A Comparative Study of Gender Equality in the Fashion Industry: Mixed-Method Research Across North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

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Abstract

This study examines gender inequality in the fashion industries of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, focusing on the cultural and structural factors shaping women's roles. Through a mixed-method approach, the research surveys 81 professionals in North Macedonia and 69 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, alongside 28 qualitative interviews with industry professionals. The findings reveal persistent challenges, including pay gaps, limited leadership opportunities, and insufficient support for women's professional development. While both countries face these issues, the study suggests that North Macedonia shows more positive shifts, with a growing number of women occupying managerial and entrepreneurial roles. However, gendered working conditions and underrepresentation in leadership remain common in both nations. The research highlights the need for targeted policies to foster inclusivity and clear support for women's career advancement. It also suggests areas for further research, particularly on how evolving cultural and economic factors impact gender equality in creative industries.

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Section 1: Introduction

Despite the fashion industry being one of the largest in the world with nearly 94 million global jobs, gendered inequities still plague the fashion sector. For instance, almost 80% of the worldwide fashion workforce is female; however, they occupy low-paying insecure positions while the leadership and management tiers are male-dominated (Lewis, 2024). Such a troubling paradox is a challenge for an industry with a "female face," yet gendered inequalities are present nearly in each corner of the industry (ILO, 2024). In an industry that dresses the world, why are women still left in the shadows regarding leadership and power?

Yet while these inequities are globalized, it seems that such issues plague transition economies more so. These challenges are also mirrored in countries like North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where similar gender-based barriers in the labor market reflect broader societal issues. The International Labor Organization stresses that women globally earn 20% less than men, North Macedonia's Women and Men Publication (2023) reports women earn 14% less than men, while women in Bosnia earn 12-15% less. In comparison to the overall labor force of both, this shows a gendered division of work where women work in sectors where lower earnings are commonplace and men work in sectors that render higher earning bases. For instance in Bosnia and Herzegovina women make up about 70-80% of the fashion workforce but remain concentrated in lower-wage, less stable positions (Gender Equality Index, 2019).

Despite its economic and cultural significance, gender inequality in the fashion industry remains an underexplored topic in both countries. While labor market data provides insights into broader trends, there is no research specifically examining how gender disparities manifest within the fashion sector. This gap is particularly striking given the industry's reliance on a predominantly female workforce, and its potential to influence societal perceptions of gender roles (Lewis, 2024).

In North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, women face challenges in the workforce due to a mix of structural issues, like fewer leadership roles, pay gaps, and financial struggles, combined with cultural pressures from patriarchal norms and traditional gender roles (Bonfiglioli, 2019). Additionally, entrepreneurship challenges increase gender

disparities in both countries. For example, in Bosnia, only 37% of women participate in the workforce compared to 58% of men, well below the EU average of 67% (Council of Europe Development Bank, 2023). Financial barriers are a significant factor, with only 25% of women-owned businesses securing bank loans compared to 41% of men. Similarly, in North Macedonia, women-owned enterprises account for just 29% of all businesses, highlighting the persistent male dominance in entrepreneurship (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, 2023). These patterns likely extend into the fashion industry, particularly among women seeking to establish themselves as designers or business owners.

Fashion is not merely an economic driver; it is a cultural force that connects nations and reflects societal values. Yet, the ways gender roles unfold within this industry vary widely across countries. Despite the significant number of women working in creative and operational roles, the gender dynamics within the fashion industry are still poorly understood. This is particularly true in post-socialist countries like North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. As the fashion industry continues to grow, understanding the dynamics of its workforce becomes increasingly critical. Women's marginalization within this sector provides an opportunity to explore the intersections of gender, labor, and culture in a context where traditional roles and systemic inequalities remain deeply entrenched.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on the fashion sectors of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, using a comparative approach to uncover shared challenges and unique regional dynamics that influence women's roles in the industry. By examining workplace challenges and socio-cultural factors, the findings aim to provide a detailed understanding of how these dynamics shape women's opportunities and experiences. These insights contribute to a broader discussion on the evolving role of gender in the workplace and its implications for the fashion industry today. Therefore, this mixed-method exploration is guided by the following research question:

How do gender disparities manifest in the fashion industry in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what cultural or structural factors drive these inequalities?

To support this study, the research also delves into several sub-questions:

1. What are the key barriers to achieving gender equality in the fashion industry in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina?
2. How do wages, job roles, and working conditions differ between men and women in the fashion sectors of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina?
3. How do gender roles and cultural perceptions in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina influence the participation and treatment of women in the fashion industry?

This research is significant for several reasons. First, it contributes to addressing a crucial gap in understanding gender inequalities within the fashion industry, a sector overlooked in academic and policy discussions in the Western Balkans despite its predominantly female workforce. While broader labor market data from North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina reveal persistent disparities in areas such as pay, leadership, and sectoral segregation, there are no studies that explicitly examine these issues in the fashion industry (ILO, 2024). Around the globe, women occupy 80% of the workforce in the garment and fashion sector but remain mainly occupying low-wage, unstable positions with limited representation in leadership roles (ILO, 2024). Hence, this research aims to explore how these trends manifest in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, offering insights into the unique cultural and structural factors that influence gender dynamics in these transitioning economies.

Both countries score below the EU average on the Gender Equality Index, reflecting economic and political challenges relevant to the fashion industry. In North Macedonia, the Gender Equality Index (2022) scored the country at 64.5, which is several points below the EU average of 68.6, highlighting persistent disparities in areas such as work, money, and decision-making. For example, in North Macedonia, women spend an average of 3.3 hours daily on unpaid care work compared to 1.1 hours for men, significantly limiting their opportunities for professional advancement. Comparatively, Bosnia and Herzegovina scored 53.9, which is significantly below the EU average and provides an important snapshot of the current gender equality situation (Gender Equality Index, 2023). The report highlighted that Bosnian women spend more than 6 hours on unpaid labor a day, while men spend 3 hours.

Additionally, in Bosnia 25% of women-owned businesses secure bank loans, compared to 41% of male-owned enterprises, which depicts structural financial barriers that may also impact women entrepreneurs in fashion (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023). Hence, the research aims to understand these broader patterns and provide context for analyzing the specific challenges faced by women in the fashion industries of both countries.

Furthermore, this research is significant as it aims to bridge the gap between literature on gender inequality in labor markets and research on creative industries in post-socialist and transitioning economies. By examining how structural barriers like wage differences, working conditions, and limited leadership opportunities—intersect with cultural factors like patriarchal norms, this research will provide valuable insights into gendered labor dynamics within the fashion industry. Additionally, its comparative approach will contribute to understanding regional variations and shared challenges, offering lessons that can be applied to similar contexts globally.

For the fashion industry, this study has practical implications. By interviewing and engaging with local designers and industry professionals, it aims to identify systemic challenges related to pay, representation, and working conditions. It will also explore how cultural expectations shape opportunities for women in leadership and entrepreneurship, providing a nuanced understanding of the gendered dynamics at play in the industry. The primary goal is to analyze the current state of gender equality in the fashion industry and identify key areas where further research is needed.

Lastly, for policymakers, the research highlights the need for targeted interventions to address structural challenges in labor market participation, wage equality, and leadership representation. It aligns with broader efforts by international organizations such as the ILO and EU to promote gender equality in the workplace. For both nations, this research report provides practical insights to inform policies that can empower women within the fashion industry, promote workplace inclusivity, and improve career advancement accessibility.

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Section 2: Literature Review

This literature review examines gender equality in the fashion and textile industries in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, contextualized within broader gender issues in the region. The analysis draws from two gender equality frameworks, and numerous sources, including governmental reports, international organizations, and academic studies.

2.1 Theoretical frameworks for understanding gender inequality

Connell's Gender Order Theory (1987) explores how societal structures and cultural norms sustain gender hierarchies. Central to this framework is the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and emphasized femininity, which delineates roles that privilege men in leadership positions while confining women to caregiving and subordinate roles (Connell, 1987). These dynamics are particularly evident in the fashion industry of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where men dominate managerial roles, and women are disproportionately employed in lower-paying production positions (Connell, 1987; Lewis, 2024).

Building on this, Acker's Gendered Organizations Theory (1990) highlights how organizational structures create room for gendered assumptions. Acker also argues that workplaces are not gender-neutral and that they are instead unequal through their policies, practices, and norms (Acker, 2012). This framework directly correlates to the organizational hierarchies of fashion and textile companies, where systemic biases and gendered divisions may play important roles in shaping workplace culture and opportunities. This is further evident in the fashion industry in how women's production roles are undervalued compared to men's managerial positions, reflecting structural biases that reinforce gender segregation (Williams et al., 2012). Together, these theories provide a framework for examining how cultural and structural factors shape women's experiences in the fashion and textile sectors of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

2.2 Gender inequalities in North Macedonia

Economic participation and wage gaps

Despite legislative measures promoting gender equality, North Macedonia's labor market continues to exhibit pronounced gender disparities. Women's labor force participation remains significantly lower than men's, driven by wage gaps, societal norms, and occupational segregation. According to the State Statistical Office (2023), women earn, on average, 14% less than men and are overrepresented in lower-paying sectors such as education (60.6%), and health and social protection (77.7%). In contrast, men dominate higher-paying industries, including ICT and construction (Women and Men Publication, 2023).

Cultural and structural barriers

Cultural expectations have been found to further increase these inequalities (The Time Use Survey, 2015). The Time Use Survey (2015) reveals that women in North Macedonia dedicate an average of 3.3 hours daily to household tasks, compared to 1.1 hours for men, restricting their capacity to engage in paid work. This imbalance is particularly notable in rural areas, where limited access to childcare services further constraints women's workforce participation. Marginalized groups, such as Roma women and women with disabilities, face compounded barriers, including discrimination and exclusion from employment opportunities (North Macedonia Gender Equality Profile, 2023).

Gender Equality Index

The Gender Equality Index (GEI) is a tool created by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) to track how countries are performing on gender equality. It evaluates six main areas: Work, which looks at job participation and working conditions; Money, focusing on income and access to financial resources; Knowledge, which covers education and training opportunities; Time, examining how men and women divide their time for unpaid care and social activities; Power, measuring representation in leadership and

decision-making roles; and Health, which assesses access to healthcare and overall well-being (Gender Equality Index, 2024). The index provides a nuanced level and analysis of gender disparities, assigning scores that highlight gaps and areas for improvement.

