

# The Social Issue of Modern Society Challenges the Key to North Macedonia Focus on Unemployment, Mental Health, and Domestic Violence

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## ABSTRACT

**Introduction:** Despite progress in technology and healthcare, North Macedonia faces significant social challenges. Unemployment is at 12.5%, with youth unemployment at 26.9%, leading to a "brain drain" that hampers economic growth. Gender disparities in employment persist, particularly in rural areas, where women face traditional barriers. Mental health issues, including rising stress and anxiety among youth, are exacerbated by stigma and inadequate resources, especially in rural regions. Domestic violence remains a critical issue, often unreported due to shame and limited support. Addressing these challenges is essential for fostering equity and community stability.

**Purpose of the research:** This research will identify and analyze the complex social challenges facing North Macedonia to highlight issues such as high unemployment rates, gender disparities in employment, rising mental health concerns, and domestic violence, all of which adversely impact individuals and communities.

By raising awareness of these social challenges and their potential repercussions, the research seeks to encourage a deeper understanding of these issues and motivate efforts toward creating a more equitable and just society.

**Methodology:** The research is based on available data analysis, including employment, mental health, domestic violence records, and equity statistics.

**Results:** The research results are mainly related to the social challenges that adversely impact individuals or groups in North Macedonia through gender disparities in employment, domestic violence, and mental health issues and the respective avenues to address those challenges.

**Conclusion:** Addressing these issues and their potential societal repercussions is essential. Raising awareness of these social challenges can encourage a deeper understanding of global issues and motivate efforts toward building a more equitable and just world.

**Keywords:** society, unemployment, mental health, violence, equity

## INTRODUCTION

We find ourselves in times characterized by significant progress in technology, commerce, and healthcare, all aimed at eliminating poverty and fostering equality. However, despite these advancements, a complicated set of social issues continues to jeopardize global stability, and North Macedonia is no exception.

Located in the Balkans, with a diverse population of about 2 million people<sup>1</sup>, North Macedonia serves as a cultural and geographic bridge between Europe and Asia, with a history molded by influences from the Roman, Byzantine, and Ottoman Empires. In broader terms, although small, being strategically positioned "on the crossroads of the Balkans," North Macedonia is an essential player in fostering regional stability and cooperation, security, and economic growth. However, while its unique heritage and evolving regional role contribute significantly to the Balkan landscape, these parameters also create complex social dynamics.

Social issues represent significant challenges, arising from a complex interplay of historical, economic, and cultural influences, impacting large segments of the population, and often resulting in disparities, conflicts, and structural inequalities. These issues tend to intensify with rapid societal changes as individuals, communities, and governments strive to adapt to evolving realities while managing competing demands and limited resources.

Globalization, EU integration, and the creation of trading blocs and common markets inevitably affect the economic landscape of North Macedonia, directly affecting the economic growth and development opportunities, with the development component further reflective of education, health, financial stability, and equity in the distribution of income parameters.

Recent employment data indicates a slight decrease in the unemployment rate to 12.5%<sup>2</sup>, while youth unemployment remains notably high at 26.9%<sup>1</sup>, contributing to a "brain drain." This migration undermines economic growth, intensifying the issues related to an aging demographic. There are considerable economic disparities between men and women, particularly in both urban and rural settings. Women frequently encounter obstacles to employment, particularly in rural areas, where traditional societal norms prevail. Cities such as Skopje benefit from relatively favorable economic conditions, in contrast to rural regions that struggle with limited job opportunities, fewer resources, and lower income levels.

Mental health concerns, particularly among younger populations, have become increasingly evident, demonstrating rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. These challenges are compounded by stigma and a lack of awareness, alongside a shortage of qualified professionals and insufficient funding, which restrict access to mental health care, especially in rural areas where medical services are often lacking. This situation extends the healthcare inequalities. Moreover, the aging population exerts pressure on both the economy and the healthcare system, highlighting a growing need for elderly care that current infrastructures are ill-equipped to manage.

