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Entenela Ndrevataj

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# Exposing Shadows

Exploring the Intersection of Image-Based  
Sexual Abuse in Kosovo

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ERMA, European Regional Master's Programme  
in Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe

Entenela Ndrevataj

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Exploring the Intersection of Image-Based  
Sexual Abuse in Kosovo

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# Foreword

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- Orr, Kate, *Missing from the Data, Missing from the Law: Indigenous Women and Girls and the Failures of Anti-Trafficking Frameworks in Latin America*. Supervisor: Davinia Gómez Sánchez, Univeristy of Deusto (Bilbao). European Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation (EMA-GC Europe), coordinated by Global Campus of Human Rights Headquarters.

- Vasilenko, Darya, *Assessing the Extent of Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women: Concluding Observations on Kazakhstan*. Supervisor: Aigerim Kussaiynkyzy, Maqsut Narikbayev University (Kazakhstan). The Master's Programme in Human Rights and Sustainability in Central Asia (MAHRS-GC Central Asia), coordinated by the OSCE Academy in Bishkek (AY 2024-26).
- Yisa, Josephine Boye, *A Human Rights-Based Approach to Overfishing in West Africa: Comparative Study of Guinea-Bissau and The Gambia*. Supervisors: Magnus Killander, University of Pretoria and Emmanuel Kasimbazi, Makerere University (Uganda). Master's Programme in Human Rights and Democratisation in Africa, coordinated by Centre for Human Rights, University of Pretoria.

# Biography

Entenela Ndrevaataj is a journalist based in Albania covering human rights, gender equality, and social justice. She is the co-founder of the Feminist Collective in Albania. She holds a Master's degree in Social Work, as well as a Master's degree from the Regional Programme in Democracy and Human Rights in South East Europe. She pursued postgraduate studies at the GRO GEST Programme in Iceland and is the recipient of the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Award from the University of Iceland for her research proposal on masculinity, race, and border politics in the context of the Italy-Albania migration agreement.

# Abstract

This research explores how misogyny, twined with cultural elements of victim-blaming, and the lack of adequate legislation have made the spread of image-based sexual abuse in Kosovo possible. The importance of this topic is underscored by the technological advancements that have amplified pre-existing issues, such as gender-based violence, which can now be shared with a wide audience within seconds. Through qualitative methods research, this illuminates the prevalence and impact of image-based sexual abuse by conducting interviews with a woman whose intimate images have been shared online, as well as with feminists, non-governmental organisation representatives, men and institutional stakeholders. The findings reveal a concerning situation for women and girls in Kosovo, where numerous communication groups have emerged that share intimate images, along with personal contacts and locations, thereby compromising their privacy. These women are frequently blamed for sharing these images by family members, society and institutional representatives, making it difficult for them to seek help. Additionally, the existing legislation is not adequately designed to fully address image-based sexual abuse, placing yet another burden on women. Moreover, the pervasive victim-blaming mentality discovered in this research highlights the necessity for the government to take action in educating and informing workers across various institutions, as well as the general population.

**Keywords:** *Image-based sexual abuse / misogyny / women and girls / victim-blaming / legislation*

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To all the women of my life who have taught me about resilience and sisterhood, a lifetime would not be enough to thank you and love you!

To all my feminist sisters around the world who stand strong against patriarchy and the cruelty of misogyny, keep pissing men off!

To all the girls and women, victims of image-based sexual abuse, you are not alone. This is just the last cry of a crumbling, oppressive system. None of us is free until every one of us is free!

To the ERMA collective and my thesis advisor (of course, women), who have supported me immensely throughout this academic journey: your support and mentorship have made the completion of this work possible! From the bottom of my heart, thank you!

To women, to life, to freedom!

# Table of Abbreviations

|               |                                                                       |
|---------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>BIRN</b>   | Balkan Investigative Reporting Network                                |
| <b>EU</b>     | European Union                                                        |
| <b>GBV</b>    | Gender-based violence                                                 |
| <b>GREVIO</b> | Group of Experts against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence |
| <b>IBSA</b>   | Image-based sexual abuse                                              |
| <b>NGO</b>    | Non-governmental organisations                                        |
| <b>WB</b>     | Western Balkans                                                       |

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# Introduction

According to a United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) report, 85% of women globally reported witnessing digital violence during the COVID-19 lockdown, while 38% experienced it firsthand.<sup>1</sup> The UN Women also noted that online abuse took different forms, starting from physical threats, sexual harassment, stalking, zoombombing, and sex trolling.<sup>2</sup> Misogyny, deeply embedded in patriarchal structures, has indeed facilitated various forms of digital violence, including hate speech, cyberstalking and online harassment.<sup>3</sup> One of the most harmful outcomes of this environment is image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), where intimate images of women are distributed online without consent.<sup>4</sup> The Western Balkan (WB) countries are no exception to global trends, where online violence against girls and women, including IBSA, has become a serious problem.<sup>5</sup> This research extensively addresses IBSA in one of the WB countries, specifically Kosovo, where the distribution of intimate materials online without consent, fuelled by misogynistic attitudes, has reached alarming proportions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UN Women, *'I Say No to Sexism Online: Combating Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence – A Guide for Champions'* (UN Women 2023).

<sup>2</sup> UN Women, *Online and ICT-Facilitated Violence against Women and Girls during COVID-19* (EVAW COVID-19 Brief No 4, April 2020) <<https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/brief-online-and-ict-facilitated-violence-against-women-and-girls-during-covid-19>> accessed 14 June 2026.

<sup>3</sup> Johanna Rinceanu, 'The Changing Role of Internet Service Providers in Regulating Image-Based Sexual Abuse' in Gian Marco Caletti and Kolis Summerer (eds), *Criminalizing Intimate Image Abuse: A Comparative Perspective* (OUP 2024) 361–75.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Megi Reçi, *'Combating Image-Based Sexual Abuse Online: A Legal Perspective on the Western Balkans'* (DCAF 2024) <https://www.dcaf.ch/sites/default/files/publications/documents/CombatingImageBasedSexualAbuseOnline.pdf> accessed 14 June 2026.

<sup>6</sup> D Elshani and D Budima, 'Misogyny in the Albanian digital manosphere: The case of Albkings' (BIRN, 2024).

Different media outlets in Kosovo have reported the existence of communication groups on various platforms that shared intimate images or videos of women, very often manipulated by artificial intelligence, accompanied by their personal information such as addresses, phone numbers or social media accounts.<sup>7</sup> The most notorious group was called AlbKings (short for ‘Albanian Kings’), created on Telegram in January 2023, that counted over 100,000 members, mostly Kosovar men, but also Albanian men from Albania and North Macedonia, including men from diaspora that shared hundreds of images or contacts of Kosovar and other Albanian women on daily basis.<sup>8</sup> Over a year later, following significant media coverage, the police in Kosovo arrested seven suspects connected to the case, including three of the group’s administrators.<sup>9</sup> While the group was initially closed, many other groups surged, operating in the same way.<sup>10</sup> The images shared still remain on strangers’ phones, meaning that the threat of perpetrating IBSA outside the internet remains a significant concern for women and girls.<sup>11</sup>

These communication groups, including many others on different social media platforms, intertwined with the ease of accessing the internet and the usage of smartphones, have further weakened the line between personal and private life, with thousands of images, posts or even videos shared online, thereby normalising non-consensual content, including sexual material. Data shows that Kosovo even surpasses European Union (EU) countries in the percentage of households with internet access at home,<sup>12</sup> meaning that it is very easy to engage in the creation or distribution of harmful content, including intimate images, without consent. An article published by *Balkan Insight* shows that different social

<sup>7</sup> KALLXO.com, ‘Kosovarët nisin të përdorin grupet e rrezikshme në “Telegram”’ (8 February 2024) <<https://kallxo.com/gjate/kosovaret-nisin-te-perdorin-grupet-e-rrezikshme-ne-telegram/>> accessed 14 June 2026.

<sup>8</sup> K Gashi, ‘“AlbKings”, perandoria e shantazhit dhe ngacimit ndaj vajzave të Kosovës’ (*Kallxo*, 2 June 2024) <<https://kallxo.com/gjate/kosovaret-nisin-te-perdorin-grupet-e-rrezikshme-ne-telegram/>> accessed 15 January 2026.

<sup>9</sup> Xh Bami, ‘Kosovo arrests seven in crackdown on misogynistic Telegram group’ (*Balkan Insight*, 30 May 2024) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/30/kosovo-arrests-seven-in-crackdown-on-misogynistic-telegram-group/bi/>> accessed 2 June 2024

<sup>10</sup> V Dragusha, ‘Gratë, cak i grupeve virale që lënë shenjë’ (*Association of Journalists of Kosovo*, 5 June 2024) <<https://agk-ks.org/lajmet/grate-cak-i-grupeve-virale-qe-lene-shenje/>> accessed 15 January 2026.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Ministry of Education, Science, Technology and Innovation, *Education Strategy 2022–2026* (2022).

media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and instant messaging platforms like Viber and WhatsApp have been used to perpetrate online abuse towards women in Kosovo, primarily to shame, abuse or threaten them into engaging in sexual activities against their will.<sup>13</sup>

This study explores the attitudes towards misogyny among boys and men in Kosovo in the creation and operation of online groups that engage in IBSA. This study also critically examines the existing laws related to IBSA in Kosovo, highlighting the primary challenges in aligning with the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention) and protecting the rights to dignity, privacy and protection from sexual harassment foreseen in article 40.<sup>14</sup> Victim-blaming is also another element further researched in this study, which proves to be an extremely widespread attitude, especially when women assert agency and control over their own bodies. Victim-blaming attitudes, prevalent in both society and institutions, prevent girls and women from seeking help, thus leaving them vulnerable in the hands of perpetrators. The legislative gaps, combined with continuous victim-blaming, resulting in self-blaming or shame, leave women in Kosovo particularly vulnerable to exploitation by online perpetrators. This toxic environment not only subjects' women to harm but also discourages them from seeking help.

Australian philosopher Kate Manne describes misogyny as 'the system that operates within a patriarchal social order to police and enforce women's subordination and to uphold male dominance'.<sup>15</sup> This concept is central to my study, where I aim to understand how online tools are now being used by Kosovar men to oppress women, reinforcing their control over women's bodies and sexual choices. After analysing these misogynistic elements, the study will also explore the factors that create an environment conducive to the operation of online groups that denigrate

<sup>13</sup> L Aliu, "'Out of control': Kosovo struggles to curb online sexual harassment' (*Balkan Insight*, 28 May 2024) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2024/05/28/out-of-control-kosovo-struggles-to-curb-online-sexual-harassment/>> accessed 17 January 2026.

<sup>14</sup> Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence CETS No 210 (adopted 11 May 2011, entered into force 1 August 2014) (Istanbul Convention). Art 40 of the Istanbul Convention specifically addresses sexual harassment and demands from state parties to implement measures to ensure that any form of unwanted sexual conduct is subject to criminal or other legal sanctions.

<sup>15</sup> K Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (OUP 2017).

Kosovar women. These women are first exposed and shamed online, often leading to offline violence. Contributing to this environment is a pervasive culture of victim-blaming, which exists not only among the general population but also among institutional representatives. This mentality is often echoed within families and communities, discouraging women from seeking help, reporting perpetrators and escaping abusive situations, thus perpetuating a cycle of violence that can escalate unpredictably. Therefore, this study aims to respond to three main research questions that will be discussed further in the analysis section, with connection to the literature review:

1. How does misogyny among men and boys contribute to the spread of IBSA in Kosovo?
2. How does victim-blaming influence women's decisions to ask for help and report the cases to the police in Kosovo?
3. How effectively does the current legal framework in Kosovo address IBSA in alignment with the Istanbul Convention?

This research is situated in the fields of women's rights, media and law and seeks to analyse how technological developments have facilitated gender-based violence (GBV) in the online/offline sphere. To explore this, the study utilises semi-structured interviews with a woman who is a victim of IBSA, a feminist activist, a representative from Kosovo's Women Network, an non-governmental organisation (NGO) focused on empowering women and girls in Kosovo, a gender researcher and a journalist who has covered the issue of IBSA in Kosovo, as well as a structured interview with open-ended questions with official representatives from the Ministry of Justice, Kosovo. Additionally, a structured interview, including both open-ended and closed-ended questions, was used to interview adult men living in Prishtina regarding their perceptions of IBSA to measure misogyny and their views on women's and girls' body autonomy and agency.

Because of the rapid spread of harmful content online, IBSA is very difficult to prevent and control. This study will contribute new insights to the limited existing literature, especially in the regional context. The first chapter will present the conceptual framework and literature review regarding patriarchy, misogyny and GBV, while IBSA is considered a type of GBV. GBV resulting from the patriarchal system and misogyny in Kosovo is also included

in this chapter. However, IBSA in Kosovo will be addressed in detail in Chapter 3, particularly due to the lack of data and studies on the issue. In Chapter 2, I will present the methodology I used to conduct this study, a qualitative one, to investigate IBSA in Kosovo, using semi-structured or structured interviews with different stakeholders in order to have a general understanding of the severity of the situation. Chapter 3 of this research will explore themes like misogyny and victim-blaming attitudes, starting from the Telegram group Albkings. This communication group influenced my analysis by including men who were part of it in this study, allowing us to explore the same themes from their perspective. Additionally, I will include interviews with feminist activists, representatives of organisations working for the empowerment of girls and women, and victims of IBSA. Lastly, I will examine law enforcement and its alignment with the Istanbul Convention.

# 1. Theoretical framework: Patriarchy, misogyny and gender-based violence

To understand the main concept of this thesis, namely IBSA, the chapter will start by situating it in the broader context of patriarchy. This research considers misogyny as a tool of patriarchy used to keep women subordinated and maintain power dynamics, ultimately resulting in GBV. These concepts will be further elaborated in this thesis, and later, the focus will shift to IBSA, as a new kind of GBV happening first in online environments. I will introduce the terminology and different concepts used generally in media reporting and online, putting an emphasis on why many feminists and human rights protectors advocate for using IBSA. This concept, rather than revenge porn or other concepts used, is also highlighted in documents that offer guidance for an effective implementation of the provisions of the Istanbul Convention, one of the most important international agreements to prevent and address violence against women and domestic violence. I will further deal with the impact of IBSA on women and girls, referring to studies done across the world, as there is a lack of data and studies in the context of the region. Finally, the literature review explores the motivations of men and boys behind IBSA, shedding light on the social and psychological factors that contribute to this behaviour. Lastly, this section will also focus on Kosovo, by providing information on patriarchy and misogyny, resulting in GBV. IBSA is recognised as one type of GBV, which will be further analysed in the third chapter.