North Macedonia's Gender Equality Index (2022) score of 64.5, which is lower than the EU average of 68.6, highlights ongoing issues in areas like economic participation, political representation, and access to resources. These challenges stem from long-standing structural barriers that continue to limit progress. For instance, the Power domain reveals that women are still underrepresented in leadership positions, both in politics and in business. In the Time domain, women's disproportionate responsibility for caregiving and domestic tasks reduces their opportunities to participate fully in the workforce or advance their careers. Additionally, female-dominated industries like textiles show how structural inequalities have deepened over time, further restricting economic opportunities for women (Bashevska & UN Women, 2020).

2.3 Gender Inequalities in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Economic participation and wage gaps

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, women face significant economic challenges, reflecting broader structural inequalities. Women comprise over 50% of the population but remain underrepresented in managerial roles (UN Women, 2023). For instance, only five out of 141 mayoral positions are held by women, and 83% of managerial positions in the largest companies are occupied by men (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023). While initiatives such as quotas and leadership training programs aim to address this gap, societal resistance, and structural barriers hinder progress (UN Women, 2023). Wage disparities also persist; women earn approximately 78% to 85% of the wages earned by men for the same work, according to the European Commission (2019). A gender pay gap of 12-15% further highlights systemic issues in workplace equity (ILO, 2024).

Cultural and structural barriers

Cultural expectations and structural limitations significantly impact women's workforce participation. Despite being 10.8% more likely than men to complete higher education (Labor Force Survey, 2020), women face persistent gender discrimination in labor market opportunities. Academic literature on traditional societal roles often positions women as primary caregivers, limiting their ability to engage fully in paid work (Bonfiglioli, 2019). Moreover, women are disproportionately employed in the informal sector, which offers lower wages and fewer protections compared to the formal economy, exacerbating economic vulnerabilities (Gender Profile of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2021).

Gender Equality Index

Bosnia's Gender Equality Index (2023) score of 53.9, which is significantly below the EU average, highlights systemic challenges in economic participation, representation, and access to resources. Compared to neighboring countries like North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina's gender pay gap remains more pronounced, reflecting deeper structural inequalities. Additionally, scores in domains such as Power (45.3) and Time (55.2) reveal that there are consistent inequalities in leadership representation and work-life balance. These statistics mirror real-life limited female participation, supported by the statistic that only 5.6% of mayoral positions are held by women in 2024 (Agency for Statistics of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2023). This correctly reflects the current sociocultural norms that frame politics as a male-dominated field (UN Women, 2023). These numbers not only portray where things stand today but also point to the urgent need for meaningful progress toward gender equality.

Working conditions in the textile industry

The textile and footwear industry is a vital sector in Bosnia and Herzegovina, employing a significant proportion of women. Women comprise over 75% of the workforce

in this industry, with approximately 20,000 workers employed between 2018 and 2024 (InfoAid, 2019). However, the working conditions are often characterized by low wages, insecure employment, and long working hours. This heavy reliance on female labor highlights the gendered nature of the sector, where women predominantly occupy production roles, such as sewing and assembly, that are characterized by low wages, shaky contracts, and minimal benefits (Lewis, 2014). Moreover, many of these workers are employed informally, further amplifying economic vulnerabilities by denying them access to social protections, such as health insurance or parental leave (InfoAid, 2019). Similarly to North Macedonia, these challenges are particularly notable in rural areas, where economic opportunities are scarce, and reliance on the textile sector is higher (ILO, 2023).

The prevalence of these issues is not unique to Bosnia and Herzegovina but reflects a global trend in gendered labor divisions within the textile industry. Studies from the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2023) indicate that women in this sector worldwide face similar barriers, including wage disparities and exploitative working conditions. In countries like Vietnam and Bangladesh, where women also make up most of the fashion sector's labor force, they similarly experience wage inequalities and unstable employment (ILO, 2023). Therefore, addressing such barriers requires targeted interventions, which could be actions like promoting unionization, or providing skills training programs to empower female workers. Efforts to formalize employment and offer pathways to leadership roles are particularly important for fostering gender equity in this vital sector.

2.4 Regional and international perspectives

Broader socioeconomic context

Gender inequalities in the Western Balkans are deeply rooted in historical and cultural contexts (Bonfiglioli, 2019). Bonfiglioli's analysis of women and industry in the Balkans provides a detailed historical perspective, linking current inequalities to patriarchal structures established during industrialization and further heightened during the transition to market economies. This economic shift often displaced women from stable, formal

employment to informal or unstable roles, particularly in sectors like textiles, where female labor became associated with low wages and limited protections (Bonfiglioli, 2019). Addressing these deeply ingrained inequalities requires not only a recognition of their historical origins but also proactive strategies to tackle structural barriers. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (2023) highlights the importance of evidence-based policies in tackling these systemic issues and advancing gender equality in the region. These policies include measures to increase women's participation in leadership and decision-making roles, implement gender-responsive budgeting, and ensure fair access to vocational training programs (OECD, 2023).

Cultural attitudes remain an important challenge to achieving gender equality, as traditional gender roles continue to define women as primary caregivers and men as breadwinners (OECD, 2023). This dynamic not only limits women's workforce participation but also reinforces occupational segregation and pay gaps. The Country Gender Equality Profile (2023) highlights resistance to challenging these norms, which are strongly rooted in societal gender expectations and continue to reinforce inequalities in both public and private life. For example, in the fashion industry, women often face limited career advancement opportunities, while men dominate higher-paid managerial roles (Lewis, 2014).

International studies have also shown that media representations further increase these disparities (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Women in the media are frequently depicted in stereotypical roles that downplay their contributions or trivialize their expertise. These types of portrayals reinforce gender stereotypes, and can even significantly influence recruitment and promotion in the workplace (Santoniccolo et al., 2023). Hence, media representation can not only reinforce cultural biases, but it can also hinder efforts to reshape societal perceptions of gender roles (Santoniccolo et al., 2023).

2.5 Research gaps and future directions

While the existing body of research provides valuable insights, critical gaps remain that are particularly relevant to the fashion and textile industries in North Macedonia and

Bosnia and Herzegovina. There is a lack of intersectional analyses exploring how gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status intersect to shape women's experiences in these industries, particularly for marginalized groups such as rural women or ethnic minorities. Similarly, deeper research is needed to understand rural-urban disparities in access to resources, such as vocational training, childcare services, and equitable employment opportunities, which significantly impact women's participation in the workforce. Additionally, longitudinal studies are needed to assess the long-term effectiveness of gender equality initiatives, such as policies promoting equal pay and access to leadership roles in the fashion sector. Addressing these gaps will be essential to advancing gender equality within these industries and informing evidence-based policymaking in both nations.

Section 3:Methodology

3.1 Mixed-methods approach

This study utilized a mixed-methods approach to investigate gender disparities within the fashion industries of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By combining quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews, the research aimed to gain both statistical insights and a deeper understanding of participants' lived experiences. This approach was essential to address the study's core research question holistically, providing measurable data while capturing the more nuanced cultural and structural factors of gender inequality.

The mixed-methods approach was selected for its ability to answer both the "what" and "why" of the study's focus areas. Quantitative methods offered objective evidence regarding gender differences in wages, roles, and sector representation, while qualitative interviews illuminated the personal narratives and perceptions underlying these patterns. The comparative nature of the research further enabled an exploration of both shared trends and distinct dynamics between North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, offering valuable regional insights.

3.2 Research design

The research was designed to provide a detailed, comparative analysis of gender disparities in the fashion industries of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. A mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, was employed to ensure a holistic examination of the topic. Quantitative data offered measurable insights into trends like the perceptions of gender equality, experience and exposure to discrimination, workplace policies, women's professional development, and traditional gender roles. Meanwhile, the qualitative interviews shed light on the cultural and structural factors when it came to gender equality.

To increase the accessibility and validity of the research, the surveys were drafted in English and subsequently translated into Macedonian and Bosnian. This process eliminated potential language barriers, enabling participants to respond with greater clarity and accuracy. The qualitative interviews were also conducted primarily in Macedonian and Bosnian to foster open communication and culturally relevant discussions. All responses, including direct quotes from participants, were translated into English during the analysis phase.

Before the interviews, participants were provided with detailed informed consent forms, which they signed to confirm their understanding of the study's purpose and their voluntary participation. Participants were fully informed about their privacy and confidentiality rights. Pseudonyms were used in reporting results and quotes to protect identities, and demographic details such as age, gender, and occupation were collected to ensure relevance to the study's focus.

The semi-structured interviews followed a topic list (Appendix B), ensuring that key themes were consistently addressed. However, the order of questions was flexible, allowing conversations to flow naturally and enabling interviewees to elaborate on issues they found most important. This adaptability enriched the qualitative data by capturing deeper insights into participants' lived experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. These recordings were securely stored to safeguard participants' privacy and were

transcribed in their original languages for thematic coding. Thematic analysis was then applied to identify patterns and recurring themes, providing a structured framework for the qualitative findings.

3.3 Data collection methods

Quantitative methods

The quantitative phase was carried out through an online survey, designed using Typeform, and distributed on various social media channels. The platform was chosen for its accessibility and user-friendly interface, which enhanced broad participation. Before distribution, the survey underwent a testing phase to ensure clarity, eliminate redundancies, and confirm neutrality in question phrasing and scales. This adjustment process aimed to minimize bias and enhance the reliability of the responses.

Both nations' surveys (Appendix A) consisted of demographic questions as well as specific questions on wages, workforce representation and decision-making, discrimination, inclusivity policies, and perceptions of gender equality. The surveys initially focused on collecting demographic data before progressing to questions about gender equality and, later, the topic of sustainability within the fashion industry. This structured approach aimed to engage participants progressively, ensuring thoughtful and comprehensive responses.

Sampling information

The survey was distributed online across North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with a total of 81 respondents from North Macedonia and 69 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, providing a broad cross-section of the fashion industry.

