

ESCAPING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY:
*THE ENGAGEMENT OF MEN IN GENDER EQUALITY
ACTIVISM IN KOSOVO*

IDEAL HOXHA



Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree Master of Philosophy
in Global Development Theory and Practice, Specialization in Gender in Global
Development

60 ECTS

Autumn 2022

Department of Health Promotion and Development Faculty of Psychology, University of
Bergen

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my participants for the incredible insight they provided to give life to this project. The experiences you shared provided me with a platform to explore a topic I am very passionate about, and I cannot thank you enough for that. Thank you for all your work addressing gender inequalities in Kosovo and engaging other men in the fight. I hope this thesis will inspire more men to continue your work and contribute to gender equality.

To my supervisor, Siri Lange, thank you for your support and the incredible patience you showed me while I was going through challenging times. In my perspective, how you handled my supervision was an excellent match, giving me the breathing room and flexibility I needed to avoid being overly worried and overwhelmed. Your belief in my ability as a writer and researcher reminded me that I had what it took to complete my thesis. Thank you for being so patient and for your advice. I'm really grateful to you.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Sunniva, for being incredibly supportive and for everything you have done for me during the entire process, and my son Emil for providing positivity the whole time, you were truly a wonderful stress reducer and a motivation for me to finish this thesis. I would also like to thank my parents for their support throughout my life, especially during stressful moments.

This might be unusual, but it only feels right to thank the person who uploaded "Rainy Night Coffee Shop Ambience with Relaxing Jazz Music and Rain Sounds" to the Calmed by Nature YouTube channel. The 8-hour video has been with me in every step of this thesis since its inception and provided me with the calmness and clarity to continue writing.

In loving memory of Mazllum Hoxha

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ABSTRACT

The need to confront outdated and harmful gendered stereotypes and norms is becoming increasingly important in the face of continuous efforts to achieve gender equality. This is done to support social and cultural transformation through individual attitudinal and behavioral change. Engaging men and boys is crucial to this process, especially in areas where patriarchy has regulated, defined, and protected gender norms for many years. In Kosovo, gender equality is highly associated with women and thus presents a problem for men who want to engage in it. However, a few men have escaped from hegemonic masculinities and decided to engage and promote gender equality despite the stigma that follows such a decision. This study will draw on the experiences of Kosovo men involved in gender transformative programs and explore the motivations behind such engagement. Furthermore, the study will explore various obstacles that prevent other men from getting involved, including; the sense of threat to traditional norms, the stigma of identifying as a male feminist, and misconceptions about feminism. Finally, the study will suggest the best strategies on how to overcome these obstacles and engage more men in the fight against gender inequality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Achieving gender equality is currently the fifth priority on UN's SDG goals (UN, n.d.-a), which states the importance the global community has put on working towards promoting and empowering women throughout the world. However, in a lot of countries like Kosovo making gender equality simply a woman's issue has proven to be difficult regarding the fight against inequalities between the genders and in most cases has seen a very slow change in attitudes. Kosovo itself has gone through drastic social changes from its Yugoslavian time, going through a violent conflict in 99' and achieving independence in 2008 (Haug, 2015). Women's rights movements and quest for gender equality in Kosovo saw a massive shift after the conflict with the establishment of UNMIK¹ as an interim administration and the boom in civil society funding from international funding organizations. UNMIK's role was to help in the state-building process and they worked aggressively towards establishing a framework for protecting and promoting women's rights (Nerea M. Cal, 2016). They quickly adopted the CEDAW convention which later became a part of the constitution and regulated national laws. UNMIK also established other mechanisms to help promote the status of women in a country with a long-lasting history of patriarchy by also introducing the 30% participation quota for women in parliament and local assembly (Lavdi Zymberi, 2017).

On top of that the funds coming from international donors saw a boom in civil society, which resulted with a lot of the funds supporting projects that were aiming to promote gender equality and empower women. However, despite all the efforts Kosovo still remains quite patriarchal in its core, and a big reason for that I believe is the fact that most of the efforts have been centered around women and therefore gender equality for some reason has increasingly become synonymous with women, leaving men out of the fight, in a place where gender norms have a strong significance in people's identities. Some men however have been able to escape these traditional norms and actively join the fight by either working for gender equality projects or promoting gender equality and women's empowerment through other means. And according

¹ UNMIK – United Nations Mission in Kosovo established an interim administration mission in Kosovo to help build national institutions and ensure rule of law.

to the WHO men and boys are often able and willing to change their attitudes and practices and at times even take a stand for gender equality (Organization, 2010). A research done by (Hearn et al., 2012) suggested that one approach to the notion of hegemonic masculinity in Sweden shows how gender equality discourses and changes in gender relations have influenced and changed men's practices. And plenty of research has concluded that interventions engaging men have a great potential to change gender behaviors and attitudes (Vaillant et al., 2020). This was also confirmed by the United Nations when they launched their "He-for-She" campaign in 2014 in an effort to involve men and boys in achieving equality by taking control against negative gender norms and behaviors (UN, 2014).

1.2 PURPOSE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF RESEARCH

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine what motivates the men in Kosovo to join the fight against gender inequalities and directly engage in work to promote equality. The second objective is to get a better understanding as to why there aren't many men engaged in the field. And finally the third objective is to get their perception on the importance of men's involvement in the fight against gender inequalities. Drawing on their personal experience I will presents finding that highlights a couple of common motivations which can later be used to inspire other potential men to join the cause and at the same time provide a platform for NGOs and other institutions to strategize their policies in order to have a larger involvement of men in the fight against gender inequalities. This study will focus on men from Kosovo who are directly involved with projects and groups that promote gender equality.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The central research question for this study is:

- What is motivating men in Kosovo to get involved in gender equality activism?

The sub-research questions are:

1. Why are there such few men who see gender equality as something to engage in?
2. What is the perception of men working with gender equality on the importance of involving men in the fight against inequalities?

1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis is organized into eight chapters. Following this introductory chapter, I will use the second chapter to give an in-depth description of how hegemonic masculinity, gender theory, and social construction of realist theory were used as the theoretical frameworks for this study, and discussing each theoretical framework separately. Chapter three will be used to identify the significant research gap on what motivates men to engage in gender equality and explore the relevant literature adjoining to this issue. In the fourth chapter, I will review my research design and methods, explaining the procedures in details before, during, and after data collection, my role as a researcher in this study, and the limitations I experienced when recruiting participants. The subsequent three chapters are separated into themes: Misconceiving feminism; Experiencing and confronting hegemonic masculinities in their work; and Understanding the role of men in addressing gender inequalities. To conclude this thesis, chapter eight will provide an overview of my key findings and recommendations for future researchers.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I will discuss the three theoretical frameworks I used to establish my research questions, analyze my data, and contextualize my findings.

2.1 HEGEMONIC MASCULIITY

The first framework “Hegemonic Masculinity was made popular by Connell who in her most quoted version defined hegemonic masculinity as the “*configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women*”(Connell, 2005, p. 77). She also highlights the fact that hegemonic masculinity is not static but rather responsive to the social changes and that most men do not necessarily embody hegemonic ideals but either way benefit from the patriarchal dividend that gives an unfair advantage to men in general as a consequence of the subordination of women, which she states makes their masculinity complicit to the social norm (Connell, 2005). There is a shared assumption that it is generally harder to notice injustice from the position of the privileged and this relates to the Connell explanation that Men who do not question or are aware of social norms that through a system of patriarchy puts them in an advantageous

position as a consequence of oppression of women, are complicit to the system. Therefore, through this theory I will attempt to explore what influenced these men to sympathize with the women and fight for gender equality while challenging hegemonic masculinities to a point of getting engaged in social work to promote the cause for equality. Connell also talks about subordinate masculinities as masculinities that do not comply with the hegemonic norms and how they have very blurry boundaries with femininity in terms of outcome (Connell, 2005). Some of these men who work with gender equality and women's rights are under constant pressure to be branded as not real men, and the theory will be helpful in understating the participants perception on how they think they are generally viewed as, and if that is something that they feel uncomfortable with. She further argues that a positive hegemony remains a central strategy for contemporary efforts in reform (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

2.2 GENDER

Gender, according to West and Zimmerman (1987), is a social construction that people "do" by exhibiting the behaviors that are required of them. People thus cannot "have" gender. This point of view describes doing gender as a person acting out the roles that are expected of them depending on how they feel their gender to be (West & Zimmerman, 1987). This means that social roles and actions based on perceived gender are governed by institutionalized social norms and institutions. Individuals then replicate these structures and standards through their portrayal of them in social encounters. The existence of gendered institutions will not change as long as people maintain them (Connell & Pearse, 2014; Iversen et al., 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). While the following section will discuss the construction of what it means to be a "Man", it is important to recognize that there are those who challenge the gender binary. The institutions that govern gender roles and behavior are influenced by the culture to which they belong. The extent of disparities may differ between cultures since gender is established as distinctions. Costa et al. (2001) maintains that: "In some cultures, gender differences may be exaggerated; in others, they may be masked." (Costa Jr et al., 2001, p. 324). As a result, gender definitions and norms vary across geographical boundaries, and people are subject to various cultural restrictions (Butler, 2004). Because to these theories, women and men are not required to precisely follow the gender standards that their society establishes. Gender is flexible and changes through time. Gender is a process that the young are socialized into since it refers to "performing" something feminine or masculine. Children learn how to behave in society's expectations through their parents, via observations of their body language and

personal preferences, and by identifying the culturally gendered symbols that are "acceptable" for them (Connell & Pearse, 2014; Iversen et al., 2010; West & Zimmerman, 1987). As a result, these many gender theories are significant in regard to this study since they offer a framework for comprehending how gender is seen. Therefore using this theoretical approach was crucial in dissecting the local gender expectations in Kosovo but also mapping the space in which the participants managed re-define these roles.

2.3 SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY

Berger and Luckmann argue that reality is a socially constructed process and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the process in which this reality occurs. They argue that what people know as reality in their everyday lives should be analyzed and understood how knowledge emerges and how it relates to the social reality, they live in. Thus, the emergence of knowledge is connected to the relation between the society and the individual (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). They also maintain that society is a direct product of human activity in which society is an objective reality, and the human being is a product of it. They state that social order is an ongoing human product and is produced by people in the course of their ongoing externalization (Berger & Luckmann, 2016)

Further they argue that culture is created and preserved by the interaction of the self with the sociocultural environment at three separate levels: externalization, objectivation, and internalization. In more specific terms, they view social order as a constant human construction. Man creates it as a result of his constant externalization. In its actual manifestations, social order is not biologically predetermined or drawn from any biological evidence. Social order cannot be drawn from the "rules of nature" since it is not a part of the "nature of things." Only human work can provide social order (Berger & Luckmann, 2016) Understanding the construction of reality, social order and gender norms is crucial in understanding the motivations behind the men involved in gender work, thus, this theory will play a crucial role in analyzing, interpreting, and concluding the project outcomes. Therefore the theory will be applied throughout the paper in contextualizing gender expectations.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review in relation to the topic is collected from a number of sources including Pro Quest, Web of Science, Google Scholar and Oria, as well as from articles referenced by the literature found in the databases. The literature has been gathered using different combinations of the search words including “Men”, “boys”, “engagement”, “involvement”, “gender equality”, “Kosovo”, and “Women”.

3.1 ENGAGING MEN IN GENDER EQUALITY

In many articles the involvement of Men in gender equality has been highlighted as important because of the Men’s power over women which in many cultural contexts requires working with men to change the conditions of women’s lives (Women, 2008). Men tend to exercise key role in achieving gender equality since in many societies men exercise predominant power in almost every sphere of life, ranging from personal matters regarding family size to the programme and policy decisions taken at all levels of government (Women, 2008). Kopano Ratele (2015) suggests that those working with men and boys must take into consideration institutional, ideological, and psychological resistance towards established gender norms, if we hope to liberate masculinities and move towards gender equality. He argues that in order to transform masculinities and persuade boys and men to work for gender equality requires us to overcome and recognize and help men and boys overcome and recognize resistance to gender justice efforts (Ratele, 2015). Drury and Kaiser (2014) argue that a major contribution towards motivating men to become allies for gender equality will involve making them more sensitive to detecting sexism (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Considering the ambiguity surrounding subtle sexism, changing the beliefs about the prevalence and nature around this type of sexism is crucial. They argue that one crucial thing is to teach men about the illegitimacy of their favorable position in society, as to become allies men must do more than recognize sexism and instead must take action by confronting it and its perpetrators (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Esplen (2006) also argues that, excluding men and boys might reduce the impact of development programs and worsen gender disparities (Esplen, 2006). She further argues that unless efforts are made to encourage males to take on more responsibility for child care and household duties, development interventions that aim to boost women's employment and income producing prospects, for example, are likely to make women's already high work burdens much worse (Esplen, 2006).

In their book “Engaging men in building gender equality” Flood and Howson argue that interventions focused on men and boys have proliferated especially in relations to violence prevention, parenting and education and sexual and reproductive health among other domains (Flood & Howson, 2015). In the last decade there has been a growth of global and national interventions and campaigns by international agencies and scholarly assessments of their impact. They argue that there is a powerful momentum for involving men in work on gender equality matters and a simply way of framing that is the assumption that men are both a part of the problem and a part of the solution (Flood & Howson, 2015). Although this may minimize the genuine challenges of engaging men in anti-patriarchal struggles there is very little doubt that gender injustice will only stop when men join with women to put an end on it (Flood & Howson, 2015).

3.2 WHAT MOTIVATES MEN TO BECOME ALLIES

There is not much research done on what actually motivates men to become allies in gender equality and women’s rights movement, as the focus of most previous studies states the importance and the benefits of men’s involvement and not necessarily what motivates them in the first place. However, De Wolf (2015) for example studied how men contributed in regard to women’s movements in France and Belgium from late 1960s till early 1980s. His research concluded that men who were enthusiastic about women’s empowerment were usually educated, were politically left wing oriented and had personal contact with feminist movements (De Wolf, 2015). Men who were direct and indirect members of feminist movements could be divided into two groups, one of the group included men who did not necessarily question their masculinity and the other group included those who found it important to redefine and question traditional forms or masculinity (De Wolf, 2015). He argues that those who did not question their masculinity were mainly focused on structural discrimination towards women and in this way, they did not hold themselves accountable for the inequalities between genders, on the other hand the group who questioned their masculinities, often did activities that were considered more feminine such as taking care of their children, engaged in household work etc. (De Wolf, 2015). He also argues that the group who questioned their masculinities did so because wanted to support women in general as they were impressed by the determination of women showed when they addressed gender inequalities as well as that these men wanted to maintain a good relationship with women so they saw as important to question their masculinity (De Wolf, 2015).

On the other hand, Goldrick-Jones (2002) highlights that one of the reasons that motivated men in UK to join feminist movements and support gender equality is that:

“...by supporting women’s struggles against sexism, they would eventually discover more fulfilling concepts of masculinity, just as many women were discovering much more empowering notions of femininity. By helping women to become more liberated, men might free themselves at the same time”(Goldrick-Jones, 2002, p. 32).

