

WOMEN'S LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION  
& SECURITY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

# **WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN WESTERN BALKANS 2024**





May 18, 2024; Vanja Macanović from Autonomni ženski centar / Autonomous Women's Center at the Femicide Memorial - National Remembrance Day of Women Victims of Violence, Serbia



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COVER PHOTO: March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march, Serbia

COVER PHOTO: Lara Končar

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, November 2024



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## THE KVINNA TILL KVINNA FOUNDATION

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation has defended women's rights since 1993.

For every woman's right to be safe and to be heard. Today we are one of the world's leading women's rights organisations, working directly in areas affected by war and conflict to strengthen women's influence and power. We work closely together with over 100 local partner organisations across 20 countries to end violence against women, reach lasting peace and close the gender gap once and for all.

Photo: Lara Končar

March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march banner, Serbia



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# Abbreviations and Acronyms

AJK	Association of Journalists of Kosovo
ASTRA	ASTRA – Antitrafficking Action
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BIRN	Balkan Investigative Reporting Network
CEDAW	United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women
Coalition Margins	Coalition Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalised Communities
CRINK	Centre for Roma Initiatives Nikšić
CSO	Civil society organisation
EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GEA	Gender Equality Act
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
hCa	Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Banja Luka
HERA	Health Education and Research Association
HRD	Human rights defender
IBAR	Interim Benchmark Assessment Report
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
ILO	International Labour Organisation
INSTAT	National Institute for Statistics (Albania)
Istanbul Convention	Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence
Kvinna till Kvinna	The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation
KWN	Kosovo Women's Network
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex and other sexualities and/or gender expressions
NAP	National Action Plan
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PES	Movement Europe Now (Pokret Evropa sad!)
Reactor	Reactor – Research in Action
Resolution 1325	UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SDR	Sustainable Development Report



Sida	Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
SLAPP	Strategic litigation against public participation
UN	United Nations
VAW	Violence against women
WCSO	Women's [rights] civil society organisation
WEE	Women's economic empowerment
WHRD	Women human rights defender
WRC	Women's Rights Centre
YUCOM	Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights



Photo: Maja Janevska Ilijeva

March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march, North Macedonia

# Purpose and Methodology

Women's Rights in Western Balkans provides unique longitudinal data on women's rights, serving as a benchmark for the six Western Balkan accession countries regarding women's rights and influence, for comparisons over time. This is the eighth edition of the report. The report is prepared as part of the regional programme *"EU Accession for Whom? Women's Rights and Participation in the Western Balkans, 2021-26"*, to strengthen evidence-based advocacy. This programme is funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) and implemented by The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation (Kvinna till Kvinna) in cooperation with women's civil society organisations (WCSOs) in the Western Balkans. It includes Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia. The overall objective of the programme is to strengthen women's rights and women's equal participation in decision-making in the Western Balkans, with the specific objective of increasing gender awareness in the European Union accession.

The four areas analysed in these annual gender benchmarking publications are women in politics, gender-based violence (GBV), security of women human rights defenders (WHRDs), and women in the labour market, as these are priority areas that Kvinna till Kvinna and partner organisations have identified for advancing women's rights. This eighth edition highlights two of the four indicators; women in the labour market and security for WHRDs. The scope of the current edition is to update relevant 2023/24 statistics and resources for each of the indicators, in each of the six

Western Balkan countries. For each indicator, and to the best of their abilities, authors followed up on accessible data and figures to determine to what extent the social position of women in the Western Balkan region improved or worsened. This report reflects data collected during the period of January 2023 to September 2024.

Data was collected through a desk study, using all accessible sources. As peer reviewers, WCSOs, partner organisations to Kvinna till Kvinna, gave their input. The recommendations are based on conclusions from the report; recommendations to governments come from WCSOs and recommendations to international actors are from Kvinna till Kvinna and WCSOs. The responsibility of the content, however, lies solely with the authors.

The authors recognise that there are limitations in the research and gender benchmarking indicators. Taking into consideration the scope of the assignment, timeframe and limited resources, the authors developed specific sub-indicators within each of the thematic areas. One of the challenges has been to limit the number of indicators, as there are numerous other indicators that could have been used to measure women's social positions. As with any desk study methodology, the greatest barrier remains the lack of updated information and data available from official sources in each of the studied countries.

We hope that this and previous editions of the report will provide useful tools, showing trends over time for women's rights in Western Balkans.

# Executive summary

In this eighth edition of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*, the focus is on the 2023-24 reporting period with a focus on the indicators of Women in the Labour Market and Security for WHRDs. One thing that was clear from the research process is that women's rights and social standing in the Western Balkans has not improved significantly since the first edition of this report according to the observed indicators. Rather than progressing, however slowly, democracy (within which is also women's rights) is indeed regressing. In 2024, **all Western Balkan countries were classified as hybrid or transitional regimes with fragile democratic institutions**, ineffective protection of political rights and civil liberties, and limited potential for sustainable, liberal democracy. The continuous shift from democratic aspirations to authoritarian tendencies has severely impacted gender equality and women's rights, further shrinking the space for critical and dissenting voices. Add to that rising numbers of femicides, declining access to social and economic rights and increased violence and threats against women's human rights defenders, and the picture unfortunately becomes rather bleak.

Regarding **women's participation in the labour market**, despite significant educational strides, women in the Western Balkans still encounter systemic barriers in labour force participation, often finding themselves relegated to lower-skilled and lower-paying positions when they secure employment. While governments in the region have pledged to prioritise and rectify this issue, progress has been slow and limited. Gender inequity remains entrenched in Western Balkan societies, within social frameworks and traditional labour divisions.

During the reporting period, the **gender disparity in labour force participation rates** remained a significant challenge, with women's regional activity rate in the labour market hovering slightly above 50% on average, compared to the men's activity rate, which exceeded 70%. Participation in formal employment is also closely related to issues of informal economy, a persisting issue in the region, as well as the gendered burden of unpaid and care work, which disproportionately fall on the shoulders of women across the region.

Western Balkan countries grapple with significant challenges in their social protection systems, particularly in safeguarding the rights of vulnerable groups of women and enhancing their economic autonomy. These protection systems, aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting social inclusion, are often unable to adequately reach and assist women in need. Presently, a considerable portion of social protection budgets in the Western Balkans is directed towards pension schemes, leaving scant resources for other initiatives, that could provide crucial support to women facing economic difficulties.

The position of **women human rights defenders** in the Western Balkans is increasingly precarious. Throughout the region, human rights defenders, women's rights activists, LGBTQI+ activists, women's and LGBTQI+ rights organisations, and independent media outlets face intimidation, threats, smear campaigns, and both digital and physical attacks, alongside an overall disregard by national authorities. The region has been characterised by **democratic backsliding** including shrinking space for civil society and activism. The situation is particularly challenging for (W)HRDs who engage with protection of women's rights, gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, the rights of ethnic minorities, as well as civil society organisations (CSOs) working for reconciliation in the region and demanding accountability for war crimes and crimes that took place during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.



Quote by Women Human Rights Defender from North Macedonia at the Berlin Process Gender Forum organised by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) in partnership with the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development, Berlin, Germany, 2024

**“Working towards gender equality and women's equal participation should not be seen as a 'cost', it is rather an investment.”**



# Context

The Western Balkans witnessed several concerning developments in 2023. Notably, the Kosovo-Serbia tensions escalated with the Banjska attack and provided for one of the worst episodes of violence in Kosovo since the war in 1999. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the recriminalisation of defamation by the Republika Srpska entity in July, coupled with worrying legislation concerning the media and civil society, intensified pressures on journalists in an already hostile environment, characterised by escalating hate speech and threats to physical safety. Serbia experienced a significant democratic decline marked by President Aleksandar Vučić's efforts to consolidate power, culminating in elections marred by irregularities,<sup>1</sup> following protests triggered by back-to-back mass shootings in May. Meanwhile, North Macedonia grappled with setbacks to the rule of law and persistent high-level corruption, exacerbated by clashes over constitutional amendments spurred by Bulgaria's veto on the country's European Union (EU) accession efforts. Similarly, Montenegro continued to grapple with the aftermath of a constitutional crisis in 2022, facing challenges from dysfunctional and corrupt municipal governments amidst ongoing instability at the national level.<sup>2</sup>

Taking economic parameters into consideration, 2023 indicated strong fiscal performance, and steady Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth contributed to a reduction in debt as a percentage of GDP in the region. Following a period of historic highs, inflation rates in the six Western Balkan countries significantly decreased in 2023.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, according to the Nations in Transit 2024 report, many developments in the Western

Balkans raised concerns for the health of democracy in the region and sustainable development. All countries in the region remained hybrid democracies, with only Kosovo shifting towards democratising hybrid. Serbia, on the contrary, moved towards a more autocratic democracy, while the other five Western Balkan countries seem to perpetuate their cyclic hybrid versions with little to no improvement, and with BiH holding the lowest-scoring democracy in the region.<sup>4</sup>

The United Nations (UN) Resolution on Srebrenica has sparked a wave of inflammatory rhetoric in the Western Balkans, both before and after its adoption. The Resolution condemns any denial of the Srebrenica genocide, recognising it as a historical event. It also condemns actions that glorify those convicted by international courts of war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. The substantial and negative reaction from Serbia had serious impacts on the fragile inter-ethnic relations of the region and in BiH. The intense backlash faced by those supporting the Resolution was further fuelled by politicians such as a Montenegrin politician who publicly dismissed the Srebrenica genocide as "fake".<sup>5</sup> Also in Montenegro, journalists from the Vjesti news outlet faced a barrage of insults for their coverage of the Resolution, with female journalists specifically targeted with gender-based threats and derogatory labels such as "prostitute journalists."<sup>6</sup> This surge in hateful rhetoric highlights the ongoing challenges in addressing sensitive historical issues in the region.

<sup>1</sup> Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, "Serbia, Early Parliamentary Elections, 17 December 2023: Final Report, OSCE, Warsaw, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> World Bank Group, "Invigorating Growth, World Bank Group, Washington DC, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>4</sup> Smeltzer, M. and Karppi, A., "Nations in Transit 2024, Freedom House, Washington DC, 2024, p. 10, (accessed 24 April 2024).

<sup>5</sup> Bavic, E., "My Dad is a War Criminal: UN Srebrenica Resolution Sparks Ugly Rhetoric Online, Balkan Insight, 17 June 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>6</sup> BIRD Monitoring, "In Montenegro, Journalists Insulted Over Srebrenica Resolution Reporting, BIRD Monitoring, May 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

The year 2023 in **Albania** was tumultuous, characterised by political accusations which culminated in fire and smoke within the parliamentary chambers.<sup>7</sup> Implementation and results of the so-called “New Justice” following the judiciary reform fuelled clashes between the political camps. The implementation has brought about significant disruptions, as previously untouchable influential figures face legal action, leading to political chaos and deepening divisions within both the ruling party and the opposition.<sup>8</sup> For example, ex-Prime Minister and leader of the opposition Sali Berisha was placed under house arrest while investigated for corruption<sup>9</sup> and accusations by the Special Anti-Corruption Structure were directed towards deputy Prime Minister Arben Ahmetaj<sup>10</sup> for corruption. In protest, opposition Members of Parliament set off smoke bombs and lit a fire in the Chambers. Unfortunately, the year failed to bring about any semblance of political stability or economic recovery. The ruling political party consolidated its power, increasing its influence over the country's institutions and setting the nation's trajectory according to its own agenda. Conversely, the opposition faced further setbacks during the reporting period, pushing them closer to the brink of destruction.<sup>11</sup> For 2024, Albania's political landscape continued to be, and is expected to remain, turbulent, with factions engaging in heated conflicts and vying for power.<sup>12</sup> Amidst these challenges, the demographic landscape of Albania emerges as a crucial factor in shaping the nation's present and future. The country is experiencing a demographic crisis, with significant population decline, driven by emigration in search of better opportunities, affecting various aspects of Albanian society, including the economy,<sup>13</sup> social cohesion, and overall development.<sup>14</sup> Addressing this crisis will be imperative to mitigate its potentially severe consequences on the nation's future trajectory.<sup>15</sup>

During 2023, **BiH's** path to membership in the EU was burdened by internal and external factors, although some limited progress was achieved, such as compliance with membership criteria.<sup>16</sup> The country continues to face barriers to accession posed by its internal structures, including challenges with war crimes prosecution, changes in electoral laws, and the lack of a transitional justice system. In 2024, at the time of writing this report, authorities in BiH were facing numerous challenges, particularly in the realm of reform efforts necessary for EU membership, linked to the 14 priorities outlined by the European Commission (EC), which BiH must fulfil before initiating formal EU accession negotiations. The nation's progress on these priorities will provide insights into the trajectory of BiH's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Achieving these reforms, however, is not only a matter of meeting EU requirements but also entails significant domestic political implications, as it necessitates constitutional and structural changes requiring broad consensus among representatives of diverse ethnic elites — a consensus that currently seems elusive. Additionally, BiH is set to witness changes in its local government bodies in 2024.<sup>17</sup> While some governmental initiatives may lead to marginal improvements in the economic landscape, overarching issues such as poverty, corruption, and increasing emigration rates require sustained efforts and commitment from BiH officials, beyond short-term policy manoeuvres. Despite potential progress in prosecuting major corruption cases, these deeply entrenched challenges defy quick fixes, underscoring the need for long-term, comprehensive strategies to address them effectively.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the issues of freedom and safety of the press must be squarely addressed. During 2023, the recriminalisation of defamation by the Republika Srpska entity in July, coupled with a series of concerning legislations on the media

<sup>7</sup> TopChannel Albania, “Kuvendi në flakë, avokati i quan deputetët e PD arrogantë dhe rrugaçë në sjellje | Breaking, [online video], TopChannel Albania, 4 December 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Gazeta Express, “Chaos in the Assembly, 18 opposition MPs are expelled for 10 days, Gazeta Express, 29 January 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>10</sup> TopChannel, “—Korrupsioni i Arben Ahmetaj Dosjet sekrete dhe aferat miliona euro Inside Story, TopChannel, 8 February 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>11</sup> Musabelliu, M., “—Albania political briefing: Albanias 2023 a year in review, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2023, (accessed 8 May 2024).

<sup>12</sup> Musabelliu, M., “—Albania political briefing: Albanias 2024 outlook and expectations, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>13</sup> Gomez, J., “Is emigration bleeding the economic life out of Albania?, Euronews, 1 December 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>14</sup> Marchais, I., “Depopulation in the Western Balkans, Jacques Delors Institute, Paris, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>15</sup> Musabelliu, M., “Albania political briefing: Albanias (de)population - shaping the course of the nation, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>16</sup> Borić, F., “Bosnia-Herzegovina external relations briefing: External Summary 2023, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>17</sup> Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, “Decision on Announcing and Conducting 2024 Local Elections, Central Election Commission of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>18</sup> Borić, F., “Bosnia-Herzegovina political briefing: The outlook for BiH Politics in 2024, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).



and civil society, exerted undue pressure on journalists and civil society activists, exacerbating an environment already marked by escalating hate speech and compromised physical safety.<sup>19</sup>

During 2023, **Kosovo** remained engaged in the EU-facilitated dialogue aimed at normalising relations with Serbia.<sup>20</sup> The process, however, was heavily affected by the resurgence of violence in the long-standing dispute between the two countries. Incidents during 2023, where violence erupted during the Banjska attack, underscored the fragility of the situation and derailed efforts to implement the terms agreed in the Ohrid agreement, signed in March 2023. Despite efforts by the government, to steer the country toward a reform agenda centred on the rule of law, Serbia's refusal to recognise Kosovo's independence remains a significant obstacle to democratisation and to EU accession.<sup>21</sup> Instability and violence escalated throughout the year, and sanctions imposed on Kosovo by the EU restricted funding and participation in talks and meetings. The sanctions also affected civil society as internal processes stalled, limiting structured dialogue with civil society related to the accession.<sup>22</sup> Kosovo's assertive stance in negotiations with Belgrade, coupled with limited consultation with the Kosovo Serb community, faced criticism from international partners, complicating the government's attempts to address this persistent challenge effectively.<sup>23</sup> Other challenges remain as well, including high emigration rates.<sup>24</sup>

Throughout the reporting period, **Montenegro** continued to grapple with the aftermath of a constitutional crisis that began in 2022, contending with dysfunctional and corrupt municipal governments amidst a lack of national stability.<sup>25</sup>

The political landscape of Montenegro in 2023 was characterised by power-centric strategies, resulting in political instability and posing challenges to its democratic integrity and European integration efforts.<sup>26</sup> Despite recent government formation, Montenegro faced renewed instability driven by internal power struggles within the dominant ruling party, Movement Europe Now (PES), as well as tensions within the broader ruling coalition, notably between the PES and the Democrats. These internal disputes underscore entrenched political interests that contribute to governmental instability, reflecting not only individual power struggles but also a broader contest for party influence.<sup>27</sup> Such conflicts deepen divisions and undermine effective governance in Montenegro, compounded by external influences on these developments.

As part of the EU accession process for candidate countries, Montenegro is required to harmonise legislation with EU *acquis*, including on gender equality, however, the 2023 EC Country Report for Montenegro indicated little progress in this respect. During the Intergovernmental Conference in Brussels, held in June 2024, Montenegro received a positive Interim Benchmark Assessment Report (known as IBAR) on the fulfilment of the interim benchmarks in Chapters 23 and 24, and received the final benchmarks for these chapters.<sup>28</sup> Soon afterwards, the Montenegrin Parliament voted for the reconstruction of the 44<sup>th</sup> Government of Montenegro. This is so far the largest Montenegrin government, chaired again by Prime Minister Miloško Spajić, consisting of seven Vice-Presidents, 25 ministries and a minister without portfolio, of which only 19% (6 out of 32 members) are women and 81% are men.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Smeltzer, M. and Karppi, A., "Nations in Transit 2024, Freedom House, Washington DC, 2024, (accessed 24 April 2024).

<sup>20</sup> European Commission, "Key findings of the 2023 Report on Kosovo, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>21</sup> European Commission, "Kosovo\* 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>22</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisations in Kosovo.

<sup>23</sup> Smeltzer, M. and Karppi, A., "Nations in Transit 2024, Freedom House, Washington DC, 2024, (accessed 24 April 2024).

<sup>24</sup> World Bank Group, "Net Migration Kosovo, World Bank Group, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Golubovic, V., "Montenegro political briefing: Political review of Montenegro in 2023, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>27</sup> Golubovic, V., "Montenegro political briefing: Challenges to stability in Montenegro: Political fragmentation and external influences, China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>28</sup> Press and information team of the Delegation to Montenegro, "Historic Day: Montenegro Receives Positive IBAR, Delegation of the European Union to Montenegro, 27 June 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>29</sup> Public Relations Service of the Government of Montenegro, "44. rekonstruisana Vlada Crne Gore, Vlada Crne Gore, 23 July 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

**North Macedonia** expected decisive actions to dismantle corrupt patronage networks, which did not materialise in 2023, leading to a continued cycle of power shifts among a small group of parties that have dominated politics for decades.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the country grappled with persistent socio-political and economic challenges in 2023, exacerbated by governance issues and the inefficient allocation of public assets. Corruption remained a pressing concern, further undermining public trust in both the political system and the judiciary. Despite the urgent need for reforms and infrastructure development, the year saw minimal progress, with slim prospects for significant improvements in the near future. The parliamentary and presidential elections held in May 2024 overshadowed developmental projects, focusing attention instead on the transitional phase accompanying changes in government leadership.<sup>31</sup> The new elections led to a governmental shift and the election of the first woman President in the country, supported by the right-wing coalition, which won most seats in the Parliament. Overall, the reporting period presented challenges for North Macedonia as it navigated through a pivotal election year, with the government not seizing opportunities for improvements, including addressing longstanding governance and corruption issues while pursuing meaningful reforms and sustainable development.<sup>32</sup>

According to the Nations in Transit 2024 report, **Serbia's** Democracy Score registered the most significant decline of all European countries, since 2005.<sup>33</sup> The beginning of 2023 seemed to follow a familiar pattern, marked by ongoing disputes over issues such as early elections, media legislation,

and economic instability. The school and mass shootings in May 2023, however, exposed deeper societal vulnerabilities, triggering protests against violence and culminating in snap elections characterised by power struggles.<sup>34</sup> The start of 2024 saw Serbia embroiled in a political crisis stemming from disputes over the December election results. The crisis, compounded by longstanding tensions over Kosovo, was exacerbated by Serbia not following the EU decision to impose sanctions on Russia, or reconsidering its ties with China, while Western pressure on Belgrade increased, to comply with agreements on normalising relations with Kosovo and following EU lead on other relations.<sup>35</sup>

The ongoing political crises in Serbia are also intricately linked to the Constitutional Court's decision<sup>36</sup> to annul the Serbian government's 2022 decree that halted the "Jadar" lithium exploitation and processing project by the British-Australian Rio Tinto mining corporation.<sup>37</sup> The situation was further exacerbated by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on the strategic partnership for sustainable raw materials between the EU and Serbia. This could lead to a further decline in public support for Serbia's European Integration in 2024, which was at 43% in 2023.<sup>38</sup> Public opinion<sup>39</sup> on lithium mining is starkly divided.<sup>40</sup> In response to these developments, environmental activists, groups, and civil society organisations (CSOs), alongside opposition parties' politicians, have called for mass protests and blockades of roads and railways, while the Minister of the Interior has declared that such activities will be viewed as illegal.<sup>41</sup> Mass protests against Rio Tinto and lithium mining were organised in August 2023, which led to the arrest of three activists.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Smeltzer, M. and Karppi, A., 'Nations in Transit 2024', Freedom House, Washington DC, 2024, (accessed 24 April 2024).

<sup>31</sup> EWB, 'New Government of North Macedonia voted in, plans to offer "legal and legitimate" proposals for the issue of constitutional change', European Western Balkans, 24 June 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>32</sup> Adela, G. M., 'North Macedonia Political Briefing: 2024 Forecast: Political, Social, and Economic Trends Analysis', China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>33</sup> Smeltzer, M. and Karppi, A., 'Nations in Transit 2024', Freedom House, Washington DC, 2024, (accessed 24 April 2024).

<sup>34</sup> Ladjevac, I., 'Serbia political briefing: An Overview of Key Political Events in 2023', China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>35</sup> Ladjevac, I., 'Serbia external relations briefing: Serbia in 2024 Forecast', China-CEE Institute, Budapest, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>36</sup> 'The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 'IUo-39/2022'', The Government of the Republic of Serbia, 16 July 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>37</sup> Уставни суд, 'Саопштење са 9. седнице Уставног суда, одржане 11. јула 2024. године, којом је председавала Снежана Марковић, председница Уставног суда', Република Србија, 11 July 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>38</sup> Министарство заевropske интеграције, 'Подршка грађана европским реформамa и даље на visokom nivou', Министарство Србија, 26 January 2023, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>39</sup> Approximately 55% of Serbian citizens oppose lithium mining, 26% are in favour, and are 19% undecided.

<sup>40</sup> TV Nova, 'Ђорђе Vukadinović predstavio istraživanje NSPM: Protiv rudnika litijuma 55,5 odsto грађана Србије', nova.rs, 18 July 2024, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>41</sup> Beta, 'Dačić: Policija neće dozvoliti blokadу пруга i puteva zbog protivljenja kopanju litijuma', NIN, 16 July 2024, (accessed 18 July 2024).

<sup>42</sup> Agence France-Presse in Belgrade, 'Thousands of Serbians protest in Belgrade against lithium mine', The Guardian, 11 August 2024, (accessed 18 September 2024).

Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 'Serbia: Activists Arrested and Released After Protesting Rio Tinto Lithium Project', Balkan Civil Society Development Network, 14 August 2024, (accessed 18 September 2024).



A prevalent concern unites the Western Balkan countries: a significant decline in population over the past three decades which persists with continuing emigration.<sup>43</sup> Each nation has experienced varying degrees of depopulation, contributing to economic challenges and social transformations. This trend, driven by negative natural growth rates and high emigration, shows no signs of abating and may persist for decades to come, exacerbating developmental pressures as young people and skilled workers seek opportunities abroad.<sup>44</sup> Compounding this issue is the irregularity of population census, often entangled in political disputes over ethnic and national representation, further complicating efforts to address demographic shifts and plan for future needs,<sup>45</sup> including addressing women's rights, gender equality, equal opportunities, and inclusion. Efficiency in addressing these issues is further undermined by the perpetually high levels of corruption throughout the region. Although some of the countries (such as Kosovo, Albania and North Macedonia) have made limited institutional efforts, partly intended for progress

towards EU integration, to combat corruption, people still see corruption as one of the largest problems in the Western Balkans.<sup>46</sup> In Serbia too, progress has been limited<sup>47</sup> and the new draft Strategy for the Fight against Corruption was seen as more of a result of the pressure to perform well for the EC screening process, rather than the result of long-term and careful consideration.<sup>48</sup> As corruption is an abuse of power for personal gain, and considering that men hold more power in society, corruption affects women differently than men. Due to their position in society and their different needs when it comes to social services, women are more likely to access and rely on services from educational institutions, social protection and healthcare systems. This is due to a multitude of intersecting push factors that place women in more precarious positions, in which they must rely more on social services, not least the fact that the burden of unpaid domestic and care work overwhelmingly falls on women (see: Forms of Unpaid Labour).<sup>49</sup>



March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march banner - "Dostojanstvo, plata, život"/"Dignity, salary, life", Serbia

<sup>43</sup> Nikitović, V., Magdalenić, I., Arsenović, D., 'The Demographic Future of Western Balkans: Between Depopulation and Immigration'. In: Zafeiris, K.N., Kotzamanis, B., Skiadas, C. (eds) Population Studies in the Western Balkans: European Studies of Population, Springer, 2024.

<sup>44</sup> European Migration Network, 'Annual Report on Migration and Asylum 2022 - EMN Report', European Migration Network, 2023, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>45</sup> Marchais, I., 'Depopulation in the Western Balkans', Jacques Delors Institute, Paris, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>46</sup> Büchner, I., 'Between anti-corruption reform and decline: Examining key actors, strengths and weaknesses in the Western Balkans and Türkiye's national integrity systems', Transparency International, Berlin, 2024, (accessed 16 August 2024).

<sup>47</sup> Bojović, M. et al., 'Preugovor Alarm: Report on the Progress of Serbia in Cluster 1', prEUgovor, 2024, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>48</sup> prEUgovor, 'New National Anti-Corruption Strategy: What is it For and Why Doesn't it Work?', prEUgovor, Belgrade, 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>49</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna Internal Policy Paper on Corruption.