North Macedonia

The majority of respondents were female (75%), followed by male respondents (22%), with a small percentage identifying as "other" or not specifying their gender. Age-

wise, the largest groups were from the 25-34 years (35%) and 35-44 years (33%) categories, followed by 18-24 years (17%). Smaller groups were represented from the 45-54 years (9%) and 55+ years (6%) brackets.

Graph 1: Gender distribution (North Macedonia)

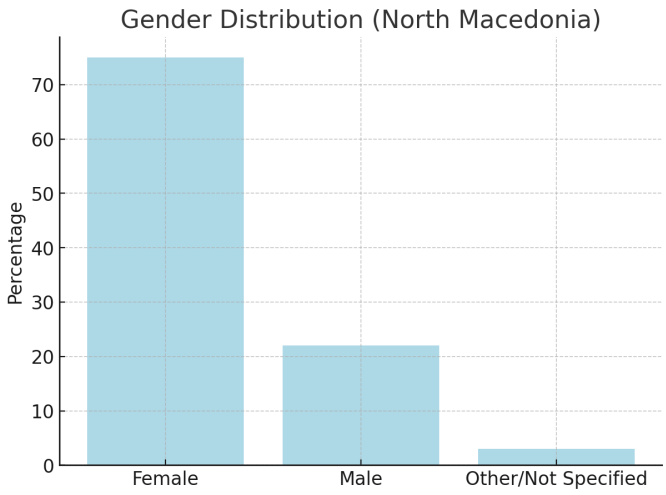

Chart 1 illustrates the gender breakdown of respondents in North Macedonia. Regarding education, 58% of respondents had completed higher education, 22% held a master's degree, and 14% had secondary education. A small percentage of respondents had doctoral degrees (1%) or some form of informal education (5%). When it came to professions, the largest number of respondents (35%) were employed in fashion design, followed by those working in fashion education and research (21%) and fashion marketing and PR (19%).

Graph 2: Age distribution (North Macedonia)

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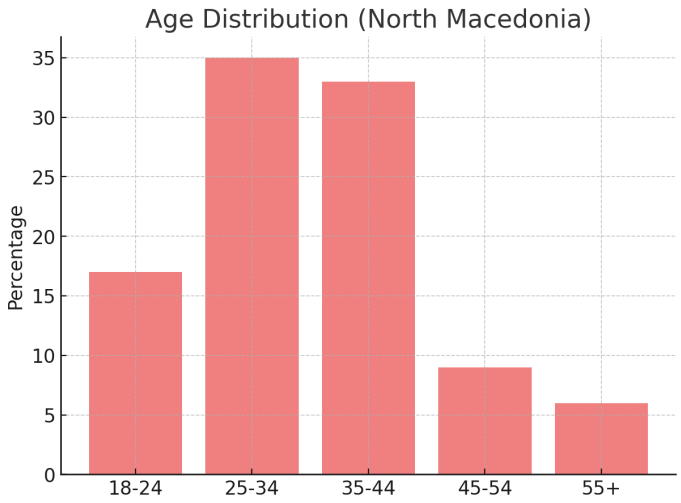
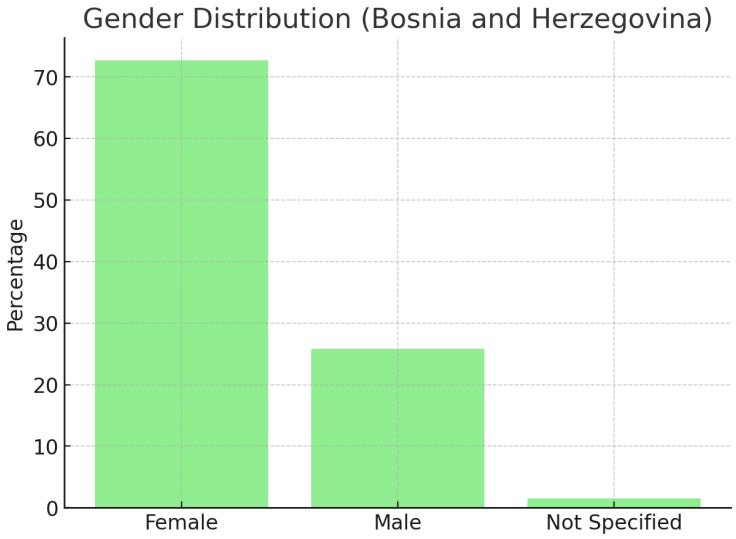


Graph 2 shows the age distribution of respondents in North Macedonia. Overall, these demographic details highlight the broad spectrum of experience and education levels among the respondents in North Macedonia. This diversity provides valuable insight into the different perspectives that may influence the findings of this study.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

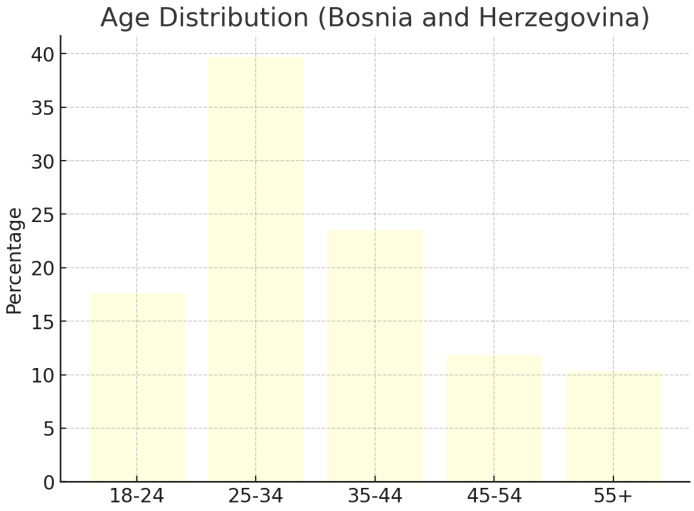
In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 72.7% of respondents were female and 25.8% were male, with one participant not specifying their gender. Additionally, the majority of respondents (91%) were from urban areas, with only 9% from rural regions. Education levels varied: 38.2% had a bachelor's degree, 22.1% were self-taught, and 20.6% held a master's degree. Regarding professional roles, 45.6% were fashion designers, followed by those in marketing/PR (13.2%), photographers (11.8%), and models (10.3%).

Graph 3: Gender distribution (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



Graph 3 depicts the gender distribution among respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The age distribution was also similar to North Macedonia, with the largest group being from the 25-34 years category (39.7%), followed by 35-44 years (23.5%). Smaller groups included 18-24 years (17.6%), 45-54 years (11.8%), and 55+ years (10.3%).

Graph 4: Age distribution (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



These demographic details from Bosnia and Herzegovina give us a clearer picture of the diverse sample of the study's participants. By understanding these factors, we can better

interpret their responses and gain a deeper insight into the broader trends shaping the fashion industry in both countries.

Qualitative methods

North Macedonia

The qualitative phase in North Macedonia involved 10 semi-structured interviews with professionals across various fashion industry sectors, including design, retail, education, research, styling, modeling, and marketing/PR. The participants, five men and five women aged 24 to 51 were selected for their expertise in key areas. Interviews lasted around 30 minutes and were conducted via Zoom, allowing for a flexible yet focused exploration of the topics, guided by a pre-established topic list (see Appendix B). This format ensured consistency while providing the opportunity for deeper probing into specific areas of interest.

The interviews provided valuable insights, with a significant portion reflecting the experiences of female participants, offering a balanced view of gender-related insights within the industry. The professionals interviewed were highly experienced, with firsthand knowledge of the challenges and opportunities in their respective fields. Their contributions were essential to gaining a deeper understanding of the fashion industry landscape in North Macedonia.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, 18 interviews were conducted with professionals from various sectors of the fashion industry, such as models, designers, textile companies, marketing experts, stylists, and zero-waste businesses. The participants varied widely, from small business owners to leaders of large textile manufacturing firms, and entrepreneurs committed to sustainability. Interviews typically lasted between one and one and a half hours and were held in informal settings like coffee meetings, creating a relaxed environment that encouraged open, candid discussions. Topics covered included the economy, politics, gender equality, sustainability, and the future of the fashion industry.

The interviewees were all based in urban areas, with representation from both Republika Srpska (RS) and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBIH). Many participants also recommended others for interviews, which helped expand the range of perspectives in the study. While most interviews took place in person, a few were conducted via phone or in writing, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the industry's dynamics.

3.4 Privacy and ethics considerations

Before conducting the interviews, the researchers adhered to the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) to ensure that all data collected was securely stored and protected. This commitment to GDPR compliance safeguarded the ethical handling of data in accordance with the EU standards and ensured legal accountability throughout the research process. Each participant signed an informed consent form, outlining their voluntary participation and specifying how their data would be used during the research. The informed consent form also ensured that participants were fully informed about the purpose of the research, the nature of the interviews, and the need for audio recordings. Before the interviews began, the form was discussed with participants, and they were reminded that they could choose to abstain from answering any question or withdraw from the interview at any time, without any consequences.

To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were used in reporting results and quotes. Additionally, demographic details such as age, gender, education, and occupation were collected to ensure the relevance of the data to the study's focus while maintaining participant confidentiality.

Section 4:Results and Discussion North Macedonia

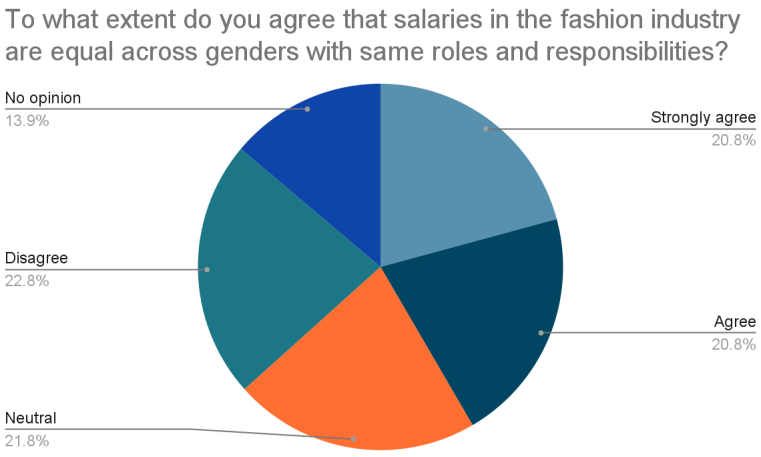
4.1 Quantitative findings

Gender equality and the workplace

The results of the survey provide a nuanced view of gender equality in the fashion industry in North Macedonia, with several key findings that highlight both progress and areas for improvement. Regarding career advancement opportunities for men and women in the fashion industry, a majority of respondents (59%) agreed or strongly agreed that there is equal opportunity for both genders. However, a significant portion (25%) remained neutral on this issue, and 14% disagreed. The Chi-square test indicated no statistical correlation between this attitude and factors such as gender, education, age, or the specific segment of the fashion industry in which respondents worked. This suggests a general perception of equality, though the neutral responses imply uncertainty or a lack of clarity in some areas.