## 1.1 Patriarchy, misogyny and gender-based violence

The scholar Gerda Lerner, in her attempt to understand the origins of the patriarchal system, dug into different societies to understand patriarchy.<sup>16</sup> Many authors claim that patriarchy is natural or biological,<sup>17</sup> but Lerner opposes this claim by providing facts on how the patriarchal system was created and used throughout history as a tool to subordinate women and gain control over their bodies.<sup>18</sup> Throughout history, men learned to institute dominance and hierarchy over other groups of people, by practicing domination over the women of their group.<sup>19</sup> Slavery, again, was institutionalised by first beginning with the enslavement of the women of the other groups.<sup>20</sup> Other authors suggest that women played an important role during humankind's evolution and development by providing evidence that women, just as men, both participated in subsistence gathering for their communities.<sup>21</sup> Lerner, in her book, further analyses the diminishment of women's role in society, which came not as a result of the lack of women's contribution, but because history was written by men.<sup>22</sup>

It was only during the first and the second wave of feminism, that took place during the 19th and 20th centuries, that challenged what history had taught about women and their contribution in the society.<sup>23</sup> Women were no longer willing to accept the subordinate role under patriarchy, firstly by offering an alternative definition to patriarchy and how this system impacted them.<sup>24</sup> One of those scholars is Sylvia Walby, who defines patriarchy as a social structure in which men, besides dominating women, also oppress and exploit women.<sup>25</sup> The author Gwen Hunnicutt defines

<sup>16</sup> Gerda Hedwig Lerner was an Austrian-born American historian and woman's history author, widely regarded as one of the most influential figures in the development of women's history as an academic discipline.

<sup>17</sup> S Goldberg, *Why the Biological Difference Between Men and Women Always Produces Male Domination* (William Morrow & Company 1973).

<sup>18</sup> G Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (OUP 1986).

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> S Lacy and C Ocobock, 'Woman the Hunter: The Archaeological Evidence' [2023] *American Anthropologist* 1.

<sup>22</sup> Lerner (n 18).

<sup>23</sup> L Brunell and E Burkett, 'Feminism' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 29 October 2024) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/feminism>> accessed 15 January 2026.

<sup>24</sup> M McDonough, 'Second Wave of Feminism' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 7 October 2024) <<https://www.britannica.com/topic/second-wave-feminism>> accessed 15 January 2026.

<sup>25</sup> S Walby, *Theorizing Patriarchy* (Basil Blackwell Ltd 1990).

patriarchy as a system that privileges males, where men as a group dominate women both structurally and ideologically, and is characterised by beliefs that justify male dominance in both public and private spheres of life.<sup>26</sup> In the public sphere, the power is shared between men, and in private matters, men exercise power over all members of the family, including young boys and men.<sup>27</sup> Other feminist scholars who have studied patriarchy extended the concept by not only considering it a system that assures dominance of male members of society over female ones, but adding other features. Allan Johnson characterises patriarchy as a societal structure that is male-dominant, male-identified and male-centred.<sup>28</sup>

The second wave of feminism, particularly, which took place from the 1960s until the 1980s, along with bringing into patriarchy into public debate, re-introduced the concept of misogyny,<sup>29</sup> which was understood as a systemic form of women's oppression, both in public and private sphere.<sup>30</sup> The second wave addressed wide range of issues, including reproductive rights, sexuality, workplace discrimination, family dynamics and gender roles in relation with patriarchy and misogyny.<sup>31</sup> Kate Millett, one of the most prominent authors of the second wave, in her book *Sexual Politics* uses the term misogyny in relation to the term 'masculine hostility', while she argues that women had no connection with the public spaces, as they were ruled through the family.<sup>32</sup> Andrea Dworkin, another author of the second wave of feminism, explains in her book *Woman Hating* that women are oppressed just because they are women regardless of race and class,<sup>33</sup> which is ultimately the general understanding of misogyny as concept. Dworkin further deals with the notion of the oppression happening within the

<sup>26</sup> G Hunnicutt, 'Varieties of Patriarchy and Violence Against Women: Resurrecting "Patriarchy" as a Theoretical Tool' (2019) 15(3) *Violence Against Women* 553.

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> AG Johnson, 'Patriarchy, the System: An It, not a He, a Them, or an Us' in *The Gender Knot: Unraveling Our Patriarchal Legacy* (vol 1, Temple UP 2014).

<sup>29</sup> Council of Europe, 'Feminism and Women's Rights Movements' (*Council of Europe*) <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/feminism-and-women-s-rights-movements>> accessed 13 January 2026.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> National Women's History Museum, 'Feminism: The Second Wave' (*National Women's History Museum*) <<https://www.womenshistory.org/exhibits/feminism-second-wave>> accessed 12 January 2026.

<sup>32</sup> K Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (OUP 2017).

<sup>33</sup> A Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (EP Dutton 1974).

private sphere that kept women outside the public environment. Women, she describes, marry their oppressors and have their children, describing this system ‘a machinery that is ruining women’s lives’.<sup>34</sup>

More modern authors from what is generally believed to be the fourth wave of feminism<sup>35</sup> have added extended features to misogyny as a concept. Kate Manne in her book *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* argues that misogyny should not be understood primarily as the hatred or hostility some men feel towards women, but instead as an attitude that wants to control, police and punish women who challenge male dominance.<sup>36</sup> Manne explains that misogynistic attitudes divide women into two groups: the good and the bad ones. The good ones are praised and rewarded by the community, who contribute in the maintaining of the patriarchy as a system that regulates the functioning of society, while the bad ones are singled out, ‘serving as a warning to those who are out of order’.<sup>37</sup> Misogyny, in this framework, becomes not just about individual antipathy, but a broader societal tool to maintain power structures and gender hierarchies, reinforcing patriarchy on both a personal and institutional level. This approach serves this study as it broadens the concept of misogyny beyond personal feelings, highlighting its pervasive role in upholding systemic gender inequality that leads to GBV.

### 1.1.1 The interplay of patriarchy and misogyny in perpetuating gender-based violence

The combination of patriarchy and misogyny bring as a result GBV. Patriarchal values legitimise GBV to ensure the dominance and superiority of men, by trying to uphold gender stereotypes and prejudices, gender expectations and gender roles, the understanding of the family sphere as private under male authority and general tolerance and acceptance of GBV by the community.<sup>38</sup> GBV and violence against women are two concepts used

<sup>34</sup> Dworkin (n 33).

<sup>35</sup> The fourth wave of feminism is generally considered to have begun in 2012, when women started publicly denouncing sexual violence, often utilising social media. This wave is most notably associated with the #MeToo movement.

<sup>36</sup> Manne (n 32).

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Council of Europe, ‘What Causes Gender-Based Violence?’ (*Council of Europe*) <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/what-causes-gender-based-violence>> accessed 15 January 2026.

interchangeably, as most violence against women is inflicted by men towards women for gender-based reasons.<sup>39</sup> Other legal documents intertwine both concepts, using the term ‘GBV against women’ to describe a severe issue impacting women worldwide solely due to their gender.<sup>40</sup> GBV can be sexual, physical, verbal, psychological and socio-economic and can manifest in various ways, from verbal abuse and hate speech to rape or murder. This abuse can take place in online and offline environments.<sup>41</sup> Perpetrators may include anyone – from current or former spouses/partners, family members, colleagues, classmates and friends, to strangers or individuals representing cultural, religious, state or intra-state institutions.<sup>42</sup>

Other studies link misogyny with GBV and male violence.<sup>43</sup> Misogynistic viewpoints and stands can lead to GBV in the domestic sphere, such as intimate partner violence, stalking, sexual harassment and sexual assault.<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, misogyny is used to justify GBV, in order to maintain patriarchal hierarchy of power.<sup>45</sup> Other studies indicate that men who were involved in terrorist attacks, prior to committing terrorism, firstly engaged in different forms of GBV to assert domination over women.<sup>46</sup> This attitude was defined as extreme misogyny.<sup>47</sup> Other extreme acts of violence that happened in public, targeting a big group of people, were motivated by grievances against women, studies suggest.<sup>48</sup> The perpetrators believed they were taking ‘corrective actions’.<sup>49</sup> Other group of men who engage in GBV, fuelled by misogyny, are

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<sup>39</sup> Council of Europe (n 38).

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> B Rottweiler, C Clemmow and P Gill, ‘A Common Psychology of Male Violence? Assessing the Effects of Misogyny on Intentions to Engage in Violent Extremism, Interpersonal Violence and Support for Violence against Women’ (2024) 30(3) *Terrorism and Political Violence* 404.

<sup>44</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> G Jasser, M Kelly and AK Rothermel, ‘Male Supremacism and the Hanau Terrorist Attack: Between Online Misogyny and the Far Right’ (*International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 20 May 2020) <<https://www.icct.nl/publication/male-supremacism-and-hanau-terrorist-attack-between-online-misogyny-and-far-right>> accessed 12 January 2026.

<sup>47</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> SR Silva and others, ‘Genderbased Mass Shootings: An Examination of Attacks Motivated by Grievances Against Women’ (2021) 27(12–13) *Violence Against Women* 2163

<sup>49</sup> *ibid.*

the ones known as ‘incels’, short for ‘involuntary celibate’.<sup>50</sup> Incels are a group of radicalised young men, that advocate for GBV online, because of their failure to have sex with women.<sup>51</sup> Elliot Rodger, who committed mass murder of female and male students, explained in his ‘manifesto’ that he would murder every ‘hot’ women that ignored him, as a tool to show superiority towards women.<sup>52</sup> Since Rodger’s deadly rampage, other men influenced by this ideology have carried out or attempted mass murders, primarily targeting women.<sup>53</sup>

### 1.1.2 Image-based sexual abuse, a new form of gender-based violence

Patriarchy and deep-rooted misogyny have led to IBSA becoming a common way to control and harm women. These systems allow gendered violence to spread, especially in digital spaces where women are targeted and exploited. Different concepts have been used to describe digital violence women face in the online sphere just because they are women, including IBSA, which is a term developed by researcher Clare McGlynn and Erika Rackley to describe a form of sexual and gendered abuse.<sup>54</sup> IBSA refers to the non-consensual creation and/or distribution of private sexual images, often leading to physical, sexual and mental harm.<sup>55</sup> They argue that IBSA strips individuals of their dignity, privacy and sexual autonomy, affecting not only the victim but also society as a whole.<sup>56</sup> Other researchers suggest using IBSA as a concept, as it refers to all forms of non-consensual creating, taking or sharing of intimate images or videos by known or unknown people who record, including the manipulated one by deepfake or threats to distribute them, considering it an umbrella term.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>50</sup> AC McGinley, ‘Misogyny and Murder’ [2022] Journal of Law & Gender 1.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> C McGlynn and E Rackley, ‘Image-Based Sexual Abuse’ (2017) 37(3) Oxford Journal of Legal Studies 534.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> N Henry, A Flynn and A Powell, *Responding to Revenge Pornography: Prevalence, Nature and Impacts* (Australian Institute of Criminology 2019).

‘Deepfake’, or involuntary porn, is a term related to the usage of technology to manipulate photos or videos through AI, creating the idea that the person is involved in sexual behaviours.<sup>58</sup> Other terms related to this are cyber-rape, where technology facilitates communication online by hiding and manipulating identity, pushing people on the other side on the communication device to engage in sexual activities.<sup>59</sup> Sextortion is another common concept that refers to the threat to share nude or sexual materials to profit from the victim, force the person to stay in abusive relationships or gain monetary profits from it.<sup>60</sup> Sext dissemination and sexting, two other used concepts, have in common the distribution of sexts, like sexually explicit messages or photographs, to people beyond the original intended audience via electronic means.<sup>61</sup> The most prevalent one, usually used in the media sphere, is what is generally known as ‘revenge pornography’, which refers to the nonconsensual distribution of nude images or videos online or via mobile phones, usually by ex-partners, for the purpose of revenge.<sup>62</sup> IBSA is a concept found also in the Istanbul Convention, the most comprehensive international treaty dedicated to combating GBV, setting the highest standards for protection, prevention and justice for victims worldwide, highlighting again the importance of the correct terminology that gasps fully this issue.

### 1.1.3 Image-based sexual abuse in the Istanbul Convention

The Istanbul Convention, formally known as the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence, is the first instrument to set legally binding standards to protect women from violence, promote gender equality and establishing comprehensive measures to prevent violence against women and domestic violence.<sup>63</sup> This

<sup>58</sup> MN Paradiso, L Rollè and T Trombetta, ‘Image-Based Sexual Abuse Associated Factors: A Systematic Review’ (2024) 39 Journal of Family Violence 931.

<sup>59</sup> Asaf Harduf, ‘Rape Goes Cyber: Online Violations of Sexual Autonomy’ 2021 50(3) University of Baltimore Law Review 358.

<sup>60</sup> Paradiso, Rollè and Tommaso (n 58).

<sup>61</sup> Bianca Klettke, David J Hallford and David J Mellor, ‘Sexting Prevalence and Correlates: A Systematic Literature Review’ (2014) 34(1) Clinical Psychology Review 44.

<sup>62</sup> Nicola Henry, Anastasia Powell and Asher Flynn, *Not Just ‘Revenge Pornography’: Australians’ Experiences of Image-Based Abuse. A Summary Report* (RMIT University 2018).

<sup>63</sup> Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence CETS No 210 (adopted 11 May 2011, entered into force 1 August 2014) (Istanbul Convention).

international treaty was signed in Istanbul in 2011 and entered into force in 2014<sup>64</sup> and it requires from state parties to develop laws, policies and support services to end all forms of GBV, that result in physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, occurring in public or in private life.<sup>65</sup> The Group of Experts against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO) is the body of independent experts responsible for monitoring the implementation by the parties of the Istanbul Convention. Its main responsibilities include assessing how well member states are meeting their commitments under the Convention, providing guidance and promoting best practices.<sup>66</sup> GREVIO experts conduct periodic reviews, where it evaluates national policies, laws and practices related to preventing physical, psychological, sexual and economic abuse against women, including digital violence.<sup>67</sup>

One such document is the General Recommendation No 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women, a document that acknowledges violence against women committed in the digital sphere as an increasingly prevalent global issue with grave consequences.<sup>68</sup> In the context of the General Recommendation, GREVIO experts recognise that technology has amplified and facilitated GBV.<sup>69</sup> This escalation has led to increased incidents of surveillance, stalking and sexual harassment, with IBSA being a significant manifestation of this violence.<sup>70</sup> The General Recommendation considers IBSA as falling under article 40 of the Istanbul Convention.<sup>71</sup> According to this article, sexual harassment constitutes '[a]ny form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an

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<sup>64</sup> Gender Matters, 'Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence' (Council of Europe) <<https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/council-of-europe-convention-on-preventing-and-combating-violence-against-women-and-domestic-violence>> accessed 13 January 2026.

