

Public
Policy Paper

Recommendations for Integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) in the Newly Proposed Law on Secondary Education



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What Is the Purpose of This Public Policy Document?

This Public Policy Document provides guidelines and recommendations for integrating gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) in the newly proposed Law on Secondary Education and its related regulations. It points out the shortcomings in the existing legal framework, which limit the access to quality and inclusive education for all students, especially for vulnerable groups – students with disabilities, students from smaller ethnic communities, etc. At the same time, it indicates the potential for advancing the existing regulatory solution and offers solid recommendations for positive social change in terms of gender equality and social inclusion.

Introduction

What the Proposed Law Offers and What It Lacks?

The Proposed Law offers certain new and contemporary solutions, such as education assistance, inclusive infrastructure, and available assistive technology for students with disabilities. It provides for additional support for Roma students through education mediators and allows for career counselling for all students to better connect with the labour market.

However, the Proposed Law completely lacks an organised approach to promoting gender equality – as an attempt to overcome stereotypical roles and share responsibilities between women and men, girls and boys, as well as to prepare them for a more equitable role in society. The Proposed Law requires special measures to encourage girls in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), where their numbers are significantly lower.

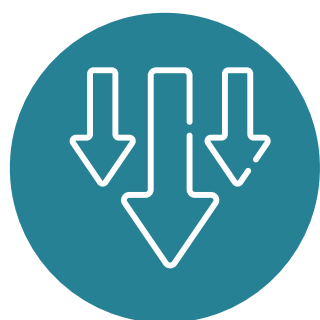
The Proposed Law is also missing out on some key elements of protection against discrimination, such as the inclusion of gender identity and sexual orientation as grounds for protection against discrimination. Even the very system of responding to discrimination and violence cases is not precisely defined, thus failing to make schools a safe and secure place for all students.

Moreover, there is a need to further improve the access and conditions for students with disabilities and for students from smaller ethnic communities, especially Roma, so as to promote inclusion and integration of these categories of students.

In view of all of the above, the priority is to enact a new law that will consider and address these observations with due care, while at the same time, basing it on a transparent and consultative process. This will ensure full inclusion, equality and protection of the rights of all students, thus laying the foundations for positive social change and for advancing the education system in the GESI areas.

A Brief Overview of the Situation with GESI in Secondary Education – GESI Statistics

According to the latest official data from the State Statistical Office, the number of students in regular secondary schools in the 2023/2024 school year is 67,278¹, marking a 2.8% decrease compared to the previous school year.



2,8%

decrease in the
number of students
in regular secondary
schools



Of these, 33,058 (49.14%) are girls. This suggests that, on average, there are no major differences in terms of girls' and boys' access to secondary education.



49,14%



50,86%



However, differences exist in girls' participation in STEM fields. Just as an example, in the 2022/2023 school year, out of a total of 1,100 students who completed secondary education in mechanical engineering, only 62 are girls (5.6%), while in electrical engineering, out of a total of 1,993 students, only 327 are girls (16.4%)². This reflects the need for the Law on Secondary Education to necessarily include incentivising or positive action measures for girls in STEM areas.



5,6%



94,4%

mechanical engineering



16,4%



83,6%

electrical engineering

¹ <<https://www.stat.gov.mk/PrikaziSooopstenie.aspx?rbtxt=17>>

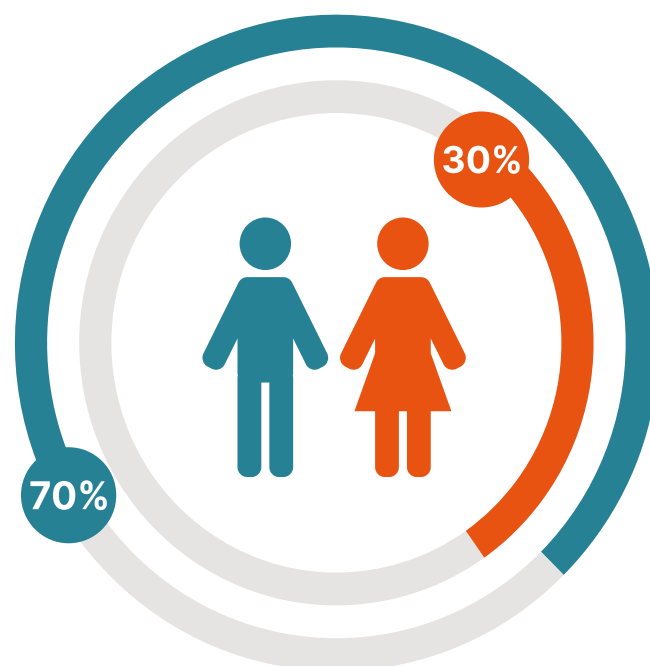
² https://makstat.stat.gov.mk/PXWeb/pxweb/mk/MakStat/MakStat_ObrzovanieNauka_SrednoObrazovanie_SrednoKrajUcebna/300_sredniucilista_rsm_t9_ml.px/



On the other hand, the number of teachers in the 2023/2024 school year is 7,051, of which 4,509 (64%) are women and 2,542 (36%) are men. In this context, it is necessary to attract male teaching staff as part of a strategy for future education reforms on an equal footing.