When asked about gender equality in salaries for similar roles, 42% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that salaries are equal, while 23% disagreed. A large portion (22%) was neutral, and 14% did not have an opinion. Again, no statistical dependence was found between this perception and factors such as gender, education, age, or industry segment, suggesting that the issue of pay equality is not influenced by these variables but remains a debated issue.

Graph 5: Equal pay



Regarding leadership representation, 46% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that men and women are equally represented in leadership roles. However, 29% disagreed, and 23% were neutral. There was no statistical correlation with gender, education, age, or industry segment, but a moderate positive correlation was found between equal representation in leadership and the perception of equal pay ($r = 0.534$, $p = 0.000$), suggesting that those who believe in equal representation in leadership also tend to perceive pay equality. In addition, on the same topic of workplace inclusivity and decision-making, 56% of respondents agreed that men and women are equally encouraged to voice their opinions and contribute to decisions. No correlation was found with demographic variables, but a positive correlation was found between support for women's advancement and encouragement in decision-making, suggesting that both issues are related to the respondents' perceptions.

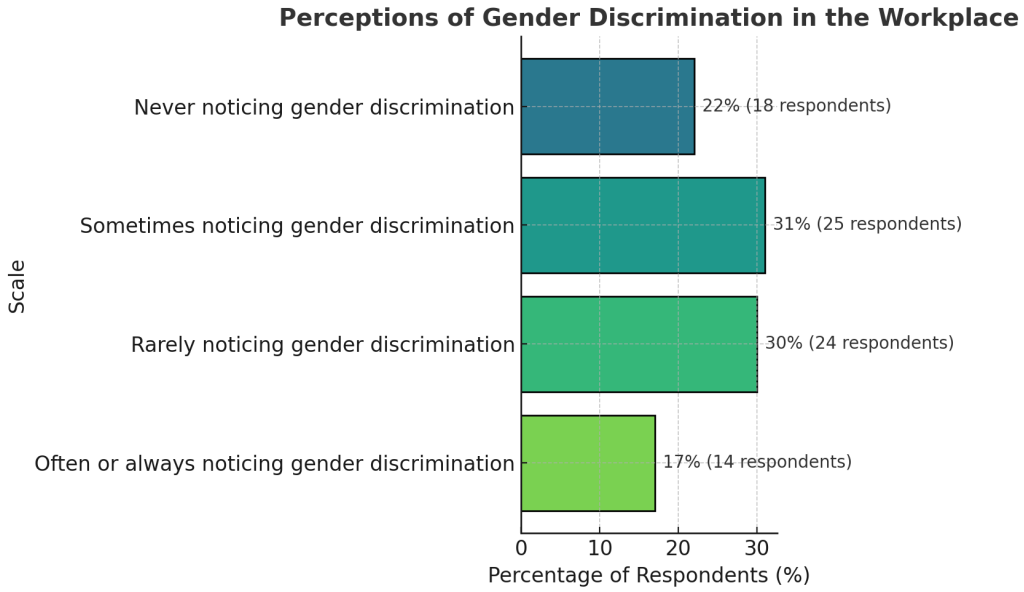
In terms of support for women's advancement, 41% of women agreed or strongly agreed that adequate support exists, compared to a higher proportion of men (84%) who shared this view. This gender discrepancy was statistically significant ($r = 39.613$, $p = 0.001$), highlighting the differences in perception between men and women regarding support for career advancement. These results indicate that men think there's much more support for professional female advancement than women think. But is there a gap between how men perceive the work being done and how women undertake their positions? This could highlight a disconnect between men's perception of the workplace environment and women's lived experience. This discrepancy emphasizes the importance of aligning perceptions with actual practices and outcomes to ensure meaningful progress in gender equality initiatives.

Perceptions of gender discrimination

Perceptions of gender discrimination in the workplace reveal a mixed picture. While 22% of respondents reported never noticing any gender discrimination, the majority (78%) acknowledged its presence to varying degrees: 31% stated it occurred sometimes, 30% rarely, and 17% often or always. Interestingly, no significant correlation was found between perceptions of discrimination and demographic factors such as gender, education, age, or

industry segment, suggesting that workplace discrimination is a broadly recognized issue across diverse groups. Similarly, 14% of respondents reported never witnessing gender-based inappropriate behavior, while 86% had observed such behavior at least occasionally, further reinforcing its pervasive nature. Despite these observations, responses regarding workplace policies to address gender discrimination were varied. While 37% of respondents were neutral, only 17% were very confident, and 20% were somewhat confident about the existence and effectiveness of such policies, highlighting a lack of clarity or consistency in organizational approaches to the issue.

Graph 6: Perceptions of gender discrimination



Based on responses from 81 individuals.

Gender bias and social standards

Regarding promotions, 38% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that men are more likely to receive promotions than women with similar qualifications. While this suggests a general belief in gender fairness, a significant portion (30%) remained neutral,

and a notable gender divide was observed, with more men disagreeing compared to women. No correlation was found with demographic variables.

Additionally, the influence of traditional gender roles on perceptions in the fashion industry was acknowledged by 60% of respondents, who either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. This highlights the ongoing impact of traditional gender expectations, although no correlation was found with demographic factors, suggesting that these perceptions are pervasive across the industry. Finally, the survey also touched on the experiences of non-binary individuals, with 36% of men agreeing that non-binary individuals face more discrimination than men and women, compared to 32% of women. Younger respondents were more likely to agree with this view, with the highest agreement found in the 18-24 age group (50%).

Conclusion

All in all, there are positive perceptions of gender equality in some areas such as career advancement and leadership, while there is also evident concern about gender discrimination, unequal pay, and traditional gender roles. The overall lack of statistical correlations for many of the questions seems to imply that these problems are quite generalized across various demographic groups of the fashion industry sector in North Macedonia. Still, response variations, especially those about gender, indicate the need for some targeted interventions and development. More about those discussions will be elaborated below, informed by the qualitative findings.

4.2 Qualitative findings

This section brings to light the qualitative findings from the interviews conducted with participants in the North Macedonian fashion industry, which underlined the effects of gender inequality in the industry and pinpointed both cultural and structural causes. These understandings in turn, provided deeper insights through the lens of gender equality theory and were confirmed by direct quotes of the interviewees.

Gender equality challenges in the fashion industry

Similarly to the quantitative survey results, the interviews revealed significant structural and cultural barriers to achieving gender equality, signifying the overarching themes identified in the survey. Participants highlighted the key challenges being traditional gender norms, undervaluation of women's labor, and unequal access to opportunities.

Several participants emphasized how deeply rooted societal expectations limit women's opportunities in the industry. Klara noted that while *"Women have gained equality in some spheres,"* traditional norms are still present, limiting their creative freedom and leadership roles. Angela observed something similar, *"We follow world trends, but our culture still expects women to prioritize their household roles, which creates tension for those pursuing careers."* These observations align with Connell's theory of gender regimes, which argues that societal institutions, including workplaces, often reinforce traditional roles through implicit norms. The presence of these norms creates additional barriers for women seeking to navigate both professional and domestic spheres (Connell, 1987).

Additionally, interviewees frequently mentioned how women's contributions, especially in production positions, were undervalued. Angela detailed the challenges faced by women in textile factories, describing them as *"hardworking and dedicated but underpaid and mistreated."* Save similarly remarked that the lack of advocacy for women in production roles *"sadly this creates a cycle of exploitation."* These observations resonate with Acker's (1990) theory of gendered organizations, which highlights how systemic undervaluation of women's labor perpetuates inequality in workplace hierarchies.

While the survey suggested general perceptions of equal career advancement (59% agreed or strongly agreed), qualitative findings revealed a more complex and layered reality. All 10 interviewees pinpointed financial barriers as key challenges to professional development, some highlighting the need for governmental support and funds. Klara and Nikola noted the absence of mentorship and funding for women, particularly young designers, as a major barrier. *"Without financial support or investors, young women have little chance to establish themselves,"* Klara explained. These findings challenge the survey's more optimistic perception of career opportunities and emphasize the need for targeted

interventions. Save further supported this argument, emphasizing, *"What we see is a complete lack of interest from the state. Even for cultural projects or education in design, there's no systematic funding. If we want to survive, we rely on private efforts or international collaborations."* Similarly, Angela reflected on the precarious nature of the industry, stating, *"Many talented people quit because they simply cannot make a living out of this profession."* The interviews showed that the barriers appear to affect both men and women, however, they disproportionately impact women in production-based sectors like textiles, where opportunities for advancement are even scarcer.

Pay inequality and work environment

The results showcased both shared and contrasting perceptions of wage disparities and working conditions in North Macedonia's fashion industry. While many participants highlighted ongoing inequalities, others provided perspectives suggesting progress or sector-specific differences. These different insights align with the quantitative survey results portrayed in Graph 5, where only 42% of respondents agreed salaries were equal for men and women, while 23% actively disagreed, and 22% expressed neutrality.

Andrea described wage inequality, particularly in factory and production roles, stating, *"I truly believe women are paid less in the same roles, especially in factories. It's almost normalized, like it's expected, but it shouldn't be"*. Her comments are consistent with Angela's firsthand experiences in factory environments, where she noted, *"I've worked in a clothing factory. The conditions were terrible: long hours, harsh environments, and little recognition for the effort women put in."* Nikola also touched on this inequality but from the perspective of male models, suggesting that the inequities extend to men in certain roles: *"There's a lack of appreciation for male models here, especially compared to female models. It's harder to find gigs, and the pay isn't great either."* This insight adds a layer of complexity to the discussion, showing that while women in factory roles face wage gaps, men in specialized creative roles may also experience undervaluation.

