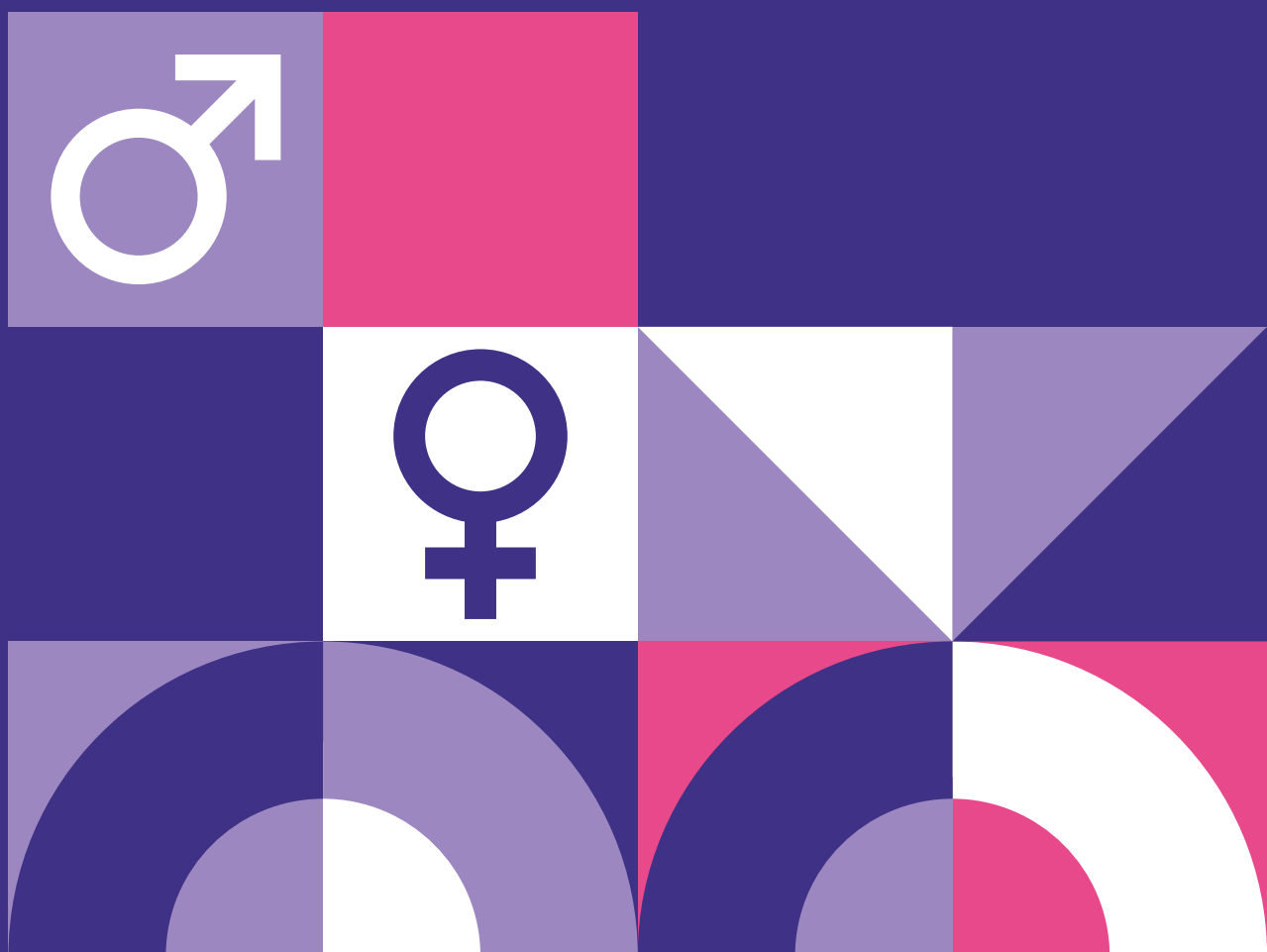




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BIAS AT THE DOORSTEP: UNVEILING DISCRIMINATION THROUGH LABOUR MARKET SITUATION TESTING

Report on Situation Testing on Discrimination
in the Employment Process



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Kosovar Gender Studies Center (KGSC) www.kgscenter.net has been contributing to gender mainstreaming since 2002 and continuously makes efforts to achieve gender equality in Kosovo. It has been pioneering changes to the discriminatory system, social norms, and double standards, and is very active in monitoring public institutions. KGSC's mission is to integrate gender-sensitive analysis, programs, and policies in all sectors of Kosovar society by increasing gender awareness and focus on gender issues, developing gender studies, and ensuring the inclusion of gender-sensitive policies through research, policy development, advocacy, and lobbying.

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study applies **situation testing** to examine discriminatory practices during the earliest stages of recruitment in Kosovo's labour market. Designed to document how employers treat matched applicants who differ only by a single protected characteristic such as **gender, ethnicity, or sexual orientation/gender identity (SOGI)**, the study contributes the first real-time evidence of exclusion in the hiring process. Unlike traditional complaint-based monitoring, which captures only cases that increase into formal disputes, situation testing reveals what usually remains invisible: the decisions, behaviours, and micro-interactions that shape opportunities long before an employment relationship is formed.

