

UN WOMEN SERIES:

Putting women at the forefront of
COVID-19 response in Europe and
Central Asia



ASSESSING THE LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF COVID-19:

A GENDER ANALYSIS OF PANDEMIC-RELATED IMPACTS
ON WOMEN AND GIRLS IN EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA



ASSESSING THE LIGHTS AND SHADOWS OF COVID-19:

A gender analysis of pandemic-related impacts on women and girls in Europe and Central Asia



UN WOMEN REGIONAL OFFICE FOR EUROPE AND CENTRAL ASIA, 2021

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
CoE	Council of Europe
CSO	civil society organization
DRR	disaster risk reduction
ECA	Europe and Central Asia
EU	European Union
EUR	Euros
GDI	Gender Development Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GII	Gender Inequality Index
HDI	Human Development Index
ICT	information and communications technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPV	intimate partner violence
MP	Member of Parliament
NAP	national action plan
NEET	not in education, employment or training
NGO	non-governmental organization
NSO	National Statistical Office
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SME	small and medium-sized enterprise
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
TVET	technical and vocational education and training
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNSCR	UN Security Council resolution
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USD	United States dollars
VAWG	violence against women and girls
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WHO	World Health Organization
WAVE	Women Against Violence Europe
WPS	women, peace and security

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic, and measures taken to address it, have exacerbated pre-existing inequalities and widened gender gaps in every sphere. UN Women has been documenting the gendered impacts of the pandemic through consultations with experts from institutional mechanisms for gender equality and women's civil society organizations (CSOs), and a series of rapid gender assessments of the situation of women and men in the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region.

At this critical juncture, this gender analysis identifies the most significant impacts of COVID-19 on gender equality in the region in order to inform gender-sensitive national response, recovery, planning and investment. It examines the impacts in five areas that were identified as priorities for ECA during the 2019 Regional Review Meeting on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+25). Key actions for sustainable recovery are also presented, with detailed recommendations.

► **Priority 1 examines the need to improve data collection and gender statistics, a pre-existing weakness across the region.** Official data often do not exist for issues that became increasingly relevant during the pandemic – such as women's and men's engagement in informal labour, time devoted to unpaid care work, and the prevalence of violence against women and girls. A lack of detailed data means significant disparities have been obscured and policy-making has not been evidence-based. COVID-19 has also put much of the core work of national statistical agencies and researchers on hold, complicating the process of capturing data. Improving data collection, including generating sex- and age-disaggregated data and gender statistics, must be at the core of response and recovery efforts. Technical support is needed to increase the capacity of national statistical offices to collect data using an intersectional perspective. Gender-sensitive surveys should be used to assess the impacts of COVID-19 and related measures and responses.

► **Under Priority 2, on empowering women as leaders, women's absence from key decision-making offices was evident in the fact that COVID-related national task forces and inter-ministerial councils in the region had sparse female representation.** Key duty-bearers, such as national gender equality bodies, were not included. Other mechanisms – such as national action plans on women, peace and security and platforms for disaster risk reduction – were rarely activated within responses. Women's organizations also report being largely omitted from government emergency planning. The lack of engagement with gender experts when emergency measures and social protection schemes were created has also contributed to COVID-19 responses that are gender insensitive and even gender-blind. As the region moves towards recovery, women's views and priorities must be equally represented in leadership and planning for the post-COVID period. Measures must ensure women's meaningful inclusion in key decision-making bodies and in the design of recovery plans. Further actions are also needed to mainstream gender into policymaking and budgeting processes.

► **Reducing economic insecurity is the focus of Priority 3.** The more acute economic impacts of the pandemic on women reflect long-standing gender disparities in access to economic resources and opportunities across the ECA region. Although women are less likely than men to have paid employment, they are more likely to occupy jobs as front-line workers. Sectors where women predominate as employees and small-business-owners – such as in hospitality, catering and tourism – have been those hardest-hit by closures. Surveys reveal that women have been more likely than men to see their paid working hours cut, and self-employed women have been more severely impacted by job losses than self-employed men. At the same time, twice as many young women as men are not in education, employment or training, and they have less access to technical and vocational education and training. To support a sustainable recovery, women's access to decent work and economic

empowerment must be supported in the COVID-19 recovery period. Special measures are needed for women entrepreneurs, not only to recover from the impacts of emergency measures but also to address unresolved barriers. Priority should also be given to ensuring that young women, especially those who are neither in education nor economically active, are supported to enter decent, skilled work and do not fall further behind.

► **Priority 4 examines the need to address unpaid care and domestic work, to which women already dedicated three times more time than men prior to the pandemic.** COVID-19 emergency measures – including working from home and the temporary closure of childcare centres and schools and the reduced availability of outside help – increased unpaid domestic workloads, childcare and homeschooling dramatically. The greater share of the burden has fallen on women. Many women have been forced to reduce their working hours or to extend the total hours they work to unsustainable levels. Actions are needed to more equitably distribute unpaid care and domestic work and to support the care economy – such as investments in early childhood education, paid parental leave policies and flexible working arrangements for parents with care responsibilities. In parallel, efforts are needed to change expectations about gender roles and to increase awareness of the contribution that unpaid care work makes to economies.

► **Finally, the pandemic's impacts on violence against women and girls are examined under Priority 5.**

Lockdown measures taken to contain COVID-19 put women and girls at a high risk of being isolated at home with abusers, cut off from many of the usual support systems. This has contributed to what has been called a “shadow pandemic.” Calls to telephone hotlines and police about domestic violence spiked across the region. In many cases, shelters, services and protection mechanisms were initially deemed “non-essential” and reduced or suspended, while police often failed to prioritize domestic violence prevention. Meanwhile, significant shortcomings in specialized services for survivors predated the pandemic and were magnified as the capacities of service-providers, many of which are civil society organizations, were stretched. To support a sustainable recovery, greater attention is needed to prevention efforts, including awareness-raising on risk factors and the use of early identification and interventions. Better national-level coordination is crucial to address violence, with standardized referral pathways across all relevant sectors. Specific actions are also needed to guarantee continuity in essential services for survivors of violence against women and girls, both during emergency situations and after.

Although the risks of backsliding on progress towards gender equality cannot be ignored, this analysis suggests that there may nevertheless be reasons for optimism.

INTRODUCTION

After the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of a novel coronavirus to be a public health emergency of international concern,¹ a global pandemic followed swiftly. The Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region was among the first to respond with far-reaching measures to contain the spread of the virus and protect public health.² As countries/territories declared states of emergency and initiated extraordinary measures, households went into lockdown and non-essential work, education, businesses and services were suspended in an effort to isolate infections, reduce transmission and mobilize resources in essential sectors to respond to the outbreak of what is now known as COVID-19.

The COVID-19 pandemic is, first and foremost, a health crisis. But its impacts in terms of societal and economic disruptions have also been profound. The pandemic continues to present complex challenges to meeting demands for health and social care while also addressing increasing loss of life and livelihoods. COVID-19 itself does not discriminate, but the far-reaching measures taken to contain it have shone a bright light on pre-existing inequalities that persist across the region. Those who were the most vulnerable have been pushed further into vulnerability and face the prospect of deeper marginalization.

In the early stages of the outbreak, the UN Secretary-General raised concerns that as the COVID-19 pandemic spread, the “limited gains” made towards achieving gender equality and women’s rights would be in serious jeopardy of being rolled back.³ As the pandemic has unfolded, the negative impacts that the health crisis has had on gender equality and women’s rights, ranging from economic security to personal safety in the home, have become increasingly clear.⁴ In the Europe and Central Asia region, UN Women

has been documenting how women and girls have been differently and disproportionately impacted due to multiple and intersecting forms of inequality and discrimination that existed before the COVID-19 pandemic. **As a first priority, all countries/territories in the ECA region have responded to the pandemic by introducing socioeconomic rescue measures to mitigate the negative consequences of emergency restrictions.**

As the region moves forward into longer-term recovery and countries/territories are beginning to plan for the post-COVID phase, there are key opportunities to ‘build back better’. Recovery must not merely reduce vulnerabilities to future crises and increase resilience but should aim for stronger and improved infrastructure and systems. Inclusivity is at the heart of building back better, and this requires gender-specific support and closing gender gaps. The ECA region is at a critical juncture, at which all efforts should be taken to avoid returning to the pre-COVID status quo and replicating gender inequalities. Rather, progress towards closing persistent gender gaps should be accelerated.

As the UN Secretary-General noted, the impacts of COVID-19 on women and girls are exacerbated across every sphere, thus requiring that all national pandemic-related measures (such as response plans, recovery packages and budgeting of resources) “place women and girls – their inclusion, representation, rights, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection – at their centre.”⁵ In order to understand the ways that the pandemic is reversing progress towards gender equality, the impacts on women, men, girls and boys must be assessed against the pre-COVID situation. In other words, we cannot build back better without first understanding where progress had been slowest, and which gaps face the greatest risk of widening.

COMMITMENTS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beijing+25 regional review for ECA⁶ highlighted the need for special measures in the region to address the multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination, exclusion and inequality. During the pandemic, the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups of women and girls have been those most profoundly impacted.⁷

The pandemic has required deeper thinking about who was in pre-existing situations of vulnerability and who has been pushed into such situations, as well as which factors make these people vulnerable. For most of the countries/territories of the ECA region, national social protection policies tend to be based less on multi-factor vulnerability assessments as on a paradigm that delineates certain ‘vulnerable groups’. ‘Women’ are often identified as a stand-alone group (or sometimes, pregnant women, single mothers, women with many children), without consideration of how gender intersects with other factors – such as age, disability, location (rural or urban), ethnic minority status, sexual orientation, health status and others (such as migrant, refugee or internally-displaced person status) – to compound vulnerabilities. In order to ensure inclusivity in COVID-19 response planning, new approaches are needed in order to deliver targeted assistance to those who are in particular situations of vulnerability, while also considering gender-based risks that have arisen during the pandemic.

Purpose and scope

The overall aim of this research is to identify the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality in the ECA region in order to inform gender-responsive national COVID-19 response and recovery plans. It is also expected that UN Women will use the findings in its strategic planning processes. The resulting report is intended for a broad audience, which includes national authorities and policymakers, international organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and UN Women Country Offices as well as other UN agencies.

At the time that the present analysis was conducted (August–November 2020), the countries/territories of

the ECA region were at various stages of lifting emergency measures. While restrictions have been scaled back, in some cases lockdown measures have had to be reintroduced due to new outbreaks. The scope of the analysis covers the situation in the ECA region in the early months of the outbreak, and thus the focus is on identifying impacts on women and girls, men and boys, and not on assessing policy measures enacted by governments at this time. Nevertheless, with the likelihood that outbreaks may continue for some time, requiring “targeted measures” to help prevent the spread of the virus,⁸ key findings from the analysis will likely remain relevant.

Structure of the analysis and methodology

The analysis is organized around five areas that were identified as priorities for Europe and Central Asia at the 2019 Regional Review Meeting on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (Beijing+25).

The COVID-19 pandemic has already begun to erode past progress in each of these five priority areas. The following questions were examined:

- ❓ What were the most persistent gender gaps before the COVID-19 outbreak in the ECA region?
- ❓ What factors are restricting women’s rights and holding back progress towards gender equality?
- ❓ Where have rollbacks been observed during the COVID-19 outbreak?
- ❓ What are the implications of this backsliding in terms of widening gender gaps even further and pushing women and girls, as well as men and boys, into situations of vulnerability?
- ❓ What should be the priority action areas for recovery in order to mitigate the negative consequences of the pandemic?
- ❓ Which measures should be taken to address COVID-19, with the ultimate aim of tackling long-standing gender inequalities?