However, not all interviewees perceived significant wage differences, in fact six out of the ten participants mentioned that pay inequality was a challenge of the past. Bojana,

reflecting on her academic and design experiences, stated, *"In the creative sectors, I haven't observed clear gender-based pay gaps. The issue might be more pronounced in other parts of the industry, like manufacturing or retail."* This nuanced perspective aligns with the survey's findings, where a substantial portion of respondents remained neutral or unsure about wage equality. Similarly, another participant stated his belief that gender does not play a significant role in determining pay, especially in creative roles. Save emphasized that *"Gender doesn't matter much in terms of creativity and design. If you have the talent, people respect you. I see many women leading creative projects here, and I think the industry values talent over gender."* Save's suggests that in creative and design roles, merit determines an individual's worth rather than gender, which is an optimistic indicator that pay inequality may not be as pronounced in these sectors or is becoming less of a challenge.

Leadership and representation

The gender dynamics in the Macedonian fashion industry showcase a complex picture. While the industry is overwhelmingly female-dominated in terms of workforce participation, some individuals still observe male-dominated leadership roles, reflecting a wider global pattern (Lewis, 2024). In this context, the issue of gender equality in leadership and professional recognition is more detailed. More than half of the interviewees expressed optimism about gender equality in their careers, while others shared mixed experiences of gendered power dynamics that continue to shape their professional development.

Even though women make up the majority in roles like designers and retail staff, many leadership positions such as management or ownership—are still held by men. However, many interviewees offered a more positive perspective, suggesting that in North Macedonia, gender doesn't necessarily limit a woman's ability to progress into these leadership roles. In fact, 5 out of 5 women who were interviewed were educators, managers, or entrepreneurs. Save, captured this sense of optimism:

"I absolutely responsibly claim that with all the fashion houses in our country, ready-made garments, industries, companies, ateliers that we have had, no one has ever told us anything

specific related to gender, sex, sexual orientation… But the only thing they have told us is to send us your portfolio."

Save's perspective reflects a more gender-neutral approach to career advancement in certain corners of the Macedonian fashion industry. Here, it's clear that skills and professionalism are the foundations of success, not gender. In such environments, women's creativity and output are judged on merit, rather than through traditional gendered lenses. This creates a sense of inclusivity, where leadership decisions are based on competence and effort.

Yet, while Save's experience is an encouraging one, it's not universal. For others, the reality is more complicated, with gender bias and expectations getting in the way of professional interactions and opportunities. Andrea shared her frustration of feeling undermined by male colleagues:

"However, I have faced attitudes and expressions where men try not to leave you, to have your say, and to have the last word. However, I personally haven't given up, but there are women who give up and withdraw."

Andrea's experience highlights a clear challenge for women in leadership: despite being in positions of authority, women often are faced with traditional gender roles that undermine their voices and leadership. The idea that authority is somehow more suited to men is still prevalent, even in spaces like fashion that are traditionally seen as female-oriented. This quote highlights Andrea's resilience, but it also shows an uncomfortable truth:| Many women, faced with this kind of resistance at their workplace, may feel discouraged and withdraw. This dynamic speaks to the enduring gender expectations in leadership and decision-making processes.

Interestingly, some interviewees, like Aleksander, felt that the fashion industry may be less affected by gender-related obstacles than other industries. He argued that fashion, with its emphasis on creativity, tends to be seen as more naturally aligned with femininity, which could lead to a more inclusive environment:

"I personally have not witnessed any gender-related obstacles in the fashion industry. What I see as an experience is that a certain gender is being "forced" in the creative industries,

not in the fashion industry, because fashion, in general, belongs, perhaps, naturally to one gender."

Aleksander's comment reflects a perception that, in creative industries like fashion, gender norms are less rigid. Fashion, he argues, is inherently linked with feminine qualities, making it a more welcoming space for women. This view aligns with the idea that creative roles are less likely to be dominated by gender bias compared to more technical or managerial roles (Williams et al., 2012). However, while Aleksander's view reflects an openness within the creative side of the fashion industry, it may overlook the deeper structural inequalities that persist, particularly at the leadership level.

Ultimately, while some parts of the industry are moving toward a more inclusive culture, with women's professionalism and creativity being prioritized, there is still much work to be done to ensure equal representation at the top levels of leadership. Gendered power dynamics still seem to shape how women are perceived and treated within the industry, particularly in decision-making roles. The ongoing tension between optimism and resilience highlights the need for changes and clear policies to establish fairness and inclusivity in the fashion sector.

Conclusion

The interviews gave a more optimistic view of gender equality in the Macedonian fashion industry, which is quite a contrast to the more neutral or even negative tone of the survey results. While the survey showed that 59% of respondents thought men and women had equal career opportunities, many of the interviewees felt that their skills and professionalism mattered more than gender when it came to climbing the professional ladder. For example, Save shared, *"I absolutely responsibly claim that with all the fashion houses in our country, ready-made garments, industries, companies, ateliers that we have had, no one has ever told us anything specific related to gender, sex, sexual orientation… But the only thing they have told us is to send us your portfolio."* This shows that in some areas of the industry, talent is what matters most, not gender. Four out of the five interviewed women

in leadership roles, like Andrea, felt that gender had not been the biggest barrier to their success.

Interestingly, however, gender inequality wasn't seen as the number one challenge in the industry. Instead, most of the interviewees pointed to a lack of governmental support, funding, and opportunities as the biggest issues. Klara and Nikola mentioned how difficult it is for both genders to break into the industry without mentorship or financial backing. Andrej also noted that "If we want to survive, we rely on private efforts or international collaborations," because there is no real support from the state. These comments hinted that financial support and structure are perceived as bigger obstacles than gender.

While gender bias still exists and was noted in the interviews, many felt optimistic about the present, and even more hopeful about the future of gender equality in the fashion world. The interviews suggested that while some areas still need structural support, especially for women in production-role settings, there is a growing trend toward merit-based success in creative and leadership roles. It was observed that women's skills and contributions are starting to be recognized more, which is an encouraging sign for the industry. In comparison to the survey results, where people were more divided or pessimistic about issues like wage inequality, the interviews showed that gender is becoming a smaller problem in many parts of the industry. However, the lack of support remains a bigger challenge, especially for the youth, and those just starting in the industry.

Section 5:Results and Discussion Bosnia and Herzegovina

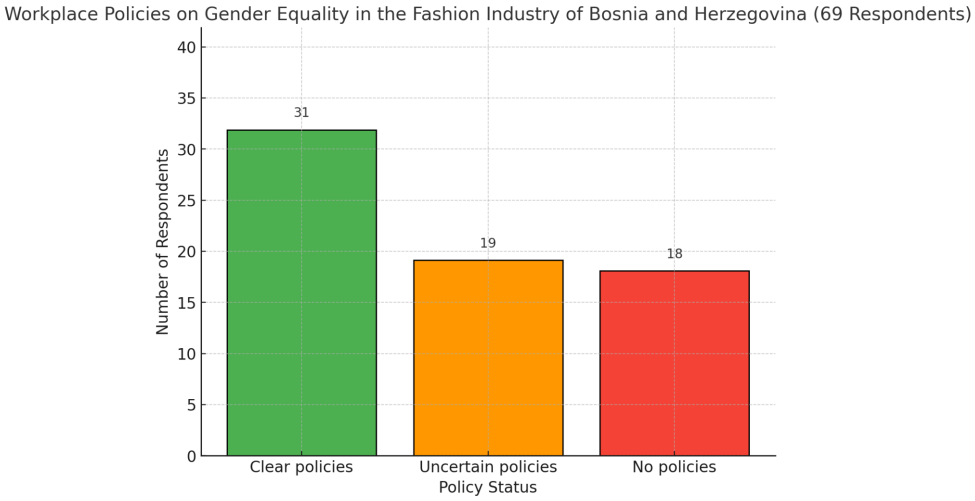
5.1 Quantitative findings

Gender equality and the workplace

The survey results highlight significant gaps in gender equality within the fashion industry, particularly in workplace policies, opportunities for advancement, and societal expectations. A notable 46.2% of respondents reported that their workplace has clear policies against gender discrimination and harassment, indicating that while some measures exist, a

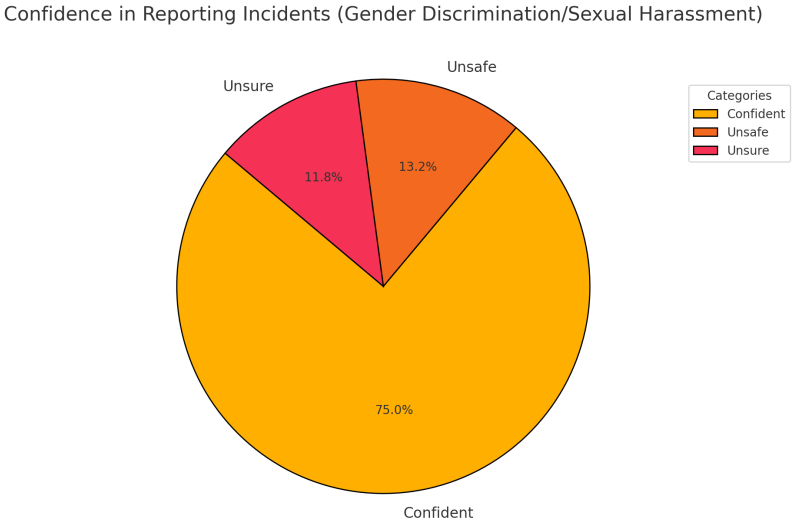
substantial portion (27.7%) remains uncertain about such policies, and 26.2% feel that no clear policies are in place. This finding illustrates the need for clearer, more consistently enforced policies in the industry to protect employees from discrimination and harassment, as well as to promote a culture of accountability.

Graph 7: Workplace policies and equality initiatives (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



Additionally, the majority respondents (74.6%) felt confident about reporting incidents of gender discrimination or sexual harassment at their workplace, trusting that these issues would be taken seriously. However, a concerning 13.4% didn't feel safe reporting such behavior, and 11.9% were unsure, revealing a lack of confidence and support in handling these situations. These findings highlight a wider challenge seen in workplaces around the world: even when policies exist, employees often question whether reporting mechanisms are truly effective (Lewis, 2024).

