents identifying it among their top three areas of concern. This strongly reinforces the centrality of anti-gender discourse as a driver of shrinking civic space in Albania, particularly for those working on feminist, LGBTQI+, and equality-based initiatives. Activists pushing back against anti-gender narratives often find themselves at the center of public and political attacks, accused of promoting “foreign ideologies” or undermining traditional values.

Similarly, freedom of expression was reported as a high-risk area by over half of respondents (54.55%), highlighting concerns about censorship, smear campaigns, and online/offline retaliation for speaking out on

rights-based issues. This aligns with broader findings that public discourse in Albania has become increasingly polarized and hostile toward dissenting or critical voices—especially those advocating for inclusion and equality.

LGBTQI+ rights were also seen as a major risk area (40.91%), confirming previous data in the report that LGBTI+ activists face persistent public hostility, moral panic campaigns, and threats from conservative actors. These defenders often operate in particularly vulnerable positions, given their frequent lack of institutional protection and the intense stigma attached to their advocacy in parts of Albanian society.

In addition, 36.36% of respondents indicated that combating discriminatory traditional values places them at elevated risk. This suggests that efforts to shift harmful gender norms, patriarchal practices, or community-level stigmas are not only difficult, but also provoke defensive or even aggressive responses from individuals, religious actors, and local power holders.

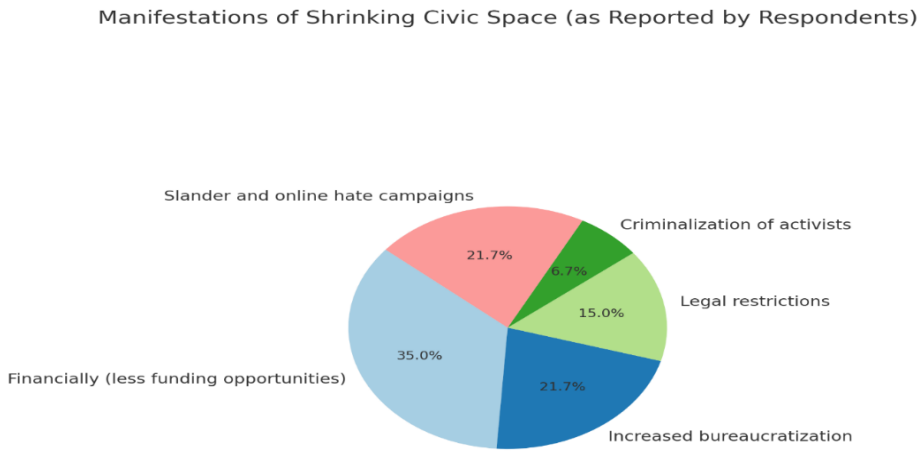
Countering corruption was also noted by 27.27% of respondents, showing that activism related to government accountability, transparency, and misuse of power remains risky—especially for those who criticize public authorities or investigate abuse.

Meanwhile, environmental activism was the least cited high-risk issue (9.09%), suggesting that although important, this area may currently be less politically or socially contentious in the Albanian context compared to identity-based advocacy.

How shrinking space manifests

Respondents described a range of ways in which shrinking civic space manifests in their daily work and advocacy, highlighting a combination of structural constraints, regulatory burdens, and social hostility. These manifestations reflect not only formal limitations imposed through law or policy but also informal practices and public narratives that delegitimize or undermine the work of civil society actors, especially those working on gender equality, GBV, and human rights. Participants were asked to identify the main obstacles they encounter in their civic engagement, selecting up to three from a list of common challenges. Their responses are summarized below:

Figure 3. Manifestations of shrinking civic space



As shown in the above graph the most commonly reported issue, cited by 95.45% of respondents, was restricted access to funding—especially to core, long-term, or public resources. This result reflects a consistent concern raised across the research: that civil society organizations, particularly WCSOs and LGBTI+ groups, are increasingly dependent on fragmented, short-term, and highly competitive external funding. The lack of institutional or flexible funding severely undermines organizational stability and the ability to sustain long-term advocacy or service delivery.

Equally concerning, over half of respondents (59.09%) identified increased bureaucratization and slander or online hate campaigns as prominent barriers. Bureaucratic hurdles often include excessive or shifting reporting requirements, delays in registration or renewal processes, and regulatory inconsistencies—all of which disproportionately affect smaller and grassroots organizations with limited administrative capacity. These burdens are especially harmful when combined with restrictive funding environments, creating a "double bind" that leaves organizations stretched thin and vulnerable.

