

SUMMER 2022

Women's economic empowerment in the Western Balkans – Meeting 1

Enhancing public, private and civil society cooperation

TIRANA, ALBANIA – 8 APRIL 2022

EVENT REPORT



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Executive summary

Equal opportunities in the regional labour market for women have a direct impact on the future sustainable economic development of the Western Balkans. The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the regional economy, directly decreasing social welfare and increasing social issues, especially impacting marginalised groups. Governments have introduced various fiscal and social assistance packages to initiate economic recovery, but the situation is returning slowly to what it was in the pre-pandemic period. The participation of women in the region's labour force was rather low prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, while the level of gender-based violence rose further. Moreover, a simultaneous increase in women's economic and political power, as well as the gender gap between men and women, in terms of both wage and labour participation, makes for a problematic environment in the Western Balkans.

As part of its Balkan Journey, Friends of Europe's **Working Group on women's economic empowerment in the Western Balkans**, carried out in partnership with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), held its inaugural meeting on 8 April 2022 in Albania to set its agenda and main focal points for the next two years. Hosted by the municipality of Tirana, the first round of discussions began with opening remarks by Mayor Erion Veliaj. Over 35 high-level personalities and experts, including national and local government representatives from the Western Balkans, European and international institutions, civil society, academia and the private sector participated in the kick-off meeting.

During three discussion rounds, the Working Group identified the main obstacles that women face in achieving greater economic empowerment in the region. The Working Group agreed that the increasing labour and gender gaps in the Western Balkans are caused by a combination of administrative, political, financial and social factors. Gender-based discrimination and violence are often a direct result of an education system that reinforces gender roles from a very young age. Low participation of women in public life and the labour market is highly affected by an unsustainable approach to projects aimed at women's active presence in different fields of social and economic life, due to changes in funding priorities.

Moreover, the Western Balkans often lack updated and decentralised data to provide a more precise picture of the situation. As a result and due to socially-imposed gender roles, policies are crafted and based on general assumptions, and this may contribute to the widening gender gap.

The Working Group emphasised that women are not a homogenous group and an assumption-based approach does more harm than good in assisting women to thrive economically. Several members of the Working Group explained that most countries in the Western Balkans have regulated the right to maternity leave. The policy was aimed at assisting women, but considering the low level of men taking paternity leave, further legal obligations for equal parental leave to be taken by both parents would more effectively facilitate women's return to the labour market after giving birth.

In addition, a lack of information on human rights exists among women in the Western Balkans, especially in poorer parts of the societies, the Working Group explained. Some members contributed insights of women giving up their property rights to men due to customary laws that exempt female family members from having any claims on property.

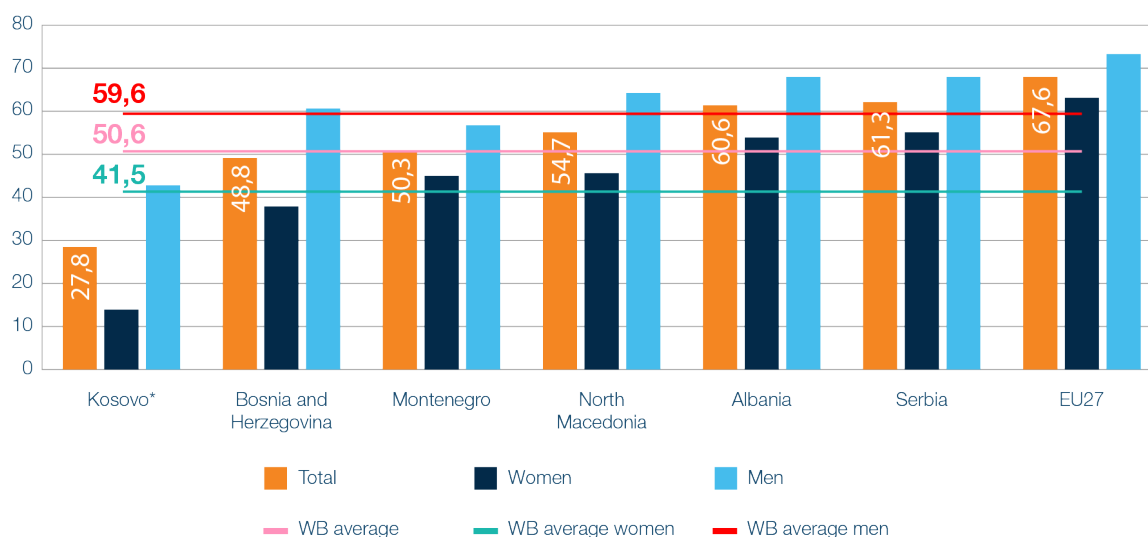
Women from rural areas, especially women who are employed in agriculture, were identified by the Working Group as a demographic that needs more empowerment due to, mainly, being engaged in unpaid labour and suffering various human rights violations. Women who do not have access to infrastructure, and thus access to assets and services, also find themselves facing difficulties in thriving economically. Members defined 'assets' as having access to land, financial services, education, mentorship, technology and information; whereas 'services' encompass access to the care economy, including facilities that assist in the daily care of children and the elderly during working hours. Women with greater access to such assets and services are more likely to engage in paid labour outside of the household.