3.3 A BRIEF HISTORY OF PATRIARCHY IN KOSOVO

Why does this matter? Bear with me as I try and explain an entire long and complex history of cultural, contextual, and social changes that have taken place in what is today known as Kosovo. As recent as February 2008, Kosovo became independent after a significant ruling from the International Court of Justice which concluded that people of Kosovo had the right to independence in accordance with International Law (Wilde, 2011). Kosovo declared its independence from Serbia who still disputes its legality. As of today, the social structure within Kosovo consists of an overall majority of 92.3 percent ethnic Albanians who are predominantly Muslim and speak the Albanian language (Minority Rights, 2022). According to estimates based on 2010 and 2013 OSCE data, Serbs make up 7.8 percent of the entire population with other minorities such as Roma, Ashkalia, Egyptians, Bosniaks, Turks, and Gorani making up the rest (Minority Rights, 2022). Since the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Kosovo had been a part of Kingdom of Serbia and later Yugoslavia as a semi-autonomous province of Serbia. After the dissolution of Yugoslavia, ethnic tension had risen among Albanians and Serbs which later escalated with an armed conflict in 1998 (Boyle, 2014). The conflict lasted for over a year after NATO² intervened by beginning air strikes which resulted in Serbian armed forces withdrawing from Kosovo (Harvey, 2006). After the war, Kosovo was given a special status under the “UN Resolution 1244” which saw the establishment of a UN interim administration mission in Kosovo. UNMIK’s role was to help in the state building process by establishing an interim civil administration. UNMIK mission ended after Kosovo declared its independence in 2008.

² NATO - The North Atlantic Treaty Organization, also called the North Atlantic Alliance, is an intergovernmental military alliance between 30 member states.

It is important to note that the ethnic Albanian minority in former Yugoslavia, which now forms a majority within Kosovo, has had a long history of patriarchy. The social and cultural norms, including gender roles were influenced from a number of sources including religion, traditions, and customs. It is nearly impossible for one to quantify how much has each factor influenced these norms, however the Albanian community had been able to preserve them as a form identity protection within former Yugoslavia. Why the post war era is important and will come across a lot during my interviews is because of two factors: Kosovo's exposure to globalization and international community's influence. With the establishment of UNMIK, Kosovo immediately adopted the CEDAW convention and helped established a number of institutions and NGOs with the intent of fighting gender disparities (Hoxha, 2015). Meanwhile there was a boom in civil society fundings that were aimed at strengthening the NGO sector and contribute to positive social changes. This meant that a lot of funds went in support of projects aiming to address gender inequalities in Kosovo, tackling various problems such as gender-based violence, sexual violence, discrimination against women, and the lack of representation in decision making to name a few. This resulted in a cultural backlash, as the status quo saw this as a threat to the existing social and cultural norms, which included how gender expectations are set. Although this new feminist movement has seen a lot of progress since then, there are still many who see this as something that was imposed from "outside" thus putting people who work to promote gender equality in scrutiny. The brief history is important to put participants experiences into a context and better understand their perceptions on this matter.

3.4 ADDING TO THE LITERATURE

The research will specifically focus on the context of Kosovo and will look at what is motivating the men who are actively involved in gender equality work to do so. Therefore, it will contribute in research to further understand motivation and driving force that is pushing men from a considerably very patriarchal society to go against gender norms and fight for equality among genders. The research will also highlight obstacles preventing men to engage focusing on stigma and the threat to traditional norms. Finally the study will present ideas and strategies on how to increase the amount of men working with gender equality and how to appeal to men in countries with strongly established gender roles.

4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

In this chapter I will be presenting the research design selected for this thesis and the framework in which the data collected is linked to the research questions. Secondly, I will describe the process of recruiting the participants by providing information on the selection criteria and the study area, and finally touch on challenges, ethical consideration, and trustworthiness of the research.

4.1 EPISTEMOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This project aims to explore and better understand the individual and shared experiences of men from Kosovo who are engaged in gender equality work and activism. Taking everything into account I have decided to use the interpretative approach to social science as an epistemological approach as I believe it is the most appropriate approach for this project. Epistemology is very important for research as it justifies and evaluate knowledge (Carter & Little, 2007). Neuman (2011), explains that epistemology is the issue of how we know what we know, and ISS “describes and interprets how people conduct their daily lives” (Neuman, 2011, p. 105).

As the aim of this research is to explore and understand the experiences and perceptions of Men from Kosovo who are engaged in gender equality work and activism this project has benefitted from drawing on a phenomenological research design. Phenomenology studies the experiences of actors related to a phenomenon (Leavy, 2014), which in my case involve men who are engaged in gender equality.

Creswell (2007) also discusses the importance of exposing one’s bias when studying a given phenomenon. According to Creswell (2007), the researcher must be careful to “bracket out, as much as possible, their own experiences” (p. 61), in order to be able to fully explain the experiences of the participants. Similarly, Leavy (2014), argues that a researcher must first explore their own views and biases and how these can shape one’s unique perception, before proceeding to analyzing the data.

4.2 STUDY AREA

This study is primarily focused on ethnic Albanian men living in Kosovo; therefore, all my interviews were conducted with men from Kosovo and mainly from the capitol Pristina where all my interviewees live. My initial fieldwork plan was to travel to Kosovo and conduct

my interviews in person, however due to some circumstantial changes in my life with the birth of a new baby and adding to that travel restriction because of Covid-19 pandemic, made it impossible for me to arrange that, and instead opted for Zoom interviews. All my interviews except two were conducted in August 2021 with the other two conducted in March 2022.

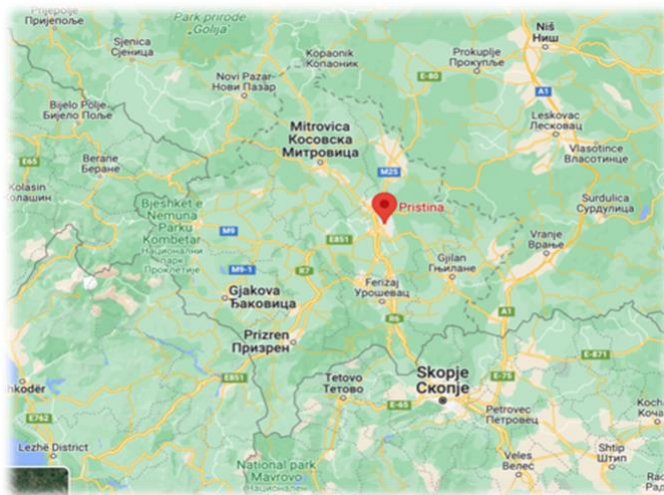


Figure 1: Map of Kosovo and Pristina the capital city.(Google Maps, n.d., accessed March 26th, 2022).

4.3 PARTICIPANTS RECRUITMENT AND SELECTION CRITERIA

Prior to my fieldwork I had established a list of participants criteria. There participants were to be Kosovo men above the ages of 18 who are engaged in some form of gender equality and feminism through work or activism. My initial aim was to interview 8 to 10 men from Kosovo who are currently engaged in civil society projects whose main objective is contribution to gender equality. However, due to a low availability of such specific profile, primarily because of the nature of civil society work and time-framed projects, some of the criteria had to be slightly altered to include men who had previously been engaged in such work and are currently not and men who are engaged as activists in feminist groups. These changes had little significance in the research as the main aim was to understand motivation behind their engagement.

Having been previously involved in gender equality projects through my previous work prior to this master’s program, I had a network of people who were also involved in gender equality activism throughout Kosovo. Initially I contacted some acquaintances that I for certain knew are part of NGO’s and groups that advocate for gender equality. Later through their network and

with the help of a Facebook group called “Feminizmi Shqiptar”³ I managed to recruit a few more participants. Ultimately, I ended up with a total of seven interviews, all men over the age of 18 who were involved in some sort of feminist work or activism. Snowball sampling (Punch, 2014) was very useful and effective sampling strategy for this research as I managed to recruit most of my participants through other participants.

Summary of participants list

Table 1: List of participants in individual zoom interviews, using pseudonyms:

<i>Name</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Association</i>
Kadri	Male	39	Local Organization
Korab	Male	24	Local Organization
Besnik	Male	38	International Organization
Erblin	Male	31	International Organization
Agon	Male	26	Local Feminist Movement
Bledor	Male	23	Local Organization
Rron	Male	20	Local Organization

4.4 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The primary data for this project was collected in August 2021, through individual interviews which was my main source of data collection. All the interviews were conducted through Zoom.

³ “Feminizmi Shqiptar” translates to Albanian Feminism in the local language.

4.4.1 INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

My main source of data collection is semi-structured individual interviews which I conducted via Zoom. I chose semi-structured interviews because they allow the researcher to follow a set list of questions while simultaneously allowing space for the participant to elaborate (Punch, 2014).

This type of interview is also best for understanding the complex behavior of people and their understanding of reality at the same time without imposing any prior categorization which can limit the field of inquiry (Punch, 2014). A qualitative research interview can also be described as an attempt to understand the world from the point of view of the subject by uncovering the meaning of their experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and this was very well suited to my topic as I had to dig deep into participants motivations. I used my interview guide as a tool to guide the conversation in a certain direction and not allowing it to drift too far off the topic while encouraging the participant to speak freely and not feel restricted by the questions. The aim was to allow the participants to share their experiences beyond the list of questions set for the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Using semi-structured interviews also allowed me to explore areas and thoughts that would have been difficult to explore with structured interviews. By using open-ended questions, I took an active role during the interviews, allowing participants to make their points and intervene in cases when there are relevant points to be made by not disturbing the flow of the interview.

The interview length ended up varying between 40 to 60 minutes long depending on participants. The differences in length were mainly because of the answers given by the participants where on some occasions they would give lengthy answers and elaborate on them and in some other they would give short and close ended answers. Almost with all the participants I had conversations prior to the interview, just to get them a bit familiar with the project and its aim, and often after the interview itself. This was a very nice experience as I got to know the participants better beyond the interview setting, and it allowed me to get a better insight into the answers they gave throughout the interviews. These conversations also served as a debriefing of the interview (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). All the interviews were conducted in Albanian, which is my mother tongue and were later translated and transcribed in English.

4.5 DATA MANAGEMENT AND ANALYSIS

All the interviews were recorded with the prior consent from the participants. The audio files were then stored to my password protected personal computer using anonymous labels for each of the participants. The audio files were kept on the computer until I was finished transcribing all the interviews and were immediately deleted after that. I made sure that the VPN was always activated during the entire duration of my project to ensure extra protection for the data collected during the interviews.

Once I was finished transcribing the interviews, I used NVivo to code them. For the data analysis I used thematic analysis strategy from (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I first looked at the data as a whole and tried to establish common themes that were of most relevancy to the research and tried to group all the quotes into those main thematic categories. This strategy allows the researcher to organize the data into themes with the ultimate aim of unpacking a story (Skovdal & Cornish, 2015).

4.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS OF RESEARCH

A very important aspect when conducting research is the trustworthiness of the findings and conclusions. When it comes to the trustworthiness, qualitative research differs from the quantitative one in ways which one measures it “since qualitative research is focused on meaning and interpretation in cases which are unique and context-bound” (Yilmaz, 2013, p. 318). Therefore, credibility, dependability and transferability are commonly highlighted factors to ensure the quality of the research.

4.6.1 CREDIBILITY

According to Shenton (2004), there are certain measures a researcher can take to ensure credibility and that is to “promote confidence that they have accurately recorded the phenomena under scrutiny” (p. 64). Credibility essentially works to demonstrate whether the findings of the study are credible compared to has previously been discovered by other relevant studies. A commonly agreed measure of credibility in qualitative studies within academia is thick description (Shenton, 2004; Tracy, 2010; Yilmaz, 2013). Thick description means describing the situation and the context of the research in great details, making it easier for the reader to assess the overall findings (Shenton, 2004). In this project I have tried to deliver detailed description of the entire research process, by providing specific context and

background in which the research took place to ensure that this will increase the credibility of my project. I have also provided details of my data collecting methods and challenges occurred.

Furthermore, Yilmaz (2013), argues for the importance of exposing one's bias for research to be credible and I have attempted to outline mine in the next section.

4.6.2 DEPENDABILITY

Dependability is important to the trustworthiness of the data because it assess whether the findings are in line with the data collected during the fieldwork (Shenton, 2004) and at the same time it ensures the consistency of the research process (Yilmaz, 2013). In order to meet the dependability criteria, I made an interview guide which I used as a tool throughout this study to guide the data collection process. Although the participants had the freedom to expand on questions and touch on other aspects of the problem which they found important to elaborate on the interviews did follow the structure of the guide and always related back to the question as it is the case with semi-structured interviews.

4.6.3 TRANSFERABILITY

Transferability as a criterion relies on the extent to which the research can be applied to other similar setting. According to Punch (2004) another aspect of thick description is to “provide sufficient information about the context of the research so that a reader can judge the transferability” (Punch, 2014, p. 160). Therefore, making use of thick description ensures both credibility and transferability in this project. Although this study is very country specific and it takes place in a specific cultural context, the findings can be transferable due to the similar nature of patriarchy dominating in countries around and even further away. Although the details of the cultural context might change, I am under the impression that the findings won't be far away if the same study was to be conducted in a similarly cultural context.

4.7 ROLE OF THE RESEARCHER

A key feature of qualitative research is the acknowledgement of the researcher that they cannot separate their own lived experiences and beliefs from their research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My aim in this section is to outline my own biases and motivations before proceeding to analyze my findings.

4.7.1 PERSONAL MOTIVATIONS

When covering my own views and biases for this project I should start with the main motivation for this project, which is gender equality. I grew up as a boy in a predominately patriarchal society in Kosovo. During my bachelor studies in Political Science, I started to become aware and notice the preferential treatment of men in the society and injustices between the two established genders at the time. Through friends and colleagues, I was soon introduced to many feminist groups and feminist theories, and this only deepened my interest in gender equality and social justice. Soon after that, I started participating in roundtables, discussions, and dialogues on gender equality, taking part in conferences local and abroad and reading about gender theory. After graduating from my bachelors' studies, I started working for a local NGO based in Pristina and I manage to create a strong network of people working with gender equality. A year later I was awarded a scholarship for my master's studies in Human Rights Policy and Practice, through which my interest in gender equality and gender theory entered an academic level. Months after graduating from my masters, I started working for a US funded project called "Act on Equality" who's aim was to increase the participation of women in local decision-making institutions and raise awareness on GBV in schools around Kosovo.

All this experience combined with UN's launch of "He for She" campaign and UN's sustainable development goal nr.5 Gender Equality were highly motivational factors for me to decide on this research topic. I see my role as a researcher as an insider, not only coming from Kosovo but also having previously worked with gender equality projects. The reason for conducting this study is that I find the engagement of men in achieving gender equality extremely important and I want to explore factors that can help other men join the cause. Therefore, it is important for me to be aware of my background and my views when analyzing and discussing the topic objectively rather than my rely on my own experience.

5.0 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Different ethical considerations are important during different stages of the process, such as involving the participants, negotiating entry to the field site of research, gathering emotional or personal data that reveal sensitive details of someone's life, etc. (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical issues are more significant when dealing with controversial topics or areas that might end up violating someone's privacy or harm them in any shape or form (Neuman, 2014). Kosovo has a long history of patriarchal dominance and feminism is in many cases, more often outside the urban areas considered a controversial topic that might end up harming

the participants in different ways, socially and politically. However, the participants had no problem of having their identity made public as they are already known for their work and have appeared at times on TV to talk about gender equality. However I decided to still use pseudonyms for their names but I will provide other information's in the participant background which will put to context their work and experience.

I will also make sure to have the ethical considerations throughout the process from getting clearance from NSD, to informed consent and throughout the data analysis. It is important to have in mind that ethical issues may arise in any stage of the project (Creswell & Poth, 2018) therefore one should be very careful through the process to make sure that is covered.

5.1 INFORMED CONSENT

I established informed consent at the start of data collection by sending an electronic consent form to sign to all the participants and receiving it back signed. I also let the participants know that they could revoke their consent at any point before, during, or after the interview. Anonymity was achieved through the pseudonym and masking procedures described in **Table 1:** within section 4.3.

5.2 NORWEGIAN RESEARCH CLEARANCE

Prior to the data collection I submitted an application to the Norwegian Center for Data Collection (NSD) and I got clearance to start collecting the data soon after that. This was also automatically transferred to the University of Bergen's (RETTE) registration system for research.

