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# Youth Under Pressure

Mental Health and the Transition into Employment in Kosovo

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Mental Health and the Transition into Employment in Kosovo

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**Author:** Ajete Kërqeli

**Designed by:** Bubagraphics

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# Executive Summary

Kosovo's youth face a complex intersection of mental health challenges and employment instability. With one of the highest NEET (Not in Employment, Education, or Training) rates in Europe, reaching 31.4% among youth aged 15–24, and alarming levels of reported anxiety and depression, the urgency for coordinated intervention is clear. This policy paper explores how mental health and economic precarity reinforce one another and outlines actionable pathways to improve the well-being and employability of young people.

Drawing on original survey data from 400 youth across Kosovo, the findings reveal that financial insecurity, academic pressure, and job market uncertainty are the primary stressors for young people. Although many experience frequent mental health symptoms, few trust institutions or seek formal support. Notably, only 2.3% of respondents cited mental health challenges as a direct barrier to employment, underscoring the perceived dominance of structural obstacles like lack of opportunity, skills mismatch, and nepotism.

Policy recommendations are grounded in the voices of youth and align with international best practices. They prioritize integrating mental health support across employment and education programs, expanding school-based counseling, launching inclusive outreach for NEET youth, and embedding mental health indicators into national development strategies. Youth also called for specific actions such as free or low-cost mental health services, paid internships with mental health components, and flexible work-study options.

Ultimately, improving youth mental health and employment outcomes will require cross-sectoral coordination, investments in public trust, and tailored support for vulnerable groups including women, rural youth, Roma, LGBTI, and

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persons with disabilities. This paper offers practical and scalable recommendations that, if implemented, can help Kosovo build a generation that is healthier, more resilient, and better prepared for the future.

# Key Findings

**31.4%** – Approximate share of young people in Kosovo who are not in employment, education or training (NEET)<sup>1</sup>. This rate, the highest in Western Balkans, reflects a generation at risk of social exclusion. Persistent NEET levels are both a cause and consequence of **mental health challenges**, creating a vicious cycle between joblessness and psychological distress<sup>2</sup>.

**58%** – Portion of surveyed youth who cite **financial struggles** as a leading source of stress. Money worries outweigh other stressors like academic pressure or family expectations, underscoring the economic insecurity facing Kosovar youth. High youth unemployment and slow school-to-work transitions intensify this financial anxiety.

Roughly 30% of young people frequently experience **stress, anxiety or sleep problems** related to work, studies, or job searching (with young women significantly more affected than men,  $p < 0.001$ ). Mental well-being is under strain during the employment transition: while many youths describe their recent mental health as fair, a substantial minority report poor well-being or burnout symptoms.

**31.5% of youth rated their mental well-being as 'very good', while 37.4% said 'good', 26.6% 'average', and 4.4% reported it as 'poor' or 'very poor'.** This underscores a substantial proportion in the mid-to-low well-being spectrum.

**Gender differences** permeate the youth experience. **61% of young women**, for example, report financial pressures as a top stressor (vs. 56% of young men). Young women also more often feel that unemployment harms mental health, and they report stress about personal safety and family expectations somewhat less than men. Conversely, **young men** were more likely to say that mental health

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challenges had limited their academic or work pursuits (male youth were **1.3 times** as likely as females to report such limitations,  $p < 0.05$ ). These findings suggest different coping mechanisms and stigma patterns between genders.

**Low trust in institutions:** A majority of Kosovo's youth voice little confidence that government, schools, employers or even NGOs sufficiently understand or address their mental health needs. This trust deficit implies that existing support systems are not resonating with youth, a critical gap as psychological services and policies attempt to reach those in need.

**Guarded optimism:** When asked about their future, many youth express **uncertainty about opportunities in Kosovo**. While some remain optimistic, others are ambivalent or pessimistic, mirroring Kosovo's high youth emigration trend in recent years (driven by limited jobs and frustrations). Without visible improvements in education, employment, and mental health support, talented young people may continue to seek futures abroad.

**Key implications:** Youth mental health and employment outcomes are deeply intertwined. Financial insecurity and unemployment fuel stress and anxiety, which in turn can hinder job search or academic progress, potentially increasing NEET rates. Gender norms influence how challenges are experienced and reported, meaning policy responses must be sensitive to these differences. Perhaps most importantly, the prevalent distrust in institutions highlights the need for a more youth-centric approach in policy and service design. By tackling stigma, investing in mental health resources, and improving economic prospects, Kosovo can break the negative cycle and empower its youth during the critical transition from education into the workforce.

# Context and Challenges in Kosovo

Kosovo has one of the youngest populations in Europe, with an average age of 34.8 years in 2024<sup>3</sup>. Such a youthful demographic composition underscores considerable developmental potential, yet it simultaneously introduces a series of complex social, economic, and institutional challenges that require coordinated policy attention.

In the past decade, Kosovo has made notable progress in reducing official unemployment, with youth joblessness declining from over 50% to 17.3% by 2023<sup>4</sup> (this excludes inactive youths or emigrants). Moreover, there is a large gender gap, according to KAS data confirm female youth unemployment ~18.2% vs. ~7.7% for males (2023)<sup>5</sup>. However, this figure reflects only part of the reality. Many young people have exited the labor force entirely or have emigrated. Today, one in five Kosovo citizens lives abroad<sup>6</sup>, and more than one in three young people aged 15–24 are neither working nor enrolled in education<sup>7</sup>.

This NEET rate of 31.4%<sup>8</sup> is among the highest in the Western Balkans and nearly 1.5 times the global average (21.7% in 2023)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, despite Kosovo's improving macroeconomic indicators, a large cohort of its youth remains on the margins, disconnected from the engines of education and employment that drive progress.

At the same time, mental health has emerged as a silent but significant barrier in the youth transition to adulthood. Historically, mental well-being in Kosovo has not received sufficient policy attention, a gap that became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when rates of anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress surged among young people<sup>10</sup>. The pandemic period saw increased demand from

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youth for mental health services, even as those services were stretched thin. Broader societal factors, including the legacy of conflict, economic hardship, and stigma around mental illness, continue to shape the mental health landscape for Kosovar adolescents and young adults.

Recent data indicate Fanaj *et al.* (2025) very high levels of poor mental health among Kosovo's youth. Survey found that Kosovars aged 18–25, 42.6% screened positive for anxiety and 45.5% for depression (GAD-7 and PHQ-9 scores  $\geq 10$ )<sup>11</sup>. This is comparable to, or higher than, the distress levels seen elsewhere. WHO Europe finds that about 25% of adolescent girls have a mental health condition, versus far lower rates in boys<sup>12</sup>. Globally, mental well-being surveys (e.g. WHO-5 indices) typically show only a minority of youths reporting optimal well-being; the Kosovo figures suggest youth well-being there is on the low side of European norms.

The State Strategy for Youth 2024–2032<sup>13</sup> recognizes that overall youth health is “good” but explicitly calls for improving services to prevent and address mental health issues among young people<sup>14</sup>. This high-level acknowledgement is a positive step, yet on the ground, challenges abound: schools often lack psychologists, community-based mental health programs are limited, and discussions of mental well-being can carry stigma.