# Women in the labour market

## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET

Women's involvement in the labour force is not only an issue of equity but also a crucial catalyst for economic advancement and overall prosperity. By dismantling barriers and advancing parity, a more inclusive and dynamic workforce can be cultivated.<sup>50</sup> Despite significant educational strides, women in the Western Balkans still encounter systemic barriers in labour force participation, often finding themselves relegated to lower-skilled and lower-paying positions when they secure employment. While governments in the region have pledged to prioritise and rectify this issue,<sup>51</sup> progress has been slow and limited.<sup>52</sup> Gender inequity remains entrenched in Western Balkan societies, within social frameworks and traditional labour divisions.<sup>53</sup>

During the reporting period, the gender disparity in labour force participation rates<sup>54</sup> remained a significant challenge, with women's regional activity rate in the labour market hovering slightly above 50% on average, compared to the men's activity rate, which exceeded 70%.<sup>55</sup> This discrepancy underscores persistent gender inequalities within the region's workforce, hindering economic progress and perpetuating social imbalances. None of the Western Balkan countries have taken adequate measures to address the economic issues that still remain.<sup>56</sup> The

covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated existing gaps, with over 40% of women reducing their paid work during the crisis, underscoring the vulnerability of women in the labour market. Participation in formal employment is also closely related to issues of informal economy, a persisting issue in the region, as well as the gendered burden of unpaid and care work, which disproportionately falls on the shoulders of women across the region. As a result, various measures and indicators of gender equality in the countries of the region, such as the Gender Equality Indexes, highlight the domains of “work” and “time” as the least performing ones.<sup>57</sup>

Despite the challenges posed by the remnants of the pandemic and other crises (such as the war in Ukraine), by the end of 2023, levels of real GDP in the Western Balkan countries surpassed pre-pandemic levels. According to the World Bank Western Balkans Regular Economic Report, during 2023, the region saw a surge in total hours worked, driven by employment expansion and the growing labour force, notably propelled by increased participation of women.<sup>58</sup> Additionally, the regional labour market exhibited positive performance throughout 2023, with unemployment rates decreasing across all countries, culminating in an overall regional rate of approximately 11%. Despite cautious optimism stemming from having weathered recent shocks, growth projections for

<sup>50</sup> World Economic Forum, 'Global Gender Gap Report 2023', World Economic Forum, Geneva, 2023, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>51</sup> World Bank, 'Unleashing Economic Growth Potential in the Western Balkans by Improving Gender Equality in Access to Economic Opportunities: Meeting of Western Balkans Ministers Communiqué', World Bank, 14 May 2018, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>52</sup> For example, most recent ILO data for the region, 2021, show that all other Western Balkan countries have female labour force participation between 40 and 53 percent (where Albania has the highest level of women in the labour market at around 53 percent, and apart from Kosovo, Bosnia has the second the lowest at 41 percent). In: Dobranja, D. et al., 'Gender Analysis: A Multifaceted Overview of Gender Justice in Kosovo', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo, Pristina, 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>53</sup> Stefanović, S., 'Economic (Non) Power of Women in the Labour Market in the Western Balkans', Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society, 2022, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>54</sup> The labour market participation rate, also known as the labour force participation rate, is a measure of the active portion of an economy's labour force. It represents the percentage of the working-age population that is either employed or actively seeking employment.

<sup>55</sup> Stefanović, S., 'Economic (Non) Power of Women in the Labour Market in the Western Balkans', Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society, 2022, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> See for example the references to Gender Equality Indexes for each of the Western Balkan countries, referred in the perspective sections of each country.

<sup>58</sup> World Bank Group, 'Western Balkans Regular Economic Report: Invigorating Growth', World Bank Group, Washington DC, 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).



the medium term have only marginally increased, indicating that while the Western Balkans is on track to return to pre-pandemic trends in 2024, meaningful convergence with EU income levels remains a distant prospect. Moreover, there is no data to show that the observed positive trends in formal economy and employment are coupled with a more gender-balanced participation and distribution of unpaid labour in the region. This leaves room for hypothesising that the double burden for women might have grown further.

Recognising gender equality as a fundamental human right is essential for cultivating inclusive

and cohesive societies. By prioritising initiatives aimed at empowering women economically, the Western Balkan countries can not only narrow gender disparities but also lay the groundwork for a more equitable, prosperous, and resilient future for all. In the subsequent sections of this report, the intricacies of each Western Balkan country are explored, examining opportunities and gender-related challenges within the labour market, addressing issues surrounding unpaid labour and shedding light on intersectional concerns that warrant attention and action.

## Albania

Albania has achieved important development milestones over the past two decades and the country is committed to paving a way towards decent work and sustainable development. Despite economic growth, significant challenges persist, particularly in demographics and economic transformation. While the economy shows signs of recovery in the post-covid era, the labour market is struggling to catch up, resulting in a slow decline of poverty but persistent issues with high unemployment rates.<sup>59</sup> Although there has been an increase in employment, participation rates remain low, and gender inequalities are eminent.<sup>60</sup> Even in areas where progress is notable such as in women's participation in decision-making at the national government level, it is mainly a matter of numbers, such as in the case of local governance, where despite the significant increase in the number of women councillors, their voices remain marginalised, and their fruitful participation in decision-making processes limited.<sup>61</sup>

Albania is part of the Global Partnership for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), where major challenges remain to achieve progress on SDG 8: *Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*. The 2022 Sustainable Development Report (SDR) index score of 71.63 suggests that Albania is more than two-thirds of the way towards achieving the status of highest-rank,<sup>62</sup> with a position of 61st out of 163 countries.

The SDR indicates that challenges remain particularly with “Decent work and economic growth”, and “while the SDG 8 index score is moderately improving, it is insufficient to attain the goal”.<sup>63</sup>

The most recent official data on labour market dynamics are issued by the National Institute for Statistics (INSTAT), in the “Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Fourth quarter 2023”.<sup>64</sup> During this period, Albania witnessed notable fluctuations in employment patterns across sectors and demographics. During 2023, the country faced a persistent problem with high unemployment rates and by the end of the year, the unemployment rate stood at approximately 11%, showing a modest decrease of 0.2 percentage points compared to the same period in 2022. Men aged 15-64 exhibited a higher employment rate of approximately 73% compared to women, whose employment rate stood at 61%. While men experienced a marginal increase of 0.7 percentage points compared to the same (fourth) quarter in 2022, women faced a slight decrease of 0.3 percentage points. With regards to unemployment, men experienced a slightly higher official unemployment rate of 10.8% compared to women at 10.5%. Comparing 2023 to the fourth quarter of 2022, men's unemployment increased marginally by 0.1 percentage points, while women's unemployment saw a slight decrease of 0.5 percentage points.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>59</sup> NILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, ‘Decent Work Country Programme 2023–26: Albania’, ILO, 2023, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>60</sup> I Dhuli, E., ‘Burra dhe gra 2023 – Women and Men 2023’, INSTAT, Tirana, 2023, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>61</sup> Erebara, G., ‘Women on Albanian Councils Told to ‘Shut Up’, Study Reveals’, Balkan Insight, 31 May 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>62</sup> A score of 100 indicates that all SDGs have been achieved.

<sup>63</sup> ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, ‘Decent Work Country Programme 2023–26: Albania’, ILO, 2023, p. 9, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>64</sup> INSTAT, ‘Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Fourth quarter 2023’, INSTAT, Tirana, 2024, (accessed 29 April 2024).

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.* p. 2-3

Youth, defined as individuals aged 15-24, experienced a decline in their employment rates, with an employment rate of 43% in the fourth quarter of 2023, marking a decrease of 1.5 percentage points compared to 2022, and 1.7 percentage points compared to the third quarter of 2023. The youth unemployment rate remained a critical concern, standing at 22% in the fourth quarter of 2023. Conversely, for individuals aged 30-64, the unemployment rate was comparatively lower at almost 8%, despite an annual increase of 0.3 percentage points, indicating ongoing challenges in securing employment opportunities for older age groups as well. Unfortunately, there is no gender disaggregated data for youth employment. The Young Professionals Network Young also posits that youth in Albania face many problems, some of which are specifically related to the school to work transition, ranging from; lived experience in drugs and alcohol use, the high likelihood of poverty, risks to changes in family structure, a decline in academic performance, the abandonment of further studies as a result of economic needs or constraints, as well as a high level of unemployment.<sup>66</sup>

Gender inequalities are further exacerbated when education is added to the equation, showing a gendered mismatch between education and employment patterns in the country. While women's employment continued to be significantly lower than that of men, the opposite held true for education. For the academic year 2022-2023, women students constituted approximately 59% of the total number of students in tertiary education.<sup>67</sup>

Women, on average, are paid less despite statistically being more likely to have higher secondary and tertiary education rates, and face greater workplace discrimination as a result of gender-based stereotypes. Other contributing factors include an overrepresentation of women in relatively low-paying sectors and unequal

distribution of family responsibilities leading to less employment and/or fewer hours of paid work, which is also the case in other Western Balkan countries. Accessing gender disaggregated data remains a challenge, and Albania has made little improvement in this regard during the reporting period. When it comes to the gender wage gap, the most recent data are those of 2022, as published by INSTAT.<sup>68</sup> The overall gender wage gap stood at 6% which is wider than that of 2021 (approximately 5%), though lower than other preceding years.<sup>69</sup> The gap is considerably wider in specific economic activities such as in the category of "Mining and quarrying; manufacturing; electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply; water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities" where the gap amounts to 27%. Similarly, the group of occupations categorised "service and sale workers" has a gender pay gap of 23%.<sup>70</sup> Similar trends have been observed and reported for the better-paid sectors like science and engineering and for health.<sup>71</sup>

Concerns about the concentration of women in low-paid jobs and limited social security coverage<sup>72</sup> are emphasised by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against All Women (CEDAW). Concentration of Albanian women in lower-paid jobs in certain industrial sectors and in the informal economy, where they are exposed to exploitation and without social security coverage, including paid and sick leave, remains worrisome.<sup>73</sup> Horizontal segregation keeps women in traditionally women-dominated sectors such as teaching or nursing. For example, in the academic year 2021-22, 77% of primary school teachers were women, and approximately 70% of upper secondary education teachers were women (which includes general education, secondary oriented education and vocational education).<sup>74</sup> An investigation by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN) on the Albanian textile sector uncovered many of the challenges faced in women-dominated sectors.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>66</sup> Young Professionals Network, 'National Roadmap of Youth Transition from School to Labour Market', Young Professionals Network, Tirana, 2022, p. 8, (accessed 3 October 2025).

<sup>67</sup> INSTAT, 'Education enrolment statistics', INSTAT, Tirana, 2023, p. 3, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>68</sup> See figures here: Dhuli, E., 'Burra dhe gra 2023 – Women and Men 2023', INSTAT, Tirana, 2023, p. 82, (accessed 9 May 2024).

<sup>69</sup> See for example data of the statistical office as cited: ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, 'Decent Work Country Programme 2023-26: Albania', ILO, 2023, p. 7, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>70</sup> INSTAT, 'Wages', INSTAT, n.d., (accessed 20 September 2024).

<sup>71</sup> ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, 'Decent Work Country Programme 2023-26: Albania', ILO, 2023, p. 7, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>72</sup> Social security refers to programmes designed to provide financial support and assistance to individuals in times of need, such as during old age, unemployment, sickness, disability, or after the loss of a breadwinner. These programmes are typically mandated by law and funded through contributions from employers, employees, and/or the government.

<sup>73</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'UN Women's Rights Committee publishes findings on Albania, Bhutan, France, Guatemala, Jamaica, Malawi, Nicaragua, Philippines, and Uruguay', OHCHR, 30 October 2023, (accessed 4 July 2024).

<sup>74</sup> Dhuli, E., 'Burra dhe gra 2023 – Women and Men 2023', INSTAT, Tirana, 2023, p. 82, (accessed 9 May 2024).

<sup>75</sup> Sinoruka, F., 'Women in Albanian Textile Sector Pay High Price for Lek's Rally', Balkan Insight, 8 March 2024, (accessed 15 April 2024).

Women employed in the textile sector often face the risk of poverty due to various factors inherent to their work environment. There can be unforeseen interruptions in work or reduced working hours, which in turn, can lead to challenges in meeting essential living and family expenses. This economic strain may escalate, causing financial disputes and insecurity for women and their families, perpetuating a cycle that is difficult to break. The closure or downsizing of textile factories in peripheral areas presents significant challenges for workers in finding alternative employment opportunities. While governmental data suggests that 43,000 individuals are employed in the textile industry PROEKSPORT ALBANIA, representing 700 clothing and footwear companies, estimates suggest the actual number exceeds 70,000, indicating potential discrepancies in official employment figures and potential informality.

Albania is still facing serious challenges also with regards to occupational safety and health. The number of fatal accidents at work has been increasing during the recent years and the sectors with the highest risk of accidents at work include mining, construction, and manufacturing.<sup>76</sup> Social

protection expenditure of Albania remains low, and coverage of income security is limited.<sup>77</sup> Spending is dominated by social insurance outlays (contributory program), which accounted for over 80% of total spending between 2015 and 2022. Gender inequalities are observable with respect to social security coverage. Such disadvantages not only have immediate effects on the wellbeing of mothers and children, but they also accumulate to deepen gender wellbeing gaps later in life, especially when women reach retirement. Although most recent accessible data for Albania are from 2021, it shows that while all men above retirement age are receiving a pension (100%), the same indicator is at 94% for women.<sup>78</sup> The EU Work-Balance Directive was introduced in 2019, and included amongst other things, minimum standards for parental leave including paternity leave, carer's leave, the right to flexible working arrangements for parents and carers, and safeguards against unfair dismissals, requiring member states to transpose the Directive in their respective national laws.<sup>79</sup> Albania, along with other EU accession countries in the region, has not adequately addressed work-life balance and has yet to harmonise legislation with the Directive.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

Comparing the labour market dynamics between 2022 and 2023 reveals some shifts. There was a marginal increase in the employment rate from 40.2% in 2022<sup>80</sup> to 41.5% in 2023,<sup>81</sup> indicating a slight improvement in employment opportunities. Similarly, the unemployment rate witnessed a decline from 15.4% in 2022<sup>82</sup> to 13.2% in 2023, suggesting a slight alleviation of unemployment pressures in BiH, though the unemployment rate can still be considered high.<sup>83</sup> Substantial gaps remain between women's and men's participation in the labour force, with men in BiH consistently

exhibiting higher activity rates, employment rates, and lower unemployment rates compared to women, highlighting the need to better examine and target interventions to promote gender equality in employment opportunities. According to the scores published in the Gender Equality Index for BiH 2023, in the sub-domain of labour market participation (the only sub-domain of participation calculated for BiH), BiH scores lower than in 2022.<sup>84</sup> Overall, for 2022, women's activity rate was at 36.1% while for men it was 59.6%. Women constitute 36.8% of employed persons,

<sup>76</sup> ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, 'Decent Work Country Programme 2023–26: Albania', ILO, 2023, p. 7, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>77</sup> Ymeri, S., 'Public expenditure on social care services June 2023', UNDP Albania, Tirana, 2023, p. 12, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>78</sup> ILOSTAT, 'Social Security Inquiry Database', ILOSTAT, n.d., (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>79</sup> Inclusion Europe, 'What is the Work-Life Balance Directive?', Inclusion Europe, n.d., (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>80</sup> CEIC, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina Labour Force Survey: Employment Rate', CEIC, n.d., (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>81</sup> Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 'Demografija i socijalne statistike: Trziste rada', Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 2023a, (accessed 29 August 2024).

<sup>82</sup> CEIC, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina Unemployment Rate', CEIC, n.d., (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>83</sup> See for example the analysis of: Izmirlija M. and Šehić D., 'Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023-2030): Gender Analysis', Prava za Sve, Sarajevo, 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>84</sup> In 2023 BiH the score was 60.9, which is 1.9 points lower in relation to the 2022 report score for the country (62.8) and 21.4 points lower than that of the 27 EU Member States (2023) (82.3). The BiH 2023 score is 32.4 points lower than best-performing Sweden's 93.3, and 8.0 points lower than lowest-scoring Italy's 68.9. Linx, L., 'Gender Equality Index: Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023', UN Women, 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).



and 50% of unemployed persons at BiH level, according to the Labour Force Survey 2022.<sup>85</sup> The biggest unemployment rate, 42.1%, is found for women in the age group of 15-24, which is higher by 10.9 percentage points than the unemployment rate of men of the same age.<sup>86</sup>

Discrimination in employment is prohibited by the provisions outlined in the Gender Equality Act (GEA), as well as the Law on Prohibition of Discrimination, along with all labour laws enforced at various government levels in the country. Still, women encounter discrimination throughout the employment process, spanning from job advertisements and recruitment to their ability to enter the workforce and eventual termination.<sup>87</sup>

In contrast, women in BiH have the highest levels of education in the region. In the academic year 2022/2023, girls comprised 60% of all students enrolled in higher education. The percentage of women students enrolled for full-time study reached 62% (with minimal gender disparity evident in part-time enrolments), compared to men's enrolment of approximately 38%.<sup>88</sup> This trend is consistent with previous years. Gendered differences are also manifested in employment with horizontal segregation in the labour market sectors and occupations, for example, women's disproportionately higher representation in the education sector, wherein about 73% of the primary education sector are women, 27% are men, and in the secondary education sector, 62% are women, 38% are men.<sup>89</sup>

A significant portion of the lower employment and activity rates among women can be attributed directly to their primary roles as caregivers for children and elderly persons. These roles are largely shaped by deeply ingrained social

stereotypes and an unequal distribution of family responsibilities between women and men.<sup>90</sup> Literature indicates that in approximately 94% of relationships surveyed, women are primarily responsible for all or most of the household chores as compared to only 6% of the cases where men were the primary responsible person.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, when it comes to childcare, women shoulder the majority of the responsibility in approximately 81% of surveyed couples, and 67% of the women prioritised family over work outside the home when faced with a choice between the two, highlighting the pervasive influence of traditional gender roles.<sup>92</sup> All this amounts to even lower rates of employed women with children under the age of six.<sup>93</sup>

Studies investigating the prevalence of sextortion (sexual extortion) in society, such as that of CSO Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (hCa) Banja Luka, have revealed its occurrence across both public and private sectors. In hCa's research sample of 232 women and 42 men across BiH, a substantial 76% of respondents acknowledged sextortion's existence in the workplace.<sup>94</sup> Reasons cited for this phenomenon include 16% attributing it to opportunities for job promotion, 15% to employment or recruitment processes, with additional factors contributing to its prevalence.<sup>95</sup> Meanwhile, Roma women are multiply discriminated, which exposes them to limited access to education, employment, and healthcare, rendering them particularly vulnerable to various forms of GBV (such as sextortion<sup>96</sup>), including in the workplace. While it is acknowledged that there is no systematic information in BiH available on employment outcomes disaggregated by ethnicity, there are evidence-based indications suggesting that individuals from the Roma community, especially Roma women, encounter additional

<sup>85</sup> Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 'Demography and Social Statistics: Labour Force Survey, year 2022', Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 2023b, (accessed 29 August 2024).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Izmirlija M. and Šehić D., 'Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023-2030): Gender Analysis', Prava za Sve, Sarajevo, 2024, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>88</sup> Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 'Demografija I Socijalne Statistike: Visoko Obrazovanje U Školskoj 2022/2023. Godini', Agencija za statistiku Bosne i Hercegovine, 2023c, (accessed 29 August 2024).

<sup>89</sup> Serdarević, N., 'Teaching and the teaching profession in a digital world – Bosnia and Herzegovina', ILO, Geneva, p. 13, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>90</sup> Linx, L., 'Gender Equality Index: Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023', UN Women, 2024, p. 37, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>91</sup> "The Impact of Gender Division of Family and Household Responsibilities on the Professional Lives of Working Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina." As cited in: Izmirlija M. and Šehić D., 'Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023-2030): Gender Analysis', Prava za Sve, Sarajevo, 2024, p. 6, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Helsinki Citizens' Parliament of Banja Luka, 'POLICY BRIEF 5: Integrating sexual extortion into labour laws and regulations', Helsinki Citizens' Parliament of Banja Luka, 2024, p. 1, (accessed 20 September 2024).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna defines sextortion as both a type of GBV and corruption used against (predominantly) women by (predominantly) men in positions of power, wherein sexual favours are obtained through the coercive power of authority, rather than through physical violence or force. Source: Förberg, J. and Poh-Janrell, J., 'They Came Together Not to Be Silenced: Gender-based Violence in Conflict & the Role of Women's Rights Organisations', Kvinna till Kvinna, Stockholm, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

barriers leading to social exclusion.<sup>97</sup>

Disparities within the labour market exert tangible effects on individuals' wellbeing and access to social protection measures. Data from the International Labour Organisation (ILO) concerning social security reveal a significant difference between men and women in terms of pension coverage upon reaching retirement age. While full coverage was reported for men under the indicator "Persons above retirement age receiving

a pension", women in BiH lagged far behind with only 44% receiving a pension.<sup>98</sup> This substantial gap, once more, underscores the systemic gender and intersectional inequities prevalent within the labour market. Such disparities not only reflect existing gender biases but also highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions aimed at promoting gender equity and ensuring equal access to social protection measures for all individuals within BiH's workforce.

## Kosovo

According to data from the Agency for Statistics in Kosovo, the labour force participation rate for individuals aged 15 to 64 was reported at approximately 39% in 2022, which at the time of writing this report were the latest available data from the Agency of Statistics in Kosovo.<sup>99</sup> As of May 2024, data for the second trimester of 2023 were published,<sup>100</sup> and according to these data, women constituted 30% of the employed population in Kosovo, compared to 29% during the same period in 2022. These findings, however, are incomplete for yearly comparison, highlighting the problem of the lack, or limited availability of, up-to-date gender disaggregated data. At the same time, with a labour force participation rate of only 22%, women in Kosovo exhibit the lowest level of participation in the region, falling behind all neighbouring countries. Meanwhile, men's labour force participation rate stood at approximately 56% for the same year.<sup>101</sup>

The gender labour gap in Kosovo, which denotes the disparity between men's and women's participation in the labour force, is thus substantial, reaching 34%. Although unemployment was highest among women aged 46 to 64 (57%), women of all ages were significantly more likely to be unemployed than

men.<sup>102</sup> Unemployment rates for men range from 19% for those between 30 and 45 years of age, to 28% for those from 18 to 29 years of age.<sup>103</sup>

Compared to women's participation rate of 22%, the inactivity rate for women in Kosovo hovers at approximately 78%, a figure that has remained relatively stable over the years.<sup>104</sup> The inactivity rate for men is approximately half of that of women. Such figures suggest not only greater barriers for women to enter and remain active in the labour market but also a high prevalence of women in the informal economy in Kosovo.

Informal work and lack of data availability in this sector remains concerning, especially as literature has indicated that women are almost twice as likely as men to engage in the informal labour sector, comprising 65% of informal workers, with women living in rural areas and women ages 46 to 64 being overrepresented in this sector.<sup>105</sup> The persistent challenge of unpaid household and caregiving responsibilities is one of the contributors to the alarmingly low participation of women in Kosovo's labour force.<sup>106</sup> Kosovo boasts a legal framework relatively supportive of gender equality, but the gap between legislation and implementation persists.<sup>107</sup> Further, provisions for

<sup>97</sup> Izmirlija M. and Šehić D., 'Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023-2030): Gender Analysis', Prava za Sve, Sarajevo, 2024, p. 5, (accessed 10 May 2024).

<sup>98</sup> ILOSTAT, 'Social Security Inquiry Database', ILOSTAT, n.d., (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>99</sup> ASKdata, 'Main labour market indicators by Variables, Year and Gender', Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>100</sup> ASKdata, 'Rezultatet e Anketës së Fuqisë Punëtore për TM2 2023', Kosovo Agency of Statistics, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> Farnsworth N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, p. 69, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p. 70

<sup>104</sup> Dobranja, D., Rozafa, J., and Loshaj, J., 'Gender Analysis: A Multifaceted Overview of Gender Justice in Kosovo', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo, Pristina, 2024, p. 15, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>105</sup> Farnsworth N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, p. 12, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> Fruttero, A. and Paolucci, M., 'Advancing Gender Equality in Kosovo: Challenges and Pathways Forward', World Bank Group, 8 March 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

achieving work-life balance in the country are scarce, and literature indicates that gender-based discrimination in the workplace also exists in hiring policies. Discrimination during the hiring process affects contract duration and renewal as many women have reported being asked about their family plans during job interviews, and some have experienced contract terminations or non-renewals once they became pregnant.<sup>108</sup> Further, formal maternity leave regulations may inadvertently perpetuate discrimination against women. While the law mandates that employers provide 70% of wages for six months of maternity leave, this requirement imposes a substantial financial burden on businesses.<sup>109</sup> On the other hand, the law stipulates only two days of paid paternity leave for fathers<sup>110</sup> and changes to the Labour Law that were expected in 2024, including those for parental leave, did not occur, in spite of long-term advocacy efforts from women's civil society organisations (WCSOs) towards harmonising the Labour Law with the EU Work Life Balance Directive, both in terms of paternity and parental leave. Consequently, these regulations inherently reinforce the disproportionate childcare responsibilities placed on women, perpetuating societal norms where women bear the majority of care and family duties.<sup>111</sup>

The employment of women in Kosovo is further hindered by unfavourable working conditions, including the prevalence of violence, particularly instances of sexual harassment in the workplace. WCSO Kosovo Women's Network (KWN) reports that Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian women are at higher risk of experiencing workplace sexual violence, as a result of their hindered access to justice.<sup>112</sup> In 2024, the Kosovo Agency for Statistics published data on GBV, indicating that in 2022, 22% of the interviewed women between the ages of 18 and 74 had been sexually harassed at work.<sup>113</sup>

Concerns regarding violence against women (VAW) in the workplace have been extensively documented in various analyses.<sup>114</sup> In 2019, Kosovo's Criminal Code was amended to include an article on sexual harassment, consistent with the EU Recast Directive and the Istanbul Convention,<sup>115</sup> foreseeing, among others, that sexual harassment by a person in a position of authority carries a higher sentence; from six months to three years, which also applies to workplaces.<sup>116</sup> It is asserted, however, that inadequate knowledge of the legal framework contributes to this issue, with many public employees being unaware of laws and regulations when it comes to addressing sexual harassment in Kosovo. Moreover, unclear reporting procedures exacerbate the problem, resulting in a notably low reporting rate. Reports from institutions responsible for monitoring public administration and handling complaints from civil servants rarely, if ever, mention instances of sexual harassment in Kosovo. Addressing these systemic issues is imperative to ensuring the safety and wellbeing of women in the workplace.<sup>117</sup>

While achieving, on average, higher education levels compared to men, women still encounter barriers to accessing quality employment or promotions within their workplaces. Many find themselves relegated to precarious, low-paying jobs, or low-ranked positions, perpetuating economic inequality. In fields such as healthcare and education where women are more heavily represented, a gender pay gap also persists because men tend to hold higher-paying positions.<sup>118</sup> Also, in sectors such as manufacturing, which is gaining considerable momentum in Kosovo's economy, with higher levels of both women and men engaging, gender differences persist with women continuing to earn less than men, as has been reported in previous editions of this report.

<sup>108</sup> Dobranja, D., Rozafa, J., and Loshaj, J., 'Gender Analysis: A Multifaceted Overview of Gender Justice in Kosovo', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo, Pristina, 2024, p. 16, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>109</sup> See the analysis of: Banjska, I., Rrahmani, G., and Farnsworth, N., 'Striking a Balance Policy: Options for Amending Kosovo's Law on Labour to Benefit Women, Men, Employers and the State', Kosovo Women's Network, Pristina, 2016 (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>110</sup> Gazeta Zyrtare E Republikës Së Kosovës, 'Ligji Nr. 03/L-212', Gazeta Zyrtare E Republikës Së Kosovës, 1 December 2010, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>111</sup> Dobranja, D., Rozafa, J., and Loshaj, J., 'Gender Analysis: A Multifaceted Overview of Gender Justice in Kosovo', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo, Pristina, 2024, p. 16, (accessed 19 September 2024).

<sup>112</sup> Farnsworth N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, p. 12, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>113</sup> ASK, 'Dhuna Në Baza Gjinore 2021/2022', Kosovo Agency of Statistics, Pristina, 2023, p. 8, (accessed 10 May 2024).