Community stability is further challenged by violence, with domestic abuse representing a critical social issue in North Macedonia. Many incidents remain unreported due to feelings of shame, resource scarcity, and traditional views on gender roles. Although initiatives to assist victims are underway, obstacles, particularly in rural areas, continue to hinder progress. Addressing these issues and their potential societal repercussions is essential. By raising awareness of these social challenges, we can encourage a deeper understanding of global issues and motivate efforts toward building a more equitable and just world.

## METHODOLOGY

Researching social issues in North Macedonia is essential for crafting policies that promote social cohesion, economic opportunity, and regional stability. By addressing these challenges, North Macedonia can create a more prosperous and harmonious society that supports its growth and integration into the European community.

The research is based on the analysis of the available secondary data, published by the Public Health Institute, Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Ministry of Health, World Health Organization (WHO), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), World Bank, International Labor Organization, and other relevant institutions. The collected information includes statistics from 2022 and 2023 reflecting economic, social, health, equity, and personal safety and security aspects that are considered in the identification of the modern society challenges in North Macedonia.

The data was collected over several months in 2024, by approaching the above-mentioned institutions and researching their publications databases and official reports.

Data processing included statistical trend and representation analysis, as well as cross-referencing of the information to arrive at a conclusion that would allow for a better understanding of the explored issues and the

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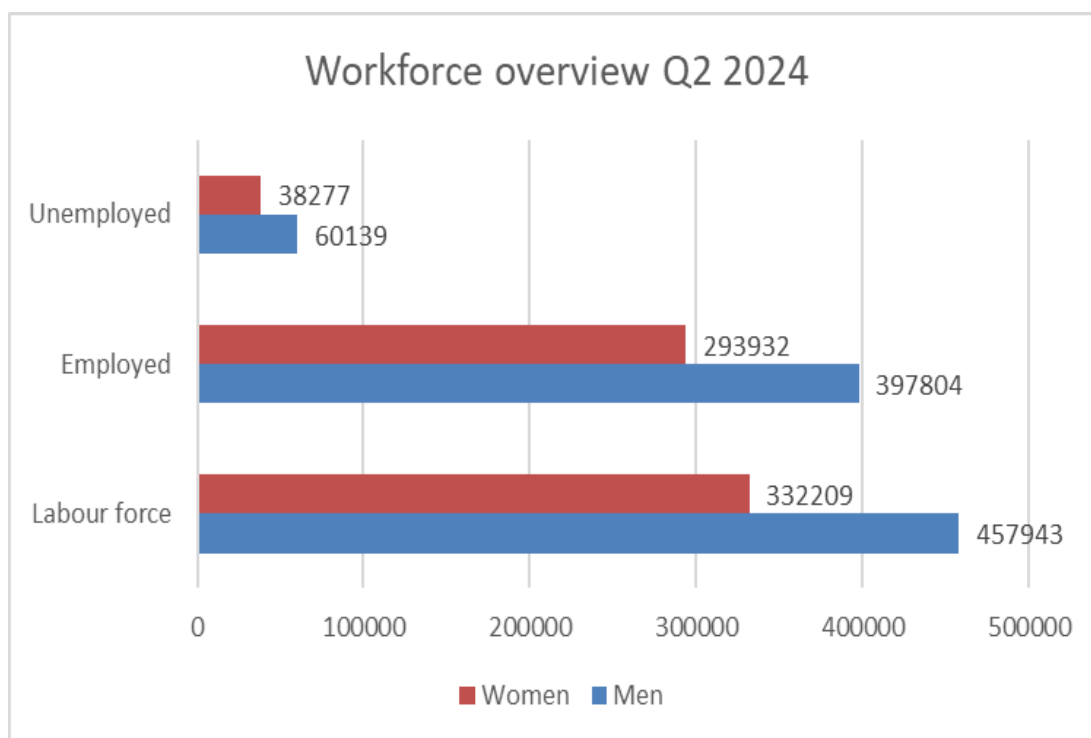
<sup>1</sup> *International Labour Office. Handbook of Labour Statistics*. ISBN 978-92-2-118627-4.

establishment of a baseline to be used in further creation of policies to address the issues and offer solutions to the socio-economic challenges.

