

THE POSITION OF VICTIMS OF SEXUAL CRIMES IN RNM

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Abstract

This research paper examines the legal status, rights, and procedural position of victims of sexual crimes within the legal system of the Republic of North Macedonia. It analyzes the relevant provisions of the Criminal Code and the Law on Criminal Procedure, alongside international conventions and human rights standards ratified by North Macedonia. Particular emphasis is placed on the harmonization of domestic legislation with the Istanbul Convention.

The study provides an in-depth analysis of procedures related to the reporting and collection of evidence in sexual crime cases, including the use of Rape Kits. It further explores the extent to which the domestic legal framework ensures effective protection and support for victims, with a focus on measures aimed at preventing re-victimization and re-traumatization during criminal proceedings.

Empirical data obtained from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, covering the period 2020–2025, is used to illustrate trends in the reporting of sexual offenses. The findings reveal significant shortcomings in the current legal framework that hinder the adequate treatment of victims and contribute to their re-victimization. The paper concludes with concrete recommendations for legislative and procedural reforms, aimed at enhancing both the substantive and procedural rights of victims of sexual crimes and improving the overall legal response to these serious offenses in North Macedonia.

Keywords: *Istanbul Convention, victims, sexual crimes, rights, law*

1. The concept of victim and international acts

When discussing crime, a key component is the victim, who suffers as a result of the committed act. Although the victim has always been mentioned, a comprehensive study of the victim—and the establishment of a specific science dedicated to studying victims—emerged much later compared to other legal sciences such as criminology. Therefore, it was and remains fertile ground for Mendelsohn's proposal of a new science that would be the "counterpart" of criminology. Instead of studying the criminal, he advocated for a focus on the victim. He initially directed attention to the culpability of the crime victim. At the same time that Mendelsohn first presented his thesis, von Hentig argued for "the importance of understanding the victim's role in the causation of crime." Mendelsohn referred to the concept as the "penal couple," while von Hentig called it a "duet." Both presented their own typology of victims, and both suggested the need to investigate the role victims play in their own victimization (O'Connell, 2008). Writings about the victim can be found in many early works by such criminologists as Beccaria (1764), Lombroso (1876), Ferri (1892), Garófalo (1885), Sutherland (1924), Wolfgang (1958). But the concept of a science to study victims can be traced in the writing of Benjamin Mendelsohn (1937; 1940), in his article "A New Branch of Bio-Psycho-Social Science, Victimology" (1956) where he proposed the term "victimology" (Chatterjee, 2023).

Although the formal study of victims, as well as the phenomenology and etiology of victimology, began quite late, the definition of a victim has been provided by many international

organizations, conventions, and agreements that define the position of the victim in the realm of crime. Thus, the United Nations Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power defines: “Victims” means persons who, individually or collectively, have suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, economic loss or substantial impairment of their fundamental rights, through acts or omissions that are in violation of criminal laws operative within Member States, including those laws proscribing criminal abuse of power (Declaration of Basic Principles of Justice for Victims of Crime and Abuse of Power, 1985). According to the Rome Statute, victims are defined as: Victims are those who have suffered harm because of the commission of any crime within the jurisdiction of the Court (Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, 1998). The Istanbul Convention, in Article 3, states that: “Victim” shall mean any natural person who is subject to violence against women and domestic violence (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011). Directive 2012/29/EU of the European Union, also known as the Victims’ Rights Directive, defines victims as: a natural person who has suffered harm, including physical, mental or emotional harm or economic loss which was directly caused by a criminal offence, as well as the family members of a person whose death was directly caused by a criminal offence and who have suffered harm as a result of that person’s death (Directive 2012/29/EU, 2012).

For different criminal offenses, victims suffer in various ways. However, when it comes to sexual crimes, the harm inflicted on the victim is overwhelming. This is due to the nature of the rights that are violated—specifically, sexual, moral, and gender-related rights and freedoms. Therefore, the treatment and status of this category of victims are vital to ensuring their recovery after the crime.