The Working Group agreed on several main areas of focus for the two-year agenda, including: **access to infrastructure and services to regulate a work-life balance; empowering women in rural areas and employed in agriculture; and gender-responsive budgeting**, among others. The Working Group agreed that an emphasis on these fields would facilitate the process of understanding the obstacles that women face in the Western Balkans, thereby easing the development of tangible recommendations, with concrete goals, for future policies to overcome these major obstacles.

Obstacles hindering women's economic empowerment

Women in the Western Balkans show a low participation rate in the labour force and suffer from a high unemployment rate. Only working-age citizens that are legally working or in active search of work are considered part of the labour force, and thus, included in the calculations of employment levels. Although improvements have been seen in the region throughout the years, mostly through increases in the general employment rate, the gender gap in the labour market remains high. Defined by the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) as the difference between the employment rates of men and women aged 20-64, the gender employment gap has seen a slight drop across the 27 EU member states, from 11.5% in 2015 to 11.1% in 2020. However, most Western Balkan economies show a much higher gap.

Employment rates, 15-64 age group by gender, 2020 (%)



Source: Eurostat (EU27), ESAP Platform (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia); ASK Kosovo* average for Q1-Q3 2020).

The outlook for the region has improved significantly, with GDP growth now projected to reach 5.9% in 2021, after a 3.1% contraction in 2020. The World Bank (WB) estimates of growth in the Western Balkans are 4.1% in 2022 and 3.8% in 2023, while the poverty rate is expected to fall to 20.3%, close to its 2019 level. However, the recovery remains fragile, especially among more vulnerable demographic groups. Job losses stemming from the pandemic crisis have disproportionately affected women and youth, which is bound to hinder the efforts to bring up the region's low rates of participation in the labour force.

The Working Group identified several obstacles women face in their daily lives in the Western Balkans, which directly or indirectly hinder their economic independence and ownership. These obstacles, which in many cases overlap and intertwine, include: **a gender-based education; the absence of a strong care economy; and unsustainable funding for projects assisting women to thrive economically.**

* For the United Nations, references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council resolution 1244 (1999).

From biased education to an unequal labour market

In the Western Balkans, a traditional education system reinforces patriarchal gender roles from a very young age and influences a mindset that prohibits women from enjoying the same opportunities as men, the Working Group stressed. Abandoning outdated gender roles at an older age and once in the labour market is difficult after having grown up with strictly defined gender roles in the home and at school. Therefore, several Working Group members suggested that equal education, where both men and women are taught about human rights from an early age, could decrease the gender gap in the labour market.

Jolanda Trebicka, Executive Director of Europartners Albania, stressed that “support from men is very important”, explaining that the backing she has received from her husband over the years, especially in the household, has allowed her the time and space to follow her career. “Men should be educated from childhood on women’s rights,” she added. In her view, it would be easier for women to thrive economically and enjoy basic rights, equally to men, if all people have information on these rights. **Andjela Djokić**, Strategic Alliance Manager at MyGuideNetwork, stated that education based on equality should “[start] from the elementary school”.