6.0 CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

My biggest challenge as I already stated before was the slim picking of the profile, I had set to interview for my research project. I did not have problems in contacting and scheduling the first few interviews with people I had known through my network prior to my studies, however finding other men of similar profile seemed to be a bit difficult as not only in Kosovo but one could argue in many countries there are very few men working with gender equality projects due to the nature of such projects and personal interests.

Another challenge I encountered during the data collection process was the inability to conduct the interviews face-to-face, hence having to rely on Zoom instead. This might have affected the data as the missing human element could have come to a benefit while exploring a topic where personal and emotional input is of highly significance.

And another significant challenge had to do with my own life circumstances. Welcoming a baby mid-way through my studies disturbed my workflow and eventually I was forced into taking a semester break and had to pick up later where I left of. This resulted in difficulties managing the time and slight detachment from the research.

5. MISCONCEIVING FEMINISM

In this results and discussion portion, there will be a total of three theme chapters, beginning with the introduction; the subsequent chapters will include both the findings from participant interviews and the discussion relating these findings to relevant literature. In the first chapter, I will begin by describing the participant's work and personal history to contextualize their experience and understanding of gender equality and feminist activism.

The chapters in this section are aligned in a way that answers the main dilemmas regarding my research questions. The first chapter within findings and discussion will begin by exploring participants' experiences of gender norms during childhood, followed by describing a sense of confusion and misunderstanding the participants themselves had an early introduction to feminism but also the general perception among men in Kosovo. Consequently, the chapter will explore the motivations that inspired the participants to engage actively in gender equality work. This will help understand why it is so uncommon to be a man and work with gender equality and what are the misconception that can contribute to other men seeing this as something they should actively engage in.

The second chapter will touch on participants' experiences of hegemonic masculinities in their work and will explore the sense of threat to the existing social norms held by both men and women in Kosovo. Among other things, the chapter will address the stigma of identifying as a male feminist within the local context and touch on noticeable changes participants have observed among their friends and family members due to their work. Further, the chapter will explore whether they empathize more with women due to their experience and knowledge acquired through time and engagement.

The third chapter will explore the participant's perception of the importance of their involvement. By doing so, I will initially compare their responses to the existing literature and further proceed to explore whether women see their involvement as a potential problem. At the end of the chapter, I will discuss their opinions on what are the best strategies to engage more men in the future in the fight against gender inequalities.

5.1 PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND⁴

5.1.1 KADRI

The first participant in this study, Kadri, is currently the director of a local organization whose goal is to promote human rights and gender equality, prevent gender-based violence, and domestic violence and generally promote a healthy lifestyle among young people. He has been engaged in gender equality work for over 15 years, working for various local organizations with different partners and, is one of the pioneers when it comes to men's engagement in gender equality activism. He has worked with people all around Kosovo, from different backgrounds, ages, and locations. He was the leader of the "Be a Man" club, which was one of the most successful programs in terms of getting men and boys interested in gender equality and positive masculinities.

5.1.2 KORAB

The second participant, Korab, is a young activist who came through the ranks from volunteering at "Be a Man" club to later getting engaged as a full-time employee in various gender equality projects with different local organizations. Korab's introduction with gender equality concepts started as early as primary school, and in high school he got familiar with the "Be a Man" club after attending one of their trainings and that inspired him to pursue the goal of being a voice for change and get engaged with gender equality by breaking gender stereotypes.

5.1.3 BLEDOR

Similar to Korab, my third participant Bledor, is also a young activist who initially went through the "Be a Man" club trainings and later got engaged as full-time employee for a local organization and has since been engaged in several projects regarding gender equality and engaging men in positive fatherhood. Bledor also has a bachelor's degree in Social Work, where he first got introduced with more in-depth knowledge of feminism and gender equality.

⁴ The names presented in this chapter are pseudonyms chosen by me and are in Albanian language to authentically resemble the participant's background.

5.1.4 BESNIK

My fourth participant Besnik has been working for an international organization for over 12 years and has been primarily engaged in a project that aims to engage men in gender equality using program's H and M from Promundo⁵. The programs have been successfully adopted in a number of high schools within capitol Pristina. Besnik is also one of the most recognizable male feminist and gender equality activist in Kosovo and his work spans way beyond his full-time position, to a leading figure and role model when it comes to positive masculinities.

5.1.5 ERBLIN

Erblin, my fifth participant currently works for an international organization in Kosovo as a gender expert in the field of energy. He has been engaged in youth projects since 2015, and in the last five years he has been directly engaged with labor rights in Kosovo, by engaging labor unions to promote women participation in the labor sector and help them improve gender equality in the decision-making structures through policy changes. Since 2019, Erblin is also engaged in a non-formal collective called "Collective for Feminist Action and Thought" which is a leftist-oriented feminist group consisting of men and women.

5.1.6 RRON

My sixth participant Rron is also a very young activist who is currently working as a project assistant in a gender equality project for a local organization. Rron began attending gender equality seminars from the age of 15, and after years of participation in feminist events and volunteering opportunities he now works full time with projects that promote gender equity.

5.1.7 AGON

My seventh participant Agon is an active youth worker and one of the main members of the "Collective for Feminist Action and Thought". He has experience in citizen activism and has been engaged in many events and actions that challenge the status quo regarding gender injustices.

⁵ Promundo is a Brazilian-based, non-governmental organization that work in collaboration to promote caring, non-violent and equitable masculinities and gender relations in Brazil and internationally.

5.2 EXPERIENCES OF GENDER NORMS DURING CHILDHOOD

The first question in my interview guide was asking the participants about their upbringing. That included questions such as: in what type of family they grew up, what was the family dynamic, and if there was something that influenced them to see things differently than other men in relation to gender roles and norms. My aim was to find common denominators that would explain why the participants chose to engage in such work knowing the prejudice and stigma that follow that choice. However, the answers were quite distinct and varied from one another, yet they all pointed to some reason they thought affected the outcome. For example, Korab explained that his grandparents differed from his parents when it came to the perpetuation of gender stereotypes, with the grandparents having more loose gender expectations than his parents, stating:

“How I grew up is a bit interesting because when you look at my grandparents from both my mother's and father's side, they were very liberal, and they had no taboos like my parents have, for example. They were very "like"; they didn't care if you were a boy or a girl and if they asked you to do something, they didn't check your gender, but they told you to do it because you are closer or something like that. If there were something that needed to be cleaned, the grandmother would tell you to clean it, or she would separate the work among all the nephews and nieces to clean.” (Korab)

He then argued that his parents expressed more patriarchal views when it came to gender roles and suggested that it was this difference that got him aware of gender stereotypes very early and pushed him to see this as something he wanted to engage stating:

“But when it comes to my parents, they are more patriarchal, my mom and dad. They are like a boy is a boy and a girl is a girl, the boy must do this, and the girl must do this, and this later affected my engagement in the "Be a Man" club's campaigns because I liked it much better how our grandparents treated us than how our parents treated us. Even though my parents grew up in that environment, they did not pick it up from them.” (Korab).

Like Korab, Kadri remembers growing up in quite a stereotype-free family environment despite the age gap. He explained that the way the parents treated all of the siblings equally regardless of their gender influenced him later in life to fight against harmful gender stereotypes, stating:

"I grew up in a big family where I was the youngest of four siblings. Maybe because I was the youngest, I got to learn a lot from others, but the way our parents treated all of us made me believe in and promote the values of social equality. My parents didn't impose gender roles upon us, especially when it came to house chores, so I believe that had an effect on me later choosing this path."(Kadri)

On the contrary, Bledor, who unfortunately lost his father during the war, stated that he grew up looking up to his mom as the main role model. He explained that even though he grew up in an environment where male domination and patriarchy had been preserved for a long time, he saw his mom engage in what is considered male gender roles since he was young. He states:

"I think losing my father has affected my upbringing in terms of pushing me to engage in gender matters, where throughout my life, I have had the chance to see my mom engage in many aspects that were supposedly meant to be only for men. For example, my mom was working; she was the breadwinner and generally did everything that was supposed to be done by a man. And I think that helped me to understand that gender does not really determine the types of work you are supposed to do."(Bledor)

He explained that to him, gender equality was very natural, and he did not grow up with the same gender stereotypes as other peers his age, and he only realized that stereotypes were problematic after he began working with other young men, stating:

"So I never really saw gender equality as a big deal because, as I said, I grew up watching my mom redefining gender norms, so I never saw it as something threatening or unusual for me. But then later, when I started working with other young men who grew up in more rural areas or who grew up in families that have distinct gender roles, that is when I realized that not all men had had the chance to grow up in an environment where they could see their mom or their dad challenge gender roles. That is when I realized that this could be a problem because I strongly believe that the way you grow up and what you are exposed to during your upbringing will affect the way you see gender roles."(Bledor)

Bledor's case is fascinating because, contrary to all the other participants, he grew up in an area known for having powerful gender roles and where being a "man" means a lot to the traditional context. Yet, his exposure to his mom challenging those norms resulted in him accepting the fluidity when it comes to gender expression in terms of performing different tasks and types of

work. Erblin, Besnik, and Rron, on the other hand, all had in common the fact that they grew up as the only boy among three or more siblings, and two of them stated that growing up among sisters helped them notice the inequalities among the two genders. Besnik, who grew up as the youngest brother of four sisters, stated that:

"I grew up as the youngest and the only boy among five siblings, so I got to see over the years the inequalities my sisters experienced. But only later, when I learned more about gender equality and feminism, I could put things into context and make the connection to everything I had seen my sisters go through growing up."(Besnik)

Similar to this was the case of Rron, who claimed that he grew up with sisters in the family and could see at a young age the differences in treatment and expectations from society. He also stated that he was lucky not to be spoiled by his parents and siblings, as it is expected when you are the only boy in a family, stating that:

"I was lucky not to be spoiled by my family members regardless of being the only boy and being the youngest of three. I was always doing house chores since I was a little kid and always got engaged in different tasks equally to my siblings. I even remember sometimes feeling jealous about other boy cousins I had who did nothing all day and got their food delivered to their rooms while they were playing video games. But now I am so happy I was not treated that way because that has shaped me into who I am today while my cousins have developed this parasite attitude and always depend on others to do things for them, so in that sense, I was very lucky."(Rron)

Erblin had a slightly different take on the influence, stating that it was not due to having sisters that influenced him to notice gender injustices. However, it was instead through other women around him, like his aunts and cousins, that he believed were under social exploitation, stating:

"I think I noticed it when I was pretty young, but it was not through my sisters necessarily but more like in other women in the family and beyond, like my aunts and cousins and even my mom. I noticed the care and other work they did around the family was taken for granted."(Erblin)

All participants claimed that only after learning about gender equality and feminism could they correctly put things into context and better understand patriarchy and how it affects gender norms and gender expectations. Although it is hard to conclude what might have inspired them

to engage in gender equality work, one can make sense of their reasoning and see that their upbringing could have played a significant role in them later adopting gender-equal values.

Zimmerman and West's (1987) theory of "gender accountability," from their publication on "Doing Gender," reinforces the interactional, contextual, and circumstantial nature of gender, illuminating the implications of the inevitable performance of gender in daily life, which is required by the various institutions and ideologies in a given society (West & Zimmerman, 1987). All the participants seem to have understand the gender performances very early in their development. Family as one of the institutions that enforces gender stereotypes was the first indication of gender roles that participants were exposed to, all naming reasons such as treatment from parents, role models and discrimination, being impactful in their decision to engage in gender equality work later in their lives. However, West and Zimmerman maintain that the political ramifications of social construction of gender are that, despite how difficult the change may be, the gender characteristics used to support men's hegemony are intrinsically social products and hence vulnerable to social change (West & Zimmerman, 1987). And that proved to be true at least among the participants, who despite early exposure to stereotypes and the stigma attached to identifying as men feminist, decided to engage actively and work towards achieving gender equality.

5.3 CONFUSION AT FIRST SIGHT

I thought I would start this next segment by addressing a theme that was quite common and very interesting to analyze: the misconception about feminism among men in Kosovo and its common association with women. I hope this will help us better understand why not many men publicly identify as feminists and actively engage in gender equality work, to begin with. Almost all of my participants from the data collection expressed confusion when asked what they thought about concepts such as feminism and gender equality the first time they heard of them. For example, Korab states:

“It took me a long time to understand the term feminism and understand what it is about. Even though all my values and behavior were feminist, I did not understand the term; I misunderstood it. I thought feminism was something about women or a women's movement until the teacher explained to me in detail what it is about”. (Korab)

And this is a massive common misconception, especially for men who grew up in post-war Kosovo. Feminism was not as present as a movement as it is today, and in a highly patriarchal

country, both men and women held views based on traditional gender roles. It was only after the war that the movement started to take pace with international funding, helping local non-governmental organizations focus on gender equality and challenging the existing gender norms that were harmful to women (Hoxha, 2015).

Bledor, on the other hand, explained that he did not make much about the concepts the first time he came across them as his knowledge was very shallow at the time but extended on the misconception that he has noticed and experienced while working with young men on gender equality training stating that:

“What I have noticed while working with young men in gender projects is that men and boys think that the topic of gender equality is a topic that belongs only to women, and I think that they tend to see themselves ranked higher than women in the social context and see gender equality as means for women to position themselves in a better way.”(Bledor)

I found his point of view quite interesting and also relatable to a problem we see in many other areas of inequality where the privileged, although they can recognize the inequalities, they do not necessarily see it as something that is up to them to change but instead as something that is up to the underprivileged. In fact (Leach et al., 2002) argue that secure majority groups tend to identify less strongly with their group than minorities do and that weak group identification results in the privileged seeing themselves more as individuals rather than members of a group, making their group membership invisible (Leach et al., 2002), which would explain in part why women see feminism as vital and a uniting cause for achieving equality, while men simply exclude themselves by default while exerting their privileged status and simply feel that they have no horse on this race. Additionally, Cornwall (2000) argues that the powerlessness that some men feel toward both women and other males has received little attention. This restricts the scope for partnerships between men and women and closes off crucial areas for change. Instead of seeing gender as a "women's issue," we should consider how power dynamics may leave both men and women vulnerable. Instead of viewing "maleness" as strong and problematic in and of itself, we need to consider how power dynamics can affect both men and women (Cornwall, 2000).

Rron, for example, recalls the time when he found himself confused about what feminism was after hearing different conflicting explanations and had to ask for an acquittance. He states:

"I remember asking her: could you please explain to me one day what this feminism is? Can you explain it to me because people are saying different things? I believe that it is an ideology that will push us towards social justice, but I hear people saying that this is only for girls and women's rights". (Rron)

It is clear that, at least from personal experience, most men in the Kosovar cultural context see gender equality more like a bug in their ears rather than something they should be fighting for to achieve social justice. Their inability to see past existing gender stereotypes and the stigma surrounding the word feminism itself prevents them from imagining the benefits they would receive from having an equal society. It does not help that these gender stereotypes have been rooted in a long history of patriarchy dominating the Kosovar society.

