

PUBLIC POLICY PAPER

ANALYSIS OF INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSES, WITH A FOCUS ON SOCIAL PROTECTION CENTERS IN CASES OF DIGITAL GENDER- BASED VIOLENCE



Contents

Abbreviations.....	3
Executive summary	4
1. Introduction.....	5
1.1. Terminology.....	6
2. Methodology.....	6
3. Rights Holders and Duty Bearers.....	9
4. Understanding of DGBV and responses by the Centers for Social Work.....	9
5. Understanding of DGBV and responses by the police.....	19
6. Understanding of DGBV and response of the Public Prosecutor’s Office and the Judiciary	20
7. Conclusions	21
8. Recommendations.....	22

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Abbreviations

DGBV	Digital Gender-Based Violence
Istanbul Convention	Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
GREVIO	Group of Experts for monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention
PI IMCSR	Public Institution Inter-Municipal Center for Social Work

Executive summary

This public policy paper examines the institutional framework and response practices in cases of Digital Gender-Based Violence (DGBV) in the Republic of North Macedonia. In this regard, Directive (EU) 2024/1385 on combating violence against women and domestic violence is used as the primary reference framework for assessing the degree of compliance in the understanding and treatment of the concept of digital gender-based violence.

Additionally, the analysis draws on the relevant international standards established by the Istanbul Convention, as well as General Recommendation No. 1 (2021) on the digital dimension of violence against women and the Explanatory Report to the Convention. These instruments serve as the normative and standard-setting basis for establishing the criteria for an appropriate institutional response.

The paper presents an analysis of institutional needs for a more effective response to digital gender-based violence, based on both the analysis of existing available data (secondary data) and the findings from a questionnaire administered to 44 employees from 24 Centers for Social Work in North Macedonia, in order to assess the institutional response to cases of digital gender-based violence (DGBV) against women and girls (primary data).

The results show that there is a basic level of awareness and recognition of the various of DGBV, with the following forms most commonly identified: non-consensual sharing of intimate content, sexual harassment through social media, digital blackmail, and online shaming. However, a significant proportion of respondents do not have a fully aligned understanding of the concept, and digital violence is most often recorded as a component of psychological or domestic violence rather than as a distinct form of violence.

With regard to response practices, nearly half of the Centers do not use the multi-sectoral protocol, due to the perception that it is insufficiently applicable to cases of DGBV. On the other hand, risk assessment is conducted in the majority of cases; however, specialized tools for assessing digital risks to the victim's safety are lacking. Additionally, the majority of employees believe that the existing legal framework is not sufficiently clear with regard to emergency protection measures in cases of DGBV or violence that includes a digital component.

A serious structural challenge is the lack of specialized training. Nearly two-thirds of respondents have never attended training on DGBV, and their knowledge of legal aspects and digital evidence management was assessed as moderate or insufficient. More than 60% of the Centers do not have clear guidelines for the preservation and handling of digital evidence, which poses a risk to the effectiveness of proceedings.

The biggest challenge for victims is secondary victimization, identified by almost two-thirds of respondents. Slow response times, an insufficiently sensitive approach, and the lack of confidential reporting conditions further undermine trust in institutions. More than one-quarter of the Centers believe that they do not provide adequate support, while psychological assistance is the most commonly available service.

Although cooperation exists with the police, public prosecutor's offices, and schools, inter-institutional coordination is assessed as insufficiently structured. Clearer mechanisms for information sharing and faster intervention are needed.

The findings indicate that the system has a basic institutional framework for response, but lacks specialization, standardization, technical preparedness, and systematic education. To strengthen the institutional response, it is necessary to: introduce specialized and mandatory training, develop clear procedures for handling digital evidence, standardize risk assessment, improve the operationalization of the legal framework, and establish more effective multi-sectoral coordination.

Based on the analysis conducted, the paper proposes a set of recommendations aimed at improving institutional responses through strengthening the capacity of institutions to address cases of DGBV and strengthening inter-institutional cooperation.

1. Introduction

Digital gender-based violence is an increasingly prevalent form of violence against women and girls that is perpetrated, facilitated, continued, or intensified through the use of information and communication technologies.

Although it does not constitute a new form of gender-based violence, the digital environment creates a distinct dynamic of perpetration, enables broader public exposure of victims, and results in long-lasting consequences, thereby creating an imperative for an appropriately adapted legal and institutional response with a victim-centered approach. This phenomenon encompasses all forms of harassment, threats, blackmail, abuse or the non-consensual sharing of content carried out through information and communication technologies, and disproportionately targets women and girls on the basis of their sex or gender.¹

The Republic of North Macedonia, in line with global trends and international standards, recognizes the need for a strengthened institutional response to the prevention of and protection against gender-based violence. In 2021, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was adopted, recognizing online sexual harassment as a specific form of gender-based violence and among the principles on which the Law is based is the principle of due diligence by institutions in the prevention, protection, investigation, and sanctioning of all forms of violence against women.² However, the rapid development of technology continually creates new opportunities for abuse that are not fully addressed by the existing laws.

Taking into account the country's efforts to align its legislation with European Union law as part of the accession process, as well as its national commitment to the full implementation of the Istanbul Convention, this policy paper provides an analysis of the institutional

¹ See: UN Women, Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls, 2022; UNDP, Analysis of Legislation Related to Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, 2024; Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence, which recognizes digital forms of gender-based violence as a distinct area of regulation, given their disproportionate impact on women and girls.

² Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia, No. 24/21 and 39/25.

framework and institutional responses in cases of DGBV, assessed against international and European standards. The aim of this public policy paper is to identify, through an evidence-based approach, the key challenges in the institutional response within the system for protection against digital gender-based violence, and to offer concrete recommendations for addressing them, including recommendations put forward by professionals working within the institutions themselves, with a particular focus on the Centers for Social Work.

1.1. Terminology

Although Directive (EU) 2024/1385 does not introduce a single overarching term, it clearly recognizes gender-based violence perpetrated through the use of information and communication technologies by regulating specific criminal acts such as online harassment, cyberstalking, and the non-consensual sharing of intimate content. A similar approach is reflected in the national legislation, where the digital dimension of gender-based violence is addressed through specific criminal offences and protective measures, without the use of a single overarching term. On the other hand, UN Women uses the term technology-facilitated violence against women and girls in its strategic and expert publications, emphasizing that the use of technology does not create new forms of violence but rather amplifies existing forms of gender-based violence. GREVIO, in turn, stresses that the digital dimension must be systematically integrated into prevention, protection, and access to justice in accordance with the Istanbul Convention.

