



EWI Fellowship Research Programme

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**PERCEPTION OF THE POSITION AND ROLES OF WOMEN IN  
PROTESTANT COMMUNITIES OF SKOPJE, NORTH MACEDONIA**

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## Biography



Melani Netkovski was born on July 30, 1994, in Varaždin, Croatia. She holds a degree in protestant theology from the University Center “Matthias Flacius Illyricus” with the topic “The Science of the Cross, Edith Stein”. She has extensive experience working with children, youth, and vulnerable groups. Over the years, she has developed strong communication and listening skills, essential for working with socially disadvantaged individuals. She is committed to contributing to the community. Currently, Melani is the National Director of *Youth First Concerns* in Skopje, North Macedonia. She has previously volunteered with various organisations focusing on social support and refugee assistance. Her education includes a bachelor's degree and ongoing master's studies in theology, along with certificates in leadership, sports community development, and human rights from training in the Netherlands, Indonesia, and Croatia. Melani and her husband Igor have a daughter, Hana. They live in Skopje and actively contribute to their community.

## Abstract

Since the very beginnings of Christianity, there have been debates about the position and roles of women in the Church. Answers to this question have been offered through various, sometimes opposing, theological interpretations, reflecting denominational differences, but also the societal context in which a particular community operates. Historically, the roles and positions of women have mostly been addressed by men. Therefore, I am interested in how women in Macedonia, specifically in Skopje, perceive their roles and positions within the Church. The first part of the paper briefly presents the problem of gender stereotyping as the root of women's discrimination in the Protestant and Macedonian context. The second part brings a study of the perception of women's roles and positions in Protestant churches of Skopje. The analysis of the study results points to a high level of dedication and engagement of women in church communities, where their involvement is, however, still limited to traditionally female roles. Women remain underrepresented in organisational, governance, and liturgical practices, and in decision-making processes within the churches. Further research should examine in more detail why this is so, shedding special light on the role of church leadership concerning the position and roles of women in Protestant communities.

**Keywords:** women, Protestantism, protestant denominations, North Macedonia, gender equality, gender stereotypes.

## 1. Introduction

“We encourage churches to acknowledge godly women who teach and model what is good, as Paul commanded, and to open wider doors of opportunity for women in education, service, and leadership, particularly in contexts where the gospel challenges unjust cultural traditions. We long that women should not be hindered from exercising God’s gifts or following God’s call on their lives.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the position and roles of women in societies change over time, this remains an issue we keep coming back to. Despite all the knowledge and protection mechanisms incorporated into relevant international law, women still do not enjoy full equality with men. This is a result of historically unequal relations between men and women, which is why, even today, women are discriminated against and prevented from reaching their full potential. Ideas about women have been formed and written down by educated men for millennia. Given that women did not have the same access to education and career opportunities as men, the understanding of men and women, of their mutual differences, and the ideals concerning women’s appearance and behaviour were shaped and described by learned men.<sup>2</sup> Such ideas emerge in various types of works – religious texts, scientific treatises, literature, philosophical discussions – which have been preserved and passed on to subsequent generations.<sup>3</sup> Androcentric ideas about women resulted in opinions and attitudes being formed about women, which, over time, came to be regarded as religious truths or scientific facts.<sup>4</sup>

Women’s rights in the church are reflected in the freedom to create their own lives and make decisions.<sup>5</sup> Protestant communities are characterised by denominational diversity, and the position

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<sup>1</sup> *The Cape Town Commitment*, 2010, Lausanne Movement Document URL: <https://lausanne.org/statement/ctcommitment> (Accessed: 28.2.2025.)

<sup>2</sup> Weisner, Merry E. (1993). *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 9-10.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9-10.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Sladojević, Ana (2023). *Rodna ravnopravnost u katoličanstvu i protestantizmu (Gender Equality in Catholicism and Protestantism)*. Zadar: Odjel za sociologiju Sveučilišta u Zadaru, p. 1.

of women varies from denomination to denomination.<sup>6</sup> Although in some Protestant denominations women are allowed to perform roles historically reserved for men, such as being ordained, preaching, and leading the church community, women still face obstacles simply because they are women. Despite the great importance placed on the issue of gender equality in many Protestant communities, women still do not enjoy full equality in church structures.<sup>7</sup> The introductory part of the paper opens with a quote from the Cape Town Commitment, which reflects the proceedings of the Third Lausanne Congress (2010). I chose this quote as it clearly points to the issue of gender inequality in the ministry of the contemporary global church and calls upon the church to change this, following Christ's model of ministry, in the face of the world's hunger for power and status. In her book *Women Around Jesus: Reflections on Authentic Personhood*, Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel strives to prove that in the encounter with Jesus, women become "their own persons", inviting her female readers to recognise themselves in the women encountered around Jesus. In meeting the women around Jesus, we are free to remove the veil of androcentric interpretations and to re-read the positions given to us by Christ. Seeing an apostle like Junia, women in episcopal ministry like Phoebe, leading Christians like Mary Magdalene, changes our perception of the position and role of women in the church.<sup>8</sup> This paper is motivated by the desire to encounter the voices of Christian women, to listen to them and to hear what they have to say about their position and roles in the Church. It aims to present the experiences and perceptions of women in the context of church affiliation and engagement, exploring their contributions to the Church, the opportunities they are given and the obstacles they face.

### *1.2. Gender stereotypes*

Gender stereotypes are preconceived notions by which women or men are arbitrarily assigned certain characteristics and roles determined by their gender.<sup>9</sup> Gender stereotyping refers

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<sup>6</sup> Sladojević, 2023, p. 22.

<sup>7</sup> Sladojević, 2023, p. 22.

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann-Wendel, Elizabeth (2018). *Postati svoj čovjek, Žene oko Isusa (Women Around Jesus: Reflections on Authentic Personhood)*. Zagreb: Kršćanska sadašnjost, p. 18.

