

# Fear of Change and Resistance to Feminism in the Western Balkans: Turning Insight Into Action

*Feminist movements in the Western Balkans are held back by stigma, chronic underfunding, and limited institutional support. Tackling misinformation, social resistance and fear of change is critical to advancing gender equality and building more just and inclusive societies.*

## WHAT IS AT STAKE?

In the Western Balkans, gender discrimination remains a daily reality. Despite years of advocacy and reform, progress is slow and uneven.

The 2023 Balkan Barometer reveals that deeply rooted stereotypes about women's roles (42%) and the persistent gender pay gap (41%) are among the biggest challenges<sup>1</sup>. Feminist movements tirelessly push for change but face constant resistance: reports indicate a rise in anti-gender movements in the Balkans, portraying feminism and LGBTQ+ rights as western imports and threats to traditional values<sup>2</sup>. This resistance stems from a broader fear of change and difference, creating a climate of intimidation for human rights defenders and blocking open dialogue. The stakes are high and go beyond women's equality. They are about building fairer, more democratic societies where everyone's rights are respected. Without stronger support, better coordination and a shift in public attitudes, feminist voices risk remaining isolated, and progress toward gender equality will stall.

Changing the narrative to recognize feminist movements as key drivers of social justice is more urgent than ever.

### What is fear of change?

Fear of change is resistance to new ideas or shifts in social norms that challenge established identities and power. In the Western Balkans, this fear centers on family, faith, and national values. It is deliberately fueled by nationalist and conservative actors, amplified by disinformation, and supported by well-funded transnational networks.

➔ **The result:** feminist voices are stigmatized, underfunded, and rejected.

## WHAT ARE THE CURRENT REALITIES?

40%

in BiH perceive feminist NGOs as out of touch and externally driven.

### Stigma fuels resistance to feminist movements

Fear of feminism in the Western Balkans is firmly set in structural and cultural systems. Often seen as a Western import, feminism is framed as a threat to traditional gender roles, national identity, and family values. This perception fuels backlash, especially in contexts influenced by conservative or nationalist narratives.

For example, In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), over 40% of people perceive feminist NGOs as “foreign-funded and disconnected from real needs.”<sup>3</sup> In Albania, harmful stereotypes paint feminists as “all lesbians” or “unmarried women.”<sup>4</sup> In 2024, nearly two thirds of CSOs identified anti-gender rhetoric as a major threat, with half facing harassment and a quarter receiving death threats<sup>5</sup>. In Montenegro, feminism faces increased marginalization, while anti-feminist narratives are openly promoted at the highest levels of power<sup>6</sup>. This troubling trend extends across the region. To stay safe and maintain community trust, some organizations deliberately avoid using the word “feminism” in public, even as they actively promote gender equality. Although adjusting language can help open space for dialogue, it also reflects the difficult balance between staying true to feminist principles and being accepted in local contexts.

## Fragmentation of the ecosystem and lack of financial support weakens collective feminist impact

Feminist organizations in the Western Balkans face critical challenges due to chronic underfunding and fragmentation.

In Albania, 95.45% of these groups report limited access to sustainable funding, especially in rural areas, leading many registered NGOs to become inactive. In BiH, 75% of women's CSOs lack sufficient funds, with about one-third at risk of closure due to financial constraints<sup>7</sup>. **Across the region, organizations face intense competition for limited and short-term donor funding, with only a small fraction managing to secure support.** This funding landscape has given rise to a donor-driven model, where external priorities often take precedence over local strategic goals. As a result, long-term advocacy efforts, collective visibility, and overall impact are undermined<sup>8</sup>.



95%

of feminist organizations in Albania report limited access to sustainable funding



26%

of Balkan citizens express trust in civil society organizations.

## Media deepens the existing distrust directed at civil society

While the media has the potential to amplify feminist voices, it often does the opposite by spreading disinformation, reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes, and fueling online hate.

In BiH, research recorded 66 cases of gendered disinformation over four years, along with widespread online hate speech targeting women's appearances, sexualities, and challenges to traditional gender roles<sup>9</sup>. These attacks, common throughout the Balkans, reduce public trust. In fact, **across the region, only 26% of citizens trust CSOs, with even lower confidence in those focused on gender and human rights**<sup>10</sup>. In Montenegro, only one in five people believe NGOs are independent from the government<sup>11</sup>, yet two-thirds acknowledge the vital role women's organizations play in reducing violence against women<sup>12</sup>. This contradiction reveals **a serious gap in trust that damages these organization's reputations**. Ongoing hostility continues to silence key feminist voices, weakening the movement and slowing progress toward gender equality<sup>13</sup>.

## Institutional gaps undermine feminist progress

Persistent gaps in legislation, enforcement, and women's representation continue to hold back feminist priorities in the region.

Femicide remains a critical, underreported issue in the region, with over 300 women killed by intimate partners or family members between 2018 and 2024<sup>14</sup>. While BiH's 2025 legal reform now criminalizes gender-based murder with harsher penalties<sup>15</sup>, Montenegro, Albania, and North Macedonia **report rising cases linked to weak enforcement and lack of official registries**<sup>16</sup>. In fact, in Albania, only 4.55% of feminist organizations consider protection mechanisms adequate<sup>17</sup>. Across the region, **public funding is scarce and difficult to access, consultations with authorities are often superficial, and feminist groups are frequently excluded from policymaking**<sup>18</sup>. Unless laws are strengthened, enforcement improved, representation increased, and data transparency ensured, feminist advocacy will remain fragile, underfunded, and prone to reversal.