<sup>65</sup> Council of Europe, *Combating Violence Against Women: Minimum Standards for Support Services* (Council of Europe 2008).

<sup>66</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Council of Europe, GREVIO Recommendation No 1 on Digital Violence Against Women (adopted on 20 October 2021) (Council of Europe 2021).

<sup>69</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>71</sup> *ibid.*

intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment'.<sup>72</sup> GREVIO requires from all states to acknowledge the digital dimension of violence against women as a form of GBV and suggests taking all the necessary steps that are in accordance with the Istanbul Convention.<sup>73</sup>

### 1.2 Literature review: Exploring the dimensions of image-based sexual abuse – psychological impacts, social stigmas and perpetrator motives

The impact of IBSA on mental health in women is immense. More than 50% of women in the United States have considered suicide as a result of the sharing of nonconsensual images online.<sup>74</sup> Another research found that women victims of IBSA had at least one mental health issue, including high level of stress, depression, anxiety, insecurity, obsessive behaviours and suicidal thoughts.<sup>75</sup> Same research reveals that IBSA has similar results compared to victims of offline sexual abuse. Post-traumatic stress disorder was a common diagnosis for victims because the shared images are actually never fully deleted and they have to live with it.<sup>76</sup> Even after escaping a violent situation, prosecuting their abuser or changing their names, victims found that their content is still shown in search engine results, on Google Maps and on popular social media platforms linked to their new identities.<sup>77</sup> Furthermore, studies suggest that victims of IBSA often struggle with forming new romantic and sexual relationships, as the trauma from the violation can significantly impair trust and intimacy.<sup>78</sup>

Another study, which gathered data from interviews with victims of IBSA over a three-year period in New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Australia – three countries that have done extended research on this topic – provides a deeper exploration of the impact of IBSA on victim's social lives. The majority of the victims

<sup>72</sup> Istanbul Convention (n 63) art 40.

<sup>73</sup> GREVIO Recommendation No 1 (n 68).

<sup>74</sup> Andrea Powell, *IBSA Landscape Report 2023* (Panorama Global 2023).

<sup>75</sup> Antoinette Huber, "A Shadow of Me Old Self": The Impact of Image-Based Sexual Abuse in a Digital Society' (2023) 29(2) *International Review of Victimology* 199.

<sup>76</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> Nicola Henry, Asher Flynn and Anastasia Powell, 'Image-Based Sexual Abuse: An International Study of Victims and Perpetrators' (Summary Report, RMIT University 2020).

were young adult women and girls aged 18–29, including minors. Research has indicated that young adults are disproportionately targeted by different forms of online abuse and harassment.<sup>79</sup> The participants described the experience as life-ruining,<sup>80</sup> changing the relationship with their bodies and others, causing forever-lasting harm in the personal, professional and online world.<sup>81</sup> Victims of IBSA see themselves in the lens of before and after the abuse.<sup>82</sup> Aside from the extraordinary impact that IBSA has on victims, women and girls face another layer of violence: that of being blamed for the violence they have experienced, which I will discuss in detail in the following section.

### 1.2.1 Victim-blaming in image-based sexual abuse: Cultural norms and gendered double standards

Women find themselves being blamed by people they know, including friends, relatives and family members, but also by strangers ‘because they recorded themselves in the first place’ and shared the images with other people.<sup>83</sup> This might impede victims of IBSA from asking for help or internalising the belief that they deserve what is happening to them, leading to self-shaming.<sup>84</sup> The current studies suggest that men put the blame on women victims of IBSA-while women, on the other hand, take it more seriously and direct women to seek help and report the abuse.<sup>85</sup> In Australia, a country that, as it was mentioned before, has conducted excessive studies about IBSA and its impact, has found that 1 in 2 men (50%) either minimise the harm or blame the victim.<sup>86</sup> Research also suggests that women who took the pictures

<sup>79</sup> K Johnson and others, ‘“It’s Torture for the Soul”: The Harms of Image-Based Sexual Abuse’ (2021) 30(4) *Social & Legal Studies* 541.

<sup>80</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>82</sup> M Gámez-Guadix, MA Sorrel and J Martínez-Bacaicoa, ‘Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence Perpetration and Victimization Among Adolescents: A Network Analysis’ (2022) 20 *Sexuality Research and Social Policy* 1000.

<sup>83</sup> A Flynn and others, ‘Victim-Blaming and Image-Based Sexual Abuse’ (2022) 56(1) *Journal of Criminology* 7.

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> S Bothamley and RJ Tully, ‘Understanding Revenge Pornography: Public Perceptions of Revenge Pornography and Victim Blaming’ (2018) 10(1) *Journal of Aggression, Conflict and Peace Research* 1.

<sup>86</sup> Henry, Flynn and Powell (n 57).

consensually but had them shared not consensually, particularly when the images contained more nudity, faced even higher levels of blame, with questions like why they sent the images, while men received a more lenient response.<sup>87</sup>

Many studies investigate the reasons why society shifts the blame on the victims of IBSA, trying to understand what the motives behind it are. An analysis of 242 studies conducted from 2012 until 2022 regarding IBSA, using different keywords related to non-consensual sharing of intimate images online, as explained in the sections above, has concluded several reasons why the family members, the community and even police authorities believe that women should not have taken and sent the image in the first place. One of the reasons was culture and the concept of morality.<sup>88</sup> Blaming victims of IBSA happens in the same manner as rape victims, by negatively evaluating their morality.<sup>89</sup> People have the tendency to simplify situations by putting a bigger emphasis on personal factors that influence men's actions.<sup>90</sup> The analysis suggests that, especially in very conservative societies that hold misogynistic attitudes towards women, the latest are subjected to 'sexual double standards' on moral grounds.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, victim-blaming attitudes were even more evident in cases when the relationship duration was short in time. Women who consensually recorded themselves were held more responsible than women whom their image was recording without the knowledge by the perpetrator.<sup>92</sup>

Victim-blaming can lead to self-blaming. In 2020, Sciacca and others collected 182 posts written in a counselling hotline website by Danish adolescents, where patterns of self-blaming were extensively found, surpassing only emotions of fear and worry about the re-sharing of the content and telling their parents.<sup>93</sup> The Danish teenagers would use words like 'naïve' or 'stupid' to describe

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<sup>87</sup> Flynn and others (n 83) 2.

<sup>88</sup> S Amudhan and others, "Snapping, Sharing and Receiving Blame": A Systematic Review on Psychosocial Factors of Victim Blaming in Non-Consensual Pornography' (2024) 33(1) *Industrial Psychiatry Journal* 1.

<sup>89</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Carmen Gomez-Berrocal and others, 'Sexual Double Standard: A Gender-Based Prejudice Referring to Sexual Freedom and Sexual Shyness' (2022) 13 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1006675.

<sup>92</sup> Amudhan (n 88) 5.

<sup>93</sup> B Sciacca and others, 'Nonconsensual Dissemination of Sexual Images Among Adolescents: Associations with Depression and Self-Esteem' (2023) 38(15–16) *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 9438.

their action of sending intimate materials, preventing them from seeking help.<sup>94</sup> Victim-blaming attitudes could lead to other consequences to victims of IBSA, including rejection from family, exclusion from labour market as a result of loss employment or migration.<sup>95</sup> In many IBSA cases, women were forced to move into another country or state, in order to escape insults, harassment and prejudices.<sup>96</sup> To fully understand the complexity of IBSA, it is important to explore and navigate the reasons men give for engaging in the non-consensual sharing of intimate images of women online.

### 1.2.2 Men and boys and their motivation behind image-based sexual abuse

While women are usually the victims of IBSA, men and boys tend to be the perpetrators.<sup>97</sup> Exploring their motivation in engaging with IBSA is crucial in tackling IBSA and preventing it from further extending and impacting other women's lives. Many studies suggest that men report various reasons why they engage in IBSA, while they tend to underestimate the impact of it.<sup>98</sup> One of the studies conducted by Barrense-Dias and others explores the behaviour of young adults regarding the sharing of intimate material without consent. The participants admitted to having been engaged in IBSA for entertainment reasons, to show off and because they were not aware of the implications of their actions.<sup>99</sup> The analysis indicates that male participants, especially those with lower educational backgrounds, were more likely to engage in this behaviour. The study suggests that the ones who engaged several times in sharing intimate images in which the face of the person is fully shown without consent with online friends quoted it as doing it for fun.<sup>100</sup> Another Australian study reveals that men had the tendency to underestimate the impact by minimising

<sup>94</sup> Sciacca and others (n 93) 16.

<sup>95</sup> T Starr and T Lavis, 'Perceptions of Revenge Pornography and Victim Blame' (2018) 12(2) *International Journal of Cyber Criminology* 427.

<sup>96</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Cyber Rights Organization, 'NCII: 90% of Victims of the Distribution of Non-Consensual Intimate Imagery Are Women' (*Cyber Rights Organization*) <<https://cyberights.org/ncii-90-of-victims-of-the-distribution-of-non-consensual-intimate-imagery-are-women/>> accessed 12 January 2026.

<sup>98</sup> Y Barrense-Dias and others, 'Non-Consensual Sexting: Characteristics and Motives of Youths Who Share Received Intimate Content Without Consent' (2020) 17(3) *Sexual Health* 270.

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>100</sup> *ibid.*

their action, considering it ‘just a picture’.<sup>101</sup> A study done by Clancy and others reports that men, who engage more in the sharing of intimate images without consent, do it to enhance their social status, boost their social standing, to increase their social standing and bragging about sexuality pursuits while feeling the need to fit in as a result of peer pressure.<sup>102</sup>

Another theory that could potentially explain the engagement of men in IBSA is the male control theory, developed by sociologist **Raewyn Connell**.<sup>103</sup> This theory argues that men perceive themselves as responsible for the suppression of the female sexuality.<sup>104</sup> Evolutionary scholars argue that men engage in suppressive attitudes towards female sexuality to ensure paternity certainty.<sup>105</sup> Men want to pass on their genes and they guard their female partner to prevent other men from impregnating them.<sup>106</sup> Another study, cited when arguing about female sexuality control is about power differences, is the one done by Ira L Reiss, using a sample of 186 cultures to measure male power and how that transcends into female sexuality suppression.<sup>107</sup> The study found that the greater the power imbalance in favour of men, the more the female sexuality of women was suppressed.<sup>108</sup> The right to have sex is impeded by men when they have more advantages, which is the norm in patriarchal systems, by keeping women under oppression.<sup>109</sup> Feminist theorists argue that men regard women as their possession and by controlling their sexuality, they keep women for themselves and impede them from having sex with other men.<sup>110</sup>

<sup>101</sup> A Howard and others, ‘Unsolicited Sexting and Help-Seeking Behaviours Among Australian Adults: A Mixed-Methods Study’ (2024) 13(6) *Social Sciences* 1.

<sup>102</sup> EM Clancy and others, ‘Sharing is Not Always Caring: Understanding Motivations and Behavioural Associations with Sext Dissemination’ (2020) 112 *Computers in Human Behavior* 106460.

<sup>103</sup> R W Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics* (Polity Press 1987)

<sup>104</sup> S Magaraggia, ‘Gender in Theory and Practice: An Interview with Raewyn Connell’ (2012) 102 *Feminist Review* 116.

<sup>105</sup> FR Luberti, KR Blake and RC Brooks, ‘Evolutionary Ecological Insights into the Suppression of Female Sexuality’ (2023) 5(1) *Current Research in Ecological and Social Psychology* 1.

<sup>106</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> IL Reiss, ‘A Sociological Journey into Sexuality’ (1986) 48(2) *Journal of Marriage and Family* 233.

<sup>108</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> RF Baumeister and JM Twenge, ‘Cultural Suppression of Female Sexuality’ (2002) 6(2) *Review of General Psychology* 166.

While there is little academic research on IBSA in the WB region, including Kosovo, GBV is already an exhausted topic. In the next section, I will present general data about all the concept mentioned above that has brought as a result GBV in Kosovo, considering that I have already presented the conceptual framework of patriarchy and misogyny. In this research, misogyny is seen as another tool that serves patriarchy as a system that seeks to keep women down and under control. IBSA remains a highly under researched topic in Kosovo and as a result IBSA, starting from the AlbKings case, will be further analysed in the third chapter. The data provided from my research are one of the first produced for this topic in Kosovo, highlighting again the importance of the topic.

### 1.2.3 Patriarchy, misogyny and gender-based violence: The case of Kosovo

Kosovo remains deeply influenced by patriarchal values, as official data highlight that men are typically seen as the family heads and primary breadwinners, while women are downgraded to reproductive roles within the household.<sup>111</sup> This imbalance is further reflected in property ownership, where only 19% of properties are held by women,<sup>112</sup> reflecting how the Kosovar society empowers men over women and facilitates women's subordination. Kosovo reports alarmingly low participation of women in the labour market, at only 22% in 2022,<sup>113</sup> which is a clear element of patriarchy, that keeps women apart from participation in labour market, and, thus, in the public sphere. To add more, official data suggest that unemployment is more present among women of higher educational level than for men in the same academic level.<sup>114</sup> Giving the husband's family a son is considered to be the women's primary patriarchal duty – the study found – which enables women to fully join the patrilineal family.<sup>115</sup> The exclusion of

<sup>111</sup> V Krasniqi, G Selaci and P Pawlak, *Kosovo Gender and Power Dynamics Assessment* (USAID 2016).

<sup>112</sup> A Isufi, 'Kosovo Women Still Struggling to Win Property Rights' (*Balkan Insight*, 9 March 2023) <<https://balkaninsight.com/2023/03/09/kosovo-women-still-struggling-to-win-property-rights/>> accessed 14 January 2026.

<sup>113</sup> B Luzha and others, 'Women's Study in the Republic of Kosovo' (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung 2023).

<sup>114</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Mission in Kosovo and United Nations Population Fund Kosovo, 'A Man's Perspective on Gender Equality in Kosovo' (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Mission in Kosovo/United Nations Population Fund Kosovo 2022).