Kadri, on the other hand, who has a long experience working with men and boys to promote positive masculinity and gender equality, extended on the idea that men tend to see gender equality more as an obstacle rather than something that could be beneficial for them. He states:

"They see this more as an obstacle rather than something good and important. I do not want to sound judgmental because you have to consider many factors that influence your thinking, such as education, social and economic status, stereotypes, etc. So, your average man in Kosovo sees women in a traditional sense as someone who would take care of domestic chores and take care of children and generally fit within the existing gender stereotype while being subordinate to their husband". (Kadri)

He believes that as much as it is unfortunate, we have to accept that this is a reality in order for us to be able to do something about it and maintains that these structures are so deeply embedded among most men that, unfortunately, it makes it much harder to change these types of perceptions due to the peer pressure, and especially existing gender stereotypes. To explain how early these stereotypes take form, Lorber and Farrell (1991) argue that gender construction begins from birth when infants are clothed or ornamented in a manner that reflects the category, as parents usually do not want to be questioned repeatedly if their child is a boy or a girl. A sex category is transformed into a gender status by name, clothing, and the usage of other gender markers (Lorber & Farrell, 1991). This then expands into other spheres once one grows older, and in isolated cultures such as the Kosovar Albanian community, it is much harder to challenge and question what one might consider harmful gender stereotypes. This can explain to a certain extent why gender equality or feminism is associated almost entirely with women, and men do not see it as a career or even something they feel the need to engage in to bring

positive societal changes. I also mentioned earlier that women seem to relate more to feminism because they are in the context of a patriarchal society, the underprivileged group. Therefore, the bonding is stronger, while men not being subjected to gender subordination have fewer tendencies to be drawn towards feminism. It is similar to feeling apathetic concerning conflicts or human rights abuses that are not happening around your vicinity, and you feel free from the responsibility of having to do something.

5.2.1 LACK OF EDUCATION?

It is worth noting that lack of exposure to such terms and ideas in schools and other social spheres was something that was predominant among all my participants, which is something that contributed to the confusion. For example, Korab explained how the first time he heard about gender equality in school, it came as a consequence of the teacher taking time to talk about this topic which was outside of the curriculum. He stated that:

“The first time, I heard about them in primary school. Our biology and civic education teachers were very innovative, and they always had lectures that were also outside of the school curriculum.” (Korab)

He then explained that only because their civic education teacher was a feminist, they heard about these concepts and discuss them during school.

“Our civic education teacher was a feminist, and she constantly had speeches or more like workshops, usually after she was done with the curriculum, she would sit down with us and talk about how we feel, talk about the patriarchy, talk about marriage and also touch upon homophobia a lot, because we had in our class many students that bullied someone on how they conducted themselves like if a guy had more feminine behavior, other boys would use homophobic slur towards them, and this pushed our teacher to talk to us more about gender equality and feminism.” (Korab)

While Besnik and Kadri had never heard of such a term before the war and were only exposed after the international community established in post-war Kosovo. Bledor, on the other hand, explained that only during his bachelor's studies did he learn about feminism and gender equality in-depth. Before that, he had a very shallow understanding of these matters, stating:

“I had heard of these terms in primary and high school, but my understanding at that point was very shallow, then when I started my bachelor's degree in social work, which

is a part of the sociology department, I got to learn more in-depth about such terms and understand what they mean. And then later, through work, I got to learn even more in detail how gender equality benefits both men and women, for example." (Bledor)

Although Kosovo Program for Gender Equality 2020-2024 states that: *Promoting gender equality through quality education and health, inclusiveness, and human capacity utilization as factors contributing to sustainable human development and the elimination of gender inequalities and stereotypes;*(AGE 2020) is one of their main priorities, I could not find any data whether gender equality is included in the standardized curriculum for primary and high schools students or whether there are efforts to approach it through other extracurricular activities. One aspect that seems to have changed since the war is that more teachers seem to be talking about these topics in recent years compared to the inexistence of such dialog prior to that. Some through educational programs and some through extracurricular activities.

5.4 DECIDING TO ENGAGE ACTIVELY

When it comes to the reasons how the participants started engaging actively in gender equality work, there were a few things noted from the interviews. For example, Korab, Rron, and Besnik were all initial members of the "Be a Man" club before they eventually decided to pursue this as their main career. The three had been members of the club at different times, and all three ended up working in different organizations later, but with projects that aimed at addressing gender equality. When asked about what motivated him to engage actively in gender equality work, Korab replied:

"Yeah, I think, as I said earlier, it was how our grandparents treated us and how our parents treated other family members and us. And I always liked how our grandparents treated us more. There was a significant difference. And later, through school, I got very interested in the topic, but it was the "Be a Man" club that got me so interested, and feel like this is something I want to be engaged with. They had this booklet that was so fascinating for me because the way they described how boys our age behaved in school was so accurate. For example, they described how they think you have to be tough; otherwise, others will bully you, or is it better to be "stronger or smarter," and stuff like that." (Korab)

Similar to Korab, Rron took the same path by volunteering for the "Be a Man" club. Later, he found an opportunity to engage in a gender equality project for one of the local organizations. He states:

"I started as a 14-year-old to attend training that talked about gender equality. Since high school, I was someone who noticed inequalities, and I was always the one who always raised his voice against any injustice. And then, when I heard about the "Be a Man" club, I started attending their meetings, and after a while, I felt like I had found my place and my mission in life, so I kept volunteering in the club and eventually, after a few years I found an opportunity to work for a project as a full-time employee, and that's the story." (Rron)

Despite the age gap, Besnik had a similar history, although he was one of the first people to be engaged in the very beginning of the "Be a Man" club, and after showing his incredible leadership skills, he later was the main coordinator for the Young Men Initiative, which was responsible for the "Be a Man" club.

"The first thing was the feeling of empathy for others, and when you want to do something, you want to value everything you do and want to see the impact of your work or whatever you put your energy on. And the problem that existed in Kosovo, you know, the way the women were treated, the way they were discriminated, the unemployment among women, the way they were presented in the media, all because of patriarchy, I noticed an injustice, and that made me want to contribute to changing it."(Besnik)

He adds that although he had empathy and gender equality was something he felt destined to contribute to. It was the experience with the "Be a Man" club that ensured him that, as a man, he could have a significant impact in terms of promoting gender-equal values among other men, stating:

"But I also had a lot of influence from the club because there we learned about how boys benefit from gender equality also. Because until then, it was all about, we are here to support you, but then the approach changed because suddenly you learned that, wait, this is something that is beneficial for men too, and that is what eventually pushed me to commit the next ten years of my life into it because although I was 26 years old when

I started, I have changed and evolved a lot from 26 to 36. It has been a good journey for me too."(Besnik)

You can see in Besnik's case but also in other participants a pattern of evolution regarding their knowledge and awareness of injustices and how that eventually influenced them to see gender equality as something they want to be involved actively and want to have an impact in the society. For instance, Edwards (2006) argues that potential social justice allies, such as male anti-violence allies, occupy various statuses over time, ranging from self-interested allyship on behalf of specific women they care about to a social justice-informed allyship practiced in solidarity with and accountability to women as well as other marginalized identities (Edwards, 2006). This aligns very well with the examples from the participants as they all had a certain interest initially, but that evolved through different stages to eventually seeing this as a career choice. Erblin and Bledor had a different path when it came to their engagement. Although Erblin had grown up to have a lot of empathy regarding women's treatment due to having a close relationship with female friends and women from his family, he had not seen gender equality as something he could potentially work with and rather accidentally stumbled upon it. He explains that he used to work in a bank after he finished his degree in Economy, but a year into his work, he was looking for opportunities for a career change and decided to apply for a youth engagement project in one of the local NGOs. He explains:

"I started working there because it was an opportunity that was presented to me at a time when I was not happy with my current job in the bank. Although the project that I was initially working on was not gender-oriented, it was the NGO itself that was very gender oriented. And that started to get my attention because although I had been a feminist my whole youth, I had not seen this as something I could actually contribute to while being employed. And when that project ended, I got the opportunity to apply for a gender equality project that was working with trade unions and trying to break the men's domination within these unions by engaging more women." (Erblin)

While for Bledor, who was doing his bachelor's in social work, it was an opportunity to engage in youth work through his internship, which was a part of his studies. Bledor states:

"During my studies, we had an opportunity to do an internship within different local organizations, and I managed to get an internship at a local youth organization. After my internship, I got the opportunity to be engaged as a volunteer in the "Be a Man" club, which was a project run by the NGO where I did my internship, and that was my

first engagement with gender equality. The focus of the project was working with young boys, and I really liked that because I always liked working with young people because it made me feel like it was contributing to a social aspect.”(Bledor)

He then explained that he was lucky to end up volunteering in a project that shared his values and encouraged him to fully commit his time to gender equality. The opportunity to work with young people and help them understand that men and women are the same in a social aspect and challenge their critical thinking is the part that he enjoyed the most and motivated him the most. Kadri recalls the time when he noticed a classic gender division between men and women in institutions, and that was a big incentive for him to start doing something about it. He states:

“It was the gender expectations that always bothered me, from wanting the first child to be a boy to seeing men exercise privileges in all spheres of society that motivated me.” (Kadri)

From the responses, one can conclude that all participants had some sort of awareness regarding gender stereotypes. However, their initial exposure to such concepts and better in-depth knowledge about gender equality is what eventually pushed them to pursue this as a full-time commitment.

5.4.1 MOTIVATING EXPERIENCES FIRST TIME ENGAGEMENT

While I was conducting my interviews, I was very interested to know the participant's first experience of engaging in any activity that promoted gender equality. I did this in an attempt to tap into their emotional realm and find out whether that first experience left them feeling something special that motivated them even more to pursue social equality. Korab, for example, explained that his first time engaging was when he was in the 9th grade, and that left him feeling very motivated. He states:

“The first time was when I was in the 9th grade, but that was also with the “Be a Man” club, and we were doing campaigns to advocate and promote gender equality. I felt very good. There was this feeling that I could do something about this and promote something I believe in and not what other people tell me to.” (Korab)

Erblin, who besides his full-time job is also a member of a non-formal movement called "Collective for Feminist Action and Thought," describes having feelings of gratitude just being a part of the community that shares his values, stating:

“It felt great just to be part of a community where you can learn from each other experience and see the diversity in there. In a working group, there are usually people from different ethnicities and sexual orientations that articulate their voices based on their experiences.”(Erblin)

While Kadri remembers the first time he attended a march for women and recalled having feelings of disappointment due to the lack of men in the march. He states:

"I felt very bad, and I felt bad because of the lack of presence of other men in the march. It was very disappointing. But that was then it was the beginning of a new era of feminism after the war, while now it is so different. Now you see plenty of men in marches, and that is nice to see." (Kadri)

Bledor remembers his first engagement during the International Day of Families, an event that promoted the positive engagement of fathers in parenthood and the equal distribution of tasks among both parents. The second one was the "We march not Celebrate" women's march, where many activists from civil society marched for equal rights. He states:

"It felt very good because if you are involved in a project or activity that you share your values with, and when you see that being successful, you feel very good because you have managed to affect a mindset for good or, If not, change you have had an impact in raising public awareness regarding social equality." (Bledor)

He believes that Kosovar society is transitioning and is very open to new ideas, especially among young people. This has resulted in him and others working within this field to achieve some progress regarding gender equality. And these achievements and the impact that the projects have had, Bledor says that it makes you feel fulfilled seeing the society taking the right direction towards having a gender-equal culture. Besnik remembers an interesting story that happened to him and other men from the club's early days of their activism. He recalls the time they had organized an event in the main square in Pristina where they were cooking traditional food in an attempt to break gender stereotypes and send a message of equality, only to be ridiculed by the media. He states:

“I remember when we organized the "Men cooking" event in the main square, and we always invited media to our events because it was the best way to send a message. And I remember after the event, they wrote the men from the "Be a Man" club are good "Kuzhiniere" (which is the female version of a cook in the Albanian language), poking

fun at the fact that men are cooking or doing something that is supposed to be done by women, completely missing the point of the whole event, and contributing to the already existing stigma about men cooking. We had to make many calls and put pressure to change the title because the aim of it was to show that men can cook and there's nothing wrong with that. And from that point on, it was obvious that we need to educate the media too when it comes to how they report and use gender-sensitive language."(Besnik)

West and Zimmerman further argue against the prevailing belief that people have the power to "undo gender," instead arguing that "accountability structures" are what changes. This represents a change in gender accountability since gender is a component of any culture that emerges via contact and regular performance; as such, it cannot be abandoned or, more accurately, "undone," but rather "re-done"(West & Zimmerman, 2009). This reflects what Besnik and the boys from the "Be a Man" club were trying to achieve in principle. They were attempting to basically re-do the concept of what it is to "Be a Man" within Kosovar cultural norms. This simultaneously acknowledges two things, 1. It is nothing wrong with "Being a Man" per sé. 2. The context of what being a "Man" means and is understand can be re-associated with positive attitudes and values. However, West and Zimmerman also maintain that *"the normative system in gender accountability, including the patriarchal system, cannot be regarded as "free floating," changes to it involve both changes in a person's orientation to these norms and changes in social relations that reflexively support changes in orientation"* (West & Zimmerman, 2009, p. 118). And this was something the participants kept noting when talking about the importance of working with men and boys from different background and ages. This is something that will also come across in the upcoming chapters.

6. EXPERIENCING AND CONFRONTING HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES IN THEIR WORK

This section will address the first sub-research question in this thesis: why are there such few men who see gender equality as something to engage in? As such, I will begin by exploring men's general perception of gender equality and the idea that this poses a threat to social norms. Further into the chapter, I will explore the stigma attached to identifying as a male feminist. I will draw on participants' experiences and explore how that stigma can be an obstacle in engaging more men in the movement. At the end of the chapter, I will examine whether the participants have a more significant sense of empathy with women due to their experience and knowledge acquired through time and whether noticing changes among their friends and family members motivates them to keep working on fighting gender inequalities.

6.1 THREAT TO THE PRIVILEGE AND SOCIAL NORMS

Most of my participants had some sort of view in terms of how they have experienced the effects of patriarchy within family, friends, and work, which resembled a traditional view of what manhood should be like. For example, when asked about how people around him (Kadri) perceive him and make of him as a man who works for gender equality, he explains that there are always two sides. On the one hand, being perceived as someone who is trying to do good work to promote healthy relationships, and on the other, being seen as someone who is weakening the concept of "Being a Man," in which he states:

"It starts with various ones like, he's not a real man, he has weakened the pride of being a man, they don't tell you directly but indirectly you hear about it, people tell you. So, for me, it was always a goal to continue my work and never really let that affect me; it only made me feel sorry for the way they see things." (Kadri)

He further explains that it is unavoidable when you are working with such concepts to be perceived in this way due to the patriarchal mentality that you are brought up with and says that he is selective when it comes to people whom he chooses to talk to outside of his work. He then proceeds to tell a story about how a doctor ridiculed him after answering that he just wants a healthy baby instead of a boy or a girl. He recalls the first time visiting the doctor to do an ultrasound for their first baby and states:

"He asked me whether I would like the baby to be a boy or a girl. And I said that I just wanted it to be a healthy baby. And he was so surprised by my answer. He then asked

my wife, but at the same time was still preoccupied with my answer and later proceeded to make an uncomfortable joke and asked me whether I was made of stone or wood. And I answered something in between. He then said: how is it that all the men who come here say it's important for the first one to be a boy, and after that, it doesn't matter? And I replied with: it is time for us to accept that we don't determent the sex of the baby."(Kadri)

Due to patriarchy, this is, unfortunately, a common theme in Kosovar society, where boys are inherently more privileged before they even come to life. Finding out that the baby will be a boy often results in what we call "Aheng," some type of family party celebration. This is due to many reasons but mainly for the family name and inheritance. Inheritance specifically has been one of the problems that local NGOs have been trying to address since after the war. When it comes to inheritance, women are automatically excluded from the conversation, and they have been since forever. In Kosovo, the percentage of women who participated in inheritance between 2008 and 2012 was quite low. According to customary law, women did not have the right to inherit from their husband's families or from their own lineage, which relates to the customary character of this circumstance, namely archaic mindset, traditional influence, and customary law impact (Hajdari, 2014). Hajdari also argues that the degree of women's participation in inheritance affects not only their social standing but also their cultural, educational, and scientific standing, as well as their representation in the country's public institutions and their participation in decision-making at all levels of society (Hajdari, 2014). Therefore it has been vitally important for local NGOs to focus a lot of their energies on inheritance. Although this has begun to change a lot among the younger generations, mainly because of civil societies 'engagement in addressing the issue and raising awareness, it still remains a big problem. For example (Rron) recalls the time when he used to work in a "Qebaptore," which is some type of meat barbeque where men usually hang out. He explains:

"When you talk about gender equality with some older men, you can see their face changes when it comes to sharing the inheritance equally. But lately, I have noticed there have been cases when they agreed to talk about it when I know for a fact when I was younger; I used to work in a "Qebaptore," and I have heard many talks among men. Every time the topic of inheritance was brought up, they didn't even discuss whether a signature from the sisters is necessary, let alone dividing the inheritance equally for the boys and girls."(Rron)

Erblin explained that he believes men in Kosovo see gender as a biological trait, therefore, are unable to think that gender stereotypes are socially constructed and can be harmful. He states"

"I think men in Kosovo believe that gender is a natural trait and not a social construct. So they don't challenge gender norms, but they see them as biological traits." (Erblin)

He further argued that most men and women in Kosovo go on with their lives without really challenging how any social norms affect their lives. They tend to see everything as destiny and as something they cannot really do anything about. Plus, when you factor in other problems that the people of Kosovo have had to deal with, one should not be surprised that gender equality does not rank high in their list of priorities, stating:

"People have been through oppression, war, poverty, economic and political instability, and a lot of other things, so I understand that this is not a priority for a lot of men, but that does not mean we shouldn't keep making it a part of the conversation, because it will affect future generations."(Erblin)

Korab, on the other hand, feels that gender division seems to be, unfortunately, worse in rural areas. He has traveled in many villages around Kosovo with his work promoting the inclusion of women in village councils and has noted a lot of cultural practices that are almost unacceptable in today's society but are very present in some areas. He states that:

"If you go to some villages in Kosovo, women there can't even go to the shop and buy bread without the presence of a man, or take a taxi anywhere, or appear anywhere in public without the presence of their husband."(Korab)

He further states something that is a very common perception among men in many villages when you gather men to discuss the topic of gender equality, and they are very hesitant to talk about it due to social practices and gender expectations in their daily lives. He states that:

"In most cases, for example, if we go into more rural areas, when you talk about gender equality or women's rights, they think that you are trying to influence their women because they think they already have their rights from religion and social norms." (Korab)

Anthropologist Sally Engle Merry calls this translating universal ideas into local context and points out the difficulty of translating universal ideas such as violence against women into a cultural context where such ideas are not a part of the normative and customary framework

(Merry, 2006). The same phenomenon was also experienced by Agon, who explained that he has, in many instances, been asked about where they get the funds for these meetings, insinuating that foreign donors are not to be trusted as they are trying to push these ideas upon them and therefore influencing their cultural norms. He states:

"It has happened to me a couple of times that some man from the meetings we organize in different villages just leans over and asks me about the funds and where we get it from, which country etc. Sometimes they also ask what religion they have there. Which I find strange."(Agon)

Both believe that there is definitely an element of religion in there that is deeply embedded into cultural practices. Yet, regardless of the reason, all these examples have at least one thing in common, and that is the preservation of the patriarchal system through hegemonic masculinity and the preservation of men's privileges over women. Korab explains that this is also something he experienced with his friends a lot, stating:

"Well, my male friends, for example, until very recently, we always had fights because they, for example, wanted to go out for a drive and harass women. I think they see gender equality as a threat to their rights and privileges because if they can go out and their girlfriends can also go out, then they wouldn't be able to do whatever they wanted because they would be seen, and they see this as a direct threat to their freedom. And in our culture, it's also the other things that a "MAN" is supposed to sleep with as many women as possible, and that is glorified as an achievement." (Korab)

Esplen (2006) argues that attempts to challenge the authority of certain men are met with opposition, particularly from men in socially dominant groups. She argues that these men view gender equality as an assault on their way of life and a danger to their privileges and asks the question where is the motivation for men and boys to work toward gender equality if they are given advantages by the current gender hierarchies? (Esplen, 2006).

Meanwhile, Connell argues that masculinities are diverse in a given culture, but one stance, a specific configuration of male attitudes and behaviors, contributes to sustaining gender inequality (men's dominance over women) and assumes authority over other, typically minority groups of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This relates to the participant's experiences in the sense that their engagement in something that is seen to challenge the gender status quo is ultimately labeled as weakening the concept of what it means to be a man. This often results

in stigma and social pressure that aims at maintaining this ideal configuration of male attitudes at the expense of achieving gender equity. Connell also maintained that masculinities are fluid and dynamic and that they may also be seen as situationally occupied positions in the sense that the position inhabited, practices, and ideals professed in one setting may vary from those espoused in another (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This presents an opportunity to instill change in the future by providing a platform and a setting for men to change and adopt positive masculine attitudes.

6.1.2 THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSLATING UNIVERSAL IDEAS INTO LOCAL CONTEXT

Sally Engle Merry (2006) asked the question of how human rights principles can spread across so many diverse, culturally varied communities, and argued that this is a specific illustration of a more general inquiry regarding the transfer of institutions and ideas between sociocultural contexts (Merry, 2006). This prompted the question of how ideas can be interpreted in various social and cultural situations. Anthropology has long struggled to understand when and how cultural translation is possible. The idea of "framing," which social movement theorists created to examine what makes an idea appealing in a social movement, may be used to explain the adoption of rights discourse. Frames are not concepts in and of themselves, but rather techniques of organizing and presenting ideas to create shared beliefs, inspire group activity, and define proper course of action (Merry, 2006). Although this seems exactly the strategy most participants had used in their work with young men and women, their impression suggested a hint of difficulty of framing gender equality norms and translating them in the cultural context. Ron insisted that if his family does not understand what he does he won't be able to have any impact in the society, stating:

"I have always believed that I won't be able to make a change in our society if my family doesn't even understand the work I do. If my family struggles to understand what it is that I work with, what I believe in. So I feel like I always have to make my family understand what it is that I'm doing what I believe in, before I get to do that with other men and women that I have worked with." (Ron)

Korab explained that there is a perception when you go to rural areas to discuss about gender equality there is a feeling that men believe you are trying to influence "their" women. That also presents a challenge in terms of what strategy to use when working with men from areas where gender stereotypes are very static, if the same strategies used elsewhere are being met with cultural resistance. Erblin, however, argued that we should be aware of potential

depoliticization of the local context when trying to contextualize universal ideas into local context, stating:

"The challenge of contextualizing universal ideas into local context hinges on framing the local context as the third world, and rather it as inferior to the universal idea of human rights. This ends up in depoliticization of the local context." (Erblin)

This is why the cooperation with people who understand the local context is crucially important. Engle Merry also raised this issue arguing that people in the middle, individuals who apply discourses and practices from the realm of international law and legal institutions to particular instances of suffering and violation, are a crucial component of the vernacularization process (Merry, 2006).

6.2 THE STIGMA OF IDENTIFYING AS A MALE FEMINIST

Most of the participants believe that there is an undeniable stigma that they believe makes it harder for men to raise their voices and publicly identify as feminists. This type of stigma runs through different layers of society, and it expresses itself by judging men who intervene with socially constructed gender roles by branding them as weaker "Men." In Kosovo, the term feminism itself does not have a good reputation. Identifying as a feminist is riddled with negative connotations in the context of the Balkans. Kosovic and Spahic-Siljak attribute this to the conflict between Western feminism and pre-existing socialist ideas in former communist regimes. This has led to widespread misunderstandings about feminism in the Former Yugoslav Republics. They observe that even women who identify as feminists do not do so openly (Spahic-Siljak & Kosovic, 2012). For men, this is even worse, considering the social taboos and the expectations of what a real man should be like. Kadri, who has been promoting gender equality for over 15 years, believes that many men are not open to talking about gender equality due to the fear of being judged by other men. When asked about why he thinks there aren't more men working and talking about gender equality, he stated:

"Because of the fear of being judged and talked about, the fear of being seen as less of a man and someone who is weakening the pride of being a man, you know, the usual stuff. And to be honest, it's not something that your family really likes either. When you get married, usually expect the gender roles to take place fully, and the moment that a man is serving tea, they will judge you immediately, and most people don't have the

courage to challenge these roles for that reason, so you end up subjecting yourself to these norms."(Kadri)

This is a phenomenon that usually slows down any social progress that is not in line with traditional norms and interfering with gender roles is no exception. It is a form of cultural resistance which sees gender equality as a new concept that is not necessarily an organic one but comes more as an influence from western civilizations. Although there is a significant age difference between the participants, their experience of stigma isn't very different from one another. Bledor, for example, states that:

"Of course, one of the reasons is that you will get judged by society, like why are you getting engaged with something that belongs to women you know. The fear of being bullied by your peers for doing something that does not belong to men, and there is this mindset in a lot of men and boys that we can't change these things, and they're just the way they are." (Bledor)

Although young boys are generally more open to engaging in conversation when it comes to gender equality and positive masculinities, they are still subject to the same peer pressure and potential bullying if they choose to do so. This is because of the dominance of traditional masculinities. Korab explains that during their meeting with young men, a lot of them show positive attitudes when it comes to gender equality but then continue to express the same version of a "tough man" once they are outside of the meetings due to the fear of being bullied, he states:

"There are also the social norms and how society will see this and how people will treat me afterward. Because there were a lot of men, for example, that within the club, who were very open-minded and supportive of the cause, but they kept saying outside of the club they needed to have reservations because people could bully them or use different slurs against them, so they were constantly afraid of how others will perceive them, and that could affect their social status". (Korab)

This maintains the vicious cycle of stagnation when it comes to progress on gender equality because the mass tries to preserve certain norms, and it does that by pressuring the ones who disobey them. Rron completely agrees with Korab on this subject as they both acknowledge the effects that judgment can have on other men, stating:

"Believe me, this stigmatization that men (who identify as feminist) receive from both women and men, but especially from men, has a significant effect. Especially when you talk to older men, the way they try to put you down it honestly makes you feel very bad, and they make you feel worthless. When they ask you in a very demeaning way, like how come you're working with women's rights, they're always trying to make you question yourself and make you feel poorly."(Rron)

He explained that because he has experienced it himself, he understands the hesitation when it comes to engaging in such topics, as not all men are willing to subject themselves to such treatment from others. But he also acknowledges that at the start of his engagement, he had to remind himself that this is for a greater cause, and he simply has to endure the consequences that come with it, stating:

"A lot of time, I have to remind myself that I am working for the better of this society and I do not deserve to hear this type of language. And there is always going to be this type of language and judgment from other men. And the pressure isn't only directed at you, and sometimes they try to influence you through your family by making them feel poorly about you. For example, people have often poked fun at my father, telling him that he now has three daughters, insinuating that I am a daughter now because of what I do and because I have long hair. And comments like this can often hurt you and put pressure on you through other members of the family as well." (Rron)

It is interesting how the idea of feminization of a man in any shape or form is seen as taboo in Kosovar society and how everything that constitutes unmanliness is somehow related to something that is associated with women. Besnik, for example, recalls the time they did research on men in Kosovo to find out what is the biggest stigma they're afraid of when it comes to performing traditionally female gender roles and states:

"It's funny because when we did some research way back, we found out that the biggest stigma for men was being seen doing what is traditionally considered as women's tasks, such as hanging clothes to dry. As long as some tasks are done indoors, they have no problems with that, but they do not want to be seen. Of course, this is changing now with men, for example, holding their babies attached to their bodies in public which a few years ago would have been seen as very unmanly. As for men who identify as feminists, there was always an element of homophobic perception towards us too. It is

becoming more normal now for men to talk publicly in support of gender equality, but at the beginning, you were immediately branded as feminine and gay.”(Besnik)

The relation to homophobia is not uncommon when it comes to men who advocate for women’s rights. Jack & Morrell (2018) argue that heterosexuality is a crucial component in the development of hegemonic masculinity, and to a greater or lesser degree, hegemonic masculinity is constructed as a gender stance that is as much "not gay" as it is not feminine or female. With these traits, it is reasonable to infer that the key characteristics of the present configuration of hegemonic masculinity are heterosexuality performance, domination and control over women, and rivalry among males (Jewkes & Morrell, 2018). And this seems to accurately apply to Kosovo’s context drawing on the participant’s experiences and their perceptions. Korab had an immediate smile when asked about what the biggest stigma of being identified as a male feminist is and quickly replied with: *“(Laughs). The most common one is that you are laying the foundations for yourself to come out as gay.”* He then follows it up with a story from his first time attending the “Be a Man” camp over the weekend, stating:

“My family understands it to a certain extent, and they are now more open-minded about it than they previously were. For example, my father, on the first trip we had with the "Be a Man" club, was reluctant to let me go because he thought I would become gay.” (Korab)

Literature seems suggests the same outcome for men who engage in gender equality. Rudman (2013) argues that although gender egalitarian males are essential for women to advance, attitudes and opinions about them have not received enough attention. Women like gender egalitarian males more than men did in three studies, but both stigmatized them as being weaker, more feminine, and more likely to be gay than control male targets (Rudman et al., 2013). The results showed that the stigma can come from various reasons, however, the presumed affiliation with women and the threat to the men’s gender identity were among the main ones (Rudman et al., 2013). This is what the participants also suggested based on their perception, and they also believed this was one of the reasons that prevents many young men to embrace gender equality.

6.3 EMPATHISING WITH WOMEN

Most of the participants declared having increased empathy with women due to their engagement with gender equality projects and awareness about women's struggle in a patriarchal system. Korab explains that being aware of how men behave got him to understand why women lack the same freedoms in Kosovar society. He states:

"Yes, I empathize way more, and I understand what they go through way more now because the more I was aware of how boys and men behave, the more I started to realize how women don't have the freedom to do the same and are often a subject of abuse from men in different forms like harassment, violence, or even the limitation of a freedom that comes from patriarchal social norms." (Korab)

Bledor adds to that by explaining that once you understand someone's struggle, you will empathize with it, and that is something that will motivate you to contribute to making a change and giving a voice to the marginalized, stating:

"I believe yes, I believe you do this work because you feel you contribute to improving the situation of women, especially in more rural areas where they exercise fewer freedoms. So unquestionably, you will have more empathy because you are in solidarity with a marginalized group, and in that way, you can manage to make their voice heard in order to be able to contribute to society, regardless of what aspect, be it political, social or economic." (Bledor)

Kadri, who is very experienced in working with men and women to promote gender equality and violence prevention, states that due to his long experience, he feels a lot of empathy towards women, especially because he knows the cultural context they are living in and how that affects them. He states:

"Yeah, I empathize a lot. When you are all the time informed about the situation when you are working with these matters like gender equality, and you hear all the stories, the violence, and the threats they receive, of course, you will feel sympathetic. I am a very emotional person, but I don't often express it, but I am very sensitive." (Kadri)

He then continues to explain that because he works a lot with counseling, especially with men, in attempts to promote positive masculinity attitudes, he reflects a lot on his behavior too. He adds:

"When men I work with in violence management and prevention ask me if I have ever been violent or raised my voice? You have to empathize in order to build a safe communication channel so they can trust you and also understand that you are also human, but for a moment, you have deviated and let emotions get the best of you. So I have learned to reflect on myself a lot. For example, if I ever get angry, I always ask myself, why did that affect me? Was it necessary? So your experience makes you understand more and reflect more and also solidarize more when it comes to women's rights, minority rights, or human rights in general." (Kadri)

When asked about whether he feels more empathetic with women after working with gender matters for a long time and understanding their struggle, Erblin stated that he does feel empathy, although he does not see women as a homogenous group but rather an intersectional category stating that it is important to be in solidarity with women from different backgrounds in order for the movement to be genuine, stating:

"I see the empathy for women more as an intersectional category and not a homogeneous group. This means that empathy goes beyond just being a woman and includes women from different social, economic, and political categories."(Erblin)

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw published an article where she focused on the multi-layered discrimination that Black women in the U.S. experience and about the ways in which several types of discrimination, including racism and sexism, can be compounded. What Erblin is referring to is what Crenshaw (1989) called intersectionality. She used the example of an intersection to demonstrate how prejudice may occur on several axes and how it might damage people in different ways (Crenshaw, 1989). Erblin believes that we must remember when we talk about discrimination of women in Kosovo, that includes all women, because minority women and women from different social and economic statuses are often forgotten.

