



Contributing to change—the mentoring programme for women in police in North Macedonia

A Case Study for the OSCE50+

This report presents one of four case studies conducted as part of an OSCE Outcome Harvesting (OH) research initiative, led by the Office of Internal Oversight (OIO) to mark the 50th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. Funded through extrabudgetary support from Finland, this initiative engaged OSCE staff in a reflective analysis of the Organization's impact, identifying significant changes influenced by the OSCE's work across its region.

The research serves a dual purpose: to strengthen internal learning by fostering evaluative thinking among OSCE staff and to demonstrate the OSCE's impact to external stakeholders through concrete examples of change the Organization contributed to over the past 10–20 years.

In line with the Outcome Harvesting approach, this case study focuses on observable changes in the behaviours, practices and relationships of key actors—referred to here as 'changes' or 'outcomes'—to which the OSCE plausibly contributed.

Between September and December 2024, OIO gathered over 50 outcome stories from OSCE staff working in field operations, institutions and the Secretariat. This process went beyond documenting individual outcomes—OIO completed a structured analysis to identify patterns across the stories and produced a synthesis report to deepen understanding of how OSCE contributions have shaped developments in its region. From this broader body of work, four stories were selected for in-depth case studies, enabling a closer examination of changes, how they occurred and the OSCE's contributions. This case study explores one of these initiatives in detail—focusing on the observed changes, the actors involved and the interventions that influenced them.

> Introduction

This case study examines the journey of the Mentoring Programme for Women in Police, a transformative initiative launched in 2017 by the OSCE Mission to Skopje in partnership with the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) of North Macedonia. Designed to support women police officers in advancing their careers and breaking barriers to leadership, the programme aimed to foster a more inclusive and equitable police force.

The report is structured into five sections:

Context: The challenges that prompted the OSCE initiative.

Key outcomes and their significance: The medium- and long-term changes observed.

Contributions: How the OSCE influenced these changes.

Concluding observations: Lessons to inform future OSCE efforts.

Data collection summary: An overview of OIO's research methods.

> Acknowledgements

The assessment was conducted by Maria Delgado, an independent evaluation consultant, under the supervision of Leslie Thomas, Senior Evaluator at OIO. Nynke de Witte, Head of Evaluation/Deputy Director OIO, provided oversight and guidance throughout the research process.

The research followed a participatory approach, involving OSCE staff, government officials and training participants. Their insights, combined with an extensive review of relevant materials, helped build a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the reform's impact.

The OIO research team would like to express sincere appreciation to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of North Macedonia staff, for their invaluable support during the data collection for this case study.

We are also grateful to the OSCE Mission to Skopje—especially Ambassador Kilian Wahl, Deputy Head of Mission Susan Penksa and Mission members Stephanie Senger, Faruk Ademi, Edward Anderson, Mark Dixon, Gordana Mitrovic and Naser Nagavci—for their valuable insights, collaboration and assistance in providing critical data.

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> Context: the challenges underpinning the OSCE's engagement

Policing has traditionally been a male-dominated profession. Around the world, women remain under-represented in police forces, often facing similar barriers to career progression and unequal experiences compared to men. Deep-rooted biases and institutional practices continue to limit women's participation, particularly in leadership roles.

North Macedonia is no exception. Despite efforts of the MoIA to mainstream gender equality into nearly all governing laws and by-laws, disparities persist—most visibly at the leadership level. As of 2019, women made up only 19.7 per cent of MoIA staff,¹ and just 12.5 per cent of management positions were held by women. Yet, public perception tells a different story. That same year, an OSCE-commissioned survey showed that 68 per cent of police officers believed female officers had equal promotion opportunities to men, and 63 per cent felt that women officers received equal treatment from their supervisors.² This contrast points to the deeper, less visible nature of gender bias in institutional culture.