<sup>115</sup> CZ Gulimoto, 'Gender Bias in Kosovo' (United Nations Population Fund Kosovo 2016).

women from the heritage while primarily being associated with reproductive roles, intertwined with high rates of employment, are two conditions perfectly in line with patriarchy that makes them totally dependent on men.

Other data indicate the prevalence of misogynistic attitudes toward women in Kosovar society. Although data on selective abortion is limited when it comes to selective abortion, in 2016, the sex ratio at birth was close to 110 male births per 100 female births, indicating that families prefer male babies compared to female babies.<sup>116</sup> The sex ratio at birth increased in 2017; there were 111.2 male births per 100 female births.<sup>117</sup> This significantly surpasses the typical natural sex ratio at birth, which is commonly estimated to be approximately 105 males for every 100 females.<sup>118</sup> Before the widespread use of ultrasound technology, which allowed families to determine the gender of a foetus and, in cases of female foetuses, opt for an abortion, Kosovars relied on myths and superstitions.<sup>119</sup> These beliefs often led families to choose names intended to influence the birth of future children. Names such as *Sose* (meaning ‘to end something’) and *Shkurte* (meaning ‘to shorten something’, in this context implying the desire to reduce the birth of female babies) serve as clear indicators of misogyny, reflecting a cultural preference for boys and a lack of affection for girls.<sup>120</sup>

As other studies mentioned above suggest, the combination of patriarchy with misogyny bring as a result GBV and Kosovo does not do any acceptance to it. Studies suggest that women tend to openly admit the GBV is highly present in Kosovo. More than 60% of women reported that violence against women by their partners, relatives or even strangers is very common, and over a quarter think it is very common.<sup>121</sup> The same study discovered more than half of all women have experienced psychological, sexual or

<sup>116</sup> I Banjska, *Abortions* (Art and Community Center – Artpolis 2019) <<https://femart-ks.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/ABORTIONS-IN-KOSOVO-1.pdf>> accessed 15 January 2026.

<sup>117</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>118</sup> Our World in Data, ‘Sex Ratio at Birth’ (*Our World in Data*) <<https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/sex-ratio-at-birth>> accessed 12 January 2026.

<sup>119</sup> Gulimoto (n 115).

<sup>120</sup> Koha, ‘Pagëzimi me emrin Shkurta, për ardhjen në jetë të një djalë’ [Baptism with the name Shkurta for the birth of a boy] (*Koha*, 20 January 2020) <<https://www.koha.net/arberi/pagezimi-me-emrin-shkurta-per-ardhjen-ne-jete-te-nje-djale>> accessed 13 January 2026.

<sup>121</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Mission in Kosovo, ‘Survey on Well-Being and Safety of Women in Kosovo’ (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Mission in Kosovo 2020).

physical violence at the hands of an intimate partner since the age of 15, while 29% admitted that they have experienced sexual harassment.<sup>122</sup> Women reported suffering from anxiety, depression or difficulty sleeping as a result of GBV.<sup>123</sup> The misogynist environment has led women to accept GBV and blame themselves for the violence they encounter. A third of women say they feel that violence against women is often provoked by the victim and that women who say they were abused often make up or exaggerate claims of abuse or rape. They also consider domestic violence as a private matter.<sup>124</sup>

On the other hand, extremely problematic attitudes, reflecting a strong tendency to approve male violence and prejudices against women, are also prevalent among men over the age of 18 in Kosovo. A conducted study by Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe revealed that men tolerate and even blame women for the violence they face.<sup>125</sup> Almost half of the respondents partially or fully agreed that there are situations where a woman deserves to be beaten.<sup>126</sup> When asked about domestic violence, around a quarter of respondents partially or fully agreed that women should tolerate violence to keep the family together.<sup>127</sup> The survey revealed concerning beliefs among Kosovo men about masculinity. Around 70% of the respondents partially or fully agreed that being a man requires toughness.<sup>128</sup> When it comes to sexual conduction, more than 60% totally agree or partially agreed that men don't talk about sex; they just do, while 23.3 totally agree that men need more sex than women do.<sup>129</sup> Adult men in Kosovo have a very clear division when it comes to household chores and other roles within the family, 70% of them attributing again reproductive roles to women, while believing that men are the ones who have the final word about decisions.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>122</sup> OSCE Mission in Kosovo (n 121) 8.

<sup>123</sup> *ibid* 9.

<sup>124</sup> *ibid* 33-34.

<sup>125</sup> OSCE Mission in Kosovo and UNFPA Kosovo, *A Men's Perspective on Gender Equality in Kosovo: Main Findings from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES)* (OSCE Mission in Kosovo and UNFPA Kosovo 2018)

<sup>126</sup> *ibid* 16.

<sup>127</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>128</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>129</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>130</sup> *ibid*.

## 2. Methodology

In this study, I employed a qualitative methods approach to investigate IBSA in Kosovo using semi-structured and structured interviews. By conducting interviews with various stakeholders, I aimed to gain a clearer understanding of the issue, focusing on various elements that create an environment of online abuse towards women. Misogyny is one of these elements and serves as a key driver behind the non-consensual sharing of intimate images of women and girls online. To gather the needed information, I, firstly, developed semi-structured interviews as a qualitative research method. This approach allowed for a flexible yet systematic exploration of key themes, combining structured open-ended questions with the ability to ask follow-up questions for deeper insights. The semi-structured questionnaire was carefully prepared in advance for all interviewees. The questions were specifically designed to suit the needs and perspectives of different target groups, including victims of IBSA, representatives of NGOs, feminist activists and other relevant stakeholders. In total, I conducted 22 interviews (as shown in Table 1), offering a broad and diverse set of perspectives from those directly affected and those actively working to address these issues.

*Table 1. Interviews with different stakeholders regarding IBSA in Kosovo*

| Interview with different stakeholders              | Number of interviews |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------------|
| Victim of IBSA                                     | 1                    |
| Representatives of NGOs fighting GBV               | 1                    |
| Structured interview from the Ministry of Justice  | 1                    |
| Journalist who covered IBSA                        | 1                    |
| Sociologist                                        | 1                    |
| Feminist activist                                  | 1                    |
| Researcher of gender studies                       | 1                    |
| Adult men who were part of AlbKings Telegram group | 3                    |
| Adult men living in Pristina                       | 12                   |

These first phase of the interviews were conducted with feminist activists or people who had been vocal about IBSA in Kosovo, which was the easiest target to reach. The interviews took place either in person or via Zoom, depending on the participant's location and availability. In both forms, the interviews were informed that the interviews were being recorded and how their information would be used. Participants were contacted through various channels, including social media and email. These interviews aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the development of IBSA in Kosovo. Feminist activists and individuals engaged in gender equality, whether professionally or personally, were initially asked about the state of women's rights and its evolution over time. Other questions explored misogyny and different factors contributing to the emergence and perpetuation of IBSA, while investigated further in the elements of victim-blaming and shaming as two key elements that halt women from seeking help.

The second phase was the contacting of NGOs, actively involved in empowering women, victims of GBV and other professions that have been reporting about IBSA or studying this phenomenon. Kosovo 2.0 facilitated the connection with Kosova Women's Network, in which I gained a more in-depth analysis of the situation. This collaboration enabled me to firstly interview one representative from the Kosova Women's Network and additionally played an important role in facilitating an interview with a victim of IBSA in Kosovo. This interview was conducted via

telephone and proved to be a critical component of my research. The conversation, which lasted 20 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the interviewee, explored the impact of IBSA on the victim's mental and physical health, as well as issues of victim-blaming, shame and the victims trust in institutions such as the police. Additionally, a structured interview consisting of open-ended questions was submitted to the Ministry of Justice in Kosovo via email. I initially informed them about the research and how the data will be incorporated, having a major focus on law regulation of IBSA and alignment with Istanbul Convention.

During the third and the last phase, I designed and implemented a questionnaire incorporating both closed-ended and open-ended questions to gather data from a sample of 15 adult men in Prishtina, three of them part of online groups which were actively sharing nonconsensual images of women and girls in Kosovo. I used a simple random sampling technique, a method that guarantees that each individual within the target population has an equal probability of being selected, thereby minimising selection bias and enhancing the generalisability of the findings. So, every day I would walk on the main street of Prishtina and ask random men, over 18 years old, if they could be part of my research, which lead to many refusals, long conversation about different topics not related to the study and also very insightful responses relevant to my research. Through the printed questionnaire, men were asked how they perceive modern women in Kosovo. Secondly, I asked more in-depth question about IBSA and who is to blame for that, while asking why they believe men share inmate images online.

The study faced limitations due to the limited time, which presented significant challenges in identifying and interviewing women victims of IBSA. The sensitivity of the topic further compounded the difficulty in securing such an interview within the limited period available. Another limitation was the repeated postponement of an interview with representatives from the Ministry of Justice, despite their initial agreement to participate. This led me to send a list of questions via email. For a period of two months, I had to send several reminders and even propose other alternatives, as conducting the interview online, which was not

accepted. The responses were superficial and often did not address my questions. A face-to-face interview would likely have provided a deeper understanding of IBSA in Kosovo and the measures they plan to take to prevent its further spread.

Another limitation came as a result of my position as a researcher, especially when interviewing adult men regarding IBSA, the Telegram group and women. The detention of seven people who created and were active in the group of AlbKings made them more constrained when answering, fearing that admitting that they were part of the group could potentially damage them. Many of these individuals expressed a lack of trust, which impeded the effectiveness of the interviews. Secondly, in order to create a safe environment, I had to preliminarily engage in conversations, very often not related to the research at all and from that, carefully slighting to the topic, which consumed a lot of time. After introducing the topic, I had to also explain briefly why I am doing it, why it necessary to research further this topic, leading inevitably to the disclosure of my positionality on the subject, which may have influenced participants' responses, potentially leading them to offer more measured or controlled information in line with their perceptions of my stance.

### 3. Breaking the silence: Analysing misogyny, blame and legal gaps in Kosovo

This chapter will explore key issues such as victim-blaming attitudes, misogyny and the lack of a suitable legal framework to address this new form of violence against women in Kosovo. By drawing on interviews with a victim of IBSA, a feminist activist, a representative from an organisation dedicated to empowering girls and women, a gender researcher, I will examine this new form of GBV in greater depth, building on the concepts outlined in this study. The themes explored with these stakeholders were central to formulating and addressing IBSA through surveys conducted with 15 men over the age of 18 in Kosovo. Additionally, this section begins by examining the case of the AlbKings Telegram group, formed in early 2023. This case is crucial for understanding the broader context and serves as an introduction to the analysis. Three of the men interviewed were part of AlbKings and their insight is crucial in analysing the main concepts of this research. Lastly, the structured interview with a representative from the Ministry of Justice in Kosovo regarding the legal gaps was helpful in providing insight into the current challenges and limitations within the legal framework addressing IBSA, as well as shedding light on the initiatives the Kosovar Government has implemented to combat this form of violence in alignment with Istanbul Convention. By further analysing the data collected from various stakeholders on IBSA in Kosovo, this study aims at addressing an under-researched topic not only in Kosovo but also in the WB region. It offers new insights into an issue that urgently needs attention to prevent its escalation, which continues to worsen the situation for women and girls.

### 3.1 Contextual overview of image-based sexual abuse through the AlbKings case

While IBSA is under-researched as a topic in the WB region and ultimately in Kosovo, the creation of AlbKings group in Telegram in 2023 gained a lot of media attention, not only in Kosovo but also in the region.<sup>131</sup> The group counted 100,000 members, mostly male, and served as a primary platform for sharing images of Kosovar women and girls, including Albanian women from the Albanian diaspora, along with their personal information as names/addresses or contact information like social media account or phone numbers.<sup>132</sup> For the purpose of this research, I will deal only with the abuse Kosovar women encountered in that group. Disturbingly, some images and videos appeared to involve minors, raising the severity of the group's activities.<sup>133</sup> Other investigations revealed shocking evidence of intimate images of minor girls of eight-years old were shared in the group.<sup>134</sup> Journalists who joined this group for the purpose of investigating it, described it as 'a market place for where each woman was assigned a price for sexual services, there were requests from certain men for minor girls, aged between 14 and 15'.<sup>135</sup>

One of the administrators of this group gave an interview for Insajder, a media outlet in Kosovo, where he admitted that there 'were cases of abuse from men that posted inappropriate content' but he himself, in these cases, took measures and deleted the content.<sup>136</sup> In the interview, he didn't mention the sharing of contacts or images of minors. Instead, he recounted a case involving a girl whose photos, previously shared on social media, were reposted in the group along with her account details. As a result, men from

<sup>131</sup> E Gagovska and A Sherifi, 'Deep Fake Content: A New Reality Awaiting State Regulation' (*Prishtina Insight*, 30 October 2024) <<https://prishtinainsight.com/deep-fake-content-a-new-reality-awaiting-state-regulation-mag/>> accessed 15 January 2026.

<sup>132</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> Zëri.al, 'Zëri zbulon skandalin në Telegram, fotot e fëmijëve dhe vajzave shqiptare u ofrohen pedofilëve dhe manjakëve në grupe' (*Zëri.al*, 5 October 2023) <<https://zeri.al/aktualitet/zri-zbulon-skandalin-ne-telegram-fotot-e-femijeve-e-vajzave-ne-duart-i18147>> accessed 13 January 2026.

<sup>134</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> D Elshani and D Budima, 'Misogyny in the Albanian digital manosphere: The case of AlbKings' (*BIRN*).

<sup>136</sup> This interview was posted on the Facebook page of the media Insajder with the description: 'Exclusive: Interview with one of the admins of "Albkings" - How the group operates, what admins gain, and how girls end up in depression due to public shaming'.

the group began messaging her.<sup>137</sup> When the girl asked the perpetrator to remove her photos, he demanded intimate images of her in order to proceed with her demand. After admitting to the request, she was forced to have sex with him, in order to not send the images to her family or publish them.<sup>138</sup> ‘Even today, the girl remains in a very troubled state of mind’, he said. The administrator explained that the main intention of the group was to reveal the real face of the Kosovar women ‘who pretend to be moral but are not’.<sup>139</sup> ‘If girls text me asking to remove their images in exchange for money or offering to meet up with me, I neither delete the photos, take their money, nor meet with them. The photos stay there for people to see who they really are’, he continued.<sup>140</sup>

Anita Nikaj, a feminist activist, part of The Collective for Feminist Action and Thought, a group that describes their collective as a group that is engaged against heteronormative, capitalist and racist patriarchy, explains that the group with thousands of members put Kosovar women in extreme vulnerable situations, subjecting them to violence from multiple directions:

Within that group, they had brothers, cousins and family members – there were 120,000 people in total. There were also children under the age of 18 in the group. In one instance, we had both a father and son that were members of the group. Thus, violence is not only pervasive but also suffocating; because it passes from father to son.<sup>141</sup>

The former administrator of AlbKings who gave an interview from the media expressed anger towards feminist activist and journalists who investigated the operation of the group, and demanded from the last ones to stop reporting and discussing this matter, otherwise they will take measures.<sup>142</sup> ‘If you deal with us, we deal with you’, he stated.<sup>143</sup> Indeed, this situation escalated and one of the journalists who was covering the operation of this group, Ardiana Thaçi, a journalist with 20 years of experience, was attacked. Her mobile phone number was shared as a contact in

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<sup>137</sup> Insajder (n 136).