The research was implemented between **13 and 30 November**, covering **18 companies** (16 low-competition and 2 medium-competition vacancies) and **25 job positions** across hospitality, logistics, administration, and cleaning services. A total of **eight male SOGI profiles, six female SOGI profiles, five gender-based profiles, and five ethnicity-based profiles** were deployed, with two additional ethnicity rounds in medium-scale companies. The sampling was constructed from publicly available vacancies on kosovajob.com, portalpune.com, and kastori.net, restricted to positions whose application processes allowed controlled submissions via e-mail or online platforms. Higher-level professional roles were excluded to preserve methodological integrity, as refusals based on genuine expertise requirements would not allow clear attribution to discriminatory behaviour.

The findings show **early patterns of differential treatment**, even within the small scope of this pilot. Roma women faced some barriers in interviews, including repeated questioning of their education, emphasis on transportation difficulties, and lower salary offers. In one illustrative case, a Roma woman, who was more qualified than the non-Roma tester, was not offered the position and was directed toward a location outside Prishtina. In contrast, the less-qualified non-Roma woman was immediately offered a job in the city centre with no concerns raised.

SOGI-based differential treatment emerged primarily among male applicants. Heterosexual men received quicker and more concrete job offers, while gay men participated in longer interviews that often failed to lead to comparable opportunities. Among women, differential treatment was less visible but appeared linked to **gender expression** rather than sexual orientation alone; lesbian applicants presenting traditionally feminine attributes experienced interviews similar to heterosexual women, suggesting the role of stereotyping in shaping employer perceptions.

Gender-based disparities were also evident. Male candidates were advised toward higher-paid or more responsible roles, whereas women were directed toward lower-paid or lower-status positions. In one testing situation, the male tester was offered a higher salary and more favorable terms, while the female tester was asked intrusive questions unrelated to job performance, such as whether her family would "allow" her to work.

Beyond the study's objectives, it uncovered **structural and procedural inconsistencies** in recruitment processes. Many companies did not respond to any applications; those

that did rarely used the official e-mail channel through which applications were submitted. Communication often proceeded through direct phone calls or mobile messages (Viber or WhatsApp), revealing informal practices that undermine transparency and reinforce subjective decision-making. Once contact was initiated, employers tended to move quickly toward interviews and decisions, indicating an absence of standardized procedures.

Taken together, the findings indicate that **Kosovo's recruitment environment is shaped by discretionary behaviour**, inconsistent communication practices, and well established stereotypes. Those factors disproportionately disadvantage Roma applicants, LGBTIQ+ applicants, and women. While the sample is limited, and the study does not support robust statistical claims, the behavioural patterns identified are clear enough to justify institutional action and further research.

The report recommends targeted measures for **government institutions**, including strengthening enforcement of the Law on Protection from Discrimination and clarifying obligations regarding equal treatment in hiring; for the **Ombudsperson**, issuing interpretative guidance and undertaking thematic investigations; for the **private sector**, adopting structured, transparent, and discrimination-free recruitment procedures; and for **civil society and media**, expanding monitoring, reporting, and awareness-raising activities. A follow-up testing cycle with a larger sample, higher-competition vacancies, and expanded geographic coverage is recommended within the next 12 months.

Finally, the study acknowledges limitations arising from its **restricted geographic scope**, **short fieldwork period**, and **small team of six testers**, which constrained the range of positions and sectors that could be tested. Despite these constraints, the findings offer a rare empirical insight into how discrimination materializes at the first gateway of employment and demonstrate the value of situation testing as a tool for building evidence-based policy reform.

2. INTRODUCTION

Situation testing is an empirical method designed to document discrimination as it occurs in real time during the hiring process. What an employer claims in internal policies or public statements often does not align with the way applicants are treated at the first point of contact. Situation testing replicates the job application process itself, creating standardized candidates who are identical in qualifications, skills, experience, and motivation, but differ only by a single protected characteristic such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender identity. That single variable is the pivot around which discriminatory treatment becomes visible.

The relevance of this method becomes more important in environments where discrimination is normalized or disguised within formal compliance frameworks. In Kosovo, institutional reports from both domestic and international bodies often describe discrimination as a “perception” problem rather than a documented reality. Introducing the Situation testing in such environments eliminates that ambiguity by producing evidence that can be observed, analyzed, and carefully challenged.

In a small labor market like Kosovo’s, where informal networks, political patronage, and cultural stereotypes often dictate access to employment, the use of situation testing offers a rare analytical value. It measures not only formal treatment but also behavioral patterns and entry barriers that never appear in legal texts but dominate daily interactions.

Using matched-pairs methodology in this study arises from the invisibility of discrimination in the earliest stages of recruitment. Unlike discriminatory dismissal or workplace harassment, which at least leave a procedural trace, the screening of applicants is mostly unknown, undocumented, and shaped by subjective judgments that rarely become visible to oversight bodies. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) norms, discrimination in hiring commonly operates through indirect and non-transparent practices rather than explicit exclusion¹. In such environments, conventional monitoring tools such as complaints, surveys, administrative data, capture almost nothing of the underlying reality because the discriminatory decision happens before there is any record to contest.

Kosovo’s constitutional and legislative framework sets an ambitious standard for equality in employment, but their implementation “delays” when tested against real labour-market behavior. This gap between legal aspiration and practical enforcement is consistently highlighted in the *EC Kosovo* 2024 Report*. According to the report, women and persons from non-majority communities continue to face serious obstacles in accessing employment².

