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Mental Health, Poverty, Risks, and Equality for Incarcerated Girls (Ages 14–17) in North Macedonia and Italy

Natasa Dimeska and Marjan Dabeski

Abstract

This paper examines the intersecting issues of mental health, poverty, and systemic inequality affecting incarcerated girls aged 14 to 17 in North Macedonia and Italy. Although constituting a small proportion of the juvenile justice population—only 2.6% in Italy and even fewer in North Macedonia—these girls face disproportionately severe vulnerabilities. The paper analyzes the socio-economic and psychological profiles of incarcerated girls, highlighting the overrepresentation of marginalized groups such as foreign-born minors in Italy and Romani youth in North Macedonia. It explores how poverty, lack of education, and absence of family or community support contribute to incarceration and complicate reintegration post-release. The study further investigates institutional shortcomings, including inadequate mental health services, the absence of girl-specific correctional infrastructure, and limited access to gender-sensitive rehabilitation programs. Drawing on national reports, EU legal frameworks, and recent legal and policy reforms, the paper calls for a rights-based, gender-responsive approach that includes educational continuity, mental health support, and non-custodial alternatives. The analysis demonstrates that a shift from punitive to rehabilitative, community-based models is essential to protect and empower one of the most vulnerable groups in Europe's justice systems.

Keywords: Juvenile justice, girls in detention, mental health, poverty, social exclusion, gender equality

Overview of Girls in Juvenile Justice Systems in North Macedonia and Italy

Girls aged 14–17 who come into conflict with the law constitute a very small percentage of the juvenile justice population in both Italy and North Macedonia. However, their marginal statistical representation belies the severity of the structural, social, and psychological challenges they face. Despite the fact that their incarceration numbers are low, these girls often confront a lack of gender-sensitive services, insufficient institutional infrastructure, and social invisibility. Their unique needs, including mental health care, trauma recovery, education, and reintegration support, are frequently unmet due to systems that are largely designed around male detainees.

Population Distribution and Institutional Infrastructure

In Italy, as of early 2024, only 13 girls were held in juvenile detention centers, representing a mere 2.6% of approximately 500 total juvenile detainees (Antigone, 2024). These girls were distributed as follows:

- 8 girls were detained in Pontremoli, Tuscany—the only dedicated all-female juvenile facility in the country.
- The remaining 5 girls were held in co-educational institutions located in Rome and Naples, raising concerns about access to gender-appropriate care, programming, and protection (Antigone, 2024).

Italy's juvenile justice system does recognize the principle of rehabilitation over punishment, but gender-specific accommodations are limited due to the low number of female detainees, leading to a shortage of tailored services such as trauma therapy, reproductive health care, and education programs specific to girls' developmental needs.

In North Macedonia, the situation has been more acute. Until 2024, there was no dedicated facility for incarcerated girls under the age of 18. Girls sentenced by juvenile courts were frequently placed in improvised units at Idrizovo Prison, a facility intended for adult women, or held in temporary arrangements that lacked both legal and psychological safeguards appropriate for minors. This arrangement was in violation of international norms, particularly the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which mandates separation of juveniles from adults in custodial settings (United Nations, 1989, art. 37[c]).

A legal reform adopted in 2024 amended the Law on Juvenile Justice, mandating that female juvenile offenders now be accommodated in the Tetovo Correctional Facility, which had previously only housed male offenders. This marks a step forward, though challenges remain in terms of transforming the Tetovo facility into a truly gender-sensitive and rehabilitative environment for girls (APT, 2024).

Social Background and Marginalization

In both countries, girls in conflict with the law overwhelmingly come from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds, including poverty-stricken households, ethnic minorities, and immigrant communities. Their pathway to detention often involves a history of trauma, domestic abuse, school dropout, and inadequate access to mental health or social services.

In Italy, systemic data reveal the following:

- 51.2% of youths in juvenile detention are foreign-born (Antigone, 2024).
- Nearly 48.7% of all minors admitted to custody in 2023 were non-Italian nationals (Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, 2024).
- Migrant children and children of asylum seekers are overrepresented, largely due to their limited access to community support and legal advocacy. Observers report that Italian-born minors with stable family and social networks are more often diverted to community-based alternatives, while marginalized youth are sent to custodial institutions.

