

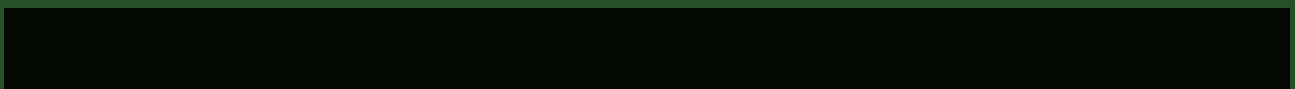


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# The Misuse of Firearms in Domestic Violence in the Western Balkans: Key Trends and Main Concerns







The South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SEESAC) is a joint initiative of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), funded by the EU, aimed at strengthening national and regional capacities to control and reduce the proliferation and misuse of small arms and light weapons, thus contributing to enhanced stability, security, and development in South Eastern and Eastern Europe.

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## List of Acronyms

|               |  |
|---------------|--|
| <b>AVMP</b>   | Armed Violence Monitoring Platform   |
| <b>BiH</b>    | Bosnia and Herzegovina   |
| <b>CSO</b>    | Civil Society Organisation   |
| <b>Moi</b>    | Ministry of the Interior   |
| <b>OSCE</b>   | Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe   |
| <b>RCC</b>    | Regional Cooperation Council   |
| <b>SALW</b>   | Small Arms and Light Weapons   |
| <b>SEE</b>    | South East Europe  |
| <b>SEESAC</b> | South Eastern and Eastern Europe Clearinghouse for the Control of Small Arms and Light Weapons |
| <b>SWC</b>    | Social Welfare Centre  |
| <b>UNDP</b>   | United Nations Development Programme   |
| <b>WB</b>     | Western Balkans  |



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# Executive Summary

In the Western Balkans, longstanding efforts have focused on documenting the impact of firearms misuse in domestic violence and enhancing prevention measures. Through extensive research and collaboration with regional institutions, SEESAC has provided pioneering analyses on the role of firearms in domestic violence, supported policy-making and legislative improvements, and developed practical tools and guidelines to strengthen prevention and response efforts.

Still, the misuse of firearms in domestic violence continues to have an adverse effect on women's and men's safety in the Western Balkans and poses a specific challenge in the context of small arms and light weapons (SALW) control. This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the impact of firearms in domestic violence and extensively documents its gender-based nature. In doing so, it aims to increase awareness about the role of firearms in domestic violence and the specific risks they present in such a context.

While it primarily intends to support policymakers and law enforcement agencies in addressing identified challenges and enhancing the safety and well-being of women and men in the Western Balkans, the analysis is also intended for international and regional organisations, civil society groups, researchers, and other stakeholders in the region.

The analysis employs a comprehensive mixed-methods approach, including the quantitative

analysis of the data extracted from the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP) and those collected from the Ministries of the Interior in the Western Balkans. Complementing this are qualitative insights from 15 focus group discussions conducted across the region with police officers dealing with domestic violence cases, officers responsible for firearms licensing, and representatives from women's organisations. These discussions draw on first-hand experiences of working with domestic violence survivors, offering an in-depth understanding of the impact of firearms on victims. The discussion insights particularly emphasise aspects that extend beyond quantitative data and are often challenging to capture due to the scarcity of information and the underreporting of domestic violence. Furthermore, the institutional response's challenges and good practices were thoroughly discussed.

Using combined evidence, the analysis underscores the detrimental and wide-ranging impacts of firearms misuse on women and men in the region, encompassing both fatal and non-fatal physical injuries, as well as psychological trauma. Its overarching finding is that the identified trends related to the firearms misuse in domestic violence are alarmingly persistent, documenting the complex risks firearms pose in this context.

The findings presented in this report highlight the multifaceted impact of firearms on the safety

and well-being of domestic violence victims, documenting multiple ways in which they intensify the existing risk factors and significantly increase the likelihood of lethal outcomes. Firearms are used as tools of coercion and control within abusive relationships, reinforcing gender inequality and power imbalances. Their presence further diminishes the already limited likelihood of victims reporting violence. This is especially evident in cases involving the possession of illegal firearms, where victims may choose not to come forward due to fear of retaliation, as well as concerns about potential legal consequences for the perpetrators. Firearms also reduce the victims' capacity to resist and defend themselves. This, along with the severity of firearm-inflicted injuries, further increases the probability of fatal outcomes. The report also provides evidence that the cultural significance attached to firearms as part of men's identity can significantly hinder the reporting of domestic violence and firearms misuse.

These findings are strongly supported by empirical evidence, as demonstrated by the significant gap between the number of recorded domestic violence incidents involving firearms and the disproportionately high number of fatalities. While from 2019 to 2023, firearm-related domestic violence incidents comprised only 3.1% of all reported firearm incidents, in the same period, domestic violence was the main cause of firearm-related fatalities in the region. More people were killed in domestic violence incidents involving firearms (152 - 93 women and 59 men) than in any other context, including criminal activities (144) and public disputes (135). The year 2020, marked by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, recorded the highest number of fatalities, underscoring the need for further investigation into how specific conditions, such as lockdowns, contribute to heightened risks.


The analysis indicates that the firearms misuse in domestic violence affects both women and men. However, the degree of exposure and patterns of victimisation differ significantly, with women being disproportionately affected. Out of all the women killed with firearms in the region, 68.4% were killed in domestic violence contexts, in contrast to 10.9% of men. Similar patterns

have also been documented across individual jurisdictions in the Western Balkans. Within the context of domestic violence, women were most at risk of firearm use by their intimate partners. 50.7% of women in the Western Balkans killed with firearms were killed by their intimate partner (compared to 0.6% of all men killed with firearms) indicating the gender-based nature of armed violence against women. Contrary to that, violence against men is usually not gender-based and men are primarily at risk from other male family members. It ensues from family disputes, property issues, transgenerational violence, etc. In the context of intimate partner violence, women are three times more likely to be killed with firearms by their current partners than by former partners. Still, a significant number of women killed by their former partners indicates that violence does not necessarily stop and often even escalates after separation, with firearms being used by the abuser as a means to reassert control over the victim.

Although data on firearms misuse are primarily available for homicides, femicides, injuries, and assaults, firearms are also used as tools to perpetrate other forms of gender-based violence - including psychological and sexual violence (such as rape), emotional harm, coercion, and economic abuse. While these forms of violence often precede fatal incidents, they are significantly underreported. Women from vulnerable groups - such as those living in rural areas, women with disabilities, and Romani women - face additional barriers to reporting violence, and information on their exposure to firearms misuse remains scarce.

Armed violence in the domestic context is predominantly male violence. A consistent trend reveals that men constitute over 98% of perpetrators in domestic violence cases involving firearms.

The analysis also provides insight into the characteristics of weapons used to commit domestic violence. Handguns are the most frequently used type of firearms in domestic violence, followed by rifles and shotguns, multiple SALW, automatic/military grade weapons, explosives, and air guns. When data on firearm ownership types were available, they consistently showed that illegally owned firearms were



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more frequently reported than legally owned ones, highlighting the challenges involved in addressing illegal weapons. Still, given the high rates of unreported domestic violence cases, the analysis suggests that such data should be taken with caution, as the misuse of legally owned firearms might be underreported, particularly when not used for assault or it does not result in life-threatening outcomes.

With regard to the institutional response, the report highlights notable progress in strengthening legislative and policy frameworks aimed at combating and preventing domestic violence, including the misuse of firearms within this context. These developments are further reflected in the practices of law enforcement officials across the region, who are increasingly attentive to identifying and addressing risk factors associated with domestic violence, including those related to firearm possession and use.

Despite these advances, several challenges remain. Risk assessments are not systematically conducted and, in certain instances, are implemented inadequately. Law enforcement officers also frequently lack information on whether seized weapons are permanently confiscated or returned to perpetrators, which may compromise both their own safety and that of the victims. Furthermore, limited access to weapon registries and gaps in firearm ownership databases may impede effective risk assessment and case management.

Challenges in intersectoral cooperation persist; however, positive practices have also been identified across the region. These include proactive engagement by police officers, enhanced collaboration with civil society

organisations, and the promotion of peer learning and exchange of experience.

Similarly, the region has seen significant legislative reforms and extensive regulation of civilian possession of firearms. Procedures for reviewing applications to obtain a firearms licence are generally stringent and well-regulated across the region. However, the limited availability of data does not allow for a full understanding of the extent to which these procedures consider domestic violence concerns, although existing evidence suggests that such factors are rarely invoked as grounds for rejecting applications. The importance of conducting thorough background checks – extending beyond administrative database reviews to include field visits and interviews – has been widely emphasised across the region. The process of issuing medical certificates for firearm licence approval, as well as cooperation with healthcare institutions, faces numerous challenges across jurisdictions in the Western Balkans and requires an urgent response.

The report concludes with strategic recommendations to reduce and prevent firearms misuse in domestic violence organised into six clusters: (1) Awareness raising and reducing the proliferation and circulation of firearms in illegal possession, (2) Enhancing risk assessment and operational response, (3) Strengthening procedures related to firearms licence approval, (4) Improving record keeping and monitoring systems, (5) Enhancing survivor-centred and Intersectional approach, (6) Regional cooperation and best practice sharing. Across all these recommendations, the report highlights the need for continuous capacity building to ensure sustainable and effective implementation.



# The Report Structure

This analysis is structured around seven chapters.

**Chapter one** briefly introduces the specific Western Balkans context in which the analysis was conducted and provides a brief overview of previous research in this field.

**Chapter two** outlines the main methodological approach taken in the analysis, its scope, and purpose.

**Chapter three** aims to provide essential information about domestic violence and violence against women in the region in general, as a backdrop for understanding how firearms exacerbate risks in such a context. The analysis presented here builds on previous analyses conducted in the region, most notably the OSCE-led Survey on Violence against Women.

**Chapter four** provides an in-depth analysis of data collected from institutions and SEESAC's Armed Violence Monitoring Platform, focusing on the role of firearms in domestic violence and their disaggregated impact on women and men.

**Chapter five** focuses on the characteristics of weapons used in domestic violence incidents in the region, and response to firearms misuse, including official data on seized and confiscated firearms, and also revoked firearms licences.

**Chapter six** integrates the findings from focus group discussions with police officers dealing with domestic violence, officers involved in firearms licence approval for civilians, and representatives of women's organisations. This

chapter aims to provide and document qualitative insights into the impact of firearms on women and men and thus contribute to overcoming challenges related to their underreporting. It also discusses challenges related to the prevention of firearms misuse and good practices identified across the region.

Finally, building on the previous chapters, **chapter seven** summarises key findings from the analysis and provides evidence-based recommendations on how to further enhance the prevention of firearms misuse in domestic violence, including those provided by participants of the focus group discussions.

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Chapter 1

# Introduction



In the Western Balkans, research has extensively documented the gendered impacts of small arms, highlighting the role of firearms in exacerbating domestic violence and posing serious risks to women's, but also men's safety. These findings have been instrumental in shaping policy response and practical strategies aimed at preventing firearms misuse and enhancing the safety and security of those most affected, both women and men.

As early as 2007, SEESAC undertook a pioneering effort to explore the linkages between firearms possession and domestic violence through a comparative study<sup>2</sup> of relevant legislation and implementation mechanisms. A regional study<sup>3</sup> on gender and SALW conducted in 2016 further examined the role of firearms in domestic violence, identifying it as a primary concern for SALW control. The study also provided extensive evidence-based recommendations, which informed and guided policy responses and programming.

Relying on SALW Surveys<sup>4</sup> conducted in the region, the 2019 analysis<sup>5</sup> of firearms misuse in domestic violence highlighted the issue's scope and complexity. The analysis found that in South East Europe (SEE), 61% of women were killed by a family member, compared to 12.4% of men. Women were disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence, with 38.6% of women, and only 1.2% of men killed by their intimate partners. During the period under analysis, firearms were frequently the weapon of choice in domestic violence: 37.7% of homicides by family members involved firearms, and 43.5% of women in SEE were killed with firearms by their intimate partners.

Since 2020, SEESAC has published the thematic series *In Focus - Armed Violence Monitors*,<sup>6</sup> a thematic series based on data from AVMP, examining firearm-related incidents in the context of domestic violence in the SEE. They provide a regular overview of incidents committed by intimate partners and close family members, which was crucial in documenting the disproportionate impact of firearms misuse on women, particularly in the context of intimate partner violence.

As part of the Western Balkans SALW Control Roadmap implementation, the UNDP offices in the region have also conducted significant research on this issue. UNDP Serbia, for example, has carried out multiple studies that highlight the adverse effects of firearms misuse on women and its specific role in femicides,<sup>7</sup> including analysis of administrative data<sup>8</sup> and of regulatory framework and practices,<sup>9</sup> as well as research on criminal justice response in cases of femicides committed with firearms. UNDP North Macedonia analysed femicides, shedding light also on the role of firearms.

In parallel, women's organisations across the region have long documented the impact of firearms on women's safety and well-being. For many years, they have served as the primary - and often the only - source of information on femicides, including those committed with firearms.

Moving forward, in 2021 and 2022, SEESAC conducted a large-scale gender analysis<sup>10</sup> of small arms control legislation and policies across the Western Balkans to assess and enhance their gender responsiveness. This analysis documented significant progress in ensuring that laws on firearms address domestic violence. It noted

- 2 SEESAC. 2007. *Firearms Possession and Domestic Violence in the Western Balkans: A Comparative Study of Legislation and Implementation Mechanisms*. Belgrade: SEESAC.
- 3 SEESAC. 2016. *Gender and SALW in South East Europe*. Belgrade: SEESAC.
- 4 SEESAC's SALW Surveys available at: <https://www.seesac.org/SALW-Surveys/>
- 5 SEESAC. 2019. *The Misuse of Firearms in Domestic Violence in South East Europe*. Belgrade: SEESAC.
- 6 *In Focus - Armed Violence Monitors* are available on SEESAC Knowledge Base: <https://www.seesac.org/Armed-Violence/>
- 7 Lacmanović. Vedrana. 2021. *Analysis of cases of femicide committed with firearms (June 2017 - June 2020)*. Belgrade: UNDP.
- 8 Stepanov, Biljana. 2022. *Nasilje u porodici – šta govore podaci*. Belgrade: UNDP Serbia.
- 9 Stevanović Govedarica, Gordana. 2021. *Small arms and light weapons, gender-based violence and domestic violence: analysis of regulatory framework and practice*. Belgrade: UNDP Serbia.
- 10 Gender analysis of SALW control legislation and policies in the Western Balkans – reports available: <https://www.seesac.org/News-Gender-in-Security-Sector/gender-analysis-of-salw-control-legislation-and-policies-in-the-western-balkans-reports/>

that laws on protection from domestic violence increasingly recognise the risks posed by firearms misuse. Furthermore, SALW control strategies in the region included specific measures to improve institutional responses to firearms misuse in domestic and intimate partner violence, including reviewing institutional practices and building capacities to tackle the issue.

However, the analysis also identified gaps in operational responses that must be addressed. These include the need to strengthen firearm licence approval processes by incorporating comprehensive background checks and improving domestic violence risk assessments, to ensure they duly take into account the dangers posed by firearms, particularly when illegally possessed. Additionally, firearms record-keeping practices often lack sex-disaggregated data and detailed information on firearms misuse in domestic violence, hindering the development of gender-responsive solutions. The analysis also underlined the need for further research to understand the implementation of relevant legislation, identify ongoing challenges, and enhance preventive measures against firearms misuse in domestic and intimate partner violence.

To support authorities in overcoming identified challenges, fulfilling strategic commitments and enhancing efforts to prevent firearms misuse in domestic violence, SEESAC - under the regional project *Support for Enhancing the Fight Against the Illegal Possession, Misuse, and Trafficking of Small Arms and Light Weapons (SALW) in the Western Balkans* funded by the European Union - provides comprehensive assistance to institutions in effectively addressing this issue. This support emphasises advancing operational responses to combat the misuse of firearms in domestic violence.

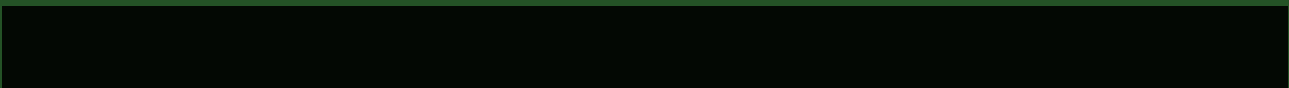
As part of these efforts, SEESAC initiated a regional analysis of the firearms misuse in domestic violence. Its findings, presented in this report, aim to document trends and main concerns related to the role of firearms in domestic violence, identify key challenges in institutional practices for preventing firearms misuse, and offer evidence-based recommendations for improvement. Already in the early stages, the analysis was instrumental in developing the

practical guidelines for enhancing the prevention of firearms misuse in domestic violence through the development of specific guidelines for first-line responders and professionals involved in the approval of firearms licences for civilians. The action-oriented, participatory process through which the analysis was conducted significantly contributed to raising awareness among key stakeholders and enhancing operational responses.

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## Chapter 2

# Research Methodology



### The purpose

The purpose of this analysis is to contribute to the enhanced prevention of the firearms misuse in domestic violence and improved safety of women and men, girls and boys in the Western Balkans.

The analysis specifically seeks to:

- document and increase awareness about the role of firearms in domestic violence and the specific risks the presence of firearms poses in such a context,
- document the disproportionate impact of the firearms misuse in domestic violence on women, as well as different patterns of risk exposure for women and men,
- document critical trends related to the issue,
- identify the main challenges in the prevention of firearms misuse in domestic violence, including in institutional response,
- propose a set of evidence-based recommendations to enhance the institutional response to the firearms misuse in domestic violence.

The main research questions are as follows:

- What is the scale of the problem? What are the frequency and characteristics of the firearms misuse in domestic violence, particularly in the broader context of armed violence in the region?
- What is the gender dimension of firearms misuse in domestic violence? How does it affect women and men?
- To what extent do current practices effectively prevent the firearms misuse in domestic violence? What are the main trends and challenges in the institutional response?
- How to further enhance the prevention of firearms misuse in domestic violence?

### Geographical scope

The analysis includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia.

Since UNDP Serbia has conducted similar research through the *Reduce Risk-Increase Safety - Towards Ending SALW Misuse in Domestic Violence Context* project, including the analysis of the 2017-2020 administrative data, Serbia was not included in the data collection and focus

group discussions. Still, data extracted from the AVMP ensured that Serbia was represented in the regional analysis.

### Methodology and data sources

The methodology employed in this analysis builds on previous experiences and a significant body of research on domestic violence and firearms misuse in such a context in the Western Balkans.

The development of the methodology was grounded in a multifaceted approach, including:

- **Key informant interviews were conducted with research experts** from the Western Balkans who have experience in analysing the link between domestic violence and firearms. These interviews aimed to identify key issues for analysis, share experiences in data collection, and address the primary challenges faced in this area.
- **Extensive literature review** aimed to provide a comprehensive overview and understanding of the current state of research on the role of firearms in domestic violence. This process was crucial for refining the research questions, contextualising the problem, and shaping a robust research methodology.
- **Regional consultations on draft methodology** were conducted in 2023 with the regional Working group for the Prevention of the Use of Firearms in Domestic Violence through Risk Assessment and the regional Working group for the Development of a Tool for Gender Sensitive Firearms Licence Approval. They were composed of the representatives of the Ministries of the interior and the Police Directorates, working on domestic violence cases, firearms licence approval, and conducting background checks. They also included representatives of departments for analytics/statistics or a similar unit in charge of record keeping/data collection and analysis relevant to preventing domestic violence. Based on their inputs, the draft methodology was further reviewed and finalised.

## Data sources

As the firearms misuse related to domestic violence is a multifaceted phenomenon with specific characteristics and dynamics, the analysis employs a wide choice of data sources, including:

### 1. Data collected through the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

The Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP) systematically monitors firearms-related incidents in South East Europe. It has collected detailed data since 2014 from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The AVMP data are gathered daily from a combination of official sources, including websites of the law enforcement institutions and ministries of the interior, as well as online and print media. Data on firearm incidents are categorised according to standardised definitions to ensure consistency and comparability across jurisdictions and reporting periods. Each incident is reviewed and analysed using a methodology developed by SEESAC. The AVMP provided data on the type of incident, firearms used, the victim's and the perpetrator's sex, their relationship, location of the incident, among other variables. The analysis integrates the key findings of SEESAC's In Focus Armed Violence Monitors on Firearm Incidents in the Context of Domestic Violence in SEE, covering cases from 2019 onward.

### 2. Data collected through the questionnaire for Ministries of the Interior

The questionnaire was designed to collect administrative data from relevant institutions for the period 2019–2021. This included information on reported incidents of domestic violence, filed criminal and misdemeanour charges, cases in which perpetrators owned or misused firearms and the use of firearms in such contexts. Additionally, data were requested on the sex, age, and relationships of victims and perpetrators, including intimate partners and other family members. Information on the type and legality of seized firearms was also

collected. The questionnaire further sought data on the number of firearms licences approved, renewed, and revoked, with particular attention to domestic violence considerations.

### 3. Focus group discussions

From 21 March to 27 April 2023, SEESAC organised 15 focus group discussions involving 68 police officers working on domestic violence and responsible for firearms licence approval, as well as 17 women's organisations. The focus groups aimed to identify key challenges in preventing firearms misuse in domestic violence, document the multiple ways in which firearms affect women's safety and well-being, and exchange ideas on strengthening institutional responses and addressing risks associated with firearms in domestic violence contexts. To support this process, comprehensive discussion guides were developed. The focus groups resulted in 15 detailed reports.

Focus group discussions were held in Sarajevo, Tirana, Podgorica, Pristina, and Skopje.

### 4. Secondary data sources

In addition to the above-mentioned data sources, additional data were extracted from the OSCE Survey on Women's Safety and Well-being and the Securimeter, a public opinion survey on security, which the Regional Cooperation Council regularly conducts, and SEESAC's perception survey.

### 5. Timeframe

The AVMP data analysed cover the period from 2019 to 2023, while the data provided by the ministries of the interior across the region refer to the period from 2019 to 2021.

### 6. Challenges

The challenges in conducting this analysis were primarily related to limitations in data availability, and in particular the lack of regionally comparable data collected by

relevant institutions. The analysis was hindered by the significant variability in how data are collected, recorded, and reported across different jurisdictions. Diverse and often non-standardised record-keeping practices made it difficult to obtain a comprehensive regional picture of the firearms misuse in domestic violence contexts. For instance, data were available primarily for the criminal offense of murder. As a result of a high number of murder-suicides, where, due to the death of perpetrators, no criminal charges were filed, those figures often do not reflect the actual number of persons, women in particular, who died in the context of domestic violence. As documented in this report, this is particularly relevant to incidents involving firearms misuse. In contrast to administrative data, the AVMP records the fatalities, which are significantly higher than figures reported under the criminal offence of murder. In certain cases, criminal acts related to domestic violence, i.e., those committed by relatives, are classified as other criminal offences rather than domestic violence. This hinders a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon and requires additional efforts

to extract accurate data. In addition, limitations in data on firearms licensing practices prevent an adequate understanding of how firearms domestic violence concerns are addressed.

To overcome these issues, multiple data sources are used in the analysis, as explained above. In particular, to overcome gaps in data availability and provide a regional overview and comparability, AVMP data were used more extensively than initially envisaged.

Challenges in data availability underscore the need for improved data collection and sharing practices. Addressing these issues is crucial for enhancing the understanding of firearms misuse in domestic violence and developing effective prevention strategies. Strengthening institutional capacities, fostering collaboration between agencies, and implementing standardised reporting mechanisms are essential steps toward overcoming these challenges and ensuring the safety and well-being of affected individuals. The analysis process also confirmed that involving Firearms Focal Points in data collection can contribute to improved practices in this field.

### Box 1

#### Using research to inform institutional response and enhance the prevention of firearms misuse in domestic violence

Building on early findings, SEESAC in cooperation with authorities in the region, initiated the development of two sets of practical guidelines for police officers and other relevant professionals:

- **Guidelines for Assessing and Addressing Risks Related to Firearms Misuse in Domestic Violence.**<sup>11</sup> They encompass a set of practical checklists aimed to assist police officers in appropriately assessing the risks of misuse of legally and illegally owned firearms in domestic violence and responding to them with the required urgency. Based on such an approach, the Guidelines provide an overview of actions related to firearms to be undertaken in each step of police proceedings, including high-risk intervention indicators, receiving a report, assessing risks, intervention, and incident aftermath.
- **Guidelines for Gender-Responsive Firearms Licence Approval.**<sup>12</sup> Through a set of practical checklists. They are designed to support professionals in integrating the gender perspective throughout the firearms licence approval process. This integration aims

11 SEESAC. 2024. *Guidelines for Assessing and Addressing Risks Related to the Firearms Misuse in Domestic Violence*. Belgrade: SEESAC.

12 SEESAC. 2024. *Guidelines for Gender Responsive Firearms Licence Approval*. Belgrade: SEESAC.

to effectively prevent the firearms misuse in domestic violence and violence against women in particular, and prevent the firearms misuse by groups most at risk of such behaviours; specifically men aged 18-30. Detailed guidance is provided on how to: review an application from the gender perspective, conduct background checks, make informed and gender-responsive decisions, and ensure continuous monitoring of compliance with the legal requirements for the weapon.

Both guidelines were developed through an extensive regional process. Initially, two regional working groups for the development of each guideline were established, one composed of police officers with vast experience in dealing with domestic violence,<sup>13</sup> and another bringing together officers working on firearms licence approval and those conducting background checks.<sup>14</sup> The focus group discussions conducted within the framework of this analysis, as well analysis of the AVMP data and those collected from institutions, greatly informed the development of guidelines, ensuring that proposed solutions are evidence-based and respond to challenges at hand. The Guidelines also build on knowledge products developed under the *Reduce Risk, Increase Safety - Towards Ending SALW Misuse in Domestic Violence Context* project implemented by UNDP Serbia and include experiences from Australia, Canada, and New Zealand.

An additional round of consultations<sup>15</sup> was held with members of the working groups to discuss the structure and content of the draft guidelines and propose amendments to ensure their practical application. In addition, five women's organisations were engaged in the peer review process, paying particular attention to ensuring that concerns related to the safety of victims of domestic violence are adequately addressed.

Following the finalisation of the guidelines, SEESAC delivered two regional trainings of trainers and established a regional pool of 29 trainers, who, in turn, delivered 10 trainings in their respective institutions and trained more than 130 police officers across the region in 2025.