<sup>114</sup> Jusufi N., 'Understanding the Institutional Context: Assessing Gender-based Violence in Kosovo', Kosovar Gender Studies Center, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>115</sup> Council of Europe, 'Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence', Council of Europe, n.d., (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>116</sup> Farnsworth N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, p. 45, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>117</sup> Vilasaliu D. et al., Sexual Harassment in the Workplace in the Private Sector, Kosovar Gender Studies Center, 2023.

<sup>118</sup> Dobranja, D., Rozafa, J., and Loshaj, J., 'Gender Analysis: A Multifaceted Overview of Gender Justice in Kosovo', Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Kosovo, Pristina, 2024, p. 17, (accessed 19 September 2024).



The absence of available data for Kosovo regarding social protection coverage<sup>119</sup> presents a significant challenge in assessing the situation for women and men in the labour market, as well as for collecting data for monitoring or watchdog purposes, or even policymaking. Unlike neighbouring nations, Kosovo lacks comprehensive data within the ILO database on social security, hindering comparative analysis. Drawing from the information provided above, however, what can be deduced is that the gender gap in social security within Kosovo is

considerable, and disproportionately affects women negatively. This disparity underscores the urgent need for substantial reforms<sup>120</sup> to address systemic inequities and ensure equitable access to social protection for all individuals, as well as gender disaggregated data. Implementing comprehensive reforms aimed at bridging the gender gap in social security coverage is essential to promote gender equality and foster inclusive economic development in Kosovo.

## Montenegro

A key message of the first Gender Equality Index for Montenegro, published in 2019, was that to achieve gender equality, Montenegro needs to eradicate discriminatory practices, primarily in the domains of “power” and “money”.<sup>121</sup> Since then, limited visible progress has been made in this regard. The Gender Equality Index in Montenegro for 2023 was 59.3, which shows an increase of 4.3 index value (on a score from 1 to 100, where 1 represents complete inequality, and 100 represents full equality) compared to the index from 2019.<sup>122</sup> The latest index lacked gender disaggregated statistics in some domains as well as complementary qualitative analysis, which was provided in the first edition of the index. This means that the public lacked access to information on specific measures that contributed to the increase in values regarding each domain or sub-domain. Compared to the EU Member States, the Montenegrin Gender Equality Index shows the highest gap of gender inequality in the area of “money”, and the lowest gap compared to the EU average in area of health,<sup>123</sup> showcasing the disadvantaged position of women in society, particularly with reference to employment and economic empowerment.

Despite having higher education levels, women's employment remains low, making up

approximately 60% of the unemployed persons.<sup>124</sup> Since 2021, the CEDAW Committee have recommended Montenegro to officially address achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men.<sup>125</sup> WCSOs in the country have raised concerns on the accumulated disadvantages also among the economically inactive older women, where the gender gaps tend to widen even more.<sup>126</sup> The Third Periodic Report for CEDAW (2024) underscored several remaining concerning issues which included: the low employment rate of women, coupled with the unequal distribution of domestic and family responsibilities between women and men, significantly hampering women's employment opportunities; high levels of horizontal and vertical occupational segregation, as well as the low value assigned to feminised occupations.<sup>127</sup> The report states that the gender wage gap remains a persistent issue, standing at 21% in 2023, with a disproportionately wider gap at higher income levels and as age increases. This is also coupled with a 12% gender pension gap. Additionally, the removal of the words “women and men” from Article 9 of the Montenegrin Labour Law concerning equal pay for the same work and work of equal value raises concerns. Despite reports of gender-based discrimination in the labour market, such as contract termination due to

<sup>119</sup> Not to be confused with the term Social Security. According to the ILO, social protection coverage encompasses the availability, accessibility, and adequacy of social protection benefits and services to all individuals, ensuring a life of dignity and economic security.

<sup>120</sup> World Bank Group, ‘More Reforms Are Needed in Kosovo for Women to Fully Contribute Towards Country's Economy and Prosperity’, World Bank Group, 9 March 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>121</sup> UNDP, ‘Gender Equality Index produced for the first time in Montenegro’, UNDP, 29 January 2020, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>122</sup> MONSTAT, ‘Gender Equality Index for Montenegro’, Montenegro Statistical Office, 2023, p. 1, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> Ministry Of Human and Minority Rights of Montenegro, ‘Women and Men in Montenegro’, Statistical Office of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2022. In: Raičević, M. et al., ‘A Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections’, Women's Rights Center Association Spektra, Podgorica, 2023, p. 15, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>125</sup> Government of Montenegro, ‘The Third Periodic Report on the Implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)’, Government of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2021, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>126</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Montenegro.

<sup>127</sup> United Nations, ‘Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Montenegro’, United Nations, 2024, p. 9-10, (accessed 25 September 2024).

maternity, there have been no gender-based complaints filed with the Labour Inspectorate since 2018.<sup>128</sup> Moreover, women consistently make up a higher percentage of unemployed persons with disabilities.

According to the EC Country Report for Montenegro 2023, the gender gap in the labour market widened after the pandemic. Although the unemployment rate of women (aged 15-64) declined faster than that of men, women's activity rate (61%) remained significantly below that of men (approximately 74%).<sup>129</sup> Horizontal and vertical segregation<sup>130</sup> play a significant role in perpetuating the observed gender disparities. According to the latest available data from 2023, the total active population of the labour force consisted of 44% women and 56% men, while approximately 53% of persons outside the labour force were women and 47% were men. Women comprised approximately 43% of the total number of employed persons, and men comprised approximately 57%.<sup>131</sup>

As per data from the World Bank, women's representation in top management positions stands at a mere 15%, with men holding 85% of these positions. A joint advocacy initiative by the Women's Rights Centre (WRC) and Investment Development Fund brought some progress in harmonising national legislation with best European practices such as the Women on Boards EU Directive, to set quotas for women in managerial positions in large business entities. Amendments to the Law on Business Entities (Article 327a) included a provision that at least 40% of the total number of non-executive directors in the Board of Directors,<sup>132</sup> should be represented by less represented gender.<sup>133</sup> The adoption of the Law is planned for the fourth quarter of 2024, beyond the reporting period of this report. Ownership of businesses by women accounts for only 24%, and men's ownership for 76%.<sup>134</sup> At the end of 2022, a total of 39,852 micro, small and medium enterprises were operating in the country,

employing 129,473 people.<sup>135</sup> Around 25% of these enterprises were owned by women. Moreover, social support services for vulnerable groups within the country remain limited and unsustainable, primarily organised by CSOs without consistent support from local or national authorities.<sup>136</sup> As has been reported in previous editions of this report, CSOs often fill gaps where governments and institutions in Montenegro are failing, but they receive little to no governmental support or grants. WCSO WRC reports that beneficiaries who have survived GBV frequently receive state-assigned lawyers who lack sensitivity, specific expertise or specialisation, and even commitment to their cases. WRC's experience demonstrates that multiple parallel legal procedures are typically required for each beneficiary of free legal aid, with each new procedure necessitating the appointment of a new lawyer. This situation imposes an additional burden on women survivors and complicates their access to justice. Despite appeals from WCSOs with extensive experience in representing cases of human rights violations, the new Draft Law on Free Legal Aid<sup>137</sup> again fails to include specialised CSOs in the provision of free legal aid. These findings may indicate that, although not measured for 2023, the Gender Equality Index measuring employment and social protection might not have improved, whereas in the 2019 report on equality between women and men in employment and social policy, Montenegro's index value was 55 out of 100 points, where, for reference, the EU average was 67.4.<sup>138</sup> On the contrary, recent developments might have contributed to the opposite.

In Montenegro, civil society actors, including the Human Rights Action and WRC protested the Constitutional Court of Montenegro's decision to eliminate women's right to retire two years earlier than men, citing it as discriminatory. CSOs argued that the decision fails to acknowledge the persistent gender disparities in employment and caregiving responsibilities. Leaning on the fact that

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>129</sup> European Commission, 'Montenegro 2023 Report', European Commission, 2023, p. 74, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>130</sup> Horizontal and vertical segregation are types of occupational segregation that contribute to gender inequality and the gender pay gap. Vertical segregation measures the inequalities in the workplace, while horizontal segregation measures the gender differences in the occupation without the inequality component. Source: Blackburn, R. M., Jarman, J. and Racko, G., 'Occupational Segregation: Its Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions'. In Razzu, G., (ed.) Gender Inequality in the Labour Market in the UK, Oxford Academic, 2014.

<sup>131</sup> MONSTAT, 'Anketa o radnoj snazi', Montenegro Statistical Office, Podgorica, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>132</sup> At least 40% of the members of the supervisory board or at least 33% of the total number of all Director positions, including Executive and Non-Executive Directors.

<sup>133</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Montenegro.

<sup>134</sup> European Commission, 'Montenegro 2023 Report', European Commission, 2023, p. 108, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>135</sup> Ministarstvo ekonomskog razvoja i turizma, 'Žensko preduzetništvo – Zašto je važno i šta smo postigli do sad?', Ministarstvo ekonomskog razvoja i turizma, 27 July 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.* p. 107

<sup>137</sup> Draft Law is accessible at: Vlada Crne Gore, 'Predlog zakona o izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o besplatnoj pravnoj pomoći s Izvještajem sa javne rasprave', Vlada Crne Gore, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*

women in Montenegro still shoulder the majority of reproductive and care work, such as childcare and household duties, the CSOs argued that this unequal distribution of responsibilities cannot be ignored in making such decisions, as they are key elements for women to achieve economic empowerment. The CSOs advocated for measures of affirmative action to address gender inequalities and criticised the court's decision to place women in an even more disadvantaged position. They emphasised the importance of improving care services and working conditions for women to achieve genuine gender equality in employment.<sup>139</sup> With amendments to the law, the line Law on Pension and Disability Insurance prescribed a single age limit for acquiring the right to an old-age pension of 65 years of age and 15 years of service.<sup>140</sup>

Data regarding social security in Montenegro are notably scarce. The domain of money, particularly the subdomain of financial resources,<sup>141</sup> constitutes one of the lowest scores in the Gender Equality Index for Montenegro 2023,<sup>142</sup> underscore the significant disadvantages faced by women in the Montenegrin society. Several contextual factors are impeding the pace of progress in addressing gender disparities. Notably, women's participation in decision-making roles is limited, while instances of sexist and hate speech are escalating. Women who challenge traditional gender roles by engaging in areas historically dominated by men in the public sphere, such as politics, often face targeted attacks and overt instances of sexist hate speech.<sup>143</sup> Men who occupy key decision-making positions in the country failed to express a clear standing on this matter. Such cases are rarely prosecuted *ex officio* calling for an urgent need to change such institutional practice. Hostile attitudes and diminishing representation underscore the persistent challenges hindering gender equality efforts in Montenegro.

WCSOs are leading actors in pushing for more policy efforts to ensure sustainable development.

They require a meticulous examination of gender impacts in all future measures, particularly within the purview of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Dialogue, as gender considerations have yet to be integrated into policy formulation,<sup>144</sup> particularly related to the program "Europe Now 2" within the recently drafted Fiscal Strategy<sup>145</sup> and implemented to address existing disparities effectively. Economic and social planning should be grounded in comprehensive data collection, particularly regarding services provided by social work centres and the distribution of social assistance within families, which was not the case at the time of writing this report.<sup>146</sup> Accessing recent data in this field remains a challenge and has not been adequately addressed by Montenegrin institutions. The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Social Welfare bear joint responsibility in this endeavour, as reform measures within the social and child protection systems must work to alleviate the poverty experienced by women and children, particularly those from vulnerable or marginalised groups who are disproportionately affected. According to WRC, for this, the government must ensure *ex ante* gender analyses and prioritise the development and implementation of a comprehensive Strategy for the Fight against Poverty.



<sup>139</sup> HRA, 'The Constitutional Court of Montenegro Unjustifiably abolished the right of women to more favourable requirements for retirement', Human Rights Action, 27 October 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>140</sup> Ministarstvo rada i socijalnog staranja, 'Usvojen Zakon o izmjenama i dopunama Zakona o penzijskom i invalidskom osiguranju', Ministarstvo rada i socijalnog staranja, 30 December 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>141</sup> The domain of "money" measures gender inequality in accessing financial resources and economic situation of women and men, and it amounts to 61.9. The first subdomain Financial resources includes monthly earnings and income of women and men. The value of this subdomain is 48.2. The second subdomain Economic resources covers the risk of poverty and distribution of income among women and men, and its value is 79.6.

<sup>142</sup> MONSTAT, 'Gender Equality Index for Montenegro', Montenegro Statistical Office, 2023, p. 3, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>143</sup> Raičević, M. et al., 'A Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections', Women's Rights Center Association Spektra, Podgorica, 2023, p. 15, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> Ministarstvo finansija, 'Nacrt Fiskalne strategije Crne Gore za period 2024-2027. Godine', Ministarstvo finansija, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>146</sup> Raičević, M. and Stjepčević, A., 'Rodna Analiza Izvještaja Evropske Komisije O Crnoj Gori Za 2023. Godinu: smjernice Za Realizaciju Preporuka', Women's Rights Center, Podgorica, (accessed 25 September 2024).



## North Macedonia

In recent years, North Macedonia has demonstrated significant advancements in employment and social protection, characterised by a consistent reduction in unemployment rates, partly due to having among the highest emigration rates in the world,<sup>147</sup> and enhanced social assistance benefits.<sup>148</sup> Still, the EC's Country Report for North Macedonia for 2023 asserted that these advancements fall short of elevating the country from its current status of being moderately prepared to join the EU, particularly concerning social policy and employment matters. Similarly, input from the civil society organisations for the EC Country Report for 2024 strongly urged the EC to recommend to national authorities to promptly finalise and adopt important laws that would help advance in this area, including the Labour Code and the Law on Gender Equality, amendment of the Law on Civil Registry in accordance with the European Court of Human Rights rulings, and taking robust measures to address the growing anti-gender and anti-democratic movement within the country, including at local level.<sup>149</sup> A substantial portion of this assessment can be elucidated through a comprehensive analysis employing a gender-sensitive perspective, although it is often not possible due to a lack of gender disaggregated data.<sup>150</sup>

Most recent data on employment are published by the Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, in the Monthly Bulletin.<sup>151</sup> The unemployment rate by the end of 2023 was 13%,<sup>152</sup> with women's unemployment rate at approximately 11% and men's at 14%.<sup>153</sup> Comparatively, the labour force participation among women is low: official statistics indicate that the majority, 56%, of working-age women are

economically inactive, in contrast to a much lower rate of approximately 34% among men.<sup>154</sup>

Additionally, within the category of economically inactive women, 41% identify as "homemakers" as opposed to the total absence of unemployed men identifying as such.<sup>155</sup> Gender disparities in employment and labour force participation stem from a complex interplay of factors, encompassing dynamics of entering and staying active in the labour market, balancing work-life responsibilities, accessing social protection, and instances of discrimination and GBV in the world of work and the labour market. These issues manifest, among others, in both horizontal and vertical gender segregation within the labour market.

Issues of intersectionality emerge when looking at gender and parenthood, gender and ethnicity, and gender and age. Being a woman and a parent appears to discourage participation in the labour market. Literature on this topic indicates that the lack of accessible childcare services impacts work-life balance. Availability of childcare services is found to increase the opportunity for women's employment. Municipalities with at least one state kindergarten have a higher rate of women's employment, with an average of 35% employed women, while the percentage of employed women in municipalities with no kindergarten is 21%.<sup>156</sup>

This indicates a strong correlation between childcare services and women's participation in the labour market, in that women who have more access to childcare are disproportionately more likely to be able to obtain and maintain employment than women with little to no access to childcare services. CSO think tank Reactor – Research in Action's (Reactor) analyses reinforce<sup>157</sup> findings of the North Macedonia Gender Equality

<sup>147</sup> North Macedonia had 1/3 of its population emigrate to work abroad in the last decade. See for example: Macrotrends, 'North Macedonia Net Migration Rate 1950-2024', Macrotrends, n.d., (accessed 25 September 2024). Li, N. and Gade, T. P., 'Emigration, Business Dynamics, and Firm Heterogeneity in North Macedonia', IMF, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>148</sup> European Commission, 'North Macedonia 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>149</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'Gender Perspective in the EU Accession Process - Input for the European Commission 2024 Country Report for the Republic of North Macedonia', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>150</sup> Gender mainstreaming efforts within the official statistical system remain limited, and despite some efforts and improvements in recent years, key gender equality indicators and data are either missing or outdated. Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> MAKSTAT, 'Monthly Statistical Bulletin', Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 1 May 2024).

<sup>152</sup> Unemployment rate is calculated as a share of the number of unemployed in the total labour force.

<sup>153</sup> MAKSTAT, 'Monthly Statistical Bulletin', Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 1 May 2024).

<sup>154</sup> MAKSTAT, 'Inactive population by categories and age, annual', Makstat, n.d., (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

<sup>156</sup> Leshoska, V. and Mitrevska, B. A., 'Availability of kindergartens and gender equality in the labour market Correlation analysis at municipal level', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, p. 26, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>157</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'In a Nutshell: Brief Gender Analysis of the 2023 Country Report', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024). Leshoska, V. and Mitrevska, B. A., 'Availability of kindergartens and gender equality in the labour market Correlation analysis at municipal level', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 2 May 2024).

Index<sup>158</sup> that note concerns about childcare availability and variability across the country. According to the Gender Equality Index of Municipalities, using data from 2021, childcare availability varies considerably across municipalities, where 21 rural municipalities<sup>159</sup> lack public institutions for childcare and education, with an average of 1.3 kindergartens per 1000 pre-school-aged children.<sup>160</sup> This means that on average there is one state kindergarten expected to cater to 562 children, with most municipalities showing coverage rates be<sup>161</sup> low 30%. Measures and activities for women from rural areas undertaken by the relevant state institutions are not sufficiently efficient and effective to include women living in rural areas in the labour market.<sup>162</sup> An awareness-raising video created by Reactor on the correlation between kindergartens and women's economic empowerment (WEE) attracted a lot of negative reactions from the anti-gender movement in the country.<sup>163</sup> This exacerbates the gender gap in the labour market for parents and persons who disproportionately take on unpaid care labour.

As with other Western Balkan countries, North Macedonia has not harmonised legislation with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. Recent reports highlight concerns in terms of challenges faced by WCSOs in their participation across various aspects of the EU accession process.<sup>164</sup> Women's rights organisations and CSOs face considerable challenges associated with their timely, systematic, and meaningful participation in democratic processes such as public debates, including those on the new draft Law on Gender Equality and the Law on Labour Relations.<sup>165</sup> Important legal improvements in terms of labour legislation related to issues, such as shared parental leave, or the protection of pregnant workers, have yet to be implemented and have been stuck in the drafting processes for years.

Similarly, but at a larger scale, the gender gap is exacerbated among Roma women and men. While the unemployment rate in the Roma population is as high as 67% and the employment rate is only 23%, the employment rate among Roma women is at an alarmingly 8%.<sup>166</sup> Adding age and geographic location to the equation increases the barriers women face towards accessing the labour market and related benefits. This is best illustrated with the case of Roma women aged between 40 and 44, having the highest unemployment rate compared to any other categories of women, clearly indicating serious and deeply rooted issues of intersectionality in discrimination and exclusion.

Gender disparities persist within North Macedonia's social protection framework, with notable inequities when it comes to access to pension schemes and benefits. For instance, in some cases, women pay contributions to a pension scheme but may not be able to meet the criteria to benefit from said pension. Additionally, a persistent issue in North Macedonia is the lack of available data: the latest available data is from 2021 and reveals a substantial gap between men and women in terms of pension coverage. On average, 96% of men enjoy pension coverage, while women's pension coverage is significantly lower, with 41% of women receiving pensions. This stark difference of 55 percentage points underscores the systemic bias that disadvantages women in accessing social protection provisions.<sup>167</sup> This disadvantage is due to a combination of factors related to work patterns, societal roles and systemic biases. Women are more likely to engage in part-time, temporary, or informal employment, which often lacks social security benefits and pension plans. Women are more likely to take career breaks or reduce their working hours for caregiving responsibilities, such as raising children or caring for elderly family members. These interruptions can result in lower lifetime earnings

<sup>158</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'Gender Equality Index of Municipalities', Reactor - Research in Action, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>159</sup> Out of 80 total municipalities, 37 are categorised as "rural municipalities".

<sup>160</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'Policy Brief: Gender Equality on the Local Level in North Macedonia', Reactor - Research in Action, n.d., (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>161</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'In a Nutshell: Brief Gender Analysis of the 2023 Country Report', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2023, p. 12-13, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>162</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'Gender Perspective in the EU Accession Process - Input for the European Commission 2024 Country Report for the Republic of North Macedonia', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>163</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in North Macedonia.

<sup>164</sup> Ivanova, T. and Jolevska, I., 'Gender mainstreaming in the EU accession process: country assessment report', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 7 August 2024).

<sup>165</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'Gender Perspective in the EU Accession Process - Input for the European Commission 2024 Country Report for the Republic of North Macedonia', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>166</sup> HERA, 'Roma Reproductive Health and Social Wellbeing in the Republic of North Macedonia: Enlargement Review 2023', HERA, Skopje, 2023, p. 5, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>167</sup> SDG Labour Market Indicators (ILOSDG), 'SDG indicator 1.3.1 - Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems (%) - Annual', ILO, Geneva, 2024, (accessed 16 September 2024).

and reduced contributions to pension schemes. Lower earnings due to the gender wage gap translate into lower contributions to social security and pension plans, leading to reduced benefits in retirement. Pension systems are designed around traditional employment patterns for men who assume continuous, full-time employment. Similarly, pension formulas that are based on the final salary or the highest-earning years, can disadvantage women who may have lower peak earnings.

These disparities are not merely *de facto* but also enshrined in law, as evidenced by the exclusion of women registered as individual farmers from health insurance benefits under certain circumstances, such as illness, workplace injury, and pregnancy-related absences.<sup>168</sup> In contrast, male farmers do not face the same challenges when it comes to health insurance, indicating that the discrimination is on the grounds of gender. The absence of adequate provision and accessibility to social protection exacerbates the vulnerability of certain groups of women, further entrenching gender inequalities within the social fabric of North Macedonia. Addressing these structural barriers is essential to achieve WEE and ensure equitable access to social protection.

While gender disparities in employment and social protection have been extensively documented, efforts to address these issues remain scarce and fragmented. For example, extensive public consultations were held across the country on the draft Law on Labour Relations. It was reported, however, that the final phase of the drafting had

transparency issues, with CSOs being excluded from the process without explanation as to why. Additionally, the public debates were organised at a time when the final draft of the law was unavailable to the general public, for which a reaction was issued by the National Platform for Gender Equality and the Network for Protection against Discrimination.<sup>169</sup> Lack of transparency and meaningful participation of relevant parties in policymaking and law-making processes is unlikely to effectively map, address, and produce sustainable results in response to gender diverse needs of women and men in North Macedonia.

Another critical aspect of policymaking processes is the availability and utilisation of data. The absence or outdated nature of relevant data has emerged as a significant barrier to developing effective policies in North Macedonia and in the region, with even less accessibility when it comes to gender disaggregated data. The 2023 EC Country Report for North Macedonia mentions the importance of data in monitoring gender realities, particularly in areas such as the gender pay gap and pension gap. For North Macedonia, the most recent data on gender pay gap are from 2018<sup>170</sup> and relevant authorities need to produce official, comprehensive data on the unadjusted<sup>171</sup> and adjusted pay gap, as well as on disparities in pension coverage between genders.<sup>172</sup> Addressing these issues is essential to fostering informed policymaking and gender equality initiatives in the country. By relying on rigorous evidence, policymakers can make more informed decisions, ultimately leading to more effective societal outcomes and enhanced public trust.

<sup>168</sup> European Commission, 'North Macedonia 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 35, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>169</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'In a Nutshell: Brief Gender Analysis of the 2023 Country Report', Reactor, Skopje, 2023, p. 13, (accessed 1 May 2024).

<sup>170</sup> Kraljević, R. et al., 'Bridging the Gender Pay Gap in the Western Balkans? A Country Case Study of Croatia, North Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia', The Foundation for European Progressive Studies, Brussels and Zagreb, 2024, p. 15, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>171</sup> The unadjusted pay gap, also known as the raw pay gap, measures the overall difference in average earnings between different groups, such as men and women, without taking into account any factors that could influence these earnings differences. The adjusted pay gap accounts for differences in various job-related characteristics between the groups being compared. This gap provides a more nuanced understanding by isolating the impact of gender (or other demographic factors) on earnings, controlling for other influences.

<sup>172</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'In a Nutshell: Brief Gender Analysis of the 2023 Country Report', Reactor, Skopje, 2023, p. 13, (accessed 1 May 2024).



## Serbia

The status of women in Serbia's labour market closely mirrors that of the broader region, with persistent gender differences raising significant concerns when it comes to women in the labour market. The 2023 EC Country Report for Serbia concludes that in the domain of equal opportunities in employment and social policy, women in Serbia continue to face a distinctly unfavourable position relative to men in the labour market.<sup>173</sup> Though accessing gender disaggregated data continues to be a challenge in Serbia, the data that are available indicate that women are more likely than men to face barriers to accessing the labour market. By the end of 2023, the employment rate of women was approximately 45%, while 57% for men.<sup>174</sup> As in previous editions of this report, women continue to face lower employment rates than men in Serbia. Although women experienced a slight decrease in unemployment rates compared to men, by the end of 2023 (with unemployment rates standing at 8.8% for men versus 9.5% for women in Q4-2023), they still lag significantly behind in labour force participation.<sup>175</sup>

The issue of women's unemployment in Serbia presents a concerning trend that demands urgent attention.<sup>176</sup> Differences persist also in the dynamics of those formally participating in the labour market. Despite women's increased presence in formal employment, the gender pay gap remains a glaring issue, standing at 8.8%.<sup>177</sup> This indicates that, on average, women earn approximately 9% less than men, underscoring the systemic challenges that women continue to face in accessing equitable opportunities for economic advancement.

Within the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector, the gender pay gap is even wider, at 9.1%.<sup>178</sup> This disparity within a sector often lauded for its potential for gender equality

underscores the deep-rooted nature of inequalities pervading various occupational domains in Serbia. Compared with the 8.8% overall gender wage gap, the 9.1% gap within ICT serves as a reminder that, despite advancements in certain sectors, gender-based inequities persist, impacting women's earning potential and economic security.