Meanwhile, the high incidence of online disinformation, hate speech, and smear campaigns points to a broader social and political climate that is increasingly hostile to rights-based advocacy. This aligns with earlier findings from the survey and focus groups, where respondents reported being labeled as "foreign agents," "anti-family," or "morally deviant"—language often used by anti-gender movements, political actors, and online trolls to delegitimize feminist and LGBTQI+ activism.

Legal restrictions, while less frequently cited (40.91%), still represent a significant concern. Although Albania does not currently criminalize civil society activity explicitly, recent regulatory changes—such as the 2021 Law on the Registration of Non-Profit Organizations—have introduced uncertainty and fear of future legal targeting. Respondents reported that legal frameworks often lack clarity or are implemented arbitrarily, making compliance difficult and creating a chilling effect on more politically active organizations.

Finally, 18.18% of respondents reported experiences or fears related to the criminalization of activism. While this remains a minority view in numerical terms, its significance lies in the potential deterrent effect it has—particularly when defenders are subjected to legal threats, police surveillance, or accusations of inciting unrest. These patterns often go hand-in-hand with shrinking space in other areas, including expression and association.

Perceived drivers behind shrinking space

When asked about the perceived causes of shrinking civic space in Albania, respondents identified a complex set of **interrelated political, ideological, and cultural factors**. Their responses suggest that restrictions on civil society are not purely legal or administrative, but also **rooted in deeper shifts in political discourse and social attitudes**, particularly toward human rights and gender equality.

Table 2. Perceived causes of shrinking civic space in Albania

Root cause	**% selected**
Fear of political change by the government	54.55%
Rise in authoritarian tendencies	50%
Anti-gender movements' increasing influence	63.64%
Rising nationalism and anti-Western sentiment	36.36%
Resurgence of traditional/conservative social values	27.27%
Other	0%

The most frequently cited driver was the increasing influence of anti-gender movements (63.64%), reflecting concerns that feminist, LGBTQI+, and gender equality advocacy is being actively undermined by groups promoting traditionalist or patriarchal values. These movements often frame gender rights as threats to national identity or

social cohesion and have grown more vocal and coordinated in recent years—both in public discourse and online spaces.

More than half of respondents (54.55%) also attributed shrinking civic space to the government's fear of political change, suggesting that civic activism—especially when critical of state institutions—is often perceived as a threat to power. This aligns with regional trends, where governments have used regulatory and financial levers to curtail dissent or suppress advocacy seen as "politically disruptive."

Closely related, 50% of respondents pointed to a rise in authoritarian tendencies—such as the centralization of power, erosion of democratic checks and balances, and marginalization of independent watchdogs—as key factors contributing to civic space restrictions. These patterns often result in less institutional tolerance for public criticism and fewer opportunities for meaningful participation by CSOs in policy processes. Additionally, 36.36% of respondents identified rising nationalism and anti-Western sentiment as contributing factors. In this context, rights-based organizations—especially those receiving international funding—are frequently labeled as "foreign agents" or accused of advancing "Western agendas," particularly when working on gender, LGBTQI+, or anti-discrimination issues. Finally, 27.27% cited a resurgence of traditional or conservative social values as a key driver, underscoring how cultural attitudes—not just political institutions—can create a hostile environment for human rights defenders. This is especially relevant for activists who challenge patriarchal norms, promote comprehensive sexuality education, or advocate for marginalized groups.

4.2 Impact on gender-based violence and human rights work

The shrinking of civic space in Albania has created a hostile environment for civil society organizations (CSOs) and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) working on gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights (HR). These actors are not only essential for providing frontline services to survivors, but also play a critical role in raising awareness, advocating for legal reforms, documenting abuses, and holding public institutions accountable.

When civic space is curtailed—through public delegitimization, restrictive regulations, funding cuts, or threats to personal safety—these actors are pushed to the margins. Their capacity to act diminishes precisely when their advocacy is most needed: during rising social conservatism, backlash against gender equality, and institutional apathy toward victims.

This section presents how this dynamic unfolds across multiple dimensions—operational, reputational, geographic, institutional, and community-based—drawing directly from the survey results, focus group insights, and individual testimonies gathered through this research.

Operational barriers

Shrinking civic space has imposed significant practical limitations on how organizations operate, especially those working outside of mainstream donor networks or institutionalized partnerships. The most frequently cited challenge is access to sustainable funding, with 95.45% of survey respondents identifying financial insecurity as a top constraint.