13 [https://www.seesac.org/News\\_1/western-balkan-authorities-raise-institutional-capacities-for-effective-prevention-and-combatting-of-use-of-firearms-in-domestic-violence/](https://www.seesac.org/News_1/western-balkan-authorities-raise-institutional-capacities-for-effective-prevention-and-combatting-of-use-of-firearms-in-domestic-violence/)

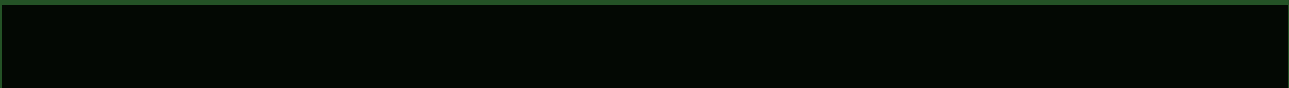
14 [https://www.seesac.org/News\\_1/western-balkan-authorities-to-make-firearms-licensing-gender-sensitive/](https://www.seesac.org/News_1/western-balkan-authorities-to-make-firearms-licensing-gender-sensitive/)

15 [https://www.seesac.org/News\\_1/regional-consultations-on-practical-tools-to-prevent-the-misuse-of-firearms-in-gender-based-violence\\_1/](https://www.seesac.org/News_1/regional-consultations-on-practical-tools-to-prevent-the-misuse-of-firearms-in-gender-based-violence_1/)

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## Chapter 3

# Domestic Violence – The Scale of the Problem



Understanding the forms, prevalence, dynamics, and patterns of domestic violence<sup>16</sup> and violence against women, as well as the structural factors that perpetuate such violence, provides critical context for identifying the specific risks associated with firearms in this setting. Such understanding allows for a more accurate assessment of how the availability and use of firearms exacerbate violence and heighten the vulnerability of victims, particularly women.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, also known as the Istanbul Convention, defines domestic violence as all acts of physical, sexual, psychological, or economic violence that occur within the family or domestic unit, or between former or current spouses or partners, regardless of whether the perpetrator currently shares, or has previously shared, the same residence as the victim.

Women and girls are exposed to a higher risk of domestic and gender-based violence than men. Violence against women in the domestic sphere differs from other types of violence because it is gender-based, i.e., directed against a woman because she is a woman, or it affects women disproportionately more. It represents all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life.

Violence against women is a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women. It is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between women and men, which have led to domination over, and discrimination against, women by men

and to the prevention of the full advancement of women.

Domestic violence, particularly intimate partner violence committed by men, refers to a relationship pattern where an individual uses abusive behaviours to gain or maintain power and control over their partner. As such, domestic violence is always an abuse of power and control by the perpetrator. Tactics used by perpetrators include coercion and threats, emotional abuse, isolation, intimidation, and the use of male privilege<sup>17</sup> and children to gain and maintain control over their partner.<sup>18</sup> The presence and use of firearms are effective tools for asserting power and control in this context.

Domestic violence incidents are rarely isolated and usually escalate in frequency and severity, potentially culminating in serious physical injury or death. Therefore, understanding the domestic violence dynamics and stages is crucial for its prevention.

The most extreme and ultimate form of violence against women is femicide (also known as feminicide), i.e., the intentional gender-motivated killing of women and girls. Femicide implies the killing of a woman by a man motivated by hatred of women, contempt, pleasure, a sense of ownership, and power over women. Femicide differs from male homicide in specific ways. For example, most cases of femicide are committed by partners or ex-partners, and involve ongoing abuse in the home, threats or intimidation, sexual violence, or situations in which women have less power or fewer resources than their partners.<sup>19</sup>

Social and cultural attitudes, norms, and expectations that underlie men's use of violence to maintain power and control over their partner or ex-partner are often used to justify it. Research has linked domestic violence to societal acceptance of male dominance, stereotyping of

16 The definitions in this chapter are sourced from the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

17 Male privilege is the system of advantages or rights that are available to men on the basis of their sex, and is grounded in the idea and practice of men's domination over women. With systemic subordination of women, men gain economic, political, social, educational, and practical advantages that are more or less unavailable to women. Domestic violence can perpetuate male privilege in today's society. It reinforces the position of power that men are viewed to have, leading women to continue to suffer its consequences. Male privilege is fostered through the ways in which women are objectified and seen to play the role of serving the needs of their male counterparts. Men can assume that they are entitled to exert control over women. This fosters a sense of authority that manifests through coercion, punishment, and other control tactics. (Source: *Domestic Violence and Male Privilege*).

18 For more details, see Amanda Kippert (2021). *What are the Power and Control Wheels?*

19 World Health Organisation. 2012. *Understanding and addressing violence against women*.

gender roles, and the normalisation of violence as a way to resolve conflict. The same has been documented in the Western Balkans. Gender stereotypes can encourage violence against women and gun ownership and use, whereas the prevalence of positive attitudes toward gun ownership in a community can hamper efforts to curb domestic violence involving firearms.

While domestic violence can happen to both women and men, the patterns, level of exposure,

and causes of women’s and men’s victimisation in the domestic context differ greatly. Within the domestic context, women run a higher risk of violence committed by their intimate partners, current or former, while men are primarily at risk of other predominantly male family members. Violence against men is usually not gender-based, and it ensues from family disputes, property issues, transgenerational violence, etc.

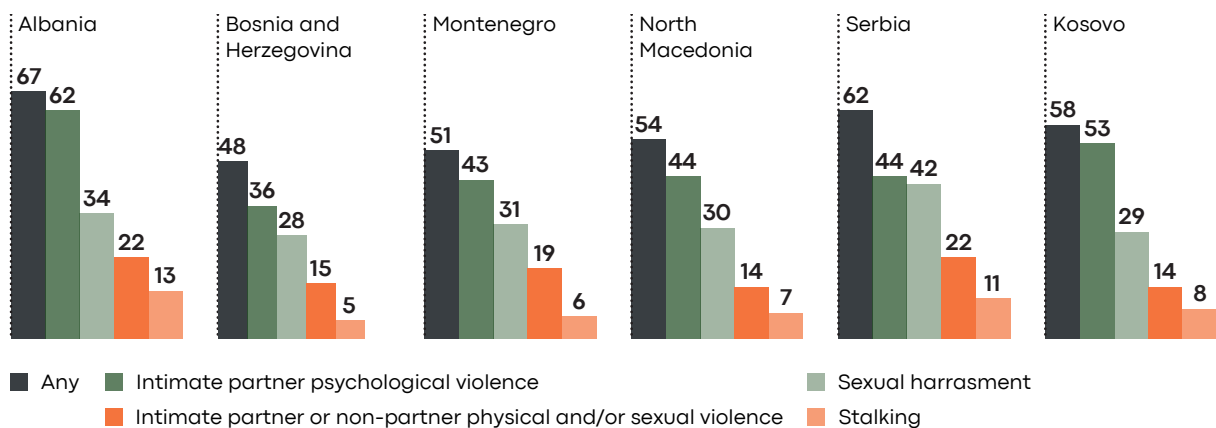
## The prevalence of domestic violence in the Western Balkans

Domestic violence in the Western Balkans is pervasive, with a disproportionately harmful impact on women’s safety and well-being. The prevalence and characteristics of violence against women in the domestic context have been extensively documented by the OSCE-led survey, which remains the latest regionally comparable data source.<sup>20</sup>

According to the survey, over half of the women in the Western Balkans have encountered

some form of violence since the age of 15. The highest percentage of women reporting any form of violence was documented in Albania at 67%, followed by Serbia at 62%, Kosovo at 58%, North Macedonia at 54%, Montenegro at 51%, and Bosnia and Herzegovina at 48%. The high prevalence of violence against women necessitates specific concerns regarding the presence of firearms and their role in enabling such violence.

**Figure 1**  
Prevalence of different forms of violence against women, %, since the age of 15



Source: OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women, 2019

20 For more information, see the OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women - Main Report. It presents the cross-regional, comparable findings of the OSCE survey on the well-being and security of women, which was conducted in 2018 in selected jurisdictions in Southeast and East Europe. The survey combined quantitative and qualitative component and was conducted with the aim of providing comparable data on the different forms of violence women experience in childhood and throughout their lives. It examined the violence experienced by women in conflict and non-conflict settings, as well as the impact of violence on women and girls, including its lasting consequences. Questions about norms and attitudes regarding violence against women were asked in order to better understand the underlying causes of violence.

The most widespread form of violence experienced by women in all Western Balkans' jurisdictions is intimate partner psychological violence, followed by sexual harassment.

Of particular urgency is the prevalence of physical violence, with the proportion of women who have experienced it varying across the region, from 14% in Kosovo and North Macedonia, 15% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 19% in Montenegro, to 22% in Albania and Serbia. Women in the Western Balkans are more likely to experience physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner than from a

non-partner. Furthermore, women are more likely to report experiencing most forms of violence from a previous partner rather than their current partner. As noted, this trend may be related to women's greater willingness to disclose violence in past relationships compared to current ones, or it may indicate that violence was a contributing factor in ending those relationships, as frequently reported by women.<sup>21</sup> Stalking ranks among the most prevalent forms of violence faced by women, with the proportion of those experiencing it ranging from 5% to 13%.

**Table 1**

**Prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence since the age of 15, by perpetrator type**

|                        | Current partner, % |                 |                                 | Previous partner, % |                 |                                 | Any partner, %    |                 |                                 | Non-partner, %    |                 |                                 |
|------------------------|--------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|---------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|
|                        | Physical violence  | Sexual violence | Physical and/or sexual violence | Physical violence   | Sexual violence | Physical and/or sexual violence | Physical violence | Sexual violence | Physical and/or sexual violence | Physical violence | Sexual violence | Physical and/or sexual violence |
| <b>Albania</b>         | 17                 | 3               | 18                              | 22                  | 6               | 23                              | 19                | 4               | 19                              | 11                | 1               | 11                              |
| <b>BiH</b>             | 6                  | 2               | 6                               | 11                  | 4               | 11                              | 10                | 4               | 11                              | 7                 | 1               | 8                               |
| <b>Montenegro</b>      | 11                 | 3               | 12                              | 15                  | 2               | 15                              | 17                | 3               | 17                              | 8                 | 1               | 9                               |
| <b>North Macedonia</b> | 6                  | 2               | 7                               | 10                  | 4               | 12                              | 9                 | 3               | 10                              | 6                 | 2               | 7                               |
| <b>Serbia</b>          | 9                  | 3               | 10                              | 17                  | 5               | 18                              | 17                | 5               | 17                              | 8                 | 2               | 9                               |
| <b>Kosovo</b>          | 8                  | 4               | 9                               | 15                  | 6               | 18                              | 9                 | 4               | 11                              | 7                 | 1               | 8                               |

Source: OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women, 2019

The survey also documented that various forms of violence experienced by intimate partners are rarely an isolated experience. Women frequently indicated that they had experienced it more than once, which particularly holds for

previous partner violence.<sup>22</sup>

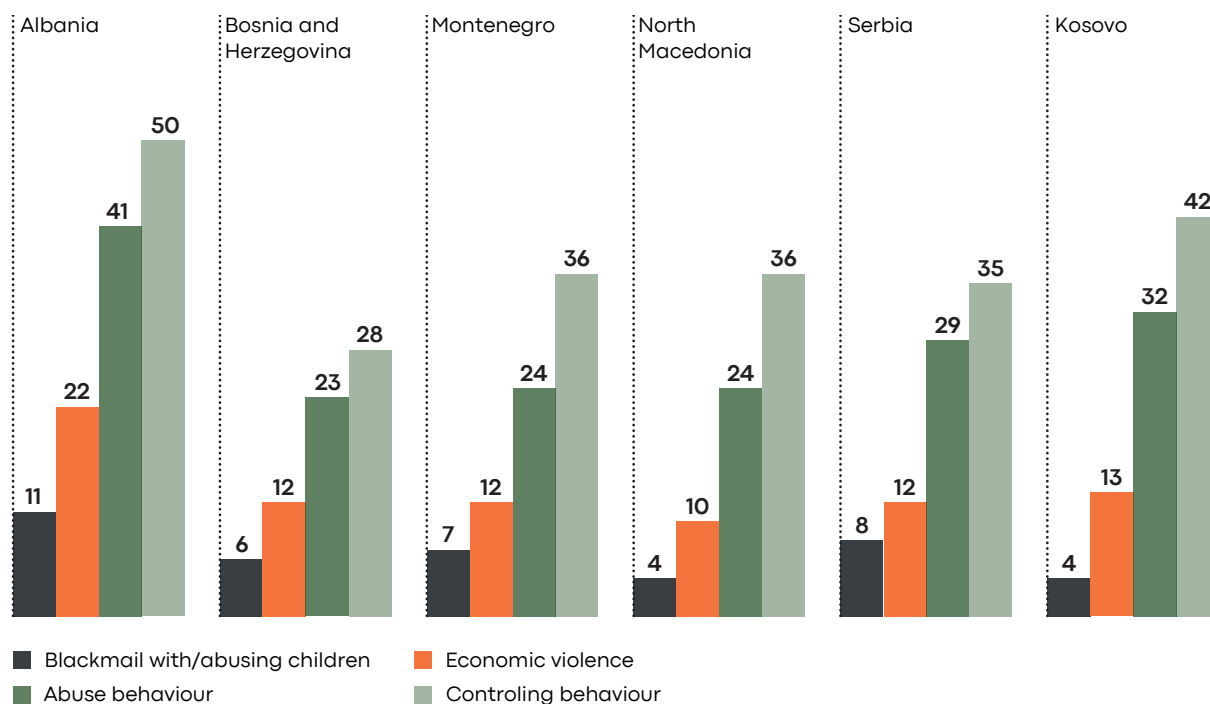
Regarding intimate partner psychological violence, controlling behaviour is the most prevalent form across all Western Balkan jurisdictions, closely followed by abusive

21 Ibid, page 43.

22 Ibid, page 41.

behaviour, economic violence, and the use or abuse of children for coercion or blackmail.

**Figure 2**  
**Prevalence of different forms of intimate partner psychological violence, in %**



Source: OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women, 2019

The survey documented numerous forms of controlling behaviours that can significantly affect women's lives, restrict their autonomy, and have profound implications for their personal freedom, health, and overall well-being.

Violence has detrimental and multiple impacts on women's well-being and has severe physical consequences and psychological effects. Bruises and scratches were most frequently reported physical consequences, followed by wounds, sprains, and burns. Injuries were most often noted as a result of the most serious incident committed by a previous partner.<sup>23</sup> Violence leaves adverse and enduring psychological consequences on survivors. The majority of survivors of physical and/or sexual violence developed at least one of the longer-term psychological symptoms, most frequently anxiety and depression, closely followed by the

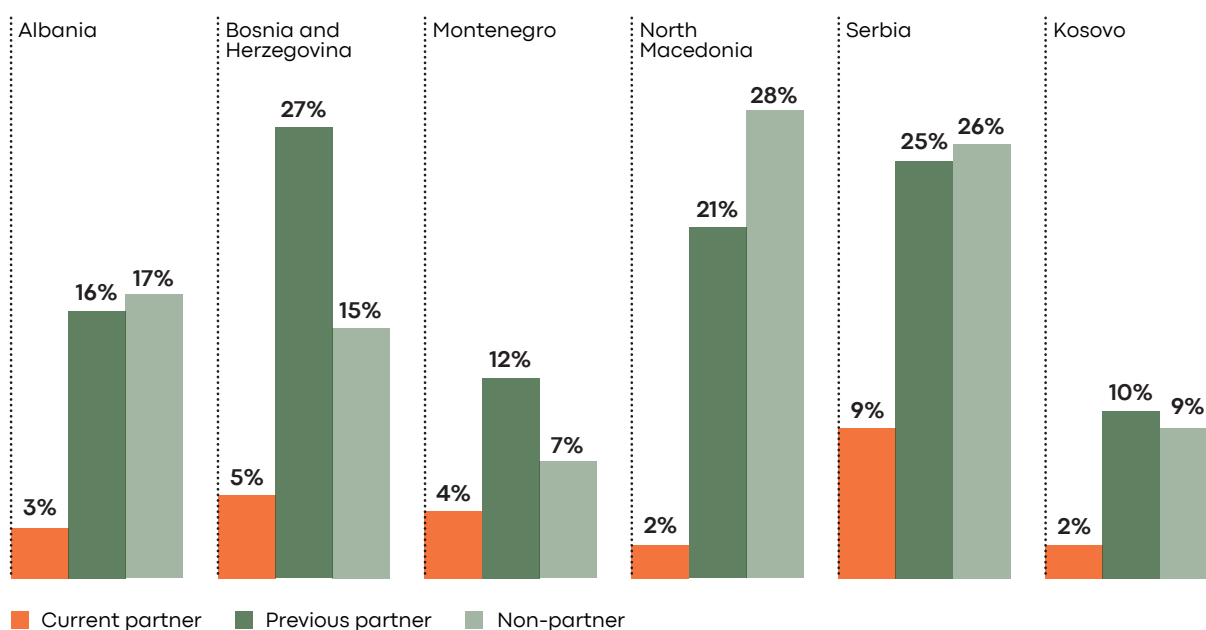
feeling of vulnerability, loss of self-confidence, difficulty sleeping etc.<sup>24</sup>

Despite their pervasiveness, experiences of violence, sexual harassment, and stalking most frequently go unreported to institutions. The survey documented that even following the most serious incidents of physical and/or sexual violence, the police were not informed in the majority of cases, as seen in Figure 3 below. Victims are considerably more likely to report their most serious incidents when these are committed by a non-partner rather than by an intimate partner. Furthermore, violence committed by current partners is the most likely to go unreported, and the rate of its reporting is significantly less than that committed by previous partners.

23 Ibid, page 86.

24 Ibid, page 88.

**Figure 3**  
**Contact with the police following victims' most serious incident of current-, previous- or non-partner violence**



Source: OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women, 2019

Survey further indicates that women are more likely to report violence by a previous partner to the police if the violence was the primary reason for ending the relationship, thus suggesting that the violence would have had to be severe before the victim sought police assistance.<sup>25</sup>

The police are even less likely to be informed by other people about severe cases of violence. For previous partner violence, only 4% of women who identified their most serious incident reported that someone else had informed the police or that the authorities had learned of it without someone reporting it. The same applies to 3% of women in cases of non-partner violence, and just over 0.5 % of women in cases of current partner violence. The likelihood of reporting violence to the police or other organisations varies based on the nature of the violence experienced. Women are less likely to contact authorities if their most serious incident involves only threats, whether physical or sexual. However, when the incident includes physical or sexual violence, there is an increase in reporting to the police or other organisations. Victims of sex-related crimes are

less likely to report to the police compared to those experiencing physical violence. This trend is influenced by the heightened feelings of shame and embarrassment associated with sexual violence.<sup>26</sup>

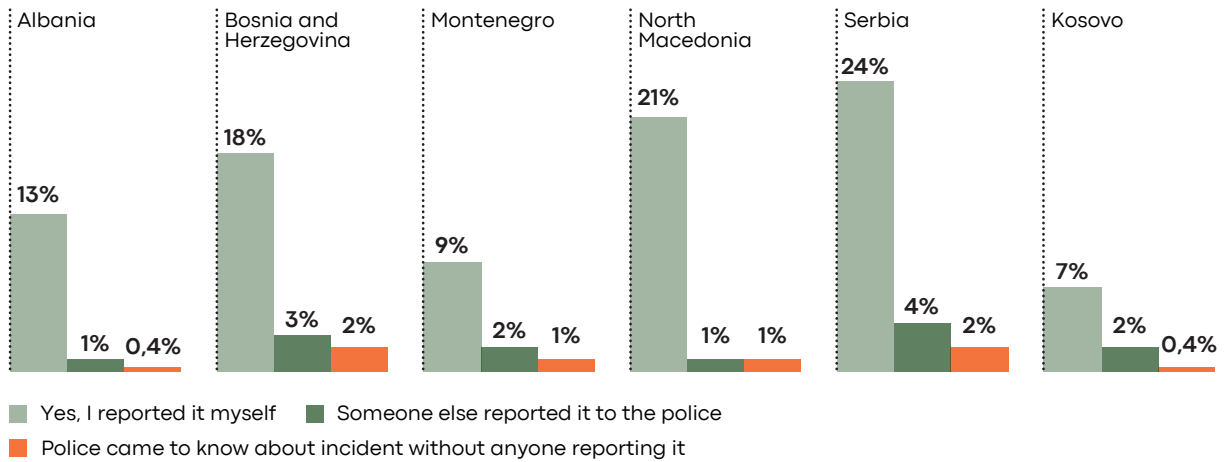
The most serious incident is, in the majority of cases, reported by survivors themselves and is only exceptionally reported by other people.

Women also opt not to contact other services, and when deciding to report their most serious incident, they are most likely to contact healthcare institutions.

25 Ibid, page 95.

26 Ibid, page 99.

**Figure 4**  
**How did the police learn of the most serious incident (all perpetrators)?**



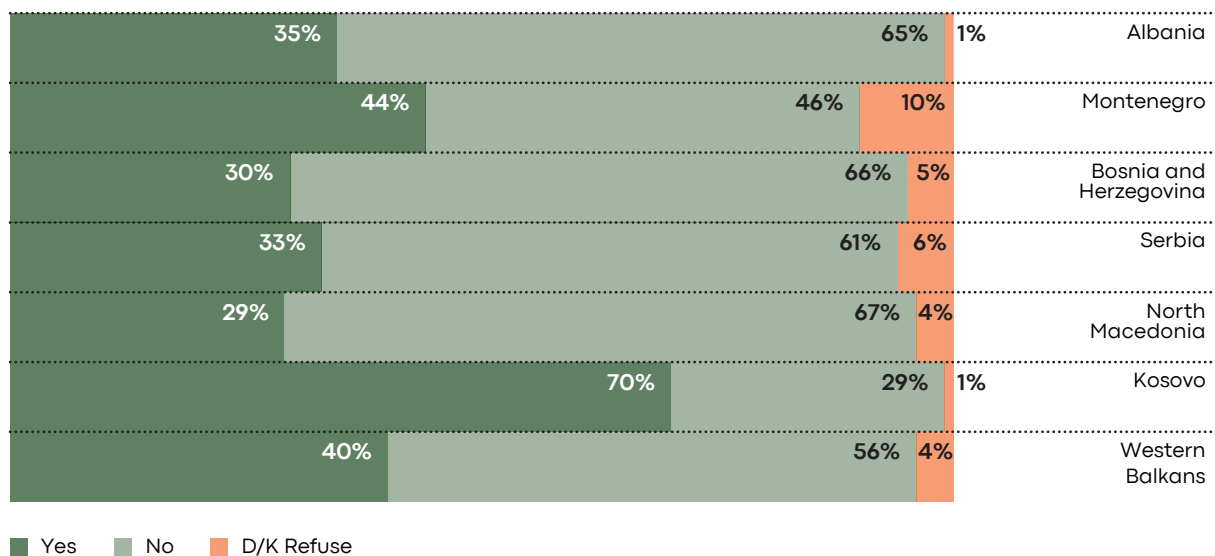
Source: OSCE-led Survey on Violence Against Women, 2019

The survey documented multiple factors contributing to underreporting of violence, with the most common reason women choose not to contact the police or other service providers after experiencing violence being their decision to handle the incident themselves. Other factors include feelings of shame, financial concerns, lack of trust in institutions, unawareness of specialised services, and fear of retaliation, in

particular, concerns that reporting could lead to escalated violence from the perpetrator.<sup>27</sup>

A public opinion survey on security in the Western Balkans further documents the high prevalence of domestic violence. In 2022, 40% of respondents in the region claimed to know someone in their family, neighbourhood, or community who had experienced domestic violence.

**Figure 5**  
**Do you know someone (in your family, neighbourhood, or community) who experienced domestic violence?**

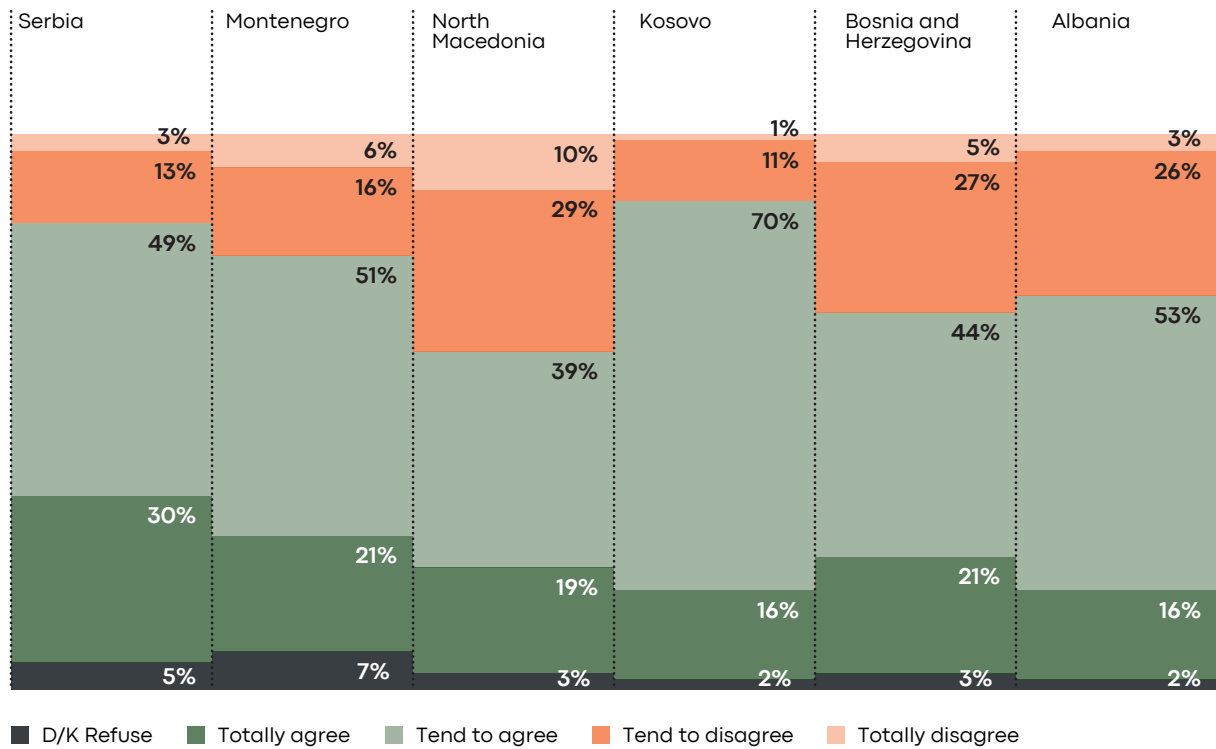


Source: RCC SecuriMeter 2022

The survey results show a growing public awareness of the importance of preventing and fighting domestic violence in the Western Balkans. Overall, in the region, 72% consider domestic violence a serious security threat in

their jurisdictions, as opposed to a quarter (25%) who do not consider that.