Sectors predominantly populated by women workers have received inadequate attention from policymakers. The study on women workers in cleaning and care services in Serbia,<sup>179</sup> conducted by WCSO ASTRA – Antitrafficking Action (ASTRA), highlights the significant challenges faced by this women-dominated sector. The research reveals that the sector is characterised by high levels of informality, with nearly half of the individuals engaged in informal work, primarily in caregiving roles.<sup>180</sup> Despite the substantial presence of cleaning and care workers in the informal workforce, ASTRA posits that there is a lack of official records documenting the exact number of individuals employed in these occupations in Serbia.<sup>181</sup> The lack of data leads to even poorer policy-making processes. It also makes watchdog roles and monitoring of this industry difficult – a role often filled by civil society. The incomplete normative framework governing working conditions in this sector poses significant risks and insecurities for women (who are overrepresented in the sector) working within it. In September 2022, the European Parliament approved the Directive on Adequate Minimum Wage and the Council formally adopted it in October 2022, requiring member states to ensure national measures comply with the new rules by November 2024.<sup>182</sup> The Serbian state has done little to address these challenges during the reporting period, and has yet to develop and implement legislative measures that establish minimum standards for wages, working hours, and working conditions for household and caregiving workers. Additionally,

<sup>173</sup> European Commission, 'Serbia 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 119, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>174</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 'Labour Force Survey, IV quarter 2023', Републички завод за статистику Србије, Belgrade, 2024, p. 5, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Amnesty International, 'Trapped by Automation: Poverty and Discrimination in Serbia's Welfare State', Amnesty International, London, 2023, p. 34, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>177</sup> European Commission, 'Serbia 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 119, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>179</sup> ASTRA - Antitrafficking Action, 'Position and Challenges of Women Workers in Cleaning and Care Services in Serbia (2023)', ASTRA, Belgrade, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>182</sup> Pape, M., 'Directive on average minimum wages - Briefing', European Parliamentary Research Service, Brussels, 2022, (accessed 17.09.2024).

ensuring compulsory social and health insurance coverage for workers in this sector would be essential to protect their rights and wellbeing.<sup>183</sup> Relevant institutions have not addressed the lack of comprehensive legislation and policies during the reporting period, and there are few mechanisms for policymakers to safeguard the rights, and improve the working conditions, of women employed in cleaning and caregiving services in Serbia. As such, women in this sector who experience labour or health and safety violations do not have equal access to reporting mechanisms as women in formal sectors. This creates additional challenges, further marginalising women in the informal care sector, and compounding the precarity of their work.

Aside from the informal care sector, the prevailing disparities within Serbia's labour market overall contribute to a notable trend of economic vulnerability among women. Elevated levels of unemployment, in combination with the disproportionate burden of family care responsibilities borne by women, exacerbate these inequalities. Consequently, women in Serbia often face multiple disadvantages, including a heightened likelihood of lacking pension insurance and being at amplified risk of poverty. Indeed, across nearly all ages and demographic groups, women tend to be at high risk of poverty (see: In Focus – Feminisation of Poverty), a trend shaped by intersecting forms of discrimination.<sup>184</sup>

Observations on disparities in social security reinforce these observations. The ILO indicators of social security in Serbia paint a stark picture of gender differences within the pension system, underscoring the systemic inequalities that persist within Serbia's social security framework. They reflect not only the existing gender biases embedded within the pension system, but also highlight the broader challenges faced by women in accessing equitable opportunities for financial security in their later years.

Addressing these disparities requires targeted interventions that prioritise gender equality and

equal opportunities within the Serbian labour market. Such interventions could include reforms to pension policies to ensure fair and equitable distribution of benefits among retirees, as well as initiatives aimed at promoting WEE and financial independence throughout their working lives.

## FORMS OF UNPAID LABOUR

Labour encompasses various forms, spanning from formal employment and entrepreneurship, to own-use production (activities people do to produce goods and provide services for their own use) as well as other unpaid work, such as volunteer work or unpaid trainee work.<sup>186</sup> Unpaid care work, which can relate to participation in the informal economy,<sup>187</sup> stands out as a significant yet often overlooked component of labour; it entails extensive time, energy and resources devoted to tasks like cooking, cleaning, and providing care for family members, including the sick and elderly, within both domestic and community settings. Globally, women, particularly those who are married, have lower education levels, reside in rural areas, or care for preschool children, bear the brunt of the burden of unpaid care.<sup>188</sup> Consequently, this imbalance perpetuates a cycle wherein women are disproportionately relegated to the least financially rewarding and most precarious forms of work, whether within formal or informal economic sectors.<sup>189</sup> Unpaid labour also disproportionately limits women's ability to access an economic livelihood, enter the labour market, or participate in the political sphere.

One crucial objective outlined in the UN Sustainable Development Goal 5 – Gender Equality – is the recognition and valuation of unpaid care work, alongside the promotion of shared domestic responsibilities.<sup>190</sup> Achieving gender equality hinges on acknowledging and valuing unpaid care and domestic labour, which necessitates the provision of adequate public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies. Additionally, fostering

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>184</sup> Amnesty International, 'Trapped by Automation: Poverty and Discrimination in Serbia's Welfare State', Amnesty International, 2023, London, p. 34, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>185</sup> SDG Labour Market Indicators (ILOSDG), 'SDG indicator 1.3.1 - Proportion of population covered by social protection floors/systems (%) -- Annual', ILO, Geneva, 2024, (accessed 16 September 2024).

<sup>186</sup> International Labour Organization, 'Statistics on unpaid work', ILO, Geneva, 2024, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>187</sup> International Labour Organization, 'Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work', ILO, Geneva, 2018, pp. 4-9, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>188</sup> Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing, United Nations Children's Fund, and International Labour Organization, 'Family-Friendly Policies for Workers in the Informal Economy', UNICEF, 2021, p. 5, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>190</sup> The Global Goals for Sustainable Development, 'Gender Equality: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

shared responsibility within households and families, tailored to national contexts, is essential and a precondition for a functioning welfare state. Despite these aims, women continue to shoulder the primary burden of unpaid domestic and care work, and this type of labour is not yet captured by any reported employment figures.

The persistent gender imbalance in the division of unpaid labour serves as both a cause and consequence of women's economic and social marginalisation. Personal and family responsibilities, including unpaid care work, prevent many people from seeking employment or limit their availability to work at short notice. Apart from participation in the labour market, it also impacts women's working hours when they are employed. This, in turn, not only limits opportunities for decent work, but also curtails access to fundamental rights such as health, education, and participation in public life. Despite its crucial role in sustainable development, the value generated by unpaid labour and the associated costs have historically been overlooked in public policy and investment decisions. There is, however, a growing recognition of its significance, driven by sustained advocacy efforts, by organisations such as Reactor in North Macedonia, who have also contributed with data collection and analysis. Despite increased awareness, many countries lack comprehensive data on unpaid labour, with data collection often infrequent or non-existent. One primary obstacle to data collection is the cost and complexity of the default measurement approach, the time use survey methodology, which measures the amount of time people spend on activities. This challenge is particularly pronounced in regions such as the Western Balkans, where data on unpaid labour are limited or outdated. Examining what is available and accessible for the region reveals a less than optimistic outlook.

Informal employment is a prevalent feature of the Western Balkan economies and, as elsewhere in the world, is characterised by unsafe working

conditions, low productivity, irregular incomes, and limited access to resources such as information, training, and technology. Workers in the informal sector lack protection under labour laws and are typically excluded from social safety nets.

Economic factors such as low wages, poverty, and inequality contribute to higher levels of informality, while legal frameworks and regulatory policies play a significant role in addressing decent work conditions and reducing informality.

In the labour markets of the Western Balkan economies, data on informality are scarce, with gender disaggregated indicators often missing. In Kosovo, household work, especially that which is performed by women, is often not recognised as work despite its contribution to family economies, leading to underreporting in official labour force statistics and skewing assessments of gender and women's participation in informal labour. A comparative report of the Regional Cooperation Council on women's employment in the Western Balkans sheds some light on the regional situation. In Albania, while there has been a slight increase in the share of informal employment, government interventions have helped mitigate the rise. Similarly, Serbia has seen a decrease in women's informality rates, albeit not at the level required to close the persistent gender gap in informality rates. North Macedonia also shows improvements, with men consistently having higher informality rates than women. Limited statistics are available for other economies, but informal employment remains a substantial portion of the labour force in Montenegro and Kosovo. Examining informality statistics in Albania and North Macedonia reveals a negative correlation between informal employment and education levels, in that the higher the educational levels, the lower the rates of informality. Women are more likely than men to engage in informal work in the 55 to 64 age group, while men dominate informal activities across other age groups, regardless of education level. On average, women spend 2.3 times more time in unpaid work compared to men in Serbia, and 2.6 times more time in Kosovo.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>192</sup> International Labour Organization, 'World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2023', ILO, Geneva, 2023, p.35, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>193</sup> International Labour Organization, 'LFS modular time use measurement project: closing the gender data gap on unpaid domestic and care work', ILO, Geneva, 2021, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>194</sup> Shehaj, E., 'Regional Comparative Report on Womens Employment in Western Balkans', Regional Cooperation Council, Sarajevo, 2022, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>195</sup> International Labour Organization, '–Decent Work Country Programme 202326: Albania', ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, Geneva, 2022, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>196</sup> Farnsworth, N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, Pristina, 2024, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>197</sup> Shehaj, E., 'Regional Comparative Report on Womens Employment in Western Balkans', Regional Cooperation Council, 2022, Sarajevo, pp. 35-37, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.



Responses to the covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath do not seem to have helped in addressing and closing the existing gender gaps. When evaluating the crisis response, it is reported that 18% of the labour market measure and 1% of the social protection measures adopted, targeted the needs of women employed in the informal sector or high-risk businesses in the Western Balkans.<sup>199</sup>

These findings underscore the imperative for evidence-based policy approaches to address informality, considering multifaceted factors like social norms, legislative frameworks, and labour market structures in each of the Western Balkan countries. Moreover, the disparities in informality rates and gender gaps across Western Balkan economies underscore the diverse influences shaping informality. In the subsequent sections, we delve deeper into the situation of each Western Balkan country.

## Albania

Albania's informal economy is estimated to account for more than a third of its GDP, roughly equivalent to \$14 billion.<sup>200</sup> The ILO highlights the substantial presence of the informal economy within Albania's workforce. As of 2019, which is still the most recent accessible data, nearly 57% of Albanian workers were employed in informal arrangements.<sup>201</sup> Approximately 51% of these workers operated as own-account workers,<sup>202</sup> while women make up 49% of contributing family workers within this segment. The sectors most susceptible to informality include agriculture, wholesale and retail trade, and construction, where informal employment rates exceed 84%. Distinct differences in participation rates between men and women were observed, as informal employment outside of agriculture was more prevalent among men, constituting 59% compared to approximately 54% for women, whereas women were twice as engaged in informal employment in households.<sup>203</sup>

Measured for the first time in 2011, the Time Use Survey in Albania revealed a tremendous gender gap in terms of unpaid labour. At that time, the unpaid work carried out by men and boys from 10 years old, accounted for only 14%, compared to 86% contributed by women and girls of the same age.<sup>204</sup> Although this survey is outdated and needs

to be conducted again to have up-to-date measurements, other similar indicators show that the imbalance persists. For example, in the Gender Equality Index<sup>205</sup> for Albania in 2020, the domain of time scored the lowest index value of 48.1 (on a scale from 0-100, with 100 representing full equality), signifying a highly unbalanced distribution of care responsibilities and unpaid household work.<sup>206</sup> While the EU and respective Member States also grapple with gender disparities in unpaid labour, Albania's figures are notably lower, indicating a larger share of individuals, particularly women, involved in daily caregiving and household tasks. Targeted interventions are needed to address the unequal distribution of unpaid labour and promote gender equality in time allocation.<sup>207</sup> At the time of writing this report, there were no available data more recent than 2020, posing a challenge in assessing the situation in Albania following the pandemic.

Women predominantly bear the burden of caring for children, older family members, and persons with disabilities, as well as undertaking housekeeping tasks like cooking, with little participation from men. Since women carry a majority of these responsibilities, they do not participate in social activities that are important for their wellbeing and quality of life to the extent that

<sup>199</sup> Egger, M. S. and Bregu, M., "'Womens empowerment key to Western Balkans efforts to build back better from the pandemic', UNDP, 2021, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>200</sup> Quarterly Informal Economy Survey, 'Albanias Informal Economy Size: Informal Economy Size as Percentage of GDP(%)', World Economics, London, 2023, (accessed 15 May 2024).

<sup>201</sup> International Labour Organization, 'Decent Work Country Programme 202326: Albania', ILO Office for Central and Eastern Europe, 2022, Geneva, p. 6, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>202</sup> Own-account workers are a subset of the self-employed who work on their own account or with one or more partners. They do not employ any other workers on a regular basis.

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>204</sup> Elezi, P. and Rydenstam, K., 'Albania Time Use Survey 2010-2011', INSTAT, Tirana, 2011, p. 6, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>205</sup> The Gender Equality Index measures gender equality on a scale of 1 (full inequality) to 100 (full equality) in six core domains: work, money, knowledge, time, power, health and two additional domains: intersecting inequalities and violence.

<sup>206</sup> Babović, M. and Miluka, J., 'Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Albania 2020', INSTAT, Tirana, 2020, pp.18-20, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

men do. Conversely, men tend to spend more time engaging in leisure activities outside the home, including sports and cultural pursuits.

UN Women reports have highlighted concerns regarding the concentration of women in informal and/or low-value-added sectors, as well as entrepreneurs.<sup>208</sup> The UN Women's Rights Committee expressed apprehension regarding women's predominance in lower-paid positions within specific industrial sectors and the informal economy.<sup>209</sup> In these contexts, women in Albania are vulnerable to exploitation and lack essential social security coverage, such as paid leave and sick leave.

Finally, the 2023 EC Country Report for Albania highlights persistent challenges stemming from a sizable informal economy and a scarcity of labour with relevant skills. While measures to combat informal employment were expanded and business support services were enhanced, disparities remain and need to be addressed to achieve greater gender equality and WEE by addressing issues of informality and unpaid labour. There remained also a lack of comprehensive information regarding the efficacy of current efforts.<sup>210</sup> While strides were made in promoting a digital platform to enhance the quality of labour inspections, further actions are imperative to effectively curtail informality.<sup>211</sup>

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

The informal economy in BiH, although substantial, is characterised by limited available data. The ILO was set to revise standards for statistics on informality in 2023 to enhance understanding and measurement, but at the time of writing this report, the revised standards had not yet been published. An overview of informal employment in the country is provided by data from 2020 published by ILO.<sup>212</sup> Overall, approximately 31% of employment in BiH is informal,<sup>213</sup> with approximately 31% for men and 30% for women, with the vast majority (91%) occurring within the informal sector, and only about 9% within the formal sector. The covid-19 pandemic exacerbated vulnerabilities within the informal economy, impacting workers who are often among the most vulnerable in society. Of particular concern was, and remains, the "invisible" category of women who are informally employed to perform housework in private households, where they often face discrimination and are at risk of being exposed to abuse and exploitation. The ILO Convention on Domestic Workers No. 189 from 2011, according to which the state would assume the obligation to guarantee the same basic labour

rights that are available to other workers, has not yet been ratified in BiH.<sup>214</sup>

The situation of unpaid labour in BiH is of significant concern, particularly for women, as highlighted by disparities in household responsibilities. Statistics reveal substantial gender gaps in performing daily tasks such as cooking, cleaning and laundry, with women shouldering the majority of these duties. A 2023 study<sup>215</sup> revealed that women spend over six hours a day on unpaid care work, including tasks such as cooking, cleaning, childcare and elderly care, while men contribute just over three hours. For example, 85% of women reported cooking at least once a day but this was only true for 27% of men. Similar differences were noted when it came to other household tasks, such as cleaning (done daily by 23% of men and 78% of women) and laundry and ironing (done daily by 16% of men and 53% of women).<sup>216</sup> The examination of two main subdomains - care activities and social activities—further elucidates the unequal distribution of unpaid labour. Women, especially those living in rural areas, dedicate significantly

<sup>208</sup> UN Women, 'Economic Empowerment', UN Women Europe and Central Asia, Istanbul, n.d., (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>209</sup> UN Women's Rights Committee, 'UN women's rights committee publishes findings on Albania, Bhutan, France, Guatemala, Jamaica, Malawi, Nicaragua, Philippines, and Uruguay', OHCHR, Geneva, 2023, (accessed 15 April 2024).

<sup>210</sup> European Commission, 'Albania 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 57, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 100.

<sup>212</sup> International Labour Organization, 'Overview of the informal economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina', ILO, Geneva, 2020, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>213</sup> See also Lucid Linx d.o.o. Sarajevo, 'Gender Equality Index for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023', UN Women, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024, p. 25, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>214</sup> Hanušić Bećirović, A. et al., '–Alternativni CEDAW izvještaj: Izvještaj organizacija civilnog društva o provedbi Konvencije o eliminaciji svih oblika diskriminacije žena u Bosni i Hercegovini 2019/2023', Helsinški parlament građana Banjaluka and Prava za sve, Sarajevo, 2023, p. 73, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>215</sup> UN Women, 'Baseline Study on Care Economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Overview of the Key Denominators, Policy and Programming Options', UN Women, Sarajevo, 2023, pp. 59-61, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Even among employed individuals, women spend more time on care responsibilities than their male counterparts, which poses challenges for achieving WEE in BiH.

The unfair share of unpaid care work contributes to the high percentage of economically inactive women in BiH, who for a long time have been emphasising household responsibilities and childcare as primary reasons for not pursuing paid employment. Other literature on this topic reinforces the message. In approximately 94% of relationships, all or most of the household chores are done by women. Caring for children is again primarily women's responsibility in as many as approximately 81% of surveyed couples. As a result, almost 7 out of 10 women (67%), when faced with a choice between paid work and family, almost always or more often prioritised family. This phenomenon further exacerbates gender disparities in the labour market, leading to one of the highest women's unemployment rates in the region. This is particularly true for women with children under the age of six. The unequal distribution of caregiving responsibilities not only hinders women's economic participation but also perpetuates societal norms and traditional gender roles. Retrieving accessible data which may reveal more in terms of how issues of intersectionality may affect national minorities, such as Roma

women, or other vulnerable groups was not possible.

The BiH Gender Equality Index indicated that the poorest performing domain is "time" (calculated for the first time in 2023), which includes the sub-domains of care activities and social activities. While direct comparison with EU scores is not feasible due to methodological differences in surveys, data provide valuable insight into gender disparities within the country and ongoing trends.

Qualitative data shed light on the awareness among women regarding the unequal distribution of unpaid labour. Despite aspirations for equal sharing of household duties, respondents express scepticism, citing the discrepancy between idealised scenarios and the realities of daily life. In recent years there has been some progress in BiH when it comes to raising awareness on the well-documented contribution of unpaid care work to the economy, with the care sector accounting for approximately 15% of total employment, while much of this labour performed by women remains unrecognised and unpaid. Efforts to recognise, reduce, and redistribute care responsibilities are essential for achieving gender equality, economic development, and WEE in BiH, but necessitates comprehensive policies to ensure a more equitable division of labour and opportunities for women in the workforce.

## Kosovo

Kosovo's status as the youngest independent country in Europe, declared in 2008, comes with both opportunities and challenges, particularly to its economic development. The reliance on consumption, infrastructure investment and remittances indicates underdeveloped production capacities, posing hurdles to sustainable growth.<sup>226</sup> One of the most pressing challenges, however, is the significant presence of the informal economy,

which has profound implications for Kosovo's economic stability and development trajectory. Reports indicate that the informal economy constitutes over 30% of the country's GDP, amounting to approximately 1.8 billion EUR annually - a figure nearly equivalent to the state's yearly budget.<sup>227</sup> This pervasive informality weakens the rule of law, and spans various sectors, including construction, services, trade and

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>218</sup> Hadziristic, T., 'Is Bosnia the worst place in Europe to be a woman?', openDemocracy, 5 December 2014, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>219</sup> Šehić, D. and Ćatović, A., 'Zastupljenost žena na rukovodećim pozicijama javnih preduzeća u Bosni i Hercegovini', PRAVA ZA SVE, Sarajevo, 2022, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>221</sup> Izmirlija M. and Šehić D., 'Employment Strategy in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (2023-2030): Gender Analysis', PRAVA ZA SVE, Sarajevo, 2024, p. 6, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>222</sup> Lucid Linx d.o.o. Sarajevo, 'Gender Equality Index for Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023', UN Women, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024, p. 10, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>224</sup> UN Women, 'Baseline Study on Care Economy in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Overview of the Key Denominators, Policy and Programming Options', UN Women, Sarajevo, 2023, pp. 61, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>226</sup> Sahiti, F., *The Growth of Firms in Less-Developed Countries: Lessons from Kosovo*, Pristina, Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019, pp. 23-46.

<sup>227</sup> Peci, B., 'Informal economy: the devil on Kosovos shoulder', Prishtina Insight, 25 June 2019.



transport, exacerbating issues such as tax evasion and budgetary losses, which hamper Kosovo's fiscal sustainability and ability to invest in essential public services and infrastructure.

Despite the resilience demonstrated by Kosovo's economy during recent crises, including the covid-19 pandemic, the prevalence of the informal economy persists as a barrier to private sector growth and overall economic prosperity. Addressing these structural challenges is required for Kosovo to not only reach its full economic potential, but also to foster a conducive environment for sustainable development. Efforts to formalise the informal economy, strengthen regulatory frameworks and enhance governance and transparency are essential steps toward European integration. This includes ensuring equal opportunities with regards to paid and unpaid forms of labour.

As addressed earlier in this report, gender inequalities in employment are significant in Kosovo. While both men and women can experience precarious employment, women are disproportionately at risk of specific vulnerabilities. Multiple factors contribute to these gender disparities, including women's disproportionate caregiving responsibilities, leading to higher levels of precarity for women. Additionally, women tend to undertake significantly more unpaid domestic labour, exacerbating their economic insecurity.<sup>228</sup> These differences intersect with other factors such as ethnicity and socioeconomic status, further amplifying vulnerabilities, particularly for women of ethnic minorities or from low-income backgrounds.

Despite legal guarantees of gender equality, entrenched traditional beliefs and customs impede women from realising these rights fully. Women's limited labour force participation in Kosovo stems largely from deeply ingrained gender roles assigning unpaid caregiving responsibilities to women.<sup>229</sup> Data from 2017 demonstrate the disparity in time allocation between genders, with

men dedicating four times as many hours to paid work (3.9 hours daily) as women (0.9 hours), while women expend three times as much time on housework (7.1 hours daily) as men (2.3 hours).<sup>230</sup> Research from 2022 shows a slight improvement, while underscoring the substantial burden of unpaid work borne by women in Kosovo, with women spending an average of 6.2 hours per day on unpaid work, compared to 3.5 hours for men.<sup>231</sup> This unpaid labour encompasses various tasks such as personal care, housework, childcare and elderly care, contributing significantly to Kosovo's economy, with women performing 63% of this work compared to men's 37%.<sup>232</sup> The covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated gender disparities, with women experiencing a considerable reduction in paid working hours while<sup>233</sup> assuming additional caregiving responsibilities as in all Western Balkan countries. Compared to men, women experienced a significant decrease in paid working hours, up to 65% less, while having to spend more time on unpaid caregiving during this period.<sup>234</sup> Relevant institutions in Kosovo were limited in their implementation of comprehensive measures to address such gender inequalities.



March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march banner – "Moj rad vredi više"/"My labour is worth more", Serbia

<sup>228</sup> Rashiti V. et al., 'Gender Equality: At the Centre of IT... and Beyond: A Gender Analysis of Digitalisation in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, Pristina, 2024, pp. 326-327, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>229</sup> Farnsworth, N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, Pristina, 2024, p. 129, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>230</sup> Siddiqui, H. et al., 'Kosovo Labor Force and Time Use Study Research Report', Millenium Foundation Kosovo, Pristina, 2018, p. 16, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>231</sup> Drevinja, M. and Ymeri, V., 'Who cares? Unpaid Care Work in Kosovo', The Institute for Social Policy Musine Kokalari, Pristina, 2022, p. 15, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>233</sup> Farnsworth, N. et al., 'In the Shadows: A Gender Analysis of Informal Work in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, Pristina, 2024, p. 117, (accessed 18 September 2024).

<sup>234</sup> Pristina Institute for Political Studies, 'Political Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic in Kosovo', PIPS, Pristina, 2022, p. 15, (accessed 24 September 2024).

## Montenegro

The informal economy in Montenegro has emerged as a pressing concern, exerting a significant impact on the nation's economy and society at large. Its proliferation gained momentum notably during the 1990s, amid transition processes from a planned to a market-based economy and the privatisation of formerly state-owned assets, much like the other former Yugoslav states.<sup>235</sup> Decades later, a substantial portion of the workforce, approximately 33% (40% of whom were women, 60% men), operates within the informal sector, either through informal hiring arrangements (22%) or by receiving parts of their salary “cash in hand” (10%).<sup>236</sup> The largest proportion of people engaged in the grey economy were in the age group 20 to 29 years. This informal employment status correlates with heightened poverty risks, with informally employed individuals facing a significantly higher poverty risk rate of 17% compared to their formally employed counterparts, at approximately 6%.<sup>237</sup> All these factors perpetuate socioeconomic inequalities but also pose substantial challenges to the nation's fiscal health.

The National Human Development Report of 2016 underscored the imperative to diminish informal work and bolster human development, shedding light on the detrimental effects of informal employment on social and health protection, particularly for the most vulnerable.<sup>238</sup> Since then, the government has made limited progress in addressing these challenges. In alignment with EU practices, the government has embraced an integrated gender-responsive programme, as recommended by the ILO, aimed at reducing informality.<sup>239</sup> Despite concerted efforts, and an

Action Plan for the Programme for Suppressing the Informal Economy for the period 2024-26 in place, progress in curbing the informal economy within the formal sector has been marginal.<sup>240</sup> Although recent data on informal employment is lacking, and gender disaggregated data is even less available, estimates from 2022 suggest that over the past eight years, the informal economy within Montenegro's formal sector has seen only a modest decline of nearly four percentage points.<sup>241</sup> Amidst strides in labour market performance, challenges persist, including long-term unemployment, elevated levels of youth unemployment and inactivity, high informality rates, and ongoing emigration,<sup>242</sup> signalling the enduring complexities faced in fostering inclusive and sustainable economic development in Montenegro.

Gender disparities in unpaid household and care work persist, with women shouldering the majority of these responsibilities, as highlighted by the Gender Equality Index,<sup>243</sup> which sheds light on the gap in unpaid domestic work, with women dedicating significantly more time to caring for dependent family members and performing household chores, resulting in limited time for personal and social activities compared to men. Data indicates that every tenth man in Montenegro engages in daily housework, including cooking, in contrast to every third man in the EU.<sup>244</sup> The unequal distribution of domestic and care work reflects entrenched gender stereotypes that position such responsibilities as primarily women's domain, while men are traditionally associated with breadwinning. This imbalance in time allocation presents a barrier to achieving gender

<sup>235</sup> Montenegrin Employers Federation and Kostic, V., 'Report: Informal Economy in Montenegro The Enabling Environment for Sustainable Enterprises in Montenegro', MEF, Podgorica, 2014, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>236</sup> UNDP, 'National Human Development Report 2016 Informal work: from challenges to solutions', United Nations Montenegro, Podgorica, 2016, (accessed 17 May 2024).

<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>238</sup> UNDP, 'National Human Development Report 2016 Informal work: from challenges to solutions', United Nations Montenegro, Podgorica, 2016, (accessed 17 May 2024).

<sup>239</sup> International Labour Organization, 'Decent Work Country Programme 2019 to 2021: Montenegro', ILO, Geneva, 2019, p. 26, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>240</sup> Government of Montenegro, 'Economic Reform Programme 2024-2026, Government of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>241</sup> Portal RTCG, 'Informal economy declined by 3.9% in eight years', CTM, Podgorica, 17 October 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024); BTI Transformation Index, 'Montenegro Country Report 2024, Bertelsmann Stiftung, n.d., (accessed 3 October 2024).

