

CHALLENGES FACED BY WOMEN AND GIRLS BELONGING TO NATIONAL MINORITIES



**Factsheet on the work of the Advisory
Committee on the Framework Convention
for the Protection of National Minorities**

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COUNCIL OF EUROPE



CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Introduction

Unequal treatment between women and men and gender stereotypes continue to persist both in societies at large, as well as within minority communities themselves. In addition, women and girls belonging to national minorities are often exposed to intersectional discrimination.¹

In line with [the Reykjavik Declaration](#) of the Heads of State and Government of the Council of Europe, adopted at their 4th Summit in May 2023, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe adopted the third [Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy \(2024-2029\)](#) in March 2024, providing the framework for the work of the Organisation and its member states in the field of gender equality for the coming years.

The [Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities \(ACFC\)](#) has embedded gender mainstreaming² across its work and adopted several recommendations in its opinions to states parties to the Framework Convention, aiming to combat the multiple discrimination faced by women and girls belonging to national minorities and to promote greater gender balance across all fields by addressing their societal, political, economic, educational and cultural marginalisation.

Key findings and recommendations

The Advisory Committee addresses discrimination against women and girls belonging to national minorities in a systematic manner. A thematic rapporteur, [the Gender Equality Rapporteur](#), has been appointed to ensure that a gender equality perspective is integrated into the work of the Advisory Committee. A regularly updated “Gender Equality Checklist” with predetermined questions for monitoring visits helps to ensure a consistent approach to [gender mainstreaming](#).³ In addition, [the thematic commentaries](#) of the Advisory Committee remain important tools for demonstrating how the Framework Convention can be best applied in practice, including by highlighting gender equality and the need to pay particular attention to discrimination against women and girls belonging to national minorities.

The Advisory Committee has identified the following four key issues:⁴

► A need for a more gender disaggregated data collection

Gender disaggregated data collection (carried out in consultation with persons belonging to national minorities themselves and in compliance with human rights and data protection standards) on the situation of women and girls belonging to national minorities forms the basis of targeted and outcome-oriented policy measures. The absence of such data in areas such as violence against women (including sexual

1. See: [Gender Equality Strategy - Gender Equality](#); Box 1, page 7.

2. [What is gender mainstreaming? - Gender Equality](#)

3. See also [Toolkit on gender mainstreaming in Council of Europe monitoring mechanisms](#) (2024).

4. See the [country-specific monitoring](#) of the implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities.

and other forms of violence or trafficking in human beings),⁵ education, healthcare, housing and employment, as well as in other fields prevents states parties from designing appropriate measures responding to the needs and interests of women and girls belonging to national minorities.⁶

► **Preventing and combatting violence against women and girls, including domestic violence**

While violence against women and girls affects all women, women and girls belonging to national minorities are potentially more exposed to this risk due to multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and the barriers they face when seeking support, protection and justice. In addition to domestic and sexual violence, they may be exposed to higher risks of early and forced marriages, or forced sterilisation, practices that are widely acknowledged as harmful, violating, or impairing human rights, and closely linked to other human rights abuses.⁷

There is a clear need to design special measures that enable women and girls belonging to national minorities to report the violence they face. Comprehensive policies should also be in place to prevent early marriages, combat domestic and sexual violence, and support awareness-raising efforts among parents, in schools, and in communities. Such policies should be developed in close co-operation with persons belonging to the communities concerned, follow an evidence-based approach, and address the underlying social and economic drivers of these issues. The authorities should also provide training for officials in social and child welfare services as well as in law enforcement (including through the development of linguistic and cultural competences) to ensure they respond appropriately to complaints of violence against women by victims belonging to national minorities.⁸

► **Ensuring equal access to education, to the labour market, to healthcare and to justice**

Women and girls belonging to national minorities are often disproportionately affected by the root causes of socio-economic inequality. Moreover, access to justice, education, the labour market or health care may be particularly difficult when national minorities live in remote or less accessible areas, such as islands, rural or mountainous regions.⁹

5. Guidance on data collection related to violence against women and domestic violence can be found in the thematic paper [“Ensuring data collection and research: Article 11 of the Istanbul Convention”](#), 2016.

6. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Albania](#), 2023, § 70; ACFC [Sixth Opinion on Finland](#), 2025, § 61.

7. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Armenia](#), 2022, § 87; [Fifth Opinion on Czechia](#), 2021, § 79; [Fifth Opinion on Ireland](#), 2024, § 69. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, also known as “the Istanbul Convention” covers all these forms of violence against women.

8. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Armenia](#), 2022, § 10; [Fifth Opinion on Norway](#), 2022, § 226; [Fifth Opinion on Kosovo*](#), 2023, § 18; [Fifth Opinion on Bosnia and Herzegovina](#), 2024, § 110.