**Figure 6**  
**To what extent do you agree with the following statement: Domestic violence presents a serious security threat?**

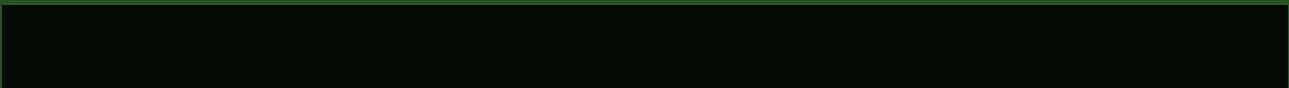


Source: RCC SecuriMeter 2022

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## Chapter 4

# The Impact of Firearms Misuse in Domestic Violence Context

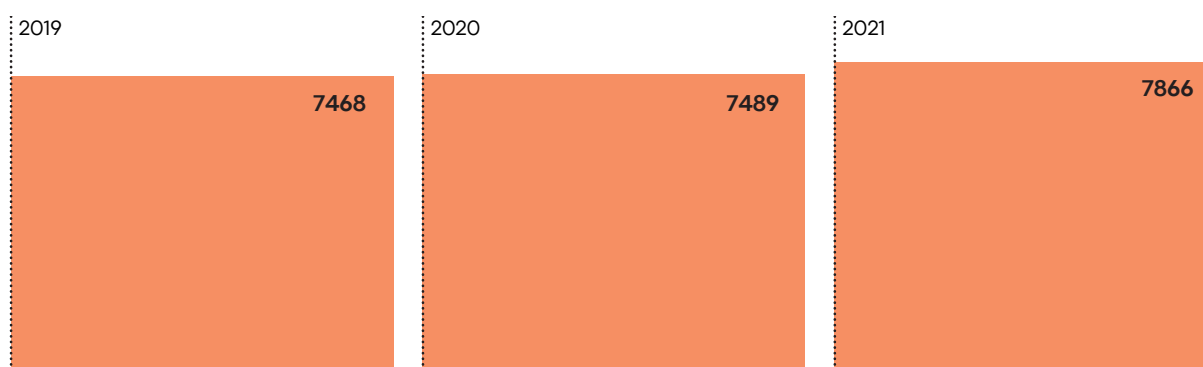


## 4.1 Challenges in capturing the frequency of firearms misuse in domestic violence

According to the data submitted by the ministries of the interior in the region, the total number of domestic violence incidents reported

to the police remained fairly constant at the regional level in the reporting period, with a slight rise documented in 2021.

**Figure 7**  
**Number of domestic violence incidents reported to the police, 2019-2021**

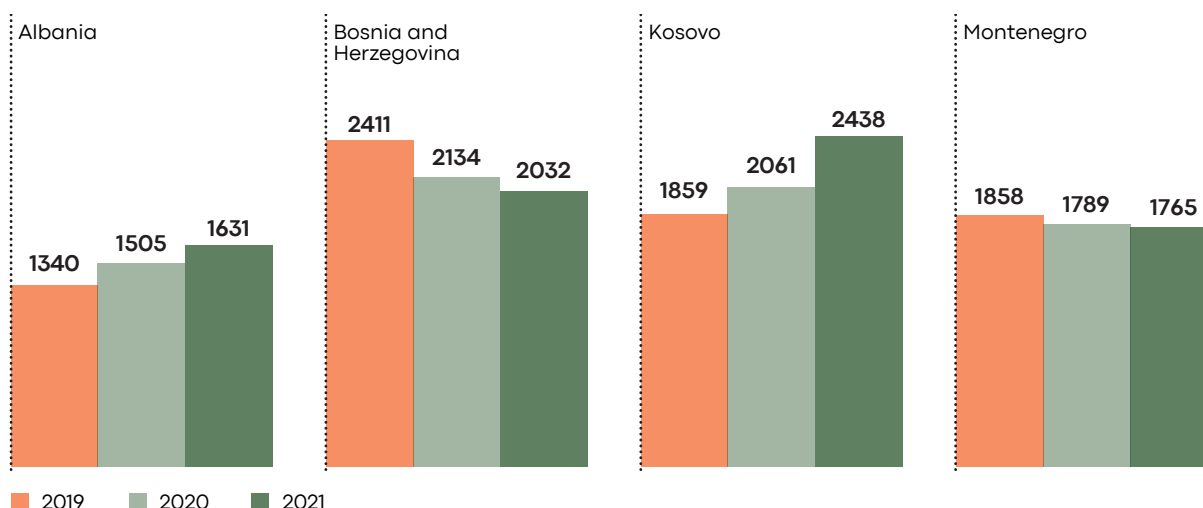


Source: Ministries of the interior in the Western Balkans

The number of reported incidents<sup>28</sup> in Albania and Kosovo steadily increased over the

reporting period, while it decreased in Bosnia and Herzegovina<sup>29</sup> and Montenegro.

**Figure 8**  
**Number of domestic violence incidents reported to the police, 2019-2021**



Source: Ministries of the interior in the Western Balkans

28 For North Macedonia, specific data were not available.

29 In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republika Srpska, the Brčko District of BiH, Sarajevo canton, Zenica-Doboj canton, West Herzegovina canton, Una-Sana canton, Tuzla canton, Posavina canton, Canton 10 submitted the data.

In Albania, there has been a steady increase in residents' requests for protection orders. In 2019, there were 1,792 requests, which rose to 1,886 in 2020 and further increased to 2,046 in 2021. Similarly, the number of protection orders granted also showed an upward trend, with 2,836 orders issued in 2019, 2,816 in 2020, and 3,151 in 2021.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 3,580 criminal offences of domestic violence resulted in criminal charges.

In Kosovo, in the period 2019-2021, 6,358 criminal charges for domestic violence were filed by the police, 1,859 in 2019, 2,061 in 2020, and 2,438 in 2021.

During the same period in Montenegro, a total of 931 criminal charges for domestic violence were filed – 305 in 2019, followed by 315 in 2020, and 311 in 2021. In the same period, a total of 4,476 misdemeanour charges were filed, 1,548 in 2019, 1,474 in 2020, and 1,454 in 2021.

In North Macedonia, official statistics do not generate statistical data on the number of filed cases, but on committed criminal acts and misdemeanours. As for criminal offences, 989 were committed in 2019, 992 in 2020, and 1,056 in 2021. As for misdemeanours, 470 were committed in 2019, 486 in 2020, before dropping to 379 in 2021. In relation to domestic violence,

3,196 complaints ('poplaka') were received in 2019; 3,759 in 2020 and 3,761 in 2021.

The understanding of the frequency of firearms presence and misuse in the context of domestic violence is hindered by the limited availability of data. For instance, in Montenegro and North Macedonia, data were available on cases in which firearms were used as a means of execution of a criminal offence, which could be significantly lower than the number of domestic violence cases when a perpetrator owned a firearm, regardless of whether it was used. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, not all entities provided such data. Although limited, available data indicate that, in contrast to the substantial number of reported domestic violence cases, the number of cases in which the perpetrator was recorded as owning a firearm - whether legal or illegal - remained comparatively low during this period.

For instance, in Albania, only 1.4% of reported domestic violence cases involved a perpetrator who owned a legal or illegal firearm. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, this figure is 3.3%, while in Kosovo it is 0.2%.

**Table 2**  
**Number of reported incidents of domestic violence in which it was registered that the domestic violence perpetrator owned a firearm, legal or illegal**

|                        | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
|------------------------|------|------|------|
| Albania                | 23   | 24   | 16   |
| Bosnia and Herzegovina | 66   | 75   | 76   |
| Kosovo                 | 5    | 8    | N/A  |
| Montenegro             | N/A  | 2    | 2    |
| North Macedonia        | N/A  | N/A  | N/A  |

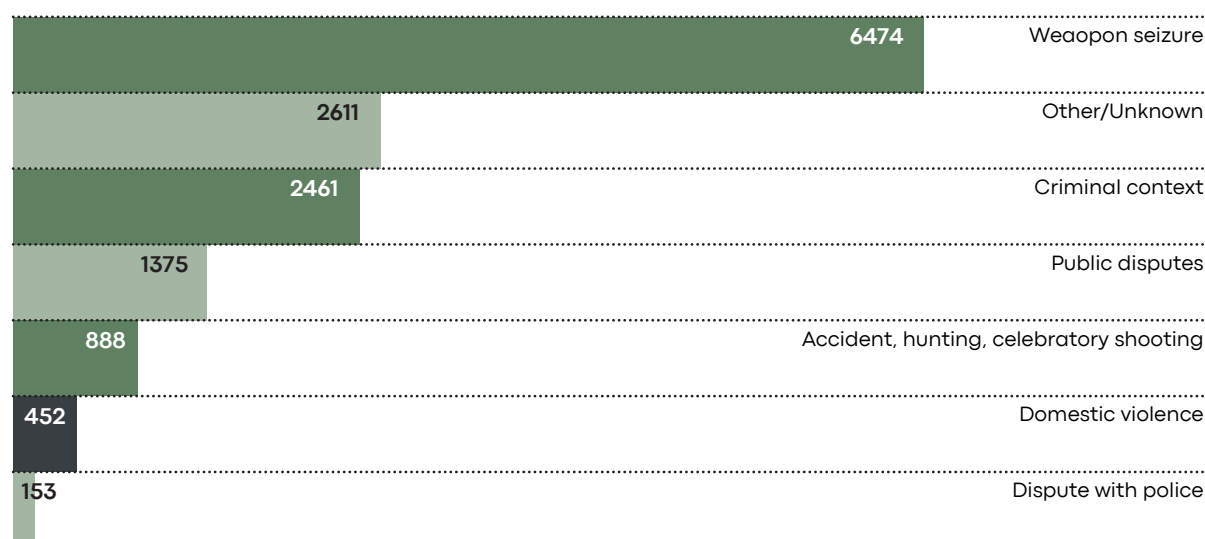
Source: Ministries of the interior in the Western Balkans

In absolute numbers, in the same period, Albania recorded 31 instances in which perpetrators owned and misused<sup>30</sup> firearms, and 32 instances in which firearms were owned but not used. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, partial data submitted by various entities indicated 26 cases of firearms misuse, alongside 194 cases in which firearms were possessed by perpetrators but not used. Montenegro reported four instances of firearms misuse and one instance in which a firearm was owned but not used. In North Macedonia, such data are not generated through the official statistics. Still, according to the means of execution, in the area of domestic violence in 2019 and 2020, five criminal offences committed with firearms were registered, and, in 2021, 11 criminal offences of this type were registered. In the reporting period, in the area of domestic violence, no offenses committed with firearms were registered. These data were not available for Kosovo.

Such low figures may also reflect record-keeping practices that do not fully capture the reality on the ground, highlighting the need for further analysis.

A similar trend of the low reporting of firearms in the context of domestic violence, is also evident in data generated through the AVMP, which indicates that the **firearms misuse in the context of domestic violence is significantly less reported compared to the other types of incidents**, including incidents occurring in the criminal context, public disputes, or undetermined shootings. From 2019 to 2023, **firearm-related incidents that occurred in the domestic violence context accounted for only 3.1% of all reported firearm incidents**, with this trend persisting throughout the period.

**Figure 9**  
**Number of firearm-related incidents in the Western Balkans (WB), by type of incident, 2019-2023**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

The AVMP documented a steady increase in the reported number of firearm incidents

in domestic violence during the same period. Specifically, the number of such incidents

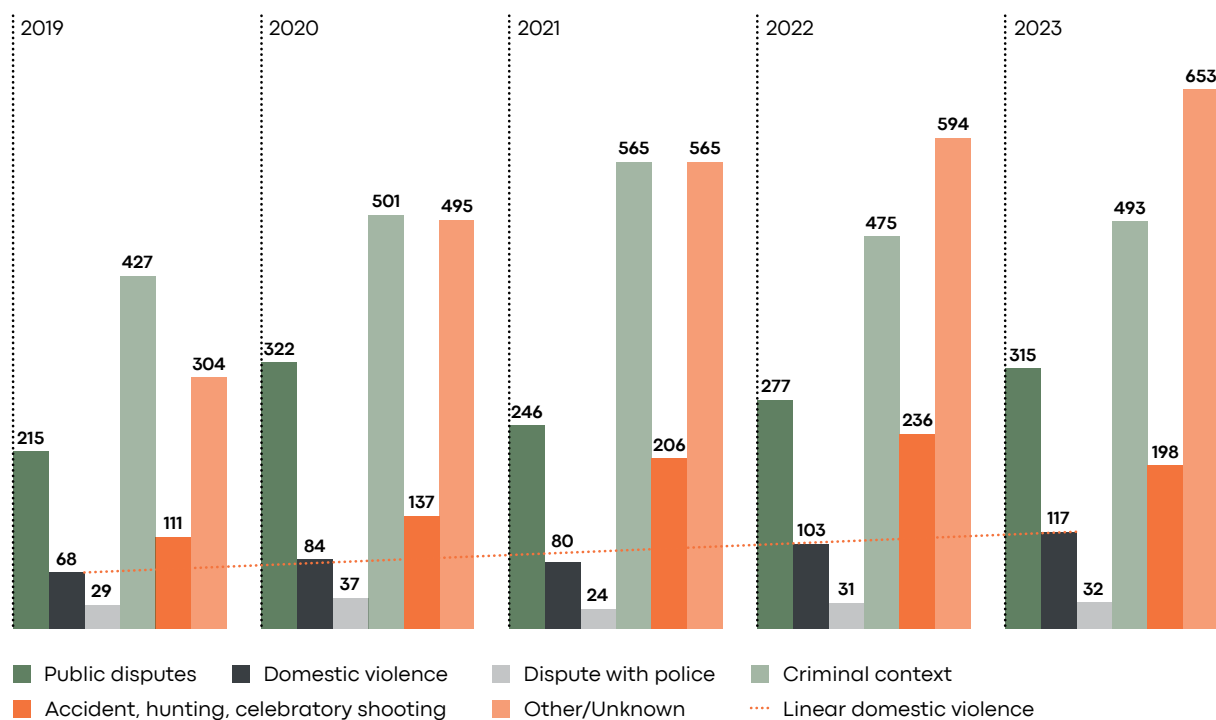
30 For the purpose of this research, the misuse of firearms refers to any form of the use of firearms for threatening, intimidation, control, coercion, psychological violence, sexual violence, economic violence, assault, injury or murder and data were requested accordingly.

increased by 72%. This increase may reflect either a genuine rise in incidents, or enhanced reporting mechanisms, including greater media attention to the issue. SEESAC made concerted efforts to positively shape public discourse on the topic of domestic violence, specifically that committed with firearms. Analysis of the media reporting on the phenomenon in the Western Balkans region<sup>31</sup> was conducted to create a baseline. Informed by the results, trainings<sup>32</sup> were organised for representatives of ministries of the interior, police services, prosecutors' offices, and the media, designed to help them better understand the phenomenon and improve the way they report on it to the public. Guidelines

on how to best communicate with the media on the subject<sup>33</sup> of domestic violence with firearms were developed for the MOIs and police services. In Serbia, pioneering work was undertaken by UNDP Serbia, which, in 2017, together with the B92 Fund, created the Journalists against Violence against Women<sup>34</sup> group. As part of its work, and with UNDP's continued support, the group monitors the quality of media coverage of violence against women based on established, reputable indicators, has developed Guidelines for Media Reporting on Violence against Women,<sup>35</sup> and provides training for representatives of the media<sup>36</sup> to help improve their reporting practices.

Figure 10

### Number of firearm-related incidents in the WB (excluding weapons seizures), by type of incident and year, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

31 SEESAC. 2024. *Analysis of Media Reporting on Firearm Misuse in Male Gender-Based Violence against Women in the Western Balkans*. Belgrade: SEESAC, 2024.

32 [https://www.seesac.org/News\\_1/seesac-finalizes-the-second-round-of-trainings-on-the-ethics-of-informing-the-public-about-incidents-of-firearms-misuse-in-domestic-violence-context/](https://www.seesac.org/News_1/seesac-finalizes-the-second-round-of-trainings-on-the-ethics-of-informing-the-public-about-incidents-of-firearms-misuse-in-domestic-violence-context/)

33 SEESAC. *Guidelines for Officials of the Ministries of Interior and Police Services for Communication with the Media in Cases of Firearm Misuse in Gender-Based Violence*. Belgrade: SEESAC, 2024.

34 <https://novinarkeprotivnasilja.org/>

35 Gligorijević, Jovana, Pavlović, Sanja and Cvetičanin Knežević, Hristina. *Guidelines on Media Reporting on Violence against Women*. Belgrade: United Nations Development Programme, 2021.

36 <https://www.undp.org/serbia/stories/media-training-step-towards-better-reporting-violence-against-women>

The factors contributing to the persistently low rates of reporting firearms misuse in domestic violence - including the role of

firearms in deterring victims from reporting - are examined in detail in Chapter 7.

## 4.2 Characteristics of firearms incidents in the domestic violence context

### Gender differentiated impact and risks of firearms misuse

According to the AVMP, women accounted for the majority of victims – 62.8% – in recorded firearms incidents in domestic settings between 2019 and 2023, compared to 37.2% for men, corresponding to 342 and 203 cases, respectively.

During the period under review, the number of recorded incidents affecting women increased from 48 to 91, representing an 89.6% rise, while incidents affecting men increased from 50 to 57, or by 14%.<sup>37</sup>

**Figure 11**  
Victims of firearms misuse in domestic violence in the WB, by sex, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

As evident from the table below, women accounted for the majority of victims<sup>38</sup> of firearm-related incidents in domestic violence

in each Western Balkans jurisdiction, with their share in the overall number of victims ranging from 53.1% in Montenegro to 69.9% in Serbia.

<sup>37</sup> In the same period, the sex of 27 victims was not reported.

<sup>38</sup> In the AVMP, a victim is defined as any individual who has been threatened, injured or killed as a result of the use of a firearm/ ammunition/explosives. Victims also include individuals who were present when a firearm was discharged but did not sustain a gunshot injury, as well as those who were present during an incident in which a firearm was present but was not used.

**Table 3**  
**Victims of firearm-related incidents related to domestic violence, by sex, year, and jurisdiction**

| Jurisdiction    | 2019      |           | 2020      |           | 2021      |           | 2022      |           | 2023      |           | Men (%)<br>(2019-2023) | Women (%)<br>(2019-2023) |
|-----------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------------------|--------------------------|
|                 | M         | W         | M         | W         | M         | W         | M         | W         | M         | W         |                        |                          |
| Albania         | 7         | 7         | 7         | 15        | 9         | 13        | 11        | 20        | 15        | 17        | 40.5%                  | 59.5%                    |
| BIH             | 8         | 12        | 8         | 8         | 2         | 9         | 2         | 5         | 7         | 9         | 38.6%                  | 61.4%                    |
| Kosovo          | 2         | 10        | 11        | 11        | 9         | 25        | 10        | 28        | 16        | 15        | 35%                    | 65%                      |
| Montenegro      | 3         | 1         | 4         | 3         | 3         | 2         | 2         | 1         | 3         | 10        | 46.9%                  | 53.1%                    |
| North Macedonia | 5         | 3         | 2         | 6         | 4         | 2         | 10        | 9         | 3         | 8         | 46.2%                  | 53.8%                    |
| Serbia          | 10        | 15        | 6         | 22        | 4         | 9         | 7         | 15        | 13        | 32        | 30.1%                  | 69.9%                    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | <b>35</b> | <b>48</b> | <b>38</b> | <b>65</b> | <b>31</b> | <b>60</b> | <b>42</b> | <b>78</b> | <b>57</b> | <b>91</b> | <b>37.2%</b>           | <b>62.8%</b>             |

Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

The highest share of women among victims was recorded in Serbia, closely followed by Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Albania. In Montenegro and North Macedonia, differences in the share of women and men were less striking.

The available official data on victims of domestic violence involving firearms reported to the police in the Western Balkans indicate that, across the region, women account for the majority of victims of such incidents. From 2019 to 2021, women made up 71.9% of victims of domestic violence incidents involving firearms in Albania, compared to 28.1% of men, while in Montenegro, women accounted for 80% and men for 20% of victims. A similar trend is also confirmed by the limited data provided by entities in Bosnia and Herzegovina,<sup>39</sup> where women accounted for 72% of victims, compared to 28% of men.

\*\*\*

While the firearms misuse in domestic violence affects both women and men, the

disproportionate impact on women and its gender-based nature become evident when examining the specific contexts and patterns of victimisation experienced by women and men in the Western Balkans.

Within the context of firearms criminality, women and men experience distinct patterns of victimisation, and the extent and context of their exposure to armed violence are highly gender specific.

Out of all firearm-related incidents affecting women recorded by the AVMP, 29.8% occurred in the context of domestic violence, ranking it as the second most common occurrence after criminal incidents, which comprised 49.1% of the total. Given the underreporting of domestic violence, exacerbated by the presence of firearms, the actual proportion of such incidents is likely to be even higher. Among other incident types, excluding the 'other/unknown' category<sup>40</sup>, no single category (e.g., public disputes, accidental discharges, celebratory shootings, hunting, or police-related disputes) exceeds five percent

39 The following entities from Bosnia and Herzegovina provided data: Brčko District, Sarajevo Canton, Tuzla Canton, and Zenica-Doboj Canton.

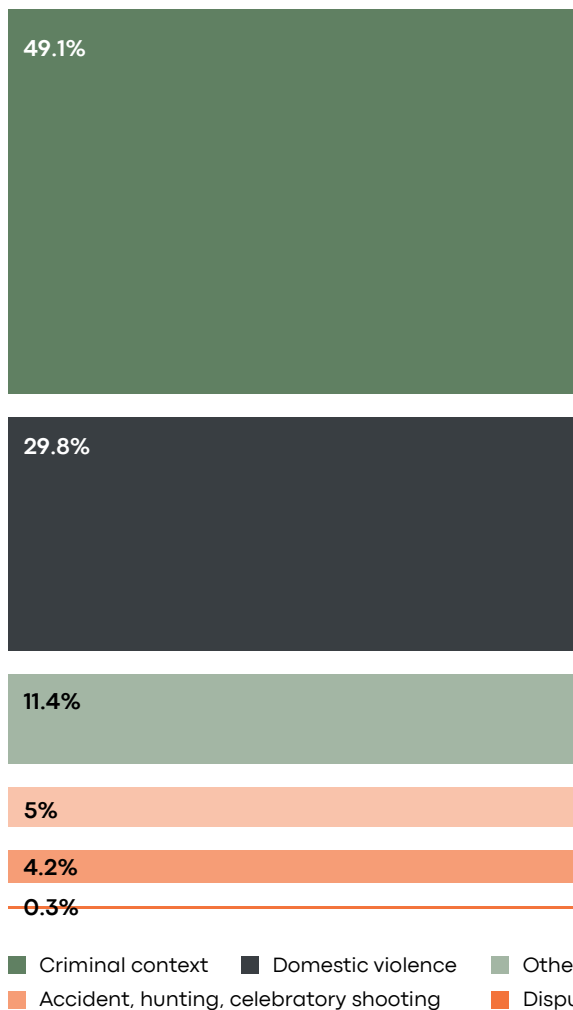
40 Other, as a separate category under the Types of Firearm incidents, refers to suicides, shootings under undetermined circumstances, non-hunting related shooting of animals, undetermined explosions, weapons used for defence, and all other incidents that cannot be classified under any of the categories above.

of firearm-related incidents involving women. The heightened risk firearms pose to women becomes even starker when fatal outcomes of such incidents are considered, which is addressed later in the report.

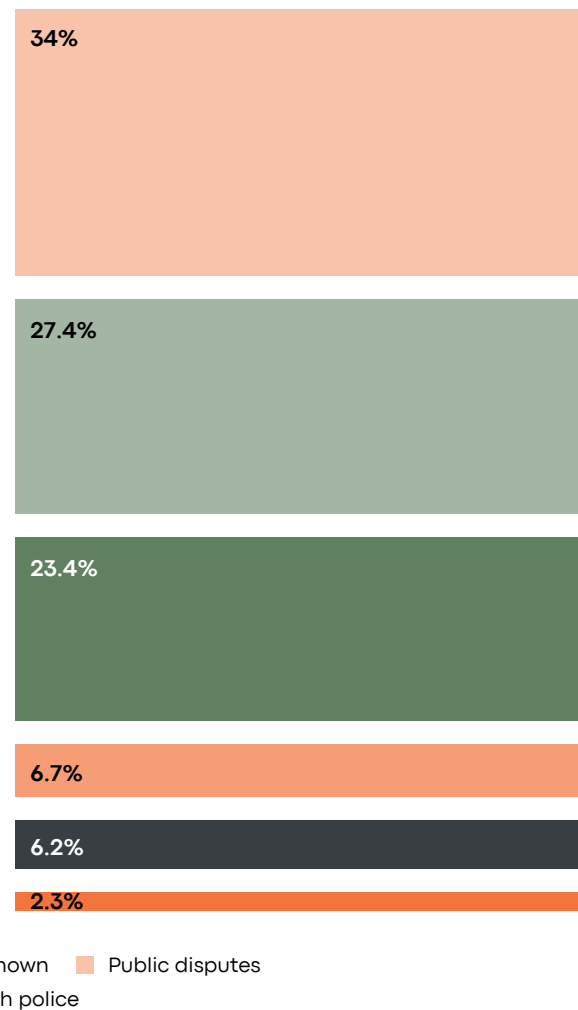
In contrast to women, men are more likely to experience firearms misuse in the context of public disputes, which accounted for over one-third of the total incidents at 34%. This is followed by incidents categorised as ‘other/unknown’ at 27.4%, criminal context at 23.4%, and accidental or celebratory shootings and hunting at 6.7%.