In terms of secondary schools for students with special educational needs, according to data from the State Statistical Office, the number of students in the 2023/24 school year stood at 247, of which only 75 (30%) were female students. This number of female students with disabilities is significantly lower and may signal a particular problem regarding the enrolment of female children with disabilities in secondary schools. In this regard, it is necessary to reconsider certain safety and security factors in schools.



According to the information from the Ministry of Education and Science, about 300 students with disabilities are involved in instruction in regular secondary schools. However, there are no organised data as to the number of students with disabilities in the education system, nor data on the type of disability. It is one weakness in the system that must necessarily be addressed – in the form of an organised registry / database. It will advance the planning of the necessary assistive technology, as well as the fiscal implications associated with it.

Regarding the Roma student population, according to the findings of the European Commission's 2024 report³, irregular school attendance, street children and segregation in schools remain challenges faced by Roma children.

³ https://www.mep.gov.mk/data/North%20Macedonia%20report_MK2.pdf

Key Challenges and Recommendations from the Aspect of GESI

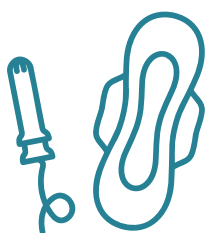
Gender Component To Play a Prominent Integrative Role in the Law

The Law on Secondary Education, which is currently in force, was adopted in 1995, which clearly indicates the need to enact a new law and new curricula that must respond to the developmental challenges facing education. They should provide both more rights and better educational outcomes for every child. Gender equality should take its necessary place as a condition for **overcoming gender stereotypes and prejudices** about traditionally divided gender roles. Given this, regulations should necessarily include special measures to overcome typical “male or female roles and occupations” in secondary education. **Support for girls to enter STEM fields** should be designed on a long-term basis. Special measures – such as enrolment quotas or extra points for girls in enrolment procedures – can yield good initial results.

Furthermore, **availability and equal access to sports opportunities** for all students is also an important aspect of psycho-physical development, and to this end consideration should be given to free admission of students to certain sports classes within the school. Measures should be envisaged to promote and encourage girls’ participation in sports clubs and activities.



Moreover, **investment in gender-sensitive infrastructure** is required, as is to make menstrual hygiene products available as a standard in high schools. In this context, ways should be found to provide free menstrual hygiene products (pads and/or tampons) in order to reduce period poverty and reduce school absenteeism due to menstruation.



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Protection against Discrimination and against Gender-Based Violence as a Prerequisite for Safety and Security in Secondary Schools

The Law covers the prevention and protection against discrimination and violence very little and quite inadequately, and it does not recognise gender equality and gender-based violence at all. Given this, the prevention and protection against discrimination of all children must occupy a special place in order to create safe conditions in schools and enhance student engagement and wellbeing.

The European Commission's 2024 report points out that there is a need to improve the **legal framework and inter-institutional capacities to combat hate speech and hate crimes**, particularly addressing sexual orientation and gender identity as the basis of hate speech. According to civil society organisations that register hate crime cases, a total of 1,171 cases of hate speech have been registered in 2023, with the most prevalent cases based on ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender identity.⁴



1 171

cases of hate
speech
in 2023

This suggests the need to promote gender equality in education and the active involvement of educational stakeholders in the prevention and protection against discrimination on all grounds, in accordance with the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.

⁴ <https://www.mep.gov.mk/data/North%20Macedonia%20report_MK2.pdf> (2024 Report on North Macedonia.)

In view of this, **it is necessary to mandatorily harmonise the Law on Secondary Education with systemic laws, such as the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination**, and to include gender identity and sexual orientation as grounds for discrimination prohibited in secondary education, in accordance with Article 5 of the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination.

The exclusion of these grounds sends a message that violence and discrimination are permissible against certain groups of students, and it is therefore important that the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination be fully reflected in the Proposed Law on Secondary Education.

Moreover, protection against discrimination and the promotion of non-violence should be embedded in the school process at all levels, through setting up working bodies and organs in schools that will be tasked with implementing and taking appropriate measures and sanctions against discrimination and violence on gender-based or any other grounds.



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Enhanced Strategies To Retain Roma Children in the Education System

Additional measures are needed for the full coverage of **Roma students in secondary education**. The UNESCO analysis of the quality of the national education system, based on 15 years of data ⁵, funded by the European Union and conducted by the UNESCO European Policy Institute, in cooperation with the Ministry of Education and Science, indicates that children in Roma neighbourhoods are less likely to be enrolled in all levels of education, including secondary education.

In this regard, the Proposed Law provides for the provision of **education mediators** in order to overcome discrimination and exclusion of Roma students or other students who come from socially disadvantaged families and/or have been out of the education system for an extended period of time. The Proposed Law focuses on inclusion and equal opportunities for different marginalised groups, but in practice stereotypes regarding the integration of Roma in secondary education, and that of students with disabilities, are still persistent.



