

Policy document for the advancement of transgender rights in North Macedonia

Summary

August 2026

Skopje

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The situation regarding the rights of transgender people in North Macedonia is unfavourable despite the existence of formal legal protection against discrimination and hate crimes. The legal framework is insufficiently implemented, and specific rights, services and procedures, such as legal gender recognition and gender-affirming medical care, remain inaccessible. Every day, transgender people face stigmatisation, dehumanisation, violence and institutional barriers across many areas of life, including healthcare, employment, social protection and intimate and partner relationships. The unfavourable conditions are further deepened by anti-gender discourses and policies. The space for civil society advocacy and action has been significantly reduced. In this context, policy improvements are needed that provide not only formal equality but also the full enjoyment of rights by transgender people.

The goal of the document is to identify and represent the experiences of transgender people of rights violations, stigmatisation, and inequality, and to identify the key policy areas where necessary changes are needed, based on their experiences and needs. The document is intended to serve as a foundation for advocacy before national authorities, as well as before international and regional organisations and other relevant actors that influence the national agenda for human rights and gender equality.

This document is prepared based on qualitative data from two focus groups with 10 transgender, intersex, and gender non-binary people, through which their experiences, needs, and key problems in accessing rights and services were identified. The findings were thematically analysed and, together with the relevant legal framework, research and reports, form the basis for determining priority areas and objectives for policy change.

Key issues and experiences

The quote “Visibility is important, but first you have to be alive” captures the focus group discussion, which emphasises the need to provide basic living conditions related to safety and livelihood as prerequisites for social and political inclusion, solidarity, advocacy, activism and queer culture. The experiences of transgender people are categorised into two broad areas: 1. Safety and freedom to authentically live their gender identity; 2. Social well-being, including the right to work, health and healthcare. Additional areas of interest include LGBTI associations and activism, and mechanisms for the protection of rights.

Safety and freedom to authentically live the gender identity

Transgender people face widespread **stigma, non-acceptance, dehumanisation and social invisibility**. Ridicule, insults, pathologisation and lack of recognition create feelings

of insecurity and fear, and experiences of violence – from microaggressions and verbal violence to hate-motivated physical violence – significantly limit dignified and free living.

Fear of violence and non-acceptance forces transgender people to constantly adapt their behaviour, appearance and gender expression according to perceived risk. This is especially true for transgender women and gender-non-binary people, who, due to greater visibility, face additional pressures to conform to gender norms. The constant pressure, stigma and experiences of violence have serious consequences for mental health, including anxiety, depression, panic attacks, self-harm and suicide attempts.

Transphobia and patriarchal gender norms are reproduced within the LGBTI community, contributing to fragmentation and the creation of hierarchies that determine which trans experiences are considered "legitimate". Therefore, the need to facilitate greater solidarity and to express support for questions that do not directly affect everyone in the LGBTI community, such as legal recognition of gender and access to gender-affirming care, is emphasised.

The social stigma also significantly affects **intimate and family relationships**. Transgender people, especially transgender women, face fetishisation, sexualisation, and non-acceptance as equal partners, and are constantly required to explain their identity, which can create additional safety risks. Family support is crucial for safety and well-being, and experiences show that with appropriate education and psychological support, acceptance and active support for transgender people within families are possible.

Legal gender recognition is a crucial prerequisite for dignified and safe living and for access to other rights and services. Despite the European Court of Human Rights' 2019 judgment and the obligation it imposed to establish a clear and accessible procedure, no law has been adopted. The absence of corresponding legal regulation of the procedure makes it uncertain, lengthy, and administratively complex.

Social well-being, the right to work, health and healthcare

Social and economic uncertainty for transgender people is the result of intertwined barriers to employment, unfavourable working conditions, and barriers to access to healthcare and social protection.

Workers' relations in North Macedonia are characterised by uncertainty, informal and precarious work, and insufficiently effective mechanisms for protecting workers' rights. In this context, transgender people face additional discrimination in employment on the grounds of gender identity, which limits their access to formal employment. The lengthy, inaccessible legal gender recognition process is a significant barrier to formal employment.

Discrimination against transgender individuals often pushes them into informal, uncertain, and low-paid jobs that are below their qualifications, frequently without contracts or access to health and pension insurance. In the workplace, they also face harassment, misgendering and deadnaming, ridicule, gossip, privacy violations, sexual harassment, and pressure to conform to gender norms.