The EC* Kosovo report repeatedly stress that although the legal framework for non-discrimination is broadly in place in Kosovo, implementation remains weak.

¹ ILO, Equality at Work Global Report, 2021, <https://www.ilo.org>

² EC Kosovo* Report, 2024: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2024_en

Institutions tasked with enforcing equality lack the capacity to ensure systematic and effective enforcement³. Also, it notes that efforts to address discrimination in employment remain limited, particularly in hiring, promotion, and pay, and that institutional gaps continue to hinder the consistent identification and handling of such cases⁴.

More targeted evidence was provided by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA). According to FRA's 2020 survey, LGBTI people face barriers in employment access, including at early hiring stages⁵. FRA's research on Roma communities similarly shows that Roma face widespread discrimination when looking for work, with many excluded from employment opportunities long before formal hiring procedures begin⁶.

Domestic institutions confirm this international picture. The Ombudsperson Institution's Annual Report 2022 underscores that discrimination in employment remains difficult to address in practice, largely due to persistent evidentiary barriers and systemic weaknesses in enforcement. Although the legal framework foresees a reversed burden of proof in discrimination cases, the Ombudsperson notes that courts often continue to demand extensive evidence from the victim, contrary to the law's intent. As a result, many discrimination complaints do not progress beyond the initial review stage⁷.

Researches from the civil society organizations further exposes the structural character of this exclusion. The Kosovo Women's Network research indicates that women in Kosovo frequently attribute their exclusion from job opportunities not to a lack of qualifications, but to discriminatory assumptions about their family responsibilities and flexibility, including during application and interview processes⁸. KGSC's research indicates that Roma women in Kosovo face triple discrimination, as women, as members of Roma communities, and as persons in socio-economically marginalised positions, and that these combined disadvantages severely limit their access to formal recruitment and labour-market services⁹.

This research is designed and implemented as a **pilot study**, meaning its value extends beyond the findings alone. It will function as a practical test of the methodological, logistical, and ethical components of situation testing in the Kosovo context. The lessons learned from tester recruitment, implementation challenges, and employer responsiveness will lay the groundwork for refining future studies, expanding the scope of testing, and strengthening precision.

³ EC Kosovo* Report, 2022: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2022_en

⁴ EC Kosovo* Report, 2024: https://enlargement.ec.europa.eu/kosovo-report-2024_en

⁵ FRA, 2020: <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2020/eu-lgbti-survey-results>

⁶ Roma survey 2021 , Technical report, Publications Office of the European Union, 2023, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2811/522602>

⁷ OIK, 2023: <https://oik-rks.org/>

⁸ KWN, 2022: <https://womensnetwork.org>

⁹ KGSC, 2023: <https://kgscenter.net>

3. LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Kosovo's equality framework is embedded in a constitutional architecture that expresses formal commitments to non-discrimination, including at the point of entry into employment. *The Constitution of Kosovo* prohibits discrimination on grounds such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity, among others, and affirms equality before the law as a foundational principle¹⁰. This constitutional guarantee is operationalized through the *Law on Protection from Discrimination (Law No. 05/L-021)*, which very broadly defines discrimination and prohibits both direct and indirect discriminatory treatment in employment¹¹. *The Labour Law (Law No. 03/L-212)* complements this framework by requiring employers to ensure fairness, objectivity, and equality of opportunity during hiring processes. Furthermore, the *Law on Gender Equality (05/L-020)* obliges all public institutions and employers to ensure equal opportunities for women and men in access to employment, vocational training and career advancement, and to apply gender-mainstreaming and affirmative measures where necessary. These provisions establish a legal expectation that access to employment must be based on merit, not identity.

Kosovo's commitments are further shaped by international human rights instruments that it has incorporated through its constitutional framework. Under CEDAW, states parties commit to take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women in employment, ensuring equal access to job opportunities, promotion, vocational training, equal pay, and safe working conditions, and to address structural obstacles, including traditional stereotypes and economic discrimination, that hinder women's full participation in the workforce¹².

This legal framework is supported by a network of institutions with distinct mandates. The Ombudsperson Institution of Kosovo (OIK) serves as the principal national body for investigating allegations of discrimination and for monitoring and promoting the implementation of anti-discrimination legislation¹³.

The Labour Inspectorate constitutes an additional enforcement mechanism, but its mandate is primarily limited to disputes arising within existing employment relationships. Its competencies focus on monitoring compliance with labour contracts, inspecting workplace conditions, and enforcing occupational health and safety standards. As a result, its authority generally does not extend to recruitment-stage discrimination, leaving a significant oversight gap at the point where many discriminatory practices first occur.

The Agency for Gender Equality (AGE) plays a central role in Kosovo's equality architecture by coordinating cross-institutional gender mainstreaming processes and monitoring progress through gender equality indicators. While the AGE does not possess investigatory or enforcement powers, its mandate to analyse policies and advise public institutions is significantly enhanced when supported by empirical evidence

¹⁰ Constitution of Kosovo, Article 24, <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=3702>

¹¹ Law on Protection from Discrimination, Article 1, Article 2: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=10924>

¹² <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm>

¹³ Official Gazette of Kosovo: <https://gzk.rks-gov.net/ActDetail.aspx?ActID=10922&langid=2>

Civil-society organizations represent an additional layer of informal monitoring. Women's organizations, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian organizations, and LGBTQI+ organizations regularly document experiences of discrimination through interviews, legal-aid cases, and community-based outreach. However, these methods rely on subjective reporting and cannot capture discriminatory behaviour in real time.