For each priority area, the publication follows the same structure: a review of the most critical gender gaps that predated the COVID-19 pandemic; an assessment of the implications of the pandemic for the ECA region, in terms of fully implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and staying on-track to reach the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); and an enumeration of priority actions to support sustainable recovery.

The analysis draws on two main sets of resources: (1) a range of publications and data collections that were used to establish the pre-COVID 'baseline' situation concerning gender equality and (2) data and information provided by experts about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in the ECA region, based primarily on research conducted by UN Women in April–June 2020, as described in Table 1.

TABLE 1
UN Women key assessments of the impacts of COVID-19 in Europe and Central Asia

▼ **Consultations with institutional mechanisms for gender equality in the ECA region**

Conducted in May 2020 with gender equality mechanisms in 14 countries/territories⁹

▼ **Consultations with women's CSOs and women's rights activists in the ECA region**

Conducted in April 2020 with 128 participants from 18 countries/territories¹⁰

▼ **Rapid Gender Assessments of the situation and needs of women and men in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic**

Conducted in April–June 2020 in 16 countries/territories of the ECA region, covering approximately 12 500 respondents, women and men. The first consolidated findings covered 10 countries/territories.¹¹

Two challenges and limitations of this analysis are worth mentioning. First, the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, and it is not yet possible to analyse the full impacts of the health crisis, and the emergency measures taken to address it, on women and men, girls and boys. The resulting report cannot capture all of the nuances of how specific groups have experienced the coronavirus pandemic. Rather, the analysis concentrates on those spheres in which gender inequalities were problematic in the ECA region before the pandemic and that have been identified as priority areas for recovery.

Second, the ECA region is diverse, comprising 18 countries/territories¹² and three subregions: the Western Balkans and Turkey, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, and Central Asia.¹³ There are many similarities in the

measures introduced to respond to the pandemic, and their consequences, and so this analysis synthesizes common findings across the region. However, data compiled for the region as a whole are only available for a few indicators. Thus, there is considerable asymmetry in available data. Wherever it was useful to highlight particular trends or to call attention to differences, information about the pre-pandemic situation for the subregions or about specific countries/territories is highlighted.

Two annexes provide additional information and data: Annex 1, listing selected UN Women materials related to the COVID-19 pandemic and Annex 2, containing the Gender Development Index and Gender Inequality Index values for countries of the ECA region and an overview of the results of UN Women's rapid gender assessments.

REGIONAL SNAPSHOT OF TRENDS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS GENDER EQUALITY

The COVID-19 pandemic is threatening to “reverse hard won gains on gender equality, while also increasing women’s and girls’ vulnerability to COVID-19 transmission and impacts.”¹⁴ An overview of the backdrop against which the pandemic has unfolded in the ECA region provides insights into where there is the greatest risk of backsliding on progress towards gender equality.

As a region, the countries/territories of Europe and Central Asia have been moving incrementally towards gender equality, but progress remains both slow and uneven. The Gender Development Index (GDI) assesses gender differences in how people are faring in a particular country or region against a global measure comparing Human Development Index (HDI) scores calculated separately for women and men in three dimensions: health, education and economic empowerment (defined as command over economic resources).¹⁵ While the Europe and Central Asia region has a relatively positive GDI score of 0.953, this score is lower than for Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries combined – 0.978.¹⁶

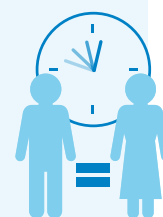
According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Gender Inequality Index (GII)

score for the ECA region of 0.256 represents a 25 per cent loss in potential human development, due to gender inequality and disparities between female and male achievements in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity (calculated as a composite of five indicators).¹⁷ See Annex 2 for more information on GDI and GII values for the ECA region and countries with sub-indices.

Considering the separate dimensions reflected in these indices, the ECA region consistently shows strong performance – meaning scores close to gender parity – in health and education. The region falls short, however, in economic empowerment (measured as economic participation and opportunities) and in political empowerment. The pronounced disparities between women and men in the economic sphere are highly relevant in the context of a pandemic that has increased economic inequalities in every country/territory. As described in this publication, indicators of gender equality are in reality interconnected (e.g. educational attainment impacts the ability to find decent work) and so gender disparities should be considered in totality in order to better understand the longer-term consequences of the pandemic for women and men.

When will gender equality be achieved if progress is not accelerated?

Globally, progress towards gender equality is slowing. The World Economic Forum estimates that the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region has closed 71.5 per cent of its gender gap so far. Yet, based on past progress towards gender parity, it may take almost 20 years for the region to catch up to Western Europe, the region with the smallest gender gap. At the current rate of progress, Eastern Europe and Central Asia can expect to close the gender gap in 107 years.¹⁸ Progress towards gender equality may only become more difficult in the post-COVID period.



Gender equality commitments and gender mainstreaming

ECA countries/territories are in various stages of nationalizing the SDGs, establishing frameworks for national indicators and targets and mainstreaming the SDGs into national strategic planning.¹⁹

A regional review of Rapid Integrated Assessments indicates that in several countries there are gaps in aligning the indicators and targets for Goal 5 with national and sectoral strategies. This is the case even for countries that have strong national commitments on gender equality (specifically noted are Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Republic of Moldova and Turkmenistan).²⁰ Slow progress towards SDG 5 may reflect overall lack of political will to prioritize gender equality. This situation is then compounded by a lack of capacity, infrastructure and resources, especially insufficient budgetary allocations, that hamper overall implementation of the SDGs.²¹ Women's CSOs have called for the "meaningful inclusion of diverse voices" in policymaking in order to overcome the "silo effect," in which gender is poorly mainstreamed across the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs are disconnected from other human rights commitments.²²

Several countries/territories that undertook Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs)²³ in 2020 noted the socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and the potential for weakening progress on the SDGs (Armenia, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, North Macedonia, Ukraine and Uzbekistan²⁴). Some also highlighted the differential impacts the pandemic has had on vulnerable groups, for particular sectors of the economy, and on education. These reports suggest that governments will need to revisit national SDG 5 targets and indicators that intersect with other SDGs. Some may need to reassess whether they can be better aligned with recovery plans and respond to unforeseen/emerging challenges brought about by the pandemic.

On the whole, the ECA region is characterized by solid foundations for gender mainstreaming, as expressed in legislation and national strategies (e.g. national action plans). All but two of the countries/territories of the ECA region have adopted stand-alone legislation on gender equality,²⁵ and many laws require gender mainstreaming in governance (e.g. mandating that

draft laws be submitted to gender expertise, establishing national mechanisms for gender equality, requiring the production of gender statistics, etc.). In parallel, at the policy level, almost all countries in the region have developed multidimensional national action plans and strategies to advance gender equality as well as thematic action plans (e.g. on women, peace and security, on combating gender-based violence and on strengthening family planning).

A characteristic issue for the region is the evaporation of political will after a law or policy has been adopted, which means that in practice national efforts are frequently declarative in nature and the implementation of gender equality commitments is inconsistent and incomplete. All too often, gender equality is neither prioritized nor mainstreamed throughout State policy but is either relegated to plans and strategies with clear 'women's themes' or merely mentioned in passing as a 'cross-cutting' issue. Weaknesses in implementation are attributed to a "formalistic attitude" towards gender equality (e.g. the concept that enacting a law on the subject is sufficient) and a lack of understanding of the core concepts, combined with insufficient State structures that are both gender-responsive and have the capacity for monitoring and holding other State institutions accountable.²⁶

The COVID-19 pandemic has unfolded against a backdrop in which gender equality has increasingly been deprioritized by governments and donors in the ECA region. The consequence is evident in the fact that the gender-specific impacts of emergency measures to address COVID-19 were largely overlooked when they were drafted. The gendered impacts of lockdown, stay-at-home orders and widespread suspension of economic activities and social services were not factored into their design or enactment. While a thorough review of all relevant legal acts is not within the scope of this analysis, it does not appear that national emergency legislation was submitted to gender impact assessments in those countries/territories with gender mainstreaming requirements.

Previous pandemics and crises have demonstrated that emergency responses have resulted in deprioritizing and defunding essential services for women and

girls (in the case of the 2014–2016 Ebola outbreak and the 2015–2016 Zika epidemic, for example²⁷). There is a heightened need to ensure that measures to address

the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are developed with a gender lens, and this will require additional efforts beyond the ‘business as usual’ approach.

CASE STUDY:

In Ukraine, more than 40 normative acts were adopted from February–April 2020 to regulate the response to COVID-19. Although the Law on Ensuring Equal Rights and Opportunities for Women and Men (2005, amended in 2018) of Ukraine mandates that draft legal acts be submitted to review by gender and legal experts,²⁸ this step was not carried out in the case of laws related to the coronavirus. The exigencies of the situation likely made it impossible to follow the proscribed procedure for conducting a gender-legal review, which is an annual process requiring the Ministry of Justice to undertake a comprehensive examination and draft an opinion, with the possibility of consulting with specialists.²⁹

Still, the lack of flexible mechanisms to ensure that gender mainstreaming requirements can be maintained, even in emergency situations, raises the question of whether the underlying aims – to prevent the adoption of legal acts that do not comply with equal rights principles – will be undermined. Many of the COVID-19-related legal acts provided special protections for people in vulnerable situations, and women are the majority in several of these categories (e.g. pensioners, recipients of social benefits, health-care workers treating people who have COVID-19, etc.). However, the result of laws that introduced emergency restrictions not being submitted to gender-legal or human rights examination meant that other vulnerabilities were overlooked. For example, no special provisions were made for: the Roma (often living in communities lacking access to clean water and basic services), single parents (who were working outside the home during lockdowns), self-employed people/small business-owners (especially in the services sector) that were forced to close, people with disabilities, people with chronic health conditions, people providing non-health essential services (including social workers) or survivors of domestic violence.

Gender stereotypes and pushback on women's rights

The continued influence of gender stereotypes and harmful social norms represent threats to gender equality and women's empowerment. This topic underpinned much of the Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting, as the role of gender stereotypes and patriarchal norms and practices implicates such areas of concern as violence against women and girls, political participation, educational and employment opportunities. Gender stereotypes affect “how women are viewed, how their work is recognized and how much their voice is valued – that is: lower than that of men. This results in exclusion, less opportunities and less power”³⁰ at all levels – in governance, the public sphere and in the family.

In the ECA region, gender stereotypes remain entrenched. Although there are examples of initiatives to address gender stereotypes at the country/territory

level, the kind of comprehensive and continuous campaigns that are needed to foster new attitudes and social norms have not yet taken place. Several of the priority areas examined in this publication hinge on tackling gender norms, such as expectations that women shoulder the greater part of domestic responsibilities. In the context of mitigating the negative impacts of the coronavirus pandemic, which has placed restrictions on women and men, girls and boys, tackling deep-rooted gender stereotypes has become all the more urgent.