In North Macedonia, poverty and discrimination intersect sharply with juvenile justice:

- Over 25% of the population lives in moderate poverty as of 2023 (Dimoski, 2023).
- The Roma minority—often living in segregated and impoverished communities—is significantly overrepresented among juvenile offenders.
- A 2024 Supreme Court judgment confirmed that Romani juveniles detained in the Tetovo Correctional Home were denied access to formal education during their incarceration (ERRC, 2024). As a result, many girls and boys left detention without even primary school completion, placing them at long-term risk of unemployment and social exclusion.

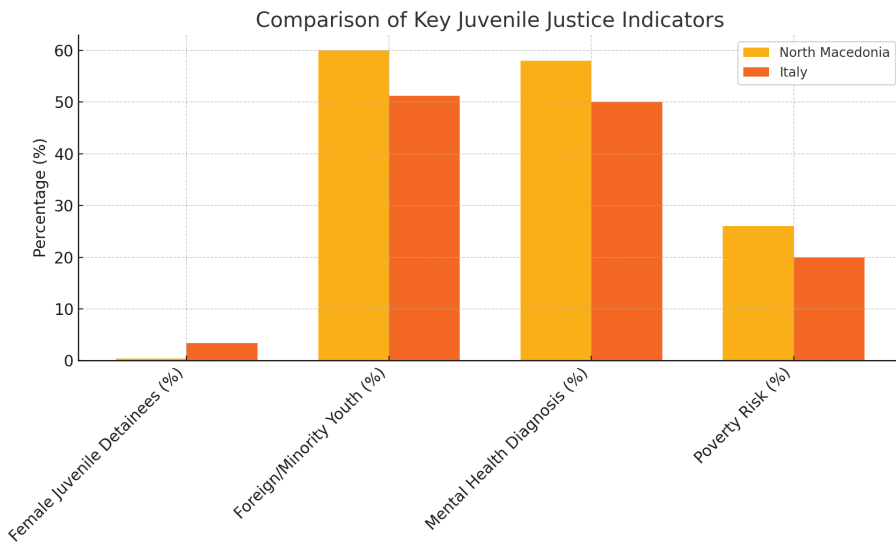
Implications and Gendered Vulnerability

This context illustrates how gender, poverty, and ethnicity intersect to create layered disadvantages for girls in detention. Unlike their male counterparts, girls are more likely to have experienced sexual abuse, neglect, or gender-based violence prior to incarceration. These prior experiences intensify their vulnerability and necessitate targeted interventions during detention.

The neglect of gender-specific programming within juvenile facilities, including the lack of trained female staff, mental health professionals, or access to menstrual hygiene, further alienates girls from rehabilitative opportunities. Isolation within male-dominated institutions can also increase risks of psychological distress and self-harm. This marginalization continues post-release, where limited reintegration support leads to high rates of recidivism, unemployment, or exposure to new forms of exploitation.

Figure 1:

Juvenile Justice Indicators – North Macedonia vs Italy



Notes: Data compiled from national and international government reports, NGO monitoring, and statistical bodies. Some figures are estimates due to lack of standardized juvenile justice statistics across countries.

Mental Health Needs and Socio-Economic Vulnerability of Incarcerated Girls (Ages 14–17)

International evidence consistently indicates that justice-involved girls experience disproportionately high levels of mental health issues. Compared to their male peers, they report greater incidences of trauma exposure, anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). According to a prominent U.S. study, nearly 84% of detained girls presented serious mental health needs, compared to only 27% of boys, with girls also far more likely to have attempted suicide (Quraishi, 2013). These trends resonate across different regions, including North Macedonia and Italy.

In North Macedonia, official reporting by the U.S. State Department in 2022 revealed that 58% of incarcerated juveniles under the age of 18 had diagnosed mental health disorders. Alarming, systemic overmedication was noted as a widespread practice, likely used to manage behavior in the absence of therapeutic support. Inadequate infrastructure further compounds these issues. Overcrowded conditions – with reports of 16 to 19 juveniles sharing a single cell – intensify psychological stress and hinder recovery. Despite the introduction of new facilities in Tetovo in 2024 for juvenile girls, longstanding gaps remain. Notably, the women’s unit in Idrizovo prison, where some girls were previously held, still lacks a permanent psychologist (APT, 2024).