6.4 NOTICING CHANGES IN ATTITUDES

Another noticeable factor in their motivation for continuing to contribute to gender equality was the changes in attitudes participants noticed among their family members, friends, and people they worked with. They all expressed feelings of gratitude when they actually started to see the fruits of their work. When asked if he had noticed any changes within his family regarding gender equality, like the use of sexist terms or any other normative noticeable changes due to its engagement in gender equality work, Korab explained that his dad, who was

initially afraid to let him attend one of the "Be a Man" club's training camps because of fear of his son turning gay, stated that:

“Later, when he saw how I was benefiting from the training and what impact that had in society and how people treated me in public, that started affecting him too. Now, for example, he doesn't use homophobic slurs and other offensive terms.” (Korab)

He then added that he had noticed a lot of changes among his friends, although, in the beginning, they were questioning his motives to work for gender equality. He explained:

“When it comes to my friends and the work I do, they always told me that I only get money and travel; you are there to make money and don't really stand for all the values. But after I started inviting them to our activities, they saw the work we do and then started to understand it better, and you could see a lot of changes in them, in their demeanor and their actions. But it was a big challenge to bring them to our activities.” (Korab)

However, he further reiterated that he had noticed many changes among his friends, especially after he had invited them to some of the workshops he used to lecture. He also explained how girls from one of the schools they used to work with, thanked them for having a positive effect on the boys, and showed feelings of gratitude, stating that they are now not afraid to socialize with boys because they are way more polite and well behaved compared to how they used to. He states:

“Yeah, as I said, I had invited a lot of more friends to the workshops we were organizing, and after that, I have seen significant changes in their perception of gender and their dynamics with the opposite gender. But in schools, we initially had meetings with boys only, but later the project evolved, and we started having mixed groups, and every time we asked the girls how the boys were behaving, they always said that you have (saved us) made our life so much easier, because now they (boys) are way more polite, and we can socialize with them and not be afraid of them.” (Korab)

Besnik argued that when you really believe in something, it will have an impact on your friends and family. He believes it is hard to know whether that change is genuine or whether it is out of respect for your beliefs. Nevertheless, he claims that it was definitely noticeable, stating:

"Yes, definitely, you know, is one of those things that is common in a patriarchal society, like I've had friends before, and I have friends now that you know when they know you believe in something, at least they don't tease you. Like before, they would make fun of me, but now, they don't, so whether they have changed or they are being polite, I don't know. But at least you can notice the changes; definitely, I have even noticed changes in my father, who is 72 years old. Even though I have learned from him, I believe I managed to impact him as well."(Besnik)

He further continues arguing that when you work with something for a long time, whenever you meet family and friends, you end up talking about your work eventually, so it is inevitable that you will have an impact. Kadri explained that at times even people he has not met before, such as friends of friends who know about him or have seen him speaking about gender equality on TV, want to always engage in the conversation when they meet because they find it interesting to talk about it stating:

"Oh yes. I even have some recent examples when I usually meet family members, friends, and acquaintances, and there's always been an understanding that Kadri works with gender equality, or I have seen him on TV promoting this and that campaign, and now they have started to engage in conversation. And for some friends of friends who have never met me and do not know me, they are also starting to talk about it and want to have these discussions because they know about me."(Kadri)

He also touched on the impact and changes that he hears about from young men he used to work with in previous years and how grateful they feel whenever they meet him, maintaining that this is always a motivational support to continue doing the work he does, stating:

"A lot of the young men that I have previously worked with, every time they see me, they tell me to thank you for all the information you provided us with. It has helped me a lot and stuff like that, it makes you realize that wait a minute, it's not all negative; you know there is progress; it is just happening very slowly." (Kadri)

He further continued stating that among his close family and friends, he has noticed incredibly positive changes, and he expressed feelings of pride when talking about men in his family or friends' group now performing tasks that would be considered a woman's job before stating:

"But with some people that I know more closely, you can see they have really changed, and you can see that now they engage in cooking more and doing the house chores and

perform other stereotypical women tasks, their partner is working. So you can see some very positive changes. But I must also mention that a lot of men lack courage when it comes to expressing gender non-formative behavior because of the stigma and social pressure. They are afraid that if they get caught doing something which is considered unmanly, they will get judged, so they lack courage. But then again, the more examples they see, the more they will feel comfortable to adopt gender equal roles."(Kadri)

Rron had a similar experience to Kadri in terms of noticing a certain growth in interest among his cousins when it came to gender equality, explaining that at times they end up until early morning discussing different aspects of his work and dissecting gender equality, stating:

"Yes, I can see changes in my cousins. For example, every time the topic of gender equality or the work I do comes up, you can tell they start to speak more formally. They are more interested, at least even if they don't understand it; they want to know more about my work and what I do, my beliefs regarding equality, and my values. Sometimes we end up staying up to five in the morning just discussing gender equality because the conversation is so engaging." (Rron)

Although in the Kosovar culture, it is not unusual to stay up to four or five am with members of your extended family, it is still interesting to hear that the conversation during that time in Rron's experience was about gender equality. Erblin stated that he has also noticed changes in terms of interest he receives now from friends and family when it comes to activities or protests that are related to gender inequalities stating:

"Yes, I have noticed a lot of changes among friends and colleagues and even family members. For example, when I invited them to different protests or symbolic actions, like women march's, they responded and attended." (Erblin)

While Agon explains how attitudes among his family members have slowly changed, especially when it comes to using derogatory language toward women of people from other marginalized groups stating that:

"It used to be normal in my family to use derogatory language towards women, for example, and that was coming from both genders, but also towards other marginalized minorities, and now I don't think I have heard such language in a long time. I think all my fights with them we have had over the years about using that type of language and respect for equal values has finally paid off (Laughs)."(Agon)

What participants described sounded generally positive. One can assume that regardless of the pace and the amount of the impact, gender transformative programs are having an impact. Often with an emphasis on masculinity, gender-transformative programs and interventions aim to enhance gender equitable attitudes and behaviors while also critically examining gender-related norms and expectations (Barker et al., 2007). Therefore it is important to understand the complex cultural context of Kosovo, to make room for a greater intervention. The growing body of research on the efficacy of gender-transformative interventions highlights the significance of initiatives that challenge gender stereotypes and associated norms rather than concentrating just on particular attitudes or behaviors (Kågesten & Chandra-Mouli, 2020). In addition to this emphasis on gender-transformative interventions, there is a rising appeal for men and boys to participate in gender equality initiatives as participants, collaborators, and change agents rather than just as allies (Jewkes et al., 2015). Which is why I believe the “Be a Man” club has been so successful in engaging young men. Their sole premise is challenging what “Being a Man” is meant to represent and trying to associate it with positive masculinity.

However, Connell who defined hegemonic masculinity as configuration of gender practices that ensures (or is assumed to ensure) men's dominance and women's subordination, and which represents the currently accepted solution to the legitimacy of patriarchal dilemma (Connell, 2005), highlights the fact that these structures will maintain patriarchy why is why important that we keep challenging them. As some of the participants noted, although you can notice progress in the capital and other urban cities, in rural areas that is not the case whatsoever. Morris and Evans (2001), who examined representations of rural masculinity and femininity in Britain, discovered a slower rate of development but an increase in the nuance and dispersion of hegemonic masculinity (Morris & Evans, 2001). Therefore, it is important that some of the work be directed towards rural areas within Kosovo, otherwise we run the risk of isolating women and men from those areas and deprive them the opportunity to engage in positive gender roles.

7. UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF MEN IN ADDRESSING GENDER INEQUALITIES

In this section, I will be discussing the participant's perceptions of the importance of men's involvement in the gender equality movement. This will address the third research question: What is the perception of men working with gender equality on the importance of involving men in the fight against inequalities? Afterward, I will compare their responses with the existing literature regarding this issue. I will then discuss whether they believe women see their involvement as a potential problem. Further into the chapter, I will be touching on whether there are more men starting to get engaged in the gender quality movement and why participants think that is. Finally, I will touch on participants' thoughts on what are the best strategies to engage more men in the future.

7.1 WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO ENGAGE MEN AS ALLIES

During my literature review, I found many articles, reports, and manuals talking about the importance of involving men as allies in the fight against gender inequalities, I was eager to know the participants' perspectives on this. So the question addressed to them was whether they see the involvement of men as important and if yes or no, why do they believe that? Besnik, for example, insisted that it is very crucial to involve men in this fight, and that is for many reasons. He stated:

"The importance is very significant and is definitely needed when as a society, you are divided into two genders around 50/50; then, of course, it is important to have support from both sides. In this case, it is very important to have the support of men, especially knowing that they occupy most of the decision-making positions and they can influence a lot of things."(Besnik)

And this statement seems to concur with Farré (2013), who argues that men continue to have a lot of influence on many elements of women's lives in both the developed and developing worlds. Men develop and carry out policies that may or may not favor women's objectives and demands in the public domain as heads of nations and government ministers, as heads of religious and faith-based organizations, as judges, as commanders of armies and other instruments of force, and as chiefs of villages (Farré, 2013). Besnik further continues to discuss the fact that feminism in Kosovo is still not to the levels that you see in the western world, arguing that we are still fighting for basic rights for women. He states:

"The good thing is maybe the fact that in comparison to the west, the feminism here is not as aggressive, as in we do not know the extent of it, but right now, we know we are dealing with a problem. It's not like we are asking for something luxurious, but we are talking about basic rights. So it's good to see more and more women in decision making, regardless that they sometimes face misogyny, but that is becoming more and more unacceptable because you can see the support from the men when it comes to social justice."(Besnik)

While Kadri also maintained that it is vitally important to engage men if you want to see real progress in society regarding gender equality. He believes that getting men to understand the benefits that come from a gender-equal lifestyle is crucial in succeeding with any kind of progress, and argues that equality is very important in terms of overall quality of life among men in Kosovo, stating"

"Definitely, definitely, I have always mentioned this, that it is important because when a man is engaged in gender equality, he will have a better overall emotional condition, will have way better knowledge on gender matters, will have a better economic stability if you consider the situations where both men and women work in a relationship and in a way, they are released from having full responsibility over everything. Because in our society, although men are privileged, some of those privileges can be a burden to many men. It's always the man who has to get educated, the man who needs to work, the man who has to feed the family, while the woman has to stay at home and take care of children and house chores. So equality helps both of them because when the woman is also working and active in the society will help remove extra pressure from the man and also will result in better social life for the children."(Kadri)

The idea of social pressure that comes from being a man in Kosovo has been used a lot as a strategy for non-profits to engage more men in gender equality. This is due to society's expectations that the man needs to be the provider, the protector and take all the roles and responsibilities of being the "man of the house. "This, of course, comes with a risk as a lot of men who fail to meet all the expectations and fail to provide will face mental health problems which can later result in negative consequences. Therefore Kadri believes that gender equality could potentially be more beneficial to men in the Kosovar context, stating:

"I actually believe that men in Kosovo would benefit way more from gender equality. That pressure that gets removed off your shoulders has massive benefits, especially when it comes to mental health."(Kadri)

Bledor argued that raising awareness among men regarding gender discrepancies and inequalities between men and women within the Kosovar context is arguably more important than working with women to achieve better gender equality. When asked if its important to include men, he responded:

"Yes, 100 percent, because if your focus is only engaging women in achieving gender equality, then you're not doing anything. But when you engage both men and women to improve gender equality, of course, you will succeed. I would even say it is more important to engage more men in order to achieve equality than women. I'm talking about the awareness aspect. But when it comes to organizing campaigns, influencing education, or making legal changes, then you need both."(Bledor)

Rron, however, also touched on the fact that we need to work with men from different age groups and not only focus on young men for the fact that fathers still have the highest power of authority in society and also are the main role models for younger men. In this case, Rron argued that regardless of the progress we achieve working with young boys and girls, if we lack a platform for those changes to take place, in what he described as getting the blessings from the older men for change to take place, we will struggle to see genuine progress stating:

"I have always insisted that we must invite men and fathers and discuss these topics not to change their minds about this because someone who's grown up his entire life with a certain set of social norms and is now in their fifties it's very difficult to change his mind on certain issues and we are not trying to do that. Simply we want to bring to their attention and discuss these topics. Because there are parents out there that wouldn't even allow their daughters to attend trainings about gender equality and talk about gender equality. And then, we talk about how it is important to talk to children about these values. I mean, you should talk to the children, of course, but we cannot ignore working with older men and fathers because they have to know this framework. They need to know what the discussion is about so they can reflect on it in order to leave space for the younger generations to change."(Rron)

He further continued pointing out that sometimes we feel good about the progress because you can actually see it take place in Pristina, where most people go to study, and of course, young people feel freer to express themselves. However, he points out that one should not forget that Pristina does not represent the whole of Kosovo, and if you actually go outside of the capital, you will still notice a great effect of traditionally patriarchal roles taking place, stating:

"I always say, if you go out of Pristina, you can see what the reality is in Kosovo, and you can see that you still need permission to attend a training, or start studying, or even go to the grocery shop. So you cannot work in an environment where you talk to a young boy about gender equality, but when he goes home, he has his sister that can't even go to the shop and buy something by herself. Or when he wakes up in the morning, he does not make his bed because he expects his sister to do it for him. And it's for that reason that I believe we need to work with men from all ages and backgrounds." (Rron)

He insisted that gender stereotypes will continue to reproduce if we do not tackle the issue from all directions and work with men and women from all ages in raising awareness as to how these stereotypes can affect someone's life, therefore the more men that get engaged, the better it is in terms of making this a topic of conversation all over Kosovo. Korab shared the same view in terms of including more men in the movement would speed up the progress on gender equality simply because the more people get engaged, the better for the movement, stating:

"The more people get involved in fighting something that is not positive, the better. So in this case, if there are more men that get involved with feminism and gender equality, we will achieve our goals much faster and much easier". (Korab)

Erblin, on the other hand, stated that it is important for men to see their role as supporters and not leaders in this movement for the fact that men in Kosovo are simply not subjected to the same treatment as women. Therefore, they cannot completely empathize with women. He insisted that women should articulate the discrimination they experience on a day-to-day basis and not men, stating:

"I see the role of men more as a support for the movement and not necessarily as leaders of the movement. The point is that women still face firsthand discrimination, and it has to be articulated by them and only be supported by men as allies." (Erblin)

In relation to this Connell developed the incredibly useful concept of the "patriarchal dividend" to give males a voice in the fight for gender equality while never losing sight of their unique

role in it. The patriarchal dividend refers to the advantage that all men have in a culture that favors men, maleness, or masculinity, whether that is explicitly or implicitly. She argues that men can decide whether to take use of this advantage or, if feasible, not to. Women are in a very different situation in respect to the feminist movement since they lack this privilege (Connell, 2016).