## FINDINGS

### Unemployment

North Macedonia experienced record low unemployment in Q2 of 2024 with only 12.5%<sup>2</sup>, marking a significant decline from the highest level of 38.7% in 2005<sup>5</sup>, as shown in Figure 1 below. These changes were enabled by significant economic growth, fostered by strengthening the business climate and stimulating foreign investments. In addition to increased job opportunities, significant achievements were made concerning the accuracy of the statistics of part-time workers, unregistered employees, as well as discouraged workers who were previously considered among the active workforce population.



**Figure 1: Workforce statistics, Q2 2024; Source: MakStat Database<sup>3</sup>**

Within the entire timeline, as well as with the most recent data, it is evident that women are outnumbered by men, although both genders are almost equally represented in the population pyramid<sup>7</sup>. Women do not necessarily follow the same career path as men and are often, due to adherence to traditional values or fewer employment opportunities, opting out of active participation in the workforce, although significant research and respective data in terms of gender income inequality are still very scarce. According to a recent publication of the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, “the gender gap in salaries in RN Macedonia in 2017 was 15 percent, and this gap increases to 17.3 percent if components like education, work experience, age, and job profile are taken into consideration.”<sup>4</sup> Following another parameter, “the gender gap is 28 percent if people who only completed primary school are taken into consideration.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Trading Economics. (n.d.). North Macedonia Unemployment Rate. <sup>5</sup>

Trading Economics. (n.d.). North Macedonia Unemployment Rate.

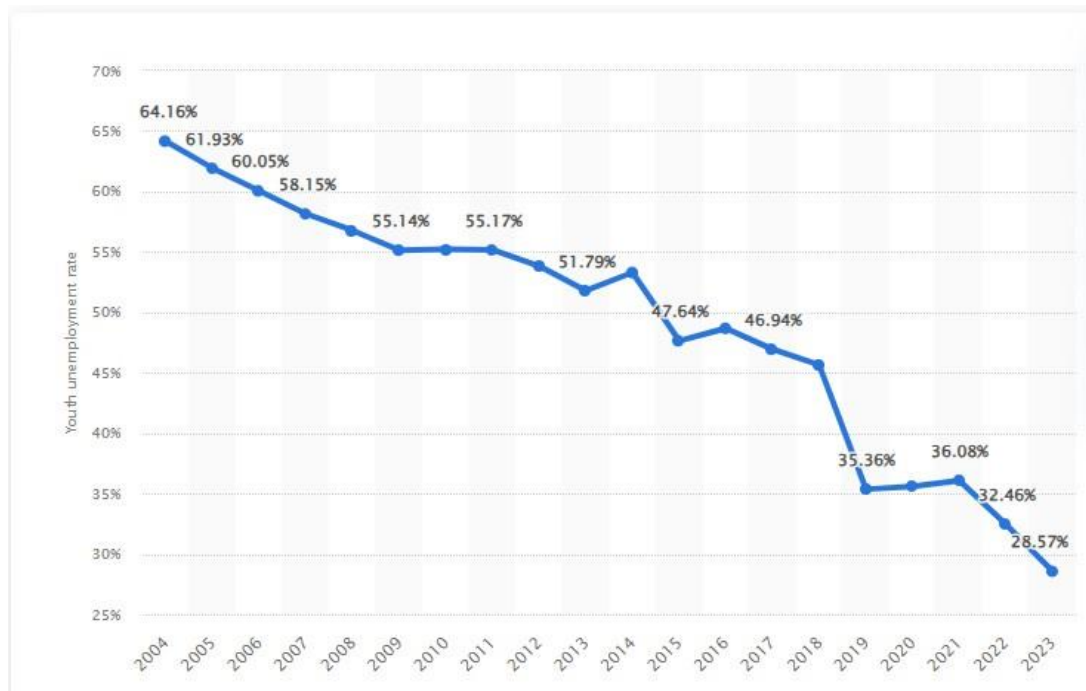
<sup>3</sup> State Statistical Office of the Republic of North Macedonia. "Labour Market – Working-age Population and Employment Rates." <sup>7</sup>