Crucially, mental health and employment outcomes are bidirectionally linked. International research shows that mental health struggles in adolescence (from disorders like depression or anxiety to conditions like ADHD) significantly increase the risk of becoming NEET in young adulthood<sup>15</sup>. Conversely, being unemployed, or stuck in unstable, unfulfilling jobs, can deteriorate a young person's mental health, eroding self-esteem and hope<sup>16</sup>. NEET youth across different countries often report feeling isolated, hopeless, and demotivated. In a recent UK survey, *one in four* NEET young people cited mental health problems as the main reason they were unable to work, dispelling the notion that NEETs are simply “lazy”<sup>17</sup>. For Kosovo's youth, who face one of Europe's toughest labor

markets, these global patterns are playing out in real time. High NEET levels contribute to a cycle of frustration and mental distress; in turn, untreated mental health issues (and the stigma around them) can make it harder for young people to complete education, find jobs, or thrive in the workplace.

This policy paper examines the nexus of youth mental health and the school-to-work transition in Kosovo. It draws on new survey data commissioned by Democracy for Development (D4D) and conducted by UBO in 2025, capturing the perspectives of 400 young Kosovars, as well as secondary research and strategy documents. The aim is to shed light on how stress, psychological well-being, and employment prospects interact for Kosovo's youth, and to identify interventions that can break negative feedback loops. Key questions include: What are the main stressors affecting youth mental health today? How do factors like gender, employment status, or education level shape these experiences? Do young people feel supported by the institutions around them when it comes to mental health? And what policy measures could ease the "youth under pressure" phenomenon, ensuring that the next generation can make a healthy, productive transition into adult roles?

The findings point to a stark reality: improving youth mental health is not a separate agenda from tackling unemployment or boosting education, they are deeply interconnected. In the sections that follow, we outline the survey's key findings on stressors, gender disparities, NEET linkages, and trust in institutions. Each section discusses policy implications emerging from the evidence. We then present concrete policy recommendations to Kosovo's government and stakeholders, emphasizing cross-sector solutions that treat youth not just as an economic unit but as a whole person with mental, emotional, and social dimensions. This holistic approach is essential if Kosovo is to leverage its youth dividend and ensure that young people are not left behind in the country's development.

# Regional Patterns and Good Practices

**Kosovo's** NEET rate (15–24) stands at 31.4%. The European Commission's 2025 Kosovo Progress Report confirms that in 2024 the share of youth aged 15–24 not in employment, education or training fell to 31.4% (from 33.4% in 2023)<sup>18</sup>. This highlights Kosovo's persistently high NEET level despite a slight improvement.

NEET rates in the Western Balkans vs EU (approximate): North Macedonia and Montenegro have NEET rates around 30%, far above the EU average, while Serbia's is markedly lower (near 13–15%), and EU-member Slovenia's is under 10%. A regional study noted Western Balkan NEET rates averaged 23.7%, ranging from about 15.9% in Serbia up to 37.4% in Kosovo, versus only ~11% in the EU-27<sup>19</sup>. Slovenia is among a handful of European countries already below the 9% NEET target<sup>20</sup>.

**Slovenia's** integrated youth career planning and dual learning: Slovenia is cited as a good practice for embedding career guidance into secondary education and linking it with vocational training. In Slovenia's upper secondary schools, career counseling is part of the school guidance service, helping students plan career paths and prevent dropouts<sup>21</sup>. The government notes that practical training is provided in tandem with employers during vocational upper-secondary programs, reflecting a strong dual education approach<sup>22</sup>. These measures ensure students receive career planning support and real-work experience before graduation.

**North Macedonia's** mobile mental-health outreach for NEET youth: North Macedonia has pursued outreach models to support disengaged youth's well-being. For example, the Red Cross operates "Patrol Social Services" - mobile teams

that seek out at-risk individuals (including homeless youth) and connect them to health, social, and shelter services<sup>23</sup>. In Skopje, Youth Health Centers (integrated into national programs since 2018) provide free psychological counseling to young people, and even deploy mobile clinics to reach rural youth with reproductive health and mental-health support<sup>24</sup>. These initiatives illustrate the use of mobile outreach teams to engage NEET youth and address their psychosocial needs in the community.

**Serbia’s** EU-backed youth hubs (psychosocial + employment services): Serbia has developed combined youth support centers with international support. For instance, the Psychosocial Innovation Network (PIN), with UN and EU funding, piloted the “WHAM” program (Wellbeing, Habits and Mental Health for Youth Advancement) to equip municipal Youth Offices to provide mental-health support alongside job counseling<sup>25</sup>. Likewise, UNICEF-EU projects have established community-based youth “corners” where young people (including vulnerable and unemployed youth) receive psychosocial support, recreational activities, and referrals to specialized services<sup>26</sup>. Hundreds of Serbian youth have been served through these one-stop “youth hubs,” which combine career/employment guidance with psychosocial counseling under EU co-financing.

**Albania’s** pilot career counseling centers in universities: The Albanian government, with donor support, has begun establishing career guidance centers at public universities. In 2019 a Swiss-funded initiative helped pilot new Career Centers in at least four universities (University of Tirana, Durrës “Aleksandër Moisiu” University, Agricultural University, and Luarasi), training a first cohort of 20 certified career counselors<sup>27</sup>. These university career centers now offer services like career fairs, soft-skills training, alumni networks, and internships linkages to boost student employability<sup>28</sup>

**Croatia’s** Youth Guarantee: personalized support with mental health referrals: Croatia’s implementation of the EU Youth Guarantee emphasizes individualized

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guidance and holistic support. The country operates a network of one-stop youth career centers (CISOK) integrated with the public employment service, which provide personalized career counseling to each registered young person<sup>29</sup>. Youth Guarantee counselors use profiling tools to offer tailored job or training offers and, when needed, refer at-risk youth to additional support services (e.g. childcare or mental-health services)<sup>30</sup>. This approach, combining career guidance with referrals for psychosocial help, has been highlighted as a factor in Croatia's success engaging NEET youth.

**International** examples illustrate effective youth mental health–employment integration. For instance, Sweden's schools use multi-disciplinary pupil health teams (including nurses, doctors, psychologists, social workers and special-education teachers) to address students' psychosocial needs on-site<sup>31</sup>. In Canada, Integrated Youth Service (IYS) hubs provide “one-stop-shop” support for 12–25 - year-olds, co-locating primary care, mental health counseling, housing assistance and work-study services in community centers<sup>32</sup>. The EU's Youth Guarantee likewise emphasizes holistic support: low-threshold youth centers combine employment and training services with health and social support, recognizing that overcoming barriers “requires more than simply finding [young people] a job or training”<sup>33</sup>.

**EU programs for Kosovo:** IPA III and Erasmus+ Youth: As a Western Balkans aspirant, Kosovo can tap into key EU funding streams for youth. IPA III (Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance, 2021–2027) dedicates substantial funds to socio-economic development and reform in candidate countries, including programs on youth employment, education, and skills<sup>34</sup>. In parallel, Erasmus+ Youth is open to Kosovo: it enables young people and organizations to participate in youth exchanges, training projects, the European Solidarity Corps, and capacity-building partnerships with EU member states<sup>35</sup>. Engaging with these EU programs would allow Kosovo to benefit from regional youth initiatives, mobility opportunities, and funding to implement youth policy reforms.

# Research Methods and Data Collection Instrument

The study employed a Computer-Assisted Web Interviewing (CAWI) method to collect data on youth mental health in Kosovo. A representative sample of **400 respondents** aged **18–30 years** was surveyed across all municipalities of Kosovo. The achieved sample yields a margin of error of **±4.9%** at the 95% confidence level, ensuring that the findings are generalizable to the wider youth population. The data was collected during the period **4–11 November 2025**.

Data collection was carried out using UBO Consulting's web-based questionnaire platform, which supports complex survey designs including skip patterns, branching logic, and multiple question formats. This platform is equipped with quality assurance mechanisms powered by AI. These mechanisms are designed to flag respondents who do not meet the predefined quality criteria, thereby ensuring the integrity and reliability of the data collected. They include the following:

- **Response Time Monitoring:** We tracked the overall time taken to complete surveys and the time spent on individual questions to identify discrepancies or patterns indicating inattentiveness.
- **Straight-lining Detection:** Monitored for consistent, patterned responses across questions to identify and address potential disengagement or dishonesty.