A parallel and worrying tendency observed in the ECA region, and globally, is a more widespread and explicit backlash against women's rights. Comparing data from the World Values Surveys from 2005 to 2014, widespread biases in gender social norms are evident and increasing. Worldwide, 91 per cent of men and 86

per cent of women show at least one clear bias against gender equality in the areas of politics, the economy, education, intimate partner violence and women's reproductive rights.³¹ Men have especially high biases related to political and economic dimensions; for example, close to 50 per cent of men agree that men should have more rights to a job than women.³²

In the ECA region, the pushback on women's rights has manifested itself in conservative movements that contend that aspects of gender equality are incompatible with "traditional" or "national" values and even question the very concept of "gender."³³ Some suggest that women's rights organizations present a threat to the country.³⁴ In Ukraine, for instance, "anti-gender movements based on stereotyped notions of the roles of a woman and a man" are considered one of the main impediments to gender transformation in the context of achieving SDGs related to gender equality.³⁵

This backlash is partly driven by grass-roots anti-gender/anti-feminist movements. However, in a number of countries it is also heralded by nationalist political parties. Within state structures, the phenomenon of 'backlash' refers to backsliding or pushback on previous commitments to gender equality norms. Particularly egregious examples show governments³⁶ taking anti-gender positions, rolling back gender equality commitments and sidelining women's rights organizations from policy processes.³⁷ The backlash against women's rights organizations often occurs within a broader context of hostility and threats towards civil society. The restriction of spaces for human rights organizations to advocate on behalf of women is especially concerning in light of the fact that women's voices are largely absent from political discussions. As such, the sidelining of women's organizations and "the implications of further squeezing [their] space and opportunities to influence decision-making cannot be overestimated."³⁸

CASE STUDY:

The first International Women's Day to fall on the eve of a global pandemic was 8 March 2020. In several countries of the ECA region, activists organized peaceful demonstrations to draw attention to key issues, such as the problem of violence against women and girls. In Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, a planned march was disrupted when masked men attacked demonstrators. Ultimately, law enforcement detained and arrested more than 50 of the women's march organizers and participants.³⁹ Although the authorities justified the detention of the activists as a measure to ensure public safety, the UN and several embassies condemned this response. The UN Office in Kyrgyzstan expressed concern that such "hatred and violence against women's groups, activities and civic organizations" undermines the SDGs and silences the voices of women.⁴⁰

In Baku, Azerbaijan, police disrupted International Women's Day demonstrations, detained several activists and removed them from the capital.⁴¹ The demonstrators claimed that the police used violence to break up the event. Authorities maintained that the event had not been sanctioned.

In Istanbul, Turkey, police blockaded women who had gathered for International Women's Day, then used tear gas to disperse marchers. Several demonstrators were detained. The authorities stated that permits had not been granted for demonstrations in some parts of the city.⁴²

Pushback on the women's rights agenda did not abate during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The influence of gender stereotypes, gender biases and backlash before the COVID-19 pandemic had already put women's rights activists in a precarious position. Pre-existing anti-feminist movements pose threats of their own but, when combined with the fallout of the pandemic, their impacts may be intensified. Attitudes

that appear to be becoming more ingrained – such as notions that men are better political leaders and should have priority when jobs are scarce, or that it is preferable for women to devote themselves to domestic responsibilities – could even further disadvantage women in the wake of job losses, reduced access to the social safety net and limited spaces for advocacy during lockdown periods and after.

THE GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORK FOR FURTHER ACTION

International commitments on women's rights provided guiding principles before COVID-19, which are equally relevant during the pandemic and should be at the forefront during the recovery period.

- ▶ The CEDAW Committee has made clear that States Parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) “have an obligation to ensure that measures taken to address the COVID-19 pandemic do not directly or indirectly discriminate against women and girls.” States must uphold women’s rights in national responses to the pandemic.⁴³ While States may derogate from some human rights obligations during states of emergency, the CEDAW Committee recommends that national law not allow women’s human rights to be subject to derogation in such circumstances.⁴⁴
- ▶ Each of the SDGs under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, including Goal 5 on achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. In fact, Goal 5 is not merely a stand-alone objective. Rather, gender equality is a cross-cutting prerequisite for sustainable development. In order to continue to make progress towards meeting SDG targets, and ensure that no one is left behind in the wake of the pandemic, “[e]very COVID-19 response plan, and every recovery package and budgeting of resources, needs to address the gender impacts of this pandemic.”⁴⁵
- ▶ UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on women, peace and security (WPS) affirms that peace and security are more sustainable when women are equally represented and involved in decision-making regarding conflict prevention and relief and recovery efforts. The WPS agenda requires that crises be addressed through the prism of gender, which means that the differential impacts of emergencies on women and girls, men and boys, should inform early warning, preparation, mitigation, response and recovery processes.⁴⁶ The principles of the WPS agenda apply not only to violent conflict but also to other threats to security, including health pandemics,⁴⁷ such as COVID-19. National action plans are the road maps for how each country/territory will implement UNSCR 1325.⁴⁸

Of the
18
ECA States

- 11** countries are members of the Council of Europe (CoE)
[Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Turkey and Ukraine]
- 7** are either European Union (EU) candidate countries or are potential candidates [Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey, and potentially Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo]
- 3** countries are part of association agreements with the EU
[Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine]

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

PRIORITY 1:

IMPROVING DATA COLLECTION AND GENDER STATISTICS



PRE-EXISTING GENDER GAPS AND CHALLENGES:

- Limited sex-disaggregated data and lack of comprehensive gender statistics predated the COVID-19 outbreak in each country/territory. The lack of reliable gender-sensitive data meant that significant disparities were obscured (e.g. levels of violence against women; the time women and men devote to unpaid work). In turn, policymaking was not evidence-based.

OBSERVATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

- The global pandemic is threatening to widen gender gaps in a number of areas, but without baseline data, this phenomenon will be difficult to measure and track. Therefore, recovery efforts must increase the capacity of national statistics agencies, as well as other stakeholders, to capture comprehensive data about gender-specific impacts of the pandemic and of policies and programmes that aim to mitigate any negative impacts.

Shortcomings in data collection

The collection, analysis and dissemination of sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics was an area of weakness across the ECA region predating the coronavirus outbreak, despite the existence of gender mainstreaming mandates that refer to improving national data collection. In the ECA region, sex-disaggregated data tend to focus on social sector indicators, such as employment, health and education, which are drawn from regular surveys (e.g. labour force surveys, household surveys) and administrative records.⁴⁹ Such data are commonly compiled in annual or semi-annual publications dedicated to “women and men” in a particular country.

Critical data gaps remain in areas such as: women’s and men’s engagement in informal labour, how much time they devote to unpaid care work, the representation of women and men as individual entrepreneurs or owners of micro-sized enterprises (as well as non-registered businesses), how women and men are engaged in smallholder farming, representation in leadership positions at the sub-national level, and the prevalence of various form of violence against women and girls

(VAWG). Not only are sex-disaggregated data limited thematically, but **data that are further disaggregated by other characteristics (such as age, geographical location [also settlement type: rural/urban], education level, disability, ethnicity, sexual orientation/identity, etc.) are almost non-existent outside of small-scale and specialized surveys.** In some countries/territories, limited technical capacity, lack of adequate financing and lack of political will have all prevented progress.⁵⁰ Related issues concern the lack of demand for gender statistics by policymakers.

Moreover, limited reliable gender-sensitive data before the COVID-19 pandemic contributed to obscuring important gender inequalities which, in turn, compromised evidence-based policymaking.

Improving data collection on VAWG is critical for the ECA region. Before the pandemic, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences noted that repeated recommendations had been issued to improve the collection, analysis and sharing of relevant data.

Effective measures to address VAWG require detailed data “to gauge the magnitude and dimensions of the problem, to establish baselines, to identify groups at high risk, to focus intervention and prevention efforts where they are needed most, to monitor changes over time, to assess the effectiveness of interventions and to address the harm to victims of violence.”⁵¹

Specific challenges for the ECA region include the lack of comprehensive and well-defined indicators that would allow for consistent data collection (e.g. criminal justice data that do not indicate the relationship between the perpetrator and victim as well as other

factors that would provide a full picture of the types and circumstances of various forms of VAWG) and administrative data that are not harmonized across sources (e.g. when law enforcement databases are not integrated with other databases, either from the justice sector or the health-care and social-services sectors).⁵² Furthermore, administrative data have limitations, notably that they only capture information about women and girls who report violence. Thus, there is a need across the region for regular population-based prevalence surveys at the national level to capture information about the true scope of all forms of VAWG.

Implications of COVID-19: How can gendered impacts be effectively measured?

The limited availability of sex-disaggregated data before the pandemic means that in some sectors, proper baseline data were not established against which the impacts of the emergency measures taken during the pandemic could eventually be measured. For instance, experts have suggested that domestic violence increased during lockdowns, as did the time that women spent on domestic chores, yet without comparative data, some of this information remains qualitative.

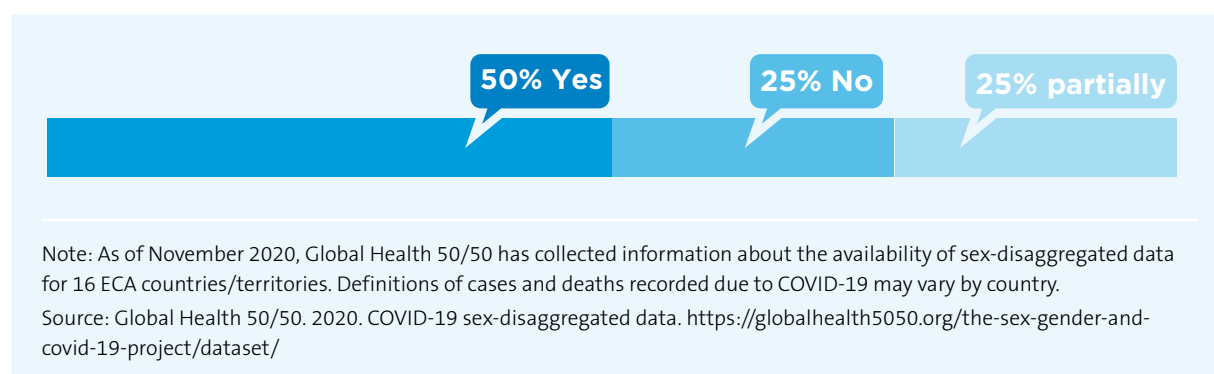
Data-collection processes have been constrained due to the pandemic, which has complicated the process of measuring the impacts of COVID-19. First, the work of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) was significantly

disrupted during lockdown periods. Globally, half of all NSOs were closed to non-essential staff, a quarter required all staff to work from home, and 69 per cent fully stopped face-to-face interviews in field data collection.⁵³ The production of gender statistics has not been prioritized and many NSOs did not have systems or indicators in place to measure intersecting forms of gender inequality that they could draw on during the pandemic.

The full picture of the direct health impacts of the pandemic on women and men is not clear for the region as a whole because disaggregated data about confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19 are not available for all countries/territories.

FIGURE 1

Are sex-disaggregated data about cases and deaths due to COVID-19 available in ECA countries/territories?