All of this demonstrates that, although legal frameworks recognize and regulate violence in the digital sphere, they do so through different approaches and without a common terminology. For these reasons, this paper uses the term digital gender-based violence as a common analytical concept for linking European, national, and international normative approaches, which allows for terminological consistency and provides a foundation for further policies and recommendations aimed at achieving a more effective institutional response. When analyzing the acts, however, the term used in each individual act will be used.

2. Methodology

In order to assess the current state of institutional responses to cases of DGBV and to identify the needs of institutions for a more effective response to digital gender-based violence, the methodology used for this paper uses a mixed-methods approach to data collection. This means that part of the data was obtained through the analysis of existing available data³ (secondary data), while another part derives from the analysis of findings from a questionnaire administered to employees of Centers for Social Work in North Macedonia, with the aim of assessing the institutional response to cases of digital gender-based violence (DGBV) against women and girls (primary data).

The analysis was developed through a transparent, participatory, and inclusive process, given that employees of the Centers for Social Work contributed with their responses to the formulation of the conclusions and recommendations presented in this paper. Therefore, as

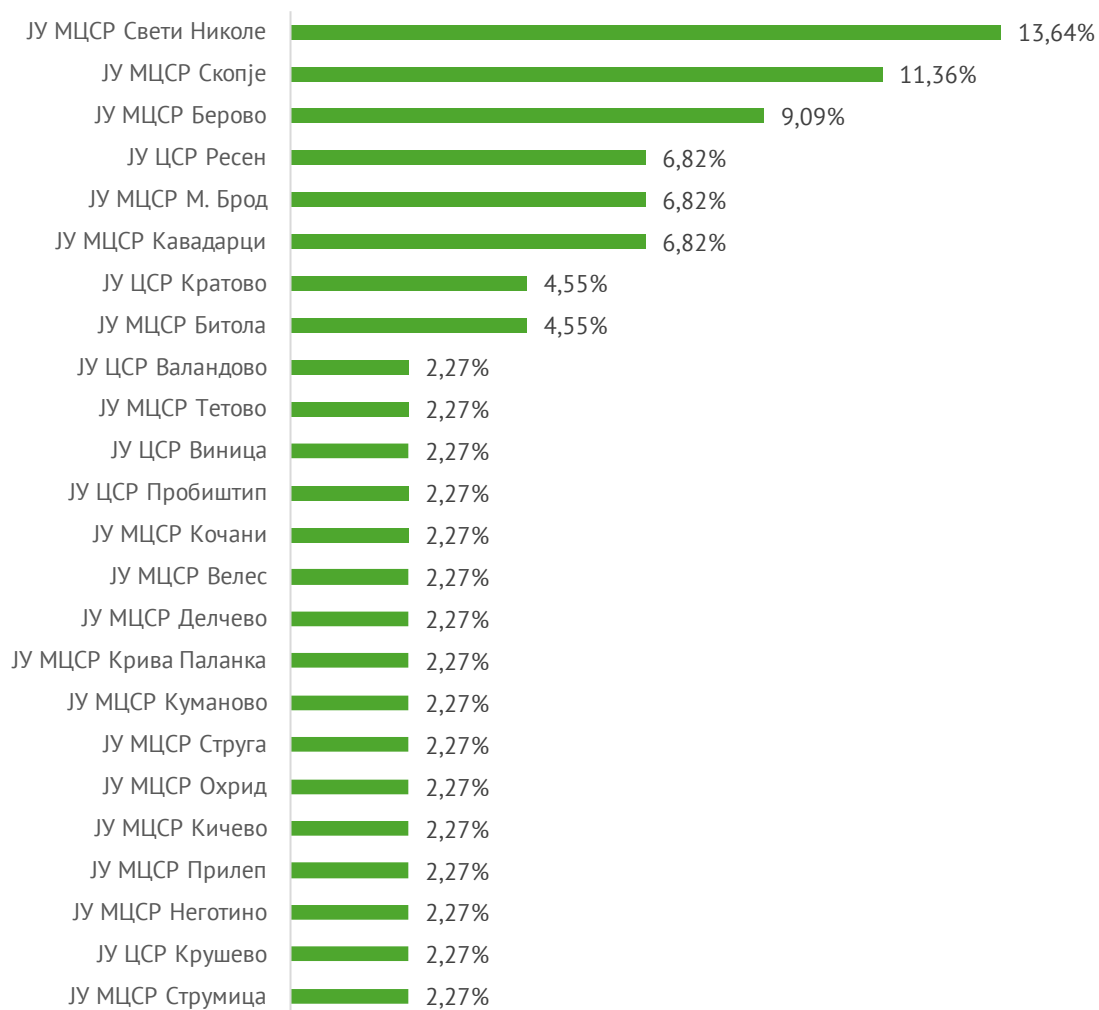
³ This section draws primarily on the data from the Analysis of Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in North Macedonia, UNDP, 2024, authored by Neda Chalovska Dimovska, available at the following link: <https://www.undp.org/north-macedonia/publications/analysis-technology-facilitated-gender-based-violence>

part of the methodological approach used in the preparation of this paper, a questionnaire was developed for employees of the Centers for Social Work across the country. The questionnaire provided deeper insight into the respondents' diverse experiences and perspectives, which can contribute to improving the functioning of the system for the prevention of digital gender-based violence (DGBV) against women and girls.

There are a total of 34 cities in the country, of which 29 have Centers for Social Work, representing 85.0% of all cities. The remaining 5 cities (15.0%)—Bogdanci, Makedonska Kamenica, Pehchevo, Demir Kapija, and Gostivar—do not have such centers and fall under the jurisdiction of Centers for Social Work located in nearby cities. Of the cities that have such centers, 22 are Inter-Municipal Centers for Social Work, while 7 serve only the municipality in which they are located. The questionnaire was completed by representatives from a total of 24 different institutions, including 18 Inter-Municipal Centers for Social Work and 6 Centers for Social Work. Among the existing Inter-Municipal Centers for Social Work, we were unable to obtain responses from the centers in Debar, Gevgelija, Radovish, and Shtip.