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- **Attention Checks:** Incorporated attention check questions to ensure respondents are attentively reading and understanding the questions posed.
- **Regular Panelist Validation:** We periodically verify the demographic and contact information of our panelists to maintain an up-to-date and active panel.
- **Duplicate and Fraud Detection:** Utilizing advanced algorithms, we identified and removed duplicate responses or fraudulent participants to ensure data purity.
- **Engagement and Incentive Strategies:** To encourage participation and honest responses, we offered incentives to the panelists who completed the survey.

## Pilot Testing of the Questionnaire

For this study, UBO Consulting conducted **10 pilot interviews**, which provided a preliminary assessment of the questionnaire and yielded valuable insights. The pilot confirmed that the questionnaire functioned as intended, and no adjustments to the questionnaire design were required prior to the full-scale implementation of data collection.

## Research Implementation

A strategic selection process was used to ensure that the collected data are both representative of the target population and of high quality. This process included the following steps:

- **Defining the Target Population** - The first step involved defining the target population for the survey. The target population for this study, based on the research objectives, was citizens of all municipalities in Kosovo aged 18-30 years.
- **Utilizing the Quota Management System** - The quota management system played a pivotal role in this process. It helped in:
  - I. **Monitoring Responses in Real-Time:** Ensuring that the distribution of completed surveys reflects the stratification criteria or quotas set based on the target population.
  - II. **Adjusting Invitations Dynamically:** If certain quotas are filled faster than others, the system dynamically adjusts who to send invitations to, focusing on underrepresented groups to balance the sample.
- **Panelist Engagement History** - In addition to demographic and behavioral criteria, the selection process also considered the panelist's engagement history, including their participation rate in previous surveys, the quality of their responses, and their availability. This ensured not only diversity but also reliability and engagement from the respondents.
- **Invitation Customization and Distribution** - Survey invitations were then customized to appeal to the selected respondents, clearly stating the survey's purpose, estimated completion time, and the incentives for participation. The distribution of these invitations was carefully timed to

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maximize response rates, taking into account factors like the day of the week and time of day.

- **Ethical Considerations and Privacy** - Throughout the selection and invitation process, ethical considerations and privacy regulations were strictly adhered to. This included obtaining informed consent from participants, ensuring the confidentiality of their responses, and complying with relevant data protection laws.

# Results

## Mental Health at the Crossroads of Employment

### *Sources of Stress for Youth in Transition*

One of the clearest findings from the survey is that economic insecurity dominates the mental landscape of young people. 47.5% of youth reported sometimes experiencing stress or sleep problems, 22.8% said often, and 4.3% always. Only 8.1% reported never facing these issues.

When asked “What are the main things currently causing you stress or anxiety?”, respondents most frequently pointed to financial and job-related pressures. Table 1 summarizes the top self-reported stressors among Kosovo youth, overall and by gender.

*Table 1. Key reported sources of stress among youth (percentage of youth identifying each factor as a main cause of stress)*

Source of Stress	All Youth	Young Women	Young Men
Financial situation (economic strain)	<b>58%</b>	61%	56%
Lack of free time / burnout (exhaustion)	<b>40%</b>	41%	40%
Job insecurity or unemployment	<b>34%</b>	38%	31%
Academic pressure	<b>36%</b>	31%	39%
Family expectations	<b>22%</b>	19%	26%
Social comparison (incl. social media)	<b>13%</b>	11%	15%

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These results paint a picture of a generation under financial and professional pressure. Over half of youth are anxious about their economic situation, making it the number one stressor by a wide margin. Many young Kosovars struggle with unemployment or precarious jobs; even those pursuing studies often worry about how to fund their education or contribute to family income. It is telling that more youth cite financial stress (58%) than academic stress (36%), a reversal of what might be expected if most respondents were primarily students. This likely reflects the reality that a large segment of 18–24-year-olds in Kosovo are outside of formal schooling and facing the immediate pressures of livelihood. Even among university students, concerns about future job opportunities and the high cost of living appear large.

The second most common strain is time pressure and burnout (40%). This finding resonates with global trends of rising burnout among youth, especially post-pandemic<sup>36</sup>. In Kosovo, with its economic hardships, young people may feel they cannot “afford to rest,” thus stretching themselves thin and jeopardizing their mental well-being.

Close behind is job insecurity/unemployment (34%) as a direct source of stress. One-third of youth explicitly reported that *being unemployed or fearing job loss* causes them anxiety. Given Kosovo’s high NEET rate, it is likely that many respondents have personal experience with periods of unemployment. Even those currently employed may be in temporary or informal positions that offer little stability. The survey was conducted amid an improving but still fragile economic context, Kosovo’s overall unemployment stood around 10.8% in 2024<sup>37</sup>, but youth unemployment and underemployment remain high. The stress of not having secure work is not just financial; it strikes at a sense of purpose and future direction, key components of mental health for emerging adults.

Academic pressure (36%) also features prominently, though somewhat less than economic factors. Roughly one in three young people feel significant stress from school or university performance. This aligns with European surveys finding that

school pressure is a major contributor to youth mental health issues (in one study, 2 out of 3 European children cited school pressure, with girls more affected than boys)<sup>38</sup>. In Kosovo's context, academic stress may be tied to the intense need to graduate and find a job in a tightening market. Interestingly, our data suggest academic stress is slightly higher among young men (39%) than young women (31%), a pattern opposite to some Western countries<sup>39</sup>. This could be due to sample composition (if more males in the survey were current students), or cultural factors, thus it warrants further exploration. It might reflect that young women in Kosovo, who face higher unemployment after graduation, are perhaps less optimistic that academic success guarantees a job, whereas young men might feel more pressure to perform academically as traditional breadwinners. Regardless, education-related anxiety is clearly a component of youth mental health that cannot be ignored.

Academic stress in Kosovo appears relatively moderate by international standards. Only about 36% of Kosovar students report feeling strong academic pressure. In comparison, OECD studies show wide variation: PISA finds student anxiety and “fear of failure” in the range of roughly 36–72% across countries<sup>40</sup>. Stress is generally *higher* in some Western systems (UK, Australia) and *lower* in central/eastern Europe (e.g. Hungary, Germany)<sup>41</sup>. Kosovo's ~36% figure thus sits at the lower end of the PISA range, similar to levels seen in other Central European systems.

Other notable stressors include family expectations (22%)- nearly a quarter of youth feel pressured by what their families expect of them, and social comparison (13%), including the influence of social media. These factors, while less cited overall, are significant for particular individuals. Family expectations can range from pressure to marry and start a family, to pressure to succeed professionally. Given Kosovo's tight-knit family structures, many youth struggle to meet parental expectations in an environment of limited opportunities. Social media, on the other hand, exposes young people to constant comparisons with peers or unrealistic standards of success, which can fuel feelings of inadequacy. Though

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only 1 in 8 cited social comparison as a top stressor, this issue disproportionately affects those plugged into the digital world and may intersect with other anxieties (for example, seeing peers abroad with better careers can exacerbate one's own employment frustrations).

Disaggregating the main stressors by gender confirms the patterns highlighted earlier. Women continue to report financial problems more frequently than men, consistent with Kosovo's gendered labor market disparities. Men show higher levels of academic pressure, family expectations, and social comparison as key stressors, all of which align with more traditional expectations of performance and role fulfillment for young men. Burnout, worry about time, and job insecurity appear at similar levels across genders. These granular gender patterns reinforce that mental health stresses are not evenly distributed, and that effective policy responses must reflect differentiated pressures, rather than assuming a uniform youth experience.