International research further highlights some recurring barriers women face in policing:³

Balancing work with family responsibilities
Managing reproductive health concerns and caregiving demands
Coping with sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination and chronic stress
Navigating leadership styles and the long-hours culture often tied to promotion
Overcoming stereotypes about women's ambition and job commitment
Facing limited organizational support, including fewer promotional opportunities

On this background, the Mission to Skopje launched a mentoring programme to support cultural change within the MoIA and to empower women to advance professionally. In 2022, the programme began including male officers and was renamed the Police Gender Mentoring Programme (GMP).

¹ Official data included in the External Evaluation of the Democratic Policing Project 2019–2023, commissioned by the Police Development Unit, OSCE Mission to Skopje; Appendix VI – MoIA staff: gender and gender-ethnicity breakdown.

² 2019 OSCE Public Perception Survey on Democratic Policing.

³ Jackie Alexander & Sarah Charman (2024), *Parallel lines? The homogeneous and gendered career patterns of senior leaders in policing in England and Wales*, *Police Practice and Research*, 25:3, 286-307; U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, National Institute of Justice, *Women in Policing: Breaking barriers and blazing a path*, <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/252963.pdf>; Garcia, V. (2003), "Difference" in the Police Department: Women, Policing, and "Doing Gender". *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 19(3), 330–344. <https://30x30initiative.org>; Jackie Alexander & Sarah Charman (2024),

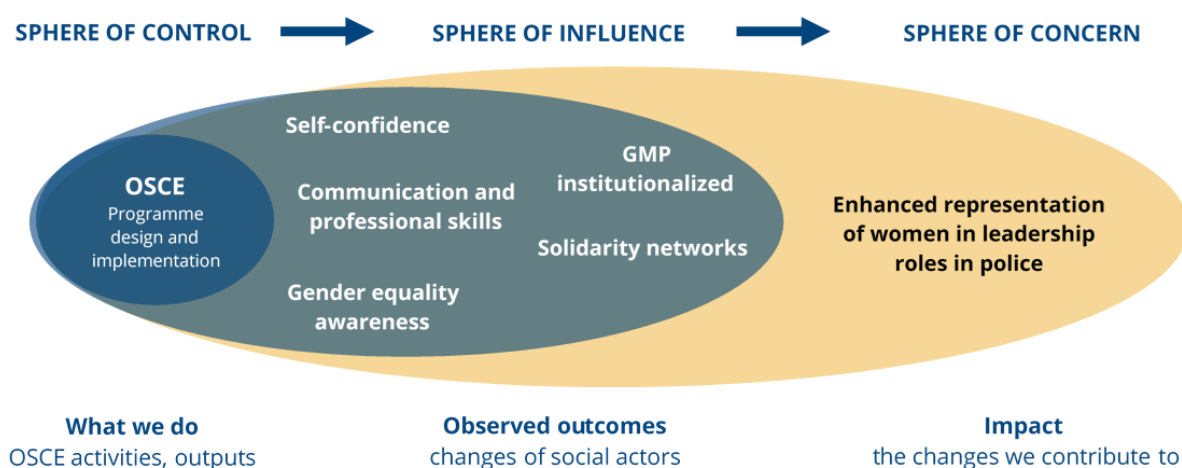
> Key outcomes and their significance

Between 2017 and 2023, the Mission to Skopje supported the institutionalization of a gender mentoring programme within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police of North Macedonia. This initiative has helped drive change at multiple levels. At the **individual level**, mentees reported breaking personal barriers, gaining confidence, developing leadership skills and accessing more career advancement opportunities. Mentors, in turn, refined their coaching abilities and deepened their commitment to fostering an inclusive workplace culture.

At the **organizational level**, the programme helped build solidarity networks among women in policing and visibly increased the number of women accessing managerial positions, opening space in areas traditionally dominated by men. Together, these changes have challenged long-standing gender barriers and contributed to a shift in institutional culture.

