**The Situation of Gender Equality in North Macedonia**

**Introduction**

Gender equality represents a cornerstone of human rights and a vital aspect of societal development. In North Macedonia, gender equality has been shaped by its complex historical evolution, socio-political changes, and international commitments. Despite the country’s strides in legislation and policy alignment with European Union norms, the actual implementation of gender equality initiatives remains challenging due to socio-cultural attitudes, economic disparities, and entrenched patriarchal norms. This essay will examine the situation of gender equality in North Macedonia, focusing on the historical context, legislative framework, socio-economic indicators, gender-based violence, and the roles of civil society and international organizations.

**Historical Context of Gender Equality in North Macedonia**

North Macedonia's journey towards gender equality is rooted in its historical legacy, particularly the socialist period of Yugoslavia, of which it was a constituent republic until its dissolution in the early 1990s. During the socialist era, women’s participation in the workforce was encouraged, and gender equality was formally promoted. However, similar to other Eastern European countries, these advances in public life coexisted with persistent gender stereotypes in private life, where women were expected to bear the primary responsibility for household duties.

The disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s and the subsequent transition to a market economy had significant consequences for gender equality. The economic instability that followed disproportionately affected women, leading to rising unemployment and a regression in social services, such as childcare, which are crucial for women's labor participation. The early transition years were marked by a resurgence of traditional gender roles, limiting the opportunities available to women in both economic and political spheres.

**Legal and Institutional Framework for Gender Equality**

North Macedonia has made considerable efforts to establish a legislative framework that supports gender equality. The Constitution guarantees equality between men and women, and several laws and policies have been enacted to promote gender equality in different sectors. The **Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men** (2006, updated in 2012) serves as the cornerstone of the country’s legislative efforts to eliminate gender discrimination. This law seeks to promote equal opportunities across employment, education, healthcare, and political participation.

North Macedonia is also a signatory to several international conventions on gender equality, including the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**, and is committed to the **Istanbul Convention**, which addresses gender-based violence. Furthermore, the country’s alignment with European Union directives as a candidate for EU membership has propelled efforts to synchronize national laws with EU gender equality standards.

Institutional support for gender equality is provided through bodies like the Ministry of Labor and Social Policy, which includes a **Sector for Equal Opportunities**. There is also a Parliamentary **Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men** that is tasked with scrutinizing legislation from a gender perspective. Despite these frameworks, implementation is often hindered by insufficient financial resources, limited political will, and resistance from certain societal groups.

**Economic Participation and Gender Disparities**

The economic participation of women in North Macedonia is a critical dimension of gender equality. Women’s labor force participation remains notably lower than that of men. As of recent data, the employment rate for women is significantly behind that of men, with economic inactivity attributed to traditional caregiving roles, limited access to childcare services, and cultural norms that discourage women's full economic participation.

The **gender pay gap** in North Macedonia, while not as pronounced as in some other countries, still poses a problem. Women often occupy lower-paying sectors such as healthcare, education, and administrative support, while men dominate high-income industries like construction, engineering, and information technology. The **horizontal and vertical segregation** in employment highlights structural barriers that limit women’s access to better-paying and leadership positions.

Moreover, the informal economy is a significant sector in North Macedonia, and women are more likely to be employed informally compared to men. This employment is often insecure, lacks social protection, and offers low wages. Women in rural areas, in particular, are highly vulnerable to economic exploitation and poverty, as they tend to work in subsistence agriculture or in roles that are not formally recognized or protected by labor laws.

**Political Representation and Leadership**

Political representation of women in North Macedonia has seen some progress, primarily due to the introduction of **gender quotas**. The Electoral Code mandates that at least 40% of candidates on party lists for parliamentary and municipal elections must be women. This quota has significantly improved the number of women in Parliament, which now stands at about **38%**, an achievement that puts North Macedonia ahead of some of its Balkan neighbors in terms of female political representation.

Despite this progress, women remain underrepresented in high-level decision-making roles. Female politicians often face challenges related to societal attitudes that question their leadership abilities, and many women in politics are assigned roles traditionally considered “appropriate” for women, such as those related to social welfare, healthcare, or education, rather than economics, foreign policy, or defense. The underrepresentation of women in mayoral positions and executive governmental roles further reflects the challenges of achieving substantive gender parity in political leadership.