**A comparison of contexts reveals that women are nearly five times more likely than men to experience firearms misuse in domestic violence, with rates of 29.8% and 6.2%, respectively.**

**Figure 12**  
**Women victims of firearm-related incidents in the WB, by type of incident, 2019-2023**



**Figure 13**  
**Men victims of firearm-related incidents in the WB, by type of incident, 2019-2023**

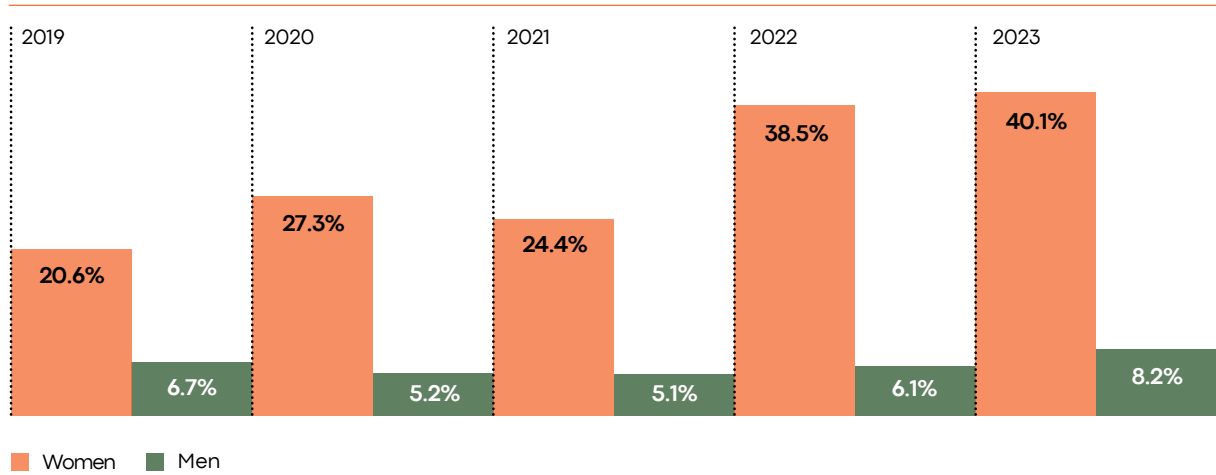


Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Significant fluctuations were observed throughout the period under analysis. With the exception of 2021, the proportion of incidents occurring in the context of domestic violence increased for both women and men. This rise

was notably more pronounced among women, with the share nearly doubling – from 20.6% to 40.1%. A smaller, but still observable increase was recorded for men, from 6.7% to 8.2%.

**Figure 14**  
**Share of firearm-related incidents related to domestic violence out of the total number of incidents in the WB, by victim sex and year**



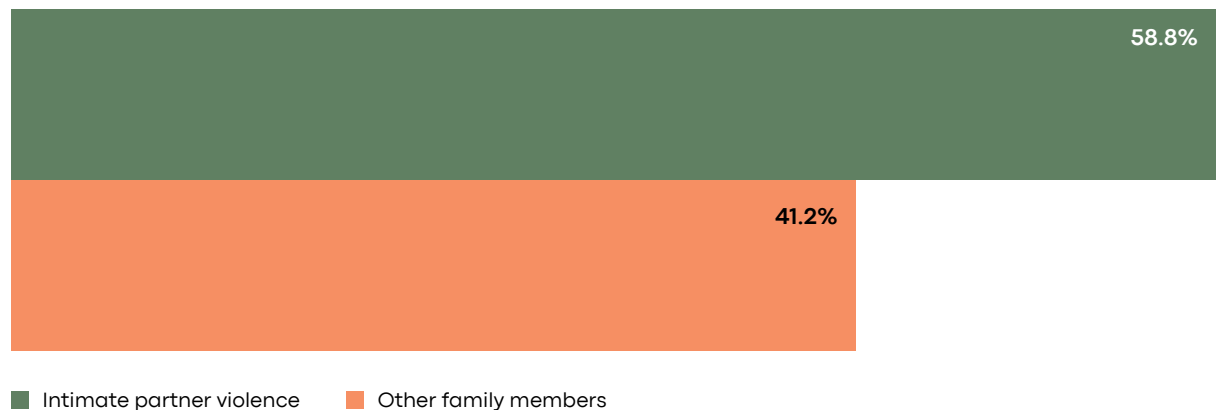
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

### Characteristics of firearms-related incidents occurring in the domestic violence context

Within the domestic setting, **firearms misuse is more commonly occurring within intimate partner violence than with violence involving other family members**. Between 2019 and 2023,

266 firearm-related incidents were recorded on the AVMP in cases of intimate partner violence, compared to 186 incidents involving other family members.

**Figure 15**  
**Firearm-related incidents by perpetrator (intimate partners and other family members) in the WB, 2019–2023**

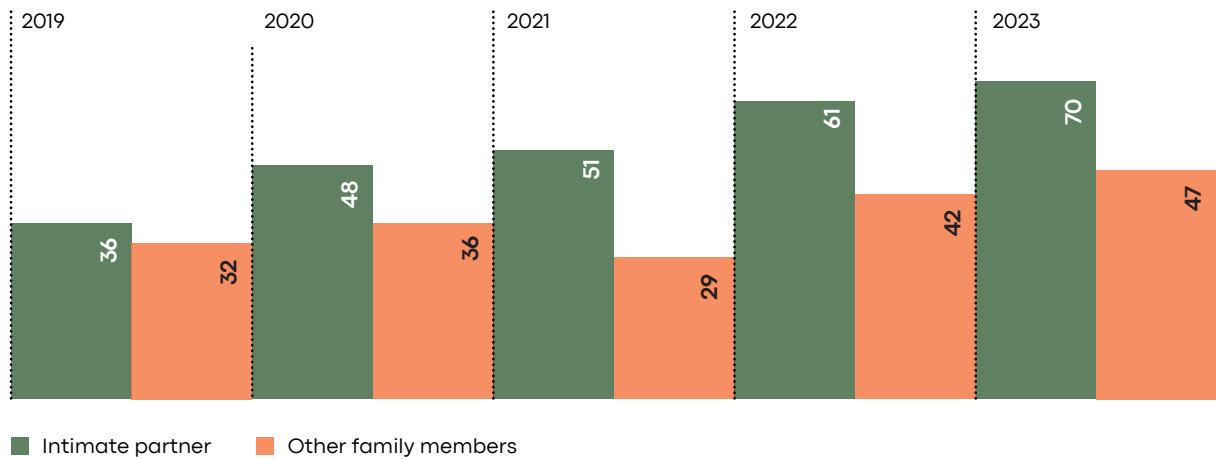


Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

The number of recorded incidents committed by intimate partners rose more steeply and almost doubled in five years, from 36 in 2019 to 70 in 2023. The number of incidents committed

by other family members also increased significantly, albeit to a lesser extent and with greater fluctuations than cases involving intimate partners.

**Figure 16**  
**Number of firearm-related incidents committed by intimate partners and other family members in the WB, by year**

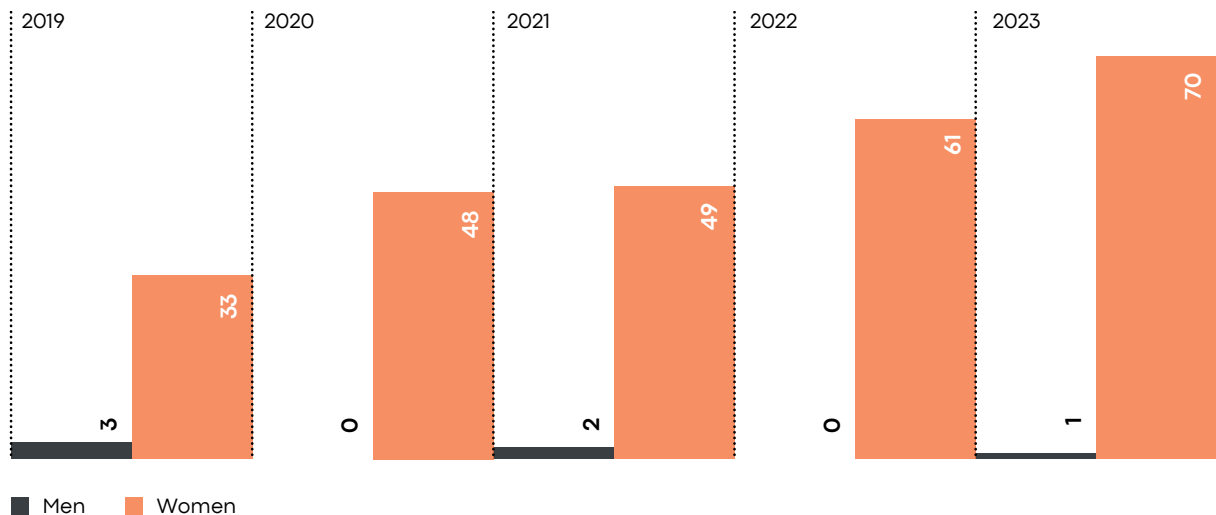


Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

**The differences in victimisation patterns highlight significant gendered differences in experiences of domestic violence.** AVMP data indicate a persistent trend in which women are disproportionately affected by firearms misuse by intimate partners, accounting for 97.7%

of victims of firearm-related intimate partner violence between 2019 and 2023. As evident from the graph below, the number of men affected by armed violence by their partners remained at a consistently low level, and in certain years, no such incidents were recorded.

**Figure 17**  
**Victims of firearm incidents committed by intimate partners in the WB, by sex and year**

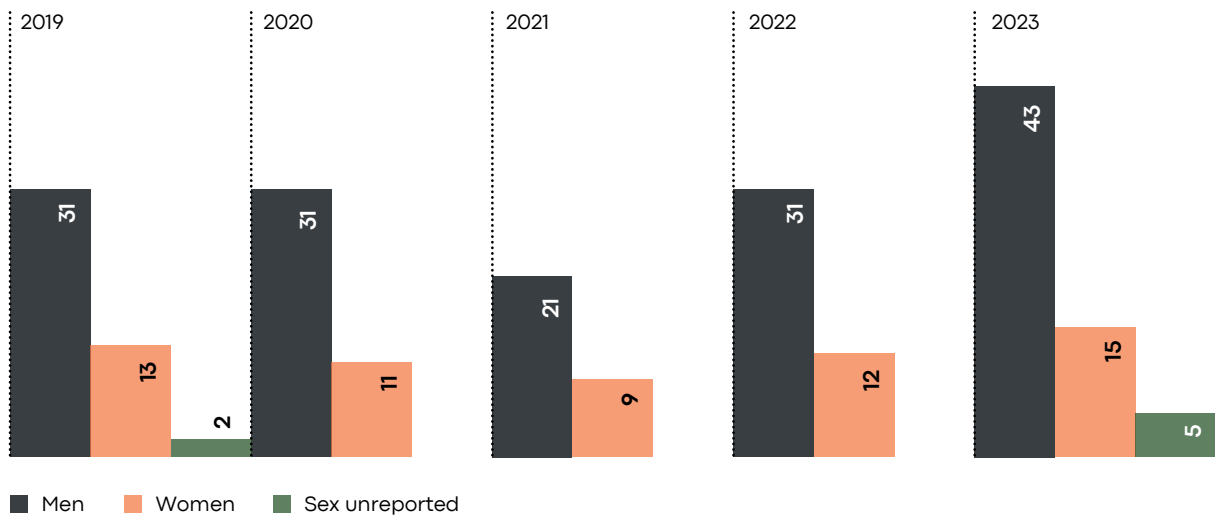


Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Women from the 36 to 60 age group are the most likely to experience domestic violence with the use of firearms, followed by those aged 19 to 35, and 61 and older. Such an age distribution of victims has been documented across the region both by SEESAC’s AVMP and the official data submitted by the MoIs in the region.

Men, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to fall victim to firearms misuse by other male family members. When the sex of such victims was known, men accounted for 72.3% of those victims, compared to 27.7% of women.

**Figure 18**  
**Victims of firearm incidents committed by other family members in the WB, 2019-2023**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Similarly to above, both women and men aged 36 to 60 were the most frequently exposed to firearms misuse by other predominantly male family members.

While detailed information on the circumstances of the incidents is limited, available data indicate that they primarily occur between immediate family members, particularly fathers and sons, both as victims and perpetrators. In addition, disputes between brothers have been recorded, as well as incidents involving extended family members, including nephews, brothers-in-law, and cousins. The motives for these incidents are diverse, encompassing family disputes, unresolved property conflicts, and prolonged abuse. Property-related disputes are a significant factor in many cases, including those involving inheritance, financial disagreements, land ownership conflicts, and, in some instances, mental health issues.

The misuse of firearms in intimate partner violence affects not only the partner but also

other family members, or individuals present at the scene. Over the five years analysed, 38 men and 22 women were also impacted by misuse of a firearm in domestic violence, while the sex of 20 additional victims was not reported. Limited data also confirm that children are among those affected.

In terms of macro-location, the firearm-related incidents in domestic violence in the Western Balkans were significantly more likely to occur in urban than rural areas, 65.4% and 34.6% respectively. The only exceptions are Albania, where incidents in rural settings were slightly more frequent (52%) than in urban areas, and Montenegro, where an overwhelming majority of incidents occurred in urban settings (90.3%).

Across the region, firearms were most likely to be used in private spaces, such as homes and yards, with 83.2% of all recorded incidents. Such trends have been very persistent, and it is in line with SEESAC’s previous research.

One in ten incidents took place in streets, sidewalks, or parking lots, followed by other public spaces, such as offices or retail establishments.

Figure 19

### Microlocation of firearm-related related to domestic violence context in the WB, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

## 4.3 Fatality of firearm incidents in the domestic context

In stark contrast to its low reporting rates, the firearms misuse in domestic violence has profound and far-reaching impacts on the safety and well-being of both women and men in the region, while also posing a significant challenge in the context of SALW control. The cumulative effects are severe, ranging from fatal and non-fatal physical injuries and psychological trauma.

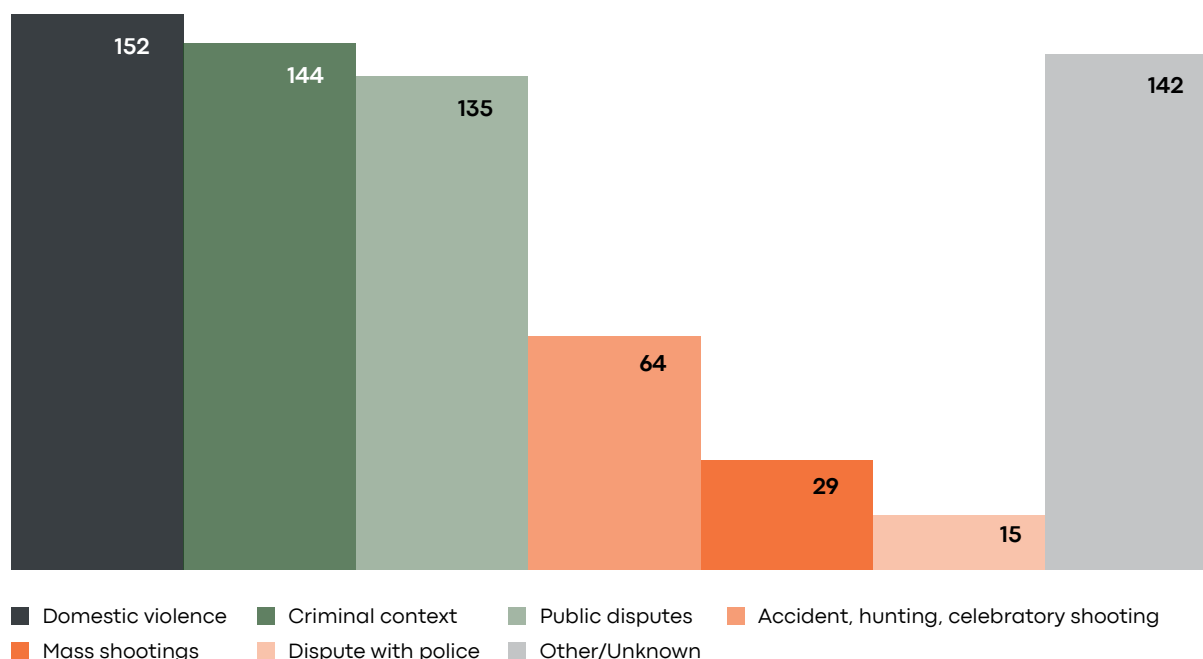
The severity of domestic violence is particularly reflected in the number of firearm-related fatalities occurring in this context. An analysis of AVMP data provides insights into the characteristics of firearms misuse in domestic violence, enabling its understanding within the broader issue of armed violence across the region, and documents the high lethality of firearms in such a context.

From 2019 to 2023, **the total number of deaths resulting from firearm incidents in domestic violence (152) was higher than that reported in any other category of incidents** covered by the AVMP, exceeding fatalities in criminal contexts (144) and public disputes (135), which ranked second and third, respectively, if category Other<sup>41</sup> is excluded.

The high number of lethal outcomes in domestic violence cases contrasts with the relatively low number of reported incidents, highlighting the specific risks associated with firearms, which increase the likelihood of fatal outcomes.

41 Other, as a separate category under the Types of Firearm Incidents, refers to suicides, shootings under undetermined circumstances, non-hunting related shooting of animals, undetermined explosions, weapons used for defence, and all other incidents that cannot be classified under any of the categories above.

**Figure 20**  
**Number of firearm-related deaths by type of incident in the WB, 2019-2023<sup>42</sup>**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

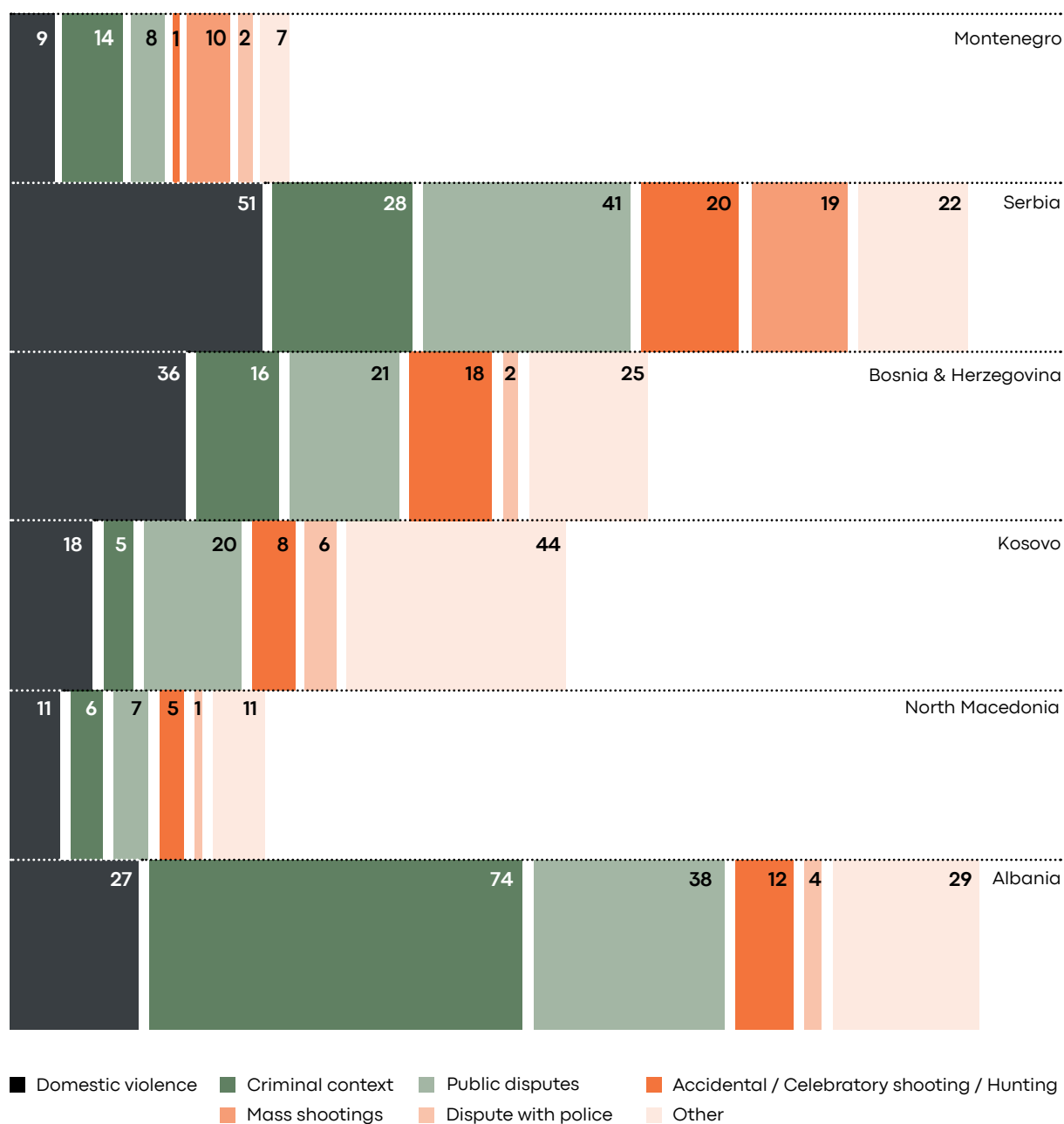
Several factors have been identified as increasing the likelihood of a fatal outcome in domestic violence when firearms are involved: the severity of gunshot-inflicted injuries, the limited ability of women to resist, the reduced likelihood of escape or intervention by others, and a heightened likelihood of an abuser actually using firearms.<sup>43</sup>

At the jurisdictional level, in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, the number of firearm-related fatalities occurring in the context of domestic violence exceeded fatalities in all other types of incidents. In Albania, domestic violence-related fatalities ranked third, following incidents in criminal contexts and public disputes; a similar pattern was observed in Montenegro, where domestic violence-related fatalities followed the “other” and criminal context categories, and in Kosovo, where they followed the “other” and public disputes categories.

42 The numbers presented in this figure include a total number of firearm-related deaths of men, women and persons whose sex was not reported.

43 SEESAC. 2016. *Gender and SALW in South East Europe*. Belgrade: SEESAC., page 23.

**Figure 21**  
**Number of firearm-related deaths by type of incident and jurisdiction, 2019-2023<sup>44</sup>**



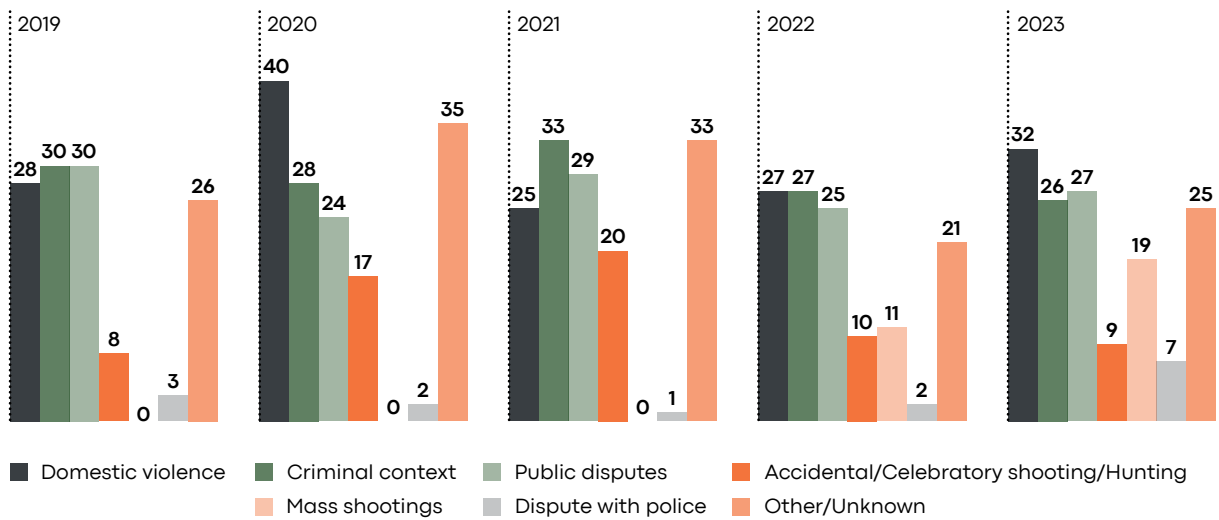
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Regionwide, the number of fatalities resulting from firearms misuse in the context of domestic violence peaked in 2020 and ranked third in 2019 and 2021. In 2022 and 2023, the number of fatalities in domestic violence ranked second; however, mass shootings that occurred

in 2022 (Cetinje) and 2023 (Belgrade, Dubona, and Orašje) significantly influenced the trends. Excluding those incidents, domestic violence would rank first in both years in terms of fatalities.

44 The numbers presented in this figure include a total number of firearm-related deaths of men, women and persons whose sex was not reported.

**Figure 22**  
**Number of firearm-related deaths in the WB, by type of incident and year**

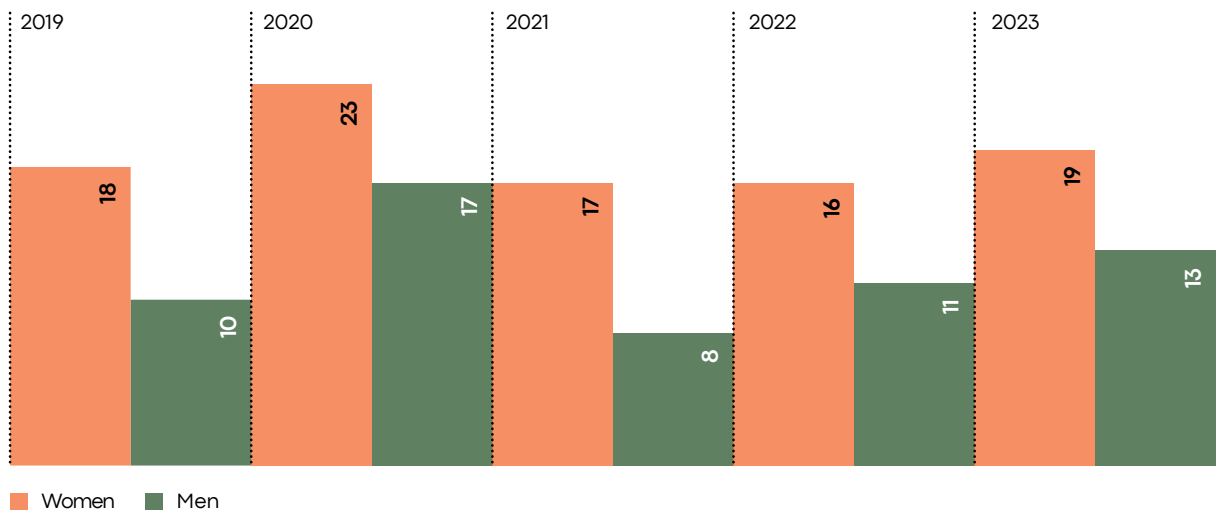


Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Notably, 2020 saw the highest number of deaths among both women and men, coinciding with the first year of the pandemic, a period defined by strict lockdown measures across the

region. This underscores the need for further research into how specific conditions during COVID-19 contributed to these outcomes.