Graph 8: Reporting discrimination and gender harassment (Bosnia and Herzegovina)



The statistics regarding support for women's advancement in the fashion industry highlight a significant area of concern. Nearly half of the respondents (46.3%) expressed uncertainty about the availability of proper support, such as professional mentorship or training to help women progress into higher leadership positions. This is a critical issue, as it suggests a lack of clarity or inconsistency in how support structures are perceived or implemented within the industry. Meanwhile, a roughly equal proportion (26.9%) of respondents believed such support either exists or does not exist, reflecting a divided or fragmented understanding of the opportunities available to women in the workplace. These mixed perceptions towards professional support structures can be explained with Acker's gendered organizations theory suggesting that companies are not gender-neutral; they are in fact shaped by societal gender norms that often favor men and disadvantage women (Acker, 2012). If women do not have options or are uncertain of their opportunities when it comes to mentorship or developmental possibilities, it indicates that the company's organizational culture may not be intentionally inclusive. In turn this lack of inclusivity can restrict women's professional progress (Acker, 2012). In industries like fashion, where women are often underrepresented in leadership roles, this lack of mentorship can further hinder career advancement.

The survey also addressed the encouragement of both men and women to express their opinions and contribute to decision-making processes. While 41.2% of respondents believed that both genders are equally encouraged, 36.8% were unsure, and 22.1% felt that women are not encouraged as much. This disparity highlights persistent gendered expectations in organizational settings, where decision-making power is often skewed toward men, a finding consistent with the broader trend of women being underrepresented in leadership roles across industries (UN, 2022).

Perceptions of gender discrimination

On the topic of discrimination against non-binary individuals, a significant 56.1% of respondents agreed that non-binary individuals face more discrimination than both women and men in the fashion industry. The finding that more than half of respondents agree that non-binary individuals face more discrimination than both women and men in the fashion industry can be directly tied to traditional gender norms and social stigmas. Historically, gender has been understood within a binary framework, male and female reinforced by societal structures, expectations, and cultural practices (Bonfiglioli, 2019). This binary framework has long shaped professional and social spaces, particularly in industries like fashion, where gender roles are often strictly defined.

When it comes to women in traditionally male-dominated roles, 36.4% of respondents reported rarely seeing women in leadership positions, such as directors or department heads. This result signals that while there are exceptions, women remain underrepresented in high-status roles within the industry, perpetuating gendered power dynamics. The availability of parental leave and flexible policies was another area where respondents expressed uncertainty, with 30.3% unsure about the existence of such policies. Only 21.2% reported availability, further underlining the lack of support for work-life balance in the industry. This is consistent with broader studies that show a disparity in family-friendly workplace policies, often disadvantageous to women, especially in industries like fashion where flexible hours are not typically prioritized.

Lastly, societal standards regarding appearance and behavior were identified as a significant issue for women in the fashion industry. A combined 56.9% of respondents agreed that women are often expected to adhere to specific standards of appearance and behavior, with men being held to fewer expectations in this regard. This highlights the continued prevalence of gendered beauty standards that disproportionately affect women in the fashion industry, reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations.

Conclusion

The survey results reveal a fashion industry still struggling with significant gender inequality, particularly when it comes to workplace policies, decision-making, and opportunities for women to advance in their careers. While there's recognition of these challenges, the gap between awareness and real, effective action remains wide, especially in leadership roles where women are still underrepresented. Moreover, non-binary individuals face their own set of challenges, pointing to a clear need for more inclusive practices. On the environmental side, there's a growing awareness of sustainability issues, but the industry continues to struggle with making meaningful changes, particularly when it comes to eco-friendly materials and sustainable production. However, there is hope: the willingness to explore innovative materials offers a promising avenue for integrating sustainability into fashion's future. The next section dives deeper into these findings and discusses them in more detail.

5.2 Qualitative Insights

The qualitative data adds layers of depth to the quantitative findings, revealing a more complex landscape of gender inequality and professional challenges in Bosnia and Herzegovina's fashion industry. The survey results found a general perception of equality in career advancement, nonetheless, these interviews uncovered significant structural and financial barriers that many of the individuals experienced within the industry.

Gender inequality in employment

The survey results showed that only 46.2% of respondents agreed their workplace had clear policies against gender discrimination and harassment, with an alarming portion (53.8%) either disagreeing or uncertain. This uncertainty was also reinforced in interviews, where many individuals said there was a lack of clear systemic frameworks to address inequality. Nonetheless, an interview with a representative from Empress Company presented a contrasting, positive depiction of the industry. Lidija highlighted that "Out of 25 employees, 23 are women, which makes up 91-92% of our team, and we take pride in having women in leadership positions," Lidija's company proactively stands out for its approach to representation, with 100% female management, which is a notable contrast to the broader industry. This is consistent with the survey's finding that 36.4% of respondents rarely see women in leadership roles. Lidija's workplace experience serves as a potential model for other businesses, showing that clear policy frameworks and inclusive leadership initiatives could create more equal workplaces.

In contrast, other interviews pointed out the absence of representation and policies. Hamza shared: "In our company, we don't have specific policies against gender discrimination. It's more about personal values than institutional frameworks." This informal approach is not unique; many other interviewees, like Daris, also noted that while they work in environments where gender equality is encouraged, there are no official or structured policies in place to support this. These differences between the attitudes of company leaders and the overall lack of formal systems illustrate the need for institutional protections and clear policies.

Leadership representation and gender norms

Further into the interviews it was revealed that the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles is a recurring theme. This problem is further increased by traditional gender norms that influence perceptions of leadership capabilities. Omar, a representative from a well-established company, reflected on the traditional gender stereotypes that are still observed in leadership expectations: *"Men are more willing to take on additional responsibilities or handle stress better,"* suggesting that women are often seen as less capable

of managing the pressures of leadership roles. This comment depicts the deeply ingrained beliefs about gender roles, which can restrict women's access to decision-making positions but also support the idea that leadership is tied to masculinity. Omar's perspective aligns with the survey findings, where 36.8% of respondents were unsure whether women were encouraged to express opinions and participate equally in decision-making processes. This uncertainty supports Acker's organizational gender theory, as well as, the broader cultural context in which leadership is generally defined by traditionally masculine qualities, which puts women at a disadvantage.

From a different perspective, Ilma, a designer and entrepreneur shared her experience with the added struggles that women face in breaking through the leadership barrier: *"Women in leadership positions are rare today, and due to the large number of male experts in the fashion field, women are often overlooked. They must work twice as hard to be recognized."* Ilma's comment speaks to the small percentage of women in leadership, as well as the additional value and effort they must make to gain equal recognition. Her personal insights revealed an interesting aspect: for women, leadership is not only competence, it is also about proving one's worth in an environment where their contributions are often undervalued. This correlates with the survey's finding that nearly half (46.3%) of respondents were unsure about the availability of mentorship and professional development opportunities for women. Without clear and structured support, many find themselves trying to navigate a system that is in some way against them.

Double standards and work-life balance

However, there are counterexamples within the industry that challenge the negative gender bias in leadership. Nara, who runs a small fashion brand, offered a different perspective: *"I've had more opportunities as a woman in this field than I expected. I think there is a growing recognition of the importance of diverse leadership, and many businesses are now looking to include women in high-level positions."* Nara's experience is unique among the interviewed, and showcases signs of a potential shift in the industry. Her quote

shows that the landscape is not fully negative, and that there are companies and individuals who recognize the value of gender diversity in leadership roles and the workplace as a whole.

Although there were positive experiences, several women emphasized the personal sacrifices that they had to make in order to succeed. Mia, a designer who has worked both in larger companies and in her own independent projects, shared: *"It's not just about doing your job well; it's about being constantly available, being present at all hours, and proving your value beyond just your work. Men are rarely held to the same standard."* Mia's experience refers to the broader, and often unspoken expectation that women must not only be great at what they do, but also be very committed to their careers, which is often at an expense of their work-life balance. Just like Ilma, she highlights a tiring reality that women in leadership positions currently still have to keep"proving" their worth. This inequality of expectations is not only seen in fashion, but across many different industries. The experiences of Ilma and Nara suggest that change is slowly taking place, but they still show the negative dynamics. The unfair expectations in combination with the lack of developmental support in turn, results in a workplace culture where women's leadership is seen as exceptional rather than the norm.

Pay inequality

While the survey results suggest that 23% of respondents felt that women were paid less than men in the fashion industry, the qualitative interviews provided personal stories and variation. The majority expressed concerns about wage inequality, especially in lower-paying, production roles, but there were other differing perspectives on the issue, with some individuals including areas of improvement in their insights. Milica for example, reflected: *"Sewing is a demanding profession, and it is undervalued in Bosnia and Herzegovina's economy. Women in these roles are often seen as disposable labor, not skilled workers."* Milica's comment points to the broader systemic issue where women's labor in production-heavy roles is underappreciated and underpaid, which aligns with global challenges as well as the survey's finding that there are still evident wage disparities in the industry.

However, not all perspectives aligned with the idea that women are always underpaid. For instance, Lidija pointed out: *"We have a policy of equal pay for equal work. I believe that women are fairly compensated here, especially compared to the broader industry."* This view suggests that some companies are actively working against wage inequality by ensuring that pay is the same across gender lines, though this still appears to be an exception rather than the rule in the broader fashion industry. Furthermore, a few individuals noted that the issue of pay gaps isn't just about gender but also tied to the sector itself. Uma, a young designer, emphasized: *"It's not only about women or men, it's the whole fashion industry that struggles with proper pay. There's a lot of undervaluation of creativity and craftsmanship. The pay doesn't reflect the effort that goes into it, no matter the gender."* Uma's perspective suggests that low wages are an industry-wide issue, affecting both men and women, though it impacts women more in lower-paying, production roles.

Other participants, particularly in more innovative and smaller businesses, stated that wage ranges are more flexible and progressive. Nara said: *"In my company, we try to provide competitive salaries, especially for women who are involved in creative roles. We value their contribution to the brand and try to make sure it's reflected in how we compensate them."* Nara's experience once again shows that in certain contexts, companies can prioritize equality initiatives such as fair pay, especially when they consider gender equality and creativity as key values. Overall, while the majority of interviewees recognized some levels of wage inequality as a challenge, some also pointed to positive exceptions.