<sup>9</sup> European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), URL: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1223> (Accessed on 10.12.2024)

to the practice of ascribing specific attributes, characteristics, or social roles to an individual on the sole basis of their membership in a particular gender group.<sup>10</sup> Such stereotypes are rooted in socially conditioned norms and expectations of what it means to be a man or a woman, and consequently determine their social roles and position.

According to Sister Mary Prudence Allen, Aristotle is a key figure among ancient philosophers, whose interpretations of the nature of women and men have influenced almost all fields of academic study, impacting not only the humanities but also the natural sciences.<sup>11</sup> In his theory of the generation of living creatures, the acclaimed philosopher applied the concept of active and passive principles in male and female bodies, attributing the active principle to the male gender and the passive to the female.<sup>12</sup> The very essence of gender stereotypes lies precisely in this idea of male activity and female passivity as being naturally given, which in turn determines the appearance, behaviour, roles and position of men and women. “*A female is, as it were, a mutilated male*”<sup>13</sup> Aristotle would argue long before we were to coin the term misogyny by which such a claim would be described today. His ideas thus became the basis of gender stereotypes and gender models of female subordination, entering the realm of theology by way of theologians he influenced, but also – no less importantly – by way of cultural norms.<sup>14</sup> Traces of Aristotle’s ideas are also present in the works of early Christian theologians such as St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas, who considered women inferior to men, seeing the human male as the only complete and privileged human being before God.<sup>15</sup> Augustine declared: “I cannot think of any reason for a woman’s being made as the man’s helper, if we dismiss the reason of procreation.” St. Thomas Aquinas, following Aristotle’s interpretation, described the female as the “defective male”, adding

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<sup>10</sup> Gender stereotyping. European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), URL: <https://eige.europa.eu/publications-resources/thesaurus/terms/1371> (Accessed on 10.12.2024)

<sup>11</sup> Anić, Jadranka Rebeka, and Šiljak – Spahić, Zilka, Rodni stereotipi: znanstveno i religijski opravdane razlike kao izlika za diskriminaciju (Gender Stereotypes: Scientifically and Religiously Justified Differences as an Excuse for Discrimination), in: Vasiljević, Snježana, (eds.) 2023, *Rodna ravnopravnost, Pravo i Politike*, Pravni fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu, p. 44-46.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Behr-Siegel, Elizabeth (1987). *The Ministry of Women in the Church*. Redondo Beach, California: Oakwood Publications, p. 50-51.

that without the divine power that willed the existence of the female sex, the birth of a female would be an accident, like the birth of any other monster.<sup>16</sup> Such views have become deeply rooted in Christian thinking and have influenced the perception of women within church structures and the wider social community.

### *1.3. The position of women in Protestantism*

Although the Protestant Reformers broke with the institutional structure and many of the theological teachings of the Catholic Church, they did not break with the scholastic theologians in their ideas about women. Riding the historical wave of Aristotle's natural philosophy, at the time of the Reformation, the question of the active male and passive female principle and all ideas arising from such an interpretation were considered scientific knowledge rather than prejudice.<sup>17</sup> For Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli, and other leaders of the English Puritan movement, woman and man were spiritually equal; both were created by God and could be saved through faith. Luther, as a priest and theologian, brought about many changes, introducing, among other things, the central concept of "*the priesthood of all believers*", which emphasised that all believers, including women, regardless of their characteristics, were entitled to be priests and to establish a direct relationship with God.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the sixteenth-century church reforms increased opportunities for female education, giving women a chance to take on greater responsibilities in churches. Some held prayer meetings and sermons and were able to baptise children.<sup>19</sup> Concerning the issue of female subordination, however, the Reformers agreed with Aristotle and scholastic theology. Some fifteenth-century Protestant writers emphasised God's idea of marriage and family as the best way to provide spiritual and moral discipline.<sup>20</sup> Protestant manuals and sermons on marriage and running the household stressed the importance of the husband's authority and the wife's

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Sladojević, 2023, p. 16-17.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Weisner, 1993, p. 22.

obedience.<sup>21</sup> Although the exhortation to marry applied to both sexes, for women, motherhood and marriage implied the highest vocation and calling.

The position and roles of women develop differently in different Protestant communities. Protestant churches instruct their believers to form their views according to the Bible and their own conscience, which results in a diversity of opinions and teachings. Moreover, the question of women in different ecclesial communities cannot be separated from the question of women in different societies. In societies where gender equality was perceived as a factor that threatened the hierarchy of the state, women were not allowed to be actively involved in church activities, while on the other hand, in more emancipated societies, women actively engaged in church ministries. In her article *Women's Human Rights in Christianity*, author Jadranka Rebeka Anić refers to an interesting study conducted by William Johnson on the attitudes of Christian churches regarding women's human rights standards. He concluded that there was no specific type of ecclesiology that ensured the acknowledgement of women's human rights but, rather, that the socio-political and cultural context or the current church leadership had a greater impact on the observance of women's human rights.<sup>22</sup>

#### *1.4. Protestantism in Macedonia*

North Macedonia is perceived as a country with a complex religious and cultural heritage, where Protestantism is only a minor part of the religious tradition, distinguished from the dominant Orthodox Christianity and Islamic tradition by its unique dynamics. During the nineteenth century, Protestantism contributed to the recovery from a great economic and spiritual crisis among the population of the time, which was a result of the centuries-long rule of the Ottoman Empire.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> Anić, Jadranka Rebeka (2011). "Ljudska prava žena u kršćanstvu" (Women's Human Rights in Christianity), in: Radačić Ivana and Jelka Vince Paula (eds.), *Ljudska prava žena: Razvoj na međunarodnoj i nacionalnoj razini 30 godina nakon usvajanja Konvencije UN-a o ukidanju svih oblika diskriminacija žena: zbornik radova* (Women's Human Rights: Developments at the International and National Level 30 Years after the Adoption of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women: Edited Volume). Zagreb: Ivo Pilar Institute of Social Sciences; Government of the Republic of Croatia, Office for Gender Equality, p. 59-80.