Table 3. Manifestation of the shrinking space for civil society

How does the shrinking space for civil society manifest itself?	**% of respondents**
Financially (less funding opportunities)	95.45%
Increased bureaucratization	59.09%
Legal restrictions	40.91%
Criminalization of activists	18.18%
Slander and online hate campaigns	59.09%

Other	0%

The overwhelming recognition of funding as a core barrier reflects a context in which donor priorities have shifted, state funding is limited or politically filtered, and long-term financial sustainability remains fragile—especially for feminist and grassroots groups. The challenge is not only about quantity but also about the rigidity of funding mechanisms, which often exclude smaller or informal groups working at the community level.

Meanwhile, over 59% of respondents also highlighted administrative burdens, including onerous registration procedures, excessive reporting requirements, and complex documentation standards. These bureaucratic pressures often favor larger, urban-based NGOs and penalize smaller organizations, particularly those in rural or marginalized communities with limited staff or language capacity.

> *"We spend more time reporting to donors than working with survivors. The compliance burden is exhausting and undercuts our mission."*— a WHRD, Tirana

These operational barriers have led to a series of cascading consequences for organizations. Staff are increasingly experiencing burnout, as limited resources are redirected away from frontline services and toward administrative demands. Many organizations have found it difficult to sustain long-term programs or retain trained personnel, particularly when financial uncertainty becomes the norm. In several cases, legal aid services, helplines, and survivor support initiatives have been discontinued altogether due to funding shortages. As a result, many groups now rely heavily on unpaid labor—most often from women activists—who continue their work despite personal risk and without adequate support.

Reputational risk and public hostility

The erosion of civic space is not only material but discursive. Several CSOs working on gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTQI+ inclusion are subjected to delegitimizing narratives that portray them as enemies of tradition, morality, or national sovereignty. These attacks are not isolated—they are part of an emerging anti-gender discourse in Albania that mimics regional and global trends. In focus group discussions, participants described being:

- accused of "destroying the family" for promoting inclusive education;
- portrayed as "foreign puppets" by politicians or religious leaders;
- harassed online through coordinated trolling, hate speech, and doxxing.

These reputational attacks, as per the participants in the focus group discussions create tangible harm, including:

- reduced trust among community members, especially in smaller towns;
- withdrawal of volunteers, staff, or partners afraid of backlash;
- self-censorship in media appearances and advocacy efforts;
- a general sense of isolation and fear, with WHRDs feeling unsupported and unsafe.

This stigmatization has particularly strong effects in rural areas, where social cohesion is high, and activists are more visible and exposed. The pressure to conform and avoid controversy often leads organizations to narrow their focus, avoiding advocacy and concentrating only on "safe" services such as referrals or basic awareness.

Impact on human rights documentation and advocacy

A critical function of many CSOs—particularly those involved in feminist or intersectional advocacy—is to document, monitor, and report on human rights violations. However, this work is also increasingly constrained.

Nearly half of all organizations surveyed have either witnessed or been directly affected by threats or civic space restrictions.

Table 4. Documented or experienced HR abuses, threats, or restrictions

From January 2022 to December 2024, have you or your organization documented or experienced HR abuses, threats, or restrictions?	% of respondents
Yes	45%
No	55%

The actual number of violations may be higher, as respondents explained that many cases go unreported due to fear of retaliation or lack of faith in accountability mechanisms.

Key barriers to effective documentation include:

- state inaction or passivity when cases are reported;
- lack of safe, independent complaint mechanisms;
- concerns about backlash if publicizing abuses related to politically sensitive actors or topics;
- insufficient legal protection for whistleblowers or defenders.

> *"We submitted a formal complaint about online threats made to our staff. Not only was there no follow-up, but we were told to be 'less provocative' in our campaigns."— CSO leader.*

The result is a silencing effect: survivors and activists stop speaking out, impunity increases, and civil society's watchdog role is diminished. This also affects regional and international accountability efforts, as data gaps widen and donor narratives become less informed by on-the-ground realities.

Uneven geographic impact

Civic space restrictions in Albania are experienced unevenly, with organizations outside of Tirana facing disproportionately layered forms of exclusion. These disparities are shaped not only by geographic location but also by factors such as minority identity and limited access to digital infrastructure. Respondents from rural and suburban areas described a range of compounding challenges, including their inability to participate in national consultations, unreliable internet access, low levels of digital literacy, and bias or dismissiveness from local authorities. Many also reported struggling to access international donors, often due to language barriers or the requirement to use digital platforms that are difficult to navigate without adequate resources or training.