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>139</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>141</sup> Interview with Anita Nikaj, feminist activist (Prishtina, 25 June 2024).

<sup>142</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>143</sup> *ibid.*

the group chat which led to hundreds of missed calls and direct messages from men residing in Kosovo or in the diaspora that explicitly demanded sexual favours from her.<sup>144</sup> After consulting the police, she decided to record some of the calls and published the same week the conversations she had with various men who called her, who were part of the Telegram group AlbKings, which brought as a result the temporary closure of the group. Immediately, the administrators created another group and this time, they demanded the group members share every personal detail of Ardiana Thaçi and her family. Thaçi reflects on experiencing significant distress and guilt for placing her family in such a vulnerable position, while police provided her with a protection order.

After a week of broadcasting the conversation within the group, I woke up one morning as usual at 7 am and picked up my phone and saw that I had dozens, even hundreds of missed calls on all my apps. Meanwhile, I was seeing messages like 'What's your price?', 'Hey, gorgeous', 'Hey, babe', 'I'm coming to get you' and other similar remarks.<sup>145</sup>

Interestingly, AlbKings was reported by many male journalists but again the target of the group became a female journalist. That is in line with the main concepts of this research, that suggests that women are the main target because of misogyny. While Thaçi's case and AlbKings serve as an introduction to IBSA, the following section analyses victim-blaming attitudes toward women and girls who are victims of IBSA outside that communication group. IBSA has long existed in Kosovo and AlbKings significantly intensified its prevalence. The analysis will be done in relation to three levels of interaction: micro, meso and macro, having in mind a sociological point of view when grouping these levels.<sup>146</sup> At

<sup>144</sup> Kallxo, 'Si u publikuan numrat e telefonit të gazetareve në grupin "AlbKings" në rrjetin social Telegram?' [How were the phone numbers of female journalists published in the "AlbKings" Telegram group?] (*Kallxo*, 31 May 2024) <<https://kallxo.com/lajm/si-u-publikuan-numrat-e-telefonit-te-gazetareve-ne-grupin-albkings-ne-rrjetin-social-telegram/>> accessed 14 January 2026.

<sup>145</sup> Interview with Ardiana Thaçi, journalist (Prishtina, 20 June 2024).

<sup>146</sup> The micro, meso and macro levels are commonly used in sociological analysis. The micro level examines individual behaviour and interactions, the meso level focuses on institutions and communities, and the macro level looks at broader societal trends and structures. These levels help categorise social phenomena at varying scales of analysis.

the micro level, the focus is on intimate relationships that usually develop one-on-one, including friends and partners, where personal dynamics can significantly influence how women are perceived and treated in cases of IBSA. This level often shapes individual attitudes and beliefs about consent, sexuality and shame. Moving to the meso level, the analysis encompasses family and community interactions. Here, the roles of relatives support or pressure, as well as community norms and values, come into play. Family dynamics can either foster resilience or perpetuate victim-blaming, while community attitudes often reflect broader societal beliefs about gender and sexuality. Finally, at the macro level, the focus shifts to institutions such as legal systems. These larger structures often dictate the overall societal response to IBSA, influencing how cases are treated and how victims are supported or marginalised. By examining these three levels: micro, meso and macro – this research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of what women endure when unconsented images of them are shared online, with the intent to shame and control their sexuality.

### 3.2 Victim-blaming as a tool to silence women

As suggested by the studies provided in this research, women are often blamed for the abuse they face, with the justification that they are at fault for sending the images in the first place, bringing as a result shame, self-blame and hesitation to report the perpetrator or seek help. In the same situation was Aurora (a pseudonym), a girl in her 20s in Kosovo, who was a victim of IBSA for three years, a violence that happened outside the Telegram group. AlbKings amplified IBSA in a more structural way, but the sharing of intimate images of women and girls without consent online has been a present problem in Kosovo. To better understand the impact of victim-blaming attitudes I will analyse her case in the lenses of interaction with friends (micro), family members and organisations (meso) and the institution of the police authorities (macro). I aim to provide relevant details that contribute to the study while making sure her identity remains protected.

Her story is essential for understanding the profound physical and mental health impacts of IBSA on victims. It also reveals how the social context (meso level) and non-professional institutional responses (macro level) leave women feeling powerless and vulnerable to their perpetrators. The purpose of this section is to provide a detailed account of how the sharing and threats of exposing non-consensual images to her family and community online impacted her mental and physical health. Additionally, the section explores the social and cultural barriers – such as shame and honour – prevent victims from seeking institutional support, focusing on victim-blaming attitudes often faced by women in such situations. Aurora reports that her relationship with her former partner began in 2018 during a vacation in one of the cities in the WB. Considering that she lives in Kosovo, the relationship was mostly maintained online until 2020.

We had a long-distance relationship, and he visited Kosovo two or three times. The rest of our contact was only through Facebook. Due to the distance, we naturally exchanged photos. In 2020, I attempted to end the relationship and it was because he had no income and had no ambition for the future, which is very problematic for a man. On the other hand, I had many other ambitions and wanted to achieve many things, while he was focused on a different direction in life. For this reason, I decided to end the relationship.<sup>147</sup>

At that moment, Aurora describes it as dramatic turn of her life, where she found herself trapped a nightmare of threats and demands. She felt obliged to comply with his demands to prevent the sharing of intimate materials online or to relatives, leading her to follow his demands in an effort to prevent IBSA, a situation that kept going for three years and violence intensified in many directions.

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<sup>147</sup> Interview with a victim of IBSA (Tirana, 26 July 2024).

From that moment on, he began to blackmail me. He threatened that if we did not meet, he would send the photos to my mother, father, brother, sister and other family members. Under this threat, I met with him 3-4 times between 2020 and 2022. During each meeting, we engaged in sexual activities under threat. After that period, I decided that I no longer wanted to continue, as I felt uncomfortable and distressed. I had problems and did not feel clean; each meeting made me feel worse. I then told him that I no longer wanted any meetings or contact.<sup>148</sup>

Her refusal to comply with his demands intensified the situation. Intimate photos of her were shared online through fake social media profiles and pornographic websites, compelling her to obey to his demands in an effort to prevent further escalation of the situation.

He started opening Instagram accounts and posting photos. He also uploaded several videos to Pornhub. At that point, I said, 'Stop, I'll do whatever you want.' He demanded money, specifying around 8,000 euros, and gave me about 4 months to gather the amount, which I managed to do. For three weeks, he didn't bother me. However, after those three weeks, the harassment began again; the blackmail resumed with demands for more money and sex.<sup>149</sup>

Aurora describes Kosovar society as highly conservative and deeply influenced by patriarchal values, a perspective that aligns with various studies referenced in this research, which highlight the impact of patriarchy in Kosovo. She mentioned that more liberal countries have a different approach towards intimate relationships, while concepts such as 'situationships' are very normalised and accepted, differently from Kosovo. She was aware that the community would shift the blame on her; a stigma that would affect her and her family, emotionally and socially. Aurora describes the three-year period under constant threats as a living nightmare, marked by significant weight loss and persistent thoughts of suicide. She even recalls one episode where she wanted to jump from the fourth floor, while being on a call with her perpetrator. During

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<sup>148</sup> Interview with a victim of IBSA (n 147).

<sup>149</sup> *ibid.*

this time, her siblings were aware of her situation but offered little support, an attitude coming as a result of victim-blaming. Only her female friends stood by her, accompanying her whenever the perpetrator demanded to meet. She believes she is still alive today only because of the support she received from her female friends, underlying again the importance of sisterhood and solidarity as a form of resistance against GBV. She describes that IBSA has totally changed the relationship with her siblings.

We are a big family, and from my family, three people know about this case. My sister and brother still judge me since from the beginning, not just recently. My relationship with the family members who know about the abuse is much more formal than it used to be. Fortunately, my parents don't know, and my siblings are married and living in their own homes, so I don't have much contact with them.<sup>150</sup>

As indicated by many previous studies done regarding IBSA and victim-blaming attitudes, women find themselves being blamed and targeted by her relatives, family members, known or unknown people. The victim-blaming not only marginalises women, experts communicate, but also limits their presence in both public and online spaces. Following an IBSA incident, women often deactivate social media accounts and reduce their participation in social life; turning their tragedy into their new destiny.

The approach of society as a whole is such that girls and women are expected to prevent it, to think about what men might see as provocative, how men might be affected by their behaviour. Victims are expected to not only take care of themselves, protect themselves and their safety, but also to protect men. This makes it extremely difficult for girls to come forward publicly and report such crimes when they happen in the online virtual world because they know they will inevitably be blamed for why their content was shared.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>150</sup> Interview with a victim of IBSA (n 147).

<sup>151</sup> Interview with Mirishane Sylva, gender researcher (Prishtina, 25 June 2024).

An interview with a young male student in Kosovo highlights the societal double standards in the treatment of IBSA victims compared to perpetrators. He recounts an incident where, one morning while at school, he received an intimate photo of his female cousin via WhatsApp from a friend. He describes this moment as deeply distressing, but notes that the impact on the victim was far more severe. She experienced significant weight loss and withdrew from social interactions with those around her: 'The community blamed the girl for deciding to send the photos, but they justified it by saying she was young and trusted too easily. The boy continued his life as usual, and the person who shared the photos remains unknown. The family knows, but the community does not'.<sup>152</sup>

Victims of IBSA are aware of victim-blaming attitudes of the society towards women, which brings as a result shame, fear and halts them from denouncing the perpetrators. In the case of Aurora, she was certain that the judgmental attitudes would extend to the police institutions. Living in a small community, she was convinced that once she would report the case to the police, her case would be exposed to the public and lacked confidence in the institutional response. Aurora also mentions the concept of honour as an impediment to ask for help, as it would have socially been perceived as she brought shame and dishonour to her family. To add more, the demand for her physical presence at the police station further undermined her trust. Irresponsible behaviour from police officers has been acknowledged also by journalist Thaçi, when she was under organised attack from the administrators of AlbKings and members of the group were constantly messaging and calling her.

The Kosovo police advised me to change my phone number and close my social media accounts, but I saw that as a form of surrender. If I changed my number and closed my accounts, it would feel like giving in to the criminals doing this online. I explained to them that I won't change my phone number for the main reason that I refuse to give up.<sup>153</sup>

<sup>152</sup> Interview with male student (Prishtina, 3 July 2024).

<sup>153</sup> Interview with Ardiana Thaçi (n 145).

Adelina Berisha from Kosovo's Women Network, an NGO that advocates for the empowerment of Kosovar women, reinforces the lack of professionalism of the police officers when dealing with IBSA, while she agrees with the claims that within public institutions there is a victim-blaming mentality and protecting the confidentiality of the victim remains still a challenge in Kosovo.<sup>154</sup> This gap in support from state institutions is frequently compensated by the efforts of NGOs working with women victims of GBV. That is the case of Aurora, who after three years of abuse, decided to ask help from Kosovo's Women Network because she felt safe and understood, instead of reporting directly at the police station.

The following section will further elaborate the influence of misogyny in men's attitude towards victims of IBSA. In this research, misogyny is not solely defined as hatred and hostile stands towards women just because of their gender, but extends to include controlling of women's bodies as a means of reinforcing patriarchal power structures. This control is exercised through the punishment of 'deviant women' that challenge patriarchy and its clear way of organising the society, as a mechanism of subordination, oppression and humiliation.

### 3.3 Different manifestations of misogyny in Kosovar men

This section incorporates the understanding of IBSA of men and boys in Kosovo integrated in this study, who in the vast majority, blame women for the sharing of intimate images without consent, elaborating concepts like morality, shame and honour. Even though the concept of victim-blaming was introduced in the above section, I will examine the view of adult men in the lenses of misogyny. Patriarchy operates by policing women's bodies. Through controlling their sexuality, it maintains the power balance, and the opposite occurs when women choose to rebel against this system. At this point, misogyny, again utilising the concept introduced by Australian philosopher Kate Manne, comes into play. It not only drives hatred toward women simply because they are women but also serves to punish girls who rebel. In this way, the sharing of intimate materials is not only seen as a deserved consequence but

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<sup>154</sup> Interview with Adelina Berisha, representative from a women's rights NGO (Prishtina, 26 June 2024).

also as a message to other girls about the possible consequences should they also choose not to submit to the patriarchal system. I conducted interviews with 15 men, of whom three were members of the AlbKings group.

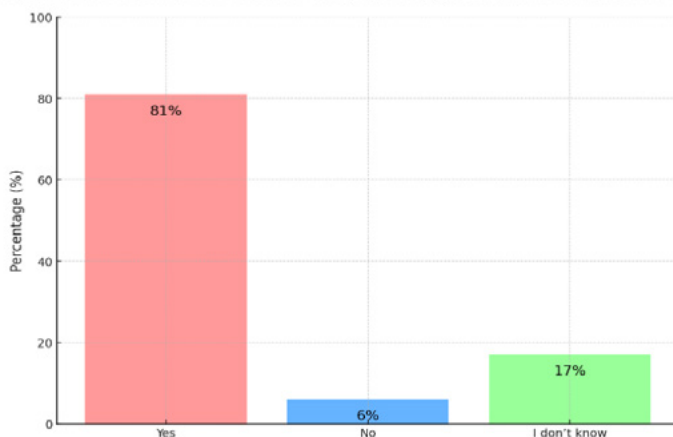
*Table 2. Age of male interview participants*

| Age of male participants | Percentage |
|--------------------------|------------|
| 18–24 years old          | 54%        |
| 25–34 years old          | 33%        |
| 35–44 years old          | 13%        |

Almost all of them expressed discomfort and agitation toward the manner in which women choose to dress in public, linking it with immorality, disobedience and sexual freedom. As indicated in Bar Graph 1, the majority of men in this study believe that women are exaggerating in terms of freedom and body autonomy – a statement coming mostly as a remark about what women decide to wear outside their houses. These viewpoints go in line again with the definition of the Australian philosopher and writer Kate Manne which defines misogyny not only hatred towards women just because they are women, but also as a tool to police women’s bodies. Misogynistic men, again referring to Manne, dislike and punish women who deviate from traditional gender roles within patriarchy.