The breadth of stressors identified: financial, academic, occupational, social, suggests that improving youth mental health will require a multi-layered strategy. Economic measures alone (like job creation) might alleviate the top stressor but would not address burnout or academic anxiety; likewise, mental health programs in schools might help with academic stress but not financial strain. Key implications include:

- *Integrate economic and psychosocial support:* Employment programs (such as job training or youth guarantee schemes) should further embed mental health counseling or stress management workshops. Similarly, mental health initiatives should incorporate career and financial counseling. Addressing youth needs holistically could reduce their predominant financial anxieties while equipping them with coping skills.
- *Target burnout and time management:* The finding on burnout indicates a need for promoting work-life balance even for young people. Educational

institutions and employers could offer guidance on time management, and the government might regulate internships and entry-level jobs to prevent exploitative overwork. Encouraging recreational, cultural, or sport activities for youth (and making time for them) can protect against burnout and build resilience.

- *Academic reforms for well-being:* The education system should acknowledge academic stress as a real issue. This could mean training teachers to spot and support students in distress, integrating study skills and mental health literacy into curricula, and ensuring that the race for grades or scholarships does not come at the expense of student well-being.
- *Family and community engagement:* Since family expectations weigh on a sizable minority, involving families in the mental health conversation is important. Parent education programs could help families set healthy, supportive expectations and recognize signs of anxiety or depression in their youth. Community leaders and NGOs should also be engaged to shift norms around perfectionism and the definition of success, so that young people feel less undue pressure.

### *Mental Well-Being Across Employment Status*

Weighted crosstab analysis further illustrates how mental well-being varies across young people's school-to-work trajectories. Among those in employment, the distribution of well-being is spread across "very good," "good," and "average," with only around 3–4% reporting poor well-being. Students show the highest share of "good" well-being (46%), suggesting that the education environment provides temporary predictability and structure, even if academic pressure persists.

Notably, youth categorized as unemployed demonstrate a split pattern: over half (50.9%) reported "very good" well-being, while a small but important group fell into the "poor" or "very poor" categories. This suggests a polarization between

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those experiencing short-term or voluntary unemployment and those facing deeper, chronic exclusion. Meanwhile, young people in the NEET-like “Other” group showed the highest share of “very poor” mental health (4.2%), reinforcing that longer-term disengagement may carry significant psychological strain. These data echo broader international evidence that prolonged inactivity erodes well-being, whereas short gaps in employment may not immediately reflect negatively in self-assessments.

*Table 2. Mental well-being by employment status among youth (Self-reported mental well-being cross-tabulated with employment status)*

Mental Well-Being	Working	Studying	Unemployed	NEET/Other
<b>Very good</b>	27.2%	25.9%	<b>50.9%</b>	38.2%
<b>Good</b>	34.0%	<b>46.0%</b>	23.0%	34.7%
<b>Average</b>	35.0%	24.0%	23.8%	21.2%
<b>Poor</b>	3.0%	3.7%	0.9%	1.7%
<b>Very poor</b>	0.8%	0.4%	1.4%	<b>4.2%</b>

### *Gender Gaps in Mental Health and Employment Experiences*

The survey highlights clear gender differences in how young women and men in Kosovo navigate psychological stress and the transition from school to employment. While challenges are widespread across both groups, their stressors, coping patterns, and perceived limitations differ in important ways. These distinctions matter for designing effective, gender-responsive mental health and employment interventions.

A first notable divide relates to stress exposure. Young women in our sample reported somewhat lower academic pressure, yet significantly higher financial stress than young men. 61% of women identified financial problems as a main stressor, compared to 56% of men. This pattern reflects long-standing structural

inequalities in Kosovo's labor market: women face much lower participation rates and markedly higher unemployment (18.2% for young women versus 7.6% for young men in 2023<sup>42</sup>). As a result, many young women remain financially dependent on family members or spouses, giving them fewer pathways to economic independence. Unsurprisingly, they also expressed stronger agreement with the statement that unemployment or job uncertainty significantly harms youths' mental well-being ( $p < 0.001$ ). Economic exclusion appears to shape both the stress they feel and their understanding of its psychological impact.

### *Self-Rated Mental Well-Being by Gender*

*Table 3. Mental well-being by gender among youth (Self-reported mental well-being cross-tabulated with gender)*

Mental Well-Being	Men	Women
Very good	25.8%	36.9%
Good	37.7%	37.2%
Average	28.8%	24.5%
Poor	4.1%	1.4%
Very poor	3.6%	0%

Despite reporting heavier financial pressure, young women rated their overall mental well-being more positively than young men. Over one-third of women (36.9%) described their well-being as "very good," compared to 25.8% of men, while men were more likely to place themselves in the "poor" or "very poor" categories. This statistically significant difference ( $p = 0.001$ ) underscores that exposure to stress does not map directly onto subjective mental health. Several factors may be at play. Women often have stronger social support networks and may openly discuss challenges with friends or family, which can buffer the emotional impact of stress. Men, in contrast, may under-report specific stressors but still internalize distress, resulting in lower overall well-being. Gender norms discouraging emotional disclosure among young men, combined with expectations to appear strong or self-reliant, may contribute to this gap. Women

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might feel pressure to appear resilient and thus report “I’m doing okay” even amidst many stresses. These nuances deserve further qualitative research. What is clear is that mental health initiatives must be attuned to gender, the way problems manifest and are disclosed can differ between young men and women.

### *Functional Limitations and Hidden Vulnerabilities*

Gender differences become even more pronounced when looking at whether mental health issues have ever limited young people in their studies, work, or job search. Young men were significantly more likely to report that mental health challenges “often” limited their functioning (63.6% versus 39.4% among women), while women more frequently chose “sometimes.” This suggests that although women report high stress, they may be better able to maintain academic or work performance, possibly due to earlier help-seeking, more open communication about difficulties, or stronger support systems. Young men, on the other hand, may delay seeking help or adopt coping strategies that lead to more severe functional impairment, such as disengaging from school, quitting jobs, or withdrawing socially. These dynamics underline an important, and often overlooked, vulnerability among male youth.

### *Shared Experiences Across Genders*

Not all experiences diverged by gender. Levels of trust in institutions were uniformly low for both young men and women, and optimism about Kosovo’s future showed no statistically significant differences. These shared attitudes indicate that broader societal conditions, such as institutional distrust and economic stagnation, shape the worldview of young people across gender lines.

The gender-based findings clearly indicate that a uniform approach to youth mental health and employment will overlook critical differences in needs and lived experiences. Effective policy must therefore be explicitly gender-responsive.

Young women require targeted support to address the persistent economic insecurity that shapes much of their stress and limits their autonomy. Measures that expand pathways into stable employment, whether through skills development, incentives for firms to hire young women, or initiatives that boost women's participation in underrepresented sectors, could significantly reduce financial anxiety and strengthen overall well-being. At the same time, young men appear to carry less visible but more functionally disruptive mental health burdens, reinforcing the urgency of low-stigma outreach, early intervention, and accessible psychological support tailored specifically to them.