<sup>23</sup> Jonovski, Jovan (2017). *Istorija na evangelsko – protestantskite crkvi vo Makedonija*. Skopje: Izgrev, p. 9.

Through this minority religious group, women significantly contributed to the development of their communities, but also the society at large.<sup>24</sup>

Protestantism in Macedonia has its roots in 19th-century missionary activities led by American and British evangelical movements.<sup>25</sup> Female missionaries played an important role during this period by serving in previously unreached and marginalised groups of society. These women were not only responsible for the spread of Protestant teachings but also became involved in social and educational initiatives that contributed to the active participation of women in religious and social life. Later, Macedonia, as a federal republic, was part of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY 1963-1991), and the legacy of the socialist period played a significant part in shaping its social structures. Although the legal framework of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia nominally provided for the equality of women in the private and public spheres, in reality, the emancipation of women was implemented by the state only within the public sphere, affecting the determination of gender roles within the family life.<sup>26</sup>

## 2. Research

Given the diversity of Protestant denominations and the peculiarity of the Macedonian context, as well as the general social context of gender equality, the question of the role and position of women in Protestant churches requires a more extensive approach than this paper allows. Therefore, the paper centres on women's perceptions of their roles and positions in the Protestant churches of Skopje. The study seeks to answer the following questions: how do women feel in their church communities, do they have a sense of belonging to them, what are their roles and positions, do they have the support of church structures in reaching their full potential through their own engagement in the church? My research starts from the following hypotheses:

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>26</sup> Grozdanov, Z. and Odak, S., 2023. *Balkanska kontekstualna teologija (The Contextual Theology of the Balkans)*. Rijeka: Ex Libris, p. 148.

- women believers are insufficiently involved in worship acts, and the ministries of governance and teaching in churches (H1)
- the church's openness towards women's issues often depends on current church leadership (H2)

### *2.1. Research objective*

This paper aims to explore the perceptions of women believers within the Evangelical Protestant communities of Skopje regarding their own positions and roles in the Church, including their needs, capacities and aspirations in the context of church ministries.

The research was based on the following set of research questions:

1. whether and to what extent women have a sense of belonging to their religious communities,
2. which church ministries are women active in,
3. how women perceive their roles in religious communities,
4. how women perceive the church's support of and encouragement for their engagement in the church,
5. how women perceive their involvement in decision-making processes in church communities,
6. what are women's attitudes on gender equality and the role of women in the Church?

## *2.2. Research methodology*

The study was conducted within the territory of the City of Skopje, the capital of North Macedonia, on a sample of 102 women – believers of Evangelical Protestant churches – out of a total of 421 potential respondents. The survey was conducted via the Google Forms platform, with the possibility of online survey completion during January 2025, and the last responses were recorded on 6 February 2025. To ensure the freedom and anonymity of responses, the survey was anonymous.

As the research questions centred on women's experiences, a mixed approach was applied. The data were collected by using a questionnaire containing open- and close-ended questions, predominantly structured according to a five-point Likert scale (1 = I completely disagree, 5 = I completely agree). The data were processed using the statistical software SPSS 20. A descriptive analysis was conducted, including:

- frequency distributions,
- representation percentages,
- graphical representations (bar and pie diagrams),
- tabular presentation of results,
- a descriptive analysis of the data obtained.

A part of the questionnaire provided the opportunity to elaborate on the answers, through which qualitative data were also collected. The data were analysed, summed up, grouped according to common topics, and interpreted in the context of the main findings to provide a deeper understanding of the respondents' experiences. Such a methodological approach enables a systematic presentation of women's attitudes and experiences in Evangelical Protestant churches and the identification of the key challenges and opportunities for greater engagement on their part.

The questionnaire was designed to cover the following thematic units:

- sample demographics – basic information about the respondents (age, level of education, marital status, etc.),

- perception of belonging to one’s religious community,
- women’s engagement in the church,
- women’s perception of the encouragement and support from the church leadership,
- perception of women’s gender-based limitations,
- religious attitudes regarding gender equality and the position of women in the church.

### **3. Research results**

#### *3.1. Demographics*

The survey included 102 female respondents from Skopje. The respondents were divided into different age groups: the largest part (63.5%) were women aged 30 to 49, followed by women over 50 (31%) and young women under 29 (21%). The majority of respondents (74.5%) had a higher education degree, while 24.5% had a secondary education. In terms of employment, the largest proportion of women (59.8%) worked full-time, 4% worked part-time, 7% were higher education students, 1% were school students, 6.9% were unemployed, 2% were housewives, while 7% worked as freelancers. The data presented indicates that most women led professionally active lives, which could affect both their perception of equality in the Church and their availability for engagement. When asked about their marital status, 60.8% of respondents stated they were married, 23.5% were not married, 8.8% were divorced, while widows made up 3.9% of the sample. Considering women’s overload with unpaid reproductive and domestic labour, it would be interesting for future studies to examine whether the overload of professional and private obligations affects women’s engagement in the Church and whether there is a correlation between greater engagement in church activities and equality in married life. As many as 95.1% of the women believers stated they were members of a church community, indicating a high level of inclusion.