Within this legal and institutional environment, situation testing emerges as a method that not only complies with Kosovo's legal standards but also enhances institutions' capacity to detect practices that would otherwise remain invisible. In Kosovo's context, matched-pairs testing aligns with the principle of *objective justification* embedded in the Law on Protection from Discrimination, it reveals whether differences in employer behaviour are based in legitimate professional criteria or on protected characteristics.



4. METHODOLOGY

Situation testing, including matched-pair testing, allows researchers to isolate discriminatory behaviour by constructing controlled scenarios in which fictional but realistic applicants differ only in one protected characteristic. In contexts such as Kosovo, where institutional reporting remains incomplete, employer practices are non-transparent, and formal complaints represent only a fraction of actual experiences, this approach creates a unique evidentiary window into exclusion mechanisms that remain otherwise invisible. The protocols, scenarios, and training tools used in this study draw directly from the technical framework developed throughout the study, including the scenario handbook, tester CV packages, protocols for field interactions, and training materials.

4.1 Structure of Matched-Pair and Multi-Tier Testing

The core of the methodology is the matched-pair approach, whereby two or more applicants with equivalent qualifications apply for the same position, differing only with the protected characteristic under examination. This format enables the isolation of identity-based treatment from merit-based selection. To strengthen test reliability, this study introduces a multi-tier design with three qualification levels: underqualified (UQ), qualified (Q), and overqualified (OQ). This approach, developed through the methodology package and scenario handbook, allows the researchers to test employer selectivity under different conditions. For example, an overqualified Roma woman receiving no response, while a qualified Albanian woman is shortlisted, becomes a strong analytical signal of discriminatory filtering. Similarly, a marginally qualified control applicant being favoured over a more qualified LGBTIQ+ applicant would challenge the idea that employers are merit-driven.

4.2 Protected Characteristics and Operationalisation in Test Profiles

The study focuses on three primary protected characteristics: gender, ethnicity (Roma, Ashkali, Egyptian), and sexual orientation/gender identity (SOGI). Operationalising these characteristics required precision. Ethnicity was indicated not through explicit statements but through i.e. Roma neighbourhood addresses and/or engagement in Roma civil society activities in the “experience” sections of CVs. Gender differences were represented through names and pronouns. SOGI indicators were incorporated through “soft” signals, such as volunteering in LGBTIQ+ activities, participating in equality-awareness workshops, or involvement in Pride-related cultural events. No explicit outing or identity disclosure was used.

4.3 Scenario Development: CVs, Cover Letters, Personal Profiles, and Qualification Tiers

Scenario development followed a detailed, multi-stage process grounded in the tools and templates included in the methodology package, particularly the expected scenario protocols and CV sets.

Each tester profile, across gender, ethnicity, and SOGI axes, was built using the same

structural template: personal information, professional summary, work experience, education, skills, and voluntary engagement. The differentiation among profiles reflected only the protected variable being tested and the assigned qualification tier. The writing style, formatting, grammar, and tone were standardised across applicants.

Cover letters were personalised only to the extent necessary to avoid detection, for example by referring to the specific vacancy or sector, but never in ways that could alter the core alignment between the applications.

Qualification tiers were introduced systematically. Overqualified profiles included stronger work histories or advanced education/training. Qualified profiles contained solid but unremarkable experience aligned with job requirements. Underqualified profiles retained minimal or entry-level experience.

4.4 Sampling Strategy and Selection of Vacancies

The sampling strategy was shaped simultaneously by methodological considerations and the study's practical constraints. Although the ideal scenario for situation testing would be the equal distribution of vacancies across low, medium, and high competition categories, the realities of the fieldwork period and available resources necessitated a more focused approach. As a result, the study concentrated primarily on low-competition vacancies, and with a smaller portion of tests conducted in moderate-competition environments.

High-competition vacancies, particularly those that routinely attract 50 or more applicants, were not included, as they require a significantly longer implementation window to detect meaningful patterns and to avoid premature or inconclusive interpretations.

High-competition testing is very demanding. Best practices indicate that this market requires extended observation windows of 6 - 8 weeks, accompanied by multi-tier tester rotations and staggered application waves. For this pilot study, the available fieldwork period was too compressed to apply the full three-tier methodology consistently, reinforcing the need to prioritise vacancies where discrimination could be reliably detected.

Despite these limitations, the selection process remained grounded in principles of representativeness and analytical value. Vacancies were chosen across diverse sectors in Pristina, including hospitality, customer service, administration, and warehousing, to ensure exposure to a range of employer types and recruitment practices. Moderate-competition vacancies were included strategically to test whether patterns identified in low-competition settings persisted when the applicant pool expanded.

The geographical scope was restricted to Pristina, reflecting both the budgetary framework and the structural centralisation of Kosovo's labour market. Pristina remains the economic core of the country, hosting the majority of formal-sector businesses and service providers. While this limitation narrows the territorial representation of findings, it ensures consistency in recruitment channels and employer practices, thereby strengthening validity.