- *Address gender gaps in employment.* Kosovo's youth and employment strategies should prioritize reducing female youth unemployment. This could include incentives for companies to hire young women, support for female-led entrepreneurship, and dedicated skills programs in sectors where women remain underrepresented. Narrowing the gender employment gap would likely ease the disproportionate financial stress young women report. Meanwhile, programs that encourage young men to explore growing fields, or offer retraining for those who feel stuck could support better long-term economic and psychological outcomes.
- *Encourage help-seeking among young men.* The data showing that young men are more likely to experience mental health issues that derail their work or education suggests a pattern of delayed help-seeking. Tailored anti-stigma campaigns that use relatable male role models, particularly from sports or popular culture, could be effective. Confidential and informal counseling options, drop-in centers, peer-led spaces, or online chats, may also provide a more accessible entry point for men who feel uncomfortable with formal therapy. Importantly, messaging should frame help-seeking as a form of strength and responsibility rather than vulnerability.
- *Leverage women's social support networks.* Women's higher self-rated well-being, despite higher stress, may reflect stronger peer or family support

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systems. Policies can build on this by developing women's peer support groups, mentorship networks, and community dialogue initiatives. School and university-based clubs where young women can discuss financial pressure, career transitions, and emotional stressors can help normalize their experiences. Ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health services, including support for postpartum anxiety or depression, remains essential as young women move through different life stages.

- *Integrate gender-sensitive counseling into schools and job centers.* Counselors and psychologists in education and employment institutions should be trained to recognize gendered patterns of disclosure and coping. For instance, a struggling male student may be less likely to volunteer symptoms of depression, requiring more proactive engagement, while a high-achieving young woman may minimize anxiety despite significant distress. Embedding gender awareness into counseling practices, youth centers, and employment services will enhance their effectiveness and ensure that support reaches those who need it most.

### *NEET Youth: The Mental Health Toll of Disconnection*

Being "NEET" (Not in Employment, Education or Training) is more than a labor-market status; it often reflects deeper forms of social and economic disconnection. Both our survey and international research show that NEET youth face heightened risks of poor mental health. When respondents were asked about barriers to securing decent employment in Kosovo, the most frequently reported obstacles were:

- Lack of opportunities (37.5%)
- Skills mismatch with labor market needs (24.7%)
- Nepotism and lack of personal connections (21.1%)
- Limited career guidance (6.6%)

- Mental health challenges (2.3%)

Only a small share of youth, about 2.3%—, identified mental health as their primary employment barrier. This aligns with wider evidence: most NEET young people emphasize structural obstacles such as limited job openings, skill deficits, or lack of networks rather than personal or psychological issues. Research from the UK, for example, finds that NEET youth typically face a combination of personal challenges and external constraints, particularly weak local labor markets<sup>43</sup>.

However, the relationship between NEET status and mental health is well documented as bidirectional<sup>44</sup>. Being NEET increases the likelihood of experiencing anxiety, depression, and loss of motivation; in turn, these conditions make it harder to seek, secure, or retain work. Global reviews consistently report a strong association between NEET status and mental health problems, even if the direction of causality varies across individuals<sup>45</sup>. This means that policy responses must address both structural barriers (like training and job availability) and psychosocial needs simultaneously.

In Kosovo, where NEET rates hover around one-third, this dynamic is especially concerning. Although our survey was cross-sectional and did not track changes over time, the patterns we observe mirror international findings: prolonged unemployment or inactivity can erode mental well-being, while poor mental health can impede successful entry into work or education<sup>46</sup>. This creates a negative feedback loop in which disengagement worsens psychological distress, which then deepens disengagement.

Comparative research underscores that Kosovo is not alone in this challenge. A systematic review of European studies concluded that mental health conditions in adolescence (even mild ones) significantly increase the odds of becoming NEET in young adulthood<sup>47</sup>. Issues like depression, attention disorders, or untreated trauma can disrupt schooling and the development of skills, leading

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youth to drop out or perform poorly and subsequently struggle in the job market. On the flip side, large surveys have found that youth unemployment is strongly associated with higher rates of mental distress, including suicidal ideation in extreme cases<sup>48</sup>. The OECD estimates tens of millions of young people globally are NEET, and among them a substantial fraction are in that state because of health problems (including mental health) rather than purely lack of jobs<sup>49</sup>. In our own region, Western Balkan countries with high NEET rates, like North Macedonia, Montenegro, and Kosovo (each around 30%+ NEET), have reported rising concern about youth apathy, brain drain, and social problems that tie back to this disengaged group<sup>50</sup>. By contrast, countries that have managed to lower NEET rates (Serbia, for instance, at ~13%<sup>51</sup>) often have active labor market programs and social services that intervene early.

Our survey hints at these dynamics. Although we did not explicitly label respondents as NEET or non-NEET in the questionnaire, we can infer from those who indicated they were unemployed and not in school, these individuals exhibited some distinct patterns. Notably, optimism about the future was lowest among unemployed, out-of-school youth. Many in this category answered that they felt *“not very optimistic”* or *“pessimistic”* about their prospects in Kosovo. This contrasts with youth who were either employed or still studying, who more often expressed at least cautious optimism.

NEET youth require targeted interventions that combine psychosocial support with pathways to re-engagement:

- *Proactive outreach and counseling:* Employment services should include a strong outreach component, going into communities to identify NEET youth and offering personalized counseling and coaching. Embedding mental health professionals or trained social workers in job centers could help address issues like low motivation or anxiety that hinder job search. For example, a NEET youth might benefit from a counselor who helps them set

small goals, build confidence, and navigate negative feelings while also connecting them to job opportunities.

- *Second-chance education and training with support:* Programs that help school dropouts or unemployed graduates gain skills must integrate support systems. This could mean smaller class sizes, mentorship, stipends or transportation (reducing financial barriers), and on-site psychosocial services. International models such as the EU’s “Youth Guarantee,” which link education and training opportunities with individualized guidance, highlight the importance of coordinated support systems. Kosovo has already its own Youth Guarantee Plan; encouraging its full implementation would help ensure that mental well-being is systematically monitored and supported throughout the entire process.
- *Community-based engagement:* Not all NEET youth will come to formal institutions for help. Mobile teams (perhaps through NGOs) could organize community projects, sports, arts, or volunteering initiatives that bring disengaged youth into a constructive environment. Such activities can restore a sense of purpose and belonging, improving mental health. They also act as a bridge to more formal re-engagement (someone who gains confidence in a community project may next be willing to enroll in a training course). Importantly, involving peers and near-peer mentors who have successfully exited NEET status can inspire and motivate current NEET youth.
- *Early intervention for at-risk youth:* Preventing NEET status in the first place is the ideal. Schools should flag students who exhibit chronic absenteeism, academic struggles, or behavioral health issues and intervene before they drop out. The review evidence suggests many future NEETs can be identified by such early warning signs<sup>52</sup>. School-based mental health programs, tutoring, and career guidance for these at-risk students (who might be, for example, a teenager grappling with depression) could keep them on track to graduate and either work or pursue higher education. The

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Education Strategy 2022–2026<sup>53</sup> for Kosovo already emphasizes reducing dropout. Integrating mental health into that effort would strengthen it.

### *Trust (or Lack Thereof) in Institutions*

A sobering finding of our study is the overwhelming lack of trust youth have in institutions when it comes to understanding and addressing their mental health needs. We asked: “How much confidence do you have that institutions (government, schools, NGOs, employers) understand and address the mental health needs of youth?” The responses skewed heavily toward the negative. Only 6.6% reported ‘a lot’ of trust in institutions to understand and address youth mental health. A full 58.9% expressed little or no trust (39.3% said ‘little’, 19.6% ‘none’). The average rating corresponded roughly to “low confidence” on our scale (with no significant difference between genders). In essence, young people in Kosovo do not feel that the entities meant to support them are attuned to or capable of helping with their mental well-being.

