



Focusing on

Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment

in Eastern Europe and Central Asia



Key Issues of Concern

Achieving true gender equality remains a major challenge in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, even though legal protections in the region are generally strong and women are relatively well-represented in secondary education and the workforce. Violence against women and girls remains persistent, as do inadequate and discriminatory responses to sexual violence, which puts women at higher risk of numerous sexual and reproductive health problems. Harmful traditional practices such as gender-biased sex selection, 'honour' killings, bride kidnapping, and child and forced marriage also persist in various parts of the region, while women and female-headed households tend to experience higher levels of poverty. Tackling these issues requires root causes of gender inequality to be identified and addressed.

Broad gaps between laws and reality

Laws on equal rights and opportunities for men and women often do not reflect women's day-to-day realities in the region. Many countries lack effective mechanisms to monitor the implementation of human-rights treaties and national laws on gender equality. Some governments fail to address root causes of gender inequality, and ignore well-documented links with other areas of policy, economic, and social development.

Gender-based violence

The persistence of gender-based violence, particularly of intimate partner violence, is an important indicator of entrenched gender inequality in the region. The World Health Organisation estimates that 26 per cent of women in Eastern Europe and 23 per cent in Central Asia have experienced physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner. Although some progress has been made in addressing this issue, establishing effective multi-sectorial responses to gender-based violence in the region remains a priority. Where laws and regulatory frameworks are in place, implementation often lags behind. Data on the issue and comprehensive referral mechanisms are improving, but remain inadequate, as does victims' access to justice and health services.

Socioeconomic consequences of gender inequality

Women in the region still shoulder the majority of the childcare burden in addition to work outside the home. Even outside traditionally female and lower-paying occupations, women in the Caucasus and Central Asia are paid up to 50 per cent less than men for equal work, and are disproportionately affected by poverty. Where informal marriage is practiced, women and their children have limited or no rights to property, inheritance, or child support.

Persistent gender stereotypes

Gender stereotypes are still prevalent in the region, where social norms often reinforce a power structure in which men are seen as breadwinners and women mainly as caretakers. Such views can lead to gender-based violence, lack of access to sexual and reproductive healthcare for women, and to fathers' limited involvement in child development. Men and boys have little exposure to more gender-equal attitudes and behaviours, nor opportunity to become positive male role models.

Gender-biased sex selection

The practice of gender-biased sex selection in favour of male offspring stems from society placing a low value on girls. It perpetuates the culture of gender inequality and can lead to serious, long-lasting social, economic, and demographic consequences. Gender-biased sex selection is common in parts of South-Eastern Europe and in the South Caucasus, which is home to some of the world's greatest sex ratio at birth imbalances.

Child marriage and other harmful traditional practices

Harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and bride kidnapping still persist – and in some cases appear to be on the rise – in the region, despite legal prohibitions. Child marriage hinders girls' rights to education, life, and physical integrity, as the early childbearing that often accompanies it is more likely to result in complications during pregnancy or childbirth.

UNFPA's Work in the Region

UNFPA works to build national capacities to pass and implement evidence-informed, human-rights-based laws and policies that advance gender equality with an emphasis on greater integration with sexual and reproductive health, eliminating gender-based violence and harmful traditional practices, and changing gender stereotypes.

Advocating for improved policies

UNFPA supports governments in the region in implementing their commitments under international legal frameworks and review processes, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). It also works to help bring national social policies in line with international gender-related standards and to promote policy changes contributing to greater gender equality.

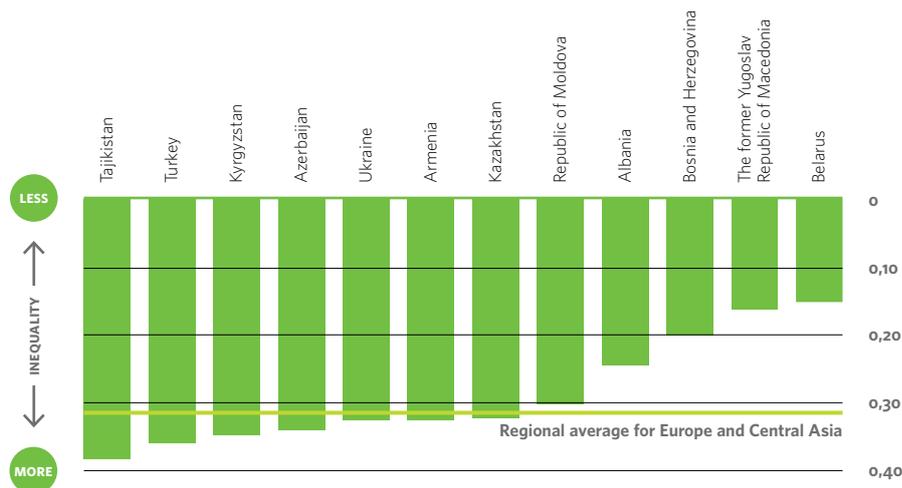
- ✓ In the 2014-15 period, 16 countries in the region received UNFPA support to implement international commitments related to gender equality and reproductive rights under CEDAW concluding observations and UPR recommendations.