4.5 Data Collection Tools: Logs, Coding Schemes, and Tracking Systems

Data collection was standardised through detailed logs and refusal scripts, reflecting the tools provided in the annex package. For each vacancy, testers recorded submission times, email content, response tone, response timing, interview invitations, employer follow-up, and any unexpected interactions such as requests for trial work. Drawing on best practices in experimental discrimination research, logs included fields for neutral observations, subjective impressions, and contextual notes.

Tone analysis, an increasingly important dimension of equality research, was conducted using descriptive coding, assessing warmth, formality, abruptness, and any micro-aggressive phrasing.

Tracking spreadsheets were used to ensure randomised application order, consistent timing across testers, and an approximately equal distribution of tests across sectors. These instruments were essential safeguards against procedural inconsistencies that could compromise validity.

4.6 Differential Protocols for Small, Medium, and High Application-Rate Vacancies

The application of differentiated testing protocols, small, medium, and high competition, was central to the design of the methodology. Yet, the practical realities of the study required an adapted approach to their implementation. While the overall methodology anticipates a full three-tier testing structure for high application-rate vacancies, this pilot study operated under a condensed timeline and a limited testing budget, which necessarily shaped how the protocols were applied in practice.

Small application-rate vacancies, formed the core of the fieldwork. These positions allowed for the most precise application of the matched-pair method: two comparable candidates applying within the same timeframe and under tightly controlled conditions. The one-round testing protocol, as established in the methodology documentation and fieldwork manuals, ensured consistency with minimal logistical strain.

Medium competition vacancies were included more selectively. The study used a two-round approach for these positions, allowing for comparison of employer responses across both time-separated and tier-separated application waves. This protocol is particularly important for detecting patterns that may emerge only after initial filtering. Because the pilot phase operated under time pressure, only a limited number of medium competition vacancies could be tested in this manner.

4.7 Procedures for Phone Calls, Emails, Interviews, and Unexpected Requests

Testers were trained to follow the communication scripts contained in the training manual by ensuring consistency in tone, formality, and response times. Phone calls required neutral accents, uniform greeting scripts, and standardised responses to potential interview questions. Email communication mirrored the cover letter tone, avoiding personal enrichment that could compromise the comparison process.

In cases where employers requested immediate trial work, a common informal practice

in Kosovo's hospitality and retail sectors, testers followed the protocol requiring polite refusal without revealing the nature of the study. The refusal script, included in the training manual and protocols, prevented testers from entering actual employment relationships, which would compromise ethical integrity and could expose them to liability. Every instance of such a request must be logged as a potential indicator of differential expectations, particularly when made to only one of the matched testers.

4.8 Ethical Safeguards: Anonymity, Data Protection, Non-Harm, and Public Interest

The study is bound to strict ethical standards aligned with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Law on Personal Data Protection of Kosovo, and international research ethics norms. All employer identities remain anonymised unless a legal obligation arises. Testers were instructed to maintain confidentiality and avoid any behaviour that could expose employers, themselves, or the research team to risk.

No tester engaged in actual work, unpaid probation, or activities that would constitute entering into a labour contract. All data was anonymised at the point of recording. The methodology was designed to minimise deception while recognising that covert testing remains justified under public interest mandates.

5. SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

The sampling process itself followed a logic of opportunities and constraints. All companies included in the study were identified through online job vacancy platforms: kosovajob.com, portalpune.com, and kastori.net. Because the fieldwork period was short, from 13 November to 30 November (17 days, including weekends), the sample reflects all vacancies published within that window that met the methodological criteria. Only positions with deadlines falling within this timeframe could be included, as employer responses were critical to the study's methodology and findings.

The study includes 18 companies in total: 16 low-rate and 2 medium-rate expected job applications. For each low-rate company, one vacancy was selected as the primary testing point; five were tested twice across two different job postings, and one was tested three times, allowing the study to potentially capture a broader range of employer expectations within the same structure. In total, 23 distinct vacancies were tested in low-competition environments and an additional 2 vacancies in medium-competition companies.

Not all posted vacancies were suitable for situation testing. Positions requiring advanced academic credentials, senior managerial authority, or specialised professional portfolios were excluded from the sampling frame. Such exclusions were not methodological preferences but practical necessities: the testers were not trained or equipped to convincingly perform at high academic or expert-professional levels, and attempting to do so would have jeopardised the entire study. An employer's refusal could be from a real mismatch in professional competence rather than discrimination based on that specific characteristic, making the interpretation of results not reflect the reality. The sampling was focused on occupations where the required experience and qualifications were realistic for the tester profiles, such as entry-level and mid-level service positions.

Four positions belonged to entry-level administrative roles, including junior administrative support and cashier functions, areas where interpersonal bias often determines who is invited for an interview. Twelve vacancies were available within hospitality and gastronomy, such as bartenders, waiters, and café managers, positions that are public-facing and shaped by gendered expectations and assumptions about appearance, temperament, and "customer fit." Four positions belonged to logistics, including drivers, warehouse assistants, and field sellers, a sector in which stereotypes regarding ethnicity, mobility, or perceived reliability commonly surface. Finally, four cleaning and maintenance positions were tested, where discriminatory assumptions about social background, ethnicity, or gender often operate implicitly. For the two medium-scale companies, the vacancies tested were both within entry-level administration, a domain where selection practices tend to be more structured but still permit space for informal judgment.