Farré meanwhile, maintains that men have a crucial and unquestionable role in the socioeconomic advancement of women both in public and private spheres around the world. Men may be overlooked in the development and application of gender-oriented policies, which could restrict their efficacy and worsen already-existing imbalances (Farré, 2013). Men also play a significant role in how women's reproductive health outcomes are affected. In some developing nations or patriarchal systems, where spouses or other family members govern women's health-related decisions, the role of men is even more crucial (Farré, 2013). Male policymakers, male healthcare managers, and male service providers all have an impact on the reproductive health of women in these nations. They may uphold a dominating male definition of what is crucial for women's needs. As partners and fathers, men have an impact on women's reproductive health as well (Farré, 2013). The participants couldn't have made it more clear on how important they thought the involvement of men is. As literature suggest many obstacles become easier when you involve men especially in patriarchal context. Since the 1980s, there has been a conceptual change from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD), which was partially prompted by the failures of focusing solely on women (Esplen, 2006). GAD approaches promised to shift the attention away from the limited focus on women alone. Instead, they focused on the relationships that were socially and historically established between men and women, which allowed for a more nuanced view of the interdependence of men and women and the relational nature of gendered power (Moser, 2012). However, it is debatable to what degree this conceptual change has been implemented because several efforts still place a strong emphasis on women rather than working to change the uneven gender relations that cause and sustain women's subordination (Esplen, 2006).

7.1.2 HOW DO THEY SEE THEIR ROLE

Besnik argues that he sees his role as very important in contributing to changes. Although, he notes that our society should soon begin to find an independent way to contribute to gender equality and not only rely on funding from abroad that supports projects through

local NGOs. He explains that after a 10-year engagement in this field, things were not moving a lot in terms of evolving to the point that we were developing sustainability. He states:

"You would assume that civil society is still the main contributor to gender equality compared to private companies or central institutions. However, I believe civil society has stagnated a lot. Like I worked for over ten years in one of the longest-lasting gender-based projects, and at some point, it was just a recycling of the same activities. Although we made a lot of progress, there were still ways to make something more innovative in order to have longevity beyond having to rely on foreign funds to support them."(Besnik)

Besnik appeared to be disappointed with the lack of creative solutions in terms of keeping the movement sustainable and reiterated that civil society and other structures that promote gender equality should begin to look at ways of working with men and women independent of foreign funding, which is what initially inspired him to start his own organization that provides non-formal education services and talks about gender equality among other topics, stating:

"I remember we made the program and the toolkit for primary and high schools in how to engage men in gender equality, and we always struggled to get it approved in only a few specific schools for even a year. And that's because the educational system is centralized, so every time you have to go to the Ministry of Education and beg them, regardless of you having a very good and useful product, it all depends on their will. One time I remember I had to wait there for 4 hours just to have a meeting about it, and it was at that time that I thought about why we need to have a centralized education when it comes to discussing and learning topics such as gender equality. So it was for this reason that a friend of mine and I started our own company/organization that we offer non-formal educational services, which is a good way to monetize your knowledge from a product that you really believe." (Besnik)

Besnik had strong beliefs that we now live in an era where centralized education does not exercise the same importance as it did 20 years ago. He insisted that the arrival of the internet has created a young generation that is thirsty for knowledge outside of what they already learn at school. This provides the perfect opportunity for non-formal education to step in and provide a different platform for education which would compensate for the lack of discussion of certain topics in schools, such as gender equality. Kadri, on the other hand, argues that as long there is

a need for information and education, he sees his role as very important in working with men, stating:

"I see my role as important in terms of working with men. I try to provide them with information regarding the benefits that gender equality could potentially have in their personal life because a lot of them lack information on gender matters in general. Talk about concrete examples, tell them real-life stories, provide them with statistics and research findings, so, in general, to help them understand that this is something that is beneficial for all of us". (Kadri)

Bledor maintained that talking about success stories is the best way to convince young men that gender equality is beneficial for them and, therefore, it is important that he continues to do so in order to achieve progress, stating:

"I see it as very important to show success stories. I think that was one of the strategies that had the most success in our campaigns. When you, for example, show examples of how a father is getting engaged in family chores and caring for their children, you know, promoting gender equal norms and equal engagement, I think that has a big impact as a strategy to engage more men in gender equality." (Bledor)

Esplen (2006) also believes that men who strive to live up to stringent social norms of "masculinity" risk a variety of negative consequences and that in order to challenge gender inequality, it is crucial to raise men's awareness of the consequences of traditional masculinity, both for themselves and for women and children (Esplen, 2006). Korab, on the other hand, explained that for a long time, he had questioned his role and his decision about working with gender equality due to noticing little progress but insisted that once he gets to hear all the positive words from all the young men, he has been working with it fills him with joy. He states:

"For a while, I had the impression that I was wasting my time going to these schools and talking about these topics because it felt like no one cared and I was talking to a wall, but then I started to see a lot of them from different generations later telling me how they've changed and what positive impact the workshops had on them, and that really makes you feel proud, and you realize that you had an influence on them." (Korab)

Erblin, on the other hand, gave some specific examples of how his role as a man working to improve gender equality among labor unions was very important considering the cultural norms in Kosovo. He explained that a lot of times, he had to talk to other men that held higher managerial positions within labor unions about the problem of gender stereotypes and how that can unconsciously affect a lot of decision-making structures. He stated:

"Yes, for example, when I worked with labor unions, it was important to talk about policies that were beneficial for the men as well, like paternity leave. And also tried and addressed managerial roles, pointing out gender stereotypes and how that can affect the decision-making structures."(Erblin)

He further added that he had noticed a trend within labor unions where women were holding women positions, such as secretary or assistant, stereotypically, and he saw it important that he, as a man addressed this with other men, claiming that it would have probably been way different if that was addressed by a woman.

7.2 HOW DO WOMEN PERCEIVE MEN'S INVOLVEMENT

After asking the participants if they think it is important to engage men in the fight against gender inequalities, I wanted to know their perception of what women in Kosovo, and especially the women who are feminist activists, think about involving men in the movement. During my previous experience as a man working with gender equality projects in Kosovo, there was a perception that at least a minority of feminist women, had doubts about men's involvement in the movement, and my aim with this question was to learn whether participants thought such a claim is true and if they've had any experience with it. However, Besnik completely dismissed this, saying that it was quite the opposite as he had received a lot of support from women, and claimed that the doubts were more present in Europe and some regional countries but way less, if not inexistent, in Kosovo. He states:

"In fact, in Kosovo, there was a lot of support from other women. For example, I have been a member of "The Kosovo Women's Network."⁶I was also a board member there

⁶ Kosovo Women's Network - Established in 1996, KWN is an informal network of women's groups and organizations from various regions in Kosovo.

for a while, so generally, they were very supportive. I know in some regional and European countries, the fear was that the funds that were being projected for women were being taken by men. I believe it was seen in that connotation, regardless, that the reason men were receiving the funds was to support the same cause of gender equality. I believe that was the fear. But I think in Kosovo they understood that we are not a Meninist movement, but instead we are supporting the same cause."(Besnik)

Coincidentally, Esplen (2006) touches on the same exact narrative, arguing that some women have been quite resistant to including males in gender and development work because they worry that doing so will weaken the feminist agenda and divert scarce funds away from women's empowerment programs and back into the hands of men (Esplen, 2006). Besnik alludes that this was a minor issue in Kosovo, especially compared to the amount of support men got from other women, stating:

"Compared to the support, that was a minor issue. Feminist movements here were even happy to have men engaged. Igo Rogova⁷ used to take as an example and always said thank God there are men that are working with other men to address gender equality. Because it is different when men address these problems among other men, it is more practical." (Besnik).

Besnik maintained that it makes sense for our cultural context to have men working with gender equality simply for the fact that it's easier to discuss gender matters with other men when you're a man. And that he believes this is because, due to gender norms, they are more comfortable talking about these topics with a man. Stating:

"I think I have read one research on this which concluded that it is more practical to discuss anatomy with young children if they are being explained by the same gender. For example, a man discussing the men's body parts with boys and a woman with girls in the very beginning so they can feel freer and more comfortable. So it is the same for our case. It is way more practical when we were the ones talking about gender equality

⁷ Igo Rogova – is the leader of the Kosovo Women's Network and one of the first women's rights activists in Kosovo.

with other men, as opposed to how it would have been in case a woman was talking to other men."(Besnik)

He believes that it is vitally important to have men who can talk and discuss these topics with other men. Sweetman (2013) also argues that males, for instance, demand attention in ways that women do not in organizations where men predominate. It will be easier to change short-term goals and move things along if a male gender counselor from an NGO can grab the attention of top male government officials in a way that a woman could not accomplish because of bias (Sweetman, 2013). Long-term, however, she argues that male representation of female views and interests may result in space being occupied by men rather than women, which can be counterproductive to confronting and changing gender stereotypes (Sweetman, 2013). Either way, we should still strive and engage more men, especially in countries with similar cultural contexts, as excluding men and boys could reduce the impact of development interventions and worsen gender disparities (Esplen, 2006). Kadri also was under the impression that, generally, it has been received as a positive thing, but he is aware of the existence of such excluding narrative, stating:

"I believe that generally is seen as a positive thing. But for some, it can be a problem because, unfortunately, there are movements that categorize all men as violent and perpetrators and are against working with men. Although this is very uncommon, unfortunately, it still exists. And you can see that every now and then through social media and other mediums, where for some women, the involvement of men in this movement is seen more as an obstacle rather than something positive." (Kadri)

Rron believes that this rage is legitimate when you live in a country where you hear stories of violence against women so often. He understands where that lack of trust comes from because he himself feels rage when he hears about stories of violence or femicide.

"There is a type of feminism among some women here that sees men and boys, and, in a way, I do not blame them, but they see men and boys as opponents. And when you see men and boys as opponents, I believe that we won't make any progress regarding gender equality because, without cooperation, there won't be any progress. But at the same time, when you hear stories of sexual violence, gender-based violence, and even murder committed by men all the time, of course, that will revolt you and make you not trust men. " (Rron)

Korab explained that he had encountered women who were unhappy with seeing men involved in gender equality and the feminist movement stating:

"It really depends. Because on the one hand, you have some women feminists that despise men and have this almost hatred towards men and think all men are the same. I've had experiences in many protests where we had arguments with other feminist women who disliked the fact that men were getting involved in this because of this hatred they had towards men. But most women feminists, I believe, are happy to have men on board". (Korab).

Erblin, on the other hand, argued that feminist women expect a man to go through a depatriarchalizing process to be considered an ally. This means that a man needs to be aware of their privileges to be able to challenge the existing social norms, stating:

"The way that I think women see the involvement of men in the feminist movement is that they expect a man to go through the process of depatriarchalizing themselves. And that means more about challenging the environment they were raised and acknowledging unjust social norms that benefit men as a consequence of women."(Erblin)

Drury and Kaiser (2014) also argue that one crucial thing is to teach men about the illegitimacy of their favorable position in society, as to become allies men must do more than recognize sexism and instead must take action by confronting it and its perpetrators (Drury & Kaiser, 2014). Agon, on the other hand explained that he does not see a reason why women would be against engaging men, regardless of not whether they like men or not, he argued that the younger generation does not really care if you are a boy or a girl who is a feminist as long as there are people raising their voice and participating in civic engagement to raise awareness, stating:

"I have never heard someone say that they are against involving men, I don't know. Maybe there is someone who thinks like that, but my genuine impression is that young people especially don't care about whether you are a boy or a girl feminist; they care about progress, and I think they see it as the more people get engaged, the more impact that will have."(Agon)

Generally, there was an overwhelming consensus by all the participants that involving men is not only important but also essential. Prominent feminist Bell Hooks (2000) also argued that

without male allies in the battle, the feminist cause could not advance. (...) *we have to do so much work to correct the assumption deeply embedded in the cultural psyche that feminism is anti-male. Feminism is anti-sexism. A male who has divested of male privilege, who has embraced feminist politics, is a worthy comrade in struggle, in no way a threat to feminism, whereas a female who remains wedded to sexist thinking and behavior infiltrating the feminist movement is a dangerous threat* (Hooks, 2000, p. 12).

7.3 ARE MORE MEN EMBRACING GENDER EQUALITY?

In this section, I will discuss whether more men are embracing and engaging in gender equality and if this could be more of a trend and less of a genuine lasting engagement. Participants had different perceptions as to why more and more men were joining the movement, but they all agreed they had seen more men involved. Besnik was of the opinion that there are more men engaged but believed that some of it comes as a result of better awareness and some of it as a trend, stating:

“Yes, there are. And it’s a bit of both. Because there could be various reasons pushing us to join the movement. It’s the same as when they involved Hashim Thaçi⁸ in the LGBT parade, do you think he believes in those values? I mean, I hope he does, but when that journalist asked him would you support your son if he was gay, and he stagnated and didn’t answer the question, but he still went in the parade. So, I believe that when you look at the protests and marches, the number has increased significantly. And hopefully, the decisions will be of a better outcome. It’s like with people who committed sexual assaults were always excused, and now there is no such toleration.”(Besnik)

Similar to Besnik, Kadri questioned the quality over the quantity of men engaged in gender equality over the years. He explained that from his experience, the number of men who genuinely believe in such values and act upon them by setting an example is far fewer than what you can perceive if you just look at men at marches and protests or even social media activity. He states:

⁸ Hashim Thaçi – Former Prime Minister and President of Kosovo who served between 2008 and 2014 as a prime minister and from 2016 to 2020 as President.

"I am of the opinion and belief that there are more men that are joining us, but I have to say again, this comes in two ways, qualitative and quantitative. The qualitative way is the one in that you really embrace these values, and you work on yourself to change the way you present yourself, change your lifestyle and your behavior to fit with the values that are promoted with gender equality and I believe there are very few men like that, unfortunately. Because it is different to just show your support for equality, to setting an example, and actually live by those values. But if we're talking about quantity, yes, there are. But we also have a lot more men and boys now that not only support the values but also live by them or at least are not bothered by them and see it as social progress, but again the amount is not satisfactory. Which is why we should work more and more with the younger generations to eliminate harmful gender stereotypes."(Kadri)

Rron also showed dissatisfactory signs by questioning the motives of some of the men that are engaged in gender equality. He described that in a formal setting, they seem to represent a good role model and appear to be knowledgeable and aware of gender issues. However, when you talk to them in a non-formal setting, they maintain signs of patriarchal thinking, stating:

"Yes, I have seen an increase in the number of men who are embracing it. However, maybe it's because I am used since I was young, not to be content with the outcome, and I always look at it and analyze it in terms of whether that outcome is good enough. So I wanted to say that in gender equality forums, I have seen more men and boys compared to how it's been before, where it was predominately only women and girls. So yeah, I see more men that are presumably working with gender equality, but at the same time, I think to myself they don't seem to believe in these values or practice these values. So that is my fear that you see some good results, but they can be deceiving at times because they get engaged for personal interests."(Rron)

Korab, however, believes that men, and young men especially, are starting to see the benefits of gender equality and experience them firsthand. He argues that economic benefits that come from having both men and women working and an improvement in social life is convincing many young men to embrace gender-equal norms. He states:

"Yes, now, even in a more passive way, without being conscious, a lot of men act more in line with gender equality because they are starting to realize the benefits that come out of it, like If the woman is also working there is an economic factor to it, but also I

had a friend who was telling me when his girlfriend wasn't working we had nothing to talk about, but now she's working and socializing and going out, so there is much more to talk about at home. And now they also divide house chores which is good to see. Seeing the benefits of gender equality is what I believe is the reason, like considering the economic benefits of having two households working is very important, and then the improvement of their social life also plays a big role and many other things.”
(Korab)

Bledor, on the other hand, argued that the biggest flux of men engaging in gender equality was the last few years, but he sees that going down soon due to shifts of focus from international agencies and institutions. He believes that what spiked an increase in men embracing and engaging in gender equality had a lot to do with the hard work the civil society put on to raise awareness and work with young people.