The outcomes summarized in the graphic below illustrate how mentoring—when integrated and sustained—can serve as a powerful catalyst for transformation across personal, professional and systemic levels.

Figure 1. Visual illustration of the sphere of influence of the OSCE's contributions⁴



GMP participants developed skills and confidence to overcome gender-based barriers in policing

When the GMP was first designed, it was not just about building skills or leadership—it aimed to confront the reality of inequality and expose the often-unseen obstacles that held women back in policing. Recognizing these challenges was the essential first step toward meaningful, lasting change.

For most participants consulted for this assessment, the programme marked the beginning of a personal journey of growth. Between 2017 and 2024, four cohorts of mentors and mentees participated, engaging 178 police officers and MoIA staff, including

⁴ Inspired by Clark and Apgar (2019), *Unpacking the Impact of International Development: Resource Guide 1*.

12 men. More than a series of training sessions, the GMP became a powerful catalyst for change—especially for the women who took part.

Still, participant feedback suggests that while a few male participants gained **awareness of the unique challenges** faced by their female colleagues, most participants—men and women—continued to attribute the underrepresentation of women in leadership to broader societal views of policing as a male profession, rather than recognizing internal systemic barriers. This highlights the difficulty of shifting deeply engrained attitudes and social norms.

Nonetheless, the programme gave many participants a significant boost in self-confidence, particularly women. Those consulted described how the experience sparked new awareness of their capacity to lead and effect change. With greater confidence came a readiness to pursue roles that once felt beyond reach—whether applying for promotion, taking on new responsibilities or stepping away from positions that no longer aligned with their ambitions. This mindset shift marked a more proactive approach to overcoming traditional career barriers.

“The self-confidence and the abilities that we gained in this programme helped us to grow up, leave the comfort zone and move forward. I'm sure that those qualities are recognized by our superiors and gave us the opportunity to move to higher positions.”

We had a lot of opportunities to meet more experienced women in the service, who walked this path when women were less represented in the service, and they showed us that there is nothing wrong with being a woman in this male-dominated profession.”

—Mentees of the GMP

Many also agreed that the programme reshaped how they viewed themselves within a traditionally male-dominated profession. A key turning point for some was the opportunity to connect with experienced female role models—women who had advanced despite limited representation and showed what was possible. As one mentee said:

The programme also helped participants sharpen their **communication skills**, particularly in public speaking and active listening. These abilities proved transformative—allowing for more confident presentations, stronger team interactions and more positive, collaborative work environments. With these tools and growing self-assurance, participants did not only make their voices heard—they helped reshape team dynamics, fostering greater mutual respect and support.

“I started paying a greater deal of attention to the body language of my colleagues. When they speak now, I am more mindful both about myself and about the others—their nonverbal communication.”

“The Training-of-Trainers helped me overcome my fear of speaking in public. Building my self-confidence, preparing thoroughly for presentations, and learning how to structure them effectively made it easier for me to present things and greatly improved my written communication at work.”

—Participants of the Training-of-Trainers

Female officers built solidarity and lasting peer networks

The GMP fostered more than professional growth; it created a powerful sense of solidarity among women in policing. For most of the women consulted in this assessment, the mentorship went beyond career guidance. It built personal and professional connections that endured well beyond the programme’s formal end.

“Since we started implementing this gender mentoring programme, we’ve established a network of women in the police across the whole country. In the past, we didn’t know each other. But now, we share experiences and support each other. This is a step forward in managing the obstacles we face.”

—A GMP mentor

As mentor-mentee relationships deepened, a wider network of support began to take shape. Women who had previously worked in isolation—often in different towns or regions—suddenly found themselves part of a shared community. They began exchanging experiences, offering support and uniting around common goals of growth and inclusion.

These connections often evolved into ongoing relationships that extended into daily police work, as one mentor described:

“My mentee was a police officer in another police station. Just today, by chance, I heard her speaking on our internal radio and giving instructions to her team. So, I called her and told her: next time you do it like this, give clearer directions, change the tone of your voice... Somehow, although the programme ended for me, I am still mentoring her. Still, we are in a good relation. I call her. She calls me.”