2. The Criminal Code of RNM and the victims

The criminalization of sexual crimes is addressed in Chapter XIX of the Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia. The Criminal Code entered into force in 1996 (Criminal Code of the Republic of Macedonia, 1996) and has since undergone several amendments. However, from the perspective of sexual crimes, the amendments adopted in 2023 are of particular significance. This is because these amendments were made as a result of the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, which required states to align their legal systems with its conditions and principles

Through these amendments, not only were the content and naming of criminal offenses changed, but the status of the victim was also transformed. February 2023 marked a turning point, allowing for the improvement of the victims’ position in a way that aligns with the needs of contemporary society. The most important changes regarding the status of the victim include: the definition of sexual intercourse; the criminalization of sexual acts committed without mutual consent; the increase of the age threshold for children’s capacity to give consent; the incorporation of sexual violence committed within domestic violence as a qualified form of sexual assault and rape; and the criminalization of sexual harassment (Law on amending and supplementing the Criminal Code, 2023).

The definition of sexual intercourse has clarified the actions committed against the victim during criminal proceedings. The term is no longer limited to the notion of “sexual intercourse” alone, but has been expanded to: “...engages in sexual intercourse or any other act equivalent to a sexual act, which consists of vaginal, anal, or oral penetration with any part of the body or object, or compels another person without their consent to engage in sexual intercourse or another sexual act with a third person, or to perform a sexual act on themselves...” (Law on amending and supplementing the Criminal Code, 2023). In this regard, another change that led to significant transformations, including in the procedural aspect, is the emphasis placed on consent, or more precisely, the lack of consent of the victim to engage in sexual intercourse or any other sexual act. Before the 2023 amendments, the victim was required to prove that they had physically resisted the perpetrator. The resistance provided by the victim had to be serious and continuous; the crime was not considered to have occurred if the person had not exerted all their strength to prevent the act from being committed (Kambovski & Tupancevski, 2011). Whereas now, it is sufficient for the victim to express their lack of willingness to engage in sexual intercourse or any other sexual act for the subsequent actions to be considered a criminal offense. Thus, paragraph 1 of Article 186 provides: “Whoever, against the clearly expressed will of another person, assessed in the context of the circumstances of the case, ... compels another person without their consent

to engage in sexual intercourse or another sexual act with a third person, or to perform a sexual act on themselves.” (Law on amending and supplementing the Criminal Code, 2023).

By raising the age threshold for giving consent—that is, the age until which a child cannot legally express consent or willingness to engage in sexual intercourse or other sexual acts—a greater number of children are now able to seek and obtain justice for crimes committed against them.

With the 2023 amendments, the Criminal Code of the Republic of North Macedonia took a further step toward aligning with modern states in addressing sexual crimes—not only in terms of their criminalization and the sanctioning of perpetrators, but also in strengthening the position of the victims of these crimes. These changes have contributed to the improvement of the position of victims of such crimes, enabling them to report these offenses more readily and with greater confidence.

3. Criminal Procedure Law and the victims

The Law on Criminal Procedure, adopted on November 17, 2010, by the Parliament of the Republic of Macedonia (now the Republic of North Macedonia), entered into force in 2012. This law regulates the entire course of criminal proceedings, step by step, and specifically addresses the position of victims of criminal offenses (Law on Criminal Procedure, 2010).

Article 21 of the Law on Criminal Procedure defines the terminology used within the law, including the definition of a victim, as follows: A victim of a criminal offense is any person who has suffered harm, including physical or mental injury, emotional suffering, material loss, or other damage or threat to their rights and interests, as a result of the commission of a criminal offense (Law on Criminal Procedure, 2010).

Chapter V of the Law on Criminal Procedure regulates the procedural position of the victim, the injured party, and the private plaintiff. Four articles within this chapter—Articles 53, 54, 55, and 56—are specifically dedicated to the victim. Article 53 of the Law on Criminal Procedure regulates the rights of victims, stating that victims are entitled to: *1) participate in criminal proceedings as an injured party, either by joining the prosecution or by seeking compensation for legal-property damage; 2) receive special care and attention from the authorities and entities involved in the criminal procedure; and 3) receive effective psychological assistance and other professional support from institutions, organizations, and bodies that provide aid to victims of criminal offenses* (Law on Criminal Procedure, 2010). Article 54 of the Law regulates the categories of vulnerable victims, specifically referring to children (persons under the age of 18) and individuals who may endanger themselves or their close relatives by giving testimony. Article 54 grants special rights to certain categories of victims, including: *(1) Victims are entitled to special procedural protection measures during testimony and investigation at all stages of the proceedings if: 1) at the time of giving testimony, they are under the age of 18; 2) by giving testimony or answering certain questions, they would expose themselves or a close person to a risk to life, health, or physical integrity (endangered victims); and 3) due to age, the nature and consequences of the criminal offense, physical or mental disability, or other relevant health conditions, social or cultural background, family circumstances, religious beliefs, or ethnic affiliation, or due to the behavior of the accused, their family members, or friends toward the victim, their mental or physical health may be harmed or the quality of their testimony may be negatively affected (particularly vulnerable victims)* (Law on Criminal Procedure, 2010).