The lack of sex-disaggregated data concerning health, but also a number of other indicators, hampers the analysis of the gendered impacts of COVID-19. Data limitations generally present significant challenges to developing responsive recovery efforts and monitoring their effectiveness, going forward. The CEDAW

Committee recommends in the post-COVID period that States Parties “collect accurate and comprehensive age- and sex-disaggregated data on the gendered impact of the health pandemic to facilitate informed and evidence-based policymaking regarding women and girls.”⁵⁴

Conclusions and priority actions

Improving data collection (both sex-disaggregated data and gender statistics) should be the foundation for recovery efforts, not the end point. Data must be analysed and contextualized in order to deepen our understanding of how the pandemic, as well as the emergency measures, have impacted women and men, as well as girls as boys. Future planning should be based on clear evidence of where gender disparities are greatest and have been persistent. There are also important opportunities to establish baseline data, where these have not existed previously, that can be used to monitor the effectiveness of recovery programmes. This is important not only to ensure that programmes are equitable but also that they work towards narrowing gender gaps

PRIORITY ACTIONS SHOULD THUS SEEK TO:

- ▶ Enact regulations on the production of national gender statistics to measure the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- ▶ Design and implement gender-sensitive survey/s at the national and/or subnational levels to monitor and assess the impact of COVID-19. These should capture information about women and girls, as well as men and boys from diverse backgrounds.
- ▶ Provide technical support and financing to improve the capacity of NSOs to mainstream gender into all relevant administrative data sources, surveys and censuses and to conduct specific surveys with a gender perspective. This includes introducing surveys that capture information about the gendered impacts of COVID-19.
- ▶ Draft and disseminate practical guidance on developing gender-sensitive indicators and gender statistics to measure the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that are specific to the ECA region.
- ▶ Strengthening administrative data collection and analysis and adopting protocols for the collection of sex-disaggregated data on all forms of VAWG. Dedicated longitudinal assessments are needed to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on all forms of VAWG.
- ▶ Ensure that all UN-supported statistical platforms and data hubs reflect sex-disaggregated data that are available from NSOs, by encouraging the regular submission of national data and updating UN databases. The UN Women Data Hub⁵⁵ and UNDP/ UN Women Global Gender Response Tracker⁵⁶ are useful models.



PRIORITY 2:

EMPOWERING WOMEN AS LEADERS AND STRENGTHENING GENDER-RESPONSIVE INSTITUTIONS

PRE-EXISTING GENDER GAPS AND CHALLENGES:

- ▶ Although special measures, such as gender quotas, have helped to increase women's representation in national parliaments, the ECA region as a whole has not achieved gender balance in decision-making.
- ▶ Women's representation in cabinet positions, specifically as ministers, is considerably lower than in legislative branches. Where women are in leading positions, they tend to be in ministries concerned with health, labour or social protection, rather than ministries of defence, finance, justice or emergency situations.
- ▶ Gender equality mechanisms have been established in all ECA countries/territories, but their mandates tend to cover coordination and advice, and they have limited authority to propose policy.
- ▶ Civil society organizations offer women an alternative space for leadership and public activism, but mechanisms for their formal engagement in government processes are weak.

OBSERVATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

- ▶ Women have been largely absent from task forces and councils that determined national responses and emergency measures to the COVID-19 pandemic, in part because these structures are inter-ministerial bodies.
- ▶ Mechanisms such as national action plans on WPS and national platforms for disaster risk reduction that include provisions for women's participation in crisis management, appear not to have been activated in response to COVID-19.
- ▶ Some gender equality mechanisms developed guidance on a gender-sensitive COVID-19 response, but such institutions were generally not included as experts in relevant task forces.
- ▶ CSOs have fulfilled important functions in reaching marginalized groups, but women's organizations with on-the-ground information report that they were omitted from government emergency planning.
- ▶ The lack of engagement of gender experts, whether through parliamentary committees, ministries, gender equality institutions or CSOs, has contributed to responses to COVID-19 that have frequently been gender blind. This raises questions about the needed measures to ensure that recovery planning and relief efforts are gender sensitive.

Gender-balanced decision-making is an essential element of inclusive and democratic processes at national, regional and local levels during “ordinary times,” but it becomes even more crucial during crises.

If women's perspectives, needs and experiences are omitted from emergency and recovery planning, the resulting policies and outcomes are likely to be gender blind and the rights and well-being of women and

girls insufficiently protected. The 2019 ECA Regional Review Meeting considered progress under two related strategic objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action – women in power and decision-making and institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women – finding areas of important progress but also persistent challenges.

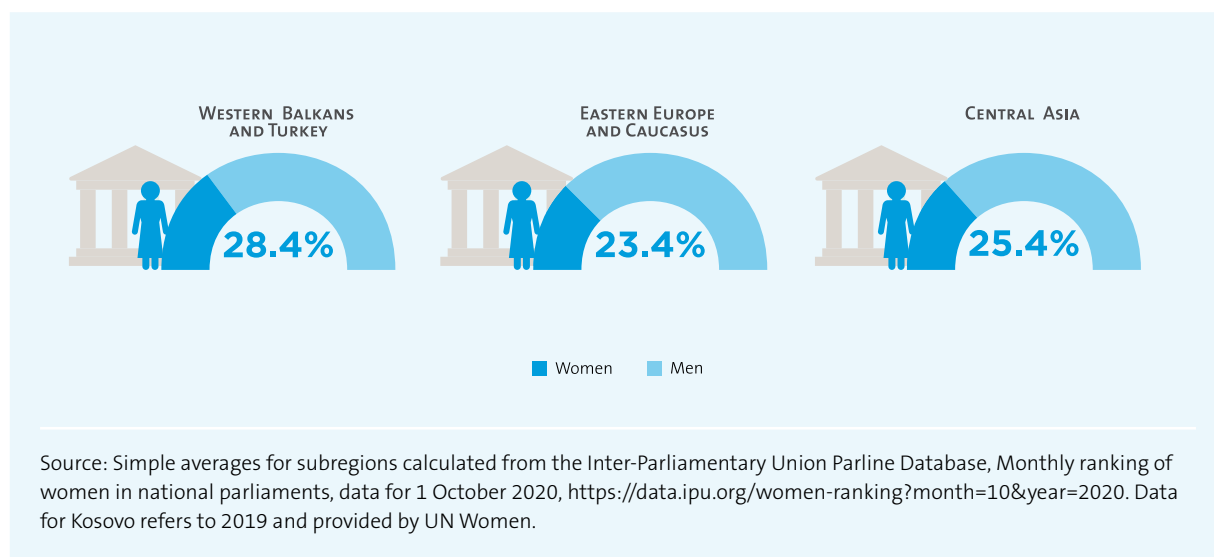
Women in decision-making positions in national government

Women's representation in national parliaments is quite mixed in the region, with some countries experiencing steady increases, reaching close to gender parity, while others continue to have very low numbers of women parliamentarians. For the ECA region

as a whole, women hold roughly a quarter of the seats in national parliaments. This figure still falls below the target set in 1995 of having a minimum of 30 per cent women in legislative bodies.⁵⁷

FIGURE 2

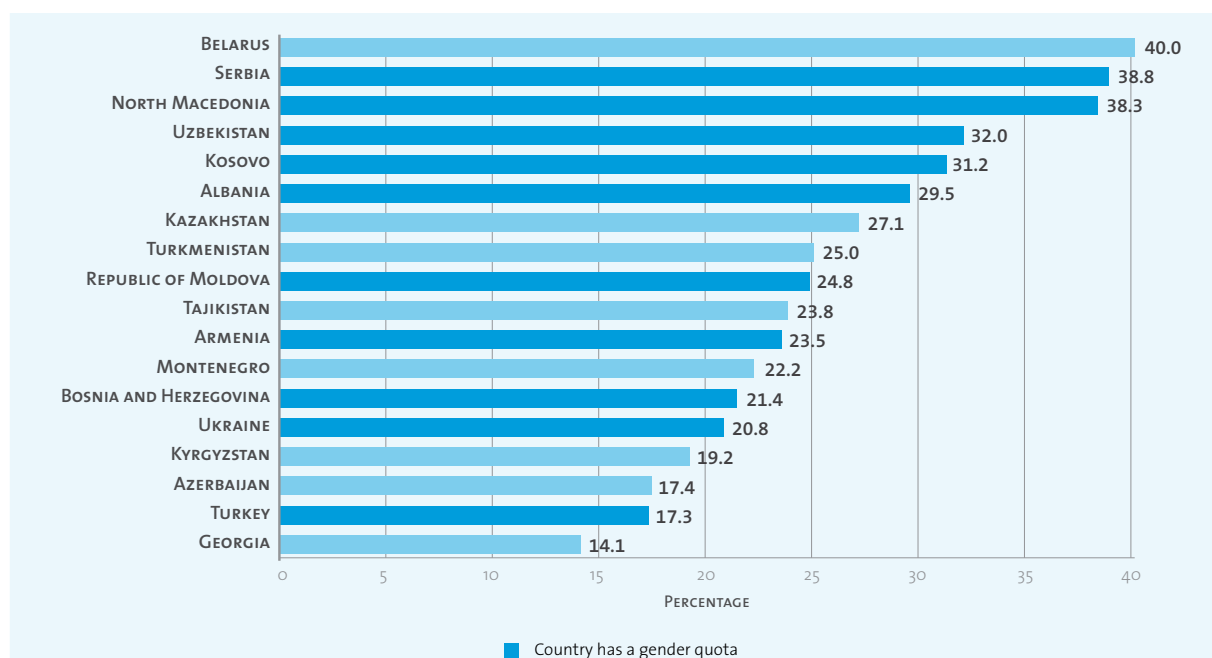
Women's representation in national parliaments, by subregion, 2020



Temporary special measures appear to have been instrumental in increasing the number of women Members of Parliament (MPs) in several ECA countries/territories. All but three of the ECA countries/territories have introduced some form of gender quotas for elected officials (for political parties or candidate lists, both voluntary and legislated) or governance (such as the 'soft quota' requiring that women be appointed to high-ranking positions in Tajikistan). Improved representation of women in the national parliaments of Armenia and Serbia in 2019 has been partly attributed to candidate quotas.⁵⁸ More recently, Georgia, Kazakhstan and Ukraine amended their respective electoral laws to introduce gender quotas that will be applicable in future election cycles and are expected to build on this positive trend.

Gender quotas for elected office appear to have been more effective in the Western Balkans than other subregions. In some countries, gender quotas have been legislated, but because they are not enforced, their objectives remain unrealized.⁵⁹ Figure 3 illustrates the considerable diversity across the region, with some countries/territories reaching almost 40 per cent representation by women MPs (in Belarus, Serbia and North Macedonia, for example), while in others, women hold less than 20 per cent of parliamentary seats. Countries/territories that have some form of gender quota (either a legislated candidate quota, reserved seats or political party quota⁶⁰) are indicated in the figure below.

FIGURE 3

Women's representation in national parliaments in the ECA region, 2020

Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2020. Parline Database, Monthly ranking of women in national parliaments, data for 1 October 2020. <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=10&year=2020>; Data for Kosovo refers to 2019 and provided by UN Women. International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). N.D. Gender Quotas Database. Accessible at: <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/database>.