<sup>242</sup> Government of Montenegro, 'Economic Reform Programme 2024-2026, Government of Montenegro, Podgorica, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024); International Labour Organization, 'Decent Work Country Programme 2019 to 2021: Montenegro', ILO, Geneva, 2019, p. 1, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>243</sup> At the national level, women are least equal when it comes to Power, followed sequentially by Time, Knowledge, Money and Work. See Komar, O., 'Gender Equality Index, Montenegro 2019', MONSTAT, Podgorica, 2019, p. 12, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.* p. 26

equality, as women's increased burden of caregiving and household duties constrains their participation in employment and social, personal, and civic engagement. Consequently, women are compelled to navigate a "double burden", juggling both paid and unpaid activities daily, which hampers their advancement and perpetuates gender gaps. Time poverty is particularly concerning for women living in rural areas of Montenegro, who make up 40% of the agricultural workforce (compared to 60% men), but are again burdened with a disproportionate share of unpaid household work. WCSOs recognise this as a key issue related to the disadvantaged position of women living in rural communities.

During the covid-19 pandemic, existing gender inequalities were expanded, particularly concerning the division of caregiving and household responsibilities.<sup>246</sup> Data highlight a disparity in the allocation of time spent on these tasks, with women dedicating considerably more time compared to men, thereby constraining their

engagement in employment and other social activities.<sup>247</sup> Despite persisting differences, unpaid care and household work are consistently overlooked in economic policies, perpetuating gender gaps in employment, workplace discrimination, income levels, and ultimately pension entitlements, making women at risk of being in a more precarious position than men throughout their lives.

Policy impact assessments should consider gender-specific impacts, to identify both positive and negative effects on women and men respectively. Embracing gender mainstreaming and intersectional approaches is crucial for bridging the gender gap in the labour market and advancing gender equality and WEE in Montenegro.<sup>248</sup> By integrating these strategies, policymakers can effectively address systemic inequalities, promote equitable opportunities, and foster inclusive economic growth that benefits all members of society and ensures that women's labour rights and human rights are protected.

## North Macedonia

The informal economy in North Macedonia is also a significant component of the national economy, although to a lesser extent than for the previously discussed countries of the region, contributing to approximately 17% of the country's GDP.<sup>249</sup> Informal employment constitutes approximately 14% of the total employment landscape,<sup>250</sup> with a negligible fraction of 0.1% found in household work. Gender disaggregated data claim that approximately one in six women in North Macedonia is participating in informal work.<sup>251</sup> The data not only highlight the substantial portion of GDP attributed to informal activities but also the nuanced variations in informal employment across different sectors and educational backgrounds. Additionally, the gender dimension reveals that informal employment affects women disproportionately, emphasising the need for

targeted interventions to address the informal labour market with a gender perspective, and promote more inclusive economic opportunities for all segments of society.

Besides differences created by informality, gender disparities in unpaid domestic labour in North Macedonia further exacerbate inequalities.<sup>252</sup> Women and girls over the age of 10 spend around 15% of their time on unpaid care and domestic work, whereas men and boys spend only 5% of their time on similar tasks.<sup>253</sup> As in other countries, the covid-19 pandemic further pronounced the differences. Thus, women in North Macedonia still face limitations in achieving work-life balance due to the unequal distribution of unpaid labour, where they bear the primary responsibility for household duties and childcare. This uneven

<sup>245</sup> Verhoeven, M. and Dowling, K., 'Women transforming rural areas in Northern Montenegro', IFAD, Rome, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>246</sup> EU Technical Assistance to Civil Society Organisations in the Western Balkans and Turkey, ", TASCO, Podgorica, 2021, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>249</sup> Zekiri, A. et al., 'Learning about informality', UNDP North Macedonia, Skopje, 12 October 2021, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>250</sup> International Labour Organization, 'Overview of the informal economy in North Macedonia', ILO, Geneva, 2019, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>251</sup> Zekiri, A. et al., 'Learning about informality', UNDP North Macedonia, Skopje, 12 October 2021, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>252</sup> Leshoska, V. et al., 'Gender-based Discrimination and Labour in North Macedonia', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2022, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>253</sup> Women Count, 'North Macedonia', UN Women, n.d., (accessed 23 September 2024).

burden is underscored by the fact that employed women in North Macedonia have less flexibility in working time compared to men, further constraining their participation in the labour market<sup>254</sup> and other social activities.<sup>255</sup> Structural factors such as insufficient childcare services, lack of family-friendly work arrangements, and limited access to shared parental leave contribute to these disparities, highlighting the need for policies that address barriers and promote gender equality in employment. As previously stated, North Macedonia has not harmonised its legislation with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive. One of the main impediments to doing so is the amendment of the Labour Law, which is taking longer than expected. The implementation would ensure the legal framework addressed many of the inequalities stated in this report.

The findings above are confirmed by the Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia, where the domain of “time” is the one with the lowest score compared to the other domains, reflecting significant gender inequalities in care activities and

social activities outside the home.<sup>256</sup> It is, however, important to note that official data on time use in the Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia are outdated. There is no indication of when an update of the Time Use Survey is likely to take place. According to Eurostat, the last round of Harmonised European Time Use Surveys was scheduled for 2020, though it has not been conducted yet.<sup>257</sup> Traditional gender norms persist, leading to women shouldering the majority of unpaid work, which hampers their career development and opportunities for leisure and other activities. The data also indicate a disparity in the time devoted to leisure and voluntary activities, with fewer employed women engaging in these pursuits compared to employed men.<sup>258</sup> These findings underscore the need for policies that challenge the gender disparities with regard to unpaid labour, by addressing traditional gender roles, improving access to childcare services, and promoting the EU Work-Life Balance Directive to enable women's full participation in the labour market and broader societal activities.

## Serbia

The informal economy in Serbia remains a pressing issue and constitutes a significant portion of the country's economic landscape. Although data is not frequently updated, estimates suggest that Serbia's informal economy accounts for approximately 31% of its GDP, amounting to roughly 4.6 billion EUR based on GDP at Purchasing Power Parity.<sup>259</sup> In 2023, the total rate of informal employment stood at 12%, where the rate of informal employment in the agricultural sector was over 50% and in non-agricultural sectors approximately 7%.<sup>260</sup> Informal employment often renders workers more vulnerable,<sup>261</sup> highlighting the need for targeted interventions to address this issue. Understanding the extent and composition of informal employment has become even more

crucial after the covid-19 crisis, as the pandemic exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and disparities within the labour market, especially targeting those who do not have labour rights protection, such as people in the informal economy or performing unpaid labour, in both of which women are overrepresented. Efforts to mitigate the impact of informal employment and promote formalisation are essential for fostering economic resilience and ensuring the wellbeing of workers, especially in times of crisis.

The most recent<sup>262</sup> Gender Equality Index for Serbia, published in 2021, reveals slow and inconsistent progress, particularly in the domains of “work” and “time”.<sup>263</sup> The domain of “time” shows

<sup>254</sup> European Commission, 'North Macedonia 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 35, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>255</sup> Bashevska, M., 'Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia 2022', UN Women, North Macedonia, 2023, pp. 9-11, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

<sup>257</sup> Reactor - Research in Action, 'Gender Perspective in the EU Accession Process - Input for the European Commission 2024 Country Report for the Republic of North Macedonia', Reactor - Research in Action, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>258</sup> Bashevska, M., 'Gender Equality Index for North Macedonia 2022', UN Women, North Macedonia, 2023, pp. 18-19, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>259</sup> Quarterly Informal Economy Survey, 'Serbias Informal Economy Size: Informal Economy Size as Percentage of GDP(%)', World Economics, London, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>260</sup> FoNet, 'Statistics Office: Employment numbers in Serbia up in Q1 2024', N1, 29 April 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>261</sup> Mušikić, S., Mitrović, S., and Marčetić, M., 'Informal Employment of Young People in Serbia, Current Situation and Trends', *Ekonomija - Teorija i Praksa*, vol. 10, no. 4, 2022.

<sup>262</sup> The next Gender Equality Index for Serbia was scheduled for 2023 but by the second quarter of 2024 still had not been released.

<sup>263</sup> Babović, M. and Petrović, M., 'Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia 2021: Digitalization, future of work and gender equality', Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Serbia, 2021, (accessed 25 September 2024).



no progress, which means that at the current pace, full equality will not be reached.<sup>264</sup> Inequalities are also highly present in performing unpaid housework and caring for family members, as well as humanitarian work, i.e. work for the community. These activities are performed by women significantly more than by men. At the same time, women participate less than men in leisure activities, activities important for personal development, wellbeing, or activities outside of the private sphere. The most recent data from 2021 indicates that while women spend less time daily on paid work compared to men (on average 51 minutes less), they devote more time to unpaid work (approximately 1.5 hours more than men on a daily basis).<sup>265</sup>

The persistent gender disparities in Serbia's workforce highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions. While the 2021 enactment of the Law on Gender Equality marks a significant milestone in recognising and defining unpaid housework, along with mandating data collection and reporting, shortcomings in the implementation of both the legislation and the measures outlined in the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2016–2020 were inadequate in effecting substantial change.<sup>266</sup> Legal developments during 2024 have led to backtracking in gender equality, with the June 28 2024 decision of the Constitutional Court<sup>267</sup> on the initiation of the procedure for the evaluation of the constitutionality of the Law on Gender Equality, and the suspension of the execution of the respective acts. This decision was taken following pressure from the Serbian Orthodox Church and anti-gender groups throughout the country who are opponents of the law's requirement to use gender-sensitive language. The Law on Gender Equality's constitutionality will be determined in the Constitutional Court, as opponents of the law are stating that the law is not aligned with the Serbian Constitution. As a result, the execution of individual acts or actions taken on the basis of the provisions of the law, and the adoption of acts on

the basis of the Law on Gender Equality have been effectively suspended, pending constitutionality assessment procedures.<sup>268</sup> This decision by the Constitutional Court has an impact on gender equality in many areas, including in the fields of employment and self-employment, which the Law on Gender Equality regulates in Articles 27 to 35.

The newly introduced National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030 also acknowledges the enduring disparities in the domain of “time”, and that women, regardless of employment status, continue to shoulder a disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic work, spending twice as much time as men on household duties while dedicating half the time to paid employment.<sup>269</sup> This is a positive step, and it will be important to follow the implementation of the National Strategy.

Of further concern is the plan to equalise the retirement age for women and men by 2032. To address this issue, adjustments to the pension system are imperative, including increased top-ups on women's years of insurance until the burden of unpaid work is equitably shared. Within this framework, Measure 1.2 of the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021–2030 aims to recognise, value, and redistribute unpaid domestic work to create more opportunities for paid work, personal development, and leisure time.<sup>270</sup> By implementing such measures, Serbia can take meaningful steps towards mitigating gender disparities in the workforce and fostering a more inclusive and equitable society.

The issue of childcare remains pressing in Serbia, and relevant institutions did not pass measures to improve access to quality childcare and support services that can in turn be push factors for women to enter the labour market. At the time of writing this report, the Serbian state had not invested adequate efforts to mitigate gender disparity in unpaid care and domestic work and to implement existing policies aimed at fostering shared responsibilities.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>265</sup> The Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina and UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 'Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective', UN Women, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>266</sup> Babović, M. and Petrović, M., 'Gender Equality Index for the Republic of Serbia 2021: Digitalization, future of work and gender equality', Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, Serbia, 2021, p. 39, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>267</sup> Република Србија Уставни суд, 'Саопштење са 8. седнице Уставног суда, одржане 27. јуна 2024. године, којом је председавала Снежана Марковић, председница Уставног суда', Република Србија Уставни суд, Belgrade, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>268</sup> Radio Slobodna Evropa, 'Ustavni sud Srbije obustavio primenu Zakona o rodnoj ravnopravnosti', Radio Slobodna Evropa, 28 June 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>269</sup> Government of the Republic of Serbia, 'The Gender Equality Strategy for the Period 2021–2030, Government of the Republic of Serbia, Belgrade, 2021, p. 28, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 112.

## IN FOCUS: FEMINISATION OF POVERTY

American sociologist Diana Pearce coined the term “feminisation of poverty” after documenting how women were disproportionately represented among the world's poor, compared to men.<sup>271</sup> In almost all societies, women have higher poverty rates than men and worldwide, the majority of people living in absolute poverty are women.<sup>272</sup> In the Western Balkan region, the feminisation of poverty remains a critical issue despite limited progress in gender equality.<sup>273</sup> At the time of writing this report, none of the six Western Balkan countries have adequately addressed this issue.

Poverty is a multi-faceted issue with many root causes. Apart from the lack of income and productive resources to ensure sustainable livelihoods, it manifests in hunger and malnutrition, limited access to education and other basic services, social discrimination and exclusion, as well as the lack of participation in decision-making.<sup>274</sup> The feminisation of poverty adds layers of complexity and factors to the problem. Poverty is pervasive in the region, and feminisation of poverty is particularly present among women living in rural areas, older women, and those who are lone parents or heads of households. Women's property rights are also limited, with a significant majority of property and mortgages registered under men's names in the Western Balkans. For example, in Albania, only 38% of property and mortgages are held by women (62% by men), while in BiH the figures are even lower, at 25% and 75% for women and men respectively, hindering women's access to the resources and wealth that is connected to property. Official gender disaggregated data on ownership is currently unavailable in North Macedonia, but administrative data from the Cadastre,

disaggregated by gender upon by thinktank Reactor's request, offers valuable insights. As of 2023, the available data highlights significant gender disparities, with men constituting 71% of property records compared to women's 29%.<sup>275</sup> These findings underscore a persistent gender gap in property ownership across North Macedonia. Caution is needed, however, in interpreting this data, as the number of property records does not necessarily equate to the number of owners and the data does not distinguish between different ownership rights.<sup>276</sup>

Additionally, the data obtained lacks segregation by property type, encompassing records for property of both land and objects, which is unfortunate since gender disparities could be different for land and object ownership.<sup>277</sup> These disparities extend to access to essential services as well. In Kosovo, less than half of women (47%) have a bank account, compared to 69% of men. Similarly, in BiH, a lower proportion of women (69%) report using Internet in the last three months compared to men (78%).<sup>278</sup> Such inequalities highlight the urgent need for targeted interventions to address gender disparities and promote equitable access to resources and opportunities for women across the region.

Digital transformation (including but not limited to internet access), and reducing what is known as the digital gender divide,<sup>279</sup> are essential for entering and staying in the labour market.<sup>280</sup> A digital transformation, one that would reduce the digital gender divide, is required to address the problems women and girls face in the Western Balkans when it comes to digitalisation, including addressing the lack of access to digital spaces and tools, power imbalances, finances, gender wage gaps, and representation in the labour market.<sup>2814</sup>

<sup>271</sup> Pearce, D., 'The feminization of poverty: women, work, and welfare', *The Urban & Social Change Review*, vol. 11, no. 1 and 2, 1978, pp. 28–36.

<sup>272</sup> Christensen, M. A. (2019). 'Feminization of Poverty: Causes and Implications'. In: Filho, W. L. (ed) *Gender Equality. Encyclopaedia of the UN Sustainable Development Goals*. Springer, 2019.

<sup>273</sup> Koczan, Z., 'Being Poor, Feeling Poorer: Inequality, Poverty and Poverty Perceptions in the Western Balkans', IMF working Papers, International Monetary Fund, 2016, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>274</sup> United Nations, 'Ending Poverty', United Nations, n.d., (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>275</sup> Leshoska, V., Bojchevska Mitrevska, A., and Jolevska, I., 'No Womens Land - Gender Analysis on Property Ownership', Reactor, Skopje, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>277</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>278</sup> Koczan, Z., 'Being Poor, Feeling Poorer: Inequality, Poverty and Poverty Perceptions in the Western Balkans', IMF working Papers, International Monetary Fund, 2016, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>279</sup> Pre-existing gender norms and relations may affect opportunities and barriers for diverse women and men's participation, access to resources, and power when it comes to digitalisation, a phenomenon referred to as the “digital gender divide”. See Borgonovi, F. et al., 'Bridging the Digital Gender Divide: Include, Upskill, Innovate', OECD, 2018, p. 22, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>280</sup> Rashiti, V. et al., 'Gender Equality: At the Centre of IT... and Beyond: A Gender Analysis of Digitalisation in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

When women have less access to the internet, it means they have limited access to information compared to men, which is why for more than a decade, civil society and international institutions, such as the UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner,<sup>282</sup> have advocated towards introducing access to the internet as a human right. Meanwhile in Serbia, the Law on Social Cards established the Single Card Register and digitalised services, where CSO A 11 – Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, noted that within the first 15 months of implementation, over 27,000 people were left without social assistance due to technical and digital errors.<sup>283</sup>

Western Balkan countries grapple with significant challenges in their social protection systems, particularly in safeguarding the rights of vulnerable groups of women and enhancing their economic autonomy. These protection systems, aimed at alleviating poverty and promoting social inclusion, are often unable to adequately reach and assist women in need. Presently, a considerable portion of social protection budgets in the Western Balkans is directed towards pension schemes, leaving scant resources for other initiatives, that could provide crucial support to women confronting economic difficulties.<sup>284</sup> This imbalance in resource allocation underscores the pressing need for comprehensive reforms, including gender budgeting, to ensure that social protection systems are more gender-responsive and better equipped to address the diverse needs of women across the region.

The root of these disparities and vulnerabilities lies within the realm of employment. As evidenced in preceding sections of this report, gender inequalities in the labour market are glaring across the region.<sup>285</sup> Additionally, social assistance programmes often establish eligibility based on categorical criteria, inadvertently dissuading women from entering the labour force and relegating them to caregiving roles.<sup>286</sup>

Effectively addressing the economic vulnerability of women in the region requires a strategic prioritisation of initiatives aimed at augmenting their participation in labour that generates income. This underscores the need for a nuanced comprehension of the multifaceted barriers that impede women's active engagement in the labour market, transcending the confines of issues such as informality and unpaid labour, which have been extensively discussed.

It is necessary to delve deeper into the complexities of intersectionality, shedding light on how gender intersects with factors such as age, ability, ethnicity, parenthood, sexual orientation and more, thereby understanding the vulnerabilities experienced by women, in all their diversity, in the region. Such an exploration is essential for devising targeted interventions that effectively address the root causes of economic inequity and empower women to thrive in the workforce. An intersection of ethnicity is explored below.

<sup>282</sup> United Nations Information Service, 'It May be Time to Reinforce Universal Access to the Internet as a Human Right, Not just a Privilege, High Commissioner tell Human Rights Council', OHCHR, 10 March 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>283</sup> A 11 Initiative, 'Saopštenje: Inicijativa A 11 predstavila dosadašnje efekte Zakona o socijalnoj karti na sistem socijalne zaštite', A 11 Initiative, 27 July 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>284</sup> Brodmann, S., Coll-Black, S., and von Lenthe, C., 'Breaking the cycle of poverty: Empowering women through enhanced social protection in the Western Balkans', World Bank Blogs, 14 September 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>285</sup> The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, 'SEE Jobs Gateway Database', wiiw, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>286</sup> Brodmann, S., Coll-Black, S., and von Lenthe, C., 'Breaking the cycle of poverty: Empowering women through enhanced social protection in the Western Balkans', World Bank Blogs, 14 September 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

## CASE STUDY

### NAVIGATING DUAL MARGINALISATION: THE FEMINISATION OF POVERTY OF ROMA WOMEN IN THE WESTERN BALKANS

The Roma community, Europe's largest ethnic minority, faces profound challenges and pervasive exclusion across various facets of life.<sup>287</sup> In the Western Balkan countries, where Roma minorities are notably marginalised, extensive literature, data and discussions highlight their disadvantaged position.<sup>288</sup> The lack of research on Roma inclusion, however, persists due to an absence of high-quality and reliable data. Ethnicity often remains absent as a topic in nationally representative household surveys in the Western Balkans, leading to undercounting in censuses and under-sampling in surveys. Roma individuals may also hesitate to self-identify, further complicating accurate data collection efforts.<sup>289</sup> Nonetheless, various reports and analyses have consistently underscored the glaring deficiencies in essential areas such as housing, formal employment, quality education, and access to healthcare and other social services among Roma communities, perpetuating their economic and social marginalisation.<sup>290</sup>

When examining the intersection of gender and ethnicity, a grimmer reality emerges for women belonging to Roma minorities in the Western Balkan countries, compared to women from ethnic majority communities. Particularly concerning are the differences

evident in employment, labour market participation and social security. In all six Western Balkan countries, the employment rates for Roma women are strikingly low, ranging between as little as 3% to 13%.<sup>291</sup> These figures highlight the compounded challenges faced by Roma women, further exacerbating their economic vulnerability and social exclusion within their communities.

Roma women's employment in **Albania** remains a pressing concern, as evidenced by various studies examining their position in the labour market.<sup>292</sup> Despite concerted efforts, Roma women continue to face significantly lower employment rates and systemic barriers to their economic participation. Qualitative insights shed further light on the challenges they face, and Roma women who have shared their lived experience emphasise the crucial role of skills, self-confidence, and social connections in securing employment or starting businesses.<sup>293</sup>

Roma workers also experience vulnerabilities and risks in their work environment, witnessing discrimination and differential treatment compared to other workers. For the first time, the Albanian government included "antigypsyism" as a standalone area in the National Action Plan for Equality, Inclusion and Participation of Roma and Egyptians in Albania 2021-2025,<sup>294</sup> however, there is little if no reporting on the progress of its implementation.

The data for **BiH** paints a stark picture of the poverty and unemployment situation among Roma women as well. Overall, the position of

<sup>287</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'Marginalized Roma community still most excluded in Western Balkans', UNDP, Belgrade, 2018, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>288</sup> Robayo-Abril, M. and Millán, N., 'Breaking the Cycle of Roma Exclusion in the Western Balkans', The World Bank Group, Washington DC, 2019, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>289</sup> European Roma Rights Centre, 'Statelessness, Discrimination and Marginalisation of Roma in the Western Balkans and Ukraine', ERRC, Budapest, 2017, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>290</sup> Brodmann, S., Coll-Black, S., and von Lenthe, C., 'Breaking the cycle of poverty: Empowering women through enhanced social protection in the Western Balkans', World Bank Blogs, 14 September 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>291</sup> The Government of Bosnia and Herzegovina and UN Women Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, 'Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective', UN Women, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>292</sup> Blazeovski, N. M., Marnie, S., and Keskine, I., 'The Position of Roma Women and Men in the Labour Markets of the Western Balkans: Micronarratives Report', UNDP, Istanbul, 2018, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>293</sup> Hadroj, R., Hamzallari, B., and Agolli, A., 'Sfidat e punësimit të grave Rome në qytetin e Korçës. Identifikimi i praktikave pozitive të politikave sociale lokale', Ndikimet Shoqërore, Albania, 2023, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>294</sup> Ministria e Shëndetësisë dhe Mbrojtjes Sociale, 'PLANI KOMBËTAR I VEPRIMIT PËR BARAZI, PËRFSHIRJE DHE PJESËMARRJEN E ROMËVE DHE EGJIPTIANËVE NË REPUBLIKËN E SHQIPËRISË (2021-2025)', Ministria e Shëndetësisë dhe Mbrojtjes Sociale, Tirana, 2021, (accessed 26 September 2024).



Roma in BiH is assessed as worse in comparison to the position of other national minorities.<sup>295</sup> Alarming figures indicate the extent of economic vulnerability within Roma households. A household survey finds that 59% of the surveyed Roma families struggled to make ends meet with monthly income of 400 BAM (approximately 200 EUR) or less, while an additional 29% subsist on even less, with incomes below 200 BAM (approximately 100 EUR).<sup>296</sup> These data underscore the widespread economic hardship experienced by Roma families in BiH, with a significant portion living below or near the poverty line. Furthermore, the statistic that 33% of Roma women cannot provide an adequate amount of food for their children<sup>297</sup> serves as a poignant reminder of the feminisation of poverty among Roma women.

Compared to both non-Roma men and women, as well as to Roma men, the employment rates of Roma women are notably lower, indicating that Roma women disproportionately face barriers to economic participation and entry into the labour market. An analysis from the Employment Agency revealed that out of the registered Roma women seeking employment, a substantial portion lacked elementary education qualifications.<sup>298</sup> In regions like Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (FBiH), Republika Srpska, and Brčko District, the majority of registered Roma women were found to not have qualifications for employment, underscoring systemic issues in education access and attainment.<sup>299</sup>

Studies have helped further identify key factors contributing to the unfavourable position of Roma women, which, apart from low education

levels, include patriarchal traditions, limited access to essential health and social services, GBV, and pervasive systematic discrimination.<sup>300</sup> The economic vulnerability of Roma women and their families is evident in their reliance on social assistance, informal seasonal work, and support from family members for sustenance, reflecting the precariousness of their economic situation and the urgent need for targeted interventions to address their needs and improve livelihoods.

As underscored in this report, women's employment in **Kosovo** remains alarmingly low, with the employment rate among Roma community members notably lower than their non-Roma<sup>301</sup> counterparts, depicting an eight-percentage point gap. These figures highlight the systemic barriers impeding Roma women's access to economic opportunities and perpetuating their marginalisation within society. Women comprised 47%, and men 53%, of the people registered as unemployed. Within ethnic minority groups, comparable proportions of women and men are registered as unemployed, with men being the majority in each minority group. Notably fewer Roma women (36%), Ashkali women (28%), and Egyptian women (30%) are registered as unemployed, suggesting obstacles to seeking work and entering the labour market.<sup>302</sup>

Advocating<sup>303</sup> for equitable access to quality education is imperative for breaking the cycle of poverty and enhancing employment prospects among marginalised communities, including Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian populations. Ensuring that all children, regardless of ethnic background, complete at least primary education is pivotal in fostering

<sup>295</sup> European Union, 'The Strategy and Action plan of Bosnia and Herzegovina for social inclusion of Roma 2021- 2025, European Union, 2020, (accessed 27 September 2024).

<sup>296</sup> Duderija, S., 'A Report on State of Rights and Position of Roma Women in Bosnia and Herzegovina', Roma Women Association "Bolja Budućnost", Tuzla, 2023, p. 17, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>299</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>300</sup> Čehajić-Čampara, M., Arnaut, L., and Veljan, N., 'Pristup i povjerenje Roma u institucije sigurnosti i pravosuđa u Bosni i Hercegovini', Atlantic Initiative, 2021, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>301</sup> Note that the term Roma is used as the EU umbrella-term which encompasses diverse groups, including Roma, Sinti, Kale, Romanichels, Boyash/Rudari, Ashkali, Egyptians, Yenish, Dom, Lom, Rom and Abdal, as well as Traveller populations (gens du voyage, Gypsies, Camminanti, etc.). EU policy documents and discussions commonly employ this terminology. See European Commission, 'Roma equality, inclusion and participation in the EU', European Commission, Geneva, 2020, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>302</sup> Rashiti, V. et al., 'Gender Equality: At the Centre of IT... and Beyond: A Gender Analysis of Digitalisation in Kosovo', Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, p. 329, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>303</sup> VORAE NGO, 'Social Justice for Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian', Voice of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians in Kosovo, n.d., (accessed 26 September 2024).

social mobility and economic empowerment, especially when it comes to achieving WEE and alleviating the feminisation of poverty. Additionally, efforts to address the specific health needs of Roma women are crucial to mitigate disparities in education, employment, and other spheres of life. Prioritising policies that empower marginalised communities and mainstreaming successful integration models into government frameworks can pave the way toward a more inclusive society where Roma women have improved access to education and therefore better employment opportunities.<sup>304</sup>

In **Montenegro** too, the status of Roma women is deeply influenced by pervasive discrimination within both the Roma community and broader society. Within Roma communities, Roma women contend with the constraints of an even more entrenched patriarchal culture, limiting their autonomy and decision-making abilities.<sup>305</sup> Additionally, they face overt racism from institutions and individuals alike, compounding their challenges. The violence against Roma and Egyptian women is exacerbated compared to the general population due to discrimination and their social exclusion that prevents them from seeking their way out of abuse through mechanisms provided by the state institutions.<sup>306</sup> Besides some legal changes related to forced conclusion of marriage<sup>307</sup> and the new definition of child in the Criminal Code as anyone under the age of 18, there is no follow-up regarding forced marriages particularly targeting Roma women. The Family<sup>308</sup> Law still enables the court to allow a

child over the age of 16 to marry.<sup>309</sup>

Recognising the severity of the issue, the EU has identified the Roma community as particularly vulnerable to discrimination and has set ambitious targets to improve their quality of life by 2030. These targets encompass various areas, including reducing the employment gap and enhancing early childhood education, with the aim of empowering Roma girls and women. In their research study on Roma women in various settlements in Montenegro, the Centre for Roma Initiatives Nikšić (CRINK) reported that during the interview process for data collection, the organisation observed a difference between the settlements, noting that factors such as lower literacy correlated with higher level of poverty in the settlement.<sup>310</sup> The research study also indicated that interview respondents from Roma communities shared that education has a direct correlation with access to a better economic livelihood, demonstrating the importance of addressing obstacles in access to education in order to alleviate the feminisation of poverty of Roma women.<sup>311</sup> Insufficient education<sup>312</sup> rates of Roma and Egyptian women on healthcare, sexual and reproductive health and rights also lead to premature and frequent pregnancies, taking a toll on reproductive, physical, and mental health, as well as creating barriers to the labour market.