Discrimination and socio-cultural challenges

The survey results revealed that a significant 56.9% of respondents believed women in the fashion industry are held to stricter standards of appearance and behavior than their male counterparts. This finding was reinforced by the interviews, which highlighted the ongoing impact of societal pressures on women's professional lives. A clear example of gender discrimination came from Melisa, who shared her painful experience with maternity discrimination: *"I was fired from my job when I became pregnant."* Her experience reflects the systemic issue of maternity discrimination, a socio-cultural problem that many women

continue to face across industries (O'Brien & Arnold, 2024). The survey concluded that 30.3% of respondents were unsure about the availability of family-friendly policies and that only 21.2% were aware that such policies are in place. This signals the widespread lack of protection for women balancing career and family responsibilities. Other interviewees, such as Daris expressed similar concerns about how motherhood affects career advancement: *"Once you're a mother, people start looking at you differently. You're not considered as dedicated or serious about your work anymore."* These two quotes reflect the societal expectation that women must choose between their career and their family, a decision that men are far less likely to make in the same way.

Furthermore, Marija spoke candidly about the strain of these social expectations, saying: *"As a woman in fashion, you're constantly judged not just for your work but also for how you present yourself. It's an additional burden that men don't face as often."* Her statement uncovers a significant issue: in the fashion industry, women are expected to meet an often unrealistic standard of beauty that can overshadow their professional achievements. Marija's experience portrays a broader societal pattern where women's competence is frequently evaluated through the lens of their appearance. This quote shows not only that it diminished her professional identity but also placed an added emotional and mental strain.

Nara elaborated further on this idea: *"The pressure to look perfect is constant. It's as if your appearance directly correlates with your value, and if you don't meet that standard, it doesn't matter how good your work is."* Nara's statement reveals just how current and deeply rooted beauty standards are, so much so that they seem to be perceived as more important than professional competence. This reflects a harsh reality in the fashion industry, where women are often judged by an idealized version of beauty rather than their skills. Together, these quotes reflect a troubling trend in the fashion industry, where women seem to face a double burden: being professionally competent while at the same time meeting societal standards of beauty. This phenomenon is not unique to the fashion industry but is particularly pronounced here, given the industry's historical and cultural ties to aesthetics.

While the interviews provided evidence of gender disparities, there were also instances of perceived equality in this area. For example, Dzan, a male model, stated that he had not observed gender-based discrimination, attributing industry challenges to economic rather than gendered factors. This perspective contrasts with the majority of interviewees, who identified systemic barriers for women. Such contradictions highlight the segmented nature of the industry, where gender inequalities are more pronounced in specific roles or contexts.

Conclusion

The Bosnian fashion industry presents a complex landscape of gender disparities, driven by deep rooted cultural perceptions as well as structural barriers. While some businesses embrace gender-inclusive leadership and implement equal pay policies, wage disparities, underrepresentation in leadership, and societal beauty standards remain significant challenges. The inequality is increased by cultural expectations, particularly around motherhood, which continue to shape women's career opportunities.

On a brighter note, younger interviewees, especially in more innovative businesses, appear more hopeful about the future of gender equality in the industry. They are optimistic about the availability of mentorship, flexible work arrangements, and overall workplace equality practices. This generational optimism suggests that while the industry is still marked by traditional barriers, change is possible, especially if companies embrace the need for systemic shifts in both policy and culture.

These insights stress that, while progress is being made, there is a need for continued efforts to address the deep-rooted inequalities in the fashion industry, particularly in terms of leadership representation, wage disparities, and support for women balancing career and family responsibilities.

5.3 Comparative Analysis

This section compares the qualitative and quantitative findings from Bosnia and North Macedonia, focusing on how gender disparities manifest in the fashion industry in both countries. It explores the key cultural and structural factors that drive these inequalities and addresses the core research question and sub-questions by evaluating the barriers to gender equality, the differences in wages, job roles, and working conditions, and the impact of gender roles and cultural perceptions on women's participation and treatment in the industry.

Inequalities in employment and leadership

The quantitative data from both Bosnia and North Macedonia reveal some similarities and differences in gender equality, particularly in leadership roles. In Bosnia, most respondents (74.6%) were confident that gender discrimination and sexual harassment would be taken seriously at work. However, 13.4% didn't feel safe reporting such incidents, suggesting a gap between policy and trust in reporting systems. This mirrors concerns raised in the qualitative interviews, where participants pointed to a cultural and institutional silence around women's advancement. Women in Bosnia continue to face expectations to prioritize family and caregiving, which can conflict with career ambitions, especially in leadership roles. Melisa's experience reflects this, where she mentioned the challenge of climbing the career ladder amid societal pressures, aligning with Connell's theory on how gender norms put women in subordinate positions both at home and at work.

In North Macedonia, the picture is more optimistic. A majority (59%) of respondents felt men and women had equal career advancement opportunities, although 25% were unsure, indicating that not everyone shares this view. The qualitative interviews confirm that while younger workers in North Macedonia tend to hold progressive views on gender equality, older generations still hold entrenched beliefs that limit women's professional opportunities, particularly in production roles within the fashion industry. This connects to Acker's framework of gendered organizations, which argues that even when formal equality is present, biases and informal practices often limit women's opportunities (Acker, 2012).

Both Bosnia and North Macedonia show that leadership roles in the fashion industry are still quite male-dominated. The qualitative and quantitative findings are aligned on this, with men holding most managerial and higher-paying positions. In Bosnia, 36.4% of respondents said they rarely saw women in leadership roles, and in North Macedonia, 29% disagreed with the statement that men and women are equally represented in leadership. Both countries share the view that leadership is often seen as a male-dominated space, reinforcing Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, where male authority is privileged in decision-making roles (Connell, 1987).

Pay gaps and working conditions

Wage inequality is an ongoing issue in both Bosnia and North Macedonia. In Bosnia, 42% of respondents believed men and women were paid equally for similar roles, while 23% disagreed. However, 22% were unsure, which suggests uncertainty around pay practices. This reflects Save's comment in the qualitative interviews, where he mentioned that wage inequality remains especially prevalent in lower-level positions. This mirrors North Macedonia's survey results, where 42% of respondents agreed salaries were equal, but a notable 14% disagreed, showing a divide in perceptions of pay equality. Both countries seem to have a disconnect between official equality and workers' actual experiences, echoing Acker's idea of gendered organizations, where gender inequalities persist despite claims of equality (Williams et al., 2012).

The qualitative findings also highlight poor working conditions, particularly in Bosnia. Melisa and others described crowded, unsafe environments in textile factories. The quantitative survey supports this, with only 21.2% of respondents in Bosnia reporting access to parental leave or flexible working policies, which are crucial for women balancing domestic and work roles. In North Macedonia, 30.3% of respondents were unsure about the availability of such policies. These results highlight the gendered nature of workplace policies, where the lack of support for work-life balance puts women at a disadvantage, especially in terms of career progression.

Gender norms and cultural factors

Cultural gender norms continue to shape women's experiences in the fashion industry in both Bosnia and North Macedonia. In Bosnia, 56.9% of respondents agreed that women are expected to meet strict standards of appearance and behavior, while men face fewer such expectations. This ties into the deep rooted beauty standards in the fashion industry, where women expressed that they felt more judged on their looks than their professional abilities. Acker's theory helps explain how these norms are embedded in workplace cultures, reinforcing women's lower status in the industry (Acker, 2012).

In North Macedonia, the survey showed that 41% of respondents thought men and women are equally encouraged to voice their opinions in decision-making, while 22% disagreed. The qualitative interviews supported this, with Bojana and Klara pointing out that women are still seen as less authoritative and less capable of leadership roles. About 60% of respondents in North Macedonia also agreed that traditional gender roles continue to impact professional dynamics in the fashion industry. This reflects a broader societal perception that women are better suited for nurturing roles rather than leadership positions (O'Brien & Arnold, 2024).

Interestingly, both Bosnian and North Macedonian respondents agreed that non-binary individuals face more discrimination in the fashion industry. In Bosnia, 56.1% of respondents felt this way, and a similar sentiment was expressed in North Macedonia. This highlights growing awareness of discrimination against non-binary individuals, but also underscores how rigid gender norms persist, affecting both women and gender non-conforming individuals in the workplace.

Conclusion

To summarize, while both Bosnia and North Macedonia show some progress toward gender equality in the fashion industry, significant barriers remain, especially in terms of leadership, working conditions and pay equality. Both countries reveal cultural and structural

factors that increase gender inequalities, such as deeply ingrained societal norms around women's roles in the family and workplace. However, North Macedonia presents a more optimistic picture, with a younger, more progressive workforce and a greater emphasis on gender equality in leadership roles, although these perceptions are not universally shared. In both countries, the lack of governmental funding, support for career advancement and the absence of adequate workplace policies continue to hinder both genders' full participation in the fashion industry. These findings highlight the ongoing need for targeted interventions, including better support structures, policies, and a cultural shift toward more inclusive practices to overcome gender disparities in both nations' fashion industries.

Section 6: Conclusion

6.1 Discussion

This research set out to examine how gender disparities manifest in the fashion industries of North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, exploring the cultural and structural factors that drive these inequalities. The findings illustrate a complex and layered landscape where traditional gender roles, cultural expectations, and structural barriers intersect to hinder women's opportunities in the sector. However, the research also revealed significant regional differences, with North Macedonia showing more progress toward gender equality in the fashion industry compared to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Some of the most significant challenges that were expressed across both countries include pay gaps, limited leadership opportunities for women, and the lack of governmental and institutional support for women entrepreneurs. In Bosnia, cultural pressures and prominent patriarchal norms continue to establish significant barriers, particularly in higher management and entrepreneurial roles. In contrast, North Macedonia's fashion industry reflects more optimism, with younger generations showing greater support for gender equality in the workplace and a higher perception of equal career opportunities. Despite these advances, women in both countries still remain underrepresented to some extent in leadership positions and continue to face challenges tied to gendered working conditions, like lower wages and limited access to benefits like parental leave.