Representation percentages of the different religious communities included in the sample:

1. Evangelical Church – 12.5%

2. Not a member – 10%
3. Evangelical Methodist Church – 10%
4. Evangelical Protestant Church “Slovo na Nadež” – 7.5%
5. Evangelical Church Aerodrom – 7.5%
6. Evangelical Protestant Church “Glasnost” – 7.5%
7. Christian Center “490” – 7.5%
8. Christian Baptist Church “Radosna vest” – 7.5%
9. Evangelical Congregational Church – 5%
10. Baptist Church – 5%
11. Evangelical Church “Soulcraft” – 2.5%
12. Crossroads Gjorche – 2.5%
13. Zajednica vo Hrom – 2.5%
14. Domašna zajednica – 2.5%
15. Ognena Planina – 2.5%
16. Božji glas – 2.5%
17. Eklesia – 2.5%
18. International Church – Skopje – 2.5%

### *3.2. Perception of belonging to one’s religious community*

The analysis of survey responses shows that most respondents lead very active religious lives, with 40.2% of women attending church several times a week, 52% of respondents regularly attending church, and no more than 1% never attending church. This data speaks to a strong presence of religious sentiment and a strong sense of belonging to one’s religious community. The strong sense of belonging to one’s religious community is confirmed by the responses indicating the extent to which the respondents felt the sense of belonging to their religious communities:

- 71.6% of respondents stated they felt the strongest sense of belonging to their religious community,

- 10.8% of respondents stated they felt a strong sense of belonging to their religious community,
- 13.7% of them responded that they felt a medium sense of belonging,
- 2.9% found that they felt a weak sense of belonging to their communities, which showed that a small percentage of women did not find support or a place for themselves in the life of their religious communities,
- 1% of respondents stated that they felt no sense of belonging whatsoever.

According to these findings, a vast majority of women believers can be concluded to feel a strong sense of belonging, while the small percentage of women who feel a medium or low sense of belonging may point to certain obstacles. These may be women who do not feel a sense of belonging to the Church as an institution, who are dissatisfied with the Church's leadership, or have personal problems that isolate them from the community. Future research should delve more deeply into the reasons behind the medium or low sense of belonging.

The most frequent factors that keep women in the community are:

- desire for spiritual engagement (although some respondents may experience certain obstacles, they nevertheless want to remain engaged in the service of God),
- church fellowship (women believers emphasise the support they receive from the community, from church support groups, and the church leadership),
- the church's plan and mission (some women believers are motivated by the particular ways or methods in which their church carries out its mission).

Such findings paint a positive picture of the role of women in Protestant communities, while providing room for improvement in terms of inclusion and support for those who feel distant from the community.

### 3.3. Women's engagement in the church

Table 1: *Women's engagement in church ministries in their community.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Yes	78	76.5	76.5	76.5
No	24	23.5	23.5	100/0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: *Women's perception of their own engagement in the religious community they belong to*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Inactive	8	7.8	7.8	7.8
Not very active	12	11.8	11.8	19.6
Moderately active	19	18.6	18.6	38.2
Active	30	29.4	29.4	67.6
Very active	33	32.4	32.4	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: *Women's activity in church ministries.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Inactive	3	2.9	2.9	2.9
Not very active	6	5.9	5.9	8.8

Moderately active	27	26.5	26.5	35.3
Active	20	19.6	19.6	54.9
Very active	46	45.1	45.1	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

According to Table 1, 76.5% of respondents are engaged in various church ministries, while 61.8% of them (see Table 2) declare themselves as very active and active. Table 3 shows that a total of 64.7% of respondents believe that women are active and very active in church ministries. This confirms the significant role of women in church activities, although they are most often engaged in traditionally “female” ministries.

The analysis of survey responses shows which ministries the respondents are engaged in within their religious communities:

- worship<sup>27</sup> (singing, music, leading worship) – the most represented category, more than 35% of respondents are part of worship teams, church choirs or participate in worship leading roles,
- working with children (Sunday school, church for children, crèche) – about 20% of respondents are engaged in educational activities for children,
- women’s ministry – part of the responses refers to the engagement of women believers in group work with women, women’s meetings, counselling activities for women and married couples,
- prayer and Bible study groups – about 15% of respondents are engaged in prayer teams and organising Bible study groups,

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<sup>27</sup> Worship refers to giving praise to God for what He has done with us or for us, and is expressed by singing spiritual songs, hymns, and praises to God and about God.

- humanitarian and social ministry (helping the poor, providing food and foster care) – 10% of respondents are engaged in activities such as caring for the elderly, the homeless, preparing meals, providing counselling and carrying out the ministry of evangelism,
- church governance (committees, organisation, administration) – 8-10% of respondents perform leadership and organisational roles, including event organisation, financial management, translation, and administrative support,
- missionary ministry (evangelism, witnessing, working in other cities) – 5-7% of respondents are engaged in extra-church activities, including missionary work and evangelism in other cities.

Table 4: *Desire for greater involvement in the activities of the church community.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Yes	50	49.0	49.0	49.0
No	52	51.0	51.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

As shown in Table 4, 51% of respondents have no desire for greater involvement in the activities of their religious community. The dominant reasons are:

- they are already sufficiently involved (several respondents stated that they are already involved in some activities such as the choir, children’s church, deaconate, etc.),
- lack of time (due to work, household duties, family or personal constraints),
- insecurities and lack of planning,
- personal dissatisfaction with the structural arrangement of the community (lack of transparency or space for women to be heard).

Respondents who expressed a desire for greater involvement in their community's activities (49%) stated the following reasons preventing them from doing so:

- lack of time (this is the answer most given, with women referring to obligations related to work, university, family and private life, or, for some, working in shifts or full time, which exhausts them),
- family or household responsibilities (caring for small children or family is a common factor, with some stating their husband or family problems as preventing them from being more active),
- professional obligations (many respondents work full time, which doesn't leave them enough time for church activities, with some stating that their profession requires complete dedication),
- personal motivation and psychological factors (some respondents are thinking about whether they should get involved and how much they would contribute at all, some feel demotivated, exhausted or are taking a break for private reasons),
- health issues (several respondents list health-related issues as an obstacle),
- community relations (some report problematic human relations, lack of transparency, or marginalisation within the community as discouraging them from more active engagement),
- financial factors (several respondents report of personal or church-related financial constraints).