Italy faces a similar crisis. Monitoring reports from 2023–2024 have documented a notable rise in mental health and substance use problems among youth in detention. However, access to consistent psychological care remains fragmented. Many juvenile facilities lack in-house psychologists, and few programs are specifically tailored to the needs of detained girls. Advocates have called for the introduction of “low-threshold interventions”—mental health support that is accessible without bureaucratic delay or extensive screening. The absence of such services risks exacerbating mental illness, fueling incidents of aggression, self-harm, or prolonged institutional dependency (Antigone, 2024).

The socio-economic background of incarcerated girls also demands close attention. Poverty is a recognized driver of juvenile offending, and in both North Macedonia and Italy, girls in conflict with the law often come from economically and socially disadvantaged contexts. In North Macedonia, roughly 26% of the population lives in moderate poverty, with even higher rates in Roma communities (Dimoski, 2023). Romani children are especially vulnerable to exclusion, and their

overrepresentation in juvenile facilities highlights the intersection of ethnic marginalization and legal vulnerability. A landmark 2024 court ruling found that Romani juveniles in a Tetovo facility were systematically denied access to education. Without basic literacy or vocational skills, these children leave the system more stigmatized and less prepared for reintegration (ERRC, 2024).

Italy's experience mirrors this dynamic. While foreign-born individuals make up only about 9% of the national population, they represent over 50% of detained minors. Many of these youth are unaccompanied migrants or children of low-income families living in precarious conditions. According to reports by Antigone and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (2024), Italian courts are more likely to impose custodial sentences on minors without stable family support—an indirect penalization of social vulnerability. In contrast, Italian youths with middle-class support networks more often benefit from alternative sanctions or community-based diversion programs. This disparity reinforces systemic inequalities and perpetuates cycles of disadvantage.

In both countries, incarceration thus acts as a multiplier of prior trauma. Girls enter juvenile systems already burdened by poverty, discrimination, and unaddressed mental health problems, only to face further institutional harm. Disruptions to education, the absence of gender-specific rehabilitation programs, and stigmatization upon release limit their chances for positive reentry. A comprehensive response must combine legal reform, mental health integration, and strong community-based services, especially in marginalized areas. Without targeted interventions, justice-involved girls remain locked in a pattern of vulnerability, rather than being supported through recovery and reintegration.

Detention Conditions and Gender-Specific Risks

Once inside detention facilities, adolescent girls face complex risks and unmet needs that justice systems—historically designed for male populations—often fail to address. Until 2024, North Macedonia had no dedicated juvenile correctional home for girls. Instead, sentenced girls were held in makeshift arrangements within the women's unit at Idrizovo, a high-security adult prison. This posed serious risks to safety, mental health, and age-appropriate rehabilitation. In response, a legislative reform in 2024 mandated that girls be transferred to the Tetovo Juvenile Correctional Home, previously used only for boys (APT, 2024).

While this reform marks progress, substantial gaps remain. National oversight institutions, including the Ombudsman and the European Committee for the

Prevention of Torture (CPT), have consistently reported overcrowding, unhygienic conditions, and inter-prisoner violence across Macedonian prisons (APT, 2024). These structural failings are mirrored in juvenile units, where girls have voiced concerns about inadequate living quarters, the absence of formal education, and a lack of vocational or psychosocial programming (ERRC, 2024). The Ombudsman’s 2022 report explicitly criticized the poor conditions and noted the near-total absence of educational and rehabilitative services for juvenile girls (Nikolic, 2024). Human rights monitors recommend an increase in trained female staff—guards, educators, and psychologists—to ensure that girls in custody can safely report abuse and receive trauma-informed care (APT, 2024; ERRC, 2024).

Italy’s juvenile justice system benefits from relatively better infrastructure, yet it too struggles to address the specific needs of detained girls. As of 2024, just 18 girls were incarcerated across the country—8 in Pontremoli (Tuscany), the sole all-girls institution, and the remainder in co-educational centers in Rome and Naples (Antigone, 2024). Due to their small numbers, detained girls often receive generic treatment designed for boys, including in-group activities, counseling, and education. Gender-specific services such as reproductive healthcare, parenting classes (for young mothers), or trauma-focused therapy are often unavailable.