*Figure 1. Male perceptions of women's freedom demand in Kosovo*

Do you believe that women in Kosovo today are exaggerating their demands for freedom?



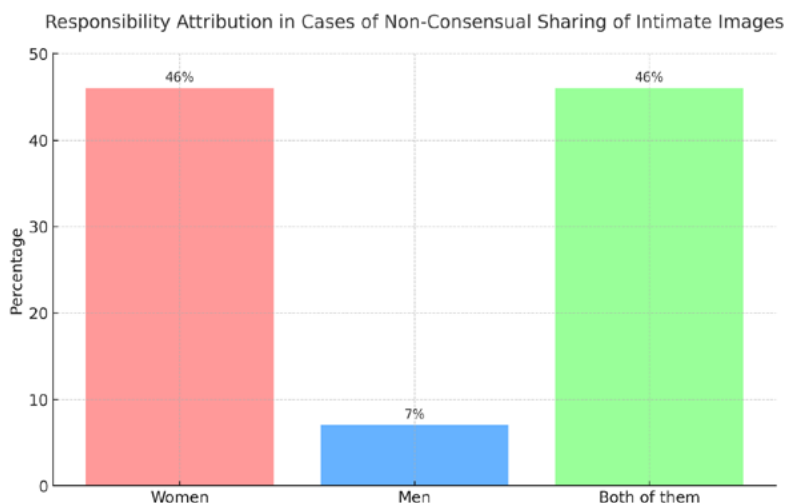
In one of the interviews conducted in Kosovo, a male respondent provided insight into societal attitudes toward women's autonomy and freedom of body expression by the perspective of men. He suggested that when a woman undresses, it triggers biological responses in men, blaming thus women for men's behaviour.

Biologically, if a man sees a woman undressed, the man experiences sexual arousal. This then leads to the realm of pornography, and when someone watches pornography, there is a loss of restraint. When a woman undresses, men fulfil a desire of theirs, but it's not that the woman benefits. The woman is more often abused.<sup>155</sup>

Half of the male respondent, on the first sight, place blame on both sides: firstly, they women for taking and sharing images with individuals they don't fully know or trust, regardless of whether they were in a relationship, and secondly men for ultimately distributing those images. While on the surface they admit to blaming both sides, in reality, the interviews suggest otherwise.

<sup>155</sup> Interview with male interviewee (Prishtina, 3 July 2024).

*Figure 2. Responses of male participants regarding their attributions of blame in cases of IBSA*



For instance, one male participant articulated that, firstly women are the ones to blame when they become victims of IBSA because ‘women are inherently born with respect’<sup>156</sup> – assuming that respect is something they must preserve, and it is lost when they engage in behaviours that are not encouraged in a patriarchal society. Meanwhile, ‘men earn the respect of others’,<sup>157</sup> again assuming that men must behave according to patriarchal values, which means taking action to correct women’s behaviours. He continued by explaining that for men, the future is what really matters, while the opposite goes for women; their value is predominantly shaped by their past experience, insinuating sexual engagement. Another respondent firstly blamed women, because they the ones who control the access in sexual activities. ‘If you become a victim, it is your fault for having given your trust. Because with today’s men, you must be very careful’,<sup>158</sup> he further elaborates, by then moving towards blaming also men for sharing intimate images without consent, explaining that they do it ‘because they have nothing interesting going on in their lives’.<sup>159</sup>

<sup>156</sup> Interview with male interviewee (n 155).

<sup>157</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>159</sup> *ibid.*

Women are judged based on factors like honour and morality which is again connected with the concept of Manne and body policing, whereas men are considered immature or not fully grown, which minimises and justifies their actions. The interviews also showed that when explaining why they blame mostly women, their vocabulary is more diverse and includes more cultural norms and social elements, while men who share those images are described as ‘childish’ or ‘stupid’. The varied vocabulary used to explain blame indicates a deeper misogynistic mindset; while women are subjected to harsh criticism that puts into question their morality and honour indicating that they are immoral women. Men who distribute these images are labelled with less harsh terms that lead to justifying of their actions. Same attitudes are found at another two male interviewee who blames women for sharing such contents with men they don’t trust fully, while men are considered ‘not real men’: ‘I don’t see that woman [victims of IBSA] as worthy of creating a family. You must be very immoral to end up in that state. Most girls are aware; you have to be very foolish to send photos to someone you’ve hang out with a few times’.<sup>160</sup>

When a girl’s photos are shared, I first hold the family accountable because they are the primary support and should educate their daughters. Naturally, I also place some blame on the woman, as I believe they may seek to be the centre of attention. As men, we are somewhat intrigued by intimate matters. I think it is a mistake on the part of women to share such photos; there is no need for them to be public. Intimate matters should remain 100% private between couples.<sup>161</sup>

The language and attitudes displayed in these interviews illustrate how misogyny operates by undermining women’s agency and reinforcing a system that protects male power balance. The interviews even highlight the view of men that suggests women should not trust them, because ‘men are men’, reassuring again the role patriarchy gives them, to dominate and exploit women, using means like misogyny. On the other hand, out of 15 respondents, only one fully attributed the blame to men, expressing his views on women’s liberation and their right to control their own

<sup>160</sup> Interview with male interviewee (4 July 2024).

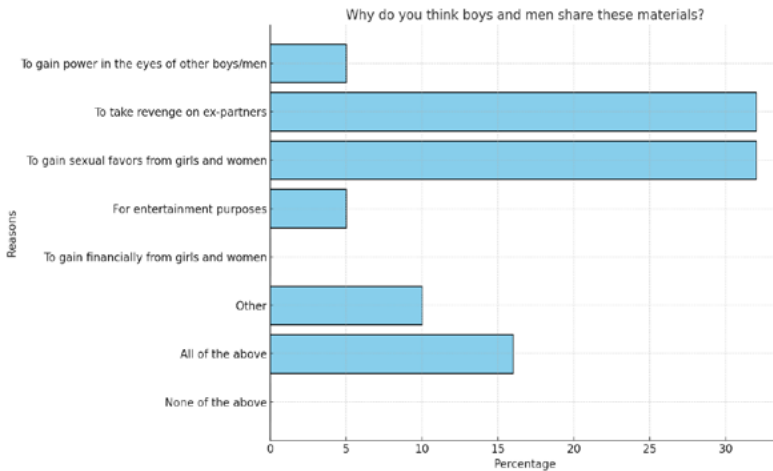
<sup>161</sup> *ibid.*

bodies. The remaining interviewees, however, predominantly held the belief that women are solely responsible for engaging in behaviours that could easily put them at risk of harm mentioning some elements like the change in relationships, assuming that after breaking up, men could use those images against them, always assuming that men can harm women, but not blaming them for the latest. Other options of how women could end up being abused online and/or offline is the loss of the device that stores those images or hackers.

### 3.3.1 Kosovar men and their reasoning for image-based sexual abuse

After asking the respondents opinion regarding women who are victims of IBSA and men who engage in IBSA, I asked a precise question only referring to men, listing some alternatives that were indicated by previous studies done about non-consensual sharing of intimate images online. They had the option to select several alternatives and several key patterns emerge, as indicated in Bar Graph 3. The most prominent motivations cited were revenge on former partners and gaining sexual favours from girls and women. This suggests that firstly IBSA happens within personal relationships that can lead to sexual exploitation. A few of the respondents indicated that all of the listed factors played a role, reflecting the complexity of motivations behind this behaviour. Interestingly, none of the respondents attributed IBSA to misogyny, though it is evident that misogyny is manifested in their reasoning, likely operating at a subconscious level, making the men unaware of its influence. In the 'Other' category, one participant expressed the belief that men engage in IBSA to protect other men from 'immoral women'. The findings highlight how motivations are often tied to personal dynamics, peer relationships or perceived power structures, as other studies suggest.

*Figure 3. Male participants responses on the motivations behind men's engagement in IBSA*



While misogynistic views among men not involved in communication groups specifically created for sharing non-consensual images of women and girls often acknowledge some responsibility for the act of sharing, those who are members of such groups express the opposite sentiment. Notably, participation in the AlbKings group has reinforced harmful attitudes towards women and girls. This was evident in interviews with two men involved in this research, who placed full blame on the victims while portraying other men as ‘real men’ or ‘saviours’ while also intensifying demands for the reassertion of patriarchal structures. These demands manifest in attempts to control women’s bodies and oppose movements, such as feminism, that seek to promote women’s liberation. All three men interviewed, who were formerly part of this Telegram group, express the belief that the women involved willingly sent their images to the group, suggesting that they are sex workers engaged in these activities for financial gain. One of the interviewees said:

It is the girls themselves who share the materials for fun, as they are young and looking to make money. Members of the family and friends have no clue what they do behind their backs. Throughout Pristina, they send locations, inviting others to come over. They gain money through it.<sup>162</sup>

The interviewee's attitudes are highly contradictory, as he initially claims that girls in the group engage in sex work, yet their family members and social circles are unaware of this. On the other hand, the group had over 100,000 members, which implies that it is impossible to send materials without revealing the identity of the sender to the family members or friends. I can analyse that such attitudes are again influenced by misogynistic views, as this reasoning serves to justify the abuse of women and girls done by men, employing simplified frameworks of thought that antagonise women, which leads to justification of abuse. Another interviewee explains that he joined that group just to verify if someone had shared any intimate images of his girlfriend. Same as the previous interviewee, he believes that women are the ones to blame:

'There are more female members than male ones, as they [men] cannot share a photo without girls sending it first. Moreover, she didn't just send it to one boy; she sent it to ten boys'.<sup>163</sup>

The research incorporated additional male participants who had been active in the AlbKings group. One of them reported engaging with the group's activities on a daily basis, noting that there were instances when up to 1,000 posts containing information about girls and women were shared in a single day. He characterised Prishtina as a 'filthy' city, primarily attributing this label to women and girls and their choices regarding their bodies, which he labelled again as immoral. Furthermore, he elaborated on the notion that women today also affect brotherhood, as they allegedly push men to engage in conflictual behaviours towards one another. For the purpose of this study, we will use the exact word the male interviewee used to describe women, victims of IBSA.

<sup>162</sup> Interview with male interview (n 155).

<sup>163</sup> *ibid.*

After seeing those videos, I don't trust women anymore. There are also good girls in Kosovo, but 90% of them are whores. Men who share these materials wanted to warn their friends not to get involved with such girls. We don't judge those men because we are men ourselves. They saved us. Those who were imprisoned, the administrators of the group, were imprisoned unjustly because they wanted to protect their friends from whores. I would even describe them as 'real men'.<sup>164</sup>

In the next section, I will analyse how men, fearing the erosion of the power granted to them by patriarchy, engage in IBSA as a means of preserving their dominance. This behaviour is a reaction to the perceived threat that gender equality poses to the patriarchal order. By targeting women in this way, men seek to maintain the advantage they hold within this system, reinforcing existing power dynamics.

### 3.3.2 Patriarchy in crisis, misogyny in action: Kosovar men and their fear of losing power

When talking about modern women, men in this study make a clear distinction of modern women from other generations, very often taking as an example their mothers' behaviour and how women would operate under previous systems like in the community or family. They clearly make a difference, especially in the reproductive roles. Very often they paralleled modern women with Kosovar men, drawing similarities between the two, perceiving the challenge of norms as an erosion of male authority and ultimately, of the patriarchy.

I am 25 years old, and I remember how my mother behaved with both her husband's family and her own. Today, 20–25 years later, that dynamic no longer exists. Women are no longer hospitable and don't show the proper respect for the family. Many aspects contribute to this, especially social media. Now, women prioritise luxury, going out and spending more time outside.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>164</sup> Interview with male interviewee (Prishtina, 5 July 2024).

<sup>165</sup> Interview with male interviewee (n 155).

Women weren't like this in the 1990s or the 1980s. Lately, women have gone crazy. They are seeking freedom, wanting to become like men. Nowadays, all the women are going out half-dressed, as if saying, 'we can do whatever we want, too'. They want to set the rules themselves, to become the head of the household. A man leads the family, he is the leader. A woman can't give you orders. A woman should stay home, do household chores and take care of the children.<sup>166</sup>

Two of the male interviewees who were part of the Telegram group, went even further and blamed women's movement for liberation like feminism for pushing women to become 'like men'. They make the contrast with women before, who were more obedient towards their husbands, engaged more in reproductive roles as doing the household chores or taking care of the family and relatives. The group itself, along with the way men publicly manifest their contempt and prejudice toward women who disobey the patriarchy, is just mechanism to preserve the power dynamics.

Men seeks to keep us under control because they don't want to lose their power. This newfound awareness among women is threatening to the patriarchal power structure, which is upheld by those who benefit the most from it – namely, men. In these groups, transactions take place; for instance, if someone likes a girl, they may ask in the group if anyone can find her number, and a group mobilises to locate it. Patriarchal power is being threatened, which is why there is such an increase in hatred as a means to maintain control.<sup>167</sup>

These environments, therefore, create an ideal territory for the perpetuation of toxic masculinity. Toxic masculinity as a concept was introduced by Shepherd Blis in the 20th century, used to describe his father's militarised, authoritarian masculinity.<sup>168</sup> After 2013, feminist scholars attributed misogyny, homophobia and men's violence to toxic masculinity.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Interview with male interviewee (n 155).

<sup>167</sup> Interview with Leonora Aliu, sociologist (Prishtina, 1 July 2024).

<sup>168</sup> C Harrington, "What is "Toxic Masculinity" and Why Does it Matter?" (2022) 24(2) Men and Masculinities 345.

<sup>169</sup> *ibid.*

I think there is a significant pressure on young men to conform to norms of masculinity. This inevitably conveys the message that men must be heterosexual, effectively filtering who qualifies as a 'real man'. This means that a 'real man' must be heterosexual and willing to dominate or demean another woman. Within these groups, there are perfect spaces to recreate and maintain toxic masculinity. For young men, it represents a new kind of entry point, allowing them to find their identity within that community. I believe the reward comes from being accepted as part of this community.<sup>170</sup>

After analysing misogyny and its impact, the final section of this research will provide an analysis of the legal framework in Kosovo and the ongoing challenges in aligning with the standards set by the Istanbul Convention. Seven suspects involved in the creation and operation of the AlbKings group were arrested under the criminal offence of 'theft of identity and credentials',<sup>171</sup> a charge that fails to address IBSA and the complexity that this new form of violence poses against girls and women. The Istanbul Convention mandates that its member states to actively work to eliminate GBV and in Recommendation No 1, it specifically addresses IBSA.