Ways in which respondents could be further motivated for greater engagement include:

- participation in small groups (Bible study and discussion groups),
- organising events (conferences, lectures, seminars),
- evangelism (spreading the faith through special projects and initiatives),
- personal engagement (individual work, assistance in church activities),
- courses and learning (mentoring, pursuing spiritual maturity through discipleship),

- prayer and spiritual preparation (praying for God’s guidance before engaging in an activity),
- technical and administrative roles (inclusion of women in the church’s technical ministry, organisation and support).

The overload of women with balancing professional obligations and unpaid domestic and reproductive labour represents a major obstacle. The church community, and especially the church leadership, should therefore take note of the obstacles such as financial constraints, family issues and problematic human relations and work to eliminate them in order to increase women’s engagement.

#### *3.4. Women’s perception of the church’s encouragement and support of their engagement*

Table 1: *Church Leadership’s Support to Women’s Engagement.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
No at all	8	7.8	7.8	7.8
Low	3	2.9	2.9	10.8
Medium	9	8.8	8.8	19.6
High	12	11.8	11.8	31.4
Yes, fully	70	68.6	68.6	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Most respondents feel fully or highly supported by the church leadership in their engagement. They state that:

- the church leadership encourages them and helps them in their ministries,

- they have the freedom to implement their initiatives and to participate in various activities,
- they receive financial, logistical and emotional support,
- pastors and church leaders communicate with them, actively involving them in the church ministries,
- they feel like part of the team, and their ideas are valued.

However, 11.7% of respondents state to have only medium, low or no support at all. The reasons they give are:

- lack of incentive and encouragement (some respondents believe that more initiative is expected from them than from the leadership),
- limited access of women to leadership roles (several respondents feel that their engagement is not taken seriously and that their role is underestimated);
- lack of space and innovation (some respondents feel that their ministry must follow strictly defined rules and that they have no freedom for new ideas),
- poor contact with the church leadership (several women have expressed dissatisfaction with pastors being unavailable, i.e. communication with them being quite poor and limited),
- perception of favouritism (some respondents believe that support is not the same for everyone but depends on personal relations with the pastor).

Although most respondents believe they are supported by the church leadership in their engagement, a part of the respondents do not see the church leadership as supportive in terms of free choice and any serious validation of their engagement.

Table 2: *Communities' encouragement for women's engagement.*

Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
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No at all	7	6.9	6.9	6.9
Low	7	6.9	6.9	13.7
Medium	14	13.7	13.7	27.5
High	22	21.6	21.6	49.0
Yes, fully	52	51.0	51.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The majority of respondents (51%) feel fully encouraged by their community to engage, while 21.6% feel highly encouraged, indicating a general feeling of support from the church community of their engagement in various ministries and activities. The key positive aspects of engagement they point out are:

- active public calls by the Church to join ministries,
- opportunities for women to express themselves personally, supporting initiatives and sharing tasks, practicing teamwork,
- support provided through open calls, motivational speeches, meetings, financial and logistical assistance,
- many women feel valued and recognised because the church leadership notices their gifts and assigns them responsibilities,
- regular seminars, trainings, Bible groups that motivate them further.

However, 35.3% of respondents express only partial satisfaction, while 13.8% feel a low level of encouragement or no encouragement at all from their church community. The challenges they list are:

- lack of active calls (respondents believe that the community is not doing enough to motivate them for greater involvement),

- the predominance of physical tasks over spiritual ones (women are dissatisfied because the focus is more on cleaning and maintaining the church premises than on spiritual ministries),
- limited support for women (respondents state that they lack support to engage and feel that their efforts are not appreciated);
- rigid structures with no space for creativity (women report being forced to agree with the pastor’s strict guidelines, which can be discouraging or cause them to start losing interest).

The open-ended question “*How do you think the church leadership could support you in your engagement?*” inspired a broad array of responses, with women recognising the importance of:

- support from church leadership and the community: “*By encouraging me*”, “*The church leadership should know the believers and their gifts better and guide them towards ministries accordingly*”, “*Through mentoring support and prayer*”,
- prayers: “*Only by praying*”, “*Through prayer and encouragement*”, “*At the moment, through prayer*”,
- financial support: “*Through financial support for everyone who engages*”, “*By paying me*”, “*By leaving free space and putting themselves at disposal in terms of time and resources*”,
- acknowledging the role of women in church ministries: “*Greater interest in women’s roles in all ministries*”, “*First of all, by growing spiritually themselves and being people who first seek God’s guidance, and then acknowledge women in ministries*”,
- transparency and openness: “*Through transparency in ministries, more information and freedom of action*”, “*They are not open to new ideas for reaching people*”.

Overall, the analysis of the responses shows that women mostly feel supported and encouraged, while a part of them feel they are not getting the necessary support and

encouragement. Some of the women lacking support and encouragement are dissatisfied with the lack of freedom in choosing their engagement and lack of valuation of women's contributions.

### *3.5. Perception of limitations to women's roles in churches based on (their) gender and/or gender roles*

Table 1: *Women's involvement in decision-making processes in the Church.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
No at all	9	8.8	8.8	8.8
Low	12	11.8	11.8	20.6
Medium	15	14.7	14.7	35.3
They are involved	25	24.5	24.5	59.8
Yes, fully	41	40.2	40.2	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

When it comes to the perception of women's involvement in decision-making processes in the Church, 40.2% of women believe that women are fully involved, 24.5% that they are involved, 14.7% see the involvement of women as medium, 11.8% believe that women's involvement is low, and 8.8% that they are not involved at all. These responses show a level of involvement in decision-making processes that is significantly lower than the general sense of belonging to the church and the level of involvement in other church activities. This suggests that a certain proportion of the women surveyed do not see involvement in decision-making processes as necessary for a sense of belonging and engagement in the church community.