Eliminating violence against women and girls

UNFPA promotes a multi-sectorial approach to combatting gender-based violence, including by working with healthcare professionals and police forces to recognise and provide appropriate services for victims of violence; and by raising awareness of the issue through partnerships with faith-based organisations and community leaders, and the media. UNFPA also works to prevent sexual violence in humanitarian and emergency settings that leave women and girls particularly vulnerable.

- ✓ At least 14 countries have committed to reform their healthcare sectors to better identify and address cases of gender-based violence using a resource and training package developed and launched in the region by UNFPA and WAVE in 2014.

Gender inequality in Eastern Europe and Central Asia



Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2014: Gender Inequality Index.
Notes: The index is a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in the three dimensions of reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market. No data for Georgia, Serbia, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Promoting male involvement

UNFPA works to change gender stereotypes, inequitable gender relations, and traditional norms on masculinity by engaging men and boys through gender-transformative programming. This includes advocating for gender-sensitive, family-friendly policies; promoting involvement of men in family life, including child-rearing; fostering coalitions that support male involvement in ending gender discrimination and violence against women; and introducing policy dialogue and advocacy campaigns to promote positive role models for young men and boys. With UNFPA's support, many countries in the region have made impressive strides in this area in recent years.

- ✓ In Turkey, where there is no formal curriculum in schools on sexual health, UNFPA organises trainings for members of the Turkish army that have reached 3 million men to date, many of whom say the experience changed their beliefs about a woman's right to make her own choices and to live free from violence.

Combating gender-biased sex selection

By engaging in research, advocacy, and policy dialogue, UNFPA seeks to address the underlying and deeply rooted gender inequities and stereotypes that lead parents to value sons over daughters, which has contributed to a skewed sex ratio at birth in several countries of the region.

- ✓ UNFPA has commissioned or carried out studies on the prevalence and root causes of gender-biased sex selection in Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, as well as in Kosovo (UNSCR 1244). In Armenia, for example, the evidence provided led to the formation of a broad coalition to eradicate gender-biased sex selection and to the Government adopting a comprehensive plan to combat the practice.

Ending child marriage and other harmful practices

UNFPA works with governments and civil society to promote and protect the human rights of girls, in particular by improving provision of reproductive health services to girls involved in, or at risk of, child marriage; promoting the harmonisation of criminal and civil legislation on harmful practices and ensuring they reflect international obligations; and raising awareness about the importance of girls' education and the consequences of harmful traditional practices for girls, families, and society in general.

- ✔ The elimination of child marriage was included in Kyrgyzstan's 2013–2017 development strategy following UNFPA's 'Too Young to Wed' campaign in 2012.

Supporting better data collection

UNFPA advocates for governments to address the gap in data regarding violence against women and traditional harmful practices such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection. It also provides technical support and advocates for the use of such data in policy-making.

- ✔ UNFPA Armenia's support for government ministries and regional administration centres in national data collection resulted in first-of-their-kind nationwide surveys that helped adopt national strategies and legislation on gender equality and gender-based violence.



Priorities for the Future

- Support governments in stepping up implementation of obligations under CEDAW, the UPR, and other international mechanisms, and in working with national human-rights institutions.
- Ensure gender-based violence is addressed in humanitarian emergency situations.
- Challenge the persistence of gender stereotypes through gender-transformative approaches.
- Promote comprehensive multi-sectoral responses to gender-based violence, including through an integrated approach with health services, especially sexual and reproductive health services.
- Intensify efforts to eliminate harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and gender-biased sex selection.
- Advocate and support governments in joining a data revolution, with specific focus on improving access to and utilisation of gender-related data.