**Figure 23**  
**Number of women and men killed with firearms in the domestic violence context in the WB, per year**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

The disproportionate impact of firearms misuse in domestic violence on women is particularly evident in the breakdown of firearm

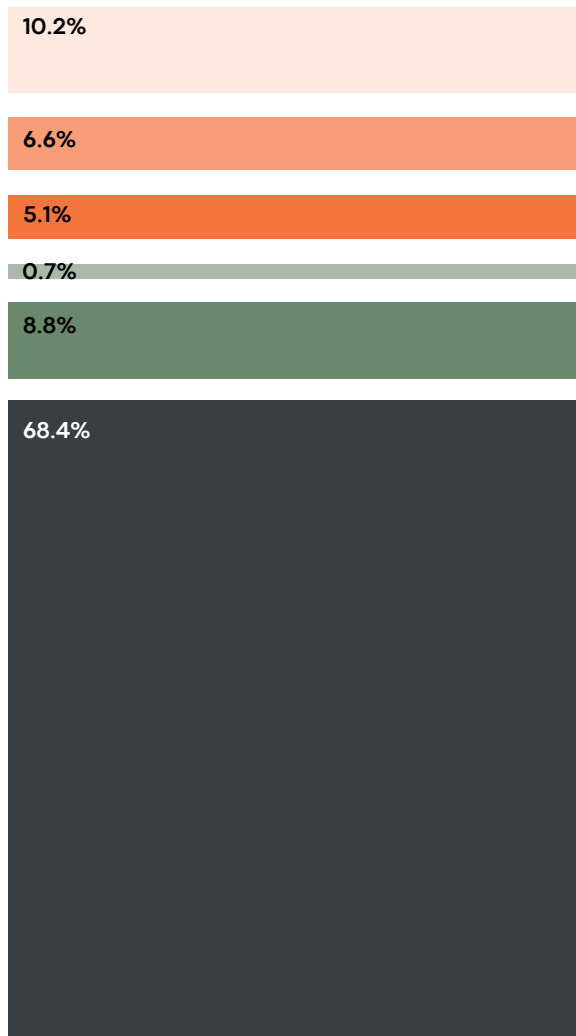
fatalities by incident type.

As illustrated in the figure below, **68.4% of women killed with firearms in the region were**

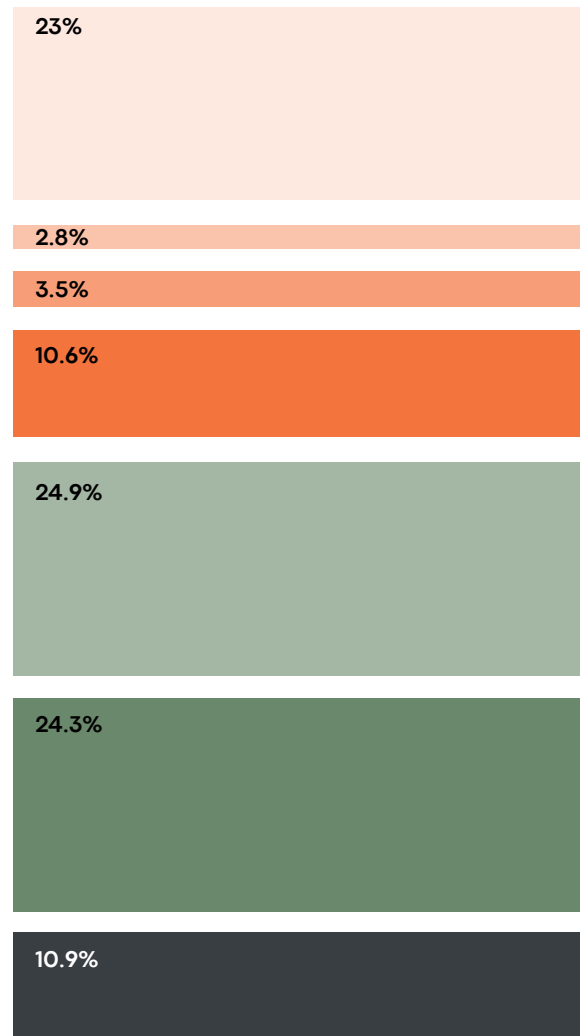
**victims of domestic violence** - a figure nearly eight times higher than those killed in criminal activities at 8.8%, the second most common context, excluding the 'other' category.

Men, in contrast, face significantly higher risks of being killed in other contexts, such as in public disputes (24.9%) and criminal context (24.3%). Still, a significant share of men killed with firearms was killed in domestic violence -10.2%.

**Figure 24**  
Firearm-related fatalities of women by type of incident in the WB, 2019-2023



**Figure 25**  
Firearm-related fatalities of men by type of incident in the WB, 2019-2023



Domestic violence
  Criminal context
  Public disputes
  Accident, hunting, celebratory shooting
  Mass shootings
  Dispute with police
  Other

Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Such a trend has been observed across the region and over time.

**Table 4**  
**Number of fatalities by type of incident in the WB,**  
**by sex and year**

|   | 2019      |           | 2020      |            | 2021      |            | 2022      |           | 2023      |            |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|------------|
|   | W         | M         | W         | M          | W         | M          | W         | M         | W         | M          |
| Domestic violence                       | 18        | 10        | 23        | 17         | 17        | 8          | 16        | 11        | 19        | 13         |
| Criminal context                        | 4         | 26        | 0         | 27         | 3         | 30         | 0         | 27        | 5         | 21         |
| Public disputes                         | 0         | 30        | 0         | 24         | 0         | 29         | 1         | 24        | 0         | 27         |
| Accidental/Celebratory shooting/Hunting | 1         | 7         | 2         | 15         | 1         | 19         | 3         | 7         | 0         | 9          |
| Mass shooting                           | 0         | 0         | 0         | 0          | 0         | 0          | 4         | 6         | 9         | 10         |
| Dispute with the police                 | 0         | 3         | 0         | 2          | 0         | 1          | 0         | 2         | 0         | 7          |
| Other                                   | 3         | 23        | 2         | 33         | 2         | 28         | 1         | 19        | 2         | 23         |
| <b>Total</b>                            | <b>26</b> | <b>99</b> | <b>27</b> | <b>118</b> | <b>23</b> | <b>115</b> | <b>25</b> | <b>96</b> | <b>35</b> | <b>110</b> |

Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

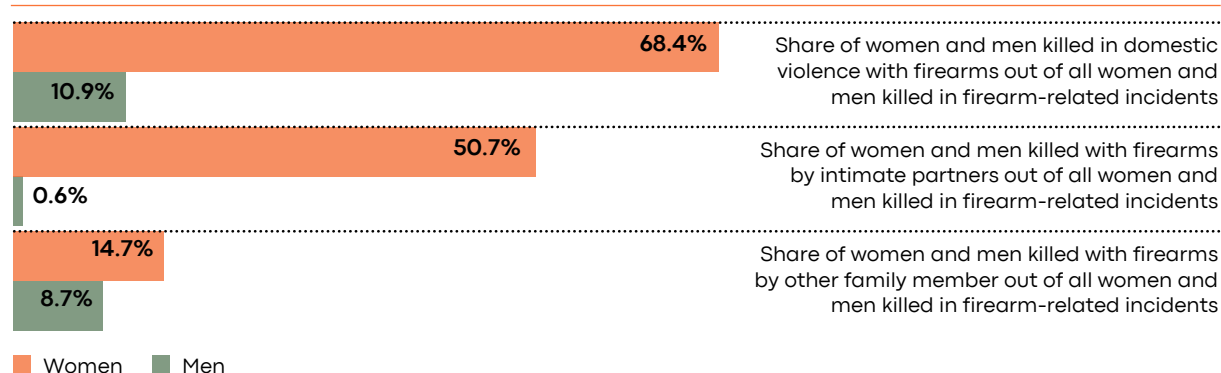
It is evident that patterns of victimisation in domestic violence display significant gender differences and disproportionately affect women. Nonetheless, in absolute terms, a substantial number of men are also victims of domestic violence-related fatalities.

Within the context of domestic violence, women were most at risk of firearm misuse by their current or former intimate partners. Slightly more than one in two women (69 out of 136) in the Western Balkans killed with firearms

was killed by their intimate partner. In the same period, three men were killed with firearms by their partners, accounting for 0.6% of all men killed with weapons. Firearms-related intimate partner violence also affects the safety of other people who might be present. In the reporting period, a total of 13 people, 4 women and 9 men, were also killed in this context.

In addition, 20 (14.7%) women and 47 (8.7%) men killed with firearms were killed by other family members, predominantly men.

**Figure 26**  
**Gender-differentiated impact of firearms misuse in the**  
**domestic violence context in the WB, 2019-2023**

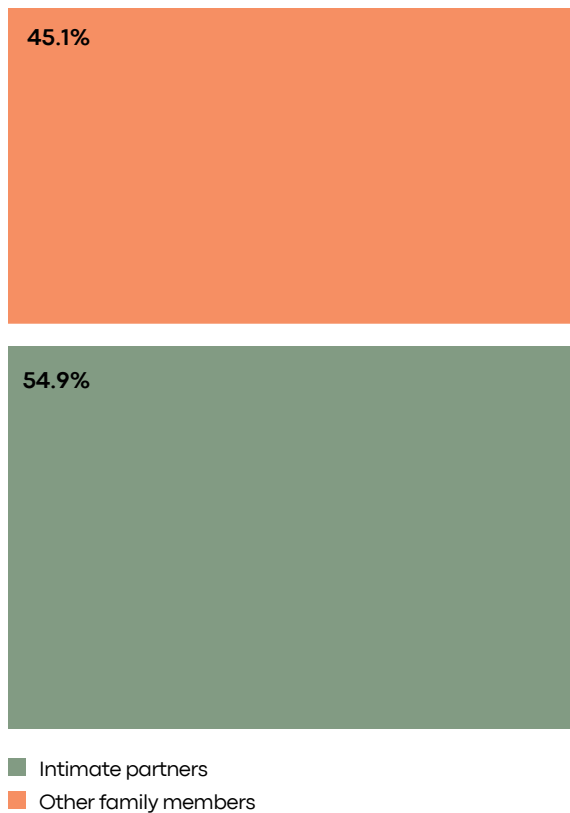


Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

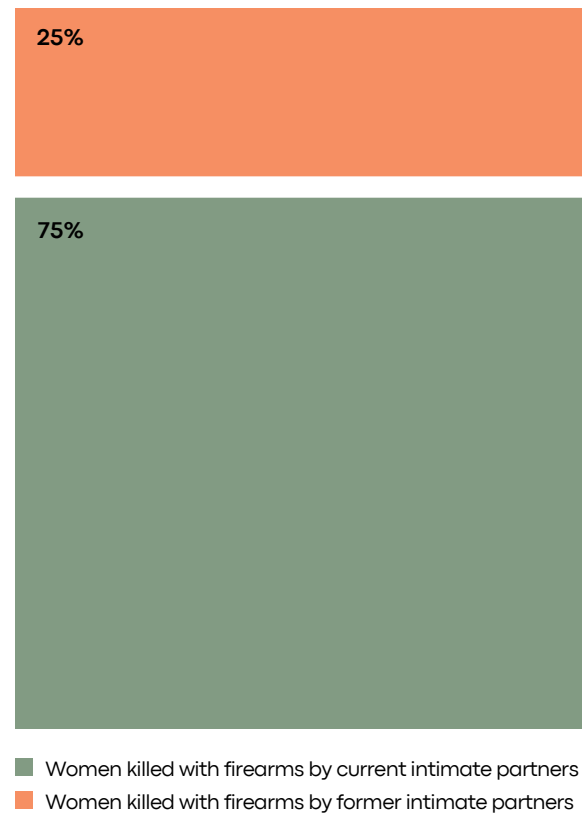
As evident, the majority of firearm-related fatalities in the context of domestic violence are linked to intimate partner violence, and this trend has remained consistent over time.

In the context of firearm-related intimate partner violence, women face a higher risk of being killed by their current intimate partners (75% of cases) compared to former partners (25% of cases). These data highlight that, while in some cases the risk may decrease after leaving the abuser, it can also escalate significantly during or after separation, and lead to a fatal outcome, which is particularly exacerbated by the presence of firearms. In addition, it shows how firearms are used by the abuser in an attempt to reassert control over the victim, which is further discussed in the Chapter 7. Research conducted in Serbia showed that the period between the moment of leaving the perpetrator and the respective femicide varied from only a few days to two years.<sup>45</sup>

**Figure 27**  
Firearm-related homicides in the context of domestic violence in the WB, by perpetrator, 2019-2023



**Figure 28**  
Share of women killed with firearms by current and former intimate partners in the WB, 2019-2023



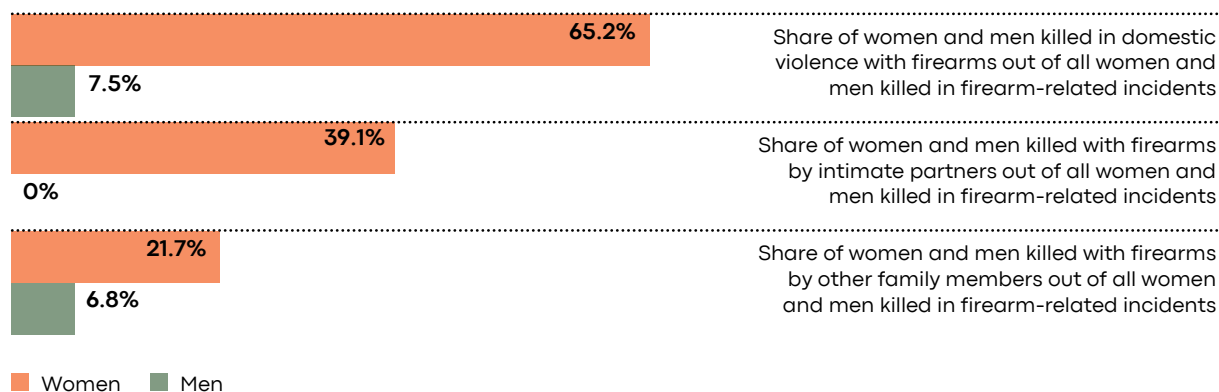
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

45

Lacmanović. Vedrana. 2021. *Analysis of cases of femicide committed with firearms (June 2017 - June 2020)*. Belgrade: UNDP.

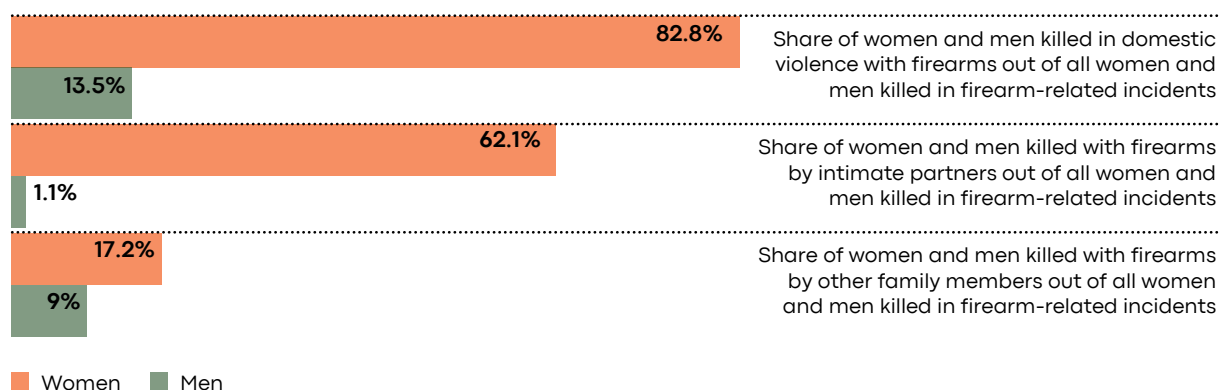
The disproportionate impact of firearms misuse on women is evident in all Western Balkans jurisdictions as shown below.

**Figure 29**  
**Albania, 2019–2023**



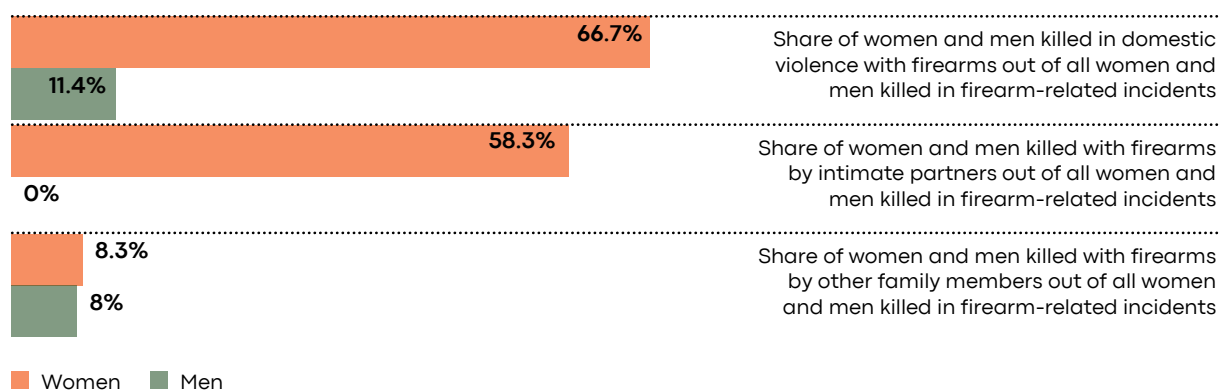
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

**Figure 30**  
**Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2019–2023**



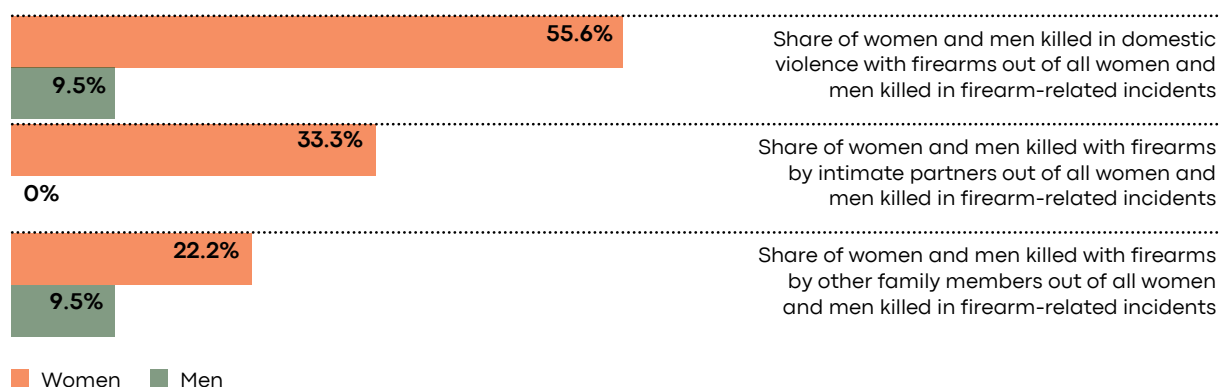
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

**Figure 31**  
**Kosovo, 2019–2023**



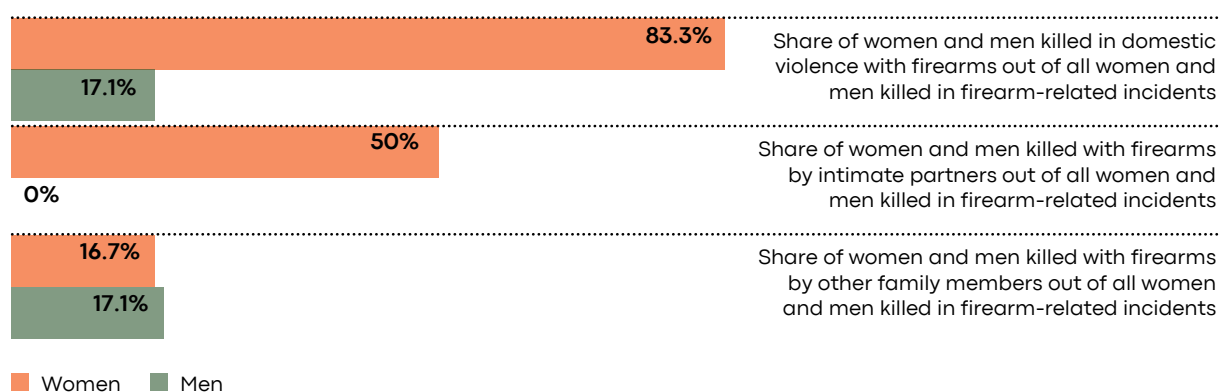
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

**Figure 32**  
**Montenegro, 2019–2023**



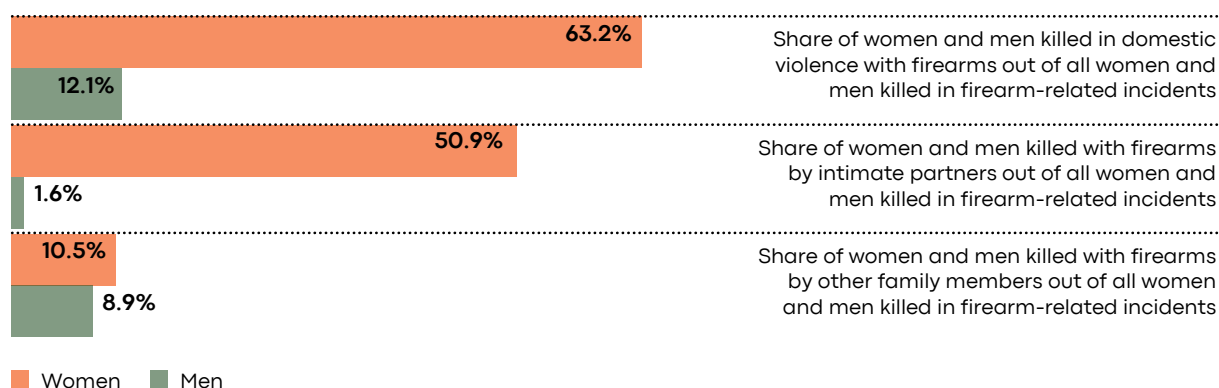
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

**Figure 33**  
**North Macedonia, 2019–2023**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

**Figure 34**  
**Serbia, 2019–2023**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

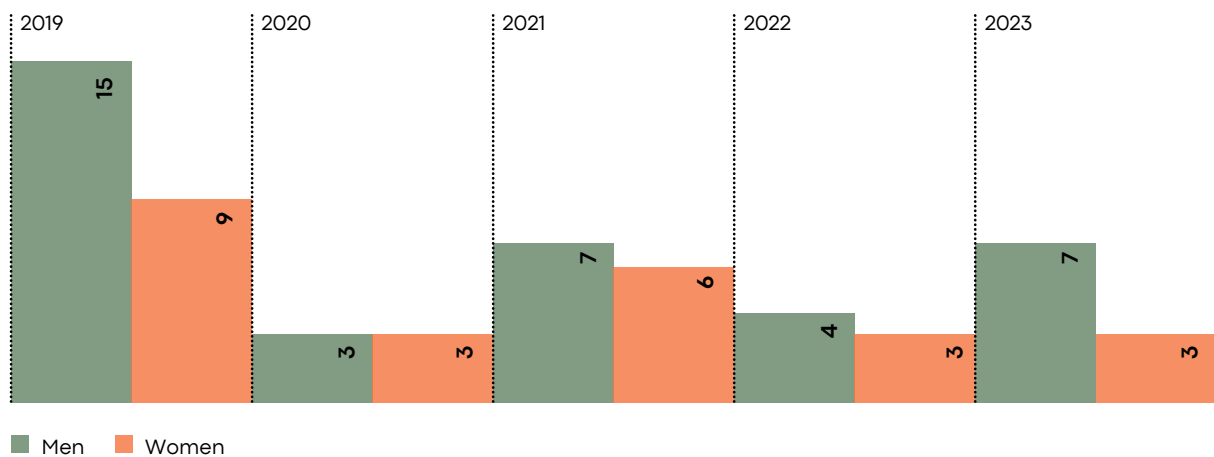
## 4.4 Injuries

The firearms misuse in the context of domestic violence adversely impacts the physical well-being of both women and men in the region, causing various forms of bodily injuries. During the five years under review, a total of 60 firearm-related injuries in the context of

domestic violence were recorded by the AVMP. The number of recorded injuries showed notable fluctuations, reaching a peak in 2019, decreasing significantly through 2020, 2021, and 2022, before rising again in 2023.

Figure 35

### Number of firearm-related injuries in the context of domestic violence in the WB, by year and victim's sex



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Overall, men were more likely than women to suffer firearm-related injuries, although there were significant variations over the five analysed years. Notably, in 2023, the number of firearm injuries among men and women was the same. Generally, the number of firearm-related injuries committed by other family members was higher than in intimate partner violence.

In terms of risks, the data reaffirmed already documented trends that women are

most at risk of firearm-inflicted injuries from their intimate partners, with 66.7% of injuries to women occurring in the context of intimate partner violence. In contrast, men face the opposite trend, being primarily at risk of firearm-related injuries inflicted by other male family members or as collateral victims in intimate partner violence (93% of the total number of injuries inflicted on men in the context of domestic violence).

## 4.5 Threats

While data related to the firearms misuse are mostly available for homicides/femicides, injuries, and assaults, firearms are also used as a tool to inflict other forms of gender-based violence, such as psychological, as well as sexual violence, including rape, emotional harm, coercion as well as economic violence. Although

these forms of violence usually precede fatal events, they are heavily underreported.

The limited data on recorded cases of firearms being used for threats offer only a partial understanding of this phenomenon. From 2019 to 2023, a total of 177 threats involving firearms in the domestic violence context were

recorded on the AVMP. Slightly over two-thirds of such incidents occurred in intimate partner violence (67.2%), affecting intimate partners (95 incidents) but also other people (24 incidents). In addition, 58 threats were committed by other family members.

Women account for the majority of victims at 69.5%, including all victims of intimate partner violence.

Although detailed information on incidents involving threats with firearms is often limited, available data indicate that such threats in the context of domestic violence or family disputes typically involve verbal or physical demonstrations of harm, intended to intimidate or coerce victims. The nature of these threats

varies but frequently includes explicit death threats or tactics designed to escalate fear, such as discharging firearms or displaying other dangerous weapons. While these threats are most often directed at intimate partners, they also extend to other family members, including children, parents, and siblings. In several cases, children were directly threatened or exposed to violence.

On several occasions, perpetrators had prior criminal records, histories of domestic violence, or restraining orders issued against them, reflecting ongoing patterns of abusive behaviour.

While many of these weapons were illegally possessed, some perpetrators used legally owned firearms to harm or threaten their victims.