Among those most affected are LGBTI+ activities, particularly in conservative areas, who experience compounded threats—both structural and interpersonal—stemming from stigmatization, harassment, and community-level hostility. The participants of the FGDs highlighted that these patterns reveal that Albania's civic space is not only shrinking in scope but becoming increasingly stratified. Certain actors—typically well-established, urban-based, and externally connected—are still able to access platforms and support, while grassroots, minority-led, or geographically remote groups are pushed further to the margins. This fragmentation is especially concerning given that many of Albania's most vulnerable and underserved communities live outside the capital and depend on these organizations for critical protection, advocacy, and visibility.

Consequences for survivors and marginalized communities

Perhaps the most critical consequence of the shrinking civic space is the diminished protection and visibility of survivors and marginalized groups. As civil society organizations withdraw—whether due to exhaustion, security

threats, reputational attacks, or financial collapse—the individuals and communities that rely on them are left increasingly vulnerable and unsupported.

Respondents described a growing reluctance among survivors to come forward, driven by fear of public exposure, lack of institutional follow-up, or judgment from their communities. At the same time, essential services—such as legal aid, psychosocial counseling, and emergency shelter—have become fragmented and under-resourced. Without adequate funding or coordination, service providers struggle to maintain continuity, leaving critical gaps in the support ecosystem. As violations continue, particularly those rooted in gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, fewer of these incidents are formally recorded or addressed. This has created a landscape in which human rights abuses go undocumented, erasing both institutional memory and pathways for accountability.

The cumulative effect is a deepening sense of invisibility and abandonment among those already facing intersecting layers of stigma and discrimination. In this climate, gender-based violence is more easily normalized, the rights of vulnerable populations are dismissed, and institutional power is further entrenched in the hands of those least accountable to public scrutiny. The retreat of civil society in this context not only silences survivors but also erodes the fundamental principles of justice and democratic participation.

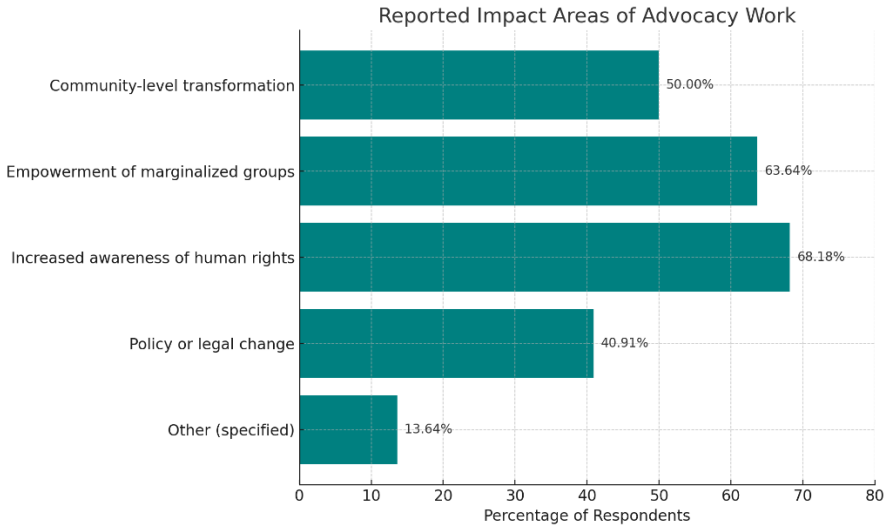
4.3 Advocacy under pressure: Effectiveness and gaps

While shrinking civic space has created significant operational, reputational, and security challenges for civil society organizations (CSOs) in Albania, particularly those working on gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights (HR), it has not extinguished their voice. On the contrary, many organizations—especially women's rights groups and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs)—have demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation, creativity, and perseverance. This section explores how advocacy has continued under increasing pressure, assesses its perceived effectiveness, and highlights both the enabling and limiting factors shaping outcomes in this constrained civic landscape.

Advocacy achievements despite constraints

Despite the difficult operating environment, many organizations report tangible positive impacts from their advocacy work in the last two years. Survey respondents identified several key areas where their interventions have made a difference:

Figure 4. Reported impact areas of advocacy work



The most frequently reported achievement was raising awareness of human rights, with over two-thirds of respondents (68.18%) citing this as a key outcome of their work. This suggests that even in restrictive conditions, civil society continues to influence public discourse, build community understanding, and foster a culture of rights.

