



Invisible Women in Northern Kosovo

A Policy Analysis on Documentation, Gender, and the Right to Work

Kosovar Stability Initiative



Invisible Women in Northern Kosovo

The absence of civil documentation has long been recognized as one of the most serious structural obstacles to the consolidation of Kosovo's institutions. Documentation is not only a bureaucratic tool; it is the foundation of citizenship, the entry point to exercising political rights, accessing education and healthcare, and participating in the labor market. The European Union has repeatedly emphasized in its Progress Reports that Kosovo must strengthen its civil registry and guarantee inclusion, particularly for vulnerable groups, if it is to advance toward accession. Yet, more than two decades after the war, significant categories of residents remain invisible to the state. Among them, Albanian women from Shkodra who married Serbian men in the north of Kosovo represent a striking case of institutional neglect and gendered exclusion.

The roots of this phenomenon lie in the post-war reality of Kosovo's north, where Serbian parallel structures operated for years, offering documents, social assistance, and health services, but outside Kosovo's legal framework. For residents of the region, and especially for women migrating from Albania, this created a dual and often contradictory reality. They lived in Kosovo, raised families there, and contributed to rural life, but legally they were recognized only through Serbian documents. Kosovo institutions, lacking access to the territory or the political will to intervene, did not establish systematic procedures to integrate them into the national registry. The result is a generation of women—wives, mothers, and workers—who remain without the legal recognition of the state in which they live.

The motivations behind these marriages were complex but often rooted in poverty and limited opportunities. In rural Shkodra, many families viewed marriage into northern Kosovo as a chance for their daughters to secure stability. Intermediaries and informal agencies reinforced this perception, promising decent living conditions and reliable husbands. In reality, many of these women encountered harsh economic conditions, patriarchal traditions, and isolation. Their stories reflect not only individual hardships but also broader structural failures, where migration across a contested border produced a new category of stateless or semi-stateless individuals.

Dukata's story illustrates these dynamics vividly. After marrying into Gornje Jasenovik, she spent nearly a decade in a single room without running water. She recalls that what was promised to her family—a stable household, modern conditions—was never realized. Today, while her husband and children possess Kosovo documents, she remains excluded. Without identification, she cannot seek employment or apply for social benefits, leaving her dependent on subsistence farming and unpaid domestic work. File Bishevac, a widow in Jabuk, raises her two children alone. Although she contributes daily through agricultural labor, her work is invisible to institutions, and she survives only on minimal Serbian assistance. Diella, married to Boshko, has never managed to obtain Kosovo documents; her Serbian ID allows her to cross borders but does not enable her to participate in Kosovo's legal or social systems.

These narratives reveal the profound disjuncture between life as lived and life as recognized by the law. For these women, marriage created a path to a new family but also a barrier to citizenship. They became simultaneously insiders—mothers and wives raising children in Kosovo—and outsiders, excluded from the rights and protections of Kosovo's legal order.

Institutional estimates underscore the scale of the problem. The Director of Health in Zubin Potok, Gordana Mihajlović, has stated that around 50 Albanian women married to Serbs in the municipality remain undocumented even after 20–22 years of residence. In a training organized by the Regional Development Agency North, of 80 women who participated, 50 were Albanian citizens in the same condition—unemployed, undocumented, and living in rural poverty. According to Mayor Izmir Zeqiri, the real number may be significantly higher, potentially involving hundreds of women and children. These figures suggest that what appears as isolated hardship is in fact a structural pattern of exclusion.

The implications for human rights are severe. International standards are unambiguous: Article 6 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognizes the right of every person to legal recognition. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) guarantees the right to be recognized everywhere as a person before the law. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) specifically obliges states to ensure that women enjoy equal access to employment, education, and social services. By leaving these women outside

the civil registry, Kosovo violates these commitments. Moreover, the exclusion is gendered: it is women, not men, who overwhelmingly remain undocumented, reflecting both patriarchal family structures and institutional neglect.

The consequences for labor rights are equally troubling. Without documentation, women cannot enter formal employment, register businesses, or benefit from labor protections. Their economic activity is confined to unpaid domestic work and informal agricultural labor. File's narrative illustrates this invisibility: despite contributing daily to her family's survival, her labor remains outside the scope of recognition and protection. Dukata's frustration at being unable to apply for jobs captures the systemic nature of this exclusion. This is not simply a matter of poverty; it is a denial of the right to work, enshrined in the International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions and recognized in the European Social Charter.

The intergenerational effects magnify the injustice. Children of undocumented women often face challenges in enrolling in school or accessing healthcare. Without birth registration tied to valid documents, they risk inheriting the same exclusion as their mothers. This creates a cycle of marginalization that perpetuates inequality across generations. For a young state like Kosovo, which aspires to EU membership, such systemic exclusion undermines the credibility of its commitment to the rule of law and human rights.

The political consequences are also significant. As long as women remain undocumented, Kosovo's institutions project an image of weakness and selective governance. Failure to integrate these women not only damages the lives of individuals and families but also challenges Kosovo's international reputation. In the context of EU integration, where protection of minority rights, gender equality, and social inclusion are core benchmarks, this problem cannot remain unresolved.

International and regional practices provide clear models for solutions. Bosnia and Herzegovina deployed mobile registration units and enacted special laws to resolve the status of displaced persons. North Macedonia in 2012 introduced a legal pathway for stateless persons to obtain documentation, while Montenegro developed targeted measures for women and children. Kosovo can adapt these experiences by designing context-specific policies

for the north, ensuring that women married into Serbian families are not left outside the legal framework.

Ultimately, this issue is not simply about documents. It is about dignity, equality, and the recognition of women as full citizens. These women are not invisible in their communities—they are mothers raising children, women laboring in fields, and contributors to local life. They are invisible only to the state, which has failed to recognize their existence in law. Addressing their situation is therefore not only a technical task of civil registration but a moral imperative for building inclusive citizenship in Kosovo.

Recommendations for Kosovo's Institutions

1. Adopt a special law for the documentation of Albanian women married in northern municipalities, introducing simplified procedures, administrative amnesty, and recognition of marriages conducted in Serbia.
2. Establish accelerated documentation procedures with clear deadlines and reduced bureaucratic barriers, ensuring transparent criteria for eligibility.
3. Deploy mobile civil registration units and provide free legal aid in northern villages, reaching women directly where they live.
4. Ensure immediate access to healthcare, social protection, and education for women and their children once documentation is issued, guaranteeing that rights materialize in practice.
5. Develop targeted employment and empowerment programs for affected women, including vocational training, subsidies for employers, and support for entrepreneurship.
6. Create an inter-institutional monitoring mechanism linking the Government of Kosovo, municipal authorities, and civil society, tasked with tracking progress and publishing annual reports.
7. Launch bilingual awareness campaigns (in Albanian and Serbian) to inform women of their rights, the procedures available, and the institutions responsible, reducing dependence on informal networks.