## 4.6 Overview of administrative data

In **Albania**, between 2019 and 2021, a total of 60 individuals were recorded as victims of homicide linked to family relations. Of these, 20 cases involved intimate partners as perpetrators, while 40 involved other family members. Women account for the majority of victims of murder occurring in a domestic setting, at 78.3% (47 out of 60), compared to 21.7% of men (13 out of 60). Women account for the majority of victims of murders, both committed by intimate partners (95% of all victims) and other family members (70% of all victims), but as is evident, they are at particular risk of being murdered by a current or former partner. Within the family context, men are more at risk of being killed by other male family members (30% of victims) than their intimate partners (only one such case was registered in the three-year period in Albania). Out of all murders committed in domestic context, 38.3% (23 out of 60) were committed with firearms. Of the intimate partner homicides, 30% were committed with firearms, compared to 42.5% of murders perpetrated by other family members. Women account for the majority of victims killed with firearms in domestic violence at 69.6% (16 out of 23), compared to 30.4% men (7 out of 23). Proportionately, one in three women (34%, 16 out of 47) murdered in domestic violence was murdered with firearms, compared

to 53.8% of men (7 out of 13).

In the same period in **Kosovo**, 39 persons were killed in the domestic violence context, 9 by their intimate partners, and 30 by other family members. Women accounted for 43.6% of those murdered, compared to 56.4% of men. Women accounted for the majority of the victims of intimate partners (8 out of 9), while men were mostly at risk of being murdered by other family members where they account for 70% of the total number of victims. 11.8% of women and 27.3% of men killed within domestic violence context were killed with firearms.

In **Montenegro**, between 2019 and 2021, a total of 16 persons were killed in domestic violence context, including nine women (56.2%) and seven men (43.8%). Women account for the majority of those killed by intimate partners (3 compared to 2 men) and killed by other family members (6 compared to 5 men). **Data on the use of firearms in those murders were not available.**

In **North Macedonia**, 15 murders occurred in the context of domestic violence, involving seven women and eight men. During the reporting period, one of these murders was committed with a firearm.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, data were shared by Republika Srpska, Sarajevo Canton

and Zenica Dobož Canton. From 2019 to 2021, in Republika Srpska, a total of 19 people were killed in domestic violence context, 10 by their intimate partners, and 9 by other family members. Women account for all victims of intimate partner femicide (10 out of 10), and 7 were killed by their current partner, while three were murdered by previous partners. Men account for the majority of victims killed by other family members at 77.8% (7 out of 9), compared to 22.2% of women (2 out of 7). Six out of 10 intimate partner femicides (60%) were committed with firearms.

In the same period, in Sarajevo Canton, 10 people were killed in domestic violence context, four by their intimate partners and 6 by other family members. Women account for the

majority of victims (3 out of 4) killed by their intimate partners, compared to one man. As for murders committed by other family members, women also make up the majority (4 out of 6, compared to 2 out of 6 men). One woman was killed with firearms, while other victims were murdered with other means. Similarly, out of all victims of other family members, one victim, a man, was killed with firearms.

In Zenica-Dobož Canton, a total of six people were killed in domestic settings. The majority of victims – five women – were killed by their intimate partners, while one man was killed by another family member. Of these cases, four women were killed by their partners using a firearm, and the male victim was killed with a firearm by another family member.

## 4.7 Perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in domestic violence context

Armed violence in domestic settings is strongly gendered, with men consistently identified as the primary perpetrators in incidents involving firearms. Both data collected from the ministries of the interior in the region

and data extracted through the AVMP confirm the persistence of such trends.

Between 2019 and 2023, AVMP data show that men constituted 98.1% of perpetrators in such incidents, compared to just 1.9% for women.

Figure 36

### Perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in the domestic violence context in the WB, by sex, 2019-2023



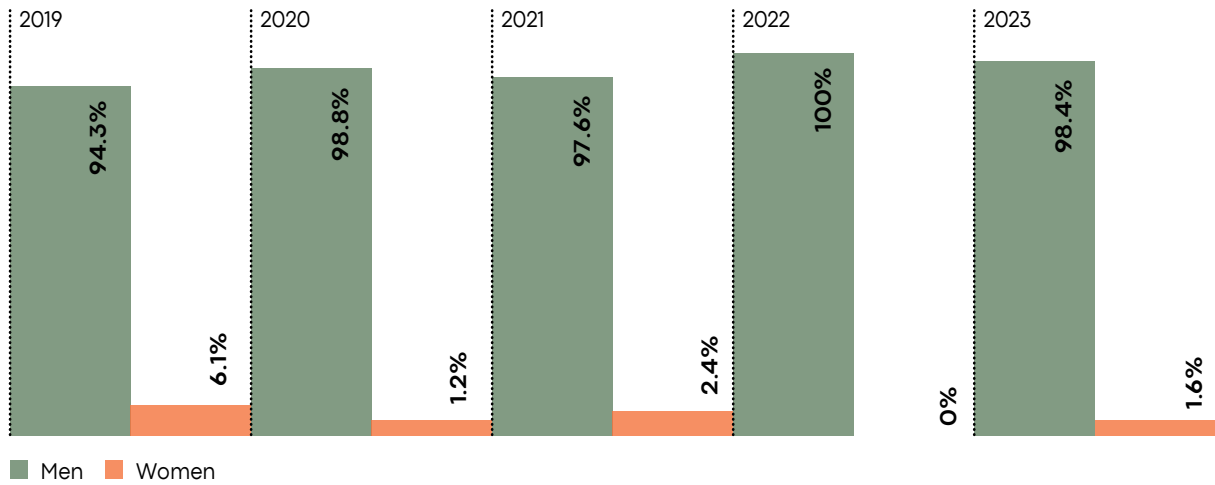
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

This pattern has been consistently documented across all Western Balkan

jurisdictions and, apart from minor fluctuations, has remained steady on an annual basis.

Figure 37

**Perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in the domestic violence context in the WB, by sex and year**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

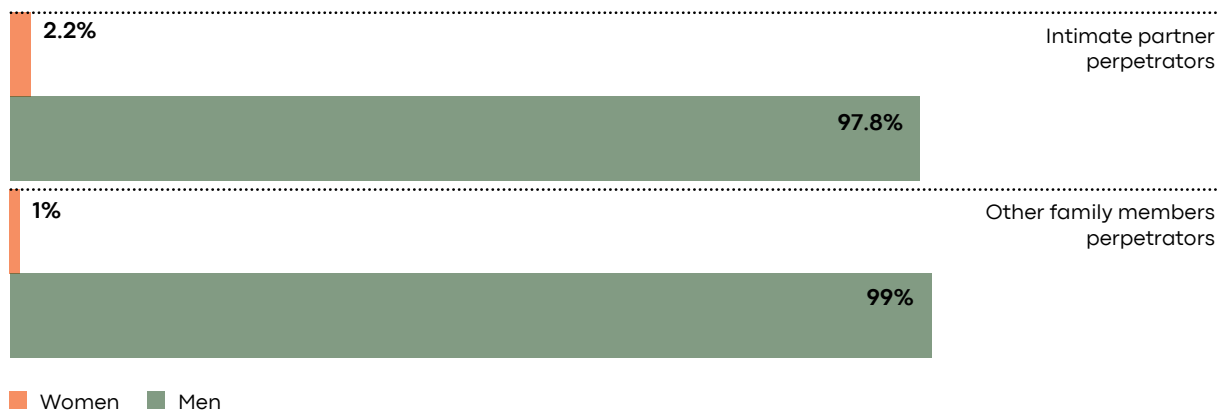
The MoI data from Albania, Montenegro and Kosovo confirmed such trends. For instance, in Albania, all perpetrators of reported domestic violence involving firearms were men (36 in 2019, 30 in 2020, 17 in 2021), the same as in Montenegro (2 in 2020 and 2 in 2021). In Kosovo, men also accounted for the majority (4 in 2019,

7 in 2020, and 4 in 2021, while the number of women was 1, 1 and zero, respectively).

Men overwhelmingly dominate as perpetrators in cases of violence with firearms, both in incidents involving intimate partners and those directed toward other family members.

Figure 38

**Perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in the domestic violence context in the WB, by sex, 2019-2023**



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

When age-related data were available, the majority of perpetrators were found to fall within the 36-60 age cohort, followed by those in the 19-35 group, and individuals aged 61 and over.

These trends have remained consistent across the region.

Figure 39

### Men perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in the domestic violence context in the WB, by age, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

## 4.8 Security sector personnel as perpetrators of firearm-related incidents in the domestic violence context

Between 2019 and 2023, 14 firearm-related incidents of domestic violence involving security sector personnel in the Western Balkans were recorded by the AVMP. The highest number of incidents, six, occurred in 2019. In 2020 and 2021, the number of such cases decreased to three each year, and in 2022 and 2023, only one incident per year was recorded. Across the region, Albania and Serbia each recorded four cases, followed by Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Montenegro with two cases each. No incidents were reported in North Macedonia during the same period.

Among the perpetrators, 11 were police officers, including two retired officers, while the remaining three cases involved military personnel. The majority of perpetrators – 12 out of 14 – were men, and two were women. In terms of age, nine perpetrators were between 36 and 60 years old, two were aged 19 to 35, and one was in the over 61 age group.

The 14 incidents involved 24 victims, with an equal number of men and women – 11 each. In two cases, the victims' sex was not specified. The majority of victims were aged 36-60, while others were in the 19-35 and 61-100 age groups.

12 people were killed in those incidents (7 women and 5 men), five were injured (4 men and 1 woman), and three were threatened (one woman and for two persons sex was not reported). Three of these incidents resulted in murder-suicides, committed by two male and one female member of the security sector.

Most incidents (78.6%) took place in urban areas and 21.4% in rural settings. When it came to the specific locations of these incidents, 57.1% unfolded in homes, apartments, or their surrounding yards, while a smaller number occurred in public spaces, such as streets and public buildings. In three cases, the exact location was not reported.

Seven cases involved legally owned weapons, while two used illegal firearms. In five cases, the type of possession was not reported. Notably, in three of the incidents, service weapons were used. Handguns were the most frequently reported type of weapon, used in eight cases, while an explosive device and a Kalashnikov rifle were used in one case each. In four incidents, the type of weapon was not specified.

Most incidents occurred in the context of intimate partner violence, with seven involving

current partners and one a former partner. The remaining six cases were directed at other family members within either the nuclear or extended family.

These cases highlight distinct challenges when security sector personnel are involved in domestic violence incidents. Their access to firearms, specialised training, and familiarity

with institutional procedures can intensify the risk of severe outcomes. The findings underscore the need for careful consideration of policies surrounding firearm control, training, and accountability mechanisms within the security sector, as well as preventive measures to reduce risks associated with domestic violence in this context.

## 4.9 Murder-suicide/femicide-suicide

Murder-suicide events are defined as incidents in which an individual commits one or more homicides subsequently taking their own life, typically within a 24-hour period. Femicide-suicide (or intimate partner femicide-suicide) is a subcategory of homicide-suicide in which a perpetrator commits suicide after killing a woman who is, or was, his intimate partner.

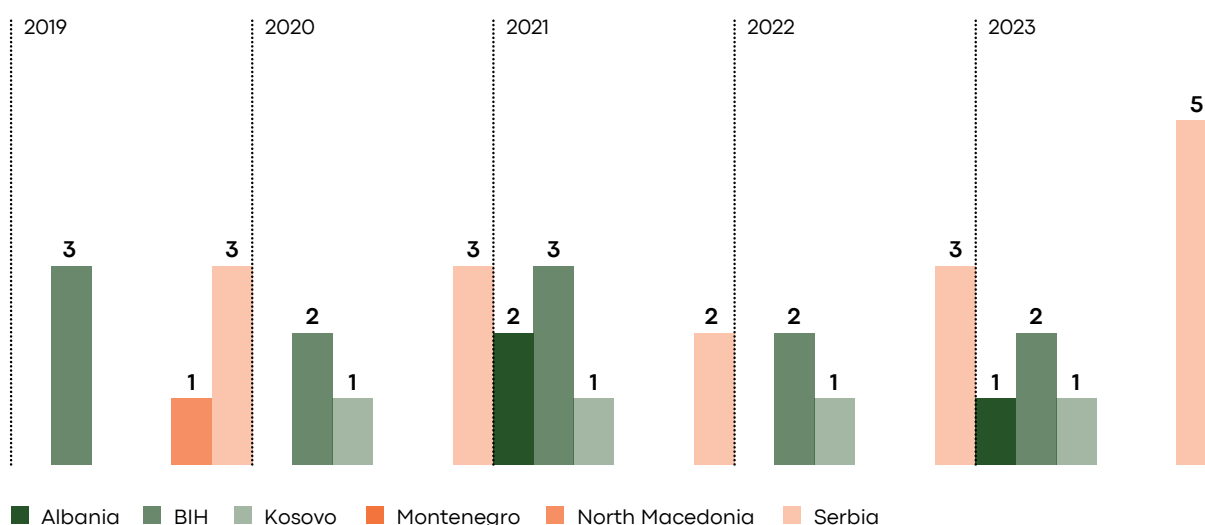
Within the context of firearms misuse in the domestic violence, femicide-suicides and murder-suicides are frequent phenomena. According to the AVMP, in from 2019 to 2023, a total of 51 such incidents were recorded.

Intimate partner homicides are often followed by the suicides of male perpetrators, with the number of such incidents reaching a total

of 36 over the five-year period, all committed by men. Given that 69 women were killed by their intimate partners during the same period, this implies that 52.2% of femicides in the context of intimate partner violence were followed by the perpetrator's suicide. In the five-year period, no cases were recorded of women committing intimate partner homicide followed by suicide.

The highest number of femicide-suicides was recorded in Serbia, followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Albania, and North Macedonia. In Montenegro, no femicide-suicides occurred during the period under review. In addition, five attempted femicide-suicides were recorded in this period.

**Figure 40**  
**Number of intimate partner femicide-suicides committed with firearms, 2019-2023**



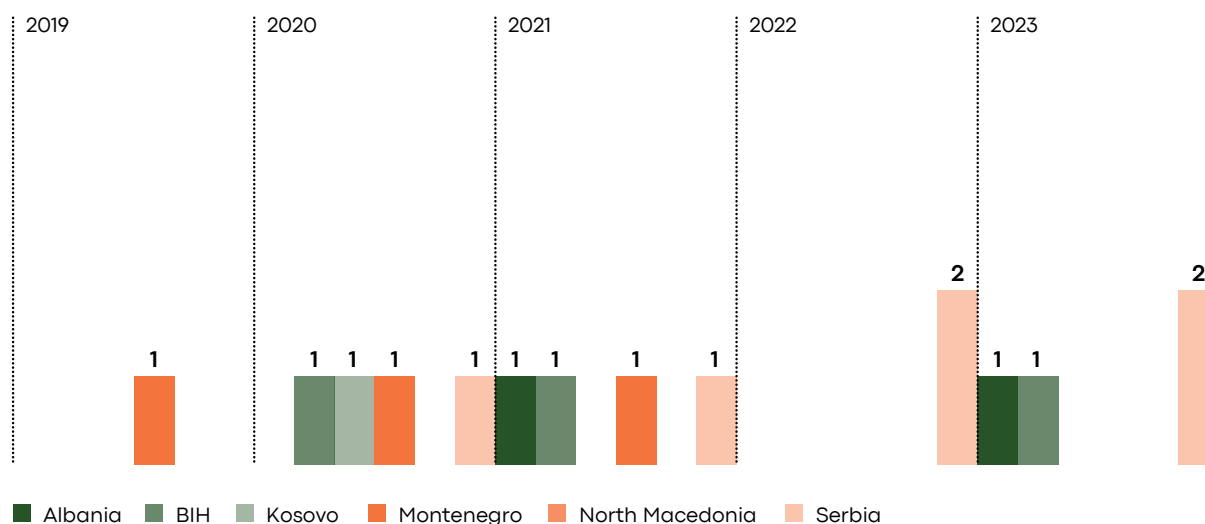
Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

In the same period, 15 murder-suicides were committed by people who had previously killed one or more family members. In 14 cases,

perpetrators were men, while in one case the perpetrator was a woman.

Figure 41

### Number of murder-suicides committed with firearms in the context of violence against other family members, 2019–2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

#### Box 2

### Understanding murder-suicides/femicide-suicides

Despite their severe impact, in-depth research on femicides followed by suicides in the Western Balkans remains scarce. To address this gap, UNDP Serbia conducted a study<sup>46</sup> examining the characteristics and prevention of intimate partner femicide-suicides committed with firearms. The research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue, shedding light on the circumstances preceding femicide-suicides, the key factors and characteristics of such acts, their consequences, and potential interventions by institutions and the community.

The research also aimed to identify specific risk factors of femicide-suicides. Access to firearms, whether legal or tied to careers or hobbies, emerges as the primary risk. Other risk factors identified in the media reporting on femicide-suicides included the history of domestic violence and perpetrators' coercive behaviour - particularly stalking, jealousy, and threats - usually occurring after separation from the victim. Professionals from public prosecutor's offices, police departments, centres for social work and shelters also underline firearm possession, mental health struggles like alcohol abuse, and psychological disorders as significant red flags.

In most femicide-suicide cases committed with firearms, the perpetrator was not previously reported to institutions. The study identified three distinct patterns in relation to the (non)reporting:

- 1) Under the radar” cases, with three subcategories:
  - a) Cases that went entirely unnoticed by anyone – perpetrators were not perceived as capable of committing a crime and thus remained invisible to institutions.
  - b) Cases in which family members and friends observed the perpetrator’s obsessive jealousy, violence, or alcoholism, and the partner left the perpetrator, yet the violence was never reported to the authorities.
  - c) Cases in which the broader community knew the perpetrators well – often aware of their stalking or pursuit of partners – and where centres for social work may have known a family member on other grounds, but violence within the relationship was still not reported.
- 2) “Red flag” cases, referring to violence in current or previous relationships marked by jealousy, obsessive stalking, or serious psychological problems. In these cases, the partners had left the perpetrators, and the violence had been repeatedly reported to institutions, which intervened. However, risk assessments were either absent or inconsistent, and no coordinated protection measures were implemented before the femicide–suicide occurred.
- 3) “Profession as a risk” cases, which may also fall under the previous two categories. These involve perpetrators whose professions entail access to firearms – such as police officers, gamekeepers, or hunters – where occupational access to weapons heightened the risk of lethal violence.

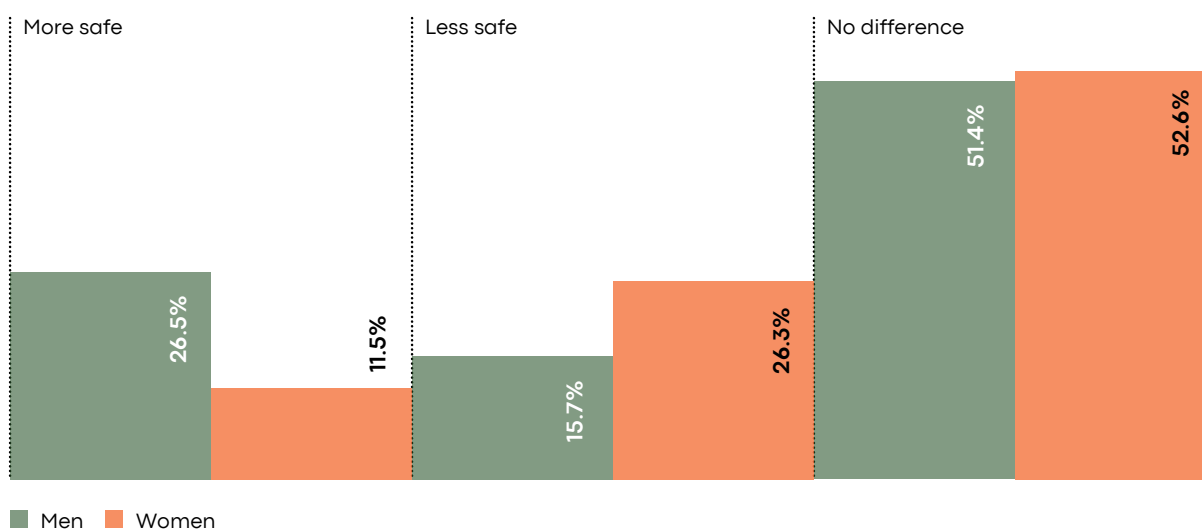
**Box 3**

**Perceptions of firearms at home**

Although half of the respondents in the Western Balkans, both women and men, across jurisdictions, believe that possessing firearms at home does not affect their sense of security, men and women express distinct differences in their perceptions of firearms’ impact on safety. While 26.5% of men feel safer with firearms at home, nearly the same percentage of women feel less safe - 26.3%.

**Figure 42**

**How would having firearms at home make you feel...?, by sex, 2024**



Source: SEESAC Research on Factors Fueling Demand and Misuse of Firearms in the Western Balkans, 2025

Significant variations across the region were documented, as evident in the table below.

**Table 5**  
**Perceptions of firearms at home in % by jurisdiction, 2025**

|                      | Jurisdictions |      |                        |      |        |      |            |      |                 |      |        |      |
|----------------------|---------------|------|------------------------|------|--------|------|------------|------|-----------------|------|--------|------|
|                      | Albania       |      | Bosnia and Herzegovina |      | Kosovo |      | Montenegro |      | North Macedonia |      | Serbia |      |
|                      | M             | W    | M                      | W    | M      | W    | M          | W    | M               | W    | M      | W    |
| <b>More safe</b>     | 26.1          | 10.4 | 29.7                   | 13.1 | 29.8   | 13.8 | 37.7       | 16.1 | 20.9            | 13   | 23.6   | 9    |
| <b>Less safe</b>     | 23.8          | 37.5 | 14.1                   | 29.6 | 12.6   | 21.3 | 12.8       | 17.1 | 25.4            | 36.6 | 11.3   | 18.9 |
| <b>No difference</b> | 46.8          | 49   | 50                     | 44.8 | 52.5   | 55.7 | 45.5       | 56.1 | 45.9            | 39.9 | 56.8   | 61.8 |

Source: SEESAC Research on Factors Fueling Demand and Misuse of Firearms in the Western Balkans, 2025

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## Chapter 5

# Characteristics of Firearms Used in Domestic Violence and Institutional Proceedings

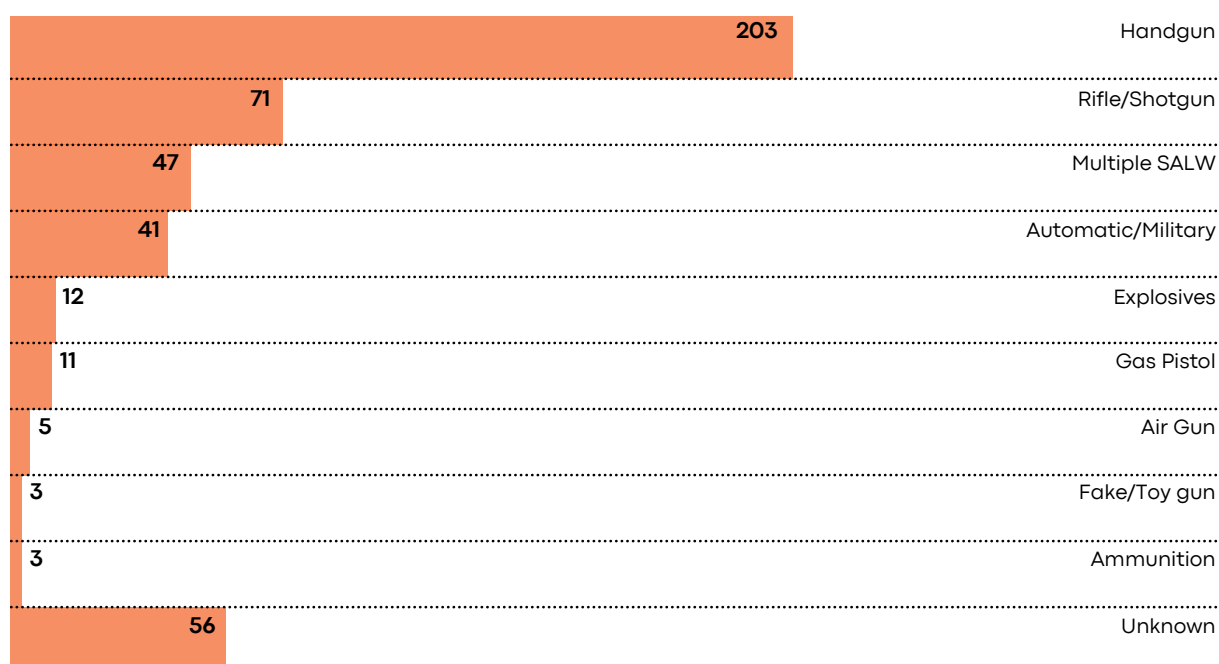
## 5.1 Type of weapons used in domestic violence

Handguns are the most frequently used type of firearms in domestic violence incidents. According to the AVMP 2019-2023 data, they were used in nearly half of all the recorded cases in the Western Balkans (203 or 44.9%). Rifles and shotguns ranked second, being used in 71 (15.7%) cases. Multiple SALW were

documented in 47 (10.4%) incidents in domestic settings, closely followed by automatic/military grade weapons with 41 (9.1%). Explosives were reported in 12 incidents (2.7%) while gas pistols were reported in 11 cases (2.1%). Air guns were used in 11 incidents.

Figure 43

### Type of firearms used in domestic violence incidents in the WB, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

The above regional trends remained consistent throughout the five-year period under analysis, with handguns persistently being the most frequently used weapons in domestic violence incidents, followed by rifles and shotguns. Until 2023, automatic and military-grade weapons represented the third most common weapon type; however, in 2023, they were surpassed by multiple SALW cases, which recorded a comparatively higher number of incidents.

Such trends were identified in all Western Balkans jurisdictions, except for Albania, where rifles/shotguns and automatic/military weapons

were the most frequently used (23 cases each), closely followed by handguns (22).

When data on firearm ownership status are available, they consistently show that illegally owned firearms are more frequently reported than legally owned ones. This trend has been documented across the region and throughout the entire period analysed, highlighting a persistent issue with the prevalence of illegal firearms. Still, given the challenges in reporting domestic violence and the specific outcome of domestic violence captured through the AVMP, the misuse of legally owned firearms should not be underestimated.