Table 2: *Gender-based ministry limitations.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
No, never	69	67.6	67.6	67.6
Rarely	14	13.7	13.7	81.4
Sometimes	11	10.8	10.8	92.2
Often	4	3.9	3.9	96.1
Yes, always	4	3.9	3.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

More than half of the respondents, 67.6%, claim that they have never felt limited in church ministry on account of their gender. A further 24.5% of respondents say that they experience limitations because of their gender rarely or sometimes, while 7.8% of women state that they feel these limitations always or often. In light of the other data presented, it can be concluded that a certain proportion of women does not recognise the influence of gender on the lack of involvement in decision-making processes and on the choices most commonly available to women in terms of engagement and church ministries.

Table 3: *Inability to practice gifts not attributed to women in one's community.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
Not at all	81	79.4	79.4	79.4
Low	5	4.9	4.9	84.3

Medium	7	6.9	6.9	91.2
High	3	2.9	2.9	94.1
Yes, fully	6	5.9	5.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The majority of respondents (79.4%) find that they encounter no obstacles in practicing their gifts<sup>28</sup> in their religious communities due to being women. Another 4.9% of the respondents believe that they are able to express their gifts, but with certain limitations; 6.9% believe that they use their gifts in moderation due to the practice of certain gifts being attributed to a particular gender; 2.9% believe that they are not really able to practice their gifts, while 5.9% of the respondents find that they are not able to practice them at all due to attributing the practice of certain gifts to a particular gender.

#### Qualitative analysis:

- Respondents who encounter no obstacles at all in practicing their gifts often emphasise the equality between women and men in church life. Some women replied that all gifts are supported regardless of gender.
- The responses of women who find that they are able to express their gifts, but with certain restrictions, indicate that women do have freedom, but also that certain traditions do limit their role in leadership positions.
- Respondents who practice their gifts in moderation point out that although there are no formal restrictions, in practice, women are not given the same opportunities as men. Some state that they are not allowed to preach.

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<sup>28</sup> This term refers to the gifts of the Spirit, the abilities and skills that God gives to all Christians through the Holy Spirit, enabling them to serve God and the Church. The New Testament lists nine Gifts of the Spirit, namely: the Word of Wisdom, the Word of Knowledge, the Gift of Faith, the Gifts of Healing, the Working of Miracles, the Gift of Prophecy, the Discerning of Spirits, the Gift of Speaking in Tongues, the Gift of Interpreting Tongues.

- Women who are not really able to practice their gifts or are not able to practice them at all point out that preaching and governing roles in the church are reserved for men. Some respondents say that their gifts are not recognised or supported.

Although a large number of respondents do not feel limited in the practice of their gifts, there are still areas in which they are limited. While most women feel very satisfied when it comes to their involvement in church ministries, there are also those who do not receive the same opportunities as men. Sometimes there is a discrepancy between theory and practice, as in some communities women are allowed to take on governing roles and preach, while in reality they have little to no involvement in such activities, or perform them without being formally ordained. Women mostly see no gender-based limitations, even though the ministries in which they are most often engaged are traditionally “women’s ministries” and despite recognising that the space for women’s participation in decision-making is narrow. For example, studies on the role of women in churches confirm the existence of church ministries that are traditionally intended for women. These ministries are often available to them only because of their gender, and such a practice is based on traditional cultural beliefs that reflect patriarchal attitudes.<sup>29</sup> This example shows that the ecclesiastical structure does not play a crucial role in determining which ministries are available to women. Instead, women’s opportunities in church ministries often depend on the discretion of the particular local church leadership.<sup>30</sup>

### 3.6. Religious attitudes related to gender equality and the role of women in the church

Table 1: *Women and men are created in God’s image.*

Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
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<sup>29</sup> For example, in Dragin 2002, p. 16, a priest from the Christian Protestant Church in Novi Sad, who when asked whether women were allowed to be priests in their church, replied that they were, but that there were no women priests because “we don’t think this is the way it should be”, and then when asked who “we” referred to, avoided answering.

<sup>30</sup> Anić, 2011, p. 69.

I neither agree nor disagree	2	2.0	2.0	2.0
I completely agree	100	98.0	98.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

One of the central questions in the survey is related to the theological view of the creation of woman and man in the image of God. The results show that 98% of respondents completely agree with the statement that men and women are created in the image of God, which points to the strong theological grounding and belief in the equality of men and women as God’s creatures in Protestant communities. This is a significant indicator of women’s awareness of their own value in the religious context. Only 2% of respondents state that they “neither agree nor disagree”, indicating that there are a small number of women who may not believe this claim or may feel that there are certain nuances to the way this doctrine is applied in practice.

Table 2: *Spiritual gifts belong equally to both women and men.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I neither agree nor disagree	5	4.9	4.9	4.9
I agree	3	2.9	2.9	7.8
I completely agree	94	92.2	92.2	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

A total of 92% of respondents completely agree, and 2.9% agree with the statement that spiritual gifts belong equally to women and men, which shows a high degree of belief that women possess the same spiritual capacity as men.

The remaining 4.9% of respondents replied with “I neither agree nor disagree”, indicating a dose of uncertainty or a different understanding of particular gifts or ecclesiastical positions that are traditionally assigned to men. The data show that the vast majority of Protestant women believe in the equal distribution of spiritual gifts between women and men. However, when these results are analysed in combination with the responses in other parts of the survey, it can be noted that spiritual gifts are not practiced equally by women and men, especially in governing and preaching roles and decision-making processes within the church, where certain limitations for women still exist.

Table 3: *Man and woman are created equal, but with different roles.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	1	1.0	1.0	1.0
I neither agree nor disagree	6	5.9	5.9	6.9
I agree	12	11.8	11.8	18.6
I completely agree	83	81.4	81.4	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

A total of 81.4% of respondents completely agree, and 11.8% of women believers agree with the statement that man and woman are created equal but with different roles. This shows that the vast majority believe in the complementarity of the sexes, meaning that women and men have equal value but different functions within the family and church. A further 5.9% of women replied

with “I neither agree nor disagree”, which may indicate a certain insecurity or lack of a firm stance, while 1% (one respondent) stated to completely agree, which could mean that she either did not believe in equality or believed that roles should not be predetermined by gender, but by the individual’s abilities.