Mental health issues among detained youth in Italy are rising, with monitoring bodies reporting increasing psychological distress and substance dependency (Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, 2024). However, staffing shortages mean that many institutions lack on-site mental health professionals. Girls with complex trauma histories are left without adequate support, increasing the risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation. Research from the National Center for Youth Law highlights that justice-involved girls globally exhibit significantly higher rates of mental health needs and self-harming behavior compared to boys (Quraishi, 2013). Without gender-responsive policies and sufficient mental health resources, these girls face re-traumatization and limited opportunities for rehabilitation. In both countries, the systemic failure to deliver tailored, safe, and dignified care for justice-involved girls highlights a critical gap in the protection of children’s rights.

Education and Reintegration Challenges

The harms of incarceration for girls frequently persist long after release, especially in the domains of education and reintegration. In North Macedonia, educational deprivation during detention is particularly severe. Many incarcerated girls—especially those from Roma backgrounds—do not receive any formal schooling while

in custody. A 2024 court ruling confirmed that Roma juveniles in the Tetovo correctional facility were denied access to primary and secondary education (ERRC, 2024). Consequently, these girls are released into society without basic education certificates, which severely limits their employment prospects and increases their vulnerability to reoffending.

This educational deficit also affects non-Roma detainees, as many experience interrupted schooling during confinement without remedial support. As a result, their reintegration into mainstream education or the job market becomes tenuous. The lack of structured vocational training and psychosocial rehabilitation in North Macedonia further compounds these challenges. There is no formal system for continuing education post-release, and mental health care continuity is practically nonexistent. Many girls leave detention with no access to therapy, medication, or support networks. In most cases, families or NGOs are left to fill the gap without systemic support.

In Italy, the legal framework mandates access to education for all juvenile detainees, and most facilities provide basic schooling. However, the short duration of many sentences prevents meaningful educational attainment. Moreover, reentry into regular schools post-release is inconsistent and largely uncoordinated. A 2023 monitoring report from Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo (2023) criticized Italy's juvenile justice system for lacking structured reintegration programs and post-release support services. It particularly noted the absence of transitional programs like halfway houses, mentorship schemes, or tailored job training for girls.

Unaccompanied foreign girls are among the most at-risk populations in Italy. Without family networks or dedicated aftercare services, these girls face high risks of homelessness, exploitation, and continued marginalization. Formal aftercare mechanisms—including counseling, vocational apprenticeships, and family-based interventions—are essential yet still insufficient. Stakeholders emphasize the need for holistic reintegration programs that address the multi-layered challenges faced by justice-involved girls, especially those from impoverished or marginalized communities.

Gender-Sensitive Standards and Equality

International legal and human rights frameworks underscore the importance of gender-responsive approaches in juvenile justice. The United Nations' Beijing Rules (1985) and Havana Rules (1990) establish foundational principles for the treatment of children in detention, emphasizing education, rehabilitation, and

proportionality. The Bangkok Rules (2010), which focus specifically on women and girls in the criminal justice system, advocate for gender-specific care, including mental health treatment, trauma recovery, and alternatives to custodial sentences.

Both North Macedonia and Italy have taken preliminary steps to align with these global standards. North Macedonia's 2024 legal reform mandating the transfer of female juveniles to a child-specific facility in Tetovo reflects movement toward a child-friendly justice model (APT, 2024). However, implementation remains a challenge due to infrastructural and staffing limitations.

Italy's juvenile system, which emphasizes rehabilitation over punishment, already incorporates diversion and community-based measures. Nevertheless, detained girls often lack equal access to gender-specific services and are disproportionately affected by systemic resource constraints. For instance, female detainees are less likely to receive reproductive health counseling or therapy for gender-based violence.

The 2021 European Union Strategy on the Rights of the Child explicitly calls for the use of detention only as a last resort and for the shortest appropriate duration (European Commission, 2021). It also emphasizes the right to education and health-care during detention, as well as post-release support. In line with these recommendations, both countries are urged to expand non-custodial alternatives—such as supervised community programs, foster care, and therapeutic placements—and to invest in dedicated services for girls. These should include trauma-informed care, gender-specific education pathways, and reintegration planning from the first day of custody. Only then can the juvenile justice systems of Italy and North Macedonia uphold their obligations to ensure equality, dignity, and opportunity for all detained children.