—A GMP mentor

Many participants cited these supportive relationships as one of the most valuable aspects of the programme—and one of the main reasons they joined in the first place.

Building on this foundation, at the time of this assessment the Mission to Skopje was working with national partners to formally establish a women’s network within the police aiming to institutionalize these connections and ensure they continue to empower future generations of women. By complementing the GMP, the network is expected to provide

long-term peer support, strengthen inclusion and help women navigate persistent institutional challenges.

The MoIA institutionalized the mentoring programme, but political changes created uncertainty about its sustainability

In 2024, the MoIA formally assumed responsibility for the GMP, marking a major step toward institutionalization. However, following parliamentary elections, a change in government led to structural shifts across ministries. This transition had two immediate consequences for the programme.

First, implementation of the fourth instalment of the GMP—already underway under MoIA leadership—faced delays. Participants voiced concern over the Ministry’s ability and commitment to continue the programme to the same standard. Second, it remained unclear which department would manage the GMP going forward. While the handover reflected institutional progress, these developments raised serious questions about the initiative’s long-term sustainability.

More women advanced into leadership roles in the Ministry and police

When the GMP launched in 2017, women held just 12.5 per cent of managerial roles in the MoIA and police. By 2023, that number had risen to 17.8 per cent—a notable increase in this traditionally male-dominated field.

Behind the statistics lie real shifts in women’s career trajectories. Through mentorship and increased confidence, participants stepped into roles that had once seemed unattainable. Examples include the country’s first female police dog handler—a position historically reserved for men—and a noticeable rise in women heading police stations, leading crime units and managing forensic teams. While not all reports could be independently verified, this trend was consistently highlighted in testimonies.⁵

"The programme has been around for five years, and I've seen many women being promoted—especially within the MoIA and the Bureau for Public Safety, but also in smaller police stations across the country."

"At my police station, the chief is a woman, and there's a head of department who is also a woman. Before, these roles were exclusively male."

—GMP participants

For many, the GMP provided the push to pursue leadership roles. Participants learned how to advocate for themselves, developed key leadership skills and, most importantly, began to see themselves as leaders.

⁵ Overall, official data for this assessment was scarce, and when available, significant discrepancies undermined its reliability. Consequently, we relied on the testimonials of those interviewed, many of whom believed that the situation was improving and that women were becoming increasingly visible in these roles.

“We gained valuable experience from our mentors. We learned to be braver and to apply for positions that people assume are meant for men—without hesitation, without prejudice.”