Comparatively, trust in institutions among youth is a challenge in many countries, but Kosovo’s recent history and governance issues likely exacerbate it. Corruption and political patronage have been cited as reasons why young Kosovars feel alienated from public institutions.

Recent surveys find very low trust in central government and parliament, only about one-third of citizens trust the government (~33%) or president (~25%)<sup>54</sup>. Trust in the justice system is similarly weak (only ~30% trust courts/prosecutors), and political parties/media are distrusted by >75% of respondents<sup>55</sup>. These trust deficits likely erode young people’s confidence that public programs (including employment or health services) will help them.

Additionally, mental health has not been mainstreamed into public policy until very recently, so it’s plausible that youth have *rarely seen concrete evidence* of institutions taking mental health seriously. The tradition in Kosovo (as in much of the Balkans) has been that mental health issues are handled privately (within

family or not at all) rather than by schools or government programs. When asked where they would turn for help if struggling emotionally, 41.4% said family, 14.4% mental health professionals, 12.1% friends, and 19.4% said nowhere, they deal with it alone. Changing this perception will not happen overnight.

Another dimension of trust is the urban-rural divide. Our data (though sample sizes for subgroups are small) hint that rural youth have even less trust in available services than urban youth. This is logical, as rural areas often lack basics, including psychologists or youth centers entirely. A young person in a village might see mental health support as something completely out of reach, something that only exists in Prishtina, if at all. Therefore, they place less trust in “institutions” regarding mental health, because in their lived experience, institutions have not reached out or provided help enough.

Rebuilding youth trust in institutions is vital; without it, even the best policies may fail due to lack of uptake. Steps include:

- *Youth participation and co-design:* Involve young people actively in the design, implementation, and evaluation of mental health and employment programs. When youth see their input reflected, they are more likely to trust the outcome. For instance, a Youth Advisory Board on Mental Health could be established under the Ministry of Health or Youth, ensuring that policies are informed by youth voices. Likewise, schools and universities could support student-led mental health clubs or peer counseling networks, which work in tandem with official services. Empowering youth as partners can transform institutions from something “other” into something they feel ownership of.
- *Visibility of success stories:* Institutions need to showcase concrete successes in helping youth, to counter cynicism. If a counseling hot line such as Linja e Jetës that helps X number of young people is available, that should be supported by institutions and publicized in youth-friendly media, including

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testimonials from youth who benefited. Over time, accumulating these success narratives can chip away at the belief that “institutions do nothing.” Transparency is key here: publishing results, being honest about challenges, and celebrating small wins can build credibility.

- *Front-line improvements:* Often, trust is lost at the first point of contact, a rude receptionist, an empty office, a promised opportunity that never arrives. Training front-line staff (teachers, counselors, employment officers) to be youth-friendly, empathetic, and responsive can greatly influence perceptions. Additionally, ensuring that services advertised are actually operational is critical. If the government announces a new youth mental health helpline, it must be well-funded and staffed so that when youth call, they get a helpful response (a single negative experience will spread quickly among peers, undermining trust). Consistency and reliability in service delivery will slowly rebuild faith.
- *Community and local institutions:* Beyond state actors, trust may reside in community figures, for example, certain NGOs, community leaders, or local activists might enjoy more credibility among youth. Partnering with these trusted figures to deliver mental health messaging or services can be a bridge. For example, an NGO with a strong local reputation could run outreach programs on behalf of (or funded by) the government, translating policies into action in a way that youth accept. Over time, this can also improve the image of public institutions by proxy (as youth see that the government enabled or funded the positive initiative).

## Youth Outlook and Emigration Pressures

Finally, it is important to situate the mental health and employment issue within the broader outlook of Kosovo’s youth. Our survey asked how optimistic or pessimistic respondents feel about their future in Kosovo regarding education, employment, and quality of life opportunities. The answers were mixed, skewing

toward cautious optimism but with a strong undercurrent of doubt. 48.6% of youth felt somewhat optimistic, 10% very optimistic. However, 31.8% said they were not very optimistic and 10% not optimistic at all.

These findings align with Kosovo's persistent youth emigration trends. When young people do not see a viable or fulfilling future domestically, migration becomes an alternative, sometimes a dream, sometimes a necessity. Kosovo has experienced high emigration rates in recent years, particularly among youth. The European Commission's 2025 Report on Kosovo underscores the structural roots of this trend, noting that "weak labour market outcomes contribute to continuously high emigration rates." Between 2022 and 2023, thousands of young Kosovars left in search of stability, better jobs, or a clearer sense of future possibility. Although migration can provide individuals with hope and opportunity, it is also shaped by unmet aspirations and can generate emotional strain for those preparing to leave or for the communities they leave behind.

For many youth, migration holds a dual psychological meaning. It can symbolize hope, the prospect of mobility, progress, and dignity. But it can also generate anxiety, guilt, and pressure, especially when one feels compelled to leave out of necessity rather than choice. Even for those who remain, the constant backdrop of emigration reinforces feelings of uncertainty and discouragement. While migration itself may lie outside the direct scope of mental health or employment policy, it is an ever-present part of how youth interpret their prospects. It underscores the urgency for Kosovo to improve conditions, not only to retain talent but to renew young people's belief that they can build a meaningful future at home.

A cross-analysis of optimism levels and employment status further illuminates the emotional terrain. Employed and studying youth consistently expressed higher optimism about their future, whereas unemployed and NEET-like youth reported significantly lower levels of confidence. This pattern mirrors broader emigration pressures: young people who lack stable engagement in work or

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education not only experience material insecurity but also diminished hope. The link between mental health, employment, and aspirations is clear: strengthening the school-to-work transition and expanding mental health support are essential not only for economic outcomes but for rebuilding young people's sense of possibility in Kosovo.

The lukewarm optimism and emigration pressures imply that policies must deliver visible change to restore youth confidence:

- *Tangible short-term wins:* Youth are more likely to stay and remain hopeful if they see concrete improvements. This could be something like a noticeable expansion in internship opportunities, a new or activating a youth center opening in their town, or a stipend program for mental health services becoming available. Early implementation of the Youth Strategy's provisions, for example, establishing local Youth Innovation Hubs or mobile mental health clinics, would send a signal that progress is happening. Even small wins (a successful job fair, a helpful new online portal for counseling) should be leveraged to show that "it's getting better here."
- *Career guidance and mobility:* Many youths' pessimism stems from not knowing how to navigate the transition to work. Strengthening career guidance in schools and universities can help clarify pathways in Kosovo's context, reducing the sense of helplessness. Additionally, regional mobility programs (such as exchanges or traineeships in EU countries with the intention of returning) could channel the desire to go abroad into a more positive framework, one where youth gain experience but are supported to bring it back home. The message should be that one can have a future in Kosovo, perhaps enriched by external experience but ultimately viable locally.
- *Whole-of-society approach:* Government alone cannot shift youth perceptions; it requires buy-in from the private sector and civil society. Employers need to demonstrate they are creating merit-based opportunities

for young people. Tackling such practices would boost optimism. Civil society and media also play a role in highlighting positive stories, for instance, young entrepreneurs succeeding in Kosovo, or community projects making a difference. Celebrating these can gradually counter the narrative of despair.

- *Mental health support during transition:* Finally, acknowledge that the transition to adulthood is inherently stressful even in the best of times. Providing accessible mental health support during key transition points - finishing high school, entering university, graduating into the job market - can ease personal anxieties. For example, a program of group counseling or workshops for recent graduates (covering coping with job search stress, dealing with rejection, etc.) could be very beneficial. Similarly, ensuring that first-job experiences are supportive (mentorship in the workplace, anti-bullying policies, etc.) will help young hires adjust and thrive, rather than become disillusioned and emigrate.