Along those lines, **Mads Galsgaard**, CEO of Learnio, brought attention to the importance of tradition and customs in creating beliefs and ways of living. “Look at the culture... what we are telling our daughters at home,” Galsgaard exhorted the Working Group. In strong agreement, **Daniela Antonovska**, an independent gender expert and consultant, explained that “tradition is built around gender roles”. Antonovska pointed out that many women either are not aware of their rights, especially property rights, and often give these up for the benefit of the men in the family, due to patriarchal customs and norms.

The occurrence has happened for decades and younger women often follow their mothers’ actions. **Olivera Vukajlović**, Acting Head of the Directorate for Competitiveness Enhancement at the Ministry of Economic Development of Montenegro, explained that in Montenegro “women often give the rights of property to the men in their [pre-marriage] families, mainly to brothers”.

Gender roles seem to prevail even after the development and establishment of policies to assist women and facilitate their participation in the labour force. One example is the right to parental leave, granted to both men and women. However, it is mainly women that take the entire maternity leave. In many cases, maternal leave amounts to almost a year-long absence from the labour market, making it more difficult for women to successfully return to work. **Milana Rikanović**, Head of Office at UN Women in Serbia, explained that “in the Western Balkans, the state is the main employer”, meaning that the majority of employees in the labour force have the right to parental leave.

“We should work with fathers to take paternity leave,” Rikanović stressed, adding that this phenomenon is a perfect example of the “segregation in education being translated to the labour market”. In this situation, women take on the role of staying at home and providing care to the child until they can attend day care, whereas men work and provide the financial means for the family.

Many women are not able to return to the labour market until many years after giving birth. This happens due to limited or no access to infrastructure, namely assets and services, that would take the expectation and burden off women to care for the young and elderly of the family. Trebicka claimed that the problem “often comes from the mentality of the family, so infrastructure for them to have access to services is important”.

The importance of a strong care economy

Having access to assets and services is crucial for women to maintain a healthier work-life balance, the Working Group agreed. Some members defined ‘assets’ as having access to land, financial services, education, mentorship, technology and information; whereas ‘services’ encompass access to the care economy, including facilities that assist in the daily care of children and the elderly during working hours. Women with greater access to such assets and services are more likely to engage in paid labour outside of the household.

Esmeralda Shehaj, Associate Professor at the Faculty of Economics of the University of Tirana, emphasised the importance of access to care for women’s economic independence. “50% of women in the Western Balkans are inactive in the labour force and others are informal workers,” she stressed. Greater access to assets and services for assistance with children and the elderly increases the chances of women participating in the labour force.

“Providing access to services and childcare should be the main goal to assist [women’s] economic empowerment,” agreed **Dragana Marjanović**, Gender and Economic Inclusion Specialist at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) Office in Serbia.

Jonida Lakuriqi, Director of Legal, External and Corporate Affairs at Vodafone Albania, claimed that unemployment increased due to the pandemic, but while “men have strongly returned to the labour market, the women have not recuperated”. “After university, men and women have the same skills; but then, mainly due to maternity, they don’t come back in the same position,” Lakuriqi explained, emphasising that policies enhancing opportunities for child and elderly care would change the narrative by allowing women to come back to the labour market. “If women are given opportunities to get back in the market, it will give back a lot to the state,” she concluded. Some members argued the private sector can be an important factor in uplifting women.

The Working Group highlighted that most policies are based on assumptions about the region, without complete and up-to-date data to fully depict the situation on the ground. Antonovska explained that “due to a lack of data, the policies are mainly assumed. They are make-believe.”

Similarly, Shehaj claimed that the Western Balkans are “lacking gender disaggregated data”, which makes it difficult to create and implement proper legal mechanisms for women’s economic empowerment. The lack of data also makes it difficult to hold governments accountable for implementing such policies.