Among the respondents, the largest shares came from the Inter-Municipal Center for Social Work in Sveti Nikole (13.64%), Skopje (11.36%), and Berovo (9.09%), followed by Resen, Makedonski Brod, and Kavadarci (6.84% each), Bitola and Kratovo (4.55% each), while all remaining centers were represented by 2.27% each (one respondent per center). In most cases, Inter-Municipal Centers for Social Work are responsible not only for the municipality in which they are located, but also for at least one additional municipality, and often two or more. The Center in Tetovo stands out, as its jurisdiction also covers the municipalities of Brvenica, Zhelino, Jegunovce, Bogovinje, and Tearce. In contrast, the City of Skopje is served by several Centers for Social Work, each covering different municipalities within Skopje.

Name of the Center for Social Work where you work



PI ISCW – Public Institution Inter-Municipal Center for Social Work

PI CSW – Public Institution Center for Social Work

3. Rights Holders and Duty Bearers

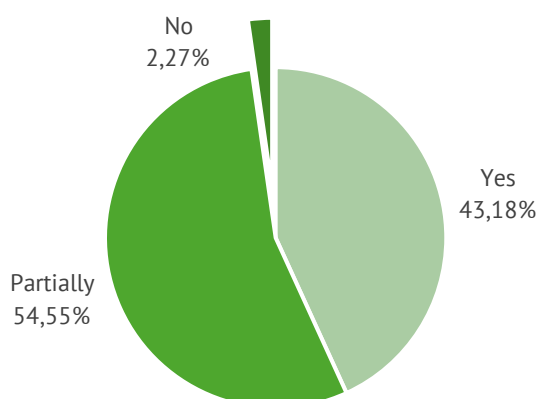
The **primary duty bearers responsible for protection** against gender-based violence, including its digital manifestations, are institutions within the executive, judicial, and local government branches, as well as independent bodies provided for by law. The key institutional mechanisms include:

Institution	Competences established under the law
Ministry of Social Policy, Demography and Youth	Development of policies and measures for prevention and protection; coordination of the protection system; monitoring the implementation of the Law; and ensuring the conditions necessary for the operation of victim support services
Centers for Social Work	Receiving reports of violence; conducting risk assessments; developing individual protection plans; proposing and implementing emergency and long-term protection measures; referring victims to appropriate services; and monitoring the victim's situation.
Ministry of Justice	Provision of primary and secondary legal aid
Ministry of Interior	Receiving reports; taking emergency protection measures; ensuring the victim's safety; filing criminal charges; and cooperating with other institutions
Public Prosecutor's Office	Acting upon criminal charges; undertaking actions for criminal prosecution and the collection of evidence; and proposing protection measures within criminal proceedings
Courts	Deciding on emergency and long-term protection measures; adjudicating misdemeanor and criminal proceedings; and providing judicial protection
Healthcare institutions	Providing healthcare services; documenting injuries; notifying the competent authorities; and issuing medical documentation
Educational institutions	Protecting children who are victims or witnesses of violence; notifying the competent authorities; and carrying out preventive activities
Local self-government units	Providing and supporting local services; carrying out preventive activities; and cooperating with institutions and CSOs
Civil society organizations – service providers	Providing specialized support services; cooperating with institutions
Coordination and inter-institutional bodies	Coordinating institutional responses; facilitating information sharing; and strengthening inter-institutional cooperation

4. Understanding of DGBV and responses by the Centers for Social Work

With regard to the understanding of the concept of DGBV, respondents were asked to provide narrative answers describing how they understand DGBV. While several comprehensive responses reflected a broader understanding of the various forms of DGBV and the information and communication technologies through which it may be perpetrated, the majority of responses associated it primarily with violence occurring on social media platforms.

Do you believe that there is a common understanding within your center of what digital gender-based violence is?

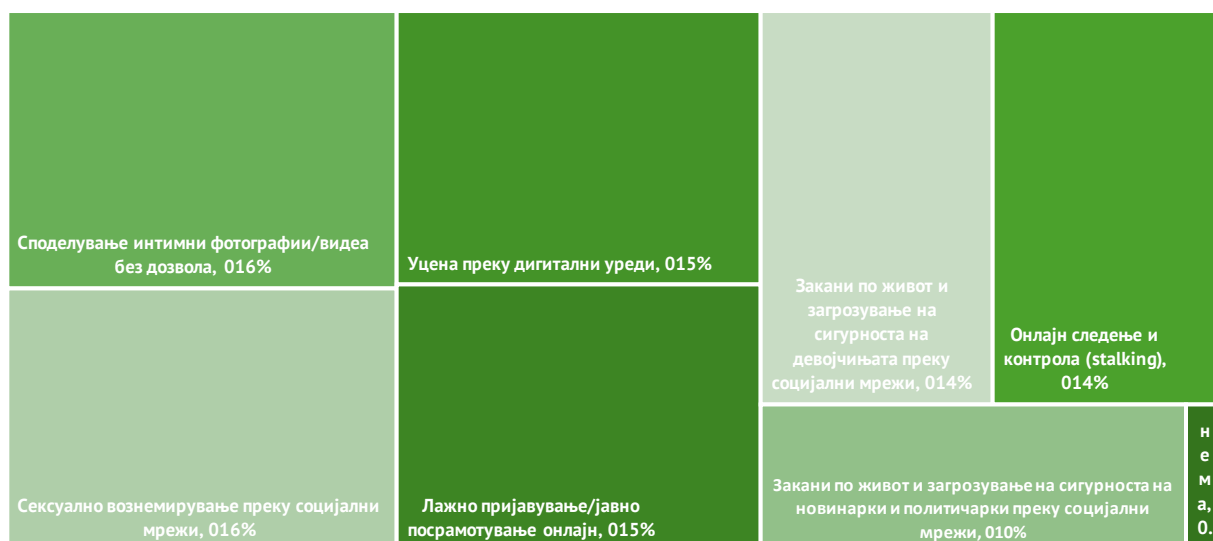


Almost all respondents believe that there is a shared understanding within the Center where they work of what constitutes digital gender-based violence. 43.18% are confident that such a shared understanding exists, while 54.55% believe this is only partially the case. Only 2.27% of respondents indicated that they did not have an opinion on this issue.