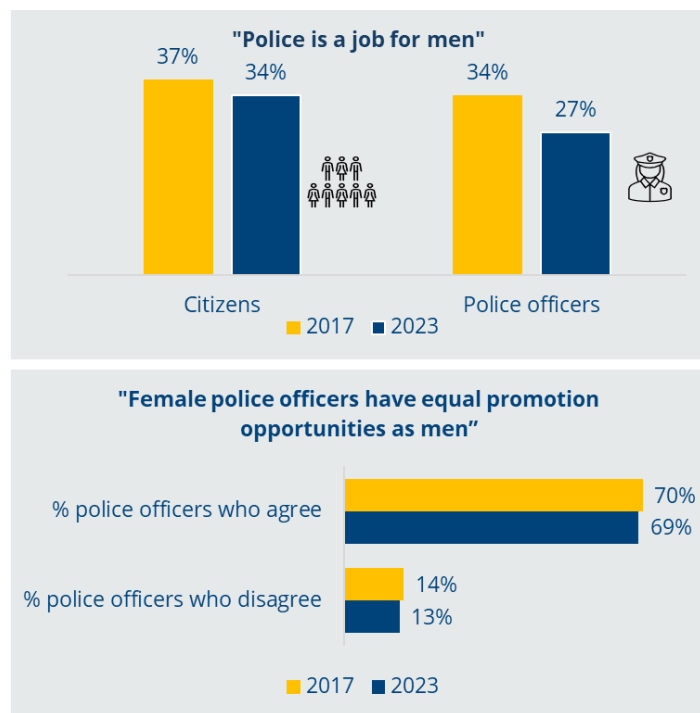
—A mentee

Still, several experts noted that most promotions occurred in administrative domains—such as human resources, legal or finance—rather than operational units, where leadership remains overwhelmingly male. Official data did not disaggregate leadership roles across MoIA departments, the Bureau for Public Safety (BPS) or police units, making it difficult to fully assess the scope of this gap. Nonetheless, testimonies suggested that most progress to date has occurred in general administration.

These findings highlight the need for more inclusive leadership pathways across both operational and support roles—especially at the grassroots level—to build a representative and gender-equal police force.

Although the individual-level changes are significant, institutional and societal shifts remain ongoing. Public perception surveys commissioned by the Mission to Skopje in 2023 show that one in four police officers still agreed with the statement: “Police is a job for men.” At the same time, 70 per cent of officers believed that men and women have equal promotion opportunities—underscoring the disconnect between perceptions and persistent structural barriers.

Source: Own elaboration with data from the Mission to Skopje’s public perception surveys



> How the OSCE contributed to the changes

From 2017 to 2023, the Mission to Skopje played a pivotal role in initiating and supporting the institutionalization of the Gender Mentoring Programme within the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the police of North Macedonia. What began as an advocacy initiative with the Police Trade Union, evolved into a multi-year effort to embed mentoring as a tool for advancing gender equality in policing. Inspired by a similar initiative at the OSCE Secretariat, the Mission’s contributions focused on programme design, capacity development and strategic engagement with institutional stakeholders. In 2024, the programme was formally handed over to the MoIA, marking a key milestone toward national ownership. While the Mission’s direct support has concluded, the outcomes of

this engagement continue to influence internal culture and professional opportunities for women and men in the police. The sections below outline how the OSCE contributed to these changes.

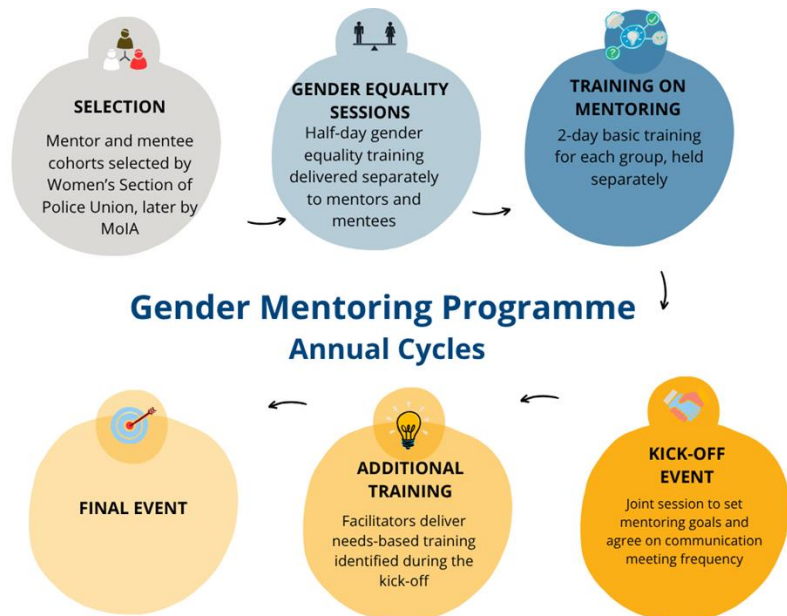
Programme design and implementation

The GMP was developed with the support of two external facilitators and a gender expert, all fully funded by the Mission to Skopje. Key features of the programme include:

Mentoring structure: The GMP targeted young officers (with less than five years of experience) as mentees and paired them with mid-level career officers (with more than ten years of experience) as mentors. Initially, participants were selected from among Union members, but the programme later expanded to include all MoIA employees. In 2022, it further evolved to include 12 male police officers across the 3rd and 4th cohorts—seven as mentors and five as mentees.