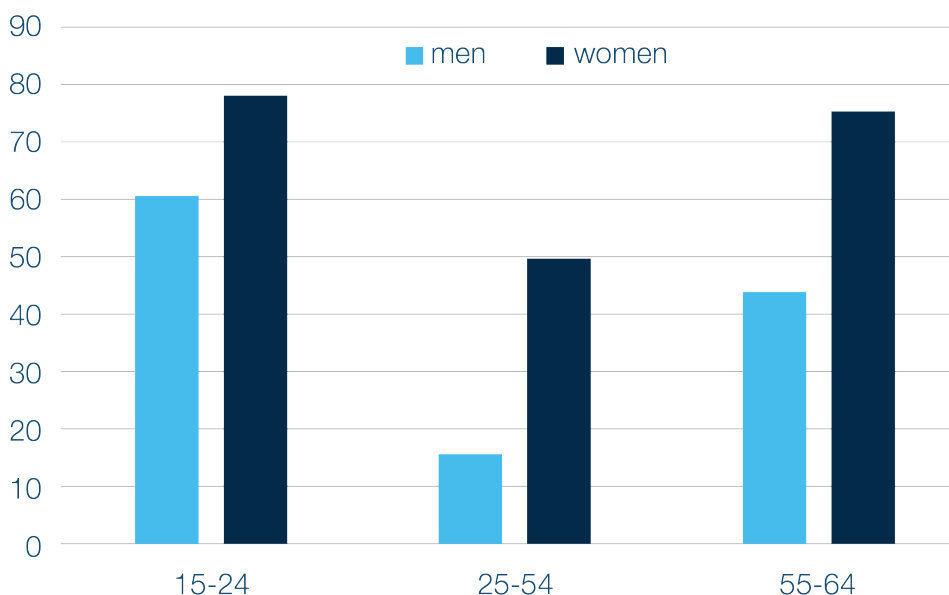
In focus: women in rural areas and agriculture

The Working Group members agreed that women from rural areas are mainly engaged in unpaid labour and suffer various human rights violations, especially women who are employed in agriculture. These include labour rights, which translate into a lack of remuneration for work done in agriculture, usually because the land is often family-owned. “Women should be compensated for the services they provide,” highlighted **Miodrag Matavulj**, Executive Director of the Centre for Economic and Rural Development (CERD). The majority of women from rural areas have less access to infrastructure and, thus, less access to assets and services than women from urban areas.

Women in rural areas also do not enjoy property rights in most of the cases. Antonovska provided an example of “husbands renting the property to the wife”, or even just placing the name of the woman as the property owner on paper but taking all the benefits, including government subsidies, themselves.

Inactivity rates are higher among rural women

Inactivity rates in rural areas by gender and age in the Western Balkans (%).



Sources: ILO, Latest Labor Force Surveys for Western Balkan countries, and OECD

Unsustainable funding: a barrier for women's independence and confidence-building

Many non-government organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations based in the Western Balkans carry out work on human rights, especially women's rights and empowerment. The vast majority of the projects that aim to assist women and reduce the gender gap by introducing equality are operated in the field and dependent on donor funding, usually from governments or international organisations. The moment financial support comes to an end, so does the project. Often, different NGOs must restart similar projects from the beginning or pick up where previous ones left off, losing any achieved momentum and potentially even progress previously made.

Several Working Group members argued that the unsustainable nature of certain funding leads to failure in tackling many of the structural obstacles that women face.

Mirela Arqimandriti, Executive Director of the Gender Alliance for Development Center, claimed there is often “no possibility of application for continuity of funding of successful projects” because of changing priorities of international organisations, or corruption within local governments. In this light, the local agencies and governments often fail to follow up on potential continuation of funding for non-governmental projects.

Maria Fernandez, Policy Officer at the European Commission Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), agreed that a change in funding comes with a “change in priorities”. Fernandez pledged to “connect the Working Group with the stakeholders who are behind funding opportunities”.