**Gender-Based Violence and Legal Protections**

Gender-based violence (GBV) is a significant barrier to achieving gender equality in North Macedonia. Violence against women, including **domestic violence**, remains widespread, although it is often underreported due to societal stigma, fear of reprisal, and mistrust of the judicial system. The **Istanbul Convention**, ratified in 2018, obligates North Macedonia to prevent violence, protect victims, and prosecute perpetrators, yet the implementation of these obligations is hindered by inadequate resources, insufficient training of law enforcement, and deeply rooted cultural norms that perpetuate victim-blaming attitudes.

There are several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working to support victims of gender-based violence, providing services such as shelters, legal assistance, and psychological support. However, the availability of such services is often limited, especially in rural areas. The legal system, while theoretically protective of women’s rights, is often criticized for its inconsistent application of laws, slow processes, and a lack of sensitivity among police and judiciary members when dealing with victims of domestic violence.

**Education and Gender Stereotypes**

Education plays a crucial role in shaping gender norms, and North Macedonia has made strides in ensuring gender parity in educational attainment at both primary and secondary levels. However, disparities arise at the tertiary level, with women tending to pursue degrees in fields such as education, healthcare, and humanities, while men dominate technical and engineering disciplines. This educational segregation is partly driven by societal stereotypes and a lack of encouragement for young women to enter non-traditional fields, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM).

Efforts have been made to introduce **gender-sensitive curricula** and to promote equal opportunities in education, but these initiatives are often fragmented and lack widespread support. Addressing the gender gap in education and promoting greater female participation in STEM fields requires concerted efforts involving educators, policymakers, and civil society organizations.

**Role of Civil Society and International Organizations**

Civil society organizations (CSOs) in North Macedonia play an indispensable role in advocating for gender equality and supporting women's rights. These organizations are often at the forefront of campaigns against gender-based violence, provide training and empowerment programs for women, and hold the government accountable for its international commitments. However, CSOs frequently operate with limited funding, and their influence can be restricted by political dynamics and societal resistance to progressive gender norms.

International organizations such as the **European Union**, **UN Women**, and the **World Bank** have also been instrumental in pushing for gender equality in North Macedonia. They provide crucial funding, technical assistance, and pressure for policy reforms. Projects funded by the EU have focused on empowering women economically, improving the conditions for female entrepreneurship, and enhancing gender equality in public administration.

**Challenges and Opportunities for Advancing Gender Equality**

The path to achieving gender equality in North Macedonia is fraught with challenges, many of which are rooted in societal attitudes and traditional norms. **Patriarchal values** remain deeply embedded, particularly in rural areas, where women’s roles are often defined by caregiving and household responsibilities. Efforts to shift these societal norms have been slow, and attempts to promote gender equality are sometimes met with resistance or are dismissed as contrary to “family values.”

On the other hand, there are significant opportunities to advance gender equality. **EU accession** remains a powerful incentive for North Macedonia to align its policies with European standards, which includes closing gender gaps in various sectors. The increasing participation of women in politics and the introduction of gender quotas have had a positive impact, which, if expanded to other areas of public and corporate life, could lead to broader changes in gender dynamics.

Economic empowerment programs, particularly those that target women entrepreneurs and support women’s entry into the formal workforce, also present significant opportunities. Expanding access to **affordable childcare** and promoting **work-life balance** policies are crucial measures that could help reduce the barriers that women face in the labor market. Engaging men and boys in gender equality initiatives is also essential for challenging stereotypes and redistributing caregiving responsibilities more equitably.

**Conclusion**

The situation of gender equality in North Macedonia is characterized by both notable progress and persistent challenges. While the country has developed a comprehensive legislative framework and has made strides in improving women's representation in politics, deep-rooted cultural norms, economic disparities, and gender-based violence continue to impede genuine equality. The role of civil society and international organizations remains crucial in advancing gender equality, but sustainable progress will depend on shifting societal attitudes and ensuring consistent implementation of laws and policies.

To create a more equitable society, North Macedonia must continue to enhance the economic participation of women, address gender-based violence effectively, and challenge traditional gender stereotypes through education and public discourse. The journey towards gender equality is complex, requiring not only legal and policy changes but also a transformation of societal attitudes that have historically restricted women’s opportunities. With sustained commitment and a multifaceted approach, North Macedonia can continue to move closer to achieving meaningful gender equality.