### 3.4 Kosovo's ongoing struggle to meet Istanbul Convention standards on image-based sexual abuse

On 25 September 2020, Kosovo's National Assembly amended the Constitution to give direct effect to the Istanbul Convention.<sup>172</sup> The Council of Europe is collaborating with Kosovo authorities on the projects to enhance Kosovo's capacity to address violence against women in line with the Convention's standards, including article 40 which deals with sexual harassment.<sup>173</sup> The Criminal Code of Kosovo was revised to incorporate criminal offences

<sup>170</sup> Interview with Mirishane Sylja (n 151).

<sup>171</sup> Seven suspects were arrested on suspicion of committing the criminal offence of 'identity and credential theft' under art 277/H(2) in conjunction with arts 31 and 77 of the Criminal Code.

<sup>172</sup> Council of Europe, 'The National Assembly of Kosovo Decides to Apply the Istanbul Convention' (Council of Europe, 25 September 2020) <https://www.coe.int/en/web/gender-matters/-/the-national-assembly-of-kosovo-decides-to-apply-the-istanbul-convention> accessed 13 January 2026.

<sup>173</sup> *ibid.*

in alignment with the Istanbul Convention, including domestic violence (article 248),<sup>174</sup> sexual harassment (article 183)<sup>175</sup> and female genital mutilation (article 180),<sup>176</sup> as outlined in articles 33–40 of the Istanbul Convention.<sup>177</sup> The document that assesses the alignment of Kosovo's laws, policies and other measures with the standards of the Istanbul Convention welcomes the introduction of offences that were previously not criminalised in Kosovo in the Criminal Code, such as sexual harassment and female genital mutilation.<sup>178</sup> Concepts like 'online', 'cyber' or 'digital' are not mentioned at all at the Criminal Code, neglecting thus IBSA, a concerning issue that poses an immediate threat to women and girls in Kosovo, impacting their physical and mental health, while it diminishes women presence in public participation.

Article 202 of the Criminal Code considers unauthorised photographing or other forms of recording as a criminal offence, punishable by a fine or imprisonment of one to three years. This article also includes the unauthorised sharing of such images, which is similarly punishable by one to three years of imprisonment.<sup>179</sup> I can argue that, despite the advancements in the Criminal Code, this article and other amendments still fail to grasp the complexity of IBSA in the digital realm. Specifically, the definitions of 'photographs' and 'recordings' may not grasp the broader spectrum of digital content that can contribute to IBSA, such as manipulated images or videos shared online. Secondly, the penalties outlined may not prevent perpetrators, as the consequences

<sup>174</sup> The revised Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo criminalises physical, psychological, sexual or economic violence within domestic relationships, punishable by a fine and imprisonment of up to three years.

<sup>175</sup> The revised Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo incorporates art 40 of the Istanbul Convention, defining sexual harassment as any unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment in line with the Convention.

<sup>176</sup> The revised Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo criminalises female genital mutilation, imposing penalties of six months to five years of imprisonment for non-medical procedures that partially or entirely alter or remove external female genitalia, in line with Istanbul Convention.

<sup>177</sup> Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence CETS No 210 (adopted 11 May 2011, entered into force 1 August 2014) (Istanbul Convention), arts 33–40.

<sup>178</sup> Council of Europe, *Assessment of the Alignment of Kosovo's Laws, Policies and Other Measures with the Standards of the Istanbul Convention* (Council of Europe 2021).

<sup>179</sup> Criminal Code of the Republic of Kosovo No 06/L-074 Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo (2019), art 248.

appear minimal compared to the severe emotional and social consequences faced by the victims. Lastly, the article does not consider the complexities of consent and the evolving nature of digital rights and privacy, which are essential to effectively combat IBSA.

GREVO, in the same document that assesses the alignment of Kosovo's laws, policies and other measures with the standards of the Istanbul Convention, also underlines the lack of data regarding the effectiveness of the existing legal framework on sexual harassment (article 40 of the Istanbul Convention).<sup>180</sup> The delegation was informed that several stakeholders couldn't distinguish between sexual harassment and sexual violence.<sup>181</sup> Sexual harassment happening in the online sphere such as IBSA requires effective application of the Criminal Code and the lack of statistics makes it difficult for delegations to determine how effective the newly incorporated criminal offences have been in addressing online GBV. This matter is also emphasised by the European Commission in its annual progress report which mentioned that during 2022–2023, only 91 cases of cybercrime were reported, while mentioning the need to progress on cyber security laws, in alignment with EU law.<sup>182</sup> In its official response, representatives from the Ministry of Justice in Kosovo admitted that they are working further to address cybercrime:

The Ministry of Justice is in the process of amending the Criminal Code to address violence against women and domestic violence from the perspective of firearms, sexual harassment and the elimination of fines in punitive policies, as well as online violence (cybercrimes). Additionally, the Supreme Court is drafting a new guideline for punitive policies in cases of domestic violence, violence against women and gender-based violence.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Council of Europe, *Assessment of the Alignment of Kosovo's Laws, Policies and Other Measures with the Standards of the Istanbul Convention* (n 178).

<sup>181</sup> *ibid* 67.

<sup>182</sup> Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations, *Kosovo Report 2023* (European Commission, 2023).

<sup>183</sup> Official response from the Ministry of Justice to author (Prishtina, 31 July 2024).

Additionally, the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence was repealed and replaced by the Law on the Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence and Gender-Based Violence Against Women.<sup>184</sup> This new legislation expands the focus beyond domestic violence, distinguishing GBV as violence against women due to their gender. This law introduces sexual harassment through the internet, an unwanted verbal, non-verbal or other action of a sexual nature, that has the purpose or consequence of violating dignity or creating a threatening, hostile, degrading or intimidating environment, approach or practice.<sup>185</sup> However, while the concept of online sexual harassment is introduced, it remains somewhat vague, as the law does not provide a detailed explanation or specific examples to illustrate how such harassment occurs or the legal consequences for perpetrators. Despite this, article 28 of the law makes an important provision, allowing victims of sexual harassment to seek a protection order.

Both forms of violence, including GBV happening online, are addressed by the National Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women.<sup>186</sup> The Action Plan allocates €86,520 from the total €5,745,570 budget for 2022–2024, prioritises awareness-raising, education and the prevention of GBV in the digital sphere.<sup>187</sup> The report however highlights that most of the awareness campaigns were organised during the annual 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence focusing on domestic violence, while the existing laws, policies, guidelines, mechanisms and trainings are again focused on domestic violence, leaving aside other GBV, such as sexual violence, forced marriage, sexual harassment or violence in the digital sphere.<sup>188</sup>

The report underscores the lack of rape crises or sexual violence referral centres in Kosovo.<sup>189</sup> In the official response, representatives from the Ministry of Justice again confirmed that they are working on ‘establishing the first referral center within the

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<sup>184</sup> Law No 08/L-185 on Prevention and Protection from Domestic Violence, Violence Against Women, and Gender-Based Violence Official Gazette of the Republic of Kosovo (2023), art 3.

<sup>185</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>186</sup> Ministry of Justice, ‘National Strategy on Protection Against Domestic Violence and Violence Against Women’ 2022.

<sup>187</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Council of Europe, *Assessment of the Alignment of Kosovo’s Laws, Policies and Other Measures with the Standards of the Istanbul Convention* (n 178).

<sup>189</sup> *ibid.*

Institute of Forensic Medicine'.<sup>190</sup> The Institute of Forensic Medicine in Prishtina momentarily is the only institution that deals with victims of sexual violence. The report found several concerning attitudes within the professional staff. Victim-blaming attitudes have been identified within the staff of the institution, leading to re-victimisation of women.<sup>191</sup> This institutional victim-blaming further deters victims from seeking help, especially when combined with the fact that only one of the nine forensic doctors at the Institute is a woman, limiting the possibility for victims to request a female examiner.<sup>192</sup> Additionally, the Institute's current facilities fail to create a safe and supportive environment, with inadequate privacy measures and accessibility issues for women with disabilities.<sup>193</sup> These shortcomings, along with entrenched rape myths, contribute to a reality where many adult women may avoid seeking forensic services, believing they will not be recognised as 'real' victims.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Official response from the Ministry of Justice to author (n 183).

<sup>191</sup> Council of Europe, *Assessment of the Alignment of Kosovo's Laws, Policies and Other Measures with the Standards of the Istanbul Convention* (n 178).

<sup>192</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>193</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>194</sup> *ibid.*

## 4. From hatred to harm: Misogyny as the main driver for image-based sexual abuse

In this chapter, I will compare the findings from my study on IBSA in Kosovo with previous research that explores the impact of this form of violence on mental and physical health, as well as on interpersonal relationships. This study, one of the first of its kind in the region regarding the non-consensual sharing of intimate materials online, highlights the devastating effects on girls and women, who constitute the vast majority of victims. The study aims to analyse the situation by focusing on several key themes: victim-blaming attitudes, misogyny and the lack of an adequate legal framework to address this type of violence. The study reveals that these three elements prevent girls and women from seeking help, leaving them vulnerable to perpetrators who, in Kosovo's case, often organised into massive communication groups like Al-bKings. This further amplifies the harm, making the victims even more vulnerable, as their images, contacts and often their locations are shared widely. Initially, I will compare the data from my study with findings from other studies conducted in various countries around the world.

Many previous studies included in this research suggest that victims of IBSA have mental health issues as a result of sharing intimate images online. They express a high level of stress, anxiety, depression, obsessive behaviours and suicidal thoughts. Victims find themselves trapped in this cycle of depression also because the unlimited access to the internet and the speed of sharing the images within seconds to a large audience of people mean that their images are never fully deleted. As a result, IBSA impacted, not only their mental health, but also their personal and professional aspects, that led to them being judged by family members and friends. My findings aligned with the results obtained in this research. The interviewee, a victim of IBSA, expressed feelings

of depression and high levels of stress that totally changed her as a person. She lost 11 kilograms for the period of three years. She even admitted to having attempted suicide several times as a result of hopelessness and fear of how it would further impact her life. Again, in line with many studies, the sharing of non-consensual images resulted in the contraction of the relationship with other siblings who were informed about the situation.

The contract of the relationship with three members of her family came as a result of victim-blaming attitudes. They judged her for taking and sharing the images with her former partner, which is again a conclusion found in many other studies. ‘Why did she send the picture in the first place?’ is a common question posed to women, often used to shift the blame onto them and divert attention from the perpetrators. Previous research on this topic explores the impact of victim-blaming in legally following the case. Those studies concluded that victim-blaming prevents women from seeking help, keeping them in abusive relationships. Such cycles of abuse are often amplified by the very nature of the internet, where anonymity and mass sharing create a dangerous environment for victims. Non-consensual content is rarely if ever completely removed. The internet can be an extremely unsafe environment for women, particularly when coupled with a lack of legal action or failure to seek help. My research suggests the same; the victim stayed in an abusive relationship for three years as a result of victim-blaming stands before asking for help.

When further exploring the victim-blaming patterns, previous research indicates that men often place the blame on women, particularly victims of IBSA, while women tend to support one another by encouraging victims to seek help or report the abuse. Further research suggests that men who engage in IBSA list several reasons for sharing non-consensual intimate images, including: (1) entertainment; (2) a desire to show off; or (3) a lack of awareness of the seriousness of their actions. Various studies suggest that this happens for several reasons, one of them being societal concepts of morality. The more patriarchal a society is, the more severely women are judged. In my study, the blame directed at women is analysed through the lens of morality; however, the expectation for women to conform to patriarchal norms, especially regarding control over their bodies, stems from deeply ingrained misogyny. This aligns with the perspective of Australian philosopher Kate Manne, who argues that misogyny is not solely hatred

toward women for being women but about enforcing and re-establishing patriarchal order by punishing those who challenge it. In my study, men involved in communication groups like AlbKings on Telegram revealed they initially joined to monitor whether any images of their partners had been shared, while others expressed curiosity about discovering which women had been ‘unmasked’ by men within the group.

Kosovar men who formally claim not to be part of any groups dedicated to sharing intimate images of women online, yet participated in my research, often place the blame on women for ‘taking and sharing the image in the first place’. In doing so, they minimise the actions of men engaged in IBSA. Their blame is rooted in notions of morality and honour, which was exposed in the previous research done about IBSA, labelling women as immoral while characterising men as ‘immature’, ‘childish’ or ‘not real men’. This tendency reflects a deeply ingrained misogynistic perspective, which seeks to subordinate women who dare to rebel against patriarchy and assert control over their own bodies. The misogyny becomes even more pronounced when these men describe modern women; the vast majority express that the ‘undressing of women’ threatens their values. They compare women to themselves, explicitly stating that women now aspire to be like men, viewing their empowerment as a direct challenge to the oppressive system that has historically favoured male dominance. This perception underscores a fear of change, revealing how deeply patriarchal norms influence their attitudes and the perceived need to preserve traditional gender roles.

This study aims to shed light on the situation of women and girls in Kosovo, considering IBSA as a type of GBV. The research reveals the importance of addressing it and highlights the crucial need for action, particularly in the context of the environment where it is emerging. Official data from various studies indicate that GBV is highly prevalent in Kosovo. More than half of women aged 18–74 reported having experienced psychological, sexual or physical violence since the age of 15. Women confirmed that sometimes it is the victim who provokes the violence, while domestic violence is often viewed as a private matter. Conversely, men are heavily influenced by toxic masculinity expectations, which endorse male violence. My research contributes to the nearly unexplored topic of IBSA by revealing patterns similar to those found in other forms of GBV, which likewise place the burden on

women. IBSA occurs under very particular conditions, including deeply entrenched moral values that render women even more vulnerable. Furthermore, the high levels of sexual violence indicated by various studies suggest that the actual figures could potentially be even higher, given that sexual violence remains a taboo subject, and discussing it openly often invites backlash.