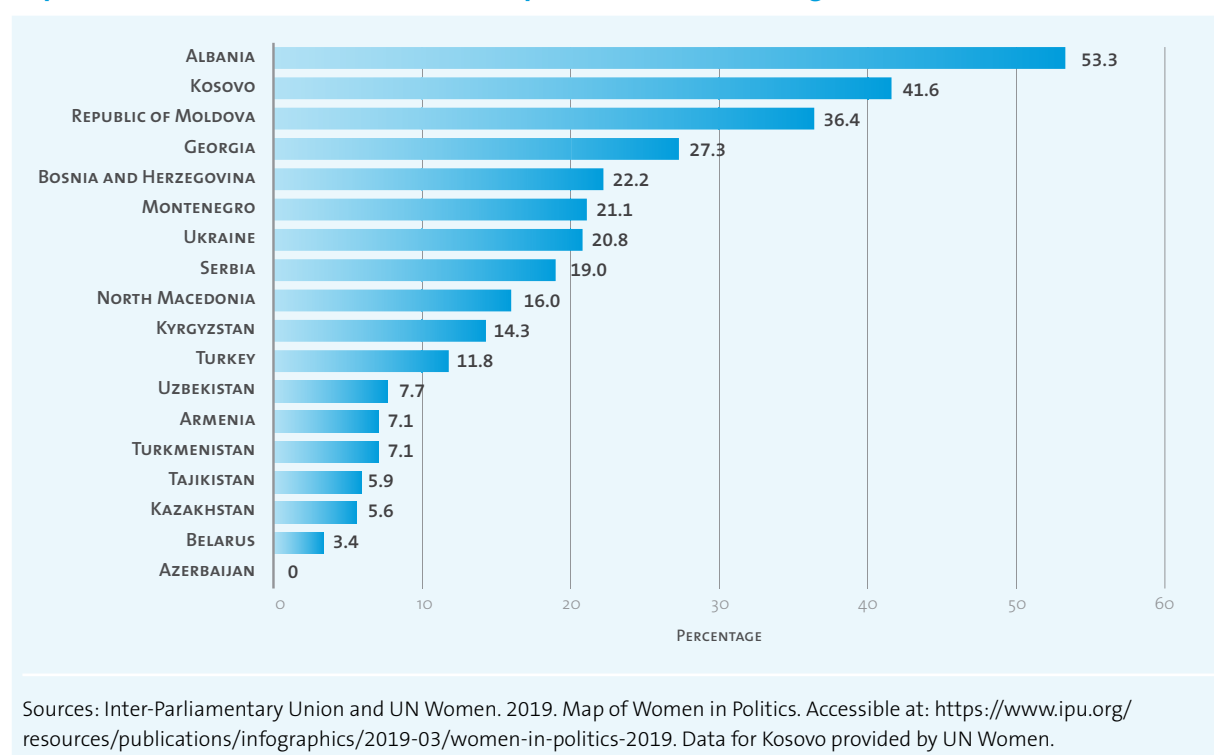
Worrying backsliding tendencies or stagnation in terms of the share of women in parliament have also been observed, despite the existence of gender quotas. Although there are important exceptions, women from minority groups have even lower levels of representation in political office in the ECA region (this includes, but is not limited to, women with disabilities, Roma women, as well as lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women).

In the ECA region, only three countries and one territory have women leaders at the highest levels of government office: the President of Georgia, the Prime Minister of Serbia, the President of the Republic of Moldova and the Acting President of Kosovo. Women's representation among high-ranking officials varies considerably by country/territory and depends on the size of the Cabinet. The situation regarding women as ministers is more changeable than that of MPs, as government reforms often result in the reshuffling of Cabinets. For instance, after changes in the Government of Kosovo, the representation of women in ministerial positions fell from almost 42

per cent to 19 per cent in 2020. Figure 4 indicates that women have obtained 20 per cent of ministerial posts in only six countries and one territory. Ministerial appointments also demonstrate the influence of gender stereotypes. Women are more likely to be given portfolios in health, education or social affairs (that also correspond to sectors with high rates of female employment), and men usually lead ministries of finance, foreign affairs, internal affairs, justice, defence and emergency situations. While this is the pattern for the ECA region as a whole, there are notable positive exceptions (Serbia has a gender-balanced Cabinet, while Albania and North Macedonia currently have women Ministers of Defence) as well as negative ones (some countries have only a single woman minister in Cabinet or none at all⁶¹). In some ECA countries (Albania, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine, for example) the post of Deputy Prime Minister includes a mandate on gender equality (and functions as part of the national machinery) – in such circumstances, one of the appointed Deputy Prime Minister posts is effectively 'reserved' for a woman.

FIGURE 4

Representation of women in ministerial positions in the ECA region, 2019



Increasing the number of women in political leadership in legislative and executive offices is a critical goal. Balanced representation that reflects the diversity of the population is also a prerequisite to gender-responsive governance. However, achieving gender balance should not be the end goal. Strategies to increase women's representation are entry points that "can help to shape gender-responsive social and economic policy agendas across a range of development priorities. ... [G]overnments are more responsive and effective when the composition of the institutions of government reflects the composition of the society."⁶² Thus, measures that pave the way for more women to enter leadership posts should

be accompanied by initiatives to mainstream gender concerns throughout governance.

Before the coronavirus outbreak, women's limited voice in formal decision-making contributed to a situation in which their views and priorities were often absent from national policy, especially in areas that are erroneously considered to be 'gender neutral'. On the other hand, where progress has been made in enacting legislation and policies that respond to issues that disproportionately impact women, networks of women MPs have been catalysts for such changes. Examples can be found in Kyrgyzstan, Montenegro and Serbia of cross-party cooperation and the adoption of gender-specific laws.⁶³

National machinery for gender equality

All ECA countries/territories⁶⁴ have an institution that is responsible for developing and coordinating policies for promoting gender equality and/or the advancement of women within their respective public administrations.

For the majority of countries/territories in the region, these institutions are responsible for developing national strategy on gender equality, engaging with government to promote and coordinate gender

mainstreaming in government functions, and coordinating and monitoring the implementation of gender-related policies.

However, in several countries there has been a trend in a different direction, and the national machinery for gender equality or on women's affairs has been restructured and brought under institutions with broader mandates. For example, in Azerbaijan, the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs replaced the former State Committee for Women's Issues in 2006. In Turkey, the General Directorate on the Status of Women was moved from the Office of the Prime Minister and, most recently, was restructured as a Department of the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services. The former Women's Committee of Uzbekistan was dissolved in 2020 when the responsibility for issues concerning equal rights and opportunities for women and men was assumed by the newly established Ministry for Mahalla and Family Support. In these cases, it appears that core functions of the national machinery – such as coordinating women's affairs, formulating policy and strategy, promoting inter-institutional cooperation and awareness-raising – have been transferred, but the repositioning of such institutions reduces their visibility and conflates issues that concern

women with those of family and children. The CEDAW Committee has made clear that combining gender equality and family issues reinforces traditional stereotypes about women's roles and responsibilities in the family.⁶⁵

Other constraints that are common for most of the national mechanisms include the fact that such institutions tend to have advisory roles with limited influence over policymaking. Such institutions are “often marginalized within governmental structures, hampered by the lack of adequate staff, training, data and sufficient resources, inadequate support from political leadership and complex and expanding mandates.”⁶⁶ In some cases, national gender mechanisms have a symbolic role and little authority to propose policy, while in others, internal leadership is weak and without the requisite expertise to have influence over decision-making.⁶⁷ When the national machinery is connected to a particular ministry, units with competency for gender equality or the advancement of women are most often located within ministries of labour, health and social affairs, an indication that gender equality is still very much perceived as a ‘soft’ subject associated with social protection. In two countries, the national gender machinery is within ministries for human rights.⁶⁸

Women's civil society activism

Civil society organizations offer women an additional avenue to make their voices heard on key issues, and women's organizations have become an important force for social change in the ECA region. They play critical roles in supporting individual women – often filling gaps where the State is weak. While there were numerous instances of civil society and government partnership before the coronavirus outbreak, CSOs had highlighted the absence of consistent and effective inclusion of women's organizations in processes to develop and implement the very laws and policies that impact women directly. In Ukraine, for instance, women's non-governmental organizations (NGOs) note that they were largely denied the opportunity to give inputs on the State's gender equality legislation at the time of drafting and adoption, despite the fact that there was legal support for public participation in

policymaking.⁶⁹ In Tajikistan, the most common form of CSO participation occurs when such organizations are invited to participate in one-off events (such as round tables) dedicated to women's rights or gender equality. Representatives of women's NGOs are rarely included in working groups, as part of public procurement processes or invited as experts by government agencies.⁷⁰

A critical stumbling block for social partnership between civil society and government is the lack of legal frameworks (e.g. when there are no requirements for CSO participation in government processes) or institutionalized mechanisms. Partnership is also hindered by the authorities' lack of understanding of the importance of engaging with CSOs in order to develop inclusive law and policy as well as the limited

capacity of CSOs themselves to undertake advocacy or lobbying activities – as opposed to, or in addition to, service-provision, for example.

Overlaying these difficulties, concern has been raised in recent years about the ‘shrinking space’ for women’s CSOs, as part of a general trend of

government restrictions on civil society. Backsliding on gender equality commitments has further reduced opportunities for women’s CSOs to collaborate with government structures or to conduct effective advocacy. Lack of financial support prevents women’s organizations not only from providing critical services, but it also impacts their overall sustainability.⁷¹

Implications of COVID-19: Were women at the table during emergency planning?

If the unequal representation of women in the public sector and the limited impact they had on policymaking was a challenge for the ECA region before COVID-19, as the pandemic has spread, it became increasingly clear that women’s specific needs are at risk of being overlooked “in the development, scrutiny and monitoring of COVID-19 policies, plans and budgets, including for economic recovery and future health resilience.”⁷²

There are two related aspects to the question of whether women in the ECA region have been able to meaningfully participate in crisis planning in response to COVID-19. First, if women were not already in the leadership of the institutions that have been tasked to respond to emergencies, it is unlikely that they were present in emergency planning. It stands to reason that they may also not be included in recovery planning. As described below, there is limited information available to assess the level of women’s representation on task forces and committees formed to address COVID-19. Second, it is not clear to what extent women experts in relevant fields have been consulted during processes to develop national emergency responses and relief plans to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic. Public consultations are a key part of government processes to ensure that no one is left behind, but very often experts from social sectors, where women are better represented, are not consulted around crisis response. An example of this is provided by CSOs in the Western Balkans and Turkey, which maintain that no governments effectively planned measures to protect the large group of women working in the informal economy when lockdown measures were put in place.⁷³

Women’s representation on COVID-19 task forces/response teams and in recovery planning

In the ECA region, national emergency response teams are largely inter-ministerial bodies, comprising line ministries. Of the countries/territories in the ECA region, approximately eight have women heading ministries of health, labour and employment, or social protection⁷⁴ (in some cases, one ministry is responsible for each of these areas), but women rarely lead ministries of defence or emergency situations. Given that these are the ministries most likely to be included in COVID-19 planning bodies, as well as the general low level of women ministers in the region, it can be assumed that a number of task forces had limited women’s representation.

In fact, women have been largely absent from coronavirus response teams. Based on a survey of COVID-19 task forces around the world, only five per cent had gender parity among team members.⁷⁵ Tracking by UNDP and UN Women indicates that women make up around a quarter of task force members globally. Although information about the composition of task forces is not publicly available for each country/territory, the global pattern seems to have been replicated in the ECA region, based on information that was available about the initial configuration of such bodies.

- ▶ Two of 15 members of the Commandant’s Office of Armenia (the inter-agency office formed in March 2020 to respond to the coronavirus outbreak) were women, or 13 per cent.⁷⁶

- ▶ In Kyrgyzstan, women represented 20 per cent of those in the Commandant's Office and Republican Headquarters of the coronavirus response.⁷⁷
- ▶ In the Republic of Moldova, the Commission for Exceptional Situations was established in March 2020 with the authority to issue binding decisions. Of the 26 members of the Commission, five were women.⁷⁸
- ▶ In Ukraine, the two key national agencies (the Anti-Crisis Headquarters for counteracting COVID-19 Acute Respiratory Disease caused by Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 and the Coordination Council) had few women representatives – only 6 of 33 members in the former and 1 of 17 members in the latter. The State Commissioner on Gender Equality was not a member of either group.
- ▶ In Uzbekistan, the specially formed Republican Commission was responsible for preparing measures to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. Comprised of representatives of line ministries and State committees, it had 2 women among its 25 members.⁷⁹

Because each country/territory typically has convened various special bodies to address different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic, more detailed analysis is needed to understand how women have been represented until now and how they will be included in the task forces responsible for recovery planning, moving forward.