With this in mind, **further measures are needed to reduce stereotypes and prejudices** regarding the integration of Roma (and persons with disabilities) in education. **Training programmes for better understanding and tolerance should be included in the curriculum** and regularly organised for teachers, students and parents. There is also a need **to strengthen the capacities of non-teaching school professionals**. All of this will foster acceptance of diversity and create a more welcoming and inclusive environment in schools.



Training programmes for better understanding and tolerance

Strengthening the capacities of non-teaching school professionals

⁵ <https://www.iiep.unesco.org/sites/default/files/medias/fichiers/2024/10/ESA-2024_North_Macedonia.pdf>

Inclusion and Necessary Changes for the Integration of Students with Disabilities

The new Law on Secondary Education is of particular importance for the inclusion of students with special educational needs, and for the provision of education assistance and the necessary assistive technology for the smooth monitoring of instruction for this target group. The Proposed Law covers these important issues through a commitment to provide a **student inclusion team, education assistance and assistive technology** to support students with disabilities and teachers. However, given that there is no accurate registry / database and more precise data on the number and type of disability, it is not possible to predict the type of assistive technology that will be required. This considered, there is a need to develop an appropriate registry, as well as a **precise socio-economic analysis with fiscal implications on this issue**.

For the full implementation of inclusion, the Proposed Law must provide for **greater investment in human, spatial and material resources**. It is therefore necessary to allocate minimum funds annually for public secondary schools which are to be transformed into resource centres, as well as funds earmarked for municipalities to open learning support centres and to provide appropriate materials. Furthermore, it is necessary **to extend the measure of free transportation for students with disabilities to their companions as well**. The Proposed Law stipulates the provision of free adaptive transport for students with disabilities, but again, the question is raised as to whether this can be implemented in all municipalities and settlements, especially in remote and rural regions, where infrastructure may be limited or underdeveloped. This requires additional coordination between local authorities and education institutions.



Student inclusion team,
education assistance
and assistive
technology



Extending the
measure of free
transportation for
students with disabilities



Precise socio-
economic analysis



Ensuring permanent
employment of
education assistants

Moreover, **permanent employment of education assistants should be ensured**. With regard to the procedure for hiring education assistants on a fixed-term basis, the Proposed Law provides that it should be completed by the end of June. This is crucial to ensuring continued support for students with disabilities and requires appropriate organisation and a prompt response by education and local authorities. Considering the importance of ensuring continuity in education assistance, it is recommended that education assistants be given the opportunity of permanent employment. This would reduce the risk of failing to provide education assistants and losing continuity in the work with students with disabilities.

Providing Gender Statistics and Follow-Up on Results Achieved

The Proposed Law raises the need for the **introduction of a unique education number for each student**; which will allow for better record-keeping on students in secondary education, monitoring their progress, tracking their further education, the process of granting scholarship, as well as following up on their pre- and post-graduation commitments. The introduction of a unique education number is a positive step, but it is imperative to ensure that data and trends are tracked based on characteristics such as **gender, age, disability, type of disability in a single organised system / database to be analytically set up** and connected to high schools across the country. This will allow for **searching, analysing and better planning of programmes** for all students, as well as for better planning of required personnel and teaching staff.



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Basing the Proposed Law on a Consultative Process with All Stakeholders

With regard to the development of the Proposed Law on Secondary Education, the notification of commencement of the preparation process for the Law on Secondary Education was published on the ENER (Unique National Electronic Register of Regulations) on 15.07.2024. Next, two versions of the Proposed Law were published, on 12.09.2024 and on 18.09.2024. **As of now, no public debate or public hearing has been organised**, with the interpretation by the Ministry that the mere publication of the Proposed Law on the ENER is an opportunity for a public hearing in which anyone can give their comments. There is no publicly available information as to which comments and opinions have been accepted and with which arguments.



The Proposed Law was submitted for parliamentary procedure on 3 December 2024. It is important to note that **the text of the Proposed Law submitted for parliamentary procedure has been amended in respect of the one available on the ENER in key segments**, such as protection against discrimination and discriminatory grounds, which suggests an insufficiently transparent government procedure in the preparation and passage of the Proposed Law.

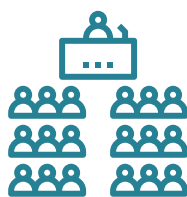


With this in mind, it is necessary to establish a **dialogue and involve the civil society organisations and expert bodies** in the planning and implementation of regulations and policies. Regulatory solutions that have the best interests of the child as their basic principle must be carried out in broad consultation and with the involvement of the expert community. The ENER tools should not be considered a substitute for a public hearing. To that end, it is necessary to organise a public hearing before the Proposed Law re-enters parliamentary procedure.

Respecting the opinion of expert bodies, such as the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination and civil society organisations, which have expertise in education, human rights and gender equality, will be a necessary step to create a new and revised regulatory solution in this area. Only in this way, the new and revised regulatory solution will be able to improve the access to and the quality of the education process for all youth in secondary education.



Establishing a dialogue and involve the civil society organisations and expert bodies



Organising a public hearing before the Proposed Law re-enters parliamentary procedure

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