In contrast to the previous article, where the law addressed a broader group of victims, Article 55 specifically targets a particular category of victims—namely, victims of criminal offenses against sexual freedom and gender morality, as well as crimes under international law. This article provides that: *(1) A victim of a criminal offense against sexual freedom and gender morality, humanity, and international law, in addition to the rights under Article 53 of this Law, also has the following rights: 1) to consult, free of charge, with a counselor or authorized person prior to the investigation, if participating in the proceedings as an injured party; 2) to be questioned by a person of the same gender at the police and the public prosecutor’s office; 3) not to answer questions related to the victim’s personal life that are not connected to the criminal offense; 4) to request questioning with the use of audiovisual means as regulated by law; and 5) to request the exclusion of the public from the main hearing. (2) The court, public prosecutor, and police are obliged to inform the victim of their rights under paragraph (1) of this article, no later than prior to their first questioning, and must record this in an official note or minutes* (Law on Criminal Procedure, 2010).

As we can see, unlike in the case of all other types of criminal offenses, the law grants special rights only to victims of certain crimes, including sexual crimes. Through this, the legislator emphasizes that state institutions involved in the criminal procedure must pay particular attention to victims of sexual crimes. Moreover, they are required to take measures that both ease the process for the victim and prevent re-victimization.

This repetitive process not only risks re-traumatizing the victim but also undermines the protective intent of Article 54, which aims to shield vulnerable individuals from further psychological harm. Despite the legal provisions designed to ensure sensitive treatment and minimize distress, in practice, victims of sexual crimes are frequently subjected to multiple, often invasive interrogations—highlighting a gap between legal standards and institutional implementation. One must not overlook the forensic examination, legal medicine, and all other procedural stages that force the victim to relive the moment of the crime. This entire ordeal for the victim could be significantly reduced—if not entirely eliminated—if video recordings were used in every case, without exception.

4. Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of the Republic of Macedonia and the victims

The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence of the Republic of North Macedonia, which entered into force on February 6, 2021, was adopted as a result of the country's ratification of the Istanbul Convention. This law provides detailed regulation not only for victims of domestic violence but also for girls and women who are victims of gender-based violence, including victims of sexual crimes. The law shifts the focus to the victim, and numerous articles are dedicated to the prevention of gender-based violence against girls and women, as well as domestic violence. Its aims are to protect victims, prevent further harm, and crucially, to prevent secondary victimization throughout the legal and institutional processes.

The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence is the successor to the Law on Prevention, Suppression, and Protection from Domestic Violence, which was adopted on September 15, 2014. The 2014 law explicitly addressed domestic violence; however, within the scope of domestic violence, sexual crimes also arise—particularly in cases of sexual violence occurring within the family. Article 4 of this law defines sexual violence as any act of sexual activity or sexual harassment committed against a person without their consent (Law on Prevention, Suppression and Protection from Domestic Violence, 2014), while the definition of victim is limited to victims of domestic violence.