Implementation of national action plans on UN Security resolution 1325

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a destabilizing effect that goes beyond a health crisis. It is threatening peace and security and exacerbating gender inequality in conflict-affected settings and post-conflict contexts.⁸⁰ The security challenges brought about by COVID-19 should be addressed through the lens of the women, peace and security agenda. Although the core pillars of the WPS agenda – protection, prevention, participation and relief and recovery – are all implicated by the current pandemic, too often gender analysis has not been a part of preparing for and responding to crises.

Since the landmark UN Security Council resolution 1325 was adopted in 2000, significant progress has been made in solidifying national frameworks to

support the WPS agenda through the adoption of national action plans (NAPs). In the ECA region, 11 countries (and also Kosovo)⁸¹ have NAPs to implement UNSCR 1325. Notably, several national action plans outline gender-sensitive early warning systems relevant to conflict, crisis situations and natural or human-made disasters and support integration of a gender perspective in relief and recovery efforts. (These are in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia).⁸²

It is difficult to gauge the extent to which NAPs on UNSCR 1325 have shaped emergency responses to COVID-19. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), the head of the Agency for Gender Equality noted that the existence of the NAP provided a platform for a gender-responsive approach to the pandemic and laid the groundwork for the agency's own recommendations for integrating gender equality into government planning and economic recovery processes, as well as for the reallocation of funds.⁸³

A more extensive assessment is needed to clarify how national action plans on UNSCR 1325 were implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the ECA region. Furthermore, the UN has noted that COVID-19 prevention and response measures have the potential to “trigger socio-economic unrests [sic], violence linked to stigmatization and deepened community mistrust in already fragile conflict settings,” and this makes the need to ensure the meaningful inclusion of women in peace and security decision-making all the more critical during the recovery period.⁸⁴

Women's leadership in disaster risk reduction and management

At the centre of the disaster risk reduction (DRR) framework are the principles of protection of human rights and the empowerment of women, to “lead and promote gender equitable and universally accessible response, recovery, rehabilitation and reconstruction approaches.”⁸⁵ Similar to the conceptualization of ‘conflict,’ risk in the context of disaster risk reduction and management refers to multiple events, including “small-scale and large-scale, frequent and infrequent, sudden and slow-onset disasters caused by natural or man-made hazards, as well as related environmental, technological and biological hazards and risks.”⁸⁶

The framework applies to the management of the COVID-19 pandemic and reducing its negative impacts.

In the ECA region, the majority of countries have established national platforms for DRR – only six countries do not have such platforms in place.⁸⁷ In at least one country (Armenia), the national platform is expected to include a gender-sensitive DRR system.⁸⁸ The Regional Plan of Action for the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 in Central Asia and South Caucasus region has only minimally mainstreamed gender, primarily in reference to the collection of sex-disaggregated data related to disaster losses and risks. There is a need to incorporate commitments that further gender equality and women's empowerment in the context of planning around disaster risk reduction.

The precise representation of women in national bodies for DRR has not been calculated, but in countries with national DRR platforms, the responsible structures tend to be drawn foremost from ministries in which women are underrepresented – ministries of emergency situations, defence and internal affairs – although some include members from all line ministries. Thus, it can be assumed that women's engagement in COVID-19 responses linked to DRR mechanisms has been minimal.

Engagement of national gender equality mechanisms

National institutions for gender equality are both duty-bearers and key experts in the context of the unfolding coronavirus pandemic. In theory, their role should encompass assessing the risks to women in particularly vulnerable situations and providing expertise to inform the planning and execution of emergency measures to ensure that any negative consequences are mitigated. Based on information provided by key informants, it appears that there was relatively minimal engagement with such national mechanisms in response planning around the COVID-19 outbreak. Institutions with relevant expertise, including national gender equality machineries, were not members of national task forces. Therefore, their contributions to government planning in the initial response period to the coronavirus was in parallel and advisory in nature. Several gender equality bodies

produced guidance and recommendations about responding to the pandemic,⁸⁹ but it does not appear that the expertise of the national machineries was widely sought during planning stages, nor do they appear to have been effectively engaged in discussions of recovery plans.

Engagement of women's civil society organizations

At the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, women's organizations across the ECA region were well-positioned to identify and conduct outreach to vulnerable groups, including women and girls. One of the strengths of women's CSOs can be seen in the fact that a great many were able to ensure continuity in support, despite having to reorganize their work under emergency conditions. Women's organizations have drawn on their expertise and supported vulnerable people through initiatives that ranged from disseminating information to providing direct assistance (including delivery of food, goods and hygiene supplies as well as legal and psychological assistance for survivors of gender-based violence).⁹⁰

While women's organizations and volunteers have shouldered much of the burden of reaching marginalized groups, especially at the community level, historically they have rarely been included in crisis response-planning – a tendency that has been replicated during the COVID-19 outbreak. Of the more than 100 women's organizations in the ECA region that participated in a regional consultation conducted by UN Women, around half reported that they had taken the initiative to propose specific actions for governments and development partners during the COVID-19 pandemic in order to ensure that women's priorities and needs were met.⁹¹ Yet the same organizations also reported that no governments in the region consulted with women's CSOs for inputs when determining national emergency measures, even in light of the fact that some measures, such as social distancing and lockdowns, exacerbated the situation for women who were already disadvantaged.⁹²

It is notable that the inclusion of civil society as a partner in both the WPS agenda and in DRR could have been an additional mechanism to ensure that women's CSOs were consulted on COVID-19 responses. For example, the national action plans for UNSCR 1325 for

Albania (for 2018–2020) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (for 2018–2022) both reference cooperation with civil society. However, a large-scale analysis of NAPs globally found that “most current NAPs mention civil society in passing ... but provide no real specification of activity or extent of involvement.”⁹³ Similarly, several national platforms for DRR (Armenia, Kyrgyzstan and Serbia) reference the inclusion of civil society in national mechanisms for coordinating disaster risk reduction, but it does not appear that these particular

policies led to consultations with women’s organizations in reference to COVID-19.

The lack of engagement with women’s organizations has contributed to a situation in which their crucial knowledge did not inform the response to COVID-19. Instead, the response has proceeded on two parallel fronts, which raises questions about whether resources are being used most efficiently and also whether assistance and support is reaching those who need it most.

Conclusions and priority actions

It is problematic not only that COVID-19 task forces to enact emergency measures have been largely male-dominated, but that existing mechanisms for engaging women in crisis planning appear not to have been used effectively. Opportunities to mitigate the negative impacts on women and girls that resulted from measures were missed. The initial omission of women also increases the risk that recovery planning processes will likewise proceed without women’s voices, unless this approach is corrected.

As the ECA region moves towards recovery, it will become increasingly important that women have the appropriate space to voice their opinions and be equally represented in decision-making related to planning and priorities in the post-COVID period. Measures are needed to hasten progress towards achieving gender equality in governance and to standardize the practice of consulting with women’s civil society organizations. Gender mainstreaming should also be applied to the design of recovery and economic stimulus packages as well as to shaping priorities for public services.

PRIORITY ACTIONS SHOULD THUS SEEK TO:

- ▶ Uphold commitments to include women’s leadership in the design, implementation and monitoring of COVID-19 response and recovery planning and budgeting. Task forces, or other commissions and working groups, formed to address the response to COVID-19 and recovery planning must include women in decision-making positions.
- ▶ Implement national gender equality legislation, gender mainstreaming and gender analysis requirements in order to ensure that national response

and recovery plans include a gender perspective. In addition, funds should be dedicated to gender-responsive relief packages to address the negative consequences of emergency measures on women and girls.

- ▶ Leverage the expertise of national gender equality mechanisms as well as women with experience in health security, early warning systems, emergency response, gender-responsive budgeting, the needs of vulnerable groups, etc. Actions should also include developing databases or rosters at the national/regional level of women experts, including from civil society, academia and the private sector. Consultative processes around COVID-19 recovery planning that include women’s participation should be established.
- ▶ Review national action plans on UNSCR 1325 on women, peace and security and national disaster risk management strategies and platforms in light of findings from the pandemic, in order to strengthen provisions that mandate women’s participation in crisis and emergency planning and response.
- ▶ Incorporate gender-sensitive procedural and budgetary parliamentary processes, for example, through gender quotas, policies on inclusion, laws on gender-mainstreamed public consultations, etc.⁹⁴
- ▶ Formalize processes for consultation with women-led CSOs in official policymaking concerning the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality, as well as in COVID-19 response and recovery planning and budgeting. In parallel, provide capacity-building for CSOs to increase their skills in advocacy and policy development.

PRIORITY 3:

REDUCING ECONOMIC INSECURITY



PRE-EXISTING GENDER GAPS AND CHALLENGES:

- ▶ In the ECA region, women's low engagement in the workforce, compared to men's, means that women are more likely to be economically dependent and national economies are not benefitting from the contributions of the full working-age population. Gender segregation in occupations, and women's predominance in low-paid fields in the public sector, contributes to a gender wage gap.
- ▶ Women's businesses in the ECA region can be characterized as micro or small-sized, with low turnover and profits, and mainly concentrated in 'feminized' sectors of the labour market. This situation partly reflects women's more limited access to key resources (capital, knowledge and skills, time, etc.).
- ▶ Considerably more men than women work in the informal sector – when agriculture is excluded. However, more women tend to work informally as domestic workers, home-based workers or as contributing family workers. Their work is largely 'invisible' and is not covered by labour laws or the social safety net.
- ▶ Labour migration is an important source of employment and income for many households. Historically, men have made up the majority of labour migrants from the region, but these patterns are changing, especially given internal migration.
- ▶ In the ECA region, young men encounter fewer difficulties in transitioning from education to paid work than their female counterparts. Young women are more likely to be inactive or to be classified as not in education, employment or training (NEET). The primary reason for women's inactivity is family/household responsibilities.

OBSERVATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

- ▶ Pre-existing occupational segregation in the ECA region has led to women being overwhelmingly represented as workers in sectors that have been the most disrupted by the pandemic: namely, education, personal services, hospitality, food and beverage services, and tourism. Women are also the majority of front-line responders, as health-care and social-sector workers. On the other hand, men make up the majority of workers in manufacturing and construction industries that could not make use of remote working arrangements and where social distancing is especially difficult.
- ▶ During the COVID-19 pandemic, both men and women have experienced job losses, reduced working hours and loss of income as a direct result of measures taken to protect the health of the population. However, because men previously occupied more stable and lucrative positions in the labour market, they are likely to be more resilient to any economic shocks.
- ▶ Entrepreneurs have been hard hit by the pandemic, but women's enterprises in particular will struggle to make the adjustments needed to restart after quarantine periods, potentially falling into insolvency.
- ▶ Informal sector workers have been put at risk of losing income and employment and may not benefit from job-protection schemes implemented during the pandemic.
- ▶ With the COVID-19 outbreak, labour migrants have temporarily or permanently lost their jobs. National governments will be required to consider ways to reintegrate and provide opportunities for decent work for all returning migrants.

- Low levels of women's employment reflect a mismatch between the demands of labour markets in the region and offered skills and knowledge. This mismatch stems from the fact that girls and young women have more limited access to technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and are underrepresented in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields in education and work.