The non-consensual sharing of intimate photos or videos was identified as one of the most common forms of DGBV by the respondents, with more than 16% of respondents citing it as such. Sexual harassment

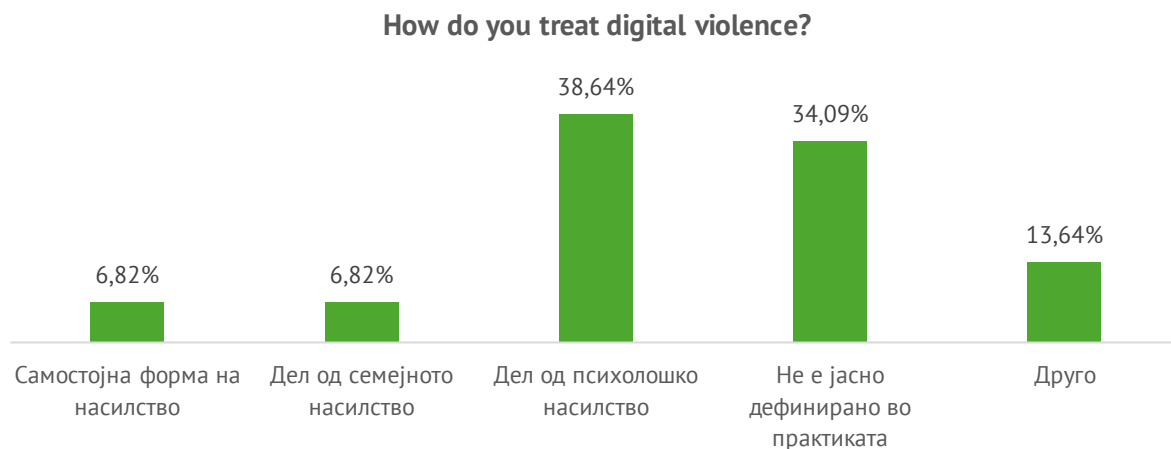
through social media (15.58%) and blackmail via digital devices (15.15%) were also identified by a significant number of respondents. False reporting and public online shaming were cited by 14.72% of respondents, while threats to life and safety of girls through social media, as well as online stalking and controlling behavior (13.18% each). Only 9.52% of respondents recognized threats to the lives and safety of women journalists and women politicians through social media as a form of DGBV. It is important to note that 4.54% of respondents indicated that, in their professional experience to date, they have not encountered this form of violence. (one of the respondents from Resen and Vinica).

Which forms of digital gender-based violence do you encounter in practice?



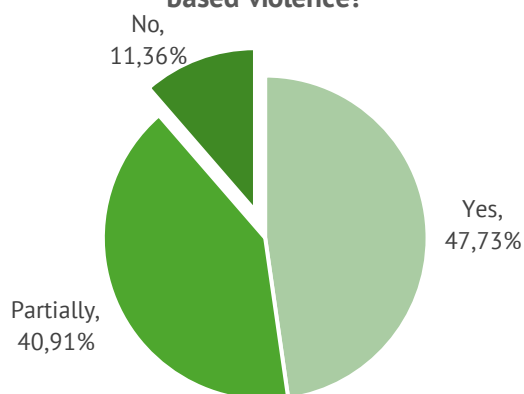
Almost forty percent of respondents (38.64%) stated that they treat digital violence as a form of psychological violence. It is also treated as a form of domestic violence by 6.82% of respondents, while more than one-third (34.09%) believe that there is no clearly defined practice for handling such cases. A portion of respondents (13.64%) also view it as a combination of domestic violence and gender-based violence, cyber violence, or, more broadly, any form of violence perpetrated through the internet. Only 6.82% of respondents

believe that digital gender-based violence should be treated as a distinct and standalone form of violence.



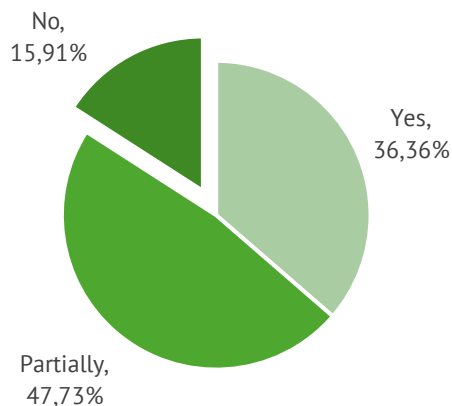
The third section of the questionnaire was aimed at gaining a better understanding of how the Centers respond to such cases in accordance with their legal obligations.

Does the Center use the multisectoral protocol in cases of digital gender-based violence?



Nearly half of the respondents (47.73%) stated that they use the multisectoral protocol in cases of digital gender-based violence, while 40.91% reported that they rely on it only partially when handling such cases. 11.36% of respondents do not use this protocol at all. It should be noted that these percentages also include respondents who had previously stated that they had not encountered any forms of DGBV.

Do you consider the multisectoral protocol for cases of digital gender-based violence to be practical and sufficient for prompt response in handling such cases?

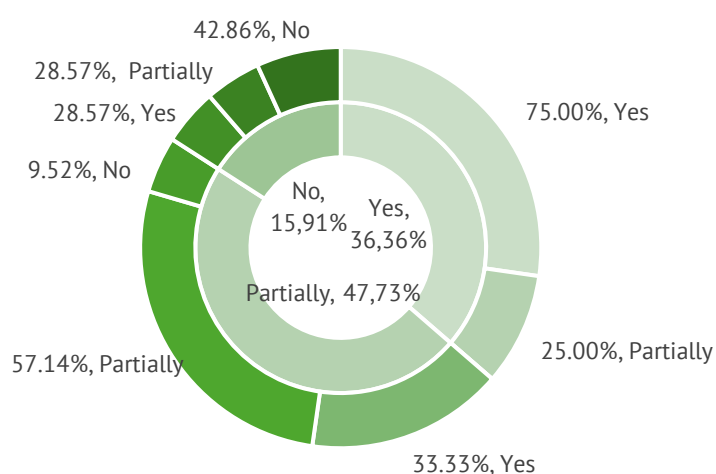


However, 36.36% of all respondents consider the protocol to be practical and sufficient for enabling a prompt response in such cases, while 47.73% believe that it is only partially sufficient. 15.91% of respondents believe that the protocol is not sufficient to ensure a prompt response when handling such cases.