Unlike the Law on Prevention, Suppression, and Protection from Domestic Violence, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence offers a broader scope of covered actions. It encompasses all forms of domestic violence, as well as various forms of sexual crimes that, for the first time, were formally introduced into the legal system of the Republic of North Macedonia through this law. Article 3 of this law defines a victim as: “Victim” means any natural person who is exposed to violence against women, gender-based violence, domestic violence, and intimate partner violence within the territory of the Republic of North Macedonia (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021). As for sexual crimes, the law recognizes several forms, marking an important step forward in the legal recognition and categorization of sexual violence within the broader context of gender-based and domestic violence:

- **“Intimate partner violence”** is defined as the behavior of a current or former spouse or partner that results in physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence.
- **“Sexual violence and rape”** is defined as any sexual act, involving any part of the body or an object, performed on another person's body without their consent. Sexual violence also exists when a person is incited or forced to engage in sexual acts with a third person without their consent. Consent must be given voluntarily, as the result of the person's free will, assessed within the context of the circumstances.
- **“Sexual harassment”** is defined as any verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is intended to, or results in, the violation of a person's dignity—particularly when it creates a threatening, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.
- **“Online sexual harassment”** is defined as any verbal, non-verbal, or other act of a sexual nature carried out via the internet that is intended to, or results in, the violation of a person's

dignity or the creation of a threatening, hostile, humiliating, or intimidating environment, access, or mode of communication.

- **“Female genital mutilation”** is defined as the cutting, infibulation, or any other form of total or partial mutilation of the female labia majora, labia minora, or clitoris (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021).

When it comes to the position of victims, the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence provides for a modern approach to victim treatment through various forms of support and protection measures. Thus, the law ensures non-discrimination, prohibits victimization, and promotes the empowerment of girls and women who experience violence. It also grants this category of victims specific rights, the respect and implementation of which lead to a victim-centered and modern approach in addressing gender-based and domestic violence.

According to Article 43 of this law, the victim is granted the right to have a companion, as follows: *(1) The victim has the right to choose a person to accompany them during the proceedings before the competent authority. (2) The companion may be any adult, except the person who is the perpetrator of gender-based and/or domestic violence involved in the proceedings. (3) The companion assists the victim in protecting her interests, provides support during procedures before official persons and institutions, helps in finding solutions to her case, and ensures emotional and procedural support. (4) The official conducting the procedure shall not allow the companion to accompany the victim if the conditions of paragraph (2) are not met, or if it is assessed that the companion cannot support the victim as required in paragraph (3), due to family or other relationships with the victim or the perpetrator of gender-based and/or domestic violence. (5) Children and persons with disabilities or legal incapacitation shall be accompanied in proceedings before competent institutions by a parent or guardian, except when that parent or guardian is the perpetrator of violence against women and/or domestic violence* (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021).

Victims of sexual crimes, due to the nature of the offense they have experienced, are particularly vulnerable to re-victimization from the very first moment they come into contact with state authorities—often as a result of inadequate training or preparedness of officials. Therefore, it is of particular importance that special attention is paid to preventing re-victimization throughout the entire process. Article 44 specifically regulates the measures that must be taken to prevent re-victimization: *(1) Competent institutions are obligated to treat victims in a manner that ensures their full protection from victimization or re-victimization, by implementing the following measures, in accordance with their respective competences: 1) protection of the victim’s identity and personal data; 2) taking the victim’s statement at the location where the report is made; 3) recording the victim’s statement at the police station or public prosecutor’s office using video and audio equipment, with the prior consent of the victim, and using it as evidence in the proceedings; 4) conducting interviews in specially designated spaces appropriate for speaking with victims; 5) limiting direct confrontation with the accused; 6) limiting the number of times the victim must give a statement to no more than twice during proceedings for protection from violence; and 7) other measures that protect the integrity of the victim* (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021).

Among the institutions with the most competence regarding the treatment of victims of sexual crimes (and domestic violence) is the Center for Social Work. The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, through Article 46, obliges the Center for Social Work to undertake the following measures to protect victims: *(1) provides temporary accommodation; 2) ensures that the victim receives necessary medical assistance and, if needed, accompanies them to the nearest healthcare institution; 3) ensures that the victim exercises the right to social and healthcare protection, in accordance with the law; 4) provides appropriate psychosocial intervention and treatment; 5) ensures that the victim receives psychosocial treatment at counseling centers by professionals from the center for social work, associations, counseling centers for women victims of violence, and other victims of domestic violence; 6) provides assistance to the family for the regular education of the child; 7) provides legal aid and representation; 8) refers the victim to the appropriate state institutions and other competent bodies for the economic empowerment of the victim and their active inclusion in the labor market, through the competent employment center; and 9) in cases of high risk and the taking of urgent protection measures, and when the victim uses temporary accommodation*

services, no later than within 12 hours of receiving the report, issues a decision on the temporary entrustment of the care and upbringing of the children to the victim parent (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021).

