

With funding from
 Austrian
Development
Cooperation



Gender Budget Watchdog Network
for a gender equal region

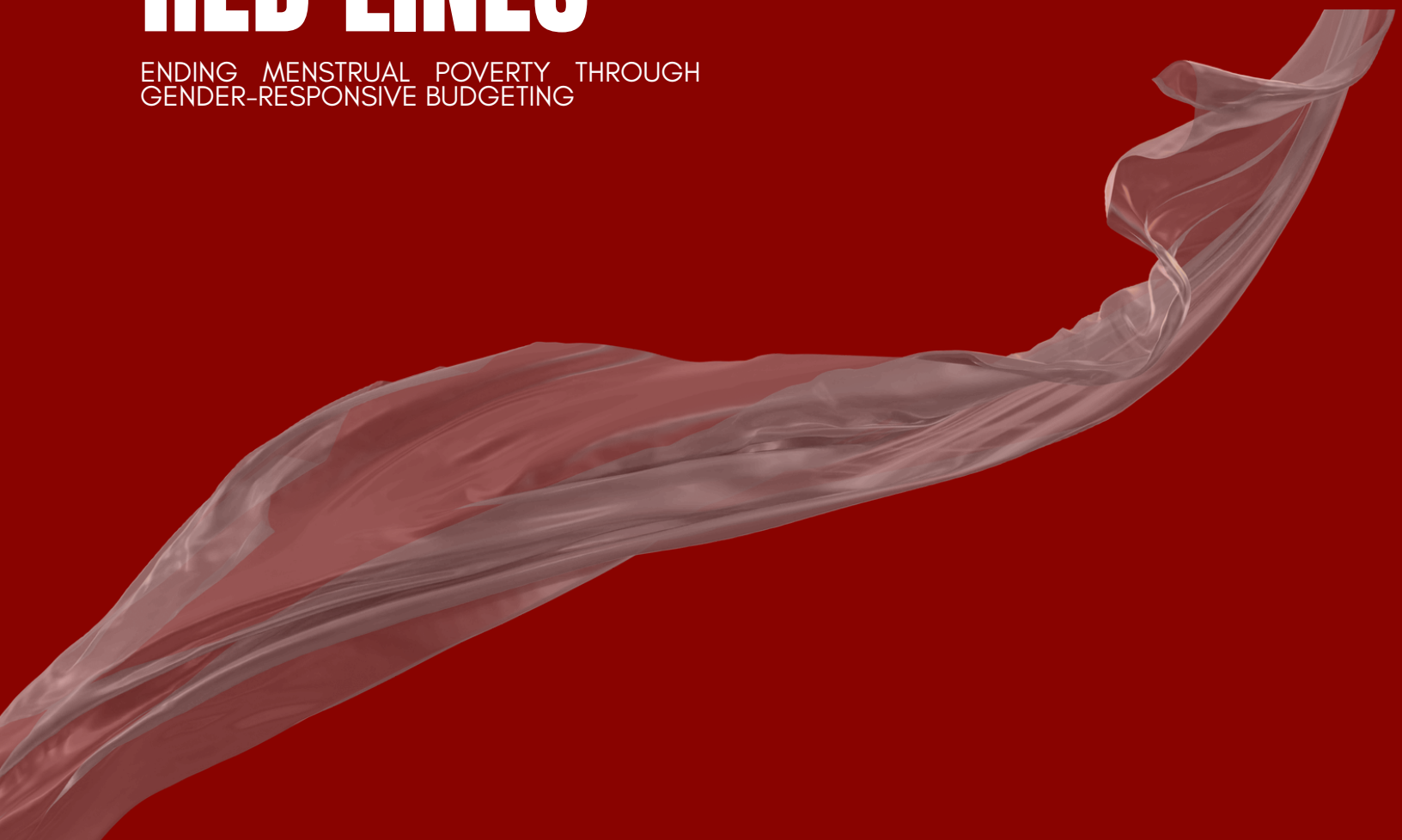


Sweden
Sverige

COMMUNITY SESSION

BUDGET RED LINES

ENDING MENSTRUAL POVERTY THROUGH
GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING



Introduction

The May 2025 community session titled Budget Red Lines brought together civil society representatives, activists, policy experts, and local government officials from across the Western Balkans. The session focused on the urgent need to improve inclusivity and gender responsiveness in public budgeting processes, with special attention to addressing menstrual poverty—a persistent but underrecognized challenge affecting women and marginalized groups in the region.

Held shortly after Menstrual Hygiene Day, the session built on ongoing advocacy efforts by fostering dialogue around budget transparency, participatory mechanisms, and systemic barriers that hinder equitable access to public services and resources. It provided a platform to share experiences, highlight challenges, and explore solutions for strengthening community engagement in budgeting through a gender-responsive lens.

Key Highlight

The discussions revealed that menstrual poverty is deeply rooted in structural inequalities involving stigma, lack of education, and inadequate political prioritization. Menstrual health remains largely invisible in public budgets, resulting in scarce or absent funding for menstrual hygiene products and education.

Research data from Montenegro, Kosovo, Serbia, and North Macedonia confirms these gaps. For example, in Kosovo, nearly 40% of women in low-income households report challenges accessing menstrual hygiene products. Serbia and North Macedonia's official budgets rarely earmark funds for menstrual health despite existing gender budgeting frameworks. Montenegro faces similar shortcomings, with health budgets not reflecting menstrual hygiene needs adequately.

The session also emphasized the ongoing exclusion of marginalized groups, especially persons with disabilities and ethnic minorities, from meaningful participation in budget consultations. Accessibility barriers, insufficient targeted outreach, and limited representation result in policies and budgets that overlook diverse community needs.

Civil society organizations (CSOs) play a crucial role in mobilizing marginalized groups, facilitating consultations, and advocating for inclusive and gender-responsive budgeting. However, institutionalizing participatory mechanisms and ensuring government accountability remain significant challenges.

Digital activism and social media have emerged as vital tools for breaking menstrual taboos and raising awareness, particularly among youth and feminist circles. Yet, translating digital engagement into sustained policy change requires stronger collaboration among CSOs, decision-makers, and community representatives.

Ultimately, addressing menstrual poverty requires dismantling systemic barriers, enhancing dignity and health rights, and integrating menstrual equity into broader gender-responsive budgeting frameworks—not merely distributing products.

Conclusion

The Budget Red Lines session highlighted critical deficiencies in inclusive and gender-responsive budgeting in the Western Balkans. Menstrual poverty is a clear indicator of broader systemic inequities that persist in access to health and social services.

To advance equity, governments must explicitly incorporate menstrual health into budget frameworks with dedicated, adequate financing. This should be accompanied by legal and institutional reforms that ensure meaningful participation of marginalized groups, particularly persons with disabilities and minorities, in budget planning and monitoring.

Civil society remains essential for advocacy and community mobilization, but sustainable change depends on embedding participatory and gender-responsive budgeting within government practices and accountability mechanisms.

Stronger partnerships between citizens, CSOs, and decision-makers are necessary to overcome structural barriers and translate commitments into tangible improvements in people's lives across the region.