“To be honest, I am not sure whether it is my perception, or it was like that, but I think the biggest flux of men engaging in gender equality activism was probably the last two years. In my opinion, this has started to decline, and I see it declining even more. I think for a while, a lot of the funds that came during the last ten years ended up supporting gender equality projects, now, the funds are going mostly on environmental projects, and I believe this will have a significant effect.”(Bledor)

He believes that international institutions like the UN and EU, for example, are starting to shift focus on climate change. Therefore the funds from now on will predominantly go towards climate change-based projects. He argues this will slow down the progress that has already been made, and Kosovo would need to find ways of integrating gender equality education in formal education, stating:

“Because now the biggest institutions like the UN and EU tend to fund projects based on whatever they are dealing with at the moment. And I think this will affect the distribution a lot when a big institution like the UN or others alike determines more or less the direction of the funds. I mean, we as a society can still do something about it, but when you lack the budget to organize different events or rent a venue, you won't be able to reach a lot of people.”(Bledor)

When asked whether some of that flux was due to trendiness, Bledor smiled and said that he was going to mention it but did not want to sound too negative, stating:

“As well, yes. I wanted to mention that earlier, but I didn’t want to sound too negative (laughs). But yes, that is only my impression. Sometimes it’s hard to distinguish whether that’s a trend or do people really believe in those values. So I don’t know, but I think the trend has an effect. If I had to slice it up, I would say 80 percent is the social engagement in raising awareness and 20 percent how trendy that is.”(Bledor)

7.4 BEST STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE MORE MEN

At the end of each interview, I asked participants about what they believe are the best strategies to engage more men in gender equality and drawing on their experience. Kadri, who has been engaged in the field of gender equality education the longest, believes that early education on gender equality values and expectations is the best strategy to see significant progress and be able to prevent gender stereotypes from affecting a child's upbringing. He states:

"Early education. Only early education. Coordination between the child, the parent, and the teacher, would be the best way. Investing in public policies that aim at raising awareness through education, and to start talking about these topics very early stages of life in order to prevent the adoption of stereotypical gender roles as early as possible."(Kadri)

Further, he gave an example of how his daughter had adopted a belief she heard at school regardless of the work that he does with her daughter in terms of understanding gender stereotypes and expectations, and drew on that as an example of how it is not enough to work only with certain groups of people, because the majority will influence the rest, stating:

"Provide free education for all children and adopt these topics and values in their education as early as possible. Because otherwise, it is difficult to make significant progress. For example, my 5-year-old daughter one day heard at school that the woman, when she gets married, goes to their husband, which is such a traditional possessive view of women, so regardless of how much I work with her, other social factors will influence her. And if we don't change that, it will be very difficult to achieve progress." (Kadri)

Meanwhile, Korab and Bledor agreed that raising awareness is one of the main factors to kickstart their curiosity about gender equality. Korab states:

“Then you have awareness-raising campaigns, making videos and short films, or expressing the cause through different art forms can serve as a seed to activate their critical thinking and make them more willing to at least be interested in the cause.”
(Korab)

Bledor added that besides raising awareness of inequalities, we should focus on sharing success stories about men who are engaged equally in their families and the benefits that come from exerting gender-equitable norms. He also suggested that using publicly recognized figures to promote such values can help set a positive example for young men, stating:

“The first thing, I would say, is raising awareness among men through training or targeting schools and universities and other educational institutions. The other is, as I mentioned earlier, sharing success stories. For example, when you see a public figure or a person that society deems important, and when you see that he is getting engaged equally in parenting or generally in family engagement, that I think will raise awareness, and it won't be considered as something bad if I as a man or someone as a boy is getting engaged in something like gender equality.” (Bledor)

Besnik, on the other hand, maintained that highlighting the benefits of gender equality is the best strategy to influence men into changing their perception about something they consider unusual. He also believes that men are slowly realizing that escaping the stoic attitude, which is a big part of how we raise men in Kosovo, benefits their general health. Therefore they are already starting to recognize that gender equality has benefits, and this provides room for us to step in and influence more men to engage, stating:

“By highlighting the fact that they earn a lot from this. You know, we are not inviting them and taking their precious time to help a third party but explain that it has to do directly with them, and they can improve their life quality but ditching negative societal expectations of men. The fact that we have raised boys with stoicism to be strong and not show weakness, I think now they are realizing that empathy and expressing emotions is a part of personality growth and improvement of their health, so they don't mind it. So you just highlight those facts.” (Besnik)

Agon also agrees with the rest in terms of raising awareness will help other men at least get interested, and stated that we should aim at making gender equality a part of different forms of

expression like integrating it in art, culture, education, civic activism, and not leave only to NGO's, stating:

"Rights now, I don't like that only NGOs, maybe there are exceptions, but it's mainly NGOs that are working with raising awareness about gender equality and involving men in the fight. I think we should start integrating gender equality in art too, for example, or civic activism like we do, literature and other forms of expression if we want to see better progress." (Agon)

While Erblin thinks that creating youth-based clubs within schools is a good way to create space for youth to discuss such topics and exchange ideas. He states:

"I think having more youth-based clubs in schools and universities that are based on informal activities where they can discuss different social constructs among the peers and network with other feminist activists so they can challenge their opinions and ideas and reach a consensus that is based in critical thinking and a progressive agenda."(Erblin)

And finally, to close this section, Korab reiterated that we need to first address the stigma before we try and engage more men because fear of being judged, especially for boys of younger ages, will certainly stop them from engaging and supporting such ideas. But maintained that hard work and persistence have proven to show results in their work, stating:

"For boys and men in our local society is a bit difficult to be a feminist because you are constantly judged and attacked by your circle and by society. They are constantly bullying you and poking fun at you, and there are probably some of those who think like you, but because of the social pressure, they join the others who are in bigger numbers. But I think because of the persistence we had in doing our job despite their judgment, that has resulted in more men joining our side." (Korab)

Many boys and men still exercise privilege and power over women, and they work to protect that privilege and power. However, Ruxton (2004) believes some men are more receptive to alternative, "gender-equitable" masculinities and reject set gender roles as well as damaging kinds of masculinity. Some men may be inspired to change by witnessing how gender inequality affects women they care about profoundly or by learning more about the advantages of active parenting, for example (Ruxton & Oxfam, 2004). While Esplen (2006) states that men must be involved as allies in initiatives by providing uplifting and relevant messages that

also address their particular issues. Programs can assist men in reflecting on and eventually resisting negative constructs of masculinity by stressing the costs of gender inequality as well as the advantages of gender equality - both for men as individuals as well as for men as members of families and communities (Esplen, 2006).

As some of the participants stated seeing other men engaged can influence more boys and men to do the same merely by having a role model. This is also something Berger and Luckmann (2016) explain in their famous book "The social construction of reality", stating that the "other" is represented to me in a vivid present we both share when we are face to face. I am aware that I am being shown to him in the same vivid present. As long as the face-to-face interaction exists, both my and his "here and now" are always impacted by one another. As a result, his expressivity and mine are always changing. I observe him smiling, pausing when he notices my frown, then starting up again when I start smiling (Berger & Luckmann, 2016). Every expression I make is directed towards him, and he does the same for me. We both have access to this ongoing reciprocity of expressive acts. This means that I may access the other's subjectivity in a face-to-face interaction through a maximum of symptoms (Berger & Luckmann, 2016).

8. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to better understand the involvement of men in gender equality in Kosovo. Through the insights provided by my seven participants I manage to explore three key factors in men's engagement. 1. Motivations to engage, 2. Obstacles for engaging more men, and 3. Importance of men's involvement. In the following conclusion chapter, I will therefore discuss the implications of my findings and connect them to my central research question and sub-research questions. Finally I will end the chapter with my recommendations for future research.

8.1 IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

8.1.1 MOTIVATIONS TO ENGAGE

Drawing from participants experience my aim initially was to look at potential patterns as to what motivated the participants to engage in such work despite all the stigma surrounding it. However, each participant had different experience and perception as to what actually pushed them to pursue gender equality as their main work. Some noted experiencing gender stereotypes at early age as a factor, and others also touched on noticing discrimination against women as a reason. However, one common pattern among three participants was their initial engagement with the "Be a Man" club. The club has not only been successful in terms of being the only platform engaging young men in gender equality education, but also producing men that later engaged in gender transformative programs as their full-time job. All three participants mentioned that despite them having feminist values, it was the club that eventually put all their values into context and exposed them to a career they had not envision before. Therefore, my suggestion is that more clubs of this nature start to operate in every municipality around Kosovo, because due to its popularity and its approach on re-defining what it means to be a "Man" the club has had a high success considering the nature of patriarchy in the country. The participants also highlighted how former members of the club always appear grateful when meeting them and explain how the gender equality education has impacted their lives. Furthermore the lack of such education in primary and high schools highlighted by participants presents an opportunity for such clubs to be initiated among formal education also.

8.1.2 EXPERIENCES OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

My first sub-research question aimed at understating obstacles of what is stopping men to engage in gender equality activism. The findings from both the participants and literature suggested a few reasons for that including the stigma of associating with feminism, the threat to privileges and traditional gender norms and the challenge of translating universal ideas into local context. All participants highlighted the stigma as one of the main factors when it comes to engaging in gender equality work and suggested that the stigma is what prevents many men in Kosovo to embrace equality and promote positive masculinity traits. They explained that the fear of being judged by others poses a threat to their social status therefore resulting in lack of engagement. This is highly embedded in gender norms and all participants concluded that breaking these norms is not easy. Besides the stigma participants also have to deal with the fear among citizens that gender equality presents some type of a threat to the local traditions. This has made it challenging for them to translate gender equality ideas into local context. However, many participants believed that highlighting the benefits of equality and showcasing success stories is a good starting strategy to get men interested in the conversation.

8.1.3 IMPORTANCE OF MEN'S INVOLVEMENT

All participants stated that the involvement of men in the fight against inequalities is crucial for the movement to succeed. They named many reasons for that including the fact that men hold the majority of decision-making positions in private and public institutions, they have authority in many spheres of life, and they are beneficiaries of privileges that come as a consequence of the subordination of women. However, it is important to highlight the fact that gender equality is beneficial for men too, therefore their engagement will result in an overall better mental and physical help. Involving men will also help break the harmful gender stereotypes that slows down the progress and participants suggested that presenting role models for young boys to follow can have a massive impact in altering gender norms and expectations. They also suggested that gender equality be included in formal education and that Kosovo institutions find ways to continue the efforts for equality and not rely on foreign funding.

8.2 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

My suggestion for future research would be to expand the study and include multiple countries and compare the perceptions among men from different backgrounds. My opinion is that patriarchy however nuanced, it expresses itself similarly in different context. Therefore findings from a bigger study would provide groundbreaking platform for intervention in terms of engaging more men in gender equality. I would also like to see more interdisciplinary studies that looks at health benefits and life quality of men who embrace gender equal roles in comparison to other men who embrace more traditional masculinity traits. And finally, more research is needed in the effects of integrating gender equality education in schools and other formal educational platforms. This will paint a good picture of how successful such efforts can be, especially considering the suggestions from the participants that early intervention can help in preventing the adaptation of harmful gender stereotypes.

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APPENDIX 1: Interview Guide

Introductory Questions:

1. Can you tell me about the work you do and how you are engaged with gender equality activism?
2. Can you please tell me a bit about yourself? Your background, where you grew up and other information about yourself so I can get a bit of context that would help me understand from what position you come from.

Research Question 1: What is driving men in Kosovo to get involved in gender equality activism?

1. When were you first introduced to concepts such as feminism, gender equality and women's rights?
 - what did you think about it at the time?
 - how much has your perception of those concepts changed today?
2. What do you think men in Kosovo generally speaking think about gender equality?
 - what about your friends and family members? Do you think they understand the work you do and the values you stand for?
 - and if not, why do you think that is the case?
3. What got you first interested in gender equality? What made you decide that this is something you want to engage actively in and raise your voice for?
4. When was your first engagement in any form of gender equality activism like protest, community work, volunteering, work, campaign etc?
 - how did that feel?
5. Did you feel you sympathized more with the struggle of women in Kosovo after getting engaged in gender equality activism or work?
6. Do you think men have a privileged status in the Kosovar society compared to women?
 - if yes, when did you first realize that?

- what made you understand that? (If you can think of any specific moments of realization or arguments that contributed in you understanding that)

7. Do you think more and more men are joining the fight for gender equality in Kosovo?

- if not, why do you think that is? and what do you think would help in getting more men to engage?
- if yes, why do you think that is? could it be a trend?

Research Question 2: What is their perception on the impact that men's involvement has in the fight for achieving social justice for women in Kosovo?

1. Do you think it is important that men join the feminist cause in order to see progress in gender equality in Kosovo?

- If yes or no, why do you think that?
- how do you think that is perceived by women who have feminist views?
- how do you think that is perceived by other men including friends and family?

2. How do you see your role in terms of influencing other men to notice inequalities and engage in social change?

3. Have you noticed any changes in attitudes towards gender dynamics and beliefs from your male friends, acquaintances, family members or colleagues because of your activism?

4. What is the biggest stigma of being identified as a male feminist and being engaged in gender equality activism?

- do you think that stigma is a part of the reason why there aren't many men interested in gender equality? If not, what other reasons can you think?

5. Based on what you have learned so far what do you think is the best strategy to involve more men in joining the fight for gender equality?

Thank you very much.

Is there anything you would like to add, or to ask me about?

APPENDIX 2: Consent Form



Interview Consent Form

Research project title: Escaping Hegemonic Masculinity: The engagement of Men in gender equality activism in Kosovo.

Researcher: Ideal Hoxha

Participants name:

The interview will take (approximately 45 - 60 min). I don't anticipate that there are any risks associated with your participation, but you have the right to stop the interview or withdraw from the research at any time.

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed as part of the above research project. Ethical procedures for academic research undertaken from Norwegian institutions require that interviewees explicitly agree to being interviewed and how the information contained in their interview will be used. This consent form is necessary for me to ensure that you understand the purpose of your involvement and that you agree to the conditions of your participation. Would you therefore please read the accompanying information sheet and then sign this form to certify that you approve the following:

- the interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced
- you will be sent the transcript and given the opportunity to correct any factual errors
- the transcript of the interview will be analysed by me as researcher
- access to the interview transcript will be limited to me and academic colleagues and researchers with whom I might collaborate as part of the research process
- any summary interview content, or direct quotations from the interview, that are made available through academic publication or other academic outlets will be anonymized so that you cannot be identified, and care will be taken to ensure that other information in the interview that could identify yourself is not revealed.
- the actual recording will be kept in a safe and password secured device and ultimately deleted after the project is over

Date and Signature:

APPENDIX 3: NSD Approval Form

14/11/2022, 21:04

Meldeskjema for behandling av personopplysninger

[Notification form](#) / [Escaping Hegemonic Masculinity: The Engagement of Men in ...](#) / Assessment

Assessment

Reference number	Type	Date
181075	Standard	23.06.2022

Project title

Escaping Hegemonic Masculinity: The Engagement of Men in Gender Equality Activism in Kosovo

Data controller (institution responsible for the project)

Universitetet i Bergen / Det psykologiske fakultet / Hemil-senteret

Project leader

Siri Lange

Student

Ideal Hoxha

Project period

25.08.2021 - 31.12.2022

Categories of personal data

General

Legal basis

Consent (General Data Protection Regulation art. 6 nr. 1 a)

The processing of personal data can begin, so long as it is carried out as described in the Notification Form. The legal basis is valid until 31.12.2022.

[Notification Form](#)

Comment

Data Protection Services has assessed the change registered on 08.06.2022.

The period for processing personal data has been extended until 31.12.2022.

If it later becomes necessary to process personal data for a longer period, then it may be necessary to inform your participants.

We will follow up the progress of the project underway (every other year) and at the new planned end date to determine whether the processing of personal data has been concluded/is being carried out in accordance with what is documented.

Contact person: Gry Henriksen

Good luck with the rest of the project!