Figure 44

### Legal status of weapons used in domestic violence in the WB, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

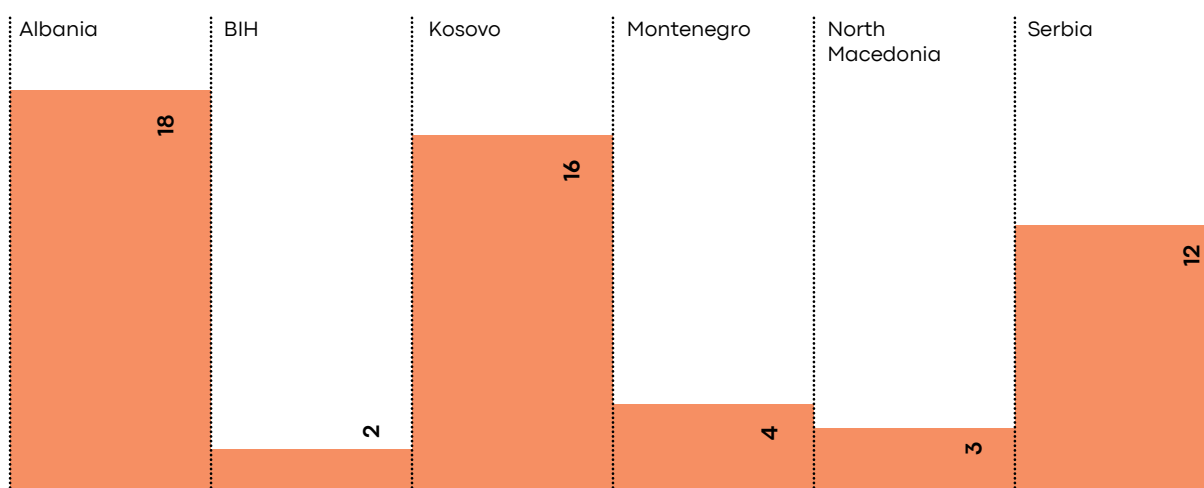
### The misuse of hunting weapons in the domestic violence context

From 2019 to 2023, the AVMP recorded a total of 55 incidents in which perpetrators, all men, used hunting weapons in the context of

domestic violence. Such incidents were most frequently recorded in Albania, Serbia, and Kosovo.

Figure 45

### Firearm incidents in which perpetrators used hunting weapons in the context of domestic violence in the WB, 2019-2023



Source: SEESAC Armed Violence Monitoring Platform

Hunting weapons were more frequently used in intimate partner violence than in incidents committed by other family members, with 33 and 21 cases reported, respectively. Of these, 13 incidents resulted in fatalities, with a total

of eight women and five men killed, while four incidents caused injuries. In 35 cases, firearms were used to threaten victims.

\*\*\*

Data shared by the Ministries of the Interior in Albania and Bosnia and Herzegovina – while no comparable data were available for other jurisdictions – provide additional insights into the types of weapons involved and the procedures followed in domestic violence cases.

From 2019 to 2021, in **Albania**, 31 pieces of legally owned firearms were temporarily seized in domestic violence incidents. Although total numbers remain small, an increase was documented in 2021 (20 seizures), compared to previous years (6 in 2019, 5 in 2020). In most cases (29 out of 31), such firearms were not misused during the reported incident. In the same period, a total of 1977 illegal firearms were confiscated, with a relatively small share of those

confiscated in domestic violence incidents at 3.4% (68 out of 1977). In 23 out of 68 domestic violence incidents in which illegal firearms were confiscated, the perpetrators misused firearms, while in 45 cases, they owned illegal firearms but did not use them during the reported incident.

Revolvers, self-loading pistols, rifles, carbines, and sub-machine guns were the most frequently seized and confiscated firearms, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all such weapons. These were followed by shotguns (including hunting weapons) at 18.6%, blank-firing weapons at 8.6%, and assault rifles, light machine guns, and explosives at 4.3%. In 2020, 14 moulds of tritol explosives were seized.

**Table 6**

### Type of firearms seized and confiscated in domestic violence cases in % and pieces in Albania, 2019-2021

|  |    |       |
|--|----|-------|
| Revolvers and self-loading pistols                         | 22 | 31.4% |
| Rifles, carbines, and shotguns (including hunting weapons) | 13 | 18.6% |
| Sub-machine guns   | 22 | 31.4% |
| Assault rifles and light machine guns                      | 4  | 5.7%  |
| Blank firing weapons                                       | 6  | 8.6%  |
| Explosive devices  | 3  | 4.3%  |

Source: Ministry of the interior of Albania

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina** in the same period, a total of 849 pieces of legally owned firearms were temporarily seized. Twenty-two pieces of legally owned firearms were temporarily seized in domestic violence incidents from 2019 to 2021. Thirty firearms were seized in cases of domestic violence in which a perpetrator of domestic violence owned a firearm but did not misuse it.

In the same period, a total of 362 pieces of illegally owned firearms were confiscated, 38.4% of which were confiscated in domestic violence incidents (139 out of 362). In 7 out of 139 domestic violence incidents in which illegal firearms were confiscated, the perpetrator misused firearms, while in 12 cases, the perpetrator owned illegal

firearms but did not use them during the reported incident.

In BiH, a total of 60 firearms were seized during the reporting period. Revolvers and self-loading pistols were the most frequently seized and confiscated types of firearms and accounted for 41.7%, while sub-machine guns and rifles, carbines, and shotguns (including hunting weapons) came in second, accounting for 23.3% each. Blank-firing weapons and explosive devices accounted for the smallest portion of the seized and confiscated firearms, accounting for 3.3% and 8.3%, respectively.

Table 7

**Type of firearms seized and confiscated in domestic violence cases in % and pieces in BiH, 2019–2021**

|  |    |        |
|--|----|--------|
| Revolvers and self-loading pistols                         | 25 | 41.7 % |
| Rifles, carbines, and shotguns (including hunting weapons) | 14 | 23.3 % |
| Sub-machine guns   | 14 | 23.3 % |
| Assault rifles and light machine guns                      | /  | /      |
| Blank firing weapons                                       | 2  | 3.3 %  |
| Explosive devices  | 5  | 8.3 %  |

Source: Ministries of the interior in Bosnia and Herzegovina

## 5.2 Licence approval, renewal and revocation taking into consideration domestic violence

In addition to data on seizures and confiscation of firearms, the analysis also aimed to provide insights into institutional proceedings related to firearms licence approval with respect to domestic violence. The brief overview of quantitative data in this paragraph is complemented with insights into the prevailing practices from professionals involved in firearms licensing processes.

In **Albania**, between 2019 and 2021, a total of 679 residents applied for a new firearms licence. Men accounted for 99.3% of applicants, compared to 0.7% for women. Almost one-third of applicants were rejected (216 out of 674), with men comprising 98.1% of those rejected. During the same period, six applicants (0.9% of all applicants) were rejected on the grounds of circumstances or security-related concerns, indicating potential misuse of firearms in domestic violence; all six were women. Additionally, 31 permits were revoked during this period on the grounds of domestic violence.

In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**,<sup>47</sup> during the reporting period (2019–2021), there were 24,072 new applications for firearm licences, with men accounting for 97.8% (23,544) and women for 2.2% (528). Data indicate that out of 24,072

applicants for new firearm licences recorded from 2019 to 2021, 671 applicants were rejected. Men accounted for 96% (645) of rejected applicants compared to 4% (26) of women. During the same period, 134 applicants (0.6% of all applicants) were rejected on the grounds of a prior criminal conviction for domestic violence or a misdemeanour with elements of domestic violence; all of these applicants were men. In addition, 107 applicants (0.4% of all applicants) - comprising 102 men and five women - were rejected due to circumstances or security-related concerns indicating a potential risk of firearms misuse in domestic violence.

During the reporting period, 2,416 pieces of legal firearms were temporarily seized - 998 in 2019, 783 in 2020 and 635 in 2021.

From 2019–2021, 2,659 licence revocation procedures were initiated. In 2019, 978 procedures, rising to 1,002 procedures in 2020 and decreasing to 679 procedures in 2021. Men accounted for the majority, with 97.2% of procedures initiated, compared to 2.8% of women.

3,169 firearm licences/permits were revoked during the reporting period. As per submitted data, domestic violence was only exceptionally

invoked as grounds for revocation (a total of 9 licences were revoked as a result of domestic violence). Such low figures might be related to record-keeping practices, as they do not necessarily provide information on the ground of licence revocation and call for further scrutiny.

In **North Macedonia**, from 2019 to 2021, a total of 18,883 residents applied for a new firearms licence permit. Men accounted for 99.3% (18,743) of applicants compared to 0.7% of women (140). Almost one-third of applicants were rejected (6,173 out of 18,883), and men accounted for 99.7% of rejected applicants compared to 0.3% of women.

Data on the grounds for rejection of firearm licence applications were unavailable, making it impossible to determine how often domestic violence was invoked as a reason for rejection.

In the reporting period, a total of 386 legal firearms were temporarily seized, 24 of which were temporarily seized on the grounds of domestic violence (out of the total number of firearms seized).

During the reviewed period, a total of 386 licence procedures for revocation were initiated. In the same period, 29 licences were revoked on the grounds of domestic violence, and men accounted for 100% of the revoked licences. Out of the total number (386) of licence revocation procedures initiated, 7.5% were revoked on the grounds of domestic violence. In 2019, there were 8 licences revoked, in 2020, the number increased to 11 and in 2021, there were 10 licences revoked on the grounds of domestic violence.

The total number of firearm licence renewal applicants from 2019 to 2021 was 6,064, 19 (0.31%) of whom were women and 6,045 (99.69%) men. Data on the number rejected applicants due to prior criminal conviction for domestic violence or a misdemeanour with elements of domestic violence were not available.

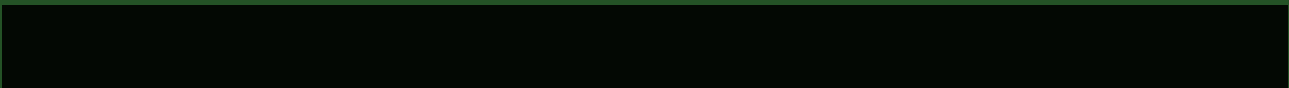
In **Montenegro**, from 2019 to 2021, a total of 5,368 residents applied for a new firearm licence. Men accounted for 97.2% of applicants compared to 2.8% of women. Only 0.9% applicants were rejected (51 out of 5,368), and men accounted for 92.2% of rejected applicants compared to 7.8% of women. The data on the grounds for rejection of applications were unavailable.

A total of 3,493 applicants applied for firearm licence renewal during the reporting period, 3,447 men and 46 women. Out of the total number of men who applied, 2.6% (89) were rejected. None of the women who applied were rejected. During the reviewed period, a total of 19 licence procedures for revocation were initiated. A total of 5 firearm licences were revoked during the reporting period, all of which belonged to men.

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Chapter 6

# Beyond Numbers: Qualitative Insights on Firearms and Domestic Violence



In 2023, SEESAC conducted 15 focus group discussions, gathering insights from 68 police officers, including those dealing with domestic violence and those in charge of firearms licence approval, and representatives of 17 women's organisations. The primary objective of gathering qualitative data was to provide a more nuanced understanding of how firearms impact victims of domestic violence, particularly focusing on aspects that quantitative data often fail to capture. Discussions extensively covered

the risks associated with firearms, institutional proceedings, and included practitioners' recommendations to enhance current practices.

The main findings of these focus group discussions are organised around three thematic issues:

1. The role of firearms in the context of domestic violence,
2. The institutional response to firearms misuse,
3. Firearms licence approval processes and domestic violence.

## 6.1 The role of firearms in domestic violence

Focus group participants underlined the profound and multifaceted impact of firearms on the safety and well-being of victims of domestic

violence, and the specific risks firearms pose in such a context.

### 6.1.1 Coercion, control, and barriers to reporting

Firearms function as tools of coercion and control within abusive relationships, reinforcing existing power imbalances and gender hierarchies. Representatives of women's organisations from the region emphasised that the mere presence of firearms is a powerful tool for perpetrators to exert control, arguing that firearms misuse should not be narrowly defined by explicit threats, injuries, assault, or femicide. Participants recounted numerous cases in which abusers used firearms to intimidate women, to threaten them directly or indirectly, indicating their capacity to inflict serious harm.

The presence of firearms further erodes the likelihood of victims reporting violence, contributing to the persistently low rates of reporting domestic violence. Women frequently refrain from reporting, especially when firearms are involved, due to fears of violence escalation and retaliation by their abuser. Often, the victims' primary goal is not to prosecute the abuser but to stop the violence. Many victims disclose the presence of firearms only after reaching a sense of safety, such as within shelters or during confidential conversations with women's organisations or law enforcement officers. There have been instances in which

women refrained from explicitly disclosing the presence of weapons - often illegally owned - but expressed fear that their partner intended to harm or kill them, highlighting the need for special consideration by police officers.

Due to the presence of firearms and fear of their misuse, violence is often not reported in the initial phase, which leads to even more serious consequences for the victims. As the focus group participants highlighted, women typically report violence only when they feel their own lives, or the lives of their children, are in imminent danger.

This extends to the non-reporting of illegal firearms, with victims withholding critical information out of fear. Victims are often driven by the need to end violence and are concerned about potential legal repercussions for the perpetrators, as well as the risk of reprisal. Some participants suggested that in such a context, women organisations could play a vital role by alleviating the burden on victims and notifying law enforcement officers about possible firearm presence. Representatives of women's organisations shared those women victims often mentioned the presence of firearms to them, but refused to do so when talking to the police.

In addition, they mentioned situations when women normalised the presence of firearms in their homes and did not perceive it as a danger. Cases were observed in which women initially withheld information about the presence of weapons when contacting the police, hoping the violence would cease, and only disclosed that the abuser was armed when the violence persisted. Additionally, some women were unaware of firearms in their homes, particularly when the weapons were illegally owned.

Participants from police and women's organisations agreed that neighbours and

community members were also hesitant to report violence and the presence of weapons due to concerns about their own safety and potential retaliation.

The lack of effective support from family, immediate surroundings, and institutions can lead to the isolation of victims. Victims can often feel unsupported by their families, law enforcement, and social services, resulting in distrust that discourages them from reporting domestic violence. Economic dependence also significantly contributes to the underreporting of domestic violence.

### 6.1.2 Cultural significance and the normalisation of firearms possession

The cultural significance attached to firearms as part of men's identity can further impede the reporting of domestic violence and firearms misuse. Participants, particularly those from Montenegro, emphasised that firearms were often viewed as integral to men's identity, a dominant understanding of masculinity, or an indispensable element of family tradition and heritage. For example, the belief that a household is incomplete without weapons can make reporting a firearm an "unforgivable" act for a woman. This normalisation of firearms

discourages reporting, as doing so is seen as a betrayal of familial values or traditions, making it increasingly challenging for women living in abusive relationships to report firearms misuse. This aligns with prior SEESAC research,<sup>48</sup> noting that the degree to which firearms shape gender constructs - particularly perceptions of manhood and masculinity - directly impacts the effectiveness of SALW control and the implementation of relevant normative frameworks.

### 6.1.3 Firearms as risk factors

The general availability of firearms poses significant risks in the context of domestic violence. Victims frequently report threats to kill, noting that many abusers could easily acquire a firearm, either through purchase or borrowing. Participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina highlighted that the large number of unsundered weapons remaining in civilian possession from past conflicts further increases accessibility. They also pointed to links between post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in men and the prevalence of domestic violence. Police officers emphasised the interplay between the pervasive patriarchal milieu and the widespread

availability of firearms as factors that exacerbate domestic violence. It was further noted that hunting weapons, which are widely prevalent, are often not perceived as dangerous, despite frequent accidents resulting from human error during hunting and alcohol consumption.

Firearms are a significant risk factor in escalating violence to fatal outcomes, particularly when women attempt to leave an abuser. Firearms and explosives are also used to reassert control over a victim when the abuser senses loss of power.

A case from Bosnia and Herzegovina described a woman who attempted to leave her abusive partner and went to her parents' home; the abuser threatened to detonate a bomb unless she returned, illustrating how firearms and explosives can be used to instil fear and exert control. A women's organisation in Montenegro documented a case in which a husband, during an argument, retrieved his firearm from a drawer and fatally shot his wife after she threatened to leave him. In North Macedonia, a perpetrator previously reported for verbally threatening his wife used his hunting rifle to kill her after she attempted to leave the marriage. Local police were aware of his firearm ownership but failed to confiscate the weapon during prior investigations. Other documented cases showed that legally owned firearms could also escalate violence that might otherwise have remained non-fatal, underscoring how the

lethality of firearms increases the likelihood of a fatal outcome. In addition to fatalities, women's organisations highlighted that the presence of firearms significantly heightens women's fear of rape and sexual violence.

Firearms also have major side effects on other family members and the community, including children, which are frequently overlooked. In one case, after a murder suicide in which the abusive husband killed his partner with a firearm and then committed suicide, their son died by suicide as well after suffering psychological consequences.

Firearms further diminish women's capacity to resist. One participant described an incident in which an abuser, while giving the victim a phone to call the police, placed a gun in front of her and threatened to kill her within seconds, making it clear that she would not be protected, while it would take the police five minutes to arrive.

#### 6.1.4 Specific challenges for vulnerable groups

Women from vulnerable groups – such as rural women, women with disabilities, or Romani women – face specific challenges in reporting violence, and information on their exposure to firearms misuse is scarce. In rural areas, due to both the symbolic and practical importance associated with firearms, as well as the persistent belief that domestic violence is a private matter, reporting a firearm's presence is often viewed as an unforgivable act. The situation is further compounded by the weak presence of police in rural areas.

Difficulties in reporting are especially pronounced for women with disabilities and Romani women, who experience multiple forms of discrimination, making escape from the cycle of violence nearly impossible. For women with

disabilities, their frequent dependence on abusers to meet their basic needs was highlighted. The general obstacle posed by economic dependence on the abuser was frequently mentioned in discussions. Cultural stigmatisation often prevents victims from vulnerable groups from disclosing firearm-related threats.

Participants highlighted cases of women and girls who are victims of violence and suffer from mental health challenges, noting that they often lack knowledge on where to refer them for further assistance. The absence of dedicated shelters offering specialised services for such individuals further complicates support efforts.

#### 6.1.5 Security personnel as perpetrators

During focus group discussions, both police officers and women's organisations highlighted the seriousness of incidents in which perpetrators of domestic violence are police officers or security officials. These cases are particularly challenging

for victims to report due to the perpetrators' professional status, institutional positions, and access to firearms. In some cases, these perpetrators also receive informal protection and avoid accountability. Specific incidents were

reported in which security officials used service-issued or personal firearms to threaten their partners or family members. The necessity of regular psychological evaluations and support

for police officers was discussed to prevent negative consequences.

## 6.2 Institutional response to firearms misuse in domestic violence

### 6.2.1 Police proceedings and risk assessment

There have been notable advancements in recent legislation and policies aimed at addressing domestic violence, particularly regarding the misuse of firearms. Law enforcement protocols adopted across the region, together with accompanying risk assessment tools, address firearms as a risk factor, although to varying degrees, and provide guidance on police procedures.

When responding to domestic violence, police officers routinely check weapon registries to determine if the reported individual possesses a legal firearm. The responding officer should also obtain information on whether weapons have been used, if there has been a threat with weapons, and the weapon's location at the moment of reporting. As part of standard procedures, the victim is questioned about the perpetrator's possession of a firearm, although this might not necessarily always be the case, and differences in proceedings in the region were documented. If a perpetrator is found to own legal firearm(s), they are seized upon arrival along with the firearms licence, often voluntarily handed over by the perpetrator. Following that, the regular administrative procedure is initiated as regulated by the laws on weapons.

If the police suspect the perpetrator possesses illegal weapons, based on information from the victim or other sources, a search is initiated to confiscate the weapon. Police officers reiterated that victims often do not report weapons due to fear of retaliation, or they may be unaware of illegal firearms. Police officers from North Macedonia shared examples from practice in which the victim was not aware that the perpetrator owned a firearm, but the abuser

threatened to use a weapon, causing fear in the victim.

The issue of individuals potentially possessing illegal firearms in addition to their legal permits was also brought up by participants from Kosovo. They raised concerns about the possibility of individuals having more firearms (illegally) than legally allowed. Accounts were shared of situations in the region in which only a single firearm was surrendered, while the rest of the weapons remained concealed. In one instance, the police visited a residence to confiscate an illegally possessed pistol but ended up uncovering and seizing multiple weapons.

There are indications that police officers also check whether other family members residing in the same household own firearms. However, these practices appear to vary significantly across the region, highlighting the need for further standardisation to effectively mitigate the risks of firearms misuse. Some police officers expressed dilemmas regarding the legal grounds for seizing weapons owned by other family members, even in situations in which the victim has reported the presence of firearms in the household. In contrast, others revealed that they consistently seized all firearms present in a household. Despite these variations in practice, focus group participants largely agreed on the importance of checking for the presence of firearms among other family members, particularly given the prevalence of large families or households with multiple families living together.

In some cases, participants suggested searching for each reported domestic violence case. Since this is not feasible in practice, some have recommended that it could at least be done in

cases involving re-offenders. Adequate timing for searches is crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of the police response and the protection of victims. It was also noted that delays in conducting house searches often allowed perpetrators to hide firearms, further undermining the effectiveness of protective measures. Delayed and inadequate action by police further undermines the victim's safety. Women's organisations shared examples of police-delayed seizure of firearms, allowing perpetrators to hide weapons even after reports of violence.

Although progress has been made, several challenges remain across the region. While risk assessment is mandatory, there are indications that it is not consistently conducted in every reported case of domestic violence or is inadequately implemented. Concerns were raised that the risk assessment form is often filled out based on personal judgment, potentially influenced by conventional thinking and a patriarchal mentality, acting as undermining factors in the proceedings of each institution involved in domestic violence cases. Proper risk assessment is essential for preventing adverse

outcomes and protecting survivors. Such a perspective was also shared by representatives of women's organisations who underlined that risk assessments, when conducted diligently, played a crucial role in protecting survivors. However, its success often depends on the individual commitment and understanding of the officers involved, underscoring the need for systemic standardisation and ongoing capacity building. The assessment is sometimes inadequately implemented using a "box-ticking" approach, without fully exploring the situation or asking critical follow-up questions. A lack of training on gender-sensitive, victim-centred approaches hinders implementation. Participants suggested providing proper training for officers, creating specialised units to handle domestic violence cases, and implementing protocols that prioritise victim safety and well-being.

In Montenegro, regular meetings of professionals working on domestic violence have resulted in more frequent seizures of weapons in domestic violence cases, ensuring that the weapons are not returned to the perpetrators.

## 6.2.2 Challenges in information management

Police officers frequently emphasised that, under the current procedure, they were not routinely informed whether a seized weapon is returned to the abuser or permanently confiscated. They stressed the importance of their colleagues in the administrative affairs department keeping them updated on such outcomes, so that the safety of survivors but also police officers and other service providers involved in a specific case, is not compromised.

A specific challenge for police officers is their access to weapon registries and the maintenance of up-to-date firearm ownership databases. In some instances, they raised concerns that databases might be outdated, inaccessible 24/7 to frontline police officers, or incomplete, particularly regarding older or unregistered weapons.

For instance, in Montenegro, an electronic database of legally owned weapons was introduced between 1993 and 1995. However,

a significant number of civilian-owned firearms were not included in these electronic records. Additionally, issues such as migration or the passing of weapon owners have led to firearms being left in households without proper documentation. For example, residents may possess weapons left by deceased family members or relatives who have moved to another country or city. While manual records kept by the Ministry of the Interior at the time may exist, police officers addressing domestic violence cases do not have access to these records. In Kosovo, each region has its own firearms licence office, which cooperates well with law enforcement. However, the lack of a unified information system for licenced weapons complicates tracking and monitoring legally owned firearms. In North Macedonia, efforts to temporarily seize legal firearms are hindered by an electronic system for firearm registration that is often outdated or inaccessible to police officers.

A notable concern raised by some police officers is also related to the capacity of safe

storage of seized or confiscated weapons, as not all police stations have adequate storage rooms.

### 6.2.3 Capacity and cross-sectoral cooperation

A common challenge is the shortage of police personnel specifically trained to handle domestic violence cases, compounded by high employee turnover, as new officers require training, disrupting progress in police procedures. To address this, participants highlighted the need for enhanced officer training, the establishment of specialised units when they are not in place, and protocols that prioritise victim safety and well-being. They underlined the importance of law enforcement officials recognising the gravity of domestic violence and implementing measures to protect and support victims effectively.

There are also challenges in cross-sectoral cooperation, particularly with healthcare institutions, social welfare centres (SWCs), and the prosecutor's office. Timely collaboration with the prosecutor's office is crucial for effective searches. Healthcare professionals are often reluctant to report injuries linked to domestic violence, citing patient confidentiality or fear of complicating family situations, which obstructs early detection and timely intervention, especially in cases involving firearms. Frontline healthcare professionals are also often unaware of the risks posed by firearm possession in violent households.

The challenges of coordination between police, social welfare centres, prosecutors, and healthcare institutions, and the absence of a unified database to track domestic violence

cases and firearm ownership across institutions, remain persistent issues in all jurisdictions, undermining efforts to holistically assess risks and monitor interventions.

In Albania, Local Coordinators against Domestic Violence, part of the Coordinated Referral Mechanism for Cases of Domestic Violence have an online database called REVALB, which is a domestic online tracking system for domestic violence cases used at the local level and at the central level by the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs. It includes an option to indicate whether the perpetrator owns firearms or not. REVALB facilitates risk assessments and enables better inter-agency communication and coordination to monitor cases more effectively.

Examples of mutually beneficial cooperation between institutions and civil society organisations (CSOs) were highlighted. Women's organisations have cooperated with the police in identifying risks, supported implementation of protective orders, and assisting victims.

The strain of complex domestic violence cases also takes a toll on officers. The participants reached a consensus on the challenging and stressful nature of their work, both mentally and physically. Furthermore, they agreed that police officers should undergo periodic psychological evaluations, and some may not be suitable for carrying service weapons.

### 6.2.4 The judicial system response

The excessive duration of procedures for crimes committed as a result of domestic violence was highlighted, posing a risk that the victim will be attacked again, as weapon confiscation is not a guarantee that the perpetrator will not acquire a new one.

The possibility of returning temporarily seized firearms to perpetrators who were not legally convicted is worrying. While some

participants suggested that it is difficult in practice to restore confiscated firearms even after dismissal of criminal charges (due to reasons like victim pressure or reconciliation), examples of opposite practices were also shared.

Participants underlined the need for further scrutiny of the judicial system's response. Women's organisations raised the issue of the courts' leniency and inefficiency in addressing

crimes involving firearms and domestic violence. High rates of suspended sentences or probation, such as 65% in domestic violence cases in Bosnia and Herzegovina, send a discouraging message to victims, embolden perpetrators, and reflect poor enforcement of the legal framework.