Recommendations: Enhancing Mental Health and Reintegration Support for Incarcerated Girls

In light of the findings, we propose the following strategic recommendations to address the mental health, educational, and socio-economic challenges affecting incarcerated girls in North Macedonia and Italy. These recommendations are grounded in a rights-based, trauma-informed, and gender-sensitive framework designed to transform both detention practices and the broader juvenile justice system.

Expand Gender-Responsive, Trauma-Informed Mental Health Support

Justice-involved girls frequently enter detention with extensive trauma histories, stemming from poverty, abuse, neglect, or exploitation. Detention, in such cases, may intensify psychological distress rather than alleviate it. A transformative approach necessitates facilities that offer tailored, trauma-informed, and gender-sensitive mental health care.

This includes the permanent presence of trained psychologists and mental health professionals who specialize in female adolescent trauma. Upon intake, each girl must undergo a confidential mental health assessment, which should be revisited regularly. Therapy plans—both individual and group-based—should be developed and continually adjusted to reflect progress and evolving needs.

Designating female professionals in key institutional roles—such as social workers, educators, and guards—helps foster trust and a sense of safety for girls, particularly those with prior abuse histories. Furthermore, each girl should receive a comprehensive case plan, integrating educational goals, therapeutic needs, and an evaluation of her familial and social environment. A girl with a history of neglect or violence should not be returned to that environment post-release without a rigorous professional family assessment.

Establish Structured Family Engagement Programs

Understanding and addressing the family context is fundamental to successful rehabilitation. Many detained girls originate from homes marked by poverty, violence, substance abuse, or emotional neglect. These factors often exacerbate or even catalyze the psychological distress and behavioral difficulties that lead to contact with the justice system.

A dedicated, multidisciplinary team—comprising a psychologist, social worker, and probation officer—should conduct professional family assessments to determine the emotional and relational dynamics within the household. These sessions should explore whether the girl experiences increased anxiety, withdrawal, or behavioral issues in response to family interactions. This step is vital in evaluating the appropriateness of reunification and informing decisions around post-release arrangements.

If familial contact exacerbates psychological harm, alternative care pathways must be considered, including foster care or supervised independent living. Structured family therapy, both during and after incarceration, is essential to rebuilding safe and healthy relationships when possible. These therapeutic sessions can help

address intergenerational trauma, communication challenges, and behavioral patterns that contribute to family conflict.

Improve Detention Conditions and Safeguards

Girls' dignity and safety must be upheld in all detention settings. In many cases, conditions in detention exacerbate trauma through overcrowding, lack of privacy, and exposure to harassment or institutional neglect. To mitigate these harms, facilities must:

- Provide separate sleeping quarters, gender-sensitive hygiene provisions (including menstrual care), and adequate recreational space;
- Prohibit solitary confinement for behavioral issues rooted in trauma or mental health challenges;
- Establish secure and confidential mechanisms for girls to report abuse or harassment;
- Ensure regular inspections by independent national and international bodies;

Hiring female psychologists and trained mental health staff is crucial, particularly in facilities like those in North Macedonia, where such positions remain unfilled despite repeated recommendations by the Ombudsman and other monitoring bodies.

Ensure Uninterrupted Education and Vocational Training

Education is not only a right but also a key pillar of rehabilitation. Many girls in detention have histories of interrupted or inadequate schooling. In custody, systems must guarantee access to formal education consistent with national standards.

Instruction should be delivered by qualified teachers, and curricula must be adapted for individual learning needs. Where a girl has missed prior schooling, remedial programs must be available. Certification should be pursued and facilitated through exam access and tutoring. Vocational training—particularly in digital literacy, entrepreneurship, or gender-relevant trades—must be a core offering, especially for girls nearing the age of legal adulthood.

Italy should continue investing in tailored short-term vocational models, while North Macedonia must implement judicial recommendations mandating the provision of schooling within detention settings, particularly for marginalized populations such as Roma youth.

Strengthen Reentry and Aftercare Systems

Effective reintegration requires early planning and holistic support systems. From the first day of detention, a girl's release plan should begin forming, involving mentorship, psychosocial support, and vocational pathways.

Halfway houses and supervised transitional housing must be available, especially for girls lacking stable home environments. Reentry support should include ongoing access to mental health care, job placement services, legal aid, and peer support networks.