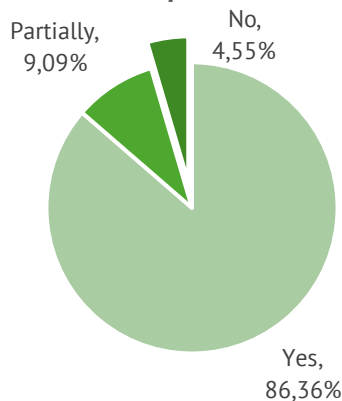
Cross-analysis of the responses to the previous two questions provided an interesting insight into respondents' views regarding the practicality of the multisectoral protocol. Of the 47.73% of respondents who stated that the Center where they work uses this protocol, 75% believe that it is practical and sufficient to

enable a prompt response in handling such cases, while 25% believe that it is only partially sufficient. Of the 40.91% of respondents who indicated that the Center where they work uses the protocol only partially, the majority (57.14%) believe that it is only partially practical and sufficient. 33.33% believe that the protocol is practical and sufficient to enable a prompt response, while 9.52% consider it impractical and insufficient for ensuring a timely response in handling such cases. The views of respondents working in Centers that do not use the multisectoral protocol (15.91% of all respondents) are relatively evenly distributed. Of this group, 28.57% believe that the use of the protocol would be beneficial, and another 28.57% consider it to be only partially beneficial, while the remaining 42.86% believe that it would not contribute to greater efficiency or a timelier response in handling such cases.

Insights into the use of the multisectoral protocol and its usefulness



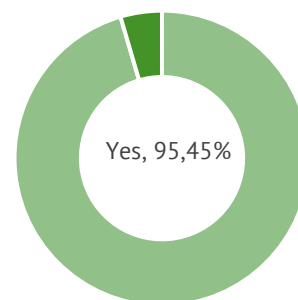
Is a risk assessment conducted when the violence has a digital component?



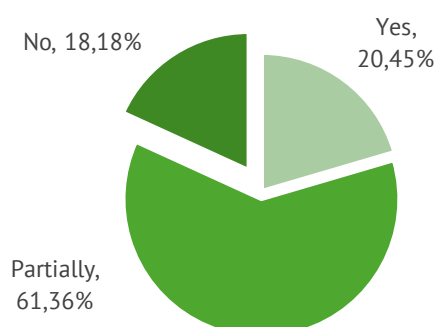
Only 4.55% of responses indicated that the Center where the respondents work does not conduct a risk assessment when the violence includes a digital component. In the vast majority of the remaining cases (86.36%), such a risk assessment is explicitly conducted, while in 9.09% of cases it is carried out only partially.

In almost all Centers (95.45%), the risk assessment takes into account the risks posed to the victim and any children involved, where applicable.

Is digital violence taken into account when assessing the risk to the victim and any children involved, if applicable?

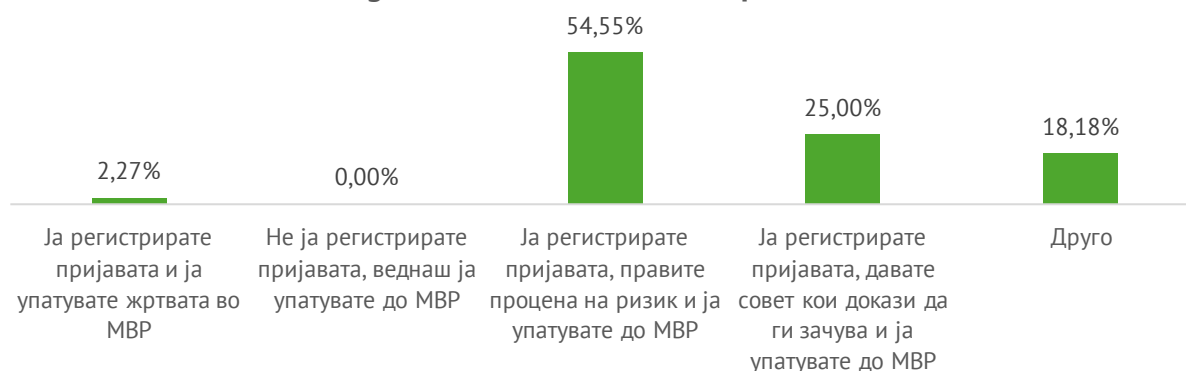


Are the measures provided under the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which may be imposed by the civil court, sufficiently clear and adequate to provide protection against digital gender-based violence



The majority of respondents believe that the measures provided under the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which may be imposed by the civil court, are either not sufficiently clear and adequate to provide protection against Digital Gender-Based Violence (DGBV) or are only partially so, with 18.18% and 61.36% of respondents expressing these views, respectively. Only 20.45% of respondents believe that the Law is sufficiently clear in this regard.

Could you describe the procedures you follow when a case of digital gender-based violence is reported?

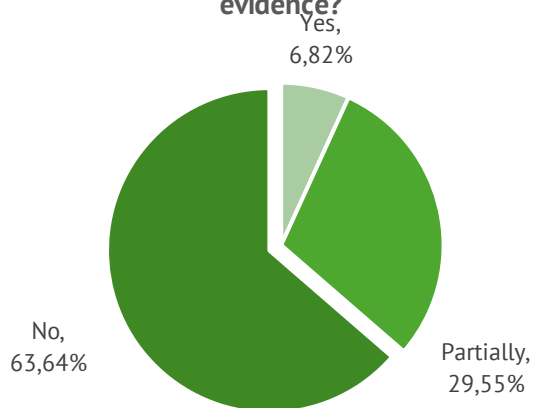


With regard to the handling of reports of digital gender-based violence, the majority of respondents (54.55%) stated that they register the report, conduct a risk assessment, and refer the victim to the MoI. Twenty-five percent of respondents stated that, in addition to these steps, they also provide guidance on preserving evidence, while only 2.27% simply register the report and refer the victim to the MoI.

Among the remaining 18.18% of respondents—which includes those who have not yet encountered such cases in practice (9.09%)—a number of different, modified practices to handling these cases were observed. Some respondents stated that, before referring the victim to the MoI and following the risk assessment, “information is collected and the victim is advised on initiating proceedings for protection measures against gender-based violence.” Others reported that they pay particular attention to preventing the victim’s re-victimization and accompany her throughout the procedure, including during the completion of questionnaires and the interview process at the MoI. Some respondents, on the other hand, do not refer the victim to the police and instead only conduct a risk assessment.

The fourth section of the questionnaire focused on the capacities of the Centers for Social Work, as well as the training provided to their employees for further professional development and capacity building.