These data indicate that the vast majority of Protestant women believers in North Macedonia accept the model of gender complementarity, which is widespread in many Protestant communities and often associated with traditional views of male authority.

Table 4: *A woman is called to submit to a man’s authority.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	11	10.8	10.8	10.8
I disagree	5	4.9	4.9	15.7
I neither agree nor disagree	20	19.6	19.6	35.3
I agree	13	12.7	12.7	48.0
I completely agree	53	52.0	52.0	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

A total of 52% of respondents completely agree, and 12.7% agree with the statement that a woman is called to submit to a man’s authority, which shows that 64.7% of the women accept the traditional idea of women’s subordination and the model of gender complementarity, within which man is considered the spiritual authority and head of the family.

A further 19.6% of women responded with “I neither agree nor disagree”, indicating a certain insecurity or neutrality, perhaps due to wavering between traditional attitudes and gender equality. A total of 15.7% of women (among which 4.9% disagree, and 10.8% completely disagree) reject

the idea of women's subordination to the authority of men. The results show that Protestant communities of North Macedonia are still dominated by traditional gender role attitudes.

Table 5: *More than anything else, a woman is called to be a man's life partner and a mother.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	14	13.7	13.7	13.7
I disagree	7	6.9	6.9	20.6
I neither agree nor disagree	23	22.5	22.5	43.1
I agree	22	21.6	21.6	64.7
I completely agree	36	35.3	35.3	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

A total of 35,3% of respondents completely agree with the statement that, more than anything else, a woman is called to be a man's life partner and a mother. Another 21.6% of respondents agree with this, meaning that a total of 56.9% of women support the traditional view according to which a woman is primarily called to be a wife and mother. Another 22.5% responded with "I neither agree nor disagree", which shows uncertainty or balancing between traditional and contemporary approaches to women's roles. A total of 20.6% of women (among which 6.9% disagree and 13.7% completely disagree) reject the idea that the roles of partner and mother are women's primary roles. Such results confirm the dominance of traditional attitudes and understandings of the role of women in Protestant communities of North Macedonia.

Table 6: *The most important role for women is motherhood.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	17	16.7	16.7	16.7
I disagree	13	12.7	12.7	29.4
I neither agree nor disagree	26	25.5	25.5	54.9
I agree	16	15.7	15.7	70.6
I completely agree	30	29.4	29.4	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The results show that a total of 45.1% (29.4%+15.7%) of women believe that motherhood is the most important role for women, confirming that almost half of the respondents see the traditional role of motherhood as a key aspect of women's identity. A significant proportion of women neither agree nor disagree (25.5%), while a total of 29.4% reject motherhood as the most important role. This suggests that, despite the dominant traditional view of motherhood, a significant proportion of respondents still believe that women can have other equally important roles.

Table 7: *Being first in creation gives Adam (man) a greater value than Eve (woman).*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	73	71.6	71.6	71.6
I disagree	7	6.9	6.9	78.4

I neither agree nor disagree	13	12.7	12.7	91.2
I agree	2	2.0	2.0	93.1
I completely agree	7	6.9	6.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

A total of 78.5% of respondents reject the claim that men, due to being first in creation, have a greater value than women. A neutral position is taken by 12.7% of the respondents, while 8.9% (2.0% + 6.9%) agree with this statement. These results clearly demonstrate that the majority of respondents do not accept a hierarchical value order based on the order in God's creation. Such attitudes are possibly a result of Protestant theology that generally advocates the equality of women and men in creation, although there is certainly a social impact through the growing awareness of gender equality, which makes even women believers tend to apply such perspectives.

Table 8: *The role of religious community leaders is intended for men alone.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	40	39.2	39.2	39.2
I disagree	9	8.8	8.8	48.0
I neither agree nor disagree	25	24.5	24.5	72.5
I agree	12	11.8	11.8	84.3
I completely agree	16	15.7	15.7	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The results show that 48% of respondents do not support the claim that church leadership is reserved for men alone. While 11.8% express their agreement, 24.5% take a neutral position, and 15.7% of respondents completely agree that leadership is intended for men alone. These data are indicative of the general support for equality in governing roles, but also of the presence of traditional attitudes in some communities.

The reasons for the differing views on this issue are manifold. Some Protestant communities support the ordination (through the laying-on of hands) of women as pastors, while others restrict them in this role based on interpretations of the Bible. Similarly, if women are more present in governing positions in some communities, their female members are more likely to have a positive attitude towards female leadership. However, although Protestant churches in North Macedonia are relatively open when it comes to the role of women, the perception of the church leadership may be impacted by traditional attitudes within the society.

Table 9: *Men possess leadership qualities, while women do not.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	81	79.4	79.4	79.4
I disagree	4	3.9	3.9	83.3
I neither agree nor disagree	7	6.9	6.9	90.2
I agree	5	4.9	4.9	95.1
I completely agree	5	4.9	4.9	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The majority of respondents (83.3%) disagree with the statement that men, unlike women, possess leadership skills. A small proportion of respondents (6.9%) take a neutral stance, while

4.9% believe that men are the ones with leadership skills. This confirms that many Protestant women recognise and believe in their own leadership capacities.

Traditional theological teachings in some Protestant churches prescribe leading roles to men and support roles to women, which may be one of the reasons why some respondents share such a view. In some modern Protestant communities, on the other hand, women are increasingly taking on leadership roles, which can certainly impact the community members' attitudes. A significant role in shaping attitudes towards women in leadership positions is certainly played by the wider social context.