4.55%

of feminist organizations in Albania consider protection mechanisms adequate.

## WHAT CAN WE DO? PRIORITY ACTION STEPS



### Institutionalize gender equality education through formal curricula and youth-centered informal education spaces

Gender equality is still widely misunderstood or misrepresented, and feminism is often portrayed as threatening or foreign. The lack of early and sustained civic education fuels resistance to change.

#### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Integrate mandatory, age-appropriate education on gender equality, feminism, and human rights in school curricula, supported by nationwide awareness campaigns emphasizing local contexts.
- ✦ Establish and connect safe, youth-led community spaces where young people can engage critically with feminist values.
- ✦ Foster partnerships between state administrations and CSOs to co-develop teaching materials, training modules, and education programs.



## Strengthen feminist ecosystem through regional solidarity and collaboration

Feminist CSOs in the Western Balkans are often isolated and lack structured platforms for exchange, visibility, and collective action.



### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Launch an annual Western Balkans Feminist Forum connecting CSOs, media, researchers, and institutions to share knowledge and coordinate action.
- ✦ Create a shared digital hub hosting feminist research, media content, toolkits, and event info to strengthen collaboration and visibility.
- ✦ Promote inclusion of Balkan feminist actors in European networks and encourage cross-sector alliances with media, academia, and public institutions to amplify feminist voices.



## Invest in bottom-up feminist research and data systems to inform policy, public debate and evidence-based advocacy

Feminist research is often driven by donor priorities rather than local realities, which leads to a lack of credible, locally-rooted research and allows anti-gender rhetoric to develop.



### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Advocate for donor and state funding prioritizing grassroots feminist research to ensure local relevance and credibility.
- ✦ Develop a regional open-access feminist database compiling gender statistics, femicide data, and advocacy tools for activists and media.
- ✦ Facilitate researcher mobility and international collaboration through platforms offering funding info, host institutions, and support networks.



## Develop feminist-centered funding mechanisms that are long-term, sustainable, flexible, and regionally responsive

Short-term, restricted funding undermines the long-term impact and survival of feminist CSOs in the region.



### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Advocate for core, unrestricted funding dedicated to women-led and rights-based organizations, emphasizing the region's unique challenges in international donor priorities. Push for gender-responsive budgeting in national and municipal institutions.
- ✦ Establish a Balkan Feminist Solidarity Fund to support cross-border initiatives and emergency assistance for activists.
- ✦ Create a gender accreditation seal for donors and institutions championing feminist philanthropy.



## Promote shared, inclusive feminist language tools to counter misconceptions and promote inclusivity, clarity, and solidarity

Language plays a central role in the struggle against gender equality. Misinterpretations and hate speech limit public support and polarize dialogue.



### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Co-develop a Feminist Language Toolkit with CSOs and language experts, promoting accessible, community-friendly language.
- ✦ Promote the toolkit across media, education, political spaces, and public institutions to build wider acceptance.
- ✦ Organize participatory workshops for CSOs to align on inclusive language and create mechanisms for mutual support.



## Leverage influential public figures and role models to normalize feminist values and reshape public narratives

Feminist messaging often struggles to reach wider audiences due to entrenched stereotypes and lack of visible champions.



### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Partner with high-profile figures and male allies in sports, culture, and business to advocate for gender equality.
- ✦ Identify and amplify local feminist role models to inspire younger generations and counter anti-gender rhetoric.
- ✦ Launch storytelling campaigns featuring diverse voices and positive masculinity, encouraging celebrities to support feminist causes publicly, especially during key awareness days and campaigns.



## Engage media actors to promote ethical reporting, inclusive language and feminist narratives

The media often reproduces harmful gender stereotypes or fails to cover feminist issues adequately and ethically.



### PROPOSED ACTIONS:

- ✦ Work with institutions and regulatory bodies to uphold ethical standards and actively counter disinformation.
- ✦ Design and deliver training for journalists, editors and media students on ethical reporting of gender-based violence, femicide, and gender equality topics.
- ✦ Create recognition schemes or awards for positive examples of gender-sensitive journalism.
- ✦ Build partnerships with media professionals to co-create feminist content and campaigns (e.g., «Journalists Against Gender-Based Violence»).
- ✦ Enhance the visibility of feminist NGOs through accessible narratives and interviews that illustrate the tangible benefits of gender equality in daily life.

## RESEARCH APPROACH

This brief draws on research and collaborative learning from a Community of Practices in early 2025, involving five CSOs from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro. Activities included three online workshops and a learning expedition to Paris to engage with established European feminist ecosystems. These exchanges were held under the theme: “*Feminist Strategies for Public Impact, Policy Change, and Regional Collaboration in the Balkans*” and inform the insights and recommendations presented here.

### SIGNATORIES:



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### SUPPORTED BY:



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