Does the Center have clear guidelines for preserving and handling digital evidence?

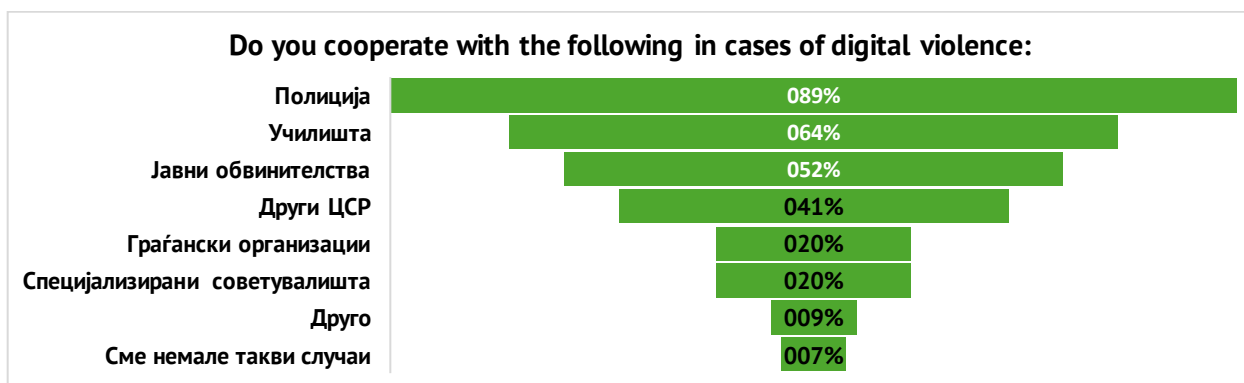


However, the responses to Question 14 of the questionnaire indicate that such training is conducted infrequently. Nearly two-thirds of respondents (63.64%) have never attended any training related to digital gender-based violence. Of the remaining 36% who had attended some form of training, the majority (68.75%) had participated in general training on domestic violence and gender-based violence, while the remaining 31.25% had attended training focused solely on domestic violence.

Furthermore, respondents were asked to assess the level of employees' knowledge in relation to three areas: understanding of the legal aspects of DGBV, understanding of the psychological consequences it has on victims, and knowledge of handling evidence, including its safety and protection. These areas were rated on a scale from one to five, where one represented the lowest level of knowledge and five the highest. The largest proportion of respondents rated employees' knowledge with a score of three: with 34.09% for the first part, 38.64% for the second and 29.55% for the third part. Respondents generally believe that employees are sufficiently familiar with the psychological consequences of DGBV for victims, with 22.73% assigning a rating of 4 and 18.18% assigning the highest rating of 5. In contrast, respondents believe that employees are not sufficiently familiar with the other two areas.

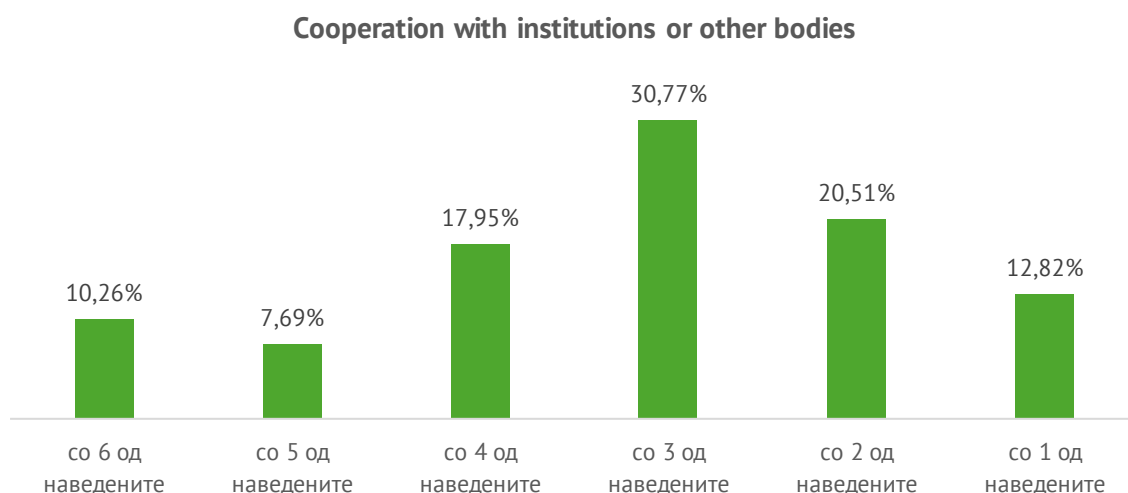
Assessment of employees' level of knowledge regarding:	1	2	3	4	5
Legal aspects of digital gender-based violence	13.64%	31.82%	34.09%	13.64%	6.82%
Psychological consequences for victims	6.82%	13.64%	38.64%	22.73%	18.18%
Safety and protection of digital evidence	18.18%	22.73%	29.55%	22.73%	6.82%

The majority of Centers (63.64%) have neither received nor established clear guidelines for the preservation and handling of digital evidence. A further 29.55% of respondents stated that this is only partially clear, while only 6.82% indicated that there is a fully clear procedure for handling such evidence. This represents a significant challenge, given that digital evidence—its preservation and subsequent accessibility—is one of the key elements in cases of digital gender-based violence.



In cases involving digital gender-based violence, the vast majority of respondents reported cooperating with the police (88.64%), while a significant proportion also collaborate with schools (63.64%). Respondents also reported cooperation with the Public Prosecutor's Offices (52.27%), as well as with other Centers for Social Work (40.91%). Only 20.45% of respondents reported cooperating with civil society organizations and specialized counseling centers, respectively. The high percentage of Centers that cooperate with schools suggests that this form of violence is becoming increasingly prevalent among young people as well.

According to the respondents' statements, they mostly cooperate with three of the listed institutions or bodies (30.77%), with the police being one of them in the majority of cases. A significant proportion of respondents also reported cooperating with at least two of the listed institutions (20.51%) or with four institutions (17.95%). In cases where respondents reported cooperating with only one institution (12.82%), that institution was the police.