The distribution of protected characteristics across the sample was determined by job positions that matched the testers' and control testers' "profiles". In low-competition companies, the tests included eight SOGI male profiles, six SOGI female profiles, five ethnicity-based profiles, and five gender-based comparative profiles. In the two medium-scale companies, the focus shifted to ethnicity, and the study deployed two rounds of testing, Roma-identifying applicant paired with control profiles.

Taken together, the composition of the sample demonstrates a pattern that mirrors the structural distribution of Kosovars' access to employment: concentration in small, service-oriented businesses; the dominance of hospitality as an employment sector; limited entry points into administrative roles; and a persistent segmentation of opportunities along occupational lines. Although the sample is not intended to represent the entire economy, it captures the strata where discriminatory filtering is most likely to occur and where institutional oversight is weakest. As a pilot, it establishes an empirical foundation for future studies with broader territorial or sectoral reach.

6. IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

The implementation process unfolded monitored steps that translated the methodological design into field practice.

The first step in this process includes the identification of suitable companies and vacancies. The research team reviewed daily online job postings across the major employment portals, selecting those positions whose recruitment criteria allowed for controlled, and documentation of the testing. This meant that vacancies requiring in-person submission of documents, phone applications, or informal referrals were excluded. To preserve the internal validity of the study, only vacancies that accepted email applications or structured online submissions were included, ensuring that both tester and control profiles could be deployed under identical conditions.

Once the list of eligible vacancies was finalised, each company was assigned a unique identifier to maintain consistency throughout the process. Small enterprises received an alphanumeric code beginning with S (e.g., S01, S02...), while medium enterprises were labeled with M (M01, M02). The coding served not only as a logistical convenience but as a part of the analytical framework, allowing researchers to track patterns across sectors, company sizes, and vacancy types without tying the data to identifiable employers.

Each morning, the researchers prepared an updated application schedule for the testers, specifying the exact company, company code, the job vacancy, the application channel, and the precise timeframe during which each submission should be done. In practice, the tester profile would submit their application mid-morning, often between 10:30 and 11:00, while the control profile followed approximately one and a half to two hours later.

In parallel with this scheduling, the research team undertook the daily preparation of application materials. For each vacancy, CVs were tailored to meet the specific requirements stated in the job announcement, qualification levels, technical skills, work experience, and, where applicable, additional competencies linked to hospitality, logistics, administration, or cleaning services. Only one vacancy required a cover letter, and in that single case researchers drafted paired letters that were similar in structure, tone, and content.

The application phase itself required disciplined consistency from the testers. Each submission had to be executed exactly as instructed: sent from the correct email address, with the correct file names, in the predefined time window, and without any spontaneous modifications.

Testers received instructions, executed applications, confirmed their submissions, and interpreted with the researchers any employer responses. The researchers collected log sheets, archived documents, categorised replies, and ensured that all materials and data were captured. Because the period of fieldwork was short, as new vacancies appeared online, they were shortly evaluated, coded, and prepared for testing.

7. INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The data from this study points to multiple layers of differential treatment within recruitment processes, reflected both in interpersonal interactions with applicants and in broader structural practices. These behavioral patterns emerged across gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, as well as through the communication methods and operational rhythms of the companies involved. What becomes visible is not a gesture or isolated incident, but subtle and overt signals that together shape the experience of candidates differently depending on who they are perceived to be.

Gender-based disparities were evident throughout the study. Men and women were directed toward different categories of positions within the same companies, reflecting persistent occupational gendering. Men were offered roles with higher salary proposals, even where responsibilities or qualifications were comparable to those offered to women. Female applicants, on the other hand, were guided into roles associated with lower wages or lower expectations regarding responsibility. This division strongly suggests that gender norms continue to inform hiring decisions and compensation structures.

One of the interviews further highlighted this bias. The control tester, who was male, was offered a position with a higher salary and more advanced working conditions, while the female tester received lower salary terms and was asked questions unrelated to job performance, such as whether she needed her family's permission to work. The male candidate faced no such inquiry; instead, he was presented with better terms and a more enthusiastic discussion regarding long-term employment. The contrast reveals the endurance of gendered assumptions embedded within recruitment interactions.

With regard to ethnicity, the differences between the treatment of Roma and non-Roma women began to form a recognizable pattern. Interviews with Roma women mostly included additional challenges introduced by the interviewers, such as an emphasis on transportation difficulties, concerns about dependability linked to commuting, or references to the need for extensive pre-employment training. A recurring pattern involved repeated questioning about their educational background, even when their qualifications were clearly stated in their CVs. This questioning implied doubt over qualifications or additional verification demands that were not directed at non-Roma women.

In contrast, interviews with non-Roma women were generally more straightforward: their qualifications were accepted without any doubts, and they were often offered concrete job opportunities, adjustments in job location, or pre-job training options. Particularly, the latter type of information—such as training before employment—was occasionally offered to non-Roma women but not communicated to Roma women, despite the positions being identical.