* All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo.

9. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Italy](#), 2022, § 202; [Fifth Opinion on Albania](#), 2023, § 189.

Fighting school absenteeism and early dropouts is crucial, as it has a decisive impact on the prospects of women and girls belonging to national minorities, including access to employment and participation in political and public life, etc.¹⁰

Unequal access to healthcare and unequal health outcomes continue to affect women and girls belonging to national minorities.¹¹ Creating a more supportive and welcoming healthcare environment – by increasing the number of healthcare mediators and raising awareness among healthcare professionals, including through training in culturally sensitive approaches – is essential to effectively address their needs.¹²

The need to provide for sustainable employment opportunities and targeted programmes to improve access of women belonging to national minorities to the labour market, as well as to invest in infrastructure remain recurring recommendations by the Advisory Committee to states parties.

Equal access to justice entails the right to an effective remedy, a fair trial, equal access to the courts and legal aid, including free legal aid where applicable, and legal representation. Yet numerous obstacles continue to hinder women's equal access to justice: taboos, prejudices, gender stereotypes, customs, poverty, lack of information, legislative gaps or weak implementation, violence against women, sex-based discrimination and sexist behaviour within the justice system, as well as in some cases, discriminatory laws themselves.¹³ These barriers particularly affect certain groups of women and girls, including those belonging to national minorities.¹⁴ Comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation, covering both the private and public spheres, is fundamental to guarantee that persons belonging to national minorities, including women and girls, enjoy effective equality before the law and equal protection of the law.

► **Underrepresentation of women and girls in political and public life**

Women and girls belonging to national minorities continue to face multiple obstacles to entering and sustainably participating in political and public decision-making. Their limited participation in political and public life is often linked to intersectional discrimination and unequal access to socio-economic life, in particular quality education and employment, as well as to different resources (financial, time, support networks).¹⁵ Women belonging to national minorities are also frequently under-represented in consultative bodies established to represent national minorities. The needs and interests of women and girls belonging to national minorities, and the diversity which exists within minorities in terms of gender and age in particular,

10. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Armenia](#), 2022, § 87; [Fifth Opinion on Serbia](#), 2025, § 151.

11. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Armenia](#), 2022, § 187.

12. ACFC [Fourth Opinion on Montenegro](#), 2024, §§ 169-171; [Fifth Opinion on Bulgaria](#), 2024, § 178; [Fourth Opinion on Latvia](#), 2023, § 195; [Fifth Opinion on Albania](#), 2023, § 192; [Fifth Opinion on North Macedonia](#), 2022, § 151; [Fifth Opinion on Lithuania](#), 2024, §§ 191-193; [Sixth Opinion on Finland](#), 2025, § 61.

13. Council of Europe Gender Equality Strategy (2024-2029), § 61.

14. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Albania](#), 2023, § 101; [Fifth Opinion on Czechia](#), 2021, § 79; [Fourth Opinion on Latvia](#), 2023, § 39.

15. ACFC [Fourth Opinion on Georgia](#), 2024, § 162; [Fifth Opinion on Estonia](#), 2022, § 200; [Fifth Opinion on the Slovak Republic](#), 2022, § 246.

should be better reflected in these bodies.¹⁶ Establishing a legislative framework with effective mechanisms to ensure that both women and men belonging to national minorities are adequately represented in elected and executive bodies at all levels is fundamental to enabling their full participation in public and political life.

Conclusion

Gender equality entails equal rights representation, visibility, empowerment, protection from gender-based violence, responsibility and participation for all, across all spheres of public and private life. It also implies equal access to and distribution of resources between women and men. By pursuing a gender sensitive approach, the Advisory Committee seeks to promote understanding of the intersectionality of gender and ethnicity throughout all phases of the monitoring process. Ensuring gender equality for women and girls belonging to national minorities contributes to the fulfilment of the Council of Europe's mission: safeguarding human rights, upholding democracy and preserving the rule of law. It is also essential in achieving sustainable development and building peaceful and inclusive societies.

**For further details, please refer to the Opinion adopted by the Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) and its other work (See [HUDOC-FCNM](#)).*

16. ACFC [Fifth Opinion on Austria](#), 2023, § 203; [Fifth Opinion on Azerbaijan](#), 2024, §§ 156-157.

The protection of national minorities is a core issue for the Council of Europe, and one of the major achievements in this field is the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities. The entry into force of the Framework Convention on 1 February 1998 was indeed an event of universal stature, for it is the first ever legally binding multilateral instrument devoted to the protection of national minorities in general.



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The Council of Europe is the continent's leading human rights organisation. It comprises 46 member states, including all members of the European Union. All Council of Europe member states have signed up to the European Convention on Human Rights, a treaty designed to protect human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The European Court of Human Rights oversees the implementation of the Convention in the member states.

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