The respondents' answers highlighted several key challenges that cut across the work of all Centers for Social Work and that respondents encounter when dealing with victims of digital gender-based violence. The main challenges identified include victims' fear of reporting incidents and ensuring their adequate protection, difficulties in securing and preserving evidence, as well as the lack of appropriate equipment. Cooperation with other institutions was also identified as a major challenge, while many respondents emphasized that they do not feel sufficiently trained to handle such cases. Another challenge faced by employees in the Centers when dealing with cases of DGBV is the difficulty in identifying such conduct as violent

behavior. The following are some of the comments provided by respondents in relation to this question:

"Difficulty in proving the violence; inappropriate classification regarding its type (psychological, gender-based, or domestic violence); insufficient awareness; an unclear legal framework; insufficient training on digital violence; and the fact that the team is not specialized solely in domestic violence."

"evidence that needs to be submitted to the court, the victim's lack of trust in institutions, stemming from the fact that when proposals for victim protection are submitted to the court, protective measures are often not imposed."

"We don't have an appropriate room. Victims are not always willing to share parts of the incident with the entire professional team at the Center for Social Work and may prefer to speak privately with a specific professional."

"A lack of resources to address these cases, inadequate seriousness in handling them, and a lack of training."

It is also important to note that 22.72% of respondents did not answer this question, while nearly 10% stated that they had not encountered such a case in their professional practice to date.

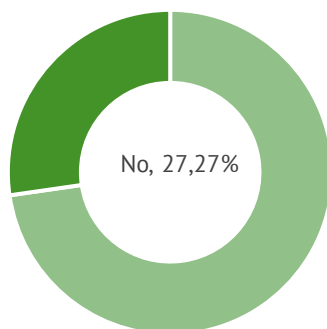
In contrast, respondents identified victims' exposure to secondary victimization as the greatest challenge faced by victims of DGBV when they decide to report the violence to institutions, with 65.91% of respondents highlighting this concern. Reporting often takes place in the presence of multiple people, and there are not always female staff members available to receive reports from women and girls. The failure of institutions to treat such cases with sufficient seriousness, as well as delays in responding to them, were also identified as major challenges for victims seeking to report digital violence, with both issues being cited by 43.18% of respondents. 22.73% of respondents believe that institutions do not know how to respond appropriately in such cases.

In your opinion, what are the most common challenges victims of digital gender-based violence face when reporting the violence to institutions?



More than one-quarter of respondents (27.25%) stated that the Center where they work does not provide adequate support to victims of digital gender-based violence.

Does the Center provide appropriate support in cases of digital gender-based violence?



Among the remaining 72.73% of respondents who stated that their Center provides some form of support, psychological support was the most commonly available service (63.64%). Additionally, 40.91% reported that they provide verbal guidance for referring the victim to the appropriate institutions, 25% stated that they accompany victims to those institutions, and 11.36% indicated that they further refer victims to specialized counseling centers or civil society organizations that provide legal and psychological assistance.

**Forms of Support Provided by the Center
(in the cases of DGBV)**



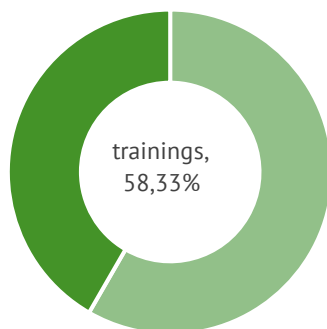
When asked about the types of support provided by the Center where they work, the largest proportion of respondents (42.31%) stated that their Center provides at least two forms of support to victims. An equal share of Centers (26.92% each) provides either one or three forms of support, while only 3.85% reported providing all available forms of support, namely the Public Institution Center for Social Work "Resen".

How many of the listed forms of appropriate support for cases of digital gender-based violence do you use in your work?



The final two questions invited respondents to provide comments on the measures that could improve the institutional response of the Centers for Social Work, as well as the measures that could enhance a coordinated and multisectoral response by institutions in cases of digital gender-based violence.

What measures would help improve the institutional response of the Center for Social Work (CSW)



The lack of, and need for, appropriate specialized training on this issue was identified as the primary measure for improving the institutional response, with more than 58% of respondents highlighting this concern. In several cases, respondents also highlighted the need for stronger inter-institutional cooperation, as well as more effective and timely responses by institutions, which would contribute to the quicker identification of perpetrators. The availability of dedicated rooms for taking statements was also identified as a useful measure for improving the institutional response. It should be noted that 18.18% of

respondents did not provide any response to this question.

The same 18.18% of respondents also did not provide any comments regarding the measures they believe would contribute to improving a coordinated and multisectoral institutional response to cases of digital gender-based violence. Once again, the need for specialized training emerged as a key priority, alongside the need for stronger inter-institutional cooperation, particularly with regard to information-sharing and the establishment of “rapid and appropriate intervention mechanisms.” Regarding trainings, respondents believe that they should be delivered jointly with representatives from all competent institutions.

5. Understanding of DGBV and responses by the police

The analysis indicates that there is broad consensus among institutions and civil society organizations that digital gender-based violence is becoming increasingly prevalent. However, the institutional response, particularly within the police, continues to face significant structural and operational challenges.

Police units responsible for combating cybercrime have limited human and technical resources. The shortage of specialized personnel, coupled with an insufficient understanding of the specific characteristics of DGBV, directly affects the quality and timeliness of the procedure. Although some police officers had received training in the collection of electronic evidence, these trainings were not specifically focused on cases of digital gender-based violence, nor did they incorporate an approach based on the needs of victims. This creates a risk of re-victimization and an insufficiently sensitive response to victims.

Additionally, disparities in capacity across different police departments are evident, resulting in the overburdening of certain units and reducing their ability to provide timely and effective protection to victims. There is also a lack of dedicated, appropriately equipped facilities for receiving victims reporting DGBV, which negatively affects victims' sense of safety and trust in the institution.

Technical resources and equipment constitute another significant challenge. The lack of modern equipment and software licenses limits the capacity for the timely and effective collection and analysis of digital evidence. Cooperation among the various police cybercrime units, as well as coordination with the Public Prosecutor's Office, is not at a satisfactory level. Administrative procedures, particularly the exchange of documentation in writing through official e-mail channels, result in significant delays, with the delivery of certain reports taking up to two months.

Although the Investigative Centre within the Basic Public Prosecutor's Office has been identified as an example of good practice, its capacities remain limited and require further strengthening through an increase in specialized personnel and the enhancement of its technical infrastructure.