Empowerment of marginalized groups (63.64%) was also a leading area of success, reflecting the sector's ongoing efforts to reach Roma communities, LGBTQI+ individuals, survivors of GBV, and women with disabilities. Respondents emphasized that many of their advocacy results were incremental and locally grounded, including changes in institutional attitudes or informal commitments by local officials.

Policy and legal change, though less frequently cited (40.91%), remains significant. These findings suggest that even when formal systems are resistant, grassroots advocacy and local-level influence can result in concrete shifts in public accountability and institutional behavior.

Strategic adaptation and resilience

To withstand growing constraints, many organizations have adopted flexible and safety-conscious advocacy strategies. These approaches often combine formal lobbying with informal mobilization and a greater reliance on digital tools and networks.

Table 4. Strategic adaptation and resilience strategies

Strategy used	**% reporting use**
Peer support networks	72.73%
Mental health or psychosocial support	27.27%
Capacity-building and training programs	77.27%
Collaboration with international organizations	68.18%
Advocacy and public awareness campaigns	77.27%

The top two strategies—capacity-building and public awareness campaigns (both 77.27%)—highlight a continued focus on community education and empowerment, even when institutional channels are limited.

Notably, peer support networks (72.73%) and international collaboration (68.18%) are also widely used, indicating the critical role of solidarity and alliance-building in helping CSOs manage risk, amplify their voice, and access external legitimacy and protection. While mental health support was the least cited strategy, its inclusion signals growing awareness of the emotional toll of advocacy work in hostile environments.

These adaptations reflect a shift away from confrontational tactics toward more sustainable and decentralized forms of resistance, particularly in spaces where public activism may be unsafe or misrepresented.

Barriers to advocacy effectiveness

Despite these adaptive strategies, many respondents noted persistent and systemic barriers that continue to limit the reach and impact of their advocacy:

- Lack of institutional responsiveness, particularly from national-level ministries;
- Fear of retaliation, especially in cases that challenge entrenched power structures or political actors;
- Media distortion or invisibility of gender rights issues in mainstream discourse;
- Fragmentation of the sector, where smaller organizations are often excluded from coalitions or funding frameworks.

"It's exhausting. We fight for visibility and impact, but the more we raise our voices, the more we're seen as troublemakers rather than change-makers." — Young WHRD in rural area.

These obstacles are especially acute for grassroots organizations, rural groups, and youth-led initiatives, who often lack the visibility, funding, and institutional access needed to influence formal decision-making processes.

Support systems and gaps

Participants were asked to reflect not only on the types of support mechanisms available to them, but also to evaluate the quality and adequacy of these support systems in the face of increasing threats, operational challenges, and public hostility.

When asked about the sources of support they rely on, respondents overwhelmingly pointed to civil society networks (86.36%) and community-based solidarity mechanisms (86.36%) as their primary lines of assistance. These forms of support—often informal, relational, and driven by trust—are highly valued by organizations because they offer rapid peer-to-peer support, emotional reassurance, resource sharing, and safety in numbers.

By contrast, less than half of respondents identified international donors or intergovernmental organizations (45.45%) as active sources of support, and only 36.36% pointed to government programs as offering any meaningful assistance. This disparity suggests a reliance on lateral solidarity rather than vertical institutional frameworks, which are either unavailable, inaccessible, or perceived as politically indifferent or overly bureaucratic.

Table 5. Types of support mechanisms available

Support type	**% of respondents**
Civil society networks	86.36%
Government programs	36.36%
International donors/UN/EU	45.45%
Community-based support	86.36%