Especially vulnerable are transgender women, most of whom are involved in sex work. Criminalisation of **sex work**, combined with risks of violence, non-payment, and disrespect for agreed services, increases unsafety and harms workers' rights. Participants emphasise the need for decriminalisation or clear legal changes that would offer protection from violence and exploitation against sex workers.

Transgender individuals have various health needs related to **gender-affirming care**, including hormonal therapy, surgical procedures, voice therapy, facial feminisation, reproductive health, mental health, and general healthcare. Therefore, a holistic and multidisciplinary approach is essential. However, access to medical gender reassignment services is often limited and expensive, as most procedures are not covered by public health insurance, or they are established but not recognised as part of gender-affirming care. Some services, like genital surgery, are unavailable locally and often require travelling abroad.

The structural obstacle of cisnormativity in the health system mainly stems from its organisation around cisgender needs. Although some medical services and resources exist, they are predominantly structured to serve cisgender populations. A core issue is the pathologisation of transgender identities through the diagnostic codes F.64 – transsexualism, which condition access to other medical services for gender-affirmation on obtaining a psychiatric diagnosis. Distrust of psychiatrists, fear of non-recognition, discrimination, and the imposition of gender conversion therapy, as well as the limited number of professionals, contribute to a large proportion of transgender people starting hormone therapy on their own ("DIY transition"), taking health risks due to the system's inaccessibility and unsafety.

Violations of patients' rights also occur in the use of general and mental health services. Participants describe inappropriate and unnecessary therapies, insufficient information and disrespect for patients' right of consent, as well as cases where mental health conditions are used to question their gender identity. Endocrinologists are difficult to access in public health, although experiences with them are generally more positive.

Everyday violations of dignity and health rights through misgendering, mockery, gossip, and the sharing of personal information without consent occur in healthcare institutions. These experiences make the healthcare system an unsafe and hostile space and lead to avoidance of healthcare institutions.

Mechanisms for rights protection

Transgender people have low trust in institutions and protective mechanisms because of fear of further victimisation and the normalisation of violations of their rights, which results in rare reporting of cases. To overcome this, collective and social support, along with ongoing free legal aid from civil society organisations, are necessary.

LGBTI associations and activism

The civil sector, which provides support for transgender people, is facing significant constraints on its ability to act because of the reduction and termination of financial support, an unfavourable political climate, stagnation in European integration, and reduced funding for advancing the human rights agenda. As a result, several LGBTI organisations have closed, and the rest have reduced capacity for legal, psychosocial and health services. The only shelter for LGBTI people who are victims of violence has closed.

Due to limited resources, associations cannot adequately meet the needs of transgender people, who have different experiences and varying levels of trust in the civil society sector.

Transgender people emphasise the need for greater visibility, education for health professionals and public sector employees, strengthening solidarity, and creating networks for support and collective action. In particular, the need for more powerful allies and joint advocacy by the LGBTI community to advance the rights of transgender people is highlighted.

Meanwhile, the spread and institutionalisation of anti-gender policies following the right-wing's rise to power in 2024 pose further risks of rights limitations and regression in equality policies.

Priority areas for policy change

Cisnormativity and transphobia are deeply rooted in society, structurally embedded in legislation and institutions, values, relations and culture. Social changes to advance the rights of transgender people need to be transformative, that is, to question and challenge patriarchy, cisnormativity and heteronormativity. Achieving structural change requires collective action, the involvement of all relevant stakeholders and the continuous implementation of policies across different areas.

Security and freedom for authentic living on gender identity

The aim of the policy changes in this area is to create conditions in which transgender people can live freely and safely, and express their gender identity without fear of violence, discrimination, harassment or humiliation. A comprehensive approach is needed, with an institutional framework grounded in respect for dignity, bodily integrity, privacy and the right to self-determination.

The main goal is to develop and enforce a **national policy that enhances the lives of LGBTI individuals**, aiming to shift societal values, decrease prejudice, and promote acceptance of sexual and gender diversity. Policies should be grounded in a gender-transformative approach and focused on substantive equality, ensuring a coordinated and comprehensive effort.

A comprehensive **implementation and enhancement of the legal framework is essential for prevention and protection against discrimination**. Legislation across different sectors

should adhere to principles of equality and non-discrimination. Institutions must have clear obligations for preventing discrimination, mainstreaming equality and ongoing monitoring. Additionally, transgender individuals need to be more informed, encouraged and trained to identify and report discrimination, as well as to utilise available protection mechanisms.