An additional systemic shortcoming is the absence of clear operational procedures for handling and coordinating responses in cases of DGBV. The police need to develop standards for intervention, as well as continuous specialized training, including training on working with victims from marginalized groups, who often express distrust in institutions and a sense of being inadequately protected.

Overall, while a basic institutional framework for addressing DGBV is in place, there is a clear need for the systemic strengthening of human resources, technical capacity, inter-institutional coordination, and an approach based on the rights and needs of victims in order to ensure a more effective and sensitive response.

6. Understanding of DGBV and response of the Public Prosecutor's Office and the Judiciary

With regard to the justice system, the analysis of available data indicates that domestic violence continues to be the most frequently reported and most readily recognized form of violence within the Public Prosecutor's Office. Despite the fact that gender-based violence is increasingly perpetrated through information and communication technologies, systematic and specialized training for public prosecutors and judges has not yet been established to ensure the timely and appropriate recognition of its various forms.

According to information obtained from the Academy for Judges and Public Prosecutors, one training session on the criminal offense of stalking was delivered in 2023 as part of the regular program for continuous professional training, while no training activities specifically addressing DGBV were planned for 2024. Although significant efforts are being made to strengthen the capacities of the Public Prosecutor's Office, the judiciary, and the police in the area of online and in person sexual exploitation, as well as in the area of trafficking in human beings, these programs do not incorporate a more in-depth analysis of the gender dimension of online sexual violence, nor do they promote a broader understanding of digital violence as a form of gender-based violence.

The lack of specialized knowledge and limited awareness of this issue results in a significant number of reported cases being dismissed on the grounds that they do not meet the legal elements of a criminal offense. Furthermore, the Public Prosecutor's Office rarely exercises its authority to initiate proceedings *ex officio* in such cases, taking the view that other criminal offenses are of higher priority.

Although cooperation between the Public Prosecutor's Office and the police is generally assessed as effective, the flow of information remains slow, and there are no specific protocols or standards in place for coordinated responses to cases of DGBV. This further impacts the efficiency and timeliness of the institutional response.

7. Conclusions

The analysis of the institutional framework and response practices in cases of DGBV in the Republic of North Macedonia indicates that, while a formal system for protection against gender-based violence has been established, its adaptation to the digital dimension remains limited and insufficiently systematized.

Although institutions largely recognize the existence and increasing prevalence of digital gender-based violence, there is still a lack of a fully harmonized understanding of the concept and its treatment as a distinct form of violence. In practice, the digital component is most often incorporated into existing categories of psychological or domestic violence without specifically recording its digital dimension, resulting in legal and operational ambiguity.

Centers for Social Work serve as a key first point of contact for victims; however, they face a shortage of specialized training, a lack of clear guidelines for handling digital evidence, and the absence of standardized tools for assessing digital risks. Although risk assessments are formally conducted in the majority of cases, they do not always take into account the specific safety risks arising from digital exposure. The lack of technical equipment and insufficient preparedness for the preservation of digital evidence pose an additional challenge.

The police have basic institutional mechanisms in place for addressing cases of DGBV; however, their capacity is limited by shortages of personnel, lack of technical equipment and of specialized expertise. Disparities in capacity across different police units, together with the slow flow of information between the police and the Public Prosecutor's Office, adversely affect the efficiency of proceedings.

Within the justice system, DGBV has yet to be adequately integrated into the regular training programs for public prosecutors and judges. The lack of specialized knowledge and gender sensitivity contributes to the limited recognition of such cases and to their dismissal on formal legal grounds. Furthermore, the possibility of initiating proceedings *ex officio* is rarely utilized in such cases.

Inter-institutional cooperation exists, but it is not sufficiently structured and formalized through dedicated protocols for handling cases of DGBV. The absence of clear operational procedures and coordination standards contributes to inconsistent practices and unequal levels of protection for victims.

Particularly concerning is the risk of secondary victimization. Victims often face insufficiently sensitive treatment, a lack of confidential reporting conditions, and institutional responses that are not sufficiently prompt. Some centers do not provide a full range of support, and an approach based on the needs of the victim has not yet been systematically established.

Overall, the system has a normative foundation and an established institutional structure; however, it lacks the specialization, standardization, technical preparedness, and continuous professional training necessary to ensure a comprehensive and effective response to digital gender-based violence.

8. Recommendations

In order to strengthen the institutional response and ensure alignment with European and international standards, the following measures are recommended:

1. Strengthening the normative and strategic framework

- Develop a clear national definition and strategic approach to digital gender-based violence as a distinct analytical and operational category.
- Enhance the legal operationalization of protective measures in cases involving a digital component, accompanied by clear guidance on their implementation.
- Align national policies with the standards set out in the Directive (EU) 2024/1385 and the Istanbul Convention.

2. Systematic and mandatory specialized training

- Introduce mandatory and continuous specialized training for employees of Centers for Social Work, police officers, public prosecutors, and judges.
- Integrate the gender dimension and a victim-centered approach into all training programs.
- Organize joint multi-sectoral training sessions to improve coordination and understanding of roles.

3. Standardization of response procedures

- Develop dedicated operational protocols for responding to cases of digital gender-based violence.
- Develop standardized tools for digital risk assessment.

- Establish clear procedures for the preservation, collection, handling, and management of digital evidence.

4. Strengthening technical and human capacities

- Increase the number of specialized professionals within police cybercrime units and investigative centers.
- Provide modern technical equipment and software licenses for digital forensic investigations.
- Ensure the availability of dedicated, confidential facilities for receiving and interviewing victims across all relevant institutions.

5. Strengthening inter-institutional coordination

- Establish formalized mechanisms for the rapid exchange of information among the police, the Public Prosecutor's Office, and Centers for Social Work.
- Develop clear deadlines and digitalized communication systems to reduce administrative delays.
- Regularly monitor and evaluate the implementation of the multisectoral protocol.

6. A rights-based and victim-centered approach

- Establish standards for preventing secondary victimization.
- Ensure a gender-sensitive and trauma-informed approach across all relevant institutions.
- Expand the availability of psychological, legal, and social support services, including through strengthened cooperation with civil society organizations.

7. Monitoring and data collection

- Establish a system for collecting disaggregated data on cases of digital gender-based violence.
- Regularly publish reports on the handling of such cases and their outcomes.

The implementation of these recommendations would enable the gradual transformation of the existing system from a reactive to a proactive model, characterized by clear specialization and a coordinated response aligned with European standards and the needs of victims.