This law also provides for urgent and temporary measures imposed on the perpetrator of gender-based violence against girls and women, and domestic violence. These measures aim to eliminate the immediate and serious risk to the life and physical and psychological integrity of the victim and her family members (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021), as well as to stop the violence, address its consequences, and implement effective actions against the perpetrator (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021).

According to this law, victims of sexual crimes have the right to compensation for damages. Article 81 regulates this and provides: *(1) Victims have the right to compensation for material and non-material damages in accordance with the law.* This compensation may be claimed within the criminal proceedings (Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, 2021).

The adoption and entry into force of this law marked the first step toward the modern treatment of criminal offenses, as well as the treatment of victims of sexual crimes, who—through this law—are given significantly greater attention and protection.

5. Harmonization of the laws of the Republic of Macedonia with the Istanbul Convention regarding victims

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, commonly known as the Istanbul Convention, falls within the category of conventions that, even two decades after its adoption, remains the most important international instrument addressing gender-based violence and domestic violence. The Convention has led to the modern treatment of gender-based crimes, including sexual crimes and domestic violence, by aligning legal and institutional responses with the needs of 21st-century society. The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence was adopted on 11 May 2011, and North Macedonia signed it on 8 July 2011 (Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, 2011).

As a signatory and ratifying state, North Macedonia is obligated to implement the Convention and uphold its principles. Although over the years there has not been significant progress in this regard, the adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, along with the 2023 amendments to the Criminal Code, represent clear signs of North Macedonia's efforts to harmonize its legal framework with the Istanbul Convention.

Given that the Convention is bringing the long-awaited changes to North Macedonia, we will now examine the body of rights that the Convention grants to victims of gender-based violence (including sexual crimes) and domestic violence.

In Chapter IV – Protection and Support, the Convention provides the following rights: the right to be informed about one's rights and available services; the right to psychological counseling; the right to shelter and education; the right to financial assistance; the right to access specialized services free of charge; the obligation of the state to provide sufficient shelters; a free and confidential 24/7 helpline; and the establishment of centers for victims of sexual violence.

Another chapter that provides for the material rights of victims is Chapter VI, which stipulates that: victims shall have the right to civil compensation not only from the perpetrator but also from institutions that have failed in their duty to protect them; victims are entitled to fair and adequate compensation; and decisions regarding child custody must take into account the violence that has been committed.

The final group of rights reserved for victims of gender-based violence and domestic violence relates to migration and asylum, and is regulated in Chapter VII. Victims have the right to maintain their legal residency status; the violence they have experienced is recognized as grounds for seeking asylum; and victims of gender-based violence must not be deported to a country where they are at risk of experiencing violence.

Unfortunately, all of these obligations set forth by the Convention have not been fully met in the case of North Macedonia, despite more than seven years having passed since its ratification. The country's progress in addressing sexual crimes is advancing slowly, step by step, yet meaningful changes are still visible.

In addition to the legal harmonization that North Macedonia has undertaken, much remains to be done—particularly in establishing Crisis Centers for victims of sexual crimes, which are intended to provide urgent assistance. Further efforts are needed in systematizing and organizing Centers for guiding victims of sexual violence, opening more such centers, increasing the number of shelters, and fulfilling the standard of one shelter per 10,000 inhabitants, among other essential measures (Greivio, 2023).

6. Statistics on the number of victims of sexual crimes in the RNM

To assess the real situation regarding sexual crimes and the number of victims, data have been obtained from the Ministry of Internal Affairs concerning criminal offenses under Chapter XIX of the Criminal Code – Criminal Offenses Against Sexual Freedom and Sexual Morality. The tables below present the actual number of reported criminal offenses for the years 2022, 2023, and 2024, as well as from January 1 to March 30, 2025, along with the corresponding number of reported victims for these offenses.