In the area of **protection and prevention of gender-based and domestic violence**, existing laws need to be applied consistently and in a manner that recognises the specific risks faced by transgender people, especially transgender women and transgender children and young people. Specialised services, family counselling and education, as well as strengthening the public sector's capacity for prevention and protection against domestic, gender-based and sexual violence and hate crimes, are needed.

In **criminal legal protection, progress has been achieved with recognition of** gender identity in hate crimes legislation. However, the police, the prosecution, and other institutions for protection against hate speech still need to significantly strengthen their capacities and mechanisms to ensure unbiased protection. It is especially crucial for the police to establish themselves as an institution trusted by transgender people and to ensure that the prosecution performs fair and effective investigations into hate crimes and hate speech, following European standards.

Improved regulation of the **digital space** is needed, with mechanisms for administrative protection against hate speech, online harassment and sexual harassment, and measures for a coordinated response to anti-gender actors who spread hate speech and harass LGBTI activists.

Legal gender recognition is essential for achieving formal equality and ensuring safe living conditions. A swift, transparent, and accessible process based on self-determination is crucial. Additionally, options for non-binary gender identification or choosing not to display gender on documents should be available, along with accessible legal and psychosocial support and information to help transgender individuals understand their rights and navigate the procedures.

Social well-being, the right to work, health and healthcare

In the area of **employment relations**, it is necessary to ensure equal access to employment, equal working conditions, and the protection of dignity and workers' rights, without discrimination based on gender identity and gender expression. The priority is to remove legal and administrative barriers, especially those arising from mismatches between personal documents and gender identity, and to fully harmonise labour legislation with protection against discrimination. Transgender people need to be included in employment, qualification, and re-qualification measures.

Labour legislation should extend to workers in the informal economy, those without contracts, and platform workers. It should also limit the use of fixed-term contracts and require the implementation of workplace equality policies. Additionally, a new law is

needed to protect against harassment at work, explicitly recognising transgender individuals and covering abuses such as misgendering, mockery, sexual harassment, and other forms. Protective mechanisms must be accessible and effective, while the labour inspectorate should proactively enforce the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination in the field of employment and labour relations.

In relation to **sex work**, the legal and social status of sex workers needs to be improved, with particular attention to the specific vulnerability of transgender sex workers. Sex work should be decriminalised and integrated into labour laws, including pensions, health coverage, social protection, and occupational safety. The criminal justice system's role should shift from punishment and prosecution to safeguarding against violence and abuse. Additionally, social services are essential for individuals seeking to exit sex work, alongside ensuring proper rights protections for workers on online platforms—covering online violence, economic and digital insecurity, and protection of personal data.

In **healthcare**, the crucial aim is for transgender individuals to access comprehensive, affordable, and safe gender-affirming care without facing pathologisation, financial barriers, discrimination, or fear of violence and humiliation. A multidisciplinary approach is essential, covering gender-affirming care, sexual and reproductive health, and mental health, while also enhancing health workers' education, training, and professional skills. It is especially crucial to move away from viewing gender identity as a pathology, a mental health disease, and to ensure that gender-affirming care is not contingent upon psychiatric diagnoses.

Gender-affirming services must be affordable, included in mandatory health insurance, available through public health facilities, geographically accessible, and supported by clear referral procedures. Simultaneously, mental health services should be expanded and improved in quality, while the effects of discrimination, violence, social isolation, and economic insecurity on mental health should be acknowledged. Ensuring full respect for patient rights, enhancing oversight through health inspections, educating healthcare staff, and aligning health policies with the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination are essential.

LGBTI community and activism

The aim of this policy field is for the LGBTI community to be a space of equality and solidarity, where no identity or experience is deemed less valid. It emphasises recognising the specific rights and needs of transgender individuals as part of a shared struggle. To achieve this, increasing education, developing support networks, and fostering solidarity are essential, as is creating spaces for socialisation and empowerment. Addressing internalised homo/transphobia and community hierarchy as core values is crucial, especially by tailoring content to meet the needs of young queer people.

LGBTI organisations should have access to sustainable funding to support ongoing activities, monitor the implementation of the law, engage in legal activism, and respond collectively to backlash from anti-gender ideologies. Building alliances with women's

movements, Roma rights activists, disability groups, and other marginalised communities is vital to enhance collective action and social emancipation.

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