Capacity-building activities: Led by external facilitators, each cohort cycle included two-and-a-half-day workshops for mentors and mentees, followed by a kick-off workshop bringing both groups together to establish mentoring goals. A half-day gender equality session, led by a Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women expert, equipped participants with knowledge and practical tools to challenge career-limiting stereotypes. Additional workshops focused on soft skills, such as communication, time and stress management, and priority setting. Feedback from participants informed supplementary, tailored training. Each programme cycle lasted one year.

Simulation and regional engagement: In June 2023, a one-day Gender Mentoring Workshop Conference Simulation for 55 GMP alumni (five men and 50 women) enabled participants to apply new skills in various conference roles, such as moderators, speakers, panel members and conference attendees. This practical experience prepared them to actively engage in the March 2024 Regional Gender & Security Conference, co-organized with the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which brought together regional law enforcement agencies to exchange experiences and best practices.

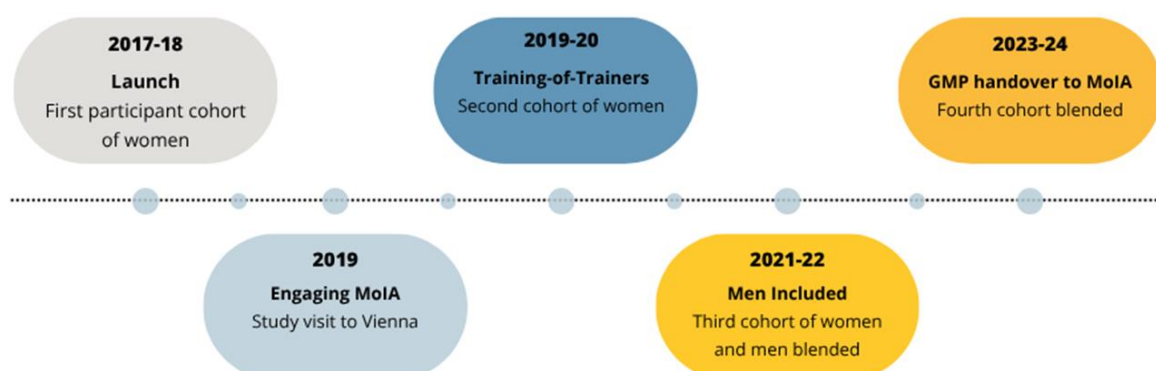


Building training capacities and institutional buy-in

Training-of-trainers: To ensure programme sustainability, the OSCE trained seven women as future trainers, equipping them to independently continue the mentoring programme within the Ministry.

Institutional awareness-raising: Initially designed as a bottom-up initiative for younger officers, it quickly became evident that securing institutional backing from senior leadership was crucial for the programme's sustainability. To address this, the OSCE organized in late 2019 a study visit to Vienna and a targeted workshop for top-level stakeholders from the MoIA and BPS to make them familiar with various gender mainstreaming opportunities within the police sector. Participants had the opportunity to gain first-hand insights into the OSCE Secretariat's Gender Mentoring Programme for Women, as well as Austrian gender mainstreaming practices, including those implemented by the Centre for Organizational Culture and Equal Treatment under the Directorate General I of the Austrian Ministry of the Interior, and Vienna's Police. These initiatives helped raise awareness among senior officials about the potential benefits of the programme and gender mainstreaming in policing institutions, fostering their commitment to institutionalizing the GMP in the MoIA.