When moderator **Dharmendra Kanani**, Director of Asia, Peace, Security & Defense and Digital & Chief Spokesperson at Friends of Europe, asked the Working Group members how many have had women mentors in their lives, less than half raised their hands, proving even further the unequal opportunities between men and women.

Many members agreed that the obstacles women face on a daily basis have direct repercussions on confidence. **Diana Xhumari**, CEO of Tegeria, claimed that, at least in information and communications technology (ICT) services, women often “lack the confidence that they may not be good enough” or at least not as good as their male counterparts. While Xhumari believed confidence “is like a muscle and can be grown”, she also agreed that society most of the time prohibits women from owning up to their achievements and abilities.

To this, Lakuriqi added that “women in leadership [positions] have a lot of experience, but that does not mean they will be selected as such”. A point of disagreement came from **Emina Bošnjak**, Executive Director of the Sarajevo Open Centre (SOC), who highlighted that “putting the issue to lack of confidence is very misplaced”. **Nina Angelovska**, President at the Macedonian e-Commerce Association and UNCTAD eTrade for Women advocate for Eastern Europe, indicated that “confidence comes from knowledge and the ‘be-the-most-prepared attitude’, but it should not be like that for all women”.

Svetlana Stefanović, Executive Director at Foundation BFPE for a Responsible Society (BFPE), stated: “Women try to be like men in [terms of] leadership, thinking it is not good to be emotional and use the small skills we naturally have, but it is important to use our networks and skills.” Therefore, more sustainable funding would help women improve their skills and even participate more actively in the labour force, especially among those in rural areas and agriculture, who more often than others give up their rights or are exploited.

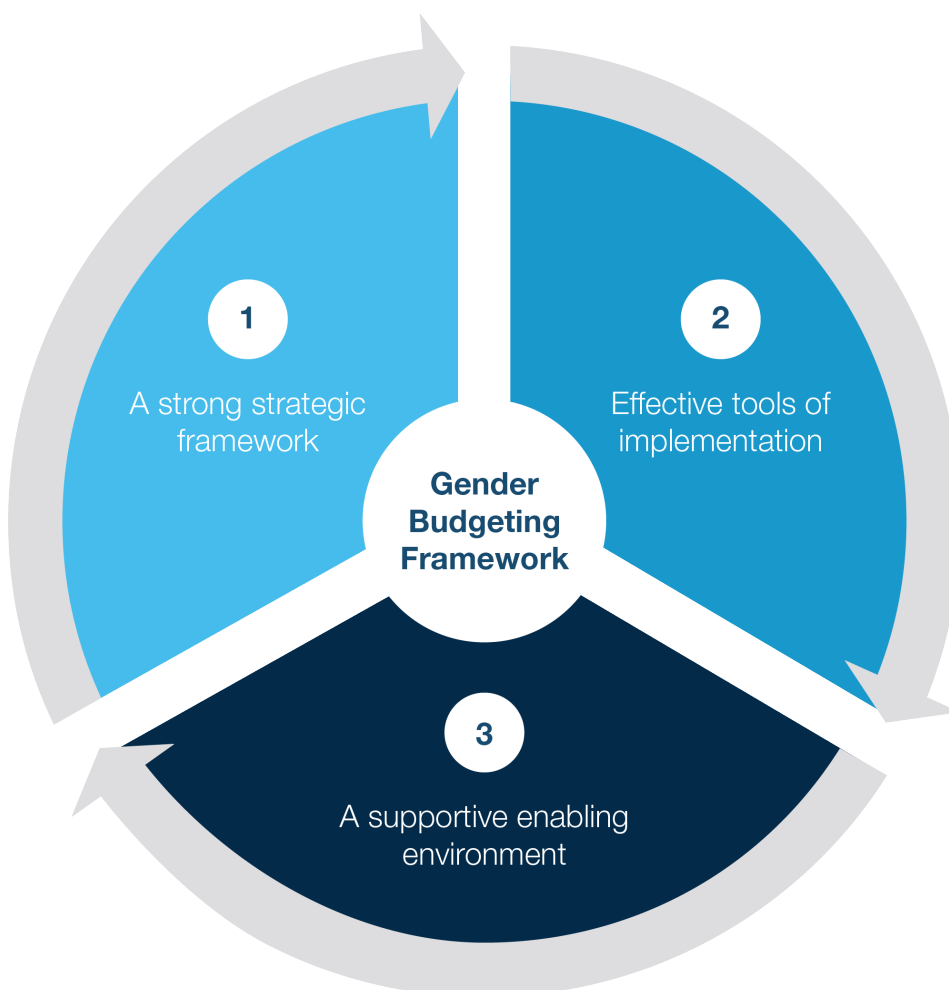
In focus: gender-responsive budgeting (GRB)