One example from the interviews illustrates how these dynamics materialized in real time. A Roma woman who was more qualified and experienced than the non-Roma woman was not offered the job. Instead, the interviewer emphasized transportation concerns and proposed a work location outside Prishtina, in a commercial center, framing the position as logistically challenging. Meanwhile, the non-Roma woman was offered the

job immediately and with more favorable terms: the employer discussed placing her in a location in the city center of Prishtina, presented the offer without hesitation, and raised no logistical concerns. This contrast, especially given the Roma candidate's higher qualifications, displays a clear pattern of ethnically motivated differentiation within the same recruitment context.

Differences based on sexual orientation were also evident. Heterosexual men received quicker access to job opportunities and participated in shorter interview interactions, suggesting a more direct pathway toward potential employment. Gay men, meanwhile, experienced longer interviews with fewer concrete proposals, indicating a more hesitant or cautious approach on the part of interviewers.

Among women, the comparison between lesbian and heterosexual participants revealed fewer observable differences, but this appeared closely tied to gender expression. When lesbian applicants presented themselves with traditionally feminine attributes, their interviews resembled those of heterosexual women, with no significant behavioral differences noted. This suggests that gender expression may influence the degree to which sexual orientation affects interviewer attitudes for women, and that less traditionally feminine presentations might have led to different outcomes—an area that warrants further exploration.

In addition to interpersonal patterns, the study identified systemic and procedural inconsistencies within the recruitment process, though these were not to be documented within the objectives of this study. The job advertisements used as part of the testing methodology generally demonstrated low responsiveness. A large number of companies did not respond to any applications submitted by testers, indicating gaps in communication or insufficient HR capacities and approaches toward recruitment channels.

Among companies that did respond, communication rarely occurred through the official email channels used during the initial application stage. Instead, the majority initiated contact via direct phone calls, followed by mobile messages, often bypassing email entirely. This indicates an inconsistency between formal application procedures and actual communication practices. Once companies made initial contact, the remaining steps moved very quickly, with interviews scheduled promptly and employment decisions—whether offers or refusals—issued within a short period of time. This pattern illustrates a lack of standardized communication procedures and inconsistent or unclear recruitment timelines.

Across all dimensions, the qualitative findings suggest that recruitment in the tested companies is shaped by a mixture of subjective judgments, structural inconsistencies, and entrenched stereotypes, producing unequal access to employment opportunities for specific groups. The patterns observed here, even within a limited testing cycle, already begin to reveal the contours of discrimination in the hiring phase and highlight the need for systemic reform.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The design of the methodology sought to achieve maximum internal validity, some contextual, logistical, and financial constraints and limitations influenced the depth of the testing process.

The most significant limitation is the restricted geographical scope, as the fieldwork was conducted only in Pristina. This decision was not grounded in a conceptual assumption that discrimination elsewhere is less prevalent, but rather in the practical realities of the study. Pristina remains the densest employment ecosystem in Kosovo, with the largest concentration of private businesses, public institutions, retail chains, hospitality venues, NGOs, and service providers. Focusing the testing in the capital the access to more diverse sectors is more possible. However, this geographical concentration also means that the findings cannot fully capture regional variations in recruitment behaviour. Cities such as Prizren, Peja, Mitrovica or Ferizaj may exhibit different hiring dynamics, and those patterns remain beyond the reach of this pilot phase.

Due to time constraints, the field-testing period was relatively short, restricting the ability to observe longer-term recruitment dynamics, employer response behaviors, or seasonal variations in job availability. A longer study duration would have enabled the collection of more robust data, clearer patterns regarding waiting times for employer responses, and a broader range of company types, including larger firms or sectors with slower recruitment cycles. Extending the study would also have strengthened longitudinal insights into how, when, and under what conditions companies communicate with applicants, as well as how hiring timelines unfold in practice.

Budget constraints played a decisive role in shaping the study's overall scale. The limited budget allowed only six testers, including control testers, narrowing the number of possible identity combinations and limiting the ability to apply in a broader private sector and across multiple job types simultaneously. As a result, small companies that have one or 2 vacant positions became the primary focus, with occasional testing in moderate-competition scenarios where the risks were low and manageable.

These limitations inevitably affect the representativeness of the sample. Low-competition vacancies, such as positions in cafés, small shops, boutique retail, small offices, and administrative support, offer valuable insights into everyday discrimination. They do not encompass the full spectrum of sectors in which exclusion can occur. High-volume recruitment environments, often display different behavioural patterns because their screening processes are more automated or more bureaucratic. Since these sectors were not fully included, the study provides an accurate but partial picture of hiring practices in Kosovo.

9. CONCLUSIONS

Although the study was conducted within a very limited time frame and relied primarily on low-rate application vacancies, the results nonetheless reveal patterns of unequal treatment in the recruitment phase. Even in this small sample, differentiated behaviour appeared across ethnicity, SOGI, and to a lesser degree, gender, demonstrating that discriminatory dynamics can surface even when the testing scope is narrow and operational conditions are compressed.

Because only a modest number of tests could be carried out, the data set is not large enough to support robust statistical analysis or significance testing using methods such as the chi-square test. Despite the limited data, the consistency across interviews and interactions shows that certain disparities recur in ways that should not be random. These tendencies form the behavioural patterns that need further research in a larger, more comprehensive future study.