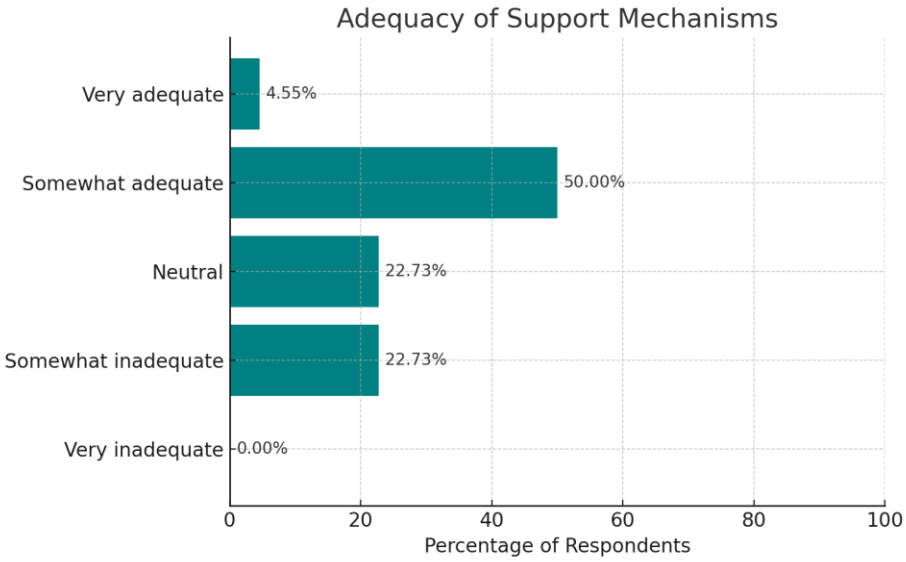
These results highlight the fragility of formal support systems for WHRDs and organizations working in sensitive fields such as gender-based violence, LGBTQI+ rights, and anti-discrimination. Despite the presence of multiple donors and state actors with mandates to protect civic space and promote gender equality, support is not reaching all groups equally, particularly smaller, rural, or marginalized organizations.

In a follow-up question, participants were asked to assess the adequacy of the available support mechanisms, using a scale from "very adequate" to "very inadequate." The results reveal a troubling gap between availability and effectiveness:

Table 6. Adequacy of support mechanism

Adequacy of support mechanisms	**% of respondents**
Very adequate	4.55%
Somewhat adequate	50.00%
Neutral	22.73%
Somewhat inadequate	22.73%
Very inadequate	0.00%

Figure 5. Adequacy of support mechanisms



While exactly half of respondents found existing mechanisms to be "somewhat adequate," only 4.55% rated them as "very adequate," which reflects a significant shortfall in trust and satisfaction. Nearly 46% of respondents were either neutral or dissatisfied, with 22.73% actively identifying the support as inadequate. These figures suggest that although some support infrastructure exists, it lacks reliability, responsiveness, and depth, particularly when organizations are faced with emergency situations such as smear campaigns, online threats, or legal intimidation.

The data also reflect a lack of tailored or intersectional support—for instance, protection measures for WHRDs may not sufficiently account for specific risks faced by LGBTQI+ defenders, or activists in rural areas. Psychosocial support, legal aid, and rapid response funding are either not integrated into donor frameworks or poorly coordinated at the national level.

5. Conclusions

This research provides compelling evidence that Albania is experiencing a progressive constriction of civic space, particularly for civil society organizations (CSOs) and women human rights defenders (WHRDs) working on gender-based violence (GBV), equality, anti-discrimination, and LGBTQI+ rights. While this trend reflects broader regional and global patterns, it takes on specific urgency in the Albanian context, where democratic institutions remain fragile and polarized discourse is increasingly weaponized against human rights actors.

Across the different dimensions explored in the report—operational capacity, reputational security, advocacy effectiveness, state engagement, and international accountability—a consistent pattern emerges: organizations working on gender and human rights face disproportionate scrutiny, underfunding, and exclusion, despite their essential role in Albania's democratic and social development.

The evidence reveals:

- *High levels of harassment and public hostility*, especially for those challenging patriarchal norms or advocating for LGBTQI+ inclusion. Half of respondents reported threats or intimidation, with one in four experiencing death threats or coordinated online abuse.
- *Restrictive operational environments*, shaped by financial insecurity (reported by 95.45% of respondents), bureaucratic burdens, and policy volatility. These barriers are particularly acute for grassroots and rural organizations with limited access to decision-makers or funding networks.
- *Clear reputational attacks*, with defenders often labeled as "foreign agents," "anti-family," or "ideological extremists." Such narratives are not just symbolic—they serve to delegitimize legitimate advocacy and justify exclusion from policy processes.
- *A fragmented and often symbolic relationship with the state*, in which consultation is largely procedural and protections are rarely enforced. Positive examples of cooperation exist, but they are isolated, driven by individual leadership, and unsupported by national frameworks.
- *Resilience and innovation* among CSOs and WHRDs, who continue to build networks, adapt their strategies, and empower marginalized communities despite rising risk. These actors remain crucial voices of accountability, equity, and social justice.