StatisticsTimes.com. (2024). *Demographics of North Macedonia*

<sup>4</sup> Macedonian Helsinki Committee. "Salary Upon Agreement: Analysis and Recommendations." November 2021.

<sup>5</sup> Eurostat. (2018). *Life and Work in North Macedonia*. June 5, 2018.

With respect to the age structure, youth unemployment, although showing the same downward trend, is still at alarmingly high levels of (depending on the source) 26.9%–28.57%<sup>6</sup>, as shown in Figure 2 below.



**Figure 2: Youth unemployment in North Macedonia; Source: Statista<sup>7</sup>.**

This decline is partially due to the decline in the younger population overall, both in terms of population pyramid and brain drain, but also due to increased university education opportunities and enrollment numbers that temporarily remove the youth from the workforce statistics.

Lack of employment opportunities pushes educated individuals abroad to seek work that matches their qualifications, especially in EU countries where wages and job security are higher. The brain drain of 10% in the last two decades<sup>8</sup> resulting from this emigration affects the country’s capacity to innovate and hinders productivity, contributing to economic stagnation.

This has an adverse impact on the domestic economy ... both in firms that close and those that survive. The industrial sector may experience a more severe shortage of skilled labor due to emigration than the other sectors. This shortage not only leads to a decline in the number of firms but may also hinder capital investment in the surviving firms. The lack of skilled workers can cause project delays, leading managers to hesitate in building construction or purchasing new machinery and equipment. This uncertainty in business operations also acts as a discouragement for investors, including foreign investors<sup>13</sup>.

### Mental health

The findings in the mental health area are based on the publication „Register for psychosis in the Republic of North Macedonia, 2023," prepared by the Department of Health Statistics at the Institute of Public Health of the Republic of North Macedonia.

<sup>6</sup> Statista. (2023). *Youth unemployment rate in North Macedonia from 2005 to 2023*

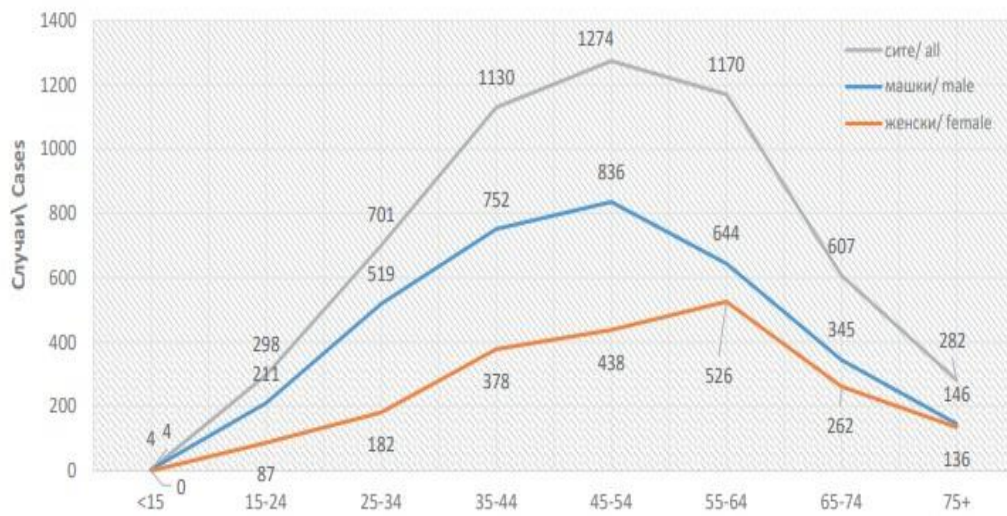
<sup>7</sup> Statista. (2023). *Youth unemployment rate in North Macedonia from 2005 to 2023*

<sup>8</sup> Li, N., & Gade, T. P. (2023). *Emigration, Business Dynamics, and Firm Heterogeneity in North Macedonia*. IMF Working Paper, European Department. Authorized for distribution by Jacques Miniane. International Monetary Fund.