To answer the central research question: *How do gender disparities manifest in the fashion industry in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and what cultural or structural factors drive these inequalities?* The dual impact of cultural norms and structural inequalities was explored in shaping both men's and women's experiences in the sector. While women continue to make up the majority of the workforce in the fashion industry in North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, they have historically been concentrated in lower-paying, less stable roles (ILO, 2024). However, the research findings suggest a noticeable positive shift in this dynamic, particularly in North Macedonia, where an increasing number of women are emerging as entrepreneurs and occupying managerial positions. This could mark a progressive departure from the traditional gender order described by Connell (1987), where men have historically dominated managerial positions.

All in all, it is evident that a complex interaction of structural and cultural variables drives gender inequality in the fashion industries of both nations. While there are more positive reflections of gender equality in North Macedonia, significant disparities remain in both countries, which stresses the need for targeted actions to address these challenges. These include clearer policies that promote inclusivity, more support for women entrepreneurs, and stronger systems to ensure equal opportunities for career growth.

Relevance

This study is important for several reasons. First, it helps fill a gap in research about gender inequalities in creative industries, especially in post-socialist countries like North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where this topic has received little attention. By exploring issues such as traditional gender roles, leadership opportunities, and wage gaps, it shows how these factors affect women's experiences in the fashion industry.

Also, the research revealed interesting challenges that were not related to equality, which too have a direct impact on men and women. These surprising results have demonstrated that the fashion industry's dynamics are more nuanced than the traditional

gender-focused research would imply. For example, some issues, like poor working conditions and access to resources, affect all workers, regardless of gender.

In addition to being useful for scholars, the results provide industry professionals with valuable data. Through hours of interviews with local industry professionals, the study highlights key challenges like unequal pay, the lack of women in leadership roles, and poor working conditions, all of which are influenced by cultural norms. The research also suggests practical steps to address these issues, helping industry leaders create a more inclusive and fair working environment.

6.2 Reflection

Limitations

When concluding this research, it is important to recognize various limitations that could have affected the applicability and validity of the results. Initially, although significant attempts were made to collect survey responses from a varied set of professionals, the total sample sizes of 81 respondents from North Macedonia and 69 from Bosnia and Herzegovina, might not entirely reflect the complete scope of the fashion sector in these nations. The distribution of online surveys may have led to self-selection bias, as individuals with more robust opinions or better tech skills were more inclined to take part, which could impact the results in favor of specific demographics.

In addition, while the 28 qualitative interviews provided important insights, the sample was limited, and was not as diverse as desired, as some fashion sectors like fashion design were more represented than others. Consequently, this may restrict the inclusion of various perspectives, like individuals working freelance, or the rural populations, whose experiences in the fashion industry might vary greatly from those in urban areas or more established companies.

Another important limitation lies in the linguistic and cultural factors that are characteristic in a cross-border study. Although the surveys and interviews were carefully translated into Macedonian, Bosnian, and English, subtle differentiation in terminology and context can remain. The nuances of a participant's insights or perspectives can diminish when adapted into a language that is not their native, potentially affecting the interpretive depth of the qualitative data. Not to mention, social desirability bias may have influenced some interviewees' willingness to disclose sensitive or personal experiences, particularly if they feared any professional repercussions or wished to maintain a positive image of their workplaces. These limitations could result in underreporting of negative experiences like harassment or discrimination, thereby affecting the study's ability to capture the full scope of gender inequalities .

The last limitation is that the research had a cross-sectional design, capturing conditions and perceptions at a single point in time. This structure makes it difficult to analyze how recent policy changes, evolving market demands, or shifting cultural attitudes might alter gender equality in the fashion sector over the longer term. As societal norms and institutional frameworks evolve, the dynamics of wage structures, leadership representation, and workplace policies could shift, limiting the applicability of the findings to future contexts.

Recommendations

Firstly, it is recommended that future research should focus on longitudinal studies to capture the evolving effects of recent policy changes, shifting cultural norms, and changes in market needs in order to better understand and address the gender discrepancies in the fashion industries of Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Tracking the long-term impacts of gender equality will help measure and determine how societal, economic, and political changes impact gender dynamics over time.

Future research should also strive for a more diverse and representative sample in light of the current study's limitations, which include the limited sample size and the

overrepresentation of particular industries like fashion design. Participants from a broader range of occupations should be included, such as freelancers, SMEs, and people from rural regions where the gender equality landscape could be different. Expanding the demographic to include these groups would provide a fuller understanding of the gendered dynamics across different contexts and regions.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Survey questions translated to English

Section 1: Demographic Information

1. Age (Select one)

• 18–24

• 25–34

• 35–44

• 45–54

• 55+

2. Gender (Select one)

• Female

• Male

• Prefer not to say

•Other

3. What industry do you currently work in? (Select one)

• Fashion design

•Craftsmanship

• Fashion marketing/PR

• Fashion education/research

• Other: _____

4. What is your highest level of education? (Select one)

• High school diploma or equivalent

• Bachelor's degree

• Master's degree

• Doctorate/PhD

• Other: _____

5. How many years have you worked in the fashion industry? (Select one)

• Less than 1 year

• 1–3 years

• 4–6 years

• 7–10 years

• 10+ years

Section 2: Gender Equality in the Fashion Industry of N.Macedonia/Bosnia

1. In your experience, to what extent do you agree that men and women in the fashion industry in Macedonia have equal opportunities for career advancement?

- Strongly agree

- Agree

- Neutral

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

2. How often do you see gender-based discrimination in your workplace (e.g., unequal pay, biased promotions, unfair treatment)?

- Always

- Often

- Sometimes

- Rarely

- Never

3. To what extent do you agree that salaries in the fashion industry in N.Macedonia/Bosnia are equal across genders for the same roles and responsibilities?

- Strongly agree

- Agree

- Neutral

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

4. To what extent do you agree that traditional gender roles and expectations influence how men and women are perceived in the fashion industry?

-Strongly agree

- Agree

- Neutral

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

5. To what extent do you agree that men and women have equal representation in leadership positions (e.g., managers, executives) in the fashion industry of N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

- Strongly agree

- Agree

- Neutral

- Disagree

- Strongly disagree

6. How often do you witness or hear of inappropriate behavior (e.g., sexist comments, harassment) based on gender in the fashion industry of N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

- Always

- Often

- Sometimes

- Rarely

- Never

7. How confident are you that your workplace has clear policies to address gender-based discrimination and harassment?

- Very confident

- Confident

- Neutral

- Not confident

- Not confident at all

8. To what extent do you agree that there is adequate support (e.g., mentoring, professional development) for women in the fashion industry to progress to higher roles in N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

9. To what extent do you agree that men and women in the fashion industry are equally encouraged to voice their opinions and contribute to decision-making processes in N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

10. To what extent do you agree that men are more likely to receive promotions than women with similar qualifications and experience?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

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11. To what extent do you agree that non-binary individuals or those with other gender identities face more discrimination compared to men and women in the fashion industry of N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

12. Do you feel that diversity and inclusion initiatives at your workplace focus enough on gender equality?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

13. How often do you see women in traditionally male-dominated roles (e.g., senior designers, technical experts) in your organization or the wider industry?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

14. How accessible are parental leave and flexible working policies in your workplace, regardless of gender?

- Very accessible
- Accessible
- Neutral
- Inaccessible
- Very inaccessible

15. How likely are you to recommend your workplace to others based on gender equality practices?

- Very likely
- Likely
- Neutral
- Not likely
- Very unlikely

16. How often do you feel that women in the fashion industry in N.Macedonia/Bosnia are expected to adhere to specific social standards of appearance and behavior that men are not held to?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Rarely
- Never

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17. To what extent do you agree that gender biases (conscious or unconscious) affect hiring practices in the fashion industry of N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

• Strongly agree

• Agree

• Neutral

• Disagree

• Strongly disagree

18. To what extent do you agree that men and women receive equal recognition and credit for their work and achievements in the fashion industry of N.Macedonia/Bosnia?

• Strongly agree

• Agree

• Neutral

• Disagree

• Strongly disagree

19. Thank you for completing this survey!

If you would like to participate in a short interview to help us deepen this research, please leave your phone number below.

___

20. Do you have feedback or suggestions to improve this survey?

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Please share any additional thoughts or comments you'd like us to know!

_____

Appendix B: Interview topic list

Introduction and personal background:

- To begin, could you tell me a bit about your background? How old are you, what is your gender and educational background?
- Can you share your current role within the fashion industry and describe the kind of work you do?
- Follow-up: How long have you been in this role, and what do you enjoy most about your work?
- How did you first become interested in the fashion industry, and what inspired you to pursue a career in this field?
- Looking back at your upbringing, were you raised by both parents or another family arrangement? Were your parents or family supportive of your decision to work in fashion?

Fashion industry and N. Macedonian culture:

- How do you see the fashion industry as a reflection of N.Macedonian/Bosnian culture and identity?
- In your opinion, is there a distinct "N.Macedonian/Bosnian style" or aesthetic? If so, how would you describe it?
- How do you personally express or reflect N.Macedonian/Bosnian culture through your work in fashion?

- (Additional if there is time) Do you think the N.Macedonian/Bosnian fashion industry is more influenced by local traditions or global trends?

- (Additional if there is time) Do you believe fashion can help shape how individuals see themselves or how the country is viewed abroad?

Challenges in the industry:

- What are some challenges the fashion industry in N. Macedonia/Bosnia faces today?

- Follow-up: Are these challenges unique to N. Macedonia/Bosnia, or do they mirror global issues in the fashion industry?

- Given the challenges we've discussed, how do you see the role of gender in these issues?

Transition to gender roles and equality:

- When you look at the roles men and women have in the fashion industry in N. Macedonia, how do you perceive the gender balance?

- Do societal expectations about gender roles in N.Macedonia/Bosnia influence career paths or opportunities in the fashion industry?

- Do you think gender roles in N.Macedonian/Bosnian society impact decision-making, leadership, or creative roles in the fashion industry? If so, how?

Exploring gender equality:

- What has your personal experience been like when it comes to gender equality in the N.Macedonian/Bosnian fashion industry?

- What role do you think the fashion industry in N.Macedonia/Bosnia plays in shaping or challenging traditional gender norms?

- Follow-up: How might the industry influence societal views on gender roles?

Closing (1-2 min)

- Thank the participant.
- As we wrap up, is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience in the N. Macedonian/Bosnian fashion industry?

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