GMP key moments



Advocating for broader systemic changes

Recognizing the potential impact of political changes on the sustainability of the GMP and overall gender equality within the police, the OSCE proactively worked to integrate gender equality into broader institutional reform processes, emphasizing the need to advance women's career development. Mission staff became active participants in key MoIA working groups focused on human resource management, disciplinary proceedings and recruitment processes. These platforms became crucial advocacy spaces where the OSCE could push for systemic reforms that support the development of a more professionalized, representative and democratic police service in North Macedonia.

Through these multifaceted contributions, the OSCE has not only supported the career progression of women in the police force but also laid the groundwork for long-term institutional transformation, ensuring a more inclusive and equitable security sector.

> Concluding observations

From individual growth to systemic change

The GMP was initially designed to equip young female officers with the tools and skills needed to advance in their careers, based on the belief that individual empowerment would drive change. While programme results demonstrate that individual growth is essential to addressing women's underrepresentation in leadership, personal development alone is not sufficient to achieve long-term transformation of women's roles in the police. Without structural reforms in human resource management, recruitment and promotion policies, the mentoring programme alone cannot dismantle long-standing barriers. Recognizing this, the Mission to Skopje expanded its efforts to push for more systemic changes in these areas, addressing institutional constraints on women's career progression in law enforcement. This experience also underscores the ongoing need to raise awareness of these systemic obstacles, ensuring that the challenges women face are recognized and addressed at all levels.

Leadership commitment as a cornerstone of impact

For the GMP to have a lasting impact, securing top-level management support was just as crucial as empowering individual officers. Although the programme initially focused on lower-ranking women, the OSCE soon realized that, without institutional buy-in from leadership, progress would be limited and unsustainable. Advocacy efforts—though not part of the initial design—proved essential in securing leadership commitment and embedding the GMP within the broader institutional framework. International security sector experts interviewed for the assessment echoed this view, stressing that mentoring on gender-related issues must occur across all levels, including middle and top management.

Including Men: expanding engagement, retaining focus

The decision to include male participants in 2021 stemmed from the understanding that achieving gender equality requires the engagement of both men and women. While male participants acknowledged that the programme helped them better understand the challenges faced by their female colleagues, it remains unclear how this awareness will translate into tangible benefits for women. At the time of the assessment, only 12 men have taken part. It is therefore too early to determine whether involving men will lead to wider shifts in awareness within the police, challenging the perception that equal opportunities already exist. Moving forward, it will be essential to keep gender equality central to the programme, ensuring that its original purpose is not diluted.

Securing the institutionalization of the programme remains a challenge

The OSCE supported the programme's implementation until 2024, when it was officially handed over to government authorities. However, many stakeholders expressed concern about its sustainability without continued OSCE support.

Conversations with OSCE staff suggest that embedding the GMP within institutional structures and achieving policy-level integration is critical for its long-term viability. To address this, early strategic discussions should focus on defining a solid institutional framework to secure the programme's permanence before handing it over. Extending the

transition period and maintaining oversight until the programme is fully embedded in government operations could help safeguard its continuity and impact.

Bridging the data gap to measure progress

One of the main challenges in assessing the GMP's impact is the absence of disaggregated official data on women's career progression in the police force. Available statistics do not distinguish between women in operational versus non-operational leadership roles, limiting the ability to measure outcomes accurately.

Adding to this, the lack of systematic monitoring of GMP participants constrains the OSCE's capacity to track long-term progress. Without a clear record of where mentees have moved within the force, it is hard to determine whether they are breaking into traditionally male-dominated spaces or whether they remain concentrated in support roles.

These data gaps create a blind spot in understanding the programme's true reach. While anecdotal evidence suggests that the programme has helped women advance in their careers and challenge workplace barriers, structured data collection—tracking promotions, career paths and cultural shifts—is essential. Anticipating intended outcomes and designing suitable monitoring tools would provide a clearer picture of progress and systemic transformations, guiding future efforts to advance women across all areas of policing.

> Data collection summary