The CSO Health Education and Research Association's (HERA) 2023 Enlargement Review sheds light on the significant challenges facing

<sup>304</sup> Blazevski, N. M., Marnie, S., and Keskine, I., 'The Position of Roma Women and Men in the Labour Markets of the Western Balkans: Micronarratives Report', UNDP, Istanbul, 2018, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>305</sup> Peace Women, 'Montenegro: Learning about Rights Helps Roma Women in Montenegro', Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, 2012, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>306</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Montenegro.

<sup>307</sup> Criminal Code (2003) introduced article 214a Forced Conclusion of Marriage, Customary Marriage, or Life Partnership of Persons of the Same Sex, as follows: (1) Whoever coerces another person, by means of force or threats, into concluding a marriage, customary marriage or life partnership of persons of the same sex, shall be punished by a prison term from six months to five years. (2) Whoever coerces or instigates a child into entering into a customary marriage or into concluding a marriage or life partnership of persons of the same sex or arranges for him a customary marriage or marriage or life partnership of persons of the same sex, shall be punished by a prison term from one to five years. See

Ministry of Justice Montenegro, 'Criminal Code of Montenegro, Government of Montenegro, 2003.

<sup>308</sup> Ministry of Justice, 'Family Law of Montenegro', Article 24, The Government of Montenegro, 2007.

<sup>309</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Montenegro.

<sup>310</sup> Centar za monitoring i istraživanja, 'Pristup zdravstvenim uslugama, obrazovanju, tržištu rada i socijalnim pravima Romkinja i Egipćanki u Bijelom Polju, Nikšiću i Podgorici', Centar za monitoring i istraživanja, Podgorica, n.d., (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>312</sup> Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, 'Concluding observations on the third periodic report of Montenegro', CEDAW/C/MNE/CO/3, Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, 2024, (accessed 26 September 2024).

the Roma population in **North Macedonia**, particularly concerning employment and socio-economic wellbeing. With an alarming 67% unemployment rate among Roma individuals, the situation for Roma women is even more dire, with only 8% currently employed (note that the overall Roma employment rate in North Macedonia stands at 22%, which is almost twice as low as for other ethnic minorities), highlighting a stark gender gap in access to economic opportunities.<sup>314</sup> Additionally, approximately 25% of the active Roma population engages in informal work, further emphasising the need for comprehensive measures to create conditions conducive to decent employment and economic independence as well as building/strengthening trust in the employment services, since 23% of Roma people remain unregistered with the Employment Service Agency, suggesting a need for targeted outreach and support initiatives.<sup>315</sup>

HERA's review also indicates that among social assistance beneficiaries, 49% are women and only a small fraction hold higher education degrees, limiting their access to employment measures in the country. Discrimination remains a significant issue, with 13% of Roma individuals reporting feeling discriminated against in the workplace on the grounds of ethnicity.<sup>316</sup> Efforts to address these challenges include specific measures designed for the employment of Roma women, yet their inclusion in national employment strategies and action plans remains inadequate.

In **Serbia**, Roma women face significant challenges in accessing employment opportunities and achieving social inclusion. The Criminal Code concerning the prohibition and punishment of racial acts in Serbia has yet to align with EU standards, namely to fully align the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination

with the EU *acquis*, and in particular Directive 2000/78/EC establishing a general framework for equal treatment in employment and occupation. The Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia 2022-30 underscores the government's commitment to address the multifaceted issues affecting Roma communities, including employment, education, and social integration.<sup>317</sup> The strategy aims to increase the employment rate of Roma community members in the public sector to a level proportionate to their representation in the overall population and to achieve a minimum employment rate of 22%,<sup>318</sup> which means that by 2030 the employment rate for Roma women in Serbia, if achieved, will still be comparatively lower than that of the majority ethnicity, which has surpassed these levels long ago.

Despite the adoption of strategies and commitments, the situation remains complex, as highlighted by the analysis of Roma employment rates conducted by the Roma Education Foundation.<sup>319</sup> This analysis sheds light on the labour market dynamics and identifies deficiencies in the legal frameworks and human resource needs, emphasising the importance of targeted interventions to enhance the employability of Roma men and women. Initiatives such as the Employment Empowerment of Young Roma project aim to mitigate these challenges by providing employment opportunities for young and educated Roma individuals, particularly in public administration, thereby fostering social inclusion and contributing to the broader development of Serbia.

In the region, amidst these challenges, inspiring stories of Roma women's entrepreneurship offer glimpses of resilience and determination. In Albania, Roma returnee women have established social enterprises,

<sup>313</sup> Health Education and Research Association, 'Roma reproductive and social well-being in the Republic of North Macedonia: Enlargement Review', HERA, Skopje, 2023, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>314</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>315</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>317</sup> European Commission, 'Serbia 2023 Report', European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 46, (accessed 2 May 2024).

<sup>318</sup> Government of the Republic of Serbia, 'Strategy for Social Inclusion of Roma in the Republic of Serbia 2022-2030', Roma Integration Regional Cooperation Council, 2022, p. 4, (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>319</sup> Dhembo, E. and Duci, V., 'Strategic Regional Policy Analysis in Western Balkans and Turkey: Secondary, Tertiary Education and Employability', Roma Education Funds, 2022, (accessed 26 September 2024).

such as the Social Business in Devoll. Ten Roma returnee<sup>320</sup> women in Devoll collaborated to revive traditional culinary products for sale, contributing to their families' income and securing a dignified life in their country of origin.<sup>321</sup> In North Macedonia, Rafaela Selimovska journeyed from working as an informal employee in a pizza restaurant abroad to establishing her own pizzeria in Shuto Orizari,<sup>322</sup> with support from initiatives like the Reintegration of Returnees project.

Transforming the landscape of feminised poverty in the Western Balkans demands evidence-based policies and interventions that acknowledge its intersectional and

multifaceted nature. It requires a concerted effort to enhance women's engagement in productive employment, with particular attention to marginalised groups like Roma, Ashkali or Egyptian women, queer women and women with disabilities. Formal employment offers crucial protection against risks and vulnerabilities, underscoring the importance of implementing targeted employment services, facilitating job placements, and extending social security benefits to all workers. By prioritising these measures, policymakers can take significant strides towards alleviating poverty and fostering sustainable development in the region.



March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march banner - "Платен домашен труд!" / "Paid domestic work", North Macedonia

<sup>320</sup> According to the EC, a returnee is a person going from a host country back to a country of origin, country of nationality or habitual residence usually after spending a significant period of time in the host country whether voluntary or forced, assisted or spontaneous. See European Commission, 'returnee, Definition(s)', European Commission, n.d., (accessed 26 September 2024).

<sup>321</sup> Blazeovski, N. M., Marnie, S., and Keskine, I., 'The Position of Roma Women and Men in the Labour Markets of the Western Balkans: Micronarratives Report', UNDP, Istanbul, 2018, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>322</sup> United Nations Development Programme, 'Roma Women in Action - For Better Future, Back at Home', UNDP North Macedonia, 2024, (accessed 26 September 2024).



# Recommendations\*

## PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE LABOUR MARKET

### IN BRIEF:

Significant barriers for entry into and maintaining labour, exist for women in the labour market throughout the region. Western Balkan governments have neither addressed gender-based discrimination in hiring and promotion, nor the overwhelming overrepresentation of unpaid domestic work performed by women.

### WITHIN ONE YEAR:

Harmonise relevant maternity leave legislation with parental leave requirements from the EU Work-Life Balance Directive to ensure parental and caregiver duties are flexible and shared among caregivers.

### Governments

- Monitor implementation and harmonisation of all anti-discrimination laws in relation to labour.
- Focus on strengthening institutional implementation of existing anti-discrimination and labour rights legislation through specialised anti-discrimination training for relevant institutions and their representatives.
- Adopt the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention (C190), with the exception of Albania who is a signatory country.
- Extend all legal protections for labour violations and gender-based discrimination to the informal economy.
- Update databases to ensure collection and management of intersectional data, disaggregated by gender.

### EU institutions, other inter-governmental organisations and donors

- Support accession countries in harmonising legal frameworks with the EU Work-Life Balance Directive.
- Require implementation of institutional reforms towards better addressing gender-based discrimination related to labour.<sup>323</sup>
- Make gender disaggregated statistics in all areas of labour a requirement in EC Country Reports.
- Provide funding opportunities to WCSOs addressing women's labour rights violations and gender-based discrimination in labour.

\* Given the diverse situation in each country, the recommendations are generalised, applying to the majority of Western Balkan countries for each recommended action.

<sup>323</sup> Farnsworth, N. et al., Gender-based Discrimination and Labour in the Western Balkans, Kosovo Women's Network, 2021.

# Security for women human rights defenders

## ATTACKS ON WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

The position of human rights defenders (HRDs) in the Western Balkans is increasingly precarious. Throughout the region, HRDs, women HRDs (WHRDs), CSOs, and independent media outlets face intimidation, threats, smear campaigns, and both digital and physical attacks, alongside an overall disregard by national authorities.<sup>324</sup> Kvinna till Kvinna's report "The State of Women Human Rights Defenders 2023" found that 53% of the interviewed activists in the Western Balkan region perceived anti-gender forces to be behind harassments targeting them.<sup>325</sup> Testimonies from activists reveal growing insecurity and a feeling of being "attacked from every side".<sup>326</sup> The rising numbers of Strategic Lawsuit against Public Participation (also known as SLAPP lawsuits) and strategic legal actions targeting HRDs, activists, individuals, organisations, and media outlets intend to intimidate, censor and silence their work.<sup>327</sup> These procedures are often long-lasting, expensive and exhausting for HRDs and their organisations. In 2023 there were a total of 53 reported SLAPP lawsuits reported in the six Western Balkan countries.<sup>328</sup> Throughout the region, there has been an increase in so-called "anti-gender" groups' mobilisation in all six accession countries. Notably, even institutions

such as the Gender Centre of Republic Srpska in BiH have faced attacks from these groups.<sup>329</sup>

Throughout the region as a whole, anti-gender groups that oppose "gender ideology" have increasingly contributed to the decline in the security of WHRDs and queer activists during this reporting period.

The region has been characterised by democratic backsliding including shrinking space for civil society and activism. The situation is particularly challenging for (W)HRDs who engage with protection of women's rights, gender equality, LGBTQI+ rights, the rights of ethnic minorities, as well as CSOs working for reconciliation in the region and demanding accountability for war crimes and crimes that took place during the wars in former Yugoslavia in the 1990s.<sup>330</sup>

Despite being signatories to international documents guaranteeing the protection and advancement of human rights, effectively implementing and harmonising legislation is lagging. While national legal frameworks are largely in place, they are often too general and fail to accommodate the specific needs and claims of (W)HRDs. Mechanisms for preventing, protecting against, and prosecuting violations targeting HRDs are frequently ineffective and weakly enforced.<sup>331</sup>

<sup>324</sup> Civil Rights Defenders, "Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans Report, Civil Rights Defenders, 2019, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>325</sup> Pruthi, C. and Zillén, E., "The state of women human rights defenders 2023, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25 and p. 34.

<sup>327</sup> Đaković, T. and Novosel, I., "Regional Report on Human Rights Defenders challenges and obstacles in the work on the protection and promotion of human rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Serbia, The Regional Network of Human Rights Houses, Belgrade and Zagreb, 2024, p. 32-34, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>328</sup> Mediacentar Online, "Više od pedeset SLAPP tužbi prijavljeno u BiH prošle godine, Vijesti i Događaji, 4 July 2024, (accessed 27 September).

<sup>329</sup> Adilović, A., et al., "Pink Report 2024 Annual Report on the State of the Human Rights of LGBT Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevski Otvoreni Centar, Sarajevo, 2024, (accessed 27 September 2024).

<sup>330</sup> Civil Rights Defenders, "Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans Report, Civil Rights Defenders, 2019, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

Legislative improvements are essential to establish adequate mechanisms for the protection of HRDs across the region.

The precarious position of WHRDs in the Western Balkans mirrors the overall state of women's rights and gender equality. The gap between international commitments and legal practices reflects the democratic backsliding in these countries over recent years. In 2024, all Western

Balkan countries were classified as hybrid or transitional regimes with fragile democratic institutions, ineffective protection of political rights and civil liberties, and limited potential for sustainable, liberal democracy.<sup>332</sup> The shift from democratic aspirations to authoritarian tendencies has severely impacted gender equality and women's rights, further shrinking the space for critical and dissenting voices.

## Albania

Albania has shown minimal advancement in terms of press freedoms, yet there has been no notable improvement in political rights and civil liberties during recent years. The situation for WHRDs and women journalists remains stagnant.<sup>333</sup> Despite the adoption of legislation and policies supporting gender equality<sup>334</sup> and LGBTQI+ inclusion,<sup>335</sup> the Albanian government has yet to exhibit adequate and effective commitment to advancing women's and LGBTQI+ rights.<sup>336</sup> Over the past five years, Albania has witnessed democratic regression and a deterioration in the environment for civil society and journalists, indicating a concerning trend.<sup>337</sup> WHRDs and women journalists continue to face significant risks due to pervasive patriarchal and traditional values and lack of robust institutional protection, leaving them vulnerable to abuse and harassment. Instances of physical aggression and hate speech against the LGBTQI+ community persist, particularly on social media, with many incidents going unreported.<sup>338</sup> Anti-gender forces and organised groups continue to exert influence in the public sphere, further complicating efforts to promote gender equality and human rights in Albania.

In 2023, there was a notable rise in hate speech

across various media platforms, reflecting a concerning trend of individuals conveying messages that sought to restrict the freedom of movement for women and girls, while granting men undue advantages in public spaces.<sup>339</sup> Journalists were not spared from the impact of hate speech, with a discernible gender bias evident in these incidents.<sup>340</sup> In 2023, various media and public figures made derogatory statements against women and girls, including journalists, young mothers, teenage girls, women singers, women over 30, women experiencing homelessness, and girls with mental health issues.<sup>341</sup> For example, when discussing issues of fertility in a national TV channel, a doctor branded women over 30 as "*plaka*", meaning very old ladies. Another public figure who is a well-known lawyer, claimed during a national television show that working women and girls automatically "become their bosses' girlfriends", echoing the harmful narrative that women "sleep their way to the top".<sup>342</sup> Even derogatory portrayals of men and boys are usually made in relation to women's situations within the family or relationships. Furthermore, instances targeting other groups, including persons with disabilities and individuals of certain religious affiliations, have been documented.<sup>343</sup>

<sup>332</sup> Freedom House, "Countries and Territories, Freedom House, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>333</sup> Reporters Without Borders, "Albania, Reporters Without Borders, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>334</sup> Ministria e Shëndetësisë dhe Mbrojtjes Sociale, "Albanias National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2030, 2021, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>335</sup> Council of Europe, "National LGBTI Action Plan 2021-2027 in Albania is presented, Tirana, 14 February 2022, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>336</sup> Danaj, E. et al., "Womens Rights in the Western Balkans: Women in Politics, Gender-based Violence, and Security for Women Human Rights Defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia 2023, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, p. 61, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>337</sup> Reporters Without Borders, "Albania, Reporters Without Borders, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>338</sup> Bogdani, N., "Women Activists in Albania Face Torrent of Online Abuse, Balkan Insight, Tirana, BIRN, 21 December 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>339</sup> Kolgeci, V. S. and Spanca, F., "Raport Monitorimi për Gjuhën e Urrejtjesh në Shqipëri 2023, Reporting Diversity Network 2.0, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>342</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11-12.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

During the consultation process for the Draft Law on Sexual and Reproductive Health in 2024, hate rhetoric intensified, particularly rhetoric perpetrated by anti-gender/anti-LGBTQI+ groups. Amidst the public consultation, the Pro Life and Family Coalition, a key group within the anti-gender movement, launched a disinformation campaign against LGBTQI+ communities. They falsely linked surrogacy provisions to alleged efforts by the LGBTQI+ community to infiltrate Albanian families. Despite clarifications that the draft law does not permit surrogacy for same-sex couples, the Coalition propagated malicious narratives, with one representative even claiming that the “aggressive gay agenda” seeks to “take babies from mothers’ chests and give them to two trans men,” portraying queer communities as “playing with the blood of Albanian babies”.<sup>344</sup> Another wave of disinformation, defamation, and hate speech was “fuelled” by the symbolic religious marriage ceremony of two lesbian women, During Pride Month 2024. This was immediately followed by the organisation of the “Manifesto of Life” by the Pro Life and Family Coalition, launching a pro-family petition and spread false claims that the LGBTQI+ community aims to depopulate the country and “degender” Albanian children.<sup>345</sup> This significantly intensified social stigma, leading to increased discrimination, harassment, and violence against LGBTQI+ individuals, leading local CSOs to call for international partners and stakeholders to take immediate and decisive action to support the queer community in Albania.<sup>346</sup>

WHRDs engaged in supporting victims/survivors of human trafficking, domestic violence, other forms of GBV, advocating for feminism or LGBTQI+ rights, or working as investigative journalists often face targeted harassment in online spaces, reflecting a concerning trend of digital violence against activists. Analyses of Albania's cybersecurity governance have highlighted the government's deficiencies in, and failure to, adequately safeguard human rights and address gender inequalities in the digital realm. Despite the universality of human rights principles, online violations are frequently downplayed, resulting in a

pervasive sense of impunity for perpetrators. In 2023 in Albania, Facebook emerged as the primary site of harassment, with nearly two-thirds of respondents reporting incidents on this platform.<sup>347</sup> In contrast, Instagram and TikTok saw comparatively lower rates of abuse. Notably, only a small fraction of respondents reported facing violations on multiple platforms, highlighting the concentrated nature of online harassment, while email-based abuse was also reported, albeit less frequently.

The disparity in the treatment of online attacks underscores the urgent need for a comprehensive framework that acknowledges and addresses digital human rights violations with the seriousness they warrant. According to “Bird Monitoring”,<sup>348</sup> (W)CSOs (two cases recorded in 2023) as well as individuals (10 cases, primarily LGBTQI+ rights activists)<sup>349</sup> are subject to these attacks. These data result from the continuous monitoring of online public communications. It is likely that many cases of digital violence are not reported, and scarce data are unable to depict the actual scale of the problem. In November 2023, an online media posted an article about an interview that an Albanian activist, Zhaklin Lekatari, had given on a TV program about sexual relations issues, following which she received backlash on social media, where commenters insulted her and attacked her with derogatory comments. In April 2024, Xheni Karaj, activist for human and LGBTQI+ rights and Executive Director of CSO Alliance Against Discrimination of LGBT in Albania, reported the creation of a fake account on Instagram with her name and photo, created by an anonymous perpetrator. She warned the author that if the person does not delete this account, she will report the case to the Police. The account was deleted by the offender.<sup>351</sup> The day before the 2024 Tirana Pride Parade, Karaj and her partner had rocks thrown at them by four teenage boys. On the day of the Pride Parade, another LGBTQI+ activist reported having had rocks thrown at her by another teenage boy. In June, Karaj and her girlfriend had large rocks thrown at them for a second time while they were in public.<sup>352</sup>

<sup>344</sup> Aleanca LGBTI, 'Official communication and fact sheet for international partners: urgent developments and call for action', Aleanca LGBTI, June 2024, p. 1.

<sup>345</sup> Hashtag.al, '“Të mbrojmë familjen” Koalicioni pro Familjes tubim në sheshin Skënderbej, nis mbledhjen e firmave, Hashtag.al, 23 May 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>346</sup> Aleanca LGBTI, 'Official communication and fact sheet for international partners: urgent developments and call for action', Aleanca LGBTI, June 2024.

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>348</sup> BIRN Investigative Resource Desk, "BIRD Monitoring, Share Foundation and BIRN, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>349</sup> BIRD Monitoring, "Civil society organisations affected in 2023, Share Foundation and BIRN, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>350</sup> BIRD Monitoring, "Activists affected in 2023, Share Foundation and BIRN, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>351</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Albania.

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*





One of the rocks thrown at the human and LGBTQI+ rights activists Xheni Karaj, and her partner on May 24, 2024 in Tirana, Albania.

Photo: Xheni Karaj

The normalisation of online violence against WHRDs poses a threat to civic participation and democratic values. Findings from a mapping on cybersecurity for WHRDs indicated that one-fifth of

respondents perceived the violations they experienced as common threats to women, and they did not consider them problematic enough to report. Six percent of respondents indicated that these threats are so tied to their work as WHRDs that they are accustomed to coping with them.<sup>353</sup> These respondents also assumed their cases would not be treated seriously by authorities. Both WHRDs and LGBTQI+ rights activists believed that online threats are not taken seriously, neither by the police nor prosecutors in Albania.<sup>354</sup> The reluctance of many WHRDs to report these violations reflects a distrust in the effectiveness of existing mechanisms to address digital abuse. This perception perpetuates a culture of impunity, emboldening perpetrators and perpetuating a cycle of violence. Sixteen percent of respondents reported that their engagement as WHRDs has been affected by their experiences in digital spaces, with some heightening their vigilance regarding personal data protection, experiencing feelings of restraint or discouragement in their work and suffering from detrimental effects on their mental health and wellbeing.<sup>355</sup> Fostering a culture of digital literacy and resilience, ensuring that WHRDs have the knowledge and resources to protect themselves and advocate for their rights in online spaces is crucial.

## Bosnia and Herzegovina

Despite the existence of a legislative framework and constitutional provisions that ostensibly support human rights and minority rights' protection, reality tells a different story. (W)HRDs in BiH face a myriad of challenges including intimidation, threats, smear campaigns, digital attacks, psychological violence and physical violence, originating from various actors, ranging from state authorities to the general public.<sup>356</sup> The situation for LGBTQI+ activists and (W)HRDs has deteriorated over time, as has been reported in previous editions of this report. In an environment characterised by weak rule of law and high levels of corruption, impunity for perpetrators targeting (W)HRDs remains.

HRDs, as well as journalists, face increasing threats and growing pressure from both the government and the general population, often encountering hostility towards their work. In a monitoring report on hate speech in BiH, 2023 saw the largest number of evidenced cases of hate speech on the grounds of gender, including sexism, sexual harassment and misogyny. In total, 29 cases were registered which represent 25% of all cases; for the first time in the history of this annual monitoring, hate speech on the grounds of gender was more frequent than hate speech on the grounds of ethnicity.<sup>357</sup> During 2023, many CSOs experienced a surge in both physical and verbal assaults targeting activists and journalists in BiH. This trend

<sup>352</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>353</sup> Reçi, M. and Kelmendi S., "Chapter 1: The freedom to defend rights in online spaces: Challenges for women human rights defenders in Albania, Online Actions, Offline Harms: Case Studies on Gender and Cybersecurity in the Western Balkans, Western Balkans Cybersecurity Research Network, 2023, p. 30, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>356</sup> Civil Rights Defenders, "Human Rights Defenders in the Western Balkans Report, Civil Rights Defenders, 2019, p. 35, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>357</sup> Gačanica, L., "Monitoring Report on Hate Speech in BiH, The Center for Investigative Reporting, Sarajevo, 2024, (accessed 26 September 2024).

included incidents of offensive and threatening written slogans (such as “kill”, “you don't belong in this city”), as well as attacks on CSOs' facilities, including Unsa Geto, Banja Luka Social Center, and Sarajevo Open Center.<sup>358</sup> Over 70 cases of attacks on journalists were recorded during the same year.<sup>359</sup> WCSOs shared that there are currently over 20 anti-gender groups operating in Republika Srpska, many of which are responsible for attacks on civil society and LGBTQI+ activists.<sup>360</sup> Fewer than 25% of these cases were investigated by the authorities, highlighting deficiencies in the enforcement of existing legal frameworks in BiH aimed at protecting human rights.<sup>361</sup> There is still a need for improvements in enforcement mechanisms to ensure the safety and security of activists and journalists.

As reported in the previous edition of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*, emerging concerns remain regarding the legal framework, particularly in the Republika Srpska entity. Amendments to the Criminal Code have classified defamation as a criminal offense, with fines of up to 3,000 BAM (1,500 EUR), posing a significant threat to independent journalism. Additionally, Republika Srpska authorities drafted a Law on Special Registry and Publicity of the Work of Non-Profit Organisations, mandating the establishment of a registry for foreign-funded CSOs and imposing stringent reporting requirements along with heavy penalties for non-compliance. Although the proposed law was withdrawn during the ninth regular session of Republika Srpska Parliament held in May 2024, Republika Srpska President Milorad Dodik tweeted that the proposed law was withdrawn for additional adjustments and will re-enter procedures in due time.<sup>362</sup> The EU and various national and international human rights organisations have expressed deep concerns regarding the potential impact of these measures on civil society and (W)HRDs, highlighting the need for vigilant monitoring and advocacy towards

safeguarding freedom of expression and civil society.<sup>363</sup>

WHRDs continue to report serious challenges they encounter in the conduct of their work, including frequent harassment, threats and attacks, as well as institutional barriers and the lack of responses from relevant authorities.<sup>364</sup> Recognising the urgency of the situation, women CSOs and WHRDs emphasise the importance of robustly documenting human rights violations and attacks, while also advocating for strengthened coalitions and increased utilisation of international human rights mechanisms as vital strategies to confront the obstacles encountered by WHRDs and other civil society actors. Besides putting pressure on civil society, anti-gender organisations have successfully advocated against the Draft Law on Protection from Domestic Violence and Violence against Women in Republika Srpska, and have also been active in the current process of removing gender identity from legislation in Republika Srpska. These legal provisions are crucial for the protection of human rights. Additionally, these organisations have institutional support for their actions from both the Republika Srpska President and Republika Srpska Prime Minister.<sup>365</sup>

As has been the trend in the region in recent years, environmental activists have in BiH also increasingly become targets. The civic initiative “Stop rudnicima u dolini Plive” against a mining project in Republika Srpska have openly become targets, with their names and photos published on Facebook and labelled as “enemies of Republika Srpska's economic prosperity”.<sup>366</sup> The backlash on environmental activists has also resulted in SLAPP lawsuits, including against women environmental activists such as Amela Šabić Ahmečković from Jezero municipality in Republika Srpska and Hahrija Čobo from Kakanj, FBiH.<sup>367</sup> At the time of writing this report, both cases had been dismissed though the pressure on environmental activists across the country has not decreased.<sup>368</sup>

<sup>358</sup> Brković, A., et al., ‘Human Rights Defenders in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Rights, Position, and Obstacles’, Human Rights House Banja Luka, Banja Luka, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>359</sup> Amnesty International, “Bosnia and Herzegovina 2023, Amnesty International, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>360</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in BiH.