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Li, N., & Gade, T. P. (2023). *Emigration, Business Dynamics, and Firm Heterogeneity in North Macedonia*. IMF Working Paper, European Department. Authorized for distribution by Jacques Miniane. International Monetary Fund.

Psychotic disorders are characterized by disorders in social, emotional, and/or cognitive function, including behavior that is inappropriate for the situation, sleep problems, social withdrawal, lack of motivation, anxiety, depression, and difficulty performing daily activities. The register provides an insight into the number of patients and hospital days on mental disorders in North Macedonia, also allowing for gender comparisons, as given in Figure 3 below:



**Figure 3: Mental disorder prevalence by age and gender;**

**Source: Public Health Institute, Psychosis Registry 2023**

It is worth mentioning that many of the patients facing mental health challenges do not always seek assistance. There are many reasons for this, including but not limited to social stigma for those attending psychiatric offices, lack of practicing professionals in the vicinity, or poor availability and long waiting times to schedule an appointment with those few professionals. Often, while mental health requires longer treatments, there are instances where patients do not return to the doctor’s office or just don’t persist with the treatments long enough.

As not all diagnosed cases end up being treated further or receiving hospital treatment, the options for hospitalization are limited, undermining the timeliness and adequacy of the intervention. Figure 4 below reflects the hospitalization data by gender for the patients treated for mental disorders, regardless of the specific diagnosis.



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**Figure 4: Mental disorder hospitalization data per year, by gender;****Source: Public Health Institute, Psychosis Registry 2023**

In comparison to these numbers is the data on the specialist services and professionals offering diagnostics and support for mental health. The Public Health Institute, in its overview of the professional services, lists a total of 19 doctors in neuropsychiatry, 40 in psychiatry and 47 in neurology, as well as 25, 42, and 40 supporting health workers in each area, respectively. According to the same source, these professionals have met 38,011 patients in neuropsychiatric offices, 135,612 in psychiatry, and 179,039 in neurology, of which 27,374 attended the neuropsychiatric office for the first time in 2023, as well as 97,999 in psychiatry and 146,168 in neurology, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, patients could also seek assistance from licensed psychologists, or visit the Center for Mental Health, or the Institution for Mental Health Center, which in 2023 assisted 433, 240, and 2,305 patients, respectively.<sup>10</sup>

All these data reflect the overall poor state of the health sector, with high patient-to-doctor ratios and limited access to support for the prevention and treatment of mental health issues, especially in smaller cities and rural areas where there is often only one professional in each of these areas, though there are cities (for example, Sveti Nikole) with no access to neurologist, psychiatric, or neuropsychiatric services, nor is there a mental health center or a similar support institution.

This has large implications for further quality of life and represents a potential threat with respect to social relations and possible domestic violence, as well as an impact on the workforce and overall economic trends.