Risks of further civic space erosion include:

- *Normalization of harassment and hate speech***.** When hate speech, smear campaigns, and online abuse against WHRDs and CSOs are ignored or minimized, they become embedded in public discourse. This legitimizes violence, silences dissent, and fosters a culture of fear that disproportionately affects those working with survivors, minorities, and women in vulnerable contexts.
- *Shrinking mandates and self-censorship***.** Faced with escalating hostility and institutional indifference, many organizations have begun to scale back their mandates, avoid public engagement, or withdraw from controversial topics such as reproductive rights, sexuality education, and LGBTQI+ advocacy. This self-censorship weakens civic discourse and limits pluralism in public life.
- *Increased isolation of marginalized communities***.** As civic space narrows, the most marginalized—Roma and Egyptian communities, LGBTQI+ individuals, survivors of violence, women with disabilities—become even more isolated. Without active advocacy and well-resourced CSOs, their experiences risk invisibility, and their access to services becomes fragmented or non-existent.
- *Disconnection between international obligations and domestic practice.* Although Albania has ratified multiple international conventions on civil society protection, gender equality, and human rights (e.g., CEDAW, Istanbul Convention, UN Declaration on HRDs), domestic implementation remains inconsistent. A widening gap between formal commitments and lived realities may undermine Albania's credibility in international forums and accession negotiations.

The space for civic engagement is not simply about the right to organize—it is the infrastructure of democracy. It enables critical voices to be heard, vulnerable communities to be protected, and institutions to be held accountable.

In Albania, organizations working on GBV and human rights are not peripheral actors—they are the backbone of rights-based service provision, survivor support, community education, and legislative reform. When their space is threatened, the consequences ripple outward—to survivors who remain invisible, to policies that remain gender-blind, and to institutions that become less transparent and more extractive.

As Albania continues on its path toward EU accession and democratic consolidation, it must treat the protection of civic space not as an external requirement but as an internal condition for justice, equity, and progress. A society that silences its defenders cannot protect its most vulnerable. A state that excludes feminist voices cannot build a future of equality.

6. Recommendations

To reverse the erosion of civic space in Albania—and to ensure that organizations and individuals working on gender-based violence (GBV) and human rights (HR) can operate safely, sustainably, and effectively—this research calls for a coordinated, multi-level response across state institutions, international actors, civil society, and oversight bodies.

The following recommendations reflect the voices, experiences, and urgent needs of WHRDs, women's rights organizations, and human rights advocates engaged in frontline work under increasing pressure.

To the Government of Albania

1. Adopt a comprehensive legal and policy framework for the protection of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs):
    - Align national protections with international standards, including the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35, and the Istanbul Convention.
    - Define institutional roles and mandates for safeguarding Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs), with clear reporting, monitoring, and enforcement mechanisms.

2. Guarantee meaningful and inclusive participation of CSOs in policy development:
    - Move beyond symbolic consultations and establish structured, inclusive mechanisms for co-creation of laws and public policies, especially those addressing GBV, gender equality, and anti-discrimination.

3. Ensure effective and timely institutional response to threats and attacks:
    - Establish dedicated units within law enforcement or oversight institutions to investigate and respond to harassment, online violence, and coordinated smear campaigns.
    - Introduce sanctions and public accountability for state or non-state actors who perpetrate threats against civil society.

4. Expand and democratize access to public funding for civil society:
    - Simplify administrative procedures and ensure transparent, equitable funding opportunities, prioritizing grassroots, women-led, rural, and minority-serving organizations.
    - Introduce multi-year and core funding streams to reduce dependence on short-term project cycles.

5. Actively counter anti-gender rhetoric and hate speech in public discourse:
    - Publicly condemn campaigns that stigmatize feminist, LGBTQI+, and human rights work.
    - Collaborate with the Audiovisual Media Authority, digital platforms, and education institutions to regulate hate speech, promote inclusion, and build public awareness.

To the international donors and development partners

1. Increase core and flexible funding for women's rights and rights-based organizations:
    - Prioritize long-term, unrestricted support that enhances sustainability, builds institutional resilience, and enables responsive advocacy.

2. Strengthen protection and care mechanisms for WHRDs and at-risk activists:

- Invest in integrated security packages covering digital safety, legal protection, psychosocial support, and rapid response infrastructure.
- Facilitate regional solidarity, temporary relocation, and trauma-informed protection services.

3. Integrate civic space priorities in bilateral and multilateral dialogues:
    - Elevate civic space protection as a strategic priority in EU accession monitoring, UN human rights reviews, and bilateral donor engagement with Albanian authorities.
4. Promote intersectional and inclusive funding practices:
    - Design programs that reflect the realities of Roma women, LGBTQI+ defenders, women with disabilities, and rural-based CSOs, ensuring their full inclusion in support and reform initiatives.