Our study highlights the legal shortcomings in addressing IBSA in Kosovo in alignment with the Istanbul Convention. Recommendation No 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women, issued by GREVIO, the body of independent experts responsible for monitoring the implementation by the parties of the Istanbul Convention, requires state parties to take several measures in order to prevent, protect and prosecute perpetrators of IBSA. Recommendation No 1 requires state parties, including Kosovo, to prevent IBSA by updating legislation in line with international standards and combating gender stereotypes and sexist attitudes online and offline. Secondly, they ask state parties to protect women online by addressing GBV in digital spaces. This includes making certain that laws include all types of cyberviolence and encouraging agency communication to ensure a gender-sensitive response. Thirdly, GREVIO demands that state parties to prosecute: In order to enhance the prosecution and sentencing of GBV against women, including in its digital manifestations, GREVIO advises state parties to put in place a number of measures.

Our research implicates that despite the legal amendments in 2019, the Criminal Code of Kosovo still does not fully address the issues related to the sharing of intimate materials without consent in accordance with the Istanbul Convention. The Criminal Code has criminalised in several articles, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment and domestic violence in accordance with the Istanbul Convention. Concepts like ‘online’, ‘cyber’ and ‘digital’ are not mentioned at all in the Criminal Code. In an official response, the Ministry of Justice admitted that it is in the process of amending the Criminal Code to address violence against women and domestic violence, including violence happening in the digital sphere. In the official response, the representatives from the Ministry of Justice also confirmed that the Supreme Court is drafting a new guideline for punitive policies in cases of domestic violence, violence against women and GBV. The Ministry of Justice in Kosovo responded that they are working on the establishment of the first referral centre for sexual violence, one of the

recommendations from GREVIO, which will be part of the Institute of Forensic Medicine. They also noted that, for the first time, they have drafted and approved the State Protocol for the Treatment of Sexual Violence.

## Conclusion: Image-based sexual abuse: A new front in the unfinished war for gender justice

This study, positioned at the intersection of women's rights, media and law, seeks to measure the impact of IBSA on girls and women in Kosovo and to explore the primary motivations behind this phenomenon. It provides a comprehensive analysis that incorporates the perspectives of all relevant stakeholders. The research questions and hypotheses suggest that misogyny is the driving force behind IBSA, operating as a tool of the patriarchal system to subordinate women and maintain existing power structures. Additional hypotheses and research questions examine victim-blaming attitudes as a tool to discourage women and girls from seeking help or reporting perpetrators. The severity of the issue is amplified by the creation and operation of a Telegram group that distributed thousands of images, contact information and locations of Albanian women and girls on a daily basis. This led to the arrest of seven suspects, including three group administrators. The delayed legal response in curbing the further spread of the AlbKings group highlights the deficiencies in the current legal framework to address the challenges posed by technological advancements and IBSA. This finding aligns with another hypothesis, which explores the existing legal framework in Kosovo and sexual harassment online, and its struggle to align with article 40 of the Istanbul Convention concerning sexual harassment.

The main findings of this study emphasise that the online environment in Kosovo is highly unsafe for girls and women, largely due to an uncontrolled digital space used to reinforce the power men hold over women within the patriarchal system. The testimony of a victim of IBSA highlights the profound physical and psychological impact of the non-consensual sharing of intimate materials online. She stated that the violence she endured for several years resulted in depression, anxiety and frequent suicidal

thoughts. Furthermore, she pointed out that factors such as victim-blaming and shame prevented her from reporting the incident to the police. Gender experts and activists assert that in Kosovo, IBSA victims face questions such as ‘why did she take the picture in the first place?’, a mindset that also exists among police officers. This attitude discourages women and girls from reporting incidents, as they fear public judgement and the consequences for their families.

Interviews with men who were active in communication groups such as AlbKings also place full blame on women and girls. The men claim that the purpose of these groups is to ‘protect’ men from immoral women. Another significant finding relates to misogyny among boys and men and how they approach IBSA. Interviews with 13 men over the age of 18 revealed deep irritation towards feminist movements and the disobedience of women to patriarchal expectations. The majority of the men interviewed argued that modern women are going too far in their demands for freedom, claiming that women now want to ‘be like men’, while they identified immodesty as the primary issue. This judgemental approach to ‘immodesty’ and bodily autonomy is rooted in misogynistic tendencies. According to Australian philosopher Kate Manne, misogyny is not merely hatred towards women because they are women, but rather an attitude aimed at policing, controlling or punishing women who resist male dominance. In this context, the punishment of women who assert agency over their bodies takes the form of public shaming through IBSA. On the other hand, the approach towards men who distribute these materials is often dismissive, with many viewing them as ‘childish’ or ‘not real men’. Some even expect women to behave differently, citing that ‘boys will be boys’, implying that men are naturally inclined to abuse when they feel the power structures are being challenged.

The legal framework and its adequacy in responding to social development, technological advancements and GBV, which has now transferred into new environments, is another aspect analysed in this study. A legal analysis shows that despite amendments to the Criminal Code in Kosovo, which introduced new concepts such as ‘sexual harassment’ and ‘unauthorised photography or recording’, significant gaps remain in fully addressing IBSA and the complexities this phenomenon presents in the modern world. The independent expert group asserts that institutions in Kosovo

are primarily focused on domestic violence and recommends further institutional preparation to address other forms of violence, including cyber violence. Representatives from the Ministry of Justice stated that efforts are being made to further address the recommendations of GREVIO concerning IBSA. Victim-blaming attitudes were found among institutional stakeholders, which could lead to re-victimisation of women and girls, victims of IBSA in Kosovo.

The findings of this study highlight once again the urgent need for immediate action in alignment with the Istanbul Convention, which requires member states to take necessary measures to prevent, protect and prosecute perpetrators. There is an immediate need to improve Kosovo's legal framework by including new concepts that reflect the complexity of the environment in which IBSA takes place. Policymakers should focus first on clearly defining IBSA, categorising it as GBV, and ensuring the inclusion of all forms of online sexual violence. Furthermore, more investment is needed in the training of personnel handling IBSA cases, going beyond domestic violence, to ensure that police officers and legal staff respond to cases with professionalism, sensitivity and up-to-date knowledge, thus avoiding the re-victimisation of girls and women, who are victims of IBSA.

Education on GBV and all its forms is critical for improvement. Digital literacy programmes should be integrated into school curricula, with a focus on educating young people about the potential risks and responsibilities associated with online behaviours. Additionally, awareness campaigns on GBV should include digital violence, focusing on the harm caused by the non-consensual sharing of intimate materials to victims, their families and relatives, along with the legal consequences of IBSA. These campaigns should be part of a broader strategy aimed at protecting privacy and human dignity in digital spaces, ensuring safe environments for the most vulnerable target groups online, such as girls and women. Ensuring such an environment and preventing IBSA requires collaboration among different stakeholders, utilising an interdisciplinary approach. Cooperation between legal experts, IT specialists, gender studies scholars, NGOs working with human rights or women's rights and feminist activists is essential for developing more effective national policies. It is also crucial to involve representatives from institutions and media to fully address this issue at all levels.

The data show that IBSA is no longer an isolated phenomenon but a real problem faced by girls and women, adding yet another unsafe environment for them. The nature of the online world, intertwined with the offline, amplifies the consequences, reaching an extraordinary audience, where anyone can suddenly become a perpetrator. IBSA is not just sexual abuse; it is a violation of human dignity. Addressing this issue is essential not only for gender equality but also for the future of digital safety and human rights in Kosovo. As the digital sphere becomes increasingly integrated into daily life, the risks posed by IBSA will continue to grow unless decisive action is taken. Cultural transformation is urgently needed. A shift in societal attitudes that challenges deep-seated misogyny is crucial for creating an environment where women feel safe both online and offline. Efforts to address IBSA must be accompanied by broader campaigns to dismantle the patriarchal norms that perpetuate GBV.

# Bibliography

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# Appendix I

Questionnaire for semi-structured interviews with the gender researcher, sociologist and representative from the women's rights NGO.

01 — What are some of the reasons that drive boys and men to distribute intimate materials without approval on the internet/ social groups or communication channels such as Viber/ WhatsApp, etc?

02 — Who are some of the typical target groups (who share some common traits, for example, ex-partners, but I believe there are other typologies) that distribute intimate materials without approval? According to your analysis, what motivates them to publicly share these materials in groups with thousands of members?

03 — How would you assess the component of misogyny in boys and men in the spread of this relatively new form of violence against women?

04 — According to your analysis, are there elements of reward from other men when someone shares materials/contacts of girls and women? Does this serve as an incentive for them to engage further, and how is this related to misogyny?

05 — Do these actions confirm in the eye of other men their masculinity?

06 — On the other hand, what are some local cultural elements or customs in Kosovo that empower this phenomenon?

07 — What stops girls and women from seeking help?

08 — I would particularly like to focus on the culture of slut-shaming. How does this culture impact the barrier to reporting these cases?

09 — What impact does the concept of shame and honour in Kosovo have on reporting/seeking help?

10 — What is your comment on the legal framework, is it sufficiently appropriate to combat image-based sexual violence?

11 — How do you perceive the role of social media in the context of image-based sexual violence in Kosovo, and what measures do you propose for both women to protect themselves and for citizens to become more sensitised and avoid judging victims?

## Appendix II

Structured interview sent to the Ministry of Justice in Kosovo.

01 — What are the institutions that provide services for women experiencing various forms of violence, including online sexual violence, and where are they primarily located?

02 — In the Criminal Code, the distribution of sexual materials without consent corresponds to article 205 'Unauthorized Photography and Recordings' and article 230 'Rape'. Do you think the phenomenon of sexual abuse through images (image-based sexual violence) is sufficiently represented in the existing laws of Kosovo, including the 'Cybercrime Prevention and Combat Law' or the 'Law on Protection from Domestic Violence'?

03 — 2.1 What remains to be improved in these laws to align them with the Istanbul Convention, specifically article 40 'Sexual Harassment' of this Convention?

04 — Is the establishment of referral centres for sexual violence foreseen, according to the recommendations in the document 'Assessment of Kosovo's Laws, Policies, and Other Measures' Alignment with the Standards of the Istanbul Convention'? What about other centres that offer psychological services?

05 — Referring to the AlbKings case, the first report about this group was made on 5 October 2023, by the media Zeri.al, while police actions were taken months later. Why was the response so delayed? On the other hand, similar groups continue to operate under different names. Are measures being taken, and what challenges are currently being faced in shutting down these groups?

06 — What measures have been taken to inform the victims of this group and other women and girls who are victims of sexual abuse through images about where they can go for help and support?

07 — What projects have been implemented or are planned by the Agency for Gender Equality to inform teachers about online violence? What are the reasons for the continued low reporting of cases in schools?

08 — A major obstacle for girls and women victims of online sexual violence is the police's response, which often blames the victims. How have you worked to educate and inform the staff of this institution?

09 — Does the Department of Cybersecurity foresee additional measures for this relatively new phenomenon, image-based sexual abuse, given the urgent need for intervention?

## Appendix III

Semi- structured questionnaire with Ardiana Thaçi who covered extensively the case of AlbKings and was attacked by the members of the group.

01 — When did your interest in reporting online sexual violence, generally known as image-based sexual abuse, begin? What were the first steps you took? How did the situation progress?

02 — What were your initial feelings when you received various phone calls from men who were part of the AlbKings group?

03 — After the names were published publicly, what was the reaction of the men who contacted you?

04 — During this period, how many contacts have you had with girls and women who are victims of image-based sexual abuse?

05 — Based on your experience in reporting this issue, how many of the girls and women have reported to the police, and if the cases are few, what do they list as reasons for not doing so?

06 — What are the perceptions of Albanian society about this phenomenon, and who is the finger pointed at?

07 — According to the analysis you have conducted, what are some of the reasons that drive boys and men to share intimate materials without consent on the internet/social groups/or communication channels like Viber/WhatsApp, etc?

08 — Who are some typical target groups (that share some common characteristics, such as ex-partners, but I believe there are other typologies) that share intimate materials without consent? What motivates them to share those materials publicly in groups with thousands of members?

09 — How would you assess the component of misogyny from boys and men in the spread of this relatively new form of violence against women?

10 — How would you evaluate the legal framework and the provision of services in Kosovo for victims of image-based sexual abuse?

## Appendix IV

A semi-structured interview with a woman who experienced image-based sexual abuse in Kosovo.

01 — Can you share with me when this all started? How did the situation begin, and what were the initial demands or threats made? How long did the abuse or coercion continue?

02 — How did this experience affect your physical and mental health? Did you experience any symptoms of anxiety, depression or other mental health challenges during or after the incident?

03 — Who among your family, friends or community knew about your situation? How was their reaction?

04 — Did you consider or decide to report the incident to the police? Why or why not? Was there any element of shame that stopped you from reporting?

05 — How did this experience affect your social life?

06 — What changes did you notice in your emotional well-being and sense of self-worth?

07 — Did this situation impact your professional life, either in your career or educational pursuits?

08 — Looking back, what support would have made a difference for you during this time?

09 — What message or advice would you like to give to other women who might be facing similar situations?

# Appendix V

A semi-structured interview with adult men who were members of AlbKings, a Telegram group that shared intimate images of Kosovar women and girls without their consent.

01 — What is your age?

02 — How did you first learn about the AlbKings Telegram group?

03 — What motivated you to join the AlbKings group?

04 — Who do you believe is at fault when intimate images of women and girls are shared online without their consent?

-Men

-Women

-Both

Please explain your reasoning.

05 — What do you think drives men to share intimate materials of women and girls in groups like AlbKings?

-To gain power in the eyes of men/boys

-To take revenge on their ex-partners

-To gain sexual favours from girls and women

-For entertainment purposes

-To gain financially from women and girls

-Other

-All of the above

-None of the above

06 — What is your opinion of men and boys who share intimate images of women and girls without their consent?

07 — How has your involvement with this group influenced the way you perceive women and girls?

## Appendix VI

A semi-structured interview with adult men in Kosovo, exploring their perspectives on image-based sexual violence.

- 01 — What is your age?
- 02 — Do you believe that women in Kosovo today are exaggerating their demands for freedom?  
-Yes/No/I don't know -If yes, please explain why.
- 03 — Who do you believe is at fault when intimate images of women and girls are shared online without their consent?  
-Men  
-Women  
-Both
- 04 — Please explain your reasoning, why women/men/both?
- 05 — What do you think drives men to share intimate materials of women and girls in groups like AlbKings?  
-To gain power in the eyes of men/boys  
-To take revenge on their ex-partners  
-To gain sexual favours from girls and women  
-For entertainment purposes  
-To gain financially from women and girls  
-Other  
-All of the above  
-None of the above
- 06 — What is your opinion of men and boys who share intimate images of women and girls without their consent?



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