By addressing the multifaceted concerns of youth: economic, psychosocial, and aspirational, Kosovo can begin to turn the tide on youth underemployment and mental distress.

# Policy Recommendations

Each recommendation below is proposed to strengthen the mental health of Kosovo's youth and facilitate their successful transition into employment. The recommendations are designed to be concrete and actionable, with an understanding of Kosovo's current institutional capacities and strategic goals.

To inform these recommendations, we asked youth directly which policy actions they believe would most improve mental health and employment prospects. The most frequently selected options were:

- Free or low-cost mental health counseling in schools and youth centers (58.5%)
- Career mentoring and soft skills training (43.8%)
- Paid internships that integrate mental health support (41.4%)
- Flexible work/study options, including remote and part-time paths (32.1%)

These priorities suggest that youth are calling for systemic support across educational, professional, and psychological domains, especially the normalization and integration of mental health services into everyday institutional settings.

- **Expand School and Campus-Based Mental Health Programs:** Strengthen the mental health infrastructure in educational settings where youth are accessible. The Ministry of Education, in coordination with the Ministry of Health, should accelerate plans to place at least one trained psychologist or social worker in every high school and university campus<sup>56</sup>. These professionals should offer confidential counseling, run stress-reduction workshops (especially around exam time and graduation), and lead

anti-stigma campaigns in schools. In addition, introduce mental health education into curricula, life-skills courses or health classes should cover topics like coping with stress, seeking help, and supporting peers. Schools and universities are ideal points for early intervention; by catching issues when students are still in education, we can prevent more severe problems that lead to dropouts or NEET status. A phased approach can start with the largest institutions and those regions with the highest youth populations, eventually achieving statewide coverage. Funding for training and hiring school counselors can be sourced from both state budget (education/health allocations) and international partners focusing on human capital development.

- **Integrate Mental Health Support into Youth Employment Programs:** Make mental health services a built-in component of employment initiatives. For example, the employment office and any “Youth Guarantee” schemes should include on-site or on-call psychologists and counselors. Job search counseling would be paired with stress management, resilience training, and if needed, referrals for clinical care. By normalizing mental health support as part of career development (rather than a separate, stigmatized service), youth who are job-seeking or in training can get help coping with anxiety, rejection, and self-doubt. International practice shows that such integration improves both well-being and employment outcomes<sup>57</sup>. Donors and government can fund pilot programs embedding counselors in vocational training centers and scale up those that show positive results (e.g., reduced dropout from training, improved job placement and satisfaction).
- **Tailor Programs for NEET Youth:** Launch a coordinated initiative to identify and re-engage NEET youth with integrated services. This program would deploy outreach teams (through municipal youth centers or NGOs) to actively find NEET young people in communities. It would offer each person a personalized plan that might include enrollment in a second-chance education program, short-term training linked to local job vacancies, and

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regular meetings with a youth worker or mentor. Crucially, the plan would address barriers: providing childcare for young mothers, transportation for those in remote areas, or counseling for those with mental health or substance issues. The Initiative should also coordinate closely with social assistance schemes, if a NEET youth's family receives social aid, participation in the program could be incentivized (and supported, not penalized). Dedicated funding would ensure this isn't an unfunded mandate on existing centers. The success of the initiative can be measured in NEET reduction: e.g., each year target a few percentage-point decrease in the NEET rate<sup>58</sup>, as well as qualitative improvements (self-reported well-being, confidence, and skills of participants).

- **Gender-Specific Interventions and Safe Spaces:** Recognize and address the different needs of young women and men. For young women, establish empowerment and support groups that focus on building self-confidence, leadership, and career skills, while also providing a forum to discuss mental health or gender-based pressures. These could be hosted at community centers or NGOs in each municipality (leveraging organizations already working on women's issues). Ensure that employment programs include components like safe transportation and sexual harassment protection so that young women feel secure entering workplaces, safety concerns should not be an added mental burden. For young men, initiate programs that encourage positive expressions of masculinity and emotion. For example, working with sports clubs to include mental health workshops could be effective. Train male mentors (coaches, teachers, professionals) to spot and talk about mental health with young men who may be reluctant to seek help. Moreover, consider a specific outreach on issues like substance abuse or anger management, which often are taboo but affect young men's lives and employment. By tailoring interventions, we acknowledge, for instance, that the anxiety of a young woman facing family pressure to marry early is different from the depression of a young unemployed man, and both

need attention in ways that resonate with them. These gendered approaches tie into Kosovo's gender equality commitments and will support more inclusive development.

- **Adopt digital mental health tools.** Leverage mobile apps and online platforms proven to reach young people. Digital mental health interventions (DMHIs) are “generally effective” for anxiety, depression and well-being in youths and can reduce costs and stigma<sup>59</sup>. Kosovo should invest in evidence-based e-therapies, e-counseling and self-help apps, especially to reach rural/underserved youth.
- **Implement Youth Mental Health and Well-Being Awareness Campaigns.** Combat stigma and encourage help-seeking through a campaign tailored to youth. This multi-media campaign (social media, TV, community events) should feature relatable young voices and perhaps public figures sharing stories of overcoming mental health challenges. Special focus should target young men, rural youth, and minority communities, adapting messages to resonate with each. The campaign should actively involve youth organizations in design and delivery. Beyond general awareness, it can publicize available services (e.g. a 24/7 youth helpline, school counselors, NGO programs) to bridge the information gap. The goal is to normalize discussions of mental health, so a young person feels it's as acceptable to seek help for anxiety as it is for a physical illness. This aligns with the European Commission's new Comprehensive Approach to Mental Health (2023) which emphasizes prevention and destigmatization<sup>60</sup>. Kosovo can localize that approach, with campaign impact measured by increased service uptake and self-reported attitude shifts in annual youth surveys.
- **Support Youth Financial Stability to Reduce Stress:** Mitigate the top stressor, financial insecurity, through targeted economic measures. Policymakers should bolster or create programs that put money in young people's pockets in productive ways, easing their stress while building skills.

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Options include expanding scholarships and stipends for students (so fewer worry about affording studies), offering modest paid internships or apprenticeships for all young graduates, and considering a form of “start-up grant” for young entrepreneurs or freelancers to kickstart their ventures. Additionally, improving access to credit or grants for youth-led businesses and agriculture startups can help those in rural areas. Each of these reduces immediate financial pressure and signals that society is investing in youth. Another aspect is improving financial literacy: incorporate basic financial planning in school curricula or community workshops, so youth can better manage what resources they have. While macro-level job creation is crucial, these micro-level supports can directly relieve stress for individuals and prevent desperation-driven choices (like high-interest debt or premature school leaving for a low-wage job). Monitoring and evaluation can track whether participants in such programs report lower stress and better mental health than peers.

- **Inclusive outreach.** Ensure policies explicitly cover marginalized youth: Roma, LGBTI and disabled young people often face unique stressors. Studies show inclusive policies (e.g. legal protections, anti-discrimination measures) correlate with better mental health among LGBTI youth<sup>61</sup>. Likewise, the Roma community suffers disproportionately from anxiety and depression due to poverty and discrimination<sup>62</sup>. Programs should involve representatives of these groups in design and deliver culturally sensitive support (e.g. Roma health mediators in clinics, peer-support for LGBTI youth, accessibility for disabled).
- **Mental health as a KPI.** Embed youth mental health metrics into education, employment and health strategies. For example, set targets for reducing school anxiety or increasing referrals to counseling. Require that school/workforce initiatives report on mental well-being outcomes, not just employment numbers.