**Domestic Violence**

"Violence against women is a significantly widespread phenomenon in the Republic of North Macedonia. Three out of five (60%) women consider violence against women to be common, whereas three out of ten consider it to be frequent. Almost one out of five women (17%) knows personally someone in their family and among their friends that has suffered a form of domestic violence."<sup>16</sup>

North Macedonia ratified the Istanbul Convention on 23 March 2018. The convention entered into force in respect of North Macedonia on 1 July 2018. The Istanbul Convention is the most far-reaching international treaty to tackle violence against women and domestic violence. It covers new ground by asking that root causes of violence against women (such as gender stereotyping, traditions harmful to women, and general manifestations of gender inequality) be addressed.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the records of the Centres for Social Work in North Macedonia and the comparative analysis for the period 2020-2023, there has been an increase in the reported cases of domestic violence, with the official data for 2023 reflecting 1605 cases, of which the dominant majority were women (1,124) and children, both male and female (120 and 117, respectively). In the same period, 244 men reported being domestic violence victims, marking a declining trend compared to 2021, when 271 men sought help and support at the Centres for Social Work<sup>12</sup>.

In addition, there has been an upward trend of domestic violence being reported by employed women (from 645 in 2020 to 773 in 2023) and the elderly (153 in 2020 to 176 in 2023), as opposed to unemployed women, where those numbers are declining (from 742 in 2020 to 656 in 2023). The same trend contrast is evident in the urban vs. rural area data, with an increased number of victims in the cities (from 1179 to 1325) and a declining

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<sup>9</sup> Source: Public Health Institute, Psychosis Registry for 2023

<sup>10</sup> Source: Public Health Institute, Psychosis Registry for 2023

<sup>16</sup>

Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, Republic of North Macedonia. "Gender Equality Strategy 2022–2026."

<sup>11</sup> Council of Europe, Istanbul Convention, 2022

<sup>12</sup> Office for Social Work, MLSP, 2024

trend in the villages (from 361 to 280) reflecting data for 2020 and 2023, respectively. The majority of the victims reported physical abuse, followed by psychological abuse, and lower numbers of sexual and economic abuse. Unfortunately, there is a significant deterioration in the support services, with the number of centers extending their assistance to the victims decreasing from 71 in 2020 to only 30 in 2023, including the Centers for Social Work in Skopje and Kumanovo and the NGO Hera Skopje.<sup>13</sup>

The number of abusers who were subject to intervention and assistance by the Centers for Social Work doubled over the 4 years, marking 68 abusers in 2020 as opposed to 139 in 2023.<sup>14</sup> While the strengthened intervention with the abusers is necessary and adhered to, it is alarming that the victims are put in a disadvantageous position with insufficient support and follow-up. Similar findings were identified in the “GREVIO’s (Baseline) Evaluation Report on legislative and other measures giving effect to the provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) NORTH MACEDONIA”, where red flags were raised concerning the urgent needs for increasing the number of professionals and the funding for the Centres for Social Work. In addition, the Report states that “This fact, paired with the shortage of shelter spaces and the unavailability of emergency barring orders, leaves many women victims of violence without the protection they need. Many of these women currently have no other option than staying with their abusers.”<sup>15</sup>

In North Macedonia, there are three SOS lines in operation, whose effectiveness was assessed in 2023 in cooperation between the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, UNFPA, UK Aid, and the British Embassy in North Macedonia<sup>16</sup>. It was confirmed that all 3 lines are available 24/7, across the year, with highly skilled professionals handling approximately 2,700 calls per year. The SOS lines are operated by 3 separate initiatives: Women’s Organization of the City of Skopje (OZS), National Council for Gender Equality (NSRR), and Crisis Center “Nadezh” (Hope). Within each initiative, different ranges of further assistance and options are available:

- The OZS offers support to victims of domestic violence and manages a shelter for long-term accommodation (up to one year)
- NSRR is the only free mobile line and offers support for all forms of violence against women, in Macedonian, Albanian, Romani, and English. Offers psychosocial counseling.
- Hope offers online support to victims of domestic violence and manages shelter for intervention accommodation of victims (up to 48 hours).