Overall, the findings indicate that discrimination in hiring does not manifest as a single moment of denial but as a sequence of sometimes overt differentiations in tone, opportunity, and salary signalling. Roma women encountered more questioning and lower offers; gay men experienced longer interviews without equivalent opportunities; men and women were channelled into different roles aligned with entrenched gender expectations. Lesbian women presenting with traditionally feminine expressions were treated similarly to heterosexual women, suggesting that gender expression itself may enable bias. These observations illustrate that, even with limited testing, the recruitment experience varies in systematic ways depending on ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender, confirming that the early pattern of discrimination are taking shape.

While the Baseline Study on Gender-Based Discrimination at Workplace documents widespread structural inequalities, entrenched gender stereotypes, discriminatory assumptions about women's family responsibilities, and persistent gaps in institutional enforcement, it also underscores the absence of reliable, recruitment-stage evidence. This pilot study addresses precisely that gap. By capturing employer responses, tone, and differential treatment at the earliest point of contact, the findings verify the patterns that the Baseline Study on Gender-Based Discrimination at workplace identified qualitatively and quantitatively, demonstrating how structural biases translate into concrete exclusionary practices during hiring. In this way, the present report strengthens the evidentiary basis for the baseline study conclusions but also provides a methodological tool for monitoring discrimination, thereby operationalizing the need for evidence-driven institutional reform highlighted in the baseline study.

The findings of this study should be understood as indicative rather than exhaustive. They highlight areas of concern but do not capture the full scope of potential discrimination or procedural irregularities within the employment system. Importantly, Kosovo's employment system as a whole requires further and more comprehensive research to determine the extent to which employers consistently adhere to legal obligations, including the provision of contracts and working conditions aligned with the Labour Law. Additional studies are needed to assess whether structural or institutional barriers exist that disproportionately affect certain groups, as well as to better understand the broader employment environment, recruitment mechanisms, and compliance practices across different sectors.

10. RECOMMENDATIONS

Strengthening equality in recruitment requires coordinated action from state institutions, employers, civil society, and international partners. The following recommendations outline a set of steps that can be undertaken in both the short and medium term to address the risks of discriminatory behaviour revealed in this testing cycle.

For government ministries, such as the Ministry of Finance, Labour and Transfers, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the immediate priority should be to reinforce the operational clarity of the Law on Protection from Discrimination and the Labour Law during the hiring stage. This can be achieved through updated administrative instructions, public guidance materials, and targeted training for employers and HR practitioners. Such steps could be taken within a mandate of four years, the government should strengthen regulatory oversight mechanisms by integrating recruitment-stage monitoring into labour market governance and expanding institutional capacity for handling discrimination complaints through specialised units or inter-ministerial cooperation structures.

The Ombudsperson Institution should expand its advisory guidance on discrimination in hiring in the private sector and issue an opinion interpreting existing laws in light of the patterns observed in this and similar studies. In the medium term (twelve to twenty-four months), the Ombudsperson should consider opening a thematic investigation on structural barriers in recruitment, incorporating testimonies, previous complaints, and findings from situation testing, thereby providing a comprehensive institutional diagnosis of the state of equality in access to employment.

The private sector requires its own set of interventions, as many of the discriminatory patterns uncovered by this study stem from unstructured recruitment processes and informal decision-making. In the long term (5 years), companies should undergo anti-discrimination and inclusive hiring training for HR staff, adopt gender- and minority-sensitive communication guidelines, and establish internal complaint mechanisms accessible to job seekers and employees alike.

Civil society organizations, especially those engaging with Roma communities, women's rights groups, LGBTQI+ organizations, and employment-focused NGOs, should amplify monitoring and documentation efforts to ensure that cases of discriminatory treatment are recorded and brought into public discussion. Within twelve months, CSOs could jointly develop a unified reporting tool to capture discriminatory practices described by job seekers. Over the medium term (twelve to twenty-four months), these organizations should collaborate to produce annual reports, coordinate testing cycles, and advocate for legal and institutional reforms grounded in empirical evidence.

Media outlets and journalists have a critical role in shaping public understanding of discrimination. In the short term, within six months, media actors can be encouraged to incorporate human-rights-based language when reporting on employment issues and to feature stories that illustrate inequalities in access to work. Over the medium term (six to twelve months), media organizations should partner with CSOs to produce investigative features or documentary segments that highlight recruitment barriers faced by marginalized groups, thereby contributing to a wider societal understanding of the problem.

This pilot study underscores the value of continued research. In the short term, within the next 12 months, a second testing cycle should be designed to include a larger sample, higher-competition vacancies, and a more diverse pool of testers to enable statistical analysis.

11. ANNEXES

Annex 1: Standardized Log Sheet

Test ID	Date/Time	Title of the position	Sector	Method (email / phone / physically)	Response (Yes/No)	Time of response	Content of response (authentic)	Tone/ Formality	Notes

Instructions: Complete this table immediately after every interaction. Be precise and neutral.

Annex 2: Refusal Script Card

Keep this card close to you during fieldwork to ensure sustainable and ethic response:

- Request for trial work: "Thank you for the opportunity. However, I can only begin with a formal employment contracted in alignment with the Law on Labour."
- Personal questions: "I prefer to focus on my qualifications and on how I can contribute to the position."
- Unexpected situation: "Thank you, but I prefer to keep communication professional and related to the recruitment process."