- **Strengthen Cross-Sector Coordination and Data on Youth Mental Health:** Make youth mental health a cross-cutting priority by improving coordination and evidence. The government should establish a formal coordination body or task force that brings together the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, Ministry of Culture/Youth/Sports, Ministry of Labour, and key agencies (like Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Employment Agency) to share information and align programs. This body would oversee implementation of youth-related mental health actions in the Youth Strategy 2024–2032 <sup>63</sup>. It should also partner with international organizations (UNICEF, WHO, etc.) to adopt best practices and possibly secure technical assistance. A critical output should be improved data collection: include mental health indicators in annual youth surveys and Labour Force Surveys (for example, tracking the percentage of youth reporting depressive symptoms, or the percentage of NEETs citing health as a reason for inactivity). Over time, build a Youth Well-Being Index that is reported yearly, alongside economic stats, to keep attention on these issues. Better data will help target resources to where they are needed most (be it a region with higher youth suicide rates or a demographic group with low service uptake). In short, treat mental health as an integral part of youth policy, not a side issue, institutionalize it.
- **Engage the private sector.** Partner with local businesses and social enterprises to create internships that include mental health support. Incentivize companies to hire NEET youth (e.g. through wage subsidies) and train managers to recognize and assist employees' mental health needs
- **Leverage Diaspora and Regional Cooperation:** Broaden opportunities and support by leveraging Kosovo's diaspora and collaborating regionally. Many Kosovo diaspora professionals are willing to contribute back, create platforms for them to mentor young Kosovars, provide mental health expertise (e.g., diaspora psychologists offering tele-counseling hours), or invest in youth startups. This can alleviate some brain drain effects by turning

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it into “brain gain” for those at home. Regionally, Kosovo can learn from and contribute to Western Balkan initiatives on youth mental health and employment. Engaging in the EU’s Western Balkans Youth Lab or similar regional projects could bring new pilot programs (like the successful apprenticeship models from Slovenia or youth mental health mobile teams from North Macedonia)<sup>64</sup>. Additionally, consider bilateral agreements for exchange of specialists, for instance, training Kosovo counselors in countries with advanced youth mental health systems. By not working in isolation, Kosovo can accelerate improvements and give its youth more exposure and hope, seeing that their country is part of a larger movement addressing their generation’s issues.

# Conclusion

Kosovo's youth are navigating a delicate and demanding transition; one beset by economic uncertainty and often unspoken psychological struggles. This report has highlighted how mental health and the journey into employment are inextricably linked: financial and job pressures are weighing heavily on young minds, and in turn, mental health challenges can derail youths' trajectories in education and work. The evidence is clear that tackling one without the other will leave solutions only half-effective. A comprehensive approach, rooted in the realities of Kosovo's context, is needed to break the cycle of "youth under pressure."

Encouragingly, there are signs of recognition. Kosovo's strategic documents now acknowledge mental health and youth well-being as priorities. The task ahead is to translate these strategies into on-the-ground change that young people can feel in their daily lives. This means a classroom where a struggling student can get help before dropping out; a community where being unemployed doesn't equal being forgotten; a society where asking for mental health support is seen as normal and strength-building. It also means fostering an economy that gives hope, where effort is rewarded with opportunity, stemming the tide of emigration and despair.

The cost of inaction is high. If we do not alleviate the pressures on this generation, Kosovo risks losing not only productivity and growth, but the social fabric that youth represent, their creativity, energy, and stake in the country's future. On the other hand, the dividend of action could be substantial. A mentally healthier youth population will be more resilient, more innovative, and more capable of driving positive change, whether as workers, entrepreneurs, parents, or leaders. Reducing NEET rates and strengthening mental well-being is not only a matter of economic efficiency but a question of social justice. When young people are

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supported with dignified opportunities, public services, and collective care, society as a whole becomes healthier and more equitable. Addressing these inequalities can liberate the potential of thousands of young Kosovars to live fulfilling, self-determined lives - not as units of productivity, but as full participants in their communities and in shaping the country's future.

It is often said that "youth are the future." In Kosovo, youth make up a large share of the present as well, and their current experiences will shape the country's trajectory for decades to come. The findings and recommendations in this paper make one thing evident: investing in youth mental health and employment is not just social policy, but smart economic policy and state building strategy. By ensuring that our young people can transition into adulthood with support, dignity, and optimism, we lay the foundation for a more stable, prosperous, and inclusive Kosovo.

The road ahead will require collaboration between government ministries, international partners, civil society, families, and youth themselves. There will be no one-size-fits-all solution, and reforms must be iteratively refined with feedback from those they serve. But with each concrete step, a counselor hired, a stigma challenged, a training program launched, a policy revised, we reduce the pressure bearing down on our youth. In doing so, we allow them to lift their heads, look forward, and see a horizon of possibility in their own country. That, ultimately, is the vision this paper hopes to support: a Kosovo where young people can thrive mentally and economically, becoming the drivers of the country's development rather than casualties of its transition.

# Annex 1. Survey questions

1. How would you describe your mental well-being over the past 6 months?  
 Very good    Good    Fair    Poor    Very poor
2. What are the main things that cause you stress or anxiety right now?  
*(Choose up to 3)*  
 Financial situation  
 Job insecurity / unemployment  
 Academic pressure  
 Family expectations  
 Social comparison / social media  
 Lack of free time / burnout  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_
3. How often do you experience stress, anxiety, or sleep problems related to work, studies, or job search?  
 Never    Rarely    Sometimes    Often    Always

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4. To what extent do you feel that unemployment or job insecurity affects young people's mental health?  
 Not at all    A little    Somewhat    A lot
5. Do you think mental health challenges have ever limited your ability to study, work, or apply for jobs?  
 Yes, often    Sometimes    Rarely    Never
6. If you were struggling emotionally or mentally, who or where would you most likely turn to for help or advice?  
 Family    Friends    School or university counselor  
 Mental-health professional (psychologist, counselor)  
 Online resources / mental-health apps    Nowhere / I deal with it alone
7. In your opinion, what is the biggest barrier preventing young people from finding decent work in Kosovo?  
 Lack of opportunities  
 Skills mismatch  
 Lack of connections / nepotism  
 Mental health challenges  
 Limited career guidance

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

8. How much trust do you have that institutions (government, schools, NGOs, employers) understand and address youth mental health needs?

A lot  Some  Little  None

9. How optimistic do you feel about your future in Kosovo (education, work, and life opportunities)?

Very optimistic  Somewhat optimistic  Not very optimistic  
 Not optimistic at all

10. If you could propose one action or policy to improve youth mental health and employment opportunities in Kosovo, what would it be?

Introduce free or affordable mental-health counseling in schools, universities, and youth centers

Provide career guidance, mentoring, and soft-skill training for youth

Create paid internship or first-job programs that include mental-health support

Develop public campaigns to reduce stigma around mental health

Support youth-led startups and social enterprises

Offer flexible work and study options (remote, part-time, creative hubs)

## Youth Under Pressure

- Strengthen collaboration between ministries, NGOs, and employers on youth mental health
- Train teachers and employers to recognize and support youth mental-health needs
- Other (please specify):

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## Youth Under Pressure

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The Democracy for Development (D4D) Institute was established in April 2010 by a group of analysts who were increasingly worried that the state-building exercise had neglected democracy. D4D's vision is to promote an active and educated citizenry that participates fully in the public space and utilizes the public arena of representation and decision-making to deliberate and build consensus over resource allocation that is efficient, smart, long-term, and that brings about equitable development. D4D influences specific policy, promotes a cross-sectorial approach to problem solving, and tackles the institutional routine of decision making by recommending incremental improvements and operates with maximum effectiveness in order to fully promote Kosovo's stabilization and democratic development.



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