Table 10: *Women are helpers in religious communities.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	24	23.5	23.5	23.5
I disagree	8	7.8	7.8	31.4
I neither agree nor disagree	21	20.6	20.6	52.0
I agree	11	10.8	10.8	62.7
I completely agree	38	37.3	37.3	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The results show that 37.3% of respondents completely agree that women have the role of helpers, while another 10.8% express their agreement. Thus, a total of 48.1% of respondents support this statement, 20.6% take a neutral position, while 31.3% disagree with the idea that women's role in church communities is that of helpers alone. These data show a division in

attitudes among Protestant communities, where, despite efforts to deconstruct stereotypes, the traditional perception of women's roles is still quite present.

This question reveals a clear division of views and attitudes among Protestant believers in North Macedonia. Although significant steps have been taken towards deconstructing gender-stereotyped roles and establishing gender equality, in some communities, the traditional understanding of women as helpers and the ones who serve is still perpetuated.

Table 11: *Women may possess the spiritual gift of preaching and teaching, and of leading a religious community.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	5	4.9	4.9	4.9
I disagree	3	2.9	2.9	7.8
I neither agree nor disagree	9	8.8	8.8	16.7
I agree	16	15.7	15.7	32.4
I completely agree	69	67.6	67.6	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

Table 11 shows that 67.6% of respondents completely agree with the idea that women can possess the spiritual gifts of preaching, teaching, and leading a religious community, while another 15.7% also state they agree. A neutral position is taken by 8.8%, while 7.8% of respondents find that women should not take on these roles.

The theological teachings of some Protestant denominations allow women to be pastors, preachers and church community leaders, which explains why a large proportion of respondents

support the idea of female spiritual leadership. As previous parts of the survey have shown, in some communities, women lead Bible study groups, participate in teaching, and organise spiritual activities, which reinforces such a perception of their role.

Table 12: *Women should be given more encouragement/support to pursue theological education.*

	Frequency	Percentage	Valid percentage	Cumulative percentage
I completely disagree	5	4.9	4.9	4.9
I disagree	2	2.0	2.0	6.9
I neither agree nor disagree	9	8.8	8.8	15.7
I agree	14	13.7	13.7	29.4
I completely agree	72	70.6	70.6	100.0
Total	102	100.0	100.0	

The analysis of the responses shows that 70.6% of respondents completely agree that women should be more encouraged to pursue theological education, while an additional 13.7% agree with this statement. A neutral position is taken by 8.8%, whereas 6.9% of respondents do not see the need for additional encouragement of women to seek theological education. Such results illustrate a strong support and recognised need for theological education as a crucial factor for a more active participation of women in church activities – such as in the roles of pastoral counsellors, Bible group leaders, or teachers.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study conducted among Protestant women believers in Skopje provides an insight into the views on the role of women in the church and society. The results show that while traditional views of motherhood as a woman's primary role continue to have significant support (45.1%), a considerable proportion of female respondents embrace more contemporary roles for women in church, including preaching (66.6%), pastoral duties (57.8%), and church leadership (73.6%). These findings illustrate a shift towards greater gender equality within Protestant communities, while at the same time marking the presence of a resistance that may be brought about by the traditional interpretations of religious texts or cultural norms. The study also highlights the need for further efforts towards removing the barriers that prevent women from fully participating in church ministries and leadership roles. Denominational differences and church leadership attitudes play a central role in shaping these perceptions and should be explored in future studies.

Based on the results of the survey, several suggestions can be made to improve the position and role of women in church communities and increase their engagement and the support they receive from church leadership. The first would be providing support to women who seek to be part of spiritual leadership. Women need to be able to participate in decision-making processes and in leading ministries. This means that women should be encouraged to lead Bible studies, seminars, and workshops for all community members and should be included in church committees and governance teams. There is also a need for a clearer and more open discussion on the possibility of women preaching, depending on the theological principles of individual communities. Such measures could change the perception of women's marginalisation and invisibility and increase their role in shaping the spiritual life of the entire community.

Furthermore, it is necessary for women's gifts to be recognised and for women to be encouraged to exercise them in the church's work. Organising one-on-one meetings or surveys in which women could share their gifts, interests, and callings to serve would contribute to this end. Applying a mentoring approach, with more experienced members encouraging women to use their potential, is extremely important. Public recognition of one's efforts and giving praise can also serve as motivation for greater involvement in church ministries, making women feel valued within the community.

Women with family and work responsibilities require flexibility when it comes to their engagement in the church, which could include creating ministry opportunities in harmony with women's lifestyles and responsibilities. It is recommended for women with children to temporarily be included in flexible, short-term projects instead of ministries that require a more active commitment. Also, women with children should be encouraged to participate in ministries in which they can engage together with their children.

Better communication and transparency in the work of church leadership would contribute to creating an environment in which women feel heard and included in decision-making. This includes holding regular meetings where women believers could present their proposals and ideas, working towards greater transparency in decision-making processes for all members, and forming women's advisory teams that would communicate proposals and problems to the church leadership. This could reduce the sense of exclusion from key decision-making processes.

To provide more support to women who want to join church ministries, it would be advisable to organise seminars, workshops, and trainings to develop leadership skills, such as public speaking and spiritual leadership. Providing financial and logistical support to women who want to start new initiatives is also crucial.

Creating a church culture of reciprocity and support among the faithful, where women and men provide mutual support to each other in ministries, would contribute to a more active and purposeful engagement of women in churches. This entails, first and foremost, encouraging men to support women in their ecclesial engagement, regardless of traditional gender roles. Organising joint initiatives in which women and men would work side by side, recognising gifts and expressing gratitude for the efforts of all community members, could help to reduce traditional barriers and increase the sense of fellowship and community.

This paper represents an initial step in studying the role of women in Protestant communities in Skopje. The study showed that there is significant support for women to take on leadership roles, but also obstacles that need to be overcome. Future research should focus on a more in-depth analysis of denominational differences and the impact of church leadership on attitudes regarding gender equality.

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