- The pre-existing risk that young women become trapped in economic inactivity, despite their desire to enter or re-enter the labour market, has likely increased in light of disruptions to education, job losses and economic downturns.
- In the post-COVID recovery period, countries/territories will be challenged to provide the workforce with the skills needed to meet the demands of a changing labour market and to ensure that women are not left behind. The pandemic has also increased the importance of digital economies that rely on workers with STEM skills. Without special interventions, women's limited participation in STEM will disadvantage them in the growing number of technical fields.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating and direct costs for public health, but the pandemic is also harming the world's economies. Emergency measures associated with the outbreak have resulted in decreased production and manufacturing, limited travel and transport, and rising unemployment. Predictions are that many countries are on the verge of recession and that most economies will shrink. Preliminary data and studies already indicate that the pandemic has had a differential impact on the economic security of women and men, and that these differences

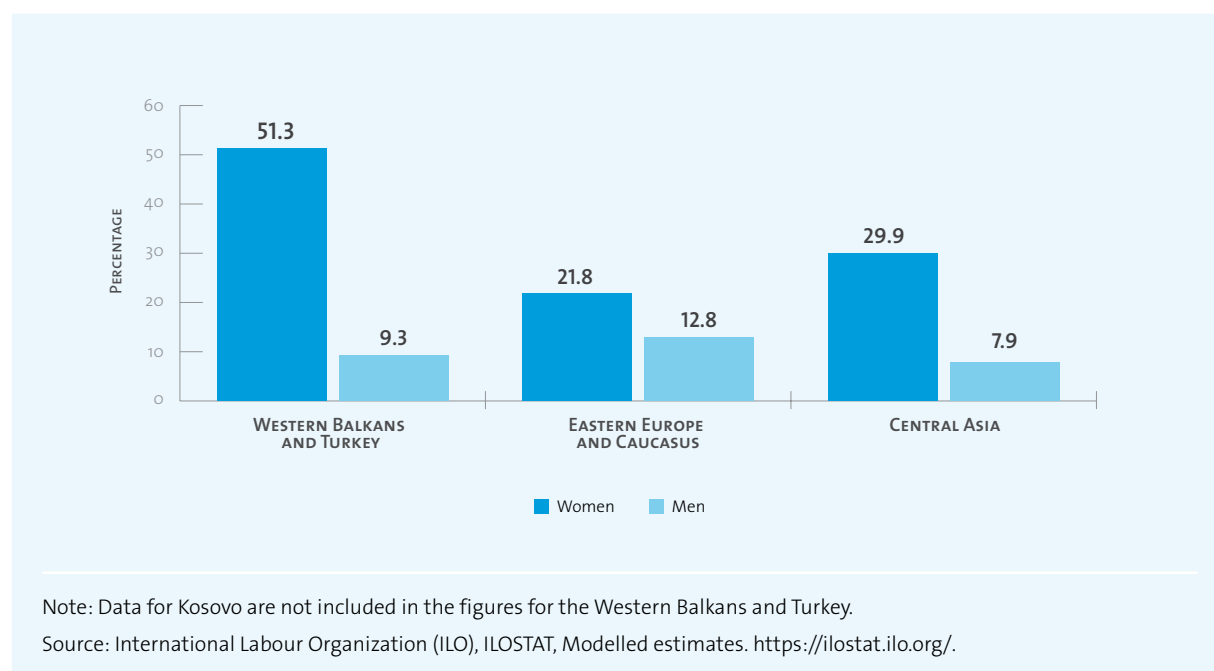
reflect long-standing and entrenched gender disparities in access to economic resources. Past crises and economic downturns have shown that women face greater risks of long-term job loss, due to their position in the labour market. In order to estimate the prospects for inclusive post-COVID recovery, the gender-specific impacts on employment and poverty must be assessed, keeping in mind the pre-COVID context, and specifically the factors behind women's lack of economic empowerment.

Labour force participation and occupational segregation

One of the most significant gender disparities for the ECA region is the lower engagement of women in the labour market, as compared to men and to women in OECD countries. Within each country/territory, men make up the large majority of the labour force. Whereas over 70 per cent of working-age men (those above age 15) are actively engaged in the labour market (meaning they are either working or looking for work), the same can be said for only 45 per cent of working-age women.⁹⁵ When the economic *inactivity* rates for women and men are calculated, the gender

gaps are especially pronounced for specific subregions. See Figure 5.

Trends in women in the workforce over the past two decades indicate that although there has been improvement in the region overall, in specific countries women's labour force participation has declined.⁹⁶ Women have notably low engagement in several countries, making up less than half of the workforce in: Turkey (32 per cent), Bosnia and Herzegovina (35 per cent), Republic of Moldova (39 per cent) and Kyrgyzstan (48 per cent).⁹⁷

FIGURE 5**Economic inactivity rate among the population aged 25-54, by sex and subregion, 2019**

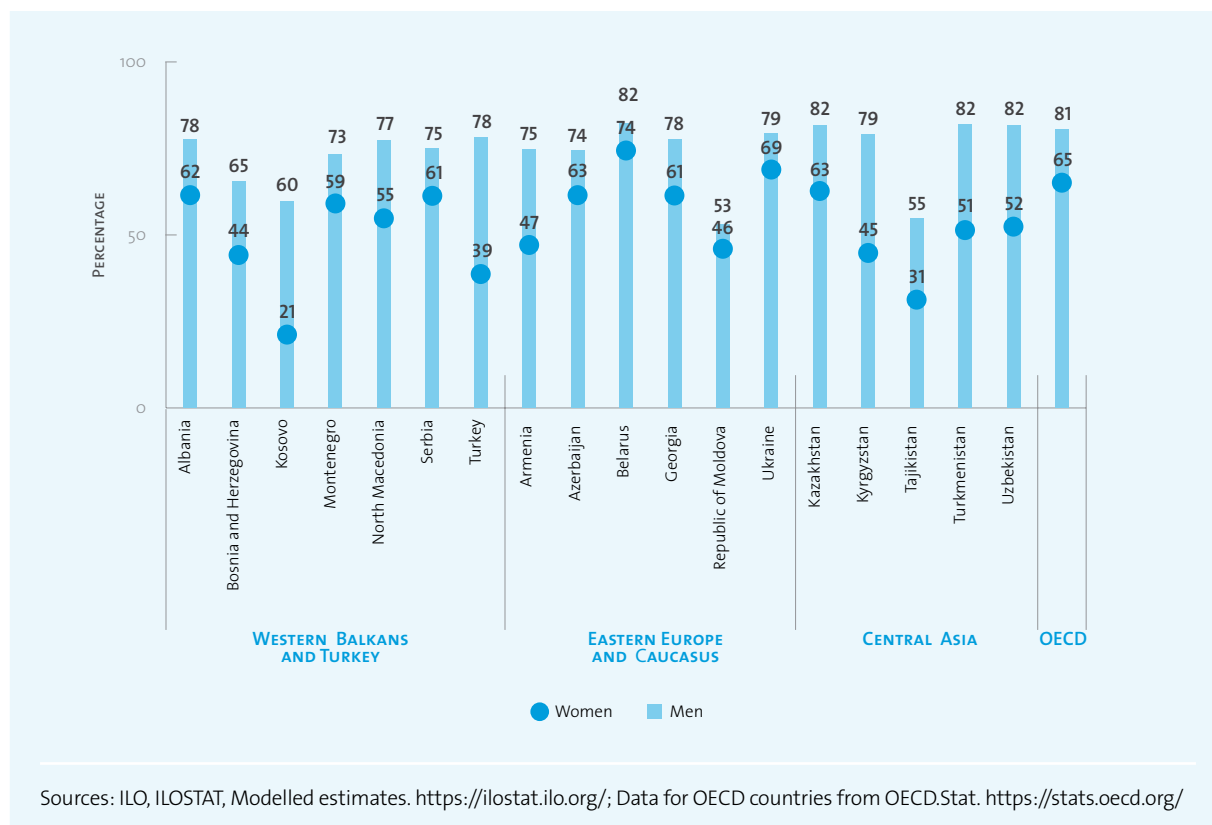
Women's labour force participation rates are typically lower than men's given that prime working years correspond to the time in many women's lives that they interrupt their careers to give birth and to raise children. This is underpinned by other factors, such as social norms and expectations as well as access to capital, for instance. Many women do not return to economic activity at the same rate as they did before motherhood. When pensioners are excluded, in Armenia⁹⁸ and the Republic of Moldova⁹⁹ around 22 per cent of all economically inactive women are out of the workforce due to "family circumstances," compared to less than 2 per cent of non-working men (men are generally inactive when they are students). In Georgia, one in four women of productive age is out of work because she is a "homemaker," according to survey data, and 49 per cent of non-working women

reported that they were out of work due to "personal or family responsibilities," compared with 22 per cent of non-working men.¹⁰⁰

While this pattern is universal, the gender gap in labour force participation is narrower in developed economies. As indicated in Figure 6 below, several countries in all subregions of Europe and Central Asia have considerably larger gender gaps in labour force participation than OECD countries (where the female labour force participation rate is 65.1 per cent and the male rate is 80.6 per cent).¹⁰¹ In countries that have reduced the gender gap in labour force participation, a key factor has been the availability of a social safety net and measures that enable women to balance their working lives with domestic responsibilities, which are still underdeveloped in the ECA region.

FIGURE 6

Economic inactivity rate among the population aged 25-54, by sex and countries/territories, 2019



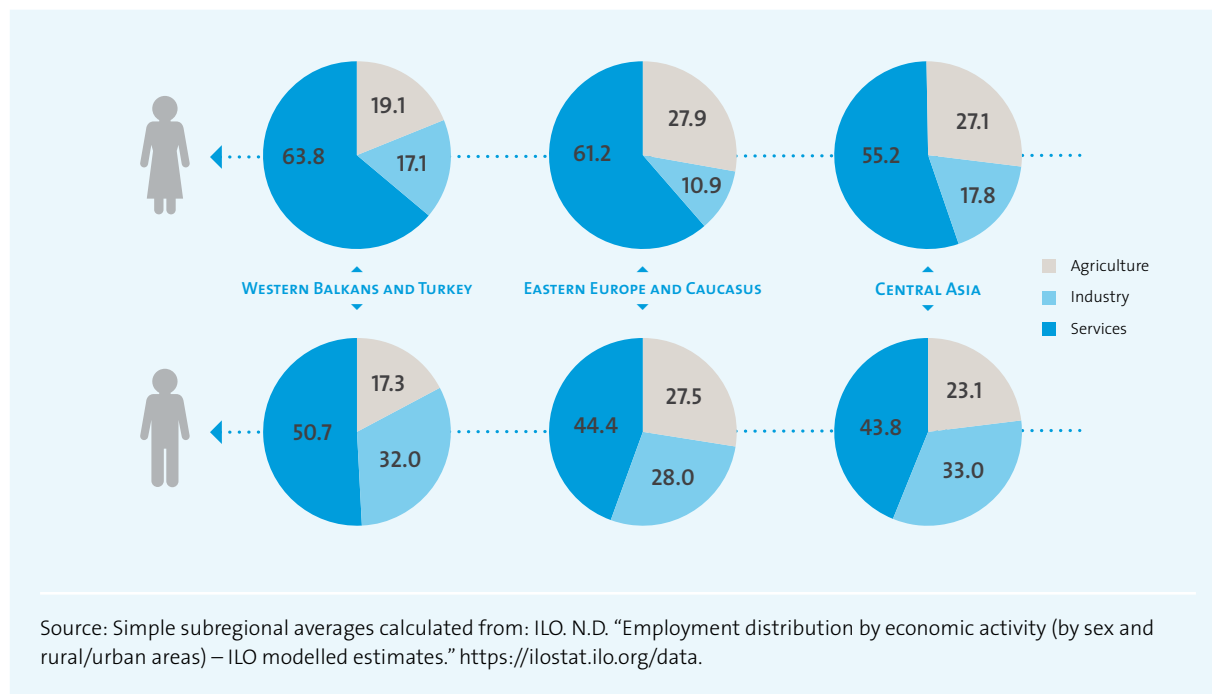
Women's lower level of engagement in the workforce not only has serious repercussions for their economic independence and vulnerability to poverty, but it also means that economies overall do not benefit from the contributions of a large segment of the working-age population. For those countries in which female economic inactivity has been increasing in recent years (particularly in Central Asia), concern had been raised that women's prospects of entering or re-entering the labour market may be further impeded due to an increase in technology-related work and the increased

digitalization of the labour market,¹⁰² for which women tend to have fewer skills and qualifications.