The Publication / Assessment of the SOS lines states: “The victims who call the SOS helpline are mostly women, and the perpetrators are usually men, their husbands, partners, or ex-partners. Elderly people who are mistreated by their sons, daughters, daughters-in-law, due to inheritance, and victims of peer violence in schools occasionally call the line as victims. In most cases, the victims are unemployed and financially dependent on the abuser, who abuses and constantly harasses the victim, psychologically and economically, and often the children of the victims also suffer. Unemployment, the difficult economic situation of the victims, lack of opportunity for financial independence, etc. are the main reasons for not reporting the violence. More than 80% of victims require personal contact with a counselor-psychologist and a lawyer and often come directly to the premises of this SOS helpline.”<sup>17</sup>

However, the availability and location of the shelters also accentuate the necessity of extending these services to victims in other cities since the service and such support are available only in Skopje, which poses logistics/transport challenges for the victims, who are often financially dependent and not able to reach the centers for social care or shelters without help. Such lack of support infrastructure, alongside the tendency (of

<sup>13</sup> Domestic Violence Report, comparative approach 2020-2023, MLSP, 2024

<sup>14</sup> Office for Social Work, MLSP, 2024

<sup>15</sup> GREVIO. *Baseline Evaluation Report on Legislative and Other Measures Giving Effect to the Provisions of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention): North Macedonia*. n.d.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). “*Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights of Young People in North Macedonia*.”

<sup>17</sup> UNFPA North Macedonia. *Analysis of the SOS Help-Lines for Victims of Gender-Based Violence in North Macedonia and Recommendations*.

the environment, especially in the rural areas) to blame the victim, the shame of the victims, the fear of repeated violence, helplessness, and lack of trust in institutions, hinder the proper identification of the scope of the issue since many cases of domestic violence go unreported and unaccounted for.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, North Macedonia faces a complex set of social challenges that persist despite recent advancements in the employment and healthcare sectors. While unemployment has decreased, especially among the general population, youth unemployment remains critically high, contributing to an ongoing “brain drain” that undermines the country’s potential for sustained economic growth and innovation. This trend of skilled workers emigrating in search of better opportunities limits North Macedonia's industrial development, creates skill gaps in key sectors, and dissuades foreign investment, which further hinders economic progress.

Moreover, gender disparities in economic opportunities, particularly in rural areas where traditional norms prevail, mean that women continue to face substantial barriers to employment, resulting in economic imbalances that disadvantage both individuals and the broader economy. Efforts to close this gender gap are essential, not only to ensure equity but also to fully harness the talent and productivity of the entire workforce.

Mental health issues have also emerged as a growing concern, especially among younger populations who face rising levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Limited resources, a shortage of qualified mental health professionals, and the prevailing stigma surrounding mental health conditions contribute to significant gaps in care. Access to mental health services is particularly challenging in rural areas, where medical infrastructure is often lacking and individuals are less likely to seek help. This scarcity of support exacerbates health inequalities and impacts quality of life, social stability, and economic productivity.

Domestic violence remains a critical issue, with numerous cases going unreported due to shame, fear, and limited access to support services. Although urban areas have seen improvements in support initiatives for victims, rural communities remain significantly underserved, with few centers for assistance and safe shelters. The limited infrastructure for domestic violence support, particularly in non-urban areas, places victims in highly vulnerable situations, often leaving them with no option but to stay with their abusers.

To address these pressing social challenges, North Macedonia will need a multi-faceted, long-term approach that includes increased investment in social services, targeted resource allocation to underserved areas, and robust policies that address the underlying inequalities. Addressing youth unemployment through skill development programs, entrepreneurship initiatives, and incentives to retain skilled workers is crucial. Expanding mental health services by training more healthcare providers, raising awareness, and reducing stigma can improve overall societal well-being. Additionally, enhancing the infrastructure and reach of domestic violence support systems, particularly in rural areas, will be vital for providing safety and stability to those affected.

A comprehensive approach that combines expanded employment opportunities, equitable access to healthcare, strong protections against violence, and policies to empower marginalized groups is essential to foster a stable, equitable, and prosperous society in North Macedonia. Such an approach will not only improve individual lives but will also contribute to regional stability and strengthen North Macedonia’s role as a key player in the Balkans.

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