<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>362</sup> Dodik, M., Post on X, 28 May 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>364</sup> Bećirspahić, A., “DIALOGUE WITH WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS: Fostering a conducive environment for the free and safe work of women human rights defenders through coalitions, joint action, and use of the United Nations human rights mechanisms, United Nations Bosnia and Herzegovina, 8 December 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>365</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in BiH.

<sup>366</sup> Antikorupcija, ‘Novi skandal u BiH: Rudarski lobi crta metu na čelu protivnika geoloških istraživanja i otvaranja rudnika’, Građanski aktivizam, 22 January 2024, (accessed 27 September 2024).

<sup>367</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>368</sup> AbrašMEDIA, “Lykos povukao tužbu protiv aktivistkinje Amele Šabić Ahmečković”, AbrašMEDIA, 9 May 2023, (accessed 27 September 2024); Analiziraj.ba, “VELIKA POBJEDA HAJRIJE ČOBO: Propast SLAPP tužbe Adriatic Metalsa protiv odvažne aktivistice!”, Analiziraj.ba, 20 June 2024, (accessed 27 September 2024).



March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march, Bosnia and Herzegovina

LGBTQI+ activists continued to face discrimination and threats during the reporting period. Perpetrators of the attacks on Banja Luka Pride organisers, as reported in the previous edition of *Women's Rights in Western Balkans*, have yet to be prosecuted, and only one recommendation based on a submitted complaint was received from the BiH Ombudsperson, despite the Pride March Organising Committee's submission of six to the institution.<sup>369</sup>

In addition to WHRDs and LGBTQI+ rights advocates, who have long faced challenges in BiH's patriarchal society, a group of activists that has emerged as vulnerable is migrant rights defenders.

In 2023, over 35,000 refugees and migrants were recorded, particularly from Afghanistan, Morocco and Syria, which has added to the challenges faced by migrant rights defenders, due to their activism and visibility. Migrant rights defenders have come under attack from both state authorities and the general population, who accuse them of facilitating immigration.<sup>370</sup> This hostility places additional pressure on those working to advocate for the rights and wellbeing of refugees and migrants, further complicating their already challenging work. Recognition and protection of these (W)HRDs and the additional risks they face is crucial in supporting their precarious work within BiH's complex socio-political landscape.

<sup>369</sup> This is how it is stated in the Word document: Adilović, A., et al., 'Pink Report 2024 – Annual Report on the State of the Human Rights of LGBT Persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina', Sarajevski Otvoreni Centar, Sarajevo, 2024, (accessed 27 September 2024).

<sup>370</sup> Front Line Defenders, 'Bosnia and Herzegovina, Front Line Defenders, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).



## Kosovo

In Kosovo, the state of human rights and their defenders has deteriorated in recent years, including this reporting period, due to the repercussions of the persistent ethnic tensions and politically motivated violence in the country. Though online spaces like social media can be effective tools in engaging people to join initiatives, campaigns, and protests, KWN states that activists can face backlash and threats on social media.<sup>371</sup> Activists who raise their voices during protests in Kosovo are often subjected to online shaming and harassment.<sup>372</sup>

As reported in the previous edition of this report, Kosovo witnessed increasing attacks on journalists, with violent incidents occurring during local elections, leading to calls from international press freedom organisations for measures to ensure journalists' safety.<sup>373</sup> The U.S. State Department Human Rights Report 2023 underlined that although the Constitution and legal framework ensured freedom of expression, including for the press, which the government generally respected, credible reports indicated that some officials, politicians, businesses, criminals, and religious groups tried to intimidate journalists through violence or threats.<sup>374</sup> During 2024, the Association of Journalist of Kosovo (AJK) raised concerns on what they refer to as dangerous<sup>375</sup> and violent attacks<sup>376</sup> by politicians on media. Women journalists were more exposed to these forms of attacks, particularly women who constitute the majority of the reporters on the field, especially in northern Kosovo.<sup>377</sup> One example of such an attack in 2024 was on investigative journalist Ardiana Thaçi. Thaçi reported on the Telegram group "AlbKings", which had over 100,000 members and shared non-consensual intimate images and

videos of women from Albania and Kosovo, but also from the region.<sup>378</sup> In the AlbKings Telegram group, it was common for someone to share the contact information of the victim/survivor in the group upon recognising one of the victims/survivors. After Thaçi's article was published, she became targeted by members of the group, and one member even managed to find her private phone number and publish it in AlbKings. These developments underscore the importance of continued vigilance and action to safeguard human rights and media freedoms, to promote freedom of expression, and to address underlying tensions to foster a more inclusive and democratic society in Kosovo.

WHRDs in Kosovo are exposed to a multitude of threats and challenges as a result of their activism, including intimidation and violence from various sources, such as family members and community leaders in both private and public spaces.<sup>379</sup> In recent years, there has been a growing concern about the prevalence of violence in virtual spaces, where CSOs, WHRDs, and queer activists struggle to combat biased algorithms, fake news, and particularly anti-gender online campaigns.<sup>380</sup> LGBTQI+ persons and activists often face threats and bullying online. Every year, hate speech calls for the death of LGBTQI+ persons and their supporters during the annual Pride Parade in Pristina. Media channels have used sensational reporting to spike public reactions. This has negatively affected the lives of activists.<sup>381</sup>

AJK reported that it was targeted with digital smear campaigns several times when it defended journalists and the media.<sup>382</sup> AJK additionally reported that government officials, including the

<sup>371</sup> Milenkovska, S., "For Women in the Balkans, Digital Space is a Double-Edged Sword, Balkan Insight, Skopje, 7 June 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> Amnesty International, "Kosovo 2023, Amnesty International, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>374</sup> U.S. Department of State, "Kosovo 2023 Human Rights Report, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>375</sup> Association of Journalists of Kosovo, "President Osmani's call for media investigations is a dangerous precedent, Association of Journalists of Kosovo, 17 August 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>376</sup> Association of Journalists of Kosovo, "AJK calls to stop the violent attacks by Vetvendosje against Periskopi and Nacionale, Association of Journalists of Kosovo, 25 July 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>377</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Kosovo.

<sup>378</sup> Association of Journalists of Kosovo, "Journalist Ardiana Thaçi Mehmeti is the target of attacks by the AlbKings group, Association of Journalists of Kosovo, 7 May 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>379</sup> Scilla, G. M., "Women, Peace and Security in Kosovo: Empowerment Through the Tangles of Tradition, Agency for Peacebuilding, 3 August 2020, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>380</sup> Rashiti, V. et al., "Gender Equality: At the Centre of IT... and Beyond: A Gender Analysis of Digitalisation in Kosovo, Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, p. 114, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>381</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>382</sup> Information shared with Kvinna till Kvinna by partner organisation in Kosovo.



Prime Minister and ruling political party members, engaged in smear campaigns to undermine public trust in the media. WCSO KWN additionally noted that smear campaigns against women target them based on their gender and involve socialised gender stereotypes regarding socially acceptable “roles”, dress, and body types for women.<sup>383</sup> Such media emphasis detracts from their effectiveness, reinforces gender stereotypes, and potentially dissuades other women from engaging in politics.<sup>384</sup>

Women and girls in Kosovo are vulnerable to various forms of gender-based “cyberviolence”, including psychological abuse, cyberstalking,

online harassment, sexual exploitation and breaches of privacy such as doxing and revenge pornography. Specific groups, such as young women, ethnic minorities, LGBTQI+ individuals, people with disabilities, as well as WHRDs and journalists, are at heightened risk.<sup>385</sup> The EC Kosovo report 2023 finds that Kosovo has some level of preparation with regards to freedom of expression, however limited progress has been made in addressing the recommendations of the previous report.<sup>386</sup> Concerns remain regarding physical attacks and threats against journalists, public smear campaigns and hate speech, with the lack of freedom of expression in the north of Kosovo mentioned as particularly concerning.<sup>387</sup>

## Montenegro

Montenegro is committed to achieving gender equality through its National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2025, and the accompanying yearly action plans, which align with the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>388</sup> Even still, WHRDs in Montenegro face pervasive challenges and threats, both online and offline. This widespread abuse not only hampers their ability to perform their work, but also discourages women from engaging in civil society work or actively participating in public and political spheres.<sup>389</sup>

In Montenegro, societal polarisation, misogyny and hate speech have escalated during the reporting period, with vulnerable groups such as Roma, Egyptian, Ashkali, persons with disabilities and LGBTQI+ persons facing multiple forms of discrimination and occasional exposure to hate speech and hate crimes.<sup>390</sup> During the reporting period, relevant institutions did not adequately address discrimination and Supreme Court data from 2018 until April 2024 had no record of cases related to gender-based discrimination against women.<sup>391</sup> While awareness of different forms of discrimination has been growing, so has the number of complaints registered by the

Ombudsperson's Office, primarily related to labour and employment issues, including cases related to hate speech and discrimination prevalent in public discourse and the media. In 2024, new cases of hate speech have surfaced, highlighting the escalating pressure faced by women activists in Montenegro. A single database on cases of discrimination at the national level has not yet been established, even though this obligation was part of the 2021 Action Plan for the National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2025.<sup>392</sup> The anti-discrimination law, the Law on Protection of Equality and Prohibition of Discrimination, which was drafted in 2022, has not yet been adopted and the overall institutional framework remains insufficiently prepared for its implementation.

The Basic State Prosecutor's Office in Nikšić has initiated legal proceedings against Veselin Čurović, the Chief of Communal Police, accusing him of unauthorised collection and use of personal data under Article 176 of the Criminal Code of Montenegro. The case revolved around Ivana Čogurić, an activist affiliated with “Ecopatriotism”, Montenegro's pioneering women's environmental movement, who reported illegal waste dumping in

<sup>383</sup> Rashiti, V. et al., “Gender Equality: At the Centre of IT... and Beyond: A Gender Analysis of Digitalisation in Kosovo, Kosovo Women's Network, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>386</sup> European Commission, “Kosovo\* 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5, p. 32.

<sup>388</sup> UN Women, ‘Montenegro commits to implementing national plan and law towards equality in all areas’, Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality, 2015, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>389</sup> Vucinic, Z., “This is Misogyny: The Growing Abuse Facing Women in Montenegrin Politics, Balkan Insight, Podgorica, 28 March 2022, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>390</sup> European Commission, “Montenegro 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 46, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>391</sup> Information was obtained from the Supreme Court of Montenegro on April 10, 2024, via an official request submitted by the Women's Rights Center.

<sup>392</sup> Montenegro Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights, ‘National Strategy for Gender Equality 2021-2025 with Action Plan 2021-2022’, July 2021.

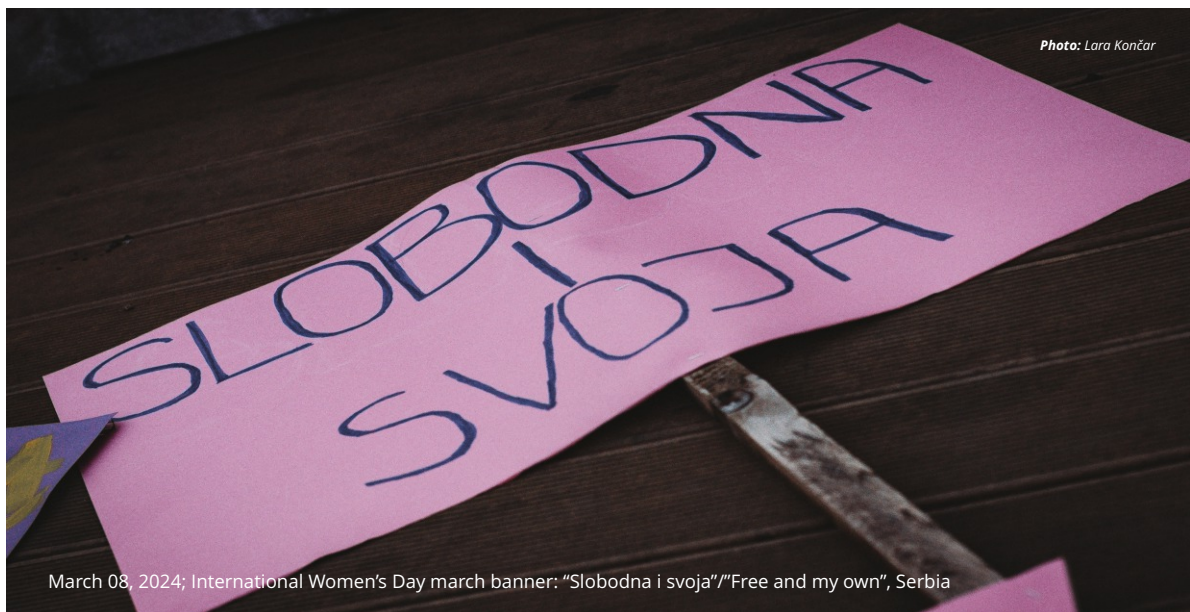
the river Gračanica. The trial took place on May 16, 2024, in the Basic Court in Nikšić. Ivana Čogurić has received pro bono legal assistance, but the verdict is still pending.<sup>393</sup>

This case is no surprise in a context which is increasingly dominated by anti-gender policies, with debates surrounding sexual and reproductive rights, privacy and autonomy at the forefront of political discourse. Instances such as attempts to exploit the Pride Parade; the broadcast of the inauguration of Serbian Orthodox Metropolitan Church Joaniki on the Parliamentary channel; debates on abortion rights heavily influenced by religious institutions; and consultations with religious figures regarding birth rate policies highlight the challenges for WHRD and LGBTQI+ rights activists, as well as for achieving gender equality.<sup>394</sup>

In this context, feminist activist Jovan Džoli Ulićević, Executive Director of trans-led feminist organisation Spektra came under attack during the reporting period with targeted libel perpetrated by Miroslav Joksimović, a Montenegrin lawyer and well-known anti-gender actor. Among the numerous attacks, one particular attack accused Ulićević of receiving 210,000 EUR from tax funds and for advocating for the draft Gender Recognition Law so that children can change their genders “whenever they feel like it”.<sup>395</sup> This type of

misinformation has been directed at Spektra on several occasions, often with photos of Ulićević attached to the social media posts made by Joksimović. As a result, Ulićević continually receives threats from Joksimović’s followers on X (formerly Twitter).

No progress has been recorded on the protection of LGBTQI+ rights in Montenegro and the work of activists during the reporting period, as evidenced by ongoing attacks on CSOs and activists working for LGBTQI+ rights. Several attacks on activists’ offices and private apartments took place, coupled with a surge in hate speech, particularly prevalent on social media platforms.<sup>396</sup> Also, instances of hate speech within the Parliament of Montenegro have escalated, with women, LGBTQI+ persons and persons with disabilities being primary targets. Under Minister Dragoslav Šćekić’s tenure, regulated access to medically assisted fertilisation for LGBTQI+ individuals were restricted, while issues such as the shortage of hormone therapy for trans women remained unaddressed by successive cabinets.<sup>397</sup> Despite civil society initiatives advocating the national government to address these issues, discriminatory regulatory practices persisted without significant objection, underscoring the need for a more robust response to such forms of institutionalised discrimination, and towards meaningful progress.



March 08, 2024; International Women's Day march banner: "Slobodna i svoja"/"Free and my own", Serbia

<sup>393</sup> Legal assistance was supported by the Sigrid Rausing Trust Foundation; Human Rights Action, "Chief of Communal Police of Nikšić Indicted for Unauthorised Use of Personal Data of a Female Environmental Activist, Human Rights Action Montenegro, 26 March 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>394</sup> Raičević, M. et al., "A Gender Perspective of the 2023 Parliamentary Elections, Women's Rights Center and Spektra Association, Podgorica, 2023, p. 12, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>395</sup> Joksimovic, M., Facebook post, 29 May 2024, (accessed 30 September 2024).

<sup>396</sup> European Commission, "Montenegro 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 49, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>397</sup> Bobičić, N. and Ulićević, J. "Antirodni narativi u Crnoj Gori: Demokratskim metodama protiv roda i demokratije, Anti-rodni narativi; Studije slučaja: Hrvatska, Srbija i Crna Gora, 2023, p. 81, (accessed 25 September 2024).

## North Macedonia

The security of WHRDs in North Macedonia is of critical concern. WHRDs and LGBTQI+ rights activists are particularly targeted with hate speech, attacks, and intimidation.<sup>398</sup> These attacks are often triggered by activists' opposing political views, anti-corruption efforts, or their advocacy in improving conditions for ethnic and religious minorities, LGBTQI+ rights and women's rights in general. The hostile environment poses a severe threat to HRDs' safety and wellbeing, hindering their essential work in advancing human rights and gender equality.

The EC's 2023 Country Report for North Macedonia found no progress in investigating the attacks on the LGBTQI+ support centre that occurred in 2012, 2013, and 2014. Law enforcement agencies have not pursued investigations into the vandalism of an LGBTQI+ organisation's office in Tetovo or the death threats against activists.<sup>399</sup> Religious bodies have vilified women's rights activists and supporters of the GEA, leading to online threats and pervasive hostility.<sup>400</sup> The continued shrinking of civic space and democratic backsliding in the region also continued in North Macedonia during the reporting period, and further impacted the safety of WHRDs. CSOs and LGBTQI+ activists criticise the authorities for shrinking the space for civil society, especially for organisations working on sexual and reproductive rights.<sup>401</sup> Growing anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric, often involving political and religious figures, has led to increased intolerance and hate speech within society.<sup>402</sup>

2023 was marked by numerous attacks and hate speech. Discriminatory remarks based on gender identity and sexual orientation were prevalent, exemplified by Bishop Jakov Stobiski of the Orthodox Church, who made derogatory comments about trans and other LGBTQI+

individuals during a television appearance.<sup>403</sup> This was not an isolated incident. Bishop Petar, Metropolitan of the Prespa-Pelagonia Orthodox Church, used his Easter epistle to criticise feminism and gender equality, labelling these as dangerous and toxic ideologies. Unlike Stobiski's remarks, Petar's statements did not receive condemnation from any State representatives. On the contrary, in June 2023, the Macedonian Orthodox Church organised a protest urging the State to abandon draft laws on Gender Equality and Civil Registry (for Legal Gender Recognition), claiming that these laws posed a serious threat to society.<sup>404</sup> This coincided with more than 12 municipal councils altering their programmes to substitute "gender equality" with "equal opportunities between men and women" in their titles and related articles, including gender-responsive budgeting. These changes involved replacing the term "gender" with "sex," substituting "gender equality" with "equality of sexes" or "equal opportunities for women and men", and introducing explicit definitions of men and women.<sup>405</sup>

In 2023, a trans activist and the coordinator of TransFormA faced hate speech on social media from anti-gender groups. The situation escalated in July 2023, when the activist was subjected to hateful comments on Facebook following her appearance on a television news programme.<sup>406</sup> Such incidents were not confined to social media; academia also witnessed similar issues. At the time of writing this report, the Network for Protection Against Discrimination and Coalition "Sexual and Health Rights of Marginalised Communities" (Coalition Margins) were pursuing a court case against the Faculty of Psychology and an author who published a textbook containing misogynistic, homophobic, and transphobic content - which was used by the Faculty.<sup>407</sup>

<sup>398</sup> Front Line Defenders, "North Macedonia, Front Line Defenders, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>399</sup> European Commission, "North Macedonia 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>400</sup> Amnesty International, "North Macedonia 2023, Amnesty International, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>401</sup> Milenkovska, S. "Policy paper on the effects of the shrinking policy space for civil society: Negative effects of anti-feminist policies and anti-gender movements, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights, Skopje, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>402</sup> European Commission, "North Macedonia 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 37, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>403</sup> Danaj, E. et al., "Womens Rights in the Western Balkans: Women in Politics, Gender-based Violence, and Security for Women Human Rights Defenders in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia 2023, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, p. 69, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>404</sup> Догов, П., "Досега незапамятено МПЦ со повик за сенароден протест по теркот на активистите, додека со невладините ги судираат ставовите, Телма, 26 June 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>405</sup> Cvetkovikj, I., "Anti-gender mobilizations in North Macedonia: A transnational tool-kit for domestic actors against gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, 19 April 2024, (accessed 25 September).

<sup>406</sup> Coalition MARGINS and TransFormA, "Submission for the Universal Periodic Review of the Republic of North Macedonia (4th Cycle), Skopje, 2023, p. 12, (accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>407</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

In February 2024, anti-gender actors continued their nationwide Caravan campaign, which began in 2023. This “caravan” travelled across the country, screening the film “What is a Woman” followed by discussions. A photograph from one of the post-film discussions was leaked, showing the audience watching a video of WHRD and queer rights advocate Irena Cvetkovik from Coalition Margins, presumably projected with negative connotations.<sup>408</sup> Additionally, the anti-gender group Coalition for the Protection of Children, in partnership with the ultra-conservative organisation Alliance Defending Freedom International, conducted training sessions on “freedom of religion and speech” for lawyers, civil society actors, and politicians. These sessions were designed to teach participants how to undermine human rights progress by inundating the judicial system with freedom of speech lawsuits under the guise of religious freedom. Bishop Jakov Stobiski of the Orthodox Church in North Macedonia also attended these trainings.<sup>409</sup>

In March 2024, Bishop Stobiski escalated his slander against WCSOs, publishing a misogynist and transphobic article targeting the Women's Organisation of Strumica. This attack vehemently opposed the concepts of women's rights and gender equality in North Macedonia and was a response to a “guerrilla action” organised by the WCSO in Strumica on March 9<sup>th</sup>.<sup>410</sup> On March 14<sup>th</sup>, the anti-gender group Take Responsibility (Преземи Одговорност) posted a photograph on

Facebook juxtaposing images of Nazis during World War II, George Soros, and WHRD Irena Cvetkovik from Coalition Margins, with a Swastika placed between Soros and Cvetkovik. The post falsely claimed that Soros, depicted as a Nazi collaborator, now supports Cvetkovik and Coalition Margins. Although the post was deleted the same day, an article by Take Responsibility soon surfaced, including a screen capture of Cvetkovik's response to the post, condemning her and reiterating the original defamatory claims.<sup>411</sup> Later in the year, four feminist CSOs, as well as several international donors were targeted in a lengthy article by a local politician, referring to certain gender equality policies and initiatives as harmful and dangerous, while bluntly exposing his own transphobia, and feeding the narrative that gender equality is a “Western ideology”.<sup>412</sup>

The urgent need for action to protect WHRDs from the ongoing attacks and discrimination they still face in North Macedonia is evident, as also reported in the EC 2023 North Macedonia Report, which included statements on the growing anti-gender movement. Institutions in North Macedonia have failed to strengthen legal frameworks and law enforcement mechanisms that will afford WHRDs and LGBTQI+ activists the protection of their human rights and safety. WHRDs and LGBTQI+ activists in North Macedonia have little access to support networks, safe spaces and resources required for their necessary protection and continuation of their vital work.

## Serbia

(W)HRDs in Serbia continue to operate in a hostile environment, regularly facing online harassment and direct attacks. In 2024, the EU Human Rights Defenders Mechanism, *ProtectDefenders.eu*, provided psychosocial support to a Serbian LGBTQI+ activist who was targeted by threats and a smear campaign in regime-owned media. *ProtectDefenders.eu* also provided digital security support to environmental activists that are under government surveillance. The government drafted the “Strategy for Creating a Stimulating

Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the Period from 2022 to 2030”<sup>413</sup>, which aims to address these challenges through inclusive mechanisms, yet the situation remains precarious. When the Action Plan Proposal for 2024-2026 for the strategy was in public hearing, the Network of Women Against Violence, composed of 28 organisations and three CSO networks, sent an Open Letter to the Serbian government bodies, including the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue.<sup>414</sup>

<sup>408</sup> Cvetkovik, I., Facebook post, 14 February 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>409</sup> Коалиција за заштита на децата, Facebook post, 11 February 2024, (accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>410</sup> Stobiski, J., “Постосомартовски родови лудории, Tiveriopol.mk, 11 March 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>411</sup> Podgovornost, “ВО СЛУЖБА НА НАЦИСТИТЕ, Livejournal, 15 March 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>412</sup> Танушев, Ѓ., “Има само мажи, жени и добар кеш, a1on.mk, (accessed 27 September 2024).

<sup>413</sup> Republic of Serbia, “Strategy for Creating a Stimulating Environment for the Development of Civil Society in the Republic of Serbia for the Period from 2022 to 2030, Belgrade, 3 February 2022, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>414</sup> Network of Women Against Violence, “2024 OPEN LETTER from womens organizations to the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, Autonomous Women's Center Belgrade, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2025).



The letter demanded that the new Action Plan ensure full protection of the physical and psychological integrity of WCSOs, transparent decision-making processes, and secure, transparent financing. The letter was prompted by serious security threats to women from organisations in southern Serbia. In response, the Ministry immediately proposed a meeting with local women's organisations, which took place on July 12, 2024 in Leskovac.<sup>415</sup> After the meeting, participants issued a press release highlighting ongoing concerns, particularly regarding security and the transparency of local project financing.

The Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM) created an interactive map, where attacks and threats on HRDs in Serbia have been documented from 2022, revealing troubling trends, including an increasing number of recorded attacks outside of Belgrade. This increase is likely partially explained by previous years' limited media coverage in local communities.<sup>416</sup> Amnesty International has highlighted that HRDs are under attack in Serbia, and the authorities have failed to provide adequate protection. Independent and investigative women journalists, WHRDs, and queer activists face threats, vilification, and punitive civil proceedings.<sup>417</sup>

After her arrest in 2022, activist Aida Ćorović was legally convicted in October 2023 for disturbing public order and fined 100,000 RSD (approximately 850 EUR) for throwing eggs at a mural of convicted war criminal Ratko Mladić in November 2021.<sup>418</sup> From the moment of her arrest, her initial stance was refusal to pay the fine, and she was willing to face imprisonment as a result of her refusal. To support her, Association KROKODIL managed to raise the necessary funds and settled the fine with the Misdemeanour Court. Within just a few days, citizens' donations totalled around 700,000 RSD, with which the association established the SLAPP BACK Fund.<sup>419</sup> This fund aims to support activists in legal representation and in defending their rights, particularly the right to freedom of speech.

A proposed Law on Internal Affairs poses an additional threat to the right to freedom of

assembly, exacerbating the already challenging environment for activists and (W)HRDs in the country. Freedom House noted Serbia's state of freedom as the largest decline in Europe during the reporting period, as well as the second largest European decline in the previous decade (second to Hungary).<sup>420</sup> Within this context, the space for civic activism continues to shrink with no indication of improvement, placing additional pressure on WHRDs and LGBTQI+ rights activists who are already disproportionately at risk of violence and threats.