Gender segregation in economic activity is a characteristic feature of the labour markets of Europe and Central Asia. Looking at the core sectors of the economy, women are overwhelmingly represented in services. A large proportion of men are service-sector workers, but their employment profile is more diverse as it also includes considerable engagement in industry. See Figure 7.

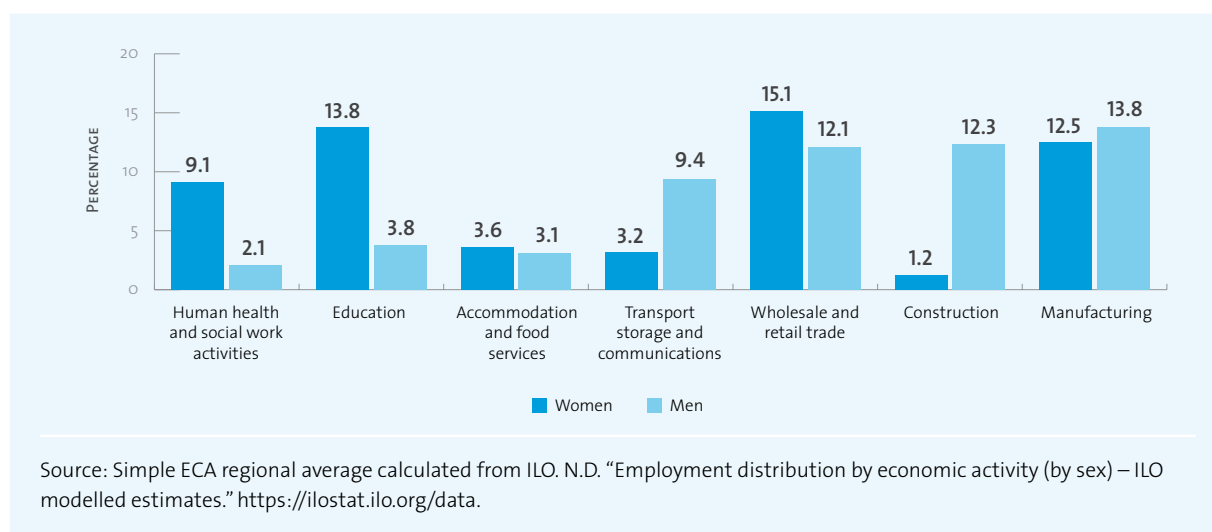
FIGURE 7

Distribution of employment by economic activity, sex and subregion, 2020 (%)



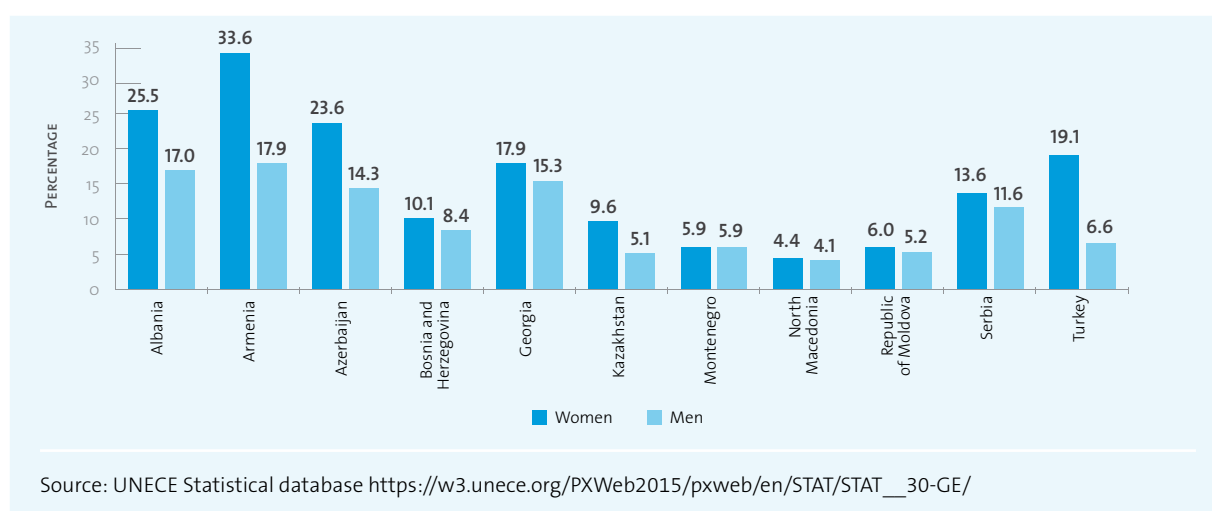
Gender segregation in occupations shapes how women are represented in the labour market. In the ECA region, women are concentrated in public sector work – primarily health care, social services and education. See Figure 8, below. Note that sectors in which female and male employment is quite balanced, such as financial and insurance activities, real estate and business administration and public administration, are not included. Occupational segregation reflects long-held stereotypes about the kind of work that is ‘appropriate’ for women, as well as gender discrimination. It is worth noting that in several countries these stereotypes had been replicated in labour laws that prohibit women from entering certain occupations.¹⁰³ Other reasons for the persistence of these patterns

concern the fact that the public sector generally offers stable work that is often more flexible and can accommodate women’s schedules and home responsibilities. At the same time, “[w]omen-dominated professions are not as equally valued both socially and in terms of remuneration when compared with fields dominated by men,”¹⁰⁴ and therefore they do not attract men who are expected to take on the role of ‘breadwinner’ in their households. Gender segregation in occupations is being further exacerbated by “skills-biased technological change” – which refers to “a shift in production technology that favours skilled over unskilled labour” – such that in both developed and emerging economies, men have benefited from skilled employment at greater rates than women.¹⁰⁵

FIGURE 8**Employment distribution for selected occupations for the ECA region, by sex, 2019****Patterns of employment and unemployment**

Among the employed population, women are disproportionately represented in part-time work, which is closely tied to expectations and practices that women take on the greater share of unpaid care and household work, while men are expected to support the household from their earnings. Women's engagement in part-time work is especially common in South-Eastern Europe (the Western Balkans and

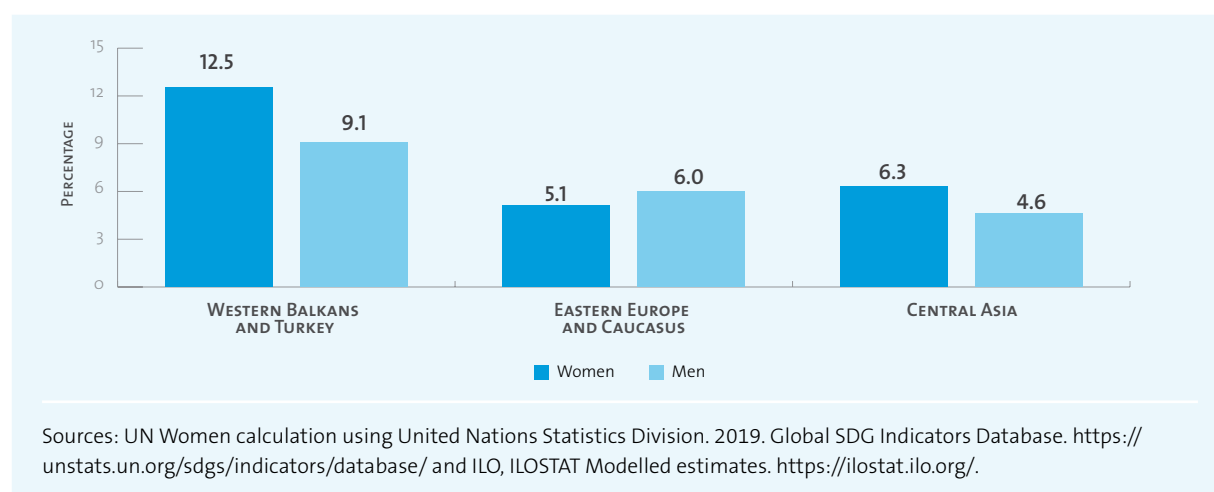
Turkey) and in Eastern Europe and the Caucasus, where close to one in every five working women is employed part-time. See Figure 9. Part-time work does not necessarily accrue the same social protections as full-time employment, such as maternity benefits, sick pay, paid holidays or unemployment protection. Women's greater engagement in part-time work is also a factor in their lower earnings overall.

FIGURE 9**Part-time employment of women and men, as a percentage of total female/male employment, 2017**

Unemployment rates for women and men vary by subregion, country/territory and by age group. Relatively recent unemployment estimations indicate that the highest unemployment rates, and largest

gender gaps, are in the Western Balkans and Turkey (South-Eastern Europe). See Figure 10. Once they become unemployed, women tend to remain out of work for longer than men, on average.

FIGURE 10
Unemployment rate by sex and subregion, 2013-2017

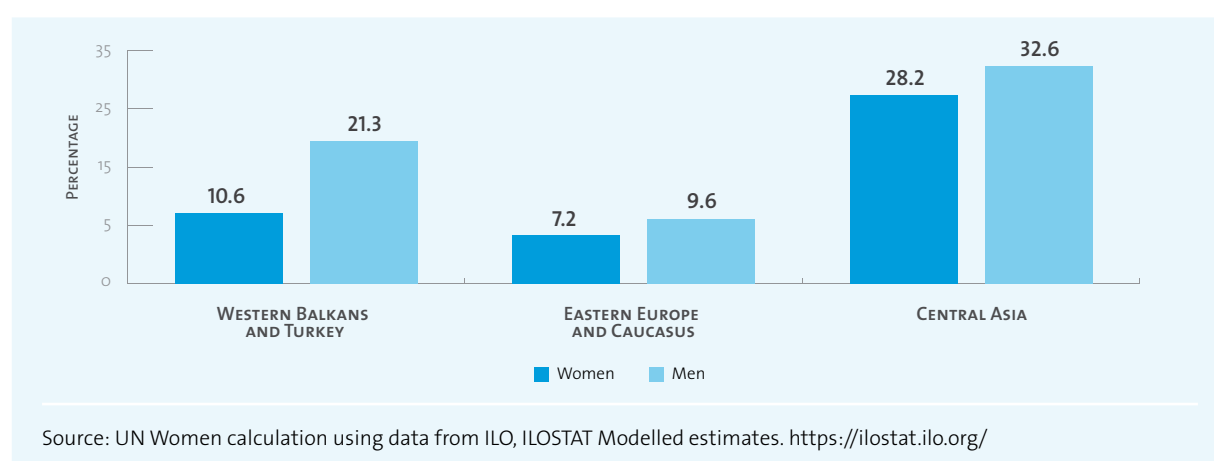


Self-employment, entrepreneurship and the ‘gig economy’

In Europe and Central Asia, men are more likely to be self-employed while women tend to work as employees. Self-employment is a broader category that includes own-account workers (which may be on a formal or informal basis), entrepreneurs and contributing workers in family enterprises (e.g