Criminal acts against sexual freedom and sexual morality	2022	2023	2024	January – March 2025
Article 186 - Sexual assault and rape	17	32	30	5
Article 187 – Statutory rape of a helpless person	6	4	2	1
Article 188 - Sexual assault of a juvenile under the age of 15	22	36	36	13
Article 189 - Statutory rape with misuse of position	0	1	2	1
Article 190- Satisfying sexual passions in front of another	21	17	19	1
Article 190-a – Sexual harassment	0	22	37	5
Article 191 - Mediation in conducting prostitution	1	1	0	0
Article 193 – Showing pornographic material to a juvenile	13	6	2	0

Article 193-a – Production and distribution of child pornography	0	8	6	0
Article 193-b - Enticement of a child under the age of 14 into statutory rape or other sexual activities	0	1	0	0
Article 194 – Incest	0	2	3	0
Total:	80	130	137	21

Table 1: Total number of victims of crimes against sexual freedom in the time frame 2022 – march 2025

As shown by the above statistics, over the four-year period all criminal offenses under Chapter XIX were reported. The offenses with the highest number of reported victims are: Sexual assault of a juvenile under the age of 15 (Article 188), Sexual assault and rape (Article 186), Satisfying sexual passions in front of another (Article 190), and Sexual harassment (Article 190-a). When analyzing the data by year, it becomes clear that 2024 was the year with the highest number of reported victims, with a total of 137 cases. These figures demonstrate that sexual crimes are clearly present in North Macedonia, making it crucial for the approach of institutions, state authorities, and society as a whole to focus first on uncovering these crimes and then on preventing them.

The table below presents the total number of reported victims for each criminal offense during the period from 2022 to March 2025. Additionally, it categorizes these victims based on their sex.

Criminal acts against sexual freedom and sexual morality	2022 – March 2025		
	Total number of victims	Female victims	Male victims
Article 186 - sexual assault and rape	84	79	5
Article 187 – Statutory rape of a helpless person	13	12	1
Article 188 - Sexual assault of a juvenile under the age of 15	107	82	15
Article 189 - Statutory rape with misuse of position	4	4	0
Article 190- Satisfying sexual passions in front of another	58	54	3
Article 190-a – Sexual harassment	64	57	7

Article 191 - Mediation in conducting prostitution	2	2	0
Article 193 – Showing pornographic material to a juvenile	21	20	1
Article 193-a – Production and distribution of child pornography	14	13	1
Article 193-b - Enticement of a child under the age of 14 into statutory rape or other sexual activities	1	1	0
Article 194 – Incest	5	5	0
Total:	368	334	34

Table 2: Victim of crimes against sexual freedom by gender in the time frame 2022 – March 2025

The above statistics reveal that the majority of victims of these crimes are girls and women. The highest number of reported female victims was recorded under the criminal offense Sexual assault of a juvenile under the age of 15 (Article 188). This same offense also recorded the highest number of male victims, with 15 boys reported as victims during the period from 2022 to March 2025. While girls and women appear as victims across all reported offenses, male victims are present in fewer cases and mostly in specific offenses such as Article 188. While girls and women are reported as victims across all criminal offenses under Chapter XIX, the same does not apply to boys and men. Over the four-year period, there were no male victims reported for four of the offenses. The gender disparity in sexual crime victimization is striking—with female victims outnumbering male victims by nearly ten to one.

Conclusion

Sexual crimes have been a part of society for a long time, and their complete eradication is nearly impossible. However, what every society facing such crimes can and must do is invest in widespread education—especially of younger generations—and work toward prevention through effective state policies.

If we analyze the domestic legislation of North Macedonia, it is clear that positive steps have indeed been taken—particularly with the amendments to the Criminal Code, the adoption of the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, and the establishment of three Centers for the Support of Victims of Sexual Violence. However, these efforts are not sufficient. North Macedonia still has a long road ahead in fully harmonizing its entire legal system with the Istanbul Convention. It is of particular importance that this harmonization extends to all laws and by-laws, and not be carried out selectively. Only in this way can we ensure that all legal acts are fully aligned with one another, enabling the effective investigation and prevention of sexual crimes—while keeping the victim at the center of attention.

A victim-oriented approach must be the guiding principle that every state—including North Macedonia—adopts when addressing sexual crimes. Only through such an approach can we truly empower the victims of these heinous crimes to turn the page, begin healing, and reclaim their lives by leaving behind the trauma they have endured.

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