Courts often rely on mitigating circumstances, even when firearms are explicitly linked to the violence. Courts also frequently fail to order the immediate seizure of firearms as part of protective orders, limiting the impact of legal interventions.

## 6.3 Regulation of Legal Civilian Possession of Firearms: Licence Approval and Revocation

### 6.3.1 Legal framework and background checks

Robust legal provisions exist in laws on weapons and laws on protection from domestic violence, aiming to prevent the firearms misuse. Prevention is primarily achieved by **restricting access** for applicants who have committed or are at risk of committing domestic violence, and by **removing firearms and revoking licences** when domestic violence occurs.

Firearms legislation establishes comprehensive eligibility criteria, requiring that applicants for firearms approval have no prior criminal convictions – including for domestic violence – or misdemeanours involving elements of violence, and that no such proceedings are pending. An application will be rejected if there are circumstances indicating that firearms could be misused, including in the domestic violence context. If a civilian already possesses a weapon, the emergence of any of these circumstances leads to the seizure of firearms and the initiation of licence revocation.

The standard procedures for reviewing applications are extensively regulated. Upon application, a systematic and comprehensive background check is initiated, relying on several sources of information, including criminal and misdemeanour records, police logs, and other official databases. Protection measures imposed according to the laws on protection from domestic violence are generally taken into consideration during background checks in the region, but officers from North Macedonia shared that complaints registered with the police or temporary protection measures imposed by a civil court in cases of domestic violence are not

taken into account.

The general impression of focus group participants is that the existing legal framework provides sufficient grounds to effectively prevent misuse. For example, in Albania, the implementation is particularly stringent, with rejections based on any indication or record of domestic violence, even without a final judgment. Participants in this jurisdiction noted cases of firearm licences being rejected based on “troubling family relations” or even incomplete documentation.

Practices regarding the expungement of criminal convictions and their impact on firearms licence applications vary across the Western Balkans. In Albania, prior convictions categorically disqualify applicants, even if they have been rehabilitated. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, expunged convictions may be noted during background checks but cannot independently serve as grounds for rejection, although officers may consider tendencies toward violence as a risk factor. In Montenegro, concerns have been raised that a man convicted of domestic violence might regain access to firearms if the conviction is removed from his criminal record. In Kosovo, applicants become eligible for permits after completing their sentences, unless the offense has been officially expunged.

In administrative appeals, the decision reached at the first instance is typically overturned because operational records and background checks do not have the same weight as convictions, and there is often no concrete

evidence that the firearm will be misused. It was proposed that, in cases of a legally convicted person, certain criminal convictions, such as violent and sexual crimes, are never deleted from the records.

The importance of a thorough background check, extending beyond checking administrative databases to include field visits and interviews, has been underlined across the region. During a background check, police officers need to verify that there are no other circumstances indicating that the firearm can be misused, such as abuse of drugs and alcohol, troubled relations with family and neighbours, violent and aggressive behaviour and a behavioural disorder. Apart from Kosovo, where background checks include only checking of administrative databases; in other jurisdictions, they entail field visits and interviews, although significant variations were documented across the region.

The importance of conducting field visits and interviewing family members was particularly highlighted, given that the majority of domestic violence cases go unreported and cannot be effectively verified through criminal or misdemeanour records alone. A credible assessment requires that background checks consider these specificities and are not limited solely to database information.

The background check is conducted by the police unit in the applicant's place of residence. In situations in which an applicant is indicated to be abusive, but the violence was never reported, the police officer conducting the background check plays a key role by indicating in the report that the applicant has a history of violent and aggressive behaviour. However, participants warned that checks were often not carried out thoroughly, with the focus placed on relations with neighbours rather than family members.

Participants raised the importance of an adequate definition of key terms, particularly "troubled family relations," to ensure proper assessment and reduce subjectivity and biases. They agreed that the police officer must be sensitised about domestic violence to conduct checks properly. In some jurisdictions, checks involve interviews with municipal leadership, nuclear family members, neighbours, associates, and co-workers to minimise the subjectivity of

a single police officer. It was agreed that great responsibility is placed on the officer conducting the check, given that the final decision is often based on their opinion. These checks require specific skills and capacities and should be conducted as an ongoing process rather than completed in a single day. Despite the importance of field visits for a proper and comprehensive assessment, in many instances guidance for conducting such visits and interviews is missing, leaving space for subjectivity and omissions.

Close collaboration between officers reviewing licensing applications and those conducting background checks is essential for credible decision-making, though it is often absent. Reaching out to SWCs or women's organisations may occur, but it remains at the discretion of the officer and is not legally mandated. Examples of proactive approaches were highlighted, such as compiling a list of domestic violence re-offenders and submitting it to the Administrative Affairs Department to trigger confiscation procedures or serve as a precautionary measure for future licence applications.

Officers dealing with licence approval underline that caution should be exercised with applicants who present a nominal reason as a justification for getting a firearm, but may have ulterior motives, requiring reasonable inquiries to verify the justification for possession.

The process of renewing a firearm licence requires careful attention to ensure that the individual remains fit to possess a firearm. Simplified renewal procedures may fail to detect changes in the licence holder's circumstances. Therefore, the renewal process should be comprehensive, incorporating interviews and reassessments similar to those conducted during the initial licensing.

In some jurisdictions, an increase in women applying for firearm licences was observed, sometimes to inherit their father's firearms or because their partners did not meet the legal requirements, potentially indicating a trend of straw purchasing.

### 6.3.2 Medical fitness evaluation

The process of issuing medical certificates for firearms licence approval involves numerous challenges. A recurring problem is the lack of standardised and rigorous medical evaluations. In some jurisdictions, applicants can bypass thorough medical checks by paying fees to private healthcare institutions, often receiving certificates quickly and without a proper medical exam. Participants commonly emphasised the need for specialised institutions and stricter accountability for healthcare professionals to ensure that medical fitness evaluations are both thorough and reliable.

Cooperation between the police and healthcare systems in addressing changes in the mental health of firearms licence holders varies and is often inadequate. In some jurisdictions, although the law mandates doctors to notify the police if a licence holder experiences significant health changes, this rarely happens in practice. This lack of communication stems from systemic weaknesses, such as the absence of integrated databases, highlighting the need for a systematic approach according to which doctors report any changes in health condition which may affect fitness to hold a firearm.

### 6.3.3 Monitoring storage, renewal, and justifiability

The practices related to monitoring safe storage conditions vary significantly and are often reliant on reactive rather than proactive measures. While the law mandates secure storage, checks are typically conducted only in response to reports of violence or violations. Cases of improper storage were noted, yet enforcement is sporadic. Inspections are rare

due to resource constraints or largely depend on complaints rather than routine checks. Albania provides a good practice example, as an annual plan of inspections, performed by specialists, proactively verifies secure storage and matching serial numbers, although challenges persist due to limited personnel.

### 6.3.4 Licensing personnel safety

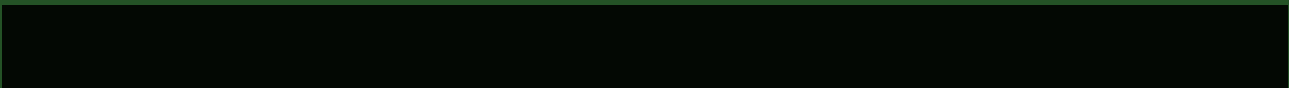
Officers responsible for approving firearms licences emphasised the stressful nature of their work, noting cases in which applicants whose requests were rejected exerted pressure or issued threats against them. This concern is particularly

pronounced in jurisdictions in which women make up the majority of professionals handling firearms licensing, and in which the final decision rests solely with these officers rather than designated commissions or senior officials.

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## Chapter 7

# Conclusions and Recommendations



## 7.1 Conclusions

The findings established that the firearms misuse in domestic violence poses a distinct, highly gendered, and highly lethal risk, significantly affecting the safety and well-being of both women and men in the region, while also posing a major challenge to SALW control

efforts. The consequences are severe, ranging from fatal and non-fatal physical injuries to profound psychological trauma.

For easier reference, the conclusions are grouped into several main clusters:

### I. The gender-based nature and severity of firearms misuse in domestic violence

- Within the context of firearms criminality, women and men experience distinct patterns of victimisation, and the extent and context of their exposure to armed violence are highly gender specific. A comparison of contexts reveals that women are nearly five times more likely than men to encounter firearms misuse in domestic violence, with rates of 29.8% and 6.2%, respectively. In absolute figures, women constituted the majority, 62.8% of victims in recorded firearms incidents in domestic settings from 2019 to 2023, compared to 37.2% for men.
- In the context of domestic violence, women and men experience significantly different risks. Data have documented a persistent trend of women being disproportionately affected by firearms misuse from their intimate partners, accounting for 97.7% of victims of firearm-related intimate partner violence from 2019 to 2023, thus highlighting its gender-based nature.
- Men, on the other hand, are significantly more likely to fall victim to firearms misuse by other male family members. When the sex of such victims was recorded, men accounted for 72.3% of victims, compared to 27.7% of women. Available data indicate that those incidents occur between immediate male family members, particularly fathers and sons, both as victims and as perpetrators.
- The severity of firearms misuse in domestic violence is particularly evident in the high number of fatalities recorded in this context. From 2019 to 2023, more people were killed in firearm incidents related to domestic violence (152 - 93 women and 59 men) than in any other category of incidents covered by the Armed Violence Monitoring Platform (AVMP), exceeding fatalities in criminal contexts (144) and public disputes (135).
- While a significant number of both women and men were killed in domestic context, the disproportionate impact of firearms misuse in domestic violence on women is particularly evident in the breakdown of firearm fatalities by incident type. 68.4% of women killed with firearms in the region were killed in a domestic violence context—a figure nearly eight times higher than those killed in criminal activities. In the same period, 10.9% of men killed with firearms in the region were killed by their family members.
- Within the context of domestic violence, women were most at risk of firearm misuse by their current or former intimate partners. In the Western Balkans, 50.7% of women killed with firearms were killed by an intimate partner, compared to only 0.6% of all men killed with firearms during the same period. Women are three times more likely to be killed by their current or recent intimate partners than by their former partners.
- At the jurisdictional level, in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and North Macedonia, the number of firearm-related fatalities occurring in the context of domestic violence exceeded those recorded in other types of incidents. In Albania, domestic violence ranked third as a context of firearm-related fatalities (after criminal contexts and public disputes), as was also the case in Montenegro (following incidents categorised as “other” and criminal contexts) and in Kosovo (following incidents categorised as “other” and public disputes).

- Notably, 2020 saw the highest number of deaths among both women and men, coinciding with the first year of the pandemic—a period marked by strict lockdown measures across the region. This underscores the need for further research into how specific conditions during COVID-19 contributed to these outcomes.
- Men were more likely than women to suffer firearm-related injuries, although there were significant variations over the five years. Women are most at risk of firearm-inflicted injuries from their intimate partners, while men are primarily at risk of firearm-related injuries inflicted by other male family members.
- Armed violence in domestic settings is strongly gendered, with men accounting for an overwhelming majority of perpetrators in incidents involving firearms. Between 2019 and 2023, AVMP data show that men constituted 98.1% of perpetrators in such incidents, compared to just 1.9% for women. This pattern has been consistently documented across all Western Balkan jurisdictions.
- When age-related data were available, the majority of perpetrators were found to fall within the 36–60 age cohort, followed by those in the 19–35 group, and individuals aged 61 and over.
- According to the AVMP, from 2019 to 2023, a total of 51 murder-suicides were recorded, predominantly in the context of intimate partner femicides. 52.2% of femicides committed in intimate partner violence with firearms were followed by the suicide of the perpetrator.
- Between 2019 and 2023, 14 firearm-related incidents of domestic violence involving security sector personnel in the Western Balkans were recorded by the AVMP. Seven women and five men were killed in those incidents, five victims were injured, and three people were threatened.

## II. Data gaps and underreporting of domestic violence

A comprehensive understanding of the problem's scope and characteristics is still hindered by limitations in record-keeping and underreporting of domestic violence.

- The high number of lethal outcomes in domestic violence cases contrasts with the relatively low number of reported incidents, highlighting the specific risks associated with firearms, which increase the likelihood of fatal outcomes.
- The firearms misuse in the context of domestic violence is significantly less reported compared to the other types of firearm-related incidents, including incidents occurring in the criminal context, public disputes, or undetermined shootings. From 2019 to 2023, firearm-related incidents in domestic violence contexts accounted for only 3.1% of all reported firearm incidents, with this trend persisting throughout the analysed period.
- Available official data confirm this trend. However, the low number of reported incidents may also stem from record-keeping practices, suggesting that further analysis is needed to determine the reasons for underreporting.
- While data related to the firearms misuse are mostly available for homicides/femicides, injuries, and assaults, firearms are also used as a tool to threaten and inflict other forms of gender-based violence, such as psychological, as well as sexual violence, including rape, emotional harm, and coercion, as well as economic violence. Although these forms of violence often precede fatal events, they are heavily underreported.
- The limited data on recorded cases of firearms being used for threats offer only a partial understanding of this phenomenon. From 2019 to 2023, a total of 177 threats involving firearms in the domestic violence context were recorded on the AVMP. Slightly above two-thirds of such incidents occurred in intimate partner violence (67.2%), affecting intimate partners (95 incidents) but also other people (24 incidents). In addition, 58 threats were committed by other family members.

### III. Weapons used in domestic violence

- Handguns are the most frequently used type of firearms in domestic violence, followed by rifles and shotguns, multiple SALW, automatic/military grade weapons, explosives, and air guns.
- When data on firearm ownership types were available, they consistently showed that illegally

owned firearms were more frequently reported than legally owned ones.

- From 2019 to 2023, the AVMP recorded a total of 55 incidents in which perpetrators, all men, used hunting weapons in the context of domestic violence.

### IV. Qualitative findings on challenges and institutional response

Qualitative insights from focus group discussions (FGDs) corroborated the impact of firearms, revealed key barriers to reporting, and

identified specific challenges in the institutional response and licensing process.

#### Coercion, control and barriers to reporting

- Firearms serve as coercion and control tools within abusive relationships, reinforcing power imbalances and gender hierarchies.
- The presence of firearms further erodes the already limited likelihood of victims reporting violence. Women frequently refrain from reporting domestic violence, especially when firearms are involved, due to fears of escalation of violence and retaliation from their abuser. Violence is often not reported in the initial phase, which leads to even more serious consequences for the victims.
- Focus group participants highlighted that women typically report violence only when they feel their lives or the lives of their children are in imminent danger.
- This extends to the non-reporting of illegal firearms, where victims may withhold critical information out of fear and potential legal repercussions for the perpetrators, as well as the fear of retaliation.
- Neighbours and other community members are also hesitant to report violence and the presence or use of weapons, due to concerns about safety and retaliation.
- Firearms reduce the victims' capacity for resistance to violent behaviours.

- The cultural significance attached to firearms as part of men's identity can further impede reporting domestic violence and firearms misuse.
- The availability of firearms remains – weapons remaining from past conflicts which have not been surrendered and remain in the possession of civilians increase the accessibility of firearms.
- Firearms, as well as explosives, are used to reassert control over a victim when the abuser feels they are failing to maintain their power. In addition to the possibility of a fatal outcome, women's organisations underlined that the presence of firearms increases women's fear of rape and sexual violence.
- In addition to having serious consequences on the immediate victims, firearms also have major side effects on other family members and the community, including children, which are frequently indirect victims in domestic violence context.
- Women from vulnerable groups, such as rural women, women with disability, or Romani women, face specific challenges in reporting violence, and information on their exposure to firearms misuse remains scarce.

### Institutional practices and challenges identified by practitioners

- Recent developments have strengthened legislative and policy frameworks for the prevention and response to domestic violence, including the firearms misuse.
- Police officers across the region reported that, as part of risk assessment procedures conducted when responding to reported domestic violence cases, they routinely check weapon registries to determine whether the reported individual possesses a (legal) firearm.
- If there are suspicions that a perpetrator might have weapons in illegal possession, after receiving information from the victim or other sources, the police initiate a search and confiscate the weapon.
- Despite progress, risk assessment is not consistently conducted in every reported domestic violence case or is often inadequately implemented.
- Police officers frequently emphasised that they are not always routinely informed whether a confiscated weapon is returned to the abuser or permanently confiscated, which in some cases can compromise both their safety and that of the victim.
- A specific challenge raised by police officers responding to domestic violence cases is their access to weapon registries and the reliability of firearm ownership databases.
- A common challenge across all jurisdictions is the shortage of police personnel specifically trained to handle domestic violence cases.
- The challenges in cross-sectoral cooperation are persistent but there are also good practice examples across the region.
- The possibility of returning temporarily seized firearms in cases where the perpetrator was not legally convicted is concerning, as it increases the risk of recurring violence.
- MoI officers dealing with firearms licence approval shared that, across the region, the laws on weapons establish comprehensive eligibility criteria requesting that any applicant for the approval to acquire firearms is not legally convicted of criminal offences, including domestic violence or misdemeanours with elements of violence, or that no criminal or misdemeanour proceedings have been initiated against the applicant.
- However, the limited reference to firearms indicates that domestic violence is rarely invoked as the grounds for rejection of applications or revocation of licences.
- The importance of a thorough background check, which extends beyond checking administrative databases and includes field visits and interviews, has been underlined across the region. Despite the importance of field visits for a proper and comprehensive assessment, in many instances guidance for conducting such visits and interviews is missing, leaving space for subjectivity and omissions.
- The process of issuing medical certificates for firearms licence approval faces numerous challenges across the Western Balkans jurisdictions. The lack of standardised and rigorous medical evaluations is a recurring problem.
- Cooperation between the police and healthcare systems, particularly in addressing the firearms licence holders' mental health changes, varies across jurisdictions and is often inadequate.
- Officers also check if the reasons for getting a firearm are justifiable. When reviewing an application and its compliance with the requirement provided by the law, they flagged that more caution should be exercised in dealing with cases in which the applicant presents a nominal reason for possessing firearms but may have ulterior motives.
- Finally, officers responsible for approving firearms licences in some instances face pressure from applicants whose requests were rejected. Rejected applicants exert pressure or even threaten them.

## 7.2 Recommendations

The conclusions and recommendations below build on the key findings of the analysis and the measures proposed by the focus group discussions participants. They emphasise the necessity of coordinating SALW control frameworks and domestic violence prevention

frameworks as a critical precondition for preventing firearms misuse in domestic violence and gender-based violence generally.

For easier reference, the recommendations to the Western Balkans' authorities are grouped into several main clusters:

### I. Mitigate firearms misuse in the domestic violence context – raise awareness and reduce the proliferation and circulation of firearms in illegal possession

- Systematically plan and implement programmes to legalise firearms in illegal possession and promote their voluntary surrender as means for, reducing their availability and illicit possession, and consequently their misuse in domestic violence.
- Link firearm legalisation and voluntary surrender activities to the overall efforts to reduce domestic violence and prevent firearms misuse in that context.
- Implement comprehensive awareness-raising activities and other targeted programmes to inform residents about risks associated with firearms, including their misuse in the domestic violence context, and to tackle the societal and cultural conditioning of linkages between masculinity and firearms, which can impede reporting.

### II. Enhance risk assessments and strengthen operational response

- Ensure that the presence of firearms – regardless of whether they were used or not – is verified without exception in every reported case of domestic violence, and that the duty police officer receiving the report records information on the presence and/or use of firearms.
- Ensure that risk assessment procedures are in place and conducted properly and promptly for every reported case of domestic violence, as mandated by the Istanbul Convention and jurisdictional legislation.
- Ensure that risk assessment takes into account all specific situations involving firearms, such as: the perpetrator or another household member (including the victim) has a weapon in legal possession, the perpetrator or another household member might have a weapon in illegal possession, the perpetrator has access to firearms as part of occupational duty and is trained in their use, or the perpetrator could easily access firearms.
- Develop a mandatory set of indicators that could facilitate a credible assessment of whether illegal firearms are present in a concrete case, and if they could be misused.
- Ensure that the intervention is planned accordingly and ensure the safety of responding officers and victims affected by the violence. Familiarise the first-line responders with high-risk indicators.
- Ensure that any legally owned weapons in the possession of a perpetrator are, without exception, seized in each reported incident as mandated by laws on weapons and domestic violence laws, with due procedures initiated, while any illegally owned weapons are immediately confiscated.
- Ensure that in the case of a reported incident, any weapons that a perpetrator can easily access, such as weapons in possession of other family members or other persons sharing the same residence, or any easily accessible weapon is immediately seized.

- Ensure that first responders have reliable, instant, and 24/7 access to up-to-date firearm registration databases to support effective and timely interventions, addressing the limited access and reliability challenges.
- Ensure that police officers who responded to a specific case of domestic violence are immediately informed if a seized weapon is returned or if it was permanently confiscated; given the risk of recurring violence if temporarily seized firearms are returned.
- Provide ongoing capacity building to ensure consistency of risk assessments by ensuring that police and other first responders are adequately trained in detecting firearm-related risks in domestic violence, both related to legal and illegal firearms, and that a victim-centred approach is fully integrated in institutional response.
- Facilitate and strengthen interinstitutional cooperation between law enforcement, prosecutors' offices, healthcare institutions, social welfare centres, and civil society organisations providing services to women and other victims of domestic violence.
- Given the prevalence of misuse of illicit firearms in domestic violence, ensure that weapons used in such incidents are adequately traced and technically examined so that such knowledge informs policy development and operational response. Systematically tracing every seized firearm enhances the overall intelligence picture on illicit firearms on both local and international level.
- Ensure that cases involving perpetrators who are police officers or personnel from the security sector are addressed with due diligence, investigated urgently and prompt disciplinary action conducted.

### III. Enhance procedures for firearms licence approval for civilians

- Ensure that the weapons registry is comprehensive and up-to-date, including accurate records of all firearm owners and their registered firearms. Regular audits should be conducted to maintain the reliability of the registry and ensure compliance with firearm regulations.
- In addition to criminal and misdemeanour records, ensure that police operational logs, as well as any information on imposed temporary protective measures and restraining orders, are duly considered when reviewing an application for acquiring firearms.
- Expand the scope of security checks to include both formal criminal records and documented patterns of violent behaviour from operational reports.
- Introduce the practice of notifying immediate family members, including partners, about the submitted application for acquiring a firearm submitted by their family member/partner. Any such notifications must take into consideration safety risks to family members.
- Enhance background check procedures by integrating mandatory interviews with family members, including current or former intimate partners, but also friends, neighbours, or associates prior to approval or renewal of a firearm licence.
- Such interviews need to be conducted cautiously, and officers must take into account that a victim of domestic violence may be unwilling to speak openly with the police for fear of further violence or reprisals. Information provided during the interview must be treated as confidential. Spouses/family members must be offered the option not to participate in the interview. This especially applies to victims of violence, as participating in the interview could further endanger their safety. If it is estimated that conducting the interview could pose a threat to their security, other sources of information should be used. In any case, intimate partners/spouses should be informed about the submitted application for firearms licensing and have the contact information of the competent official.
- Police officers conducting such interviews must be adequately trained and provided with the necessary knowledge and tools, such as question guides, checklists, and other supporting materials.

- Standardise and enhance procedures for medical fitness evaluations, ensuring that they credibly document applicants' health fitness, including mental health and any history of substance abuse.
- Ensure that health care institutions regularly notify the relevant MoI/police departments about any health-related changes that could affect one's fitness to hold a firearms licence.
- Ensure continuous monitoring of the fulfilment of the legal conditions for the possession of weapons, including effective monitoring of conditions for safe firearm storage

at home through regular inspections to ensure compliance with legal safety standards.

- Ensure automatic and permanent licence revocation for individuals convicted of domestic violence, as well as violent misdemeanours. This should include a prohibition for perpetrators to reapply for licences after expunged convictions.
- When reviewing an application, ensure that due caution is exercised in dealing with cases in which the applicant presents a nominal reason for possessing firearms but may have ulterior motives.

#### IV. Improve data and monitoring systems

- Enhance data collection mechanisms to ensure that all incidents of firearms misuse in the domestic violence context are properly documented.
- Set up or enhance existing databases to facilitate monitoring of submitted and rejected firearms licence applications (including those related to domestic violence); seized firearms (including those linked to domestic violence); returned firearms previously seized due to domestic violence; revoked licences; and

both legal and illegal firearms that have been confiscated.

- More research is needed on:
  1. Impact on children of firearms misuse in domestic violence,
  2. Reasons for the low reporting of domestic violence firearm incidents,
  3. How specific conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown measures, contributed to the increased risks of firearms misuse in domestic violence.

#### V. Provide capacity building and enhance a victim-centred and intersectional approach

- Provide training to law enforcement on the regional *Guidelines for Assessing and Addressing Risks Related to Firearms Misuse in Domestic Violence*, *Guidelines for Gender-Responsive Firearms Licence Approval*, and support peer learning through further strengthening of the regional pool of trainers.
- Consider integrating and localising the Guidelines in the standard operating procedures.
- Expand gender-sensitivity training for all institutional actors to improve their understanding of the gendered dynamics of firearms misuse and domestic violence and better align responses with survivor needs.
- Ensure that police officers responding to domestic violence cases are familiarised with the use of detection tools, such as K9 and metal

detectors, and that such tools are available to them when needed.

- Ensure that all interventions in response to domestic violence incidents, as well as procedures for reviewing firearms licence applications, are victim-centred – integrating a victim-centred approach in training – while prioritising victims' rights and safety (including direct and indirect victims, such as children), and guarantee that assistance is provided with dignity and respect.
- Ensure that all such interventions and procedures fully take into account specific barriers faced by women from vulnerable groups (such as rural women, women with disability, or Romani women) which are limiting the survivors' ability to report violence, and ensure access to

comprehensive support services such as shelters, legal aid, and financial assistance programs.

- Facilitate inter-sectoral approach when reviewing a firearms licence application and ensure that police domestic violence units or designated police officers are consulted at every stage of the background check process. In case

that more information is needed for proper assessment, consider consulting the centres for social work, SOS helplines, shelters and other women's organisations providing support to victims of domestic violence, and the family doctors.

## **VI. Maintain and strengthen further regional cooperation and knowledge sharing**

- Facilitate knowledge exchange among jurisdictions to share good practices and harmonise approaches in aligning their proceedings with international and regional mandatory legal frameworks and best practices in domestic violence prevention.

- Strengthen the cooperation between first-line responders and women's organisations dealing with domestic violence and providing services to victims. Ensure that women's organisations are included in any normative or policy development related to SALW control.

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