To the Civil Society Organizations and networks

1. Strengthen joint advocacy and collective organizing:
    - Build or expand coalitions that unify WCSOs, feminist networks, youth activists, and legal advocacy groups to amplify voice and influence.
2. Institutionalize care and protection strategies:
    - Mainstream digital security, legal preparedness, and mental health support within organizations.
    - Establish internal policies on staff safety, risk management, and mutual aid.
3. Monitor and document civic space threats and advocacy outcomes:
    - Collect and publish evidence-based reports, policy briefs, and testimonies to build public and political pressure for reform.
4. Engage in cross-sector partnerships:
    - Collaborate with journalists, bar associations, academic institutions, and independent commissions to expand civic alliances and strengthen human rights architecture.

To the independent oversight institutions

1. Monitor and publicly report on violations of civic space and attacks on WHRDs:
    - The Ombudsperson's Office, Commissioner for Protection from Discrimination, and Data Protection Authority should proactively investigate and address shrinking space dynamics and related human rights violations.
2. Advance civic and human rights education:
    - Partner with CSOs to promote public understanding of the importance of civil society, democratic engagement, and the defense of rights-based advocacy—especially among youth and marginalized communities.

Cross-cutting priorities

- Apply a gender lens to all civic space analyses and interventions, recognizing that WHRDs and organizations working on GBV face distinct and compounding risks.
- Center marginalized voices—particularly Roma and Egyptian women, LGBTQI+ activists, survivors of violence, and rural CSOs—in all strategies to protect and expand civic space.
- Create safe, enabling, and inclusive environments for civic participation and public debate at both national and local levels—through legal reform, public awareness, and investment in dialogue infrastructure.

Annexes

Annex 1. Glossary of terms

Advocacy. The act of supporting a cause or proposal to influence public policy, social norms, or institutional practices. In the context of this report, advocacy refers to actions by CSOs and WHRDs to advance gender equality, human rights, and accountability.

Anti-gender rhetoric. A form of political or ideological discourse that opposes gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights, and the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals. It is often used to delegitimize feminist activism and portray human rights work as a threat to traditional values.

Civic space. The set of legal, political, and social conditions that allow civil society to organize, participate, and communicate freely and safely. It includes the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly.

Civil Society Organization (CSO). A non-governmental, non-profit entity formed voluntarily by individuals or groups to pursue shared interests, often in advocacy, service provision, or community engagement. CSOs include NGOs, grassroots organizations, and networks.

Disinformation. False or misleading information deliberately spread to deceive or manipulate public opinion. In shrinking civic spaces, disinformation is often used to discredit civil society actors or foster distrust toward human rights organizations.

Gender-based violence (GBV). Any harmful act directed at an individual based on their gender. GBV includes physical, sexual, psychological, or economic abuse and disproportionately affects women and girls. It is both a human rights violation and a barrier to equality.

Human rights. Fundamental rights and freedoms that belong to every person, regardless of nationality, gender, ethnicity, religion, or other status. These include civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights.

Human Rights Defender (HRD). Any person who, individually or in association with others, acts to promote or protect human rights and fundamental freedoms. HRDs can be lawyers, journalists, CSO representatives, or ordinary citizens.

Intersectionality. A framework for understanding how different aspects of a person's identity (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status) combine to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege.

LGBTQI+. An inclusive acronym representing individuals who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, Intersex, and other non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities.

Online harassment. The use of digital platforms (social media, email, websites) to threaten, intimidate, or discredit individuals or organizations. WHRDs and feminist CSOs are increasingly targeted by online abuse.

Shrinking civic space. A process in which governments and other actors impose legal, financial, administrative, or social restrictions that reduce the ability of civil society to operate freely, safely, and effectively.

Smear campaigns. Coordinated efforts to damage the credibility, integrity, or reputation of individuals or organizations—often through false accusations, manipulation of facts, or stigmatizing narratives.

Survivor-centered approach. A method of delivering services or conducting advocacy that prioritizes the safety, dignity, agency, and rights of individuals who have experienced violence, particularly GBV survivors.

Tokenism. Superficial or symbolic efforts to include marginalized groups or civil society in decision-making without providing meaningful influence or genuine participation.

Women Human Rights Defender (WHRD). A woman who defends human rights or a person of any gender who defends women's rights or gender equality. WHRDs often face gender-specific threats, including sexualized violence, defamation, and stigmatization.

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