In order to achieve sustainable funding for projects empowering women to thrive economically in the Western Balkans, gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) – which aims to ensure equal distribution of resources as a contribution for equal opportunities for all – should be mandatory, according to a majority of Working Group members.

When applying GRB, governments consider the problems faced by men and women on the ground and decide to allocate money proportionally to the severity of the issue. Several NGOs in the Western Balkans work towards pushing GRB forward; however, it has not turned into a fully implemented policy at the central or local government levels.

GRB would include higher allocations for social services and disabled persons to reduce the women's burden in unpaid labour, as would increased support for women in rural areas through subsidies. The implementation of GRB must be highly regulated in order to decrease the risks of manipulation and corruption.

The core elements for an effective GRB



Source: OECD

Outcomes

Improving multi-stakeholder cooperation. The Working Group placed emphasis on the role of collaboration among the public, private and civil society sectors in establishing sustainable methods of funding for projects that aim to help women thrive economically. Building synergies between central and local government authorities, as well as with individual stakeholders, is of high importance. Multi-agent cooperation would positively affect the sustainability of funding and allow for a diverse set of stakeholders to take adequate action to provide women with access to infrastructure, assets and services to re-enter the labour market and maintain work-life balance.

Promoting digitalisation among women through technology. One essential way to improve women's access to infrastructure is via technology. The Working Group agreed to come up with ways of improving the digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas. Moreover, the Working Group will work to design tangible programmes for women to improve their leadership and digital skills.

Enhancing women's knowledge of their rights. This goes hand-in-hand with increasing women's access to information and knowledge on human rights and especially property rights. It is important for women, the Working Group recognised, to be aware of their rights and methods to claim them, without suffering any consequences. Thus, simultaneous work with men and women in understanding and accepting equality is crucial to slowly reduce the prevalence of traditional gender roles.

Establishing GRB practices as the norm. Finally, the Working Group near unanimously agreed that introducing GRB as a policymaking method across the region would promote equal opportunities for women. GRB was concluded to be of high significance and relevance for the Working Group's future work.

Empowering women in rural areas and in agriculture. Special emphasis was also be given to the status of women in rural areas and of women employed in agriculture. In order to achieve tangible results on increasingly integrating this demographic into the labour market, the Working Group stated its commitment to finding sustainable and long-term funding solutions, as well as introducing the importance of the care economy in the central government policymaking priorities.

Next steps

The kick-off meeting was designed to identify the challenges that women in the Western Balkans face in achieving greater economic empowerment. Following three rounds of discussion, participants agreed on the main focal themes of the Working Group's two-year agenda:

- access to infrastructure and services to regulate a work-life balance;
- women in rural areas and employed in the agriculture sector; and
- gender-responsive budgeting (GRB).

Other key themes that were raised in the kick-off meeting included: introducing education based on gender equality rather than on gender roles; fostering the sustainable funding of projects aimed at women's economic empowerment; and promoting the use of technology as a cross-cutting tool to enable these changes. These themes will inform the basis of the Working Group's work to formulate a set

of recommendations, with concrete goals, for overcoming the obstacles to women's economic empowerment in the Western Balkans.

Creating new opportunities for women in the regional labour market is crucial for the sustainable economic development of the Western Balkans. Rising to the challenge of addressing obstacles and challenges is more important than ever given the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the long road ahead towards social and economic recovery.