Family members or guardians must be supported to become partners in rehabilitation. This includes:

- Parenting workshops focused on trauma-informed care and communication;
- Conflict resolution counseling;
- Material assistance (e.g., housing, food, transportation support) to reduce financial strain that may affect reintegration outcomes.

Unaccompanied minors or girls from dysfunctional homes require guardianship and ongoing case management to prevent homelessness, trafficking, or return to abusive situations.

Expand Diversion and Alternatives to Custody

Custodial sentences should be a last resort, in accordance with both EU standards and UN principles. Community-based responses that include social work engagement are often more effective in addressing the root causes of behavior while reducing harm.

Alternatives include:

- Supervised probation with regular psychosocial check-ins;
- Restorative justice practices, such as mediated encounters between victim and offender;
- Placement in therapeutic or gender-sensitive group homes that offer daily structure and support.

These approaches reduce recidivism, minimize institutional trauma, and provide a more appropriate developmental context for girls.

Address Structural Inequalities and Root Causes

The juvenile justice system reflects—and often amplifies—structural inequalities in society. Poverty, marginalization, ethnic discrimination, and lack of access to quality education form the backdrop against which many girls enter the justice system. Effective prevention and reintegration strategies must therefore address these broader social determinants that increase a girl’s risk of incarceration.

Girls in North Macedonia and Italy who enter detention are disproportionately from poor, minority, or migrant communities, where education is often disrupted, services are underfunded, and family life is shaped by economic instability or trauma. Roma girls in North Macedonia and foreign-born girls in Italy are consistently overrepresented in detention, highlighting the need to confront institutional biases and systemic barriers.

Governments must expand access to inclusive, quality education in underserved communities, particularly in Roma settlements, inner-city neighborhoods, and migrant-dense regions. Education access must begin early and include retention strategies, mentorship, and safe school environments that are responsive to girls’ needs.

Community-based programs for girls’ empowerment—including leadership training, mental health workshops, and violence prevention—should be prioritized. These initiatives build resilience, social capital, and confidence, equipping girls with tools to resist risky behaviors or exploitative relationships.

Schools, health clinics, and child welfare services must be empowered to identify at-risk girls before delinquency occurs. Early identification programs—like trauma screening in schools, social work outreach in high-poverty areas, and peer mediation—can serve as the first line of defense.

Equally important is systemic coordination. Governments must strengthen collaboration across education, health, justice, and child protection sectors to ensure girls receive continuous, holistic support. For example, a school counselor identifying behavioral distress should be able to refer the case to a social worker and health team without bureaucratic delays.

Preventive social services—including safe spaces, after-school programs, and mobile counseling units—can intercept vulnerable girls before they come into contact with the justice system. Investing in these services is not merely a welfare expense—it is a long-term societal investment in reducing incarceration, improving public safety, and fostering gender equity.

Finally, addressing inequality requires dismantling the intergenerational transmission of poverty and trauma. Programs that support caregivers through employment assistance, parenting support, and access to psychosocial care contribute to more stable homes and reduce the likelihood of family crises that precipitate justice involvement.

By adopting a structural lens and investing in communities, governments in North Macedonia and Italy can proactively reduce girls' contact with the justice system and build pathways to inclusion and dignity.

Conclusion

Girls in juvenile detention in North Macedonia and Italy reflect deep intersections of trauma, poverty, and gender inequality. Evidence shows they bear disproportionately high mental health burdens and are often failed by under-resourced justice systems. The pathways into and out of incarceration are rarely linear: many girls arrive in custody already harmed, and without significant psychosocial support, they leave further marginalized.

International frameworks—such as the UN's Bangkok Rules and the EU Child Rights Strategy—highlight states' obligations to uphold the rights and dignity of all children in conflict with the law. Implementing these frameworks in practice requires investment, training, and a gendered lens across all stages of the justice process. From intake assessments to family meetings, educational continuity to reentry planning, systems must be equipped to serve girls not as anomalies, but as full rights-bearers.

Giving incarcerated girls the opportunity to heal, learn, and reintegrate is not only a human rights obligation—it is a long-term investment in social cohesion and justice. By centering girls' mental health and life circumstances in justice reform, North Macedonia and Italy can lead by example in building rehabilitative, inclusive, and equitable systems.

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