The 2023 EC Serbia Report highlighted that CSOs and HRDs continue to raise awareness about civil and political rights amid a polarised environment, facing verbal attacks and smear campaigns from high-level officials and in Parliament.<sup>421</sup> Hate speech, threats, stalking, vandalism of home or office spaces and physical violence against WHRDs persisted, with inadequate implementation of legislation and impunity for perpetrators, as has been reported in previous editions of this report. The implementation of hate crime legislation, including crimes based on sexual orientation, remains inadequate in Serbia. For instance, the Pride Info Centre in Belgrade was subjected to multiple attacks during the reporting period, and at the time of writing this report, the Centre has reported 20 attacks to the police since its opening in August 2017. Attacks on Pride Info Centre are on the grounds of gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation. Without implementation of existing anti-discrimination legislation, coupled with a lack of institutional will to respond to the attacks or pursue perpetrators, the Centre's staff and volunteers cannot receive justice for the ongoing violence they have faced. Alongside the lack of legislative implementation, there still exists a lack of centralised official data on hate crimes, broken down by bias motivation. Due to a lack of trust in institutions and fear of secondary victimisation, many cases of violence and discrimination against LGBTQI+ activists go unreported. According to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, extremist and far-right groups have extended their attacks and threats to include migrants, with incidents increasingly

<sup>415</sup> Republic of Serbia, "Делегација Министарства у посети југу Србије поводом отвореног писма Мреже „Жене против насиља“, Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, July 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>416</sup> Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights (YUCOM), "Report on the Attacks on Human Rights Defenders in Serbia for 2022, Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights – YUCOM, Belgrade, 2022, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>417</sup> Amnesty International, "Serbia 2023, Amnesty International, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>418</sup> Martinović, I., "Serbian Activist Fined For Eggging Ratko Mladic Mural, Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 4 October 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>419</sup> KROKODIL, "SLAPP Back Fund, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>420</sup> Gorokhovskaja, Y. and Grothe, C., "Freedom in the World 2024: The Mounting Damage of Flawed Elections and Armed Conflict, Freedom House, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>421</sup> European Commission, "Serbia 2023 Report, European Commission, Brussels, 2023, p. 15, (accessed 25 September 2024).

motivated by hatred and ethnic identity.<sup>422</sup>

A series of attacks on (W)HRDs, civil society, and LGBTQI+ activists continued into 2024. Just weeks after the car of election observers from the CSO CRTA was destroyed during their election observation mission,<sup>423</sup> the entire glass exterior of the entrance to the Pride Info Centre was demolished in broad daylight on Orthodox Christmas Day.<sup>424</sup> The Ombudsperson launched an investigation into the case and is assessing irregularities in the Ministry of Interior's handling of the attack on the Pride Info Centre. At the time of publishing this report, the police have not been able to identify or locate the perpetrator/s.<sup>425</sup> In June 2024, the display window of Pride Info Centre was again vandalised, making this the 24<sup>th</sup> attack on the Centre since its opening, and police have neither identified the perpetrators for nor sanctioned the previous 23 cases.<sup>426</sup>

In February 2024, Serbia's Interior Ministry investigated a case of police brutality reported by LGBTQI+ rights CSO "Da se zna!", in which police officers allegedly assaulted two young LGBTQI+ persons during a search of their home in Belgrade. The Ministry stated that the internal control section informed the relevant prosecutor's office and will sanction any officers found to have exceeded their powers. Da se zna! and witnesses described severe physical and psychological abuse, including sexual assault, during the incident, and have also referred to their documentation of ongoing violence and discrimination against the LGBTQI+ community in Serbia.<sup>427</sup> Though the victims/survivors of violence were not initially targeted for their activism, they have since turned to civil society for support, as well as to raise awareness of this incident and to put pressure on prosecutors and the Ministry of Interior, recognising civil society as the viable form of support that can lead to justice. As a result of the awareness-raising and their legal representation regarding this incident of police brutality, Da se zna! became the target of an ongoing defamation

campaign against the organisation, orchestrated by government-operated media. Tabloids launched smear campaigns wherein the CSO was accused of selling drugs out of their office space. In the summer of 2024, due to their vocal and public support of environmental activists arrested for organising protests against the planned Rio Tinto lithium mines in Serbia, Da se zna! was again targeted by regime media and tabloids, publishing that it is a "confirmed fact" that the organisation deals drugs. Meanwhile, Da se zna! has stated that none of their staff have ever been involved in, or accused of, criminal activity and that this form of reporting is directed at them to discredit their work and defame the organisation.<sup>428</sup>

In March 2024, three incidents took place at the International Women's Day march in Belgrade.<sup>429</sup> One man seized a Pride flag from an activist and destroyed it before being removed by the police. A passerby observing the march shouted insults, derogatory language, and slander at the protesters, leading to his removal and interrogation by the police. A man wearing a shirt with insulting and derogatory language was also removed from the area by the police. That same month, a security guard physically attacked and forcefully removed journalist Verica Marinčić from municipal council proceedings in the northern town of Indija, restricting her from covering the council proceedings, an attack that was captured on video and reported to police.<sup>430</sup> This was not the first time that Marinčić has been under attack for her reporting, and this incident occurred in a series of events over the timespan of several years where the ruling party, the Serbian Progressive Party, has not invited her media outlet IN Media to events organised by the local government.<sup>431</sup>

Other attacks on women journalists have also been recorded, with Serbian journalists and press freedom advocates pointing to a concerning deterioration in the media's ability to report without fear of reprisal under the country's ruling party.<sup>432</sup> Ana Lalić Hegediš, a reporter for news site

<sup>422</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>423</sup> N1 Beograd, "Određeno zadržavanje muškarcu iz Beograda osumnjičenom za napad na tim Crte u Odžacima, N1, 17 December 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>424</sup> N1 Belgrade, "Pride Info Center in downtown Belgrade vandalized, N1, 8 January 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>425</sup> N1, "Proceedings launched over attack on Pride Info Center, N1, 10 January 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>426</sup> Belgrade Pride, Instagram Post, 28 June 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>427</sup> Dragojlo, S., "Serbia Investigates Allegations of Police Assault on Two LGBT People, Balkan Insight, Belgrade, 27 February 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>428</sup> Da se zna!, Instagram post, 17 August 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>429</sup> Vukajlović, N., "Incidenti na osmomartovskom maršu u centru Beograda: Muškarac lomio LGBT zastavu, Danas, 8 March 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>430</sup> Dragojlo, S., "Serbian Journalists Associations Condemn Attack on Local Reporter, Balkan Insight, Belgrade, 5 March 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>432</sup> Mong, A., "In Serbia, a witch-hunt for journalists who don't toe government line, Committee to Protect Journalists, 9 May 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

*Nova.rs* and president of the Independent Association of Journalists of Vojvodina, describes the context in which she works as a “witch hunt” against journalists. Lalić Hegediš herself is a victim/survivor of attacks and online threats, especially since March 2024 after attending a panel discussion where she criticised the construction of “yet another new Orthodox church”. The Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Serbia has deplored the threats against her as disturbing and unacceptable in a public statement.<sup>433</sup> Such attacks on journalists have also been deemed as partly organised by pro-government media and politicians.<sup>434</sup>

Many of the attacks against WCSOs during the year were related to the Law on Gender Equality, which has been heavily criticised by high-ranking officials in the Serbian Orthodox Church, as well as many politicians. During April and June, Women's Forum Prijepolje received an unprecedented amount of negative and hateful comments on content regarding the Law on Gender Equality, on videos they created about meetings on the implementation of the Law in the municipalities of Priboj and Sjenica. This was reported not to be the case for Women's Forum Prijepolje regarding videos on other topics.

In Leskovac, “Žene za mir” (Women for Peace Association), along with women activists from other cities, organised a street action, which they reported in advance to the police. They set up a five-day installation to inform passers-by about cases of femicide in Serbia. Despite prior notification, the City Administration demanded a “sketch of the occupancy of the public area certified by an authorised designer”, imposed a fee of 750 RSD (approximately 6 EUR), prohibited the prominent display of the list of femicide victims, and ordered the installation to be taken down, hindering WHRDs from raising awareness about violence against women and femicide.<sup>435</sup>

In June 2024, the women's rights activist group “Osnažene” reported harassment and violent threats received on the online platform Telegram,

following their infiltration and exposure of a Telegram group for non-consensual image sharing of women and underage girls.<sup>436</sup> The name of the Telegram group was “Telegram from the shadows: Incest, child and revenge pornography”, and following a text written by Osnažene to publicly expose the group, members began receiving threats of legal action and lawsuits, sexual violence, and insults.<sup>437</sup> A number of groups with similar names, for example “Osnažene žene”, were mistaken for Osnažene and also received attacks and threats.



At the end of June 2024, the “Mirëdita, Dobar dan” festival, a Kosovo-Serbian cultural exchange, was cancelled due to the Ministry of Internal Affairs' alleged inability to ensure the safety of participants. The bus carrying guests from Kosovo was intercepted on the outskirts of Belgrade and sent back. The Prime Minister of Serbia stated that the festival was pointless and that organisers deserved to be detested, supporting the decision.<sup>438</sup> Following the cancellation, Sofija Todorović, the director of the Youth Initiative for Human Rights – one of the festival organisers – received a threatening phone call on her personal cell phone, and a threatening letter along with a halved pig's head, delivered to the organisation's address by a man posing as a courier.<sup>439</sup> It is also important to note that Todorović continually faces

<sup>433</sup> OSCE Mission to Serbia, Facebook Post, 12 March 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>434</sup> Mong, A., “In Serbia, a witch-hunt for journalists who don't toe government line, Committee to Protect Journalists, 9 May 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>435</sup> Marinković, D., “Grad Leskovac zabranio da na ulici bude vidno istaknut spisak žena koje su u Srbiji stradale u femicidu, Rešetka, 21 May 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>436</sup> Da se zna!, Instagram post, 13 June 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>437</sup> Zdravković, A., Tomašević, N. and Ivković, S., “Telegram iza senke: incest, dečija i osvetnička pornografija, Osnažene, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>438</sup> Todorovic, S., “Hate and Lies: How the Serbian Authorities Shut Down a Peacebuilding Festival, Balkan Insight, Belgrade, 1 July 2024, (accessed 25 September 2025).

<sup>439</sup> Insajder, “Jednoj od organizatorki Festivala „Mirdita, dobar dan“ dostavljena prepolovljena svinjska glava: “S njima ne postoji dijalog”, Insajder, 28 June 2024, (accessed 25 September).

harassment and procedural barriers due to her peacebuilding activism. During the period between July 6 and August 31, 2024, she had been detained by border police in Serbia a total of eight times, upon crossing of the Serbian border, since her passport is flagged, though for unknown reasons.<sup>440</sup>

These incidents indicate the ongoing hostility faced by women and LGBTQI+ activists in Serbia. Adequately addressing the protection of WHRDs and queer activists should include strengthening legal protection, improving law enforcement training on human rights issues, and fostering a more supportive public environment for activism. The Serbian government has not taken adequate steps in implementing reporting or protection mechanisms for (W)HRD, women journalists, or LGBTQI+ activists during this reporting period.

## IN FOCUS: FEMINIST SECURITY FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

At the end of 2022, the UN Security Council gathered to Debate on Women, Peace, and Security, with briefings from the UN Secretary-General, the Executive Director of UN Women, and civil society representatives. The debate was valued as crucial at a time when global security was deteriorating at a significant pace, highlighted by record military spending of 2.1 trillion USD and decreasing funding for women's organisations in conflict zones.<sup>441</sup> In 2022, the participation of women in peace negotiations had fallen to a mere 19% in UN-led processes, down from 23% in 2020.<sup>442</sup> Amid rising and intensifying conflicts, post-pandemic challenges, economic recessions and climate change, recent advancements in gender equality are reversing, and violence against WHRDs, including those involved in UN processes, has intensified. Over one-third of Security Council

Briefers faced reprisals and intimidation since 2018.<sup>443</sup> Trends in the Western Balkan countries are similar to global ones. It is in this context that a feminist perspective to security becomes even more relevant and essential, as a response to poly-crises.

Feminist security is crucial, be it in conflict zones, in times of peace or in times of war,<sup>444</sup> and a feminist perspective should be an obligation for internal and foreign policies.<sup>445</sup> Unlike a militarised form of security, feminist security promotes inclusivity, equity, and sustainable peace. It focuses on human security rather than state security, addressing issues like GBV, economic inequality, and social injustice. It prioritises the wellbeing of individuals and communities over military might, weapons or arms trade. Militarisation and high spending on arms can drain resources, perpetuate conflict, and lead to human rights abuses and social disruption. Additionally, feminist security implements UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (Resolution 1325), where women's participation in all forms of peace negotiations before, during, and after armed conflict are an integral part of peacebuilding and peacekeeping. Without women's participation, negotiations and outcomes will lack a comprehensive approach that encompasses all genders and their rights and needs.

Feminist security is also vital for the security of WHRDs because it addresses the unique challenges they face, overlooked by traditional security frameworks.<sup>446</sup> It is widely documented (including in this report) that WHRDs encounter pervasive gender-based discrimination, limiting their access to vital resources and decision-making arenas, thereby undermining their ability to effect change.<sup>447</sup> They are also subject to gender-specific threats and violence, often of a sexualised or misogynistic nature, which poses severe risks to their safety and wellbeing. Additionally, WHRDs face hostility and defamation from both authorities and the general public, fuelled by harmful anti-

<sup>440</sup> Fonet, "Spisak i dalje postoji: Sofija Todorović ponovo zadržana na aerodromu, Danas, 31 August 2024, (accessed 27 September 2024).

<sup>441</sup> UN Women, "In focus: Women, peace and security, UN Women, 18 October 2022, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>444</sup> Förberg, J. and Poh-Janrell, J., "They Came Together Not to Be Silenced: Gender-based Violence in Conflict & the Role of Womens Rights Organisations, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Stockholm, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).

<sup>445</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, "Making Feminist Foreign Policy a reality: Experiences and Lessons Learned from one of Swedens Largest Womens Rights Organisations, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>446</sup> McNamara, K., 'Review: Whose Security? Feminism and International Relations', *Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 547–553.

<sup>447</sup> Förberg, J. and Poh-Janrell, J., "They Came Together Not to Be Silenced: Gender-based Violence in Conflict & the Role of Womens Rights Organisations, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, Stockholm, 2023, (accessed 24 September 2024).



gender narratives.<sup>448</sup> Their exclusion and marginalisation result in under-recognition and chronic underfunding, further hampering their essential work.<sup>449</sup> In the digital realm, WHRDs confront gender-specific challenges and violence, making online spaces another battleground for their safety. Thus, feminist security is essential to ensure that WHRDs are protected, empowered, and able to continue their vital contributions to human rights and social justice.

Scholars have extensively argued for the necessity of a feminist approach to security, which requires much more than superficially adding gender to policymaking processes.<sup>450</sup> Feminist security reflects a dedication to feminism as a multifaceted and expansive field of inquiry and ethical-political engagement that is intricately connected with the analysis of security. Literature indicates that feminist security regards gender as one of many intersecting power relations that require to be thoroughly addressed.<sup>451</sup> Unfortunately, gender equality policies and particularly those related to security, have been manifesting a significant gap between policy rhetoric, policy documents, and legal frameworks *vis-à-vis* results. The Western Balkan countries are a prominent example. As shown in this report and in previous editions, international commitments and national policies and legislations do not match actions and results, revealing that a substantial policy logic shift is still missing.

## RESOLUTION 1325: OBLIGATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

Resolution 1325 was adopted on October 31, 2000. It is a landmark international legal framework that addresses the disproportionate impact of armed conflict on women and the pivotal role that women could and should play in conflict management, conflict resolution and sustainable peace. The resolution emphasises the importance of women's participation and representation at all levels of decision-making in peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, the need to protect women and girls from GBV in situations of armed conflict, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and the necessity of mainstreaming a gender perspective into peacekeeping operations and post-conflict processes.

Obligations for signatories of Resolution 1325 include, but are not limited to:

- Ensuring increased representation of women at all decision-making levels in national, regional, and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention, management, and resolution of conflict;
- Enforcing and strengthening laws and policies that prevent and respond to VAW and girls;
- Incorporating gender perspectives in all aspects of peacekeeping, conflict prevention, and post-conflict relief;
- Strengthening the role of women in the prevention of conflicts;
- Supporting the specific needs of women and girls in the design and implementation of disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration programs.

Feminist security emphasises the importance of incorporating gender perspectives into the analysis and practice of security. Resolution 1325 feeds into feminist security by challenging traditional security paradigms, which often focus on state security and military might, and shifts the focus to human security, recognising the specific needs and contributions of women in conflict and post-conflict settings.

Resolution 1325 plays a critical role in promoting a feminist approach to security by advocating for the inclusion and protection of women at all levels of peace and security processes, thus contributing to more comprehensive and equitable security policies. Based on how the Western Balkan countries are working towards implementing Resolution 1325 (see: Annex 1), little priority is given to implementing a feminist approach to security.

All Western Balkan countries are signatories to Resolution 1325, but when it comes to implementation, as well as to the corresponding National Action Plans (NAPs), none of the countries are adequately addressing the Resolution's requirements. Though all six countries in the region have adopted at least one NAP, not all of them have had additional NAPs, and only Montenegro and Albania have created new plans to cover this reporting period.

<sup>448</sup> Pruthi, C. and Zillén, E., "The state of women human rights defenders 2023, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, (accessed 17 September 2024).

<sup>449</sup> UN Women, "In focus: Women, peace and security, UN Women, 18 October 2022, (accessed 25 September 2024).<sup>450</sup> Stern, M. and Wibben, A., 'A decade of feminist security studies revisited', Security Dialogue, 2014.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

## GOOD PRACTICES AND APPROACHES OF FEMINIST SECURITY

### A FEMINIST FOREIGN POLICY<sup>452</sup>

The comprehensive approach to a Feminist Foreign Policy emphasises the integration of gender equality and women's rights into all aspects of international relations. This approach advocates for a foreign policy framework that prioritises women's and marginalised groups' rights, actively addresses power imbalances, and promotes peace and security through a gender lens. The key principles include ensuring women's meaningful participation in decision-making, promoting gender-sensitive conflict resolution, and challenging patriarchal structures in both national and international contexts. It would also be important to allocate resources to support women's rights organisations and initiatives, ensuring that foreign aid and development cooperation are gender-responsive, and fostering accountability through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms.

The benefits of adopting a feminist foreign policy are multifaceted. It leads to more inclusive and sustainable peace processes by addressing the root causes of conflict and inequality. By centring the experiences and needs of women and marginalised communities, Feminist Foreign Policy contributes to more just and equitable international policies, enhancing global stability and security. Additionally, this approach strengthens international cooperation by fostering solidarity across borders, as it recognises that the promotion of gender equality is essential for addressing global challenges such as climate change, poverty and human rights abuses. Ultimately, Feminist Foreign Policy not only advances gender equality but also contributes to more peaceful and democratic societies.

### A FEMINIST APPROACH TO CONFLICT SENSITIVITY<sup>453</sup>

Another feminist approach integrates gender perspectives into conflict sensitivity to ensure that interventions in conflict-affected areas do not exacerbate existing inequalities or violence. This approach involves a thorough, gender-sensitive

conflict analysis to understand how conflicts uniquely impact women, men and marginalised groups, in all their diversity. It emphasises the importance of designing and implementing programs that are responsive to these dynamics and that actively promote gender equality. The approach also advocates for the inclusion of women in peacebuilding and decision-making processes, recognising their critical role in creating sustainable peace. All stakeholders working in conflict-affected areas are encouraged to implement a feminist approach to conflict sensitivity in their work.

The benefits of adopting this feminist approach to conflict sensitivity are significant. It enhances the effectiveness of interventions by ensuring they are more inclusive and equitable, which helps prevent further harm to vulnerable populations. By prioritising the empowerment and protection of women, this approach contributes to more comprehensive and lasting peacebuilding efforts. Additionally, it supports the resilience of communities by addressing gender-based power imbalances and fostering environments where all individuals can participate in rebuilding and developing their societies. This approach not only advances gender equality, but also strengthens the overall impact and sustainability of conflict-sensitive initiatives.

### URGENT FUNDS – THE CASE OF SLAPP BACK FUND IN SERBIA

There are several stakeholders that provide urgent financial support to (W)HRDs facing immediate threats, allowing them to take swift protective actions, including relocation. This is an important safety net for activists. The case of the SLAPP BACK fund in Serbia is an example of a domestic rapid response fund that is also crowd-funded. It was established in early 2024 by Association KROKODIL. The fund aims to support activists in legal representation and in defending their rights, particularly the right to freedom of speech.

<sup>452</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 'Making Feminist Foreign Policy a reality: Experiences and Lessons Learned from one of Sweden's Largest Women's Rights Organisations', The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024).

<sup>453</sup> The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 'A Feminist Approach to Conflict Sensitivity', The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2024, (accessed 25 September 2024).

# Recommendations<sup>\*</sup>

## SECURITY FOR WOMEN HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS

### IN BRIEF:

Attacks against WHRDs, as well as against women journalists, are under-reported and in cases where the attacks are reported, they are often not adequately addressed by the relevant institutions. No complaint and support mechanisms exist, and no systematic data is collected for evidence-based policymaking.

### WITHIN ONE YEAR:

Support regional baseline research that monitors threats and attacks, assesses the nature of attacks, and evaluates reporting mechanisms.

### Governments

- Create new, or amend existing policy documents aimed at creating a safe environment for the work of HRDs by including a definition and recognition of WHRD.
- Ensure that instances of violence and harassment in both offline and digital spaces against WHRDs are effectively investigated, adequately sanctioned and ensure gender-bias is enacted and consistently applied as an aggravating circumstance.
- Implement a requirement for national human rights institutions and/or gender equality bodies to collect, analyse and distribute data on attacks on WHRDs and journalists.

### EU institutions, other inter-governmental organisations and donors

- Ensure implementation of specific policies such as the EU Human Rights Country Strategies and the EU Gender Action Plan III, including an analysis of the needs and challenges of WHRDs and specific measures to address them.
- Fund research and data collection on WHRDs and women journalists in the Western Balkans to document incidents, responses and applicable legal frameworks.
- Allocate funds, in consultation with HRDs and WHRDs, aimed at increasing safety and mitigating security risks, including digital security, for HRDs and WHRDs.
- Fund specific programmes to comprehensively address GBV against WHRDs, including digital harassment.

<sup>\*</sup> Given the diverse situation in each country, the recommendations are generalised, applying to the majority of Western Balkan countries for each recommended action.

# Annex 1

## COMPARISON TABLE: NATIONAL ACTION PLANS FOR UN RESOLUTION 1325, BY COUNTRY

Country	Year of Adoption of First NAP	Period Covered by First NAP	Other NAPs and Periods Covered	Currently Valid NAP
<b>Albania</b>	2018	2018 – 2020	2023 – 2027	Yes
<b>BiH</b>	2010	2010 – 2013	Second NAP adopted in 2014, covered 2014 – 2017  Third NAP adopted in 2018, covered 2018 – 2022	No
<b>Kosovo</b>	2014	2013 – 2015	N/A	No
<b>Montenegro</b>	2017	2017 – 2018	2019 – 2022 2024 – 2027	Yes
<b>North Macedonia</b>	2013	2013 – 2015	2020 – 2025	Yes
<b>Serbia</b>	2010	2010 – 2015	2017 – 2020	No

Source: Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, "National Action Plans by Region, (accessed June 2024); Konsultimi Publik, "Draft Plani i Veprimit Për zbatimin e Rezolutës 1325 të Këshillit të Sigurimit të Organizatës së Kombeve të Bashkuara "Për gruan, paqen dhe sigurinë" 2023-2027, (accessed 25 September 2024); Government of Montenegro, "National Action Plan for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security, Ministry of Defence, 2019, (accessed 25 September 2024); Government of Montenegro, "Strategija implementacije R SBUN 1325 - Žene, mir i bezbjednost i njoj pratećih rezolucija za period 2024-2027, sa AP za 2024-2025. Godinu, Ministry of Defense, November 2023, (accessed 25 September 2024); Republic of North Macedonia, "Second National Action Plan of the Republic of North Macedonia for the Implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 Women, Peace and Security 2020 2025, UN Women, July 2020, (accessed 25 September 2025).



# Annex 2

COMPARISON TABLE:  
FREEDOM HOUSE RANKINGS OVER SIX YEAR PERIOD

Freedom House – Democracy Percentage Rating (0 – 100)							
Country	Ranking 2019	Ranking 2020	Ranking 2021	Ranking 2022	Ranking 2023	Ranking 2024	Change over six-year period
Albania	48	47	46	46	46	46	↓-2
BiH	39	39	39	38	37	36	↓-3
Kosovo	35	36	36	38	38	38	↑+3
Montenegro	49	48	47	47	46	46	↓-3
North Macedonia	45	46	47	47	48	46	↑+1
Serbia	50	49	48	46	46	43	↓-7

Source: Freedom House, "Countries and Territories, Freedom House, 2024, (accessed 24 September 2024).

# Annex 3

## STATISTICAL DATA SHOWS:

### COMPARISON TABLE: LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION RATE 2018 – 2023, BY GENDER

	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
	% W	% M	%W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M
<b>Albania</b>	67	50	68	44	66	44	66	44	66	44	68	53
<b>BiH</b>	53	31	51	40	53	39	52	40	52	41	60	41
<b>Kosovo</b>	56	18	53	18	49	23	55	19	55	23	56	22
<b>Montenegro</b>	64	48	65	44	63	45	63	46	63	46	64	49
<b>North Macedonia</b>	68	45	66	41	61	40	62	40	62	40	63	43
<b>Serbia</b>	63	44	63	45	62	45	63	45	63	45	68	51

Source: ILOSTAT, "Labour Force Participation Rate 2018-2023, by gender, World Bank Group, (accessed 12 September 2024).

### COMPARISON TABLE: UNEMPLOYMENT RATES 2018 – 2023, BY GENDER

	2018		2019		2020		2021		2022		2023	
	% W	% M	%W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M	% W	% M
<b>Albania</b>	13	12	12	11	13	13	12	12	12	12	10.8	10.5
<b>BiH</b>	17	20	14	19	14	17	14	18	12	17	11	17
<b>Kosovo</b>	38	39	34	22	23	32	24	30	24	30	8	18
<b>Montenegro</b>	15	15	15	16	17	18	18	19	15	16	12	14
<b>North Macedonia</b>	20	20	16	18	17	17	16	16	16	14	14	11
<b>Serbia</b>	12	14	10	11	9	9	11	12	9	10	9	10

Sources: ILOSTAT, "Unemployment, female (% of female labor force), World Bank Group, (accessed 12 September 2024); ILOSTAT, "Unemployment, male (% of male labor force), World Bank Group, (accessed 12 September 2024); INSTAT, "Quarterly Labour Force Survey - Fourth quarter 2023, INSTAT, Tirana, 2024, (accessed 29 April 2024); European Institute for Gender Equality, "Unemployment by sex and age annual data, Gender Statistics Database, 2023, (accessed 26 September 2024); Kosovo Agency of Statistics, "Papunësia dhe shkalla e papunësisë sipas gjinisë, grup moshë 15-64, 2016/TM1 - 2023/TM4, Anketa e Fuqisë Punëtore, 2023, (accessed 1 May 2024); MONSTAT, "Labour Force Survey 2023, Montenegro Statistical Office, March 2024, (accessed 26 September 2024); MAKSTAT, "Monthly Statistical Bulletin, Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office, XXXI, no. 04, 2024, (accessed 26 September 2024); European Institute for Gender Equality, "Unemployment by sex and age annual data, Gender Statistics Database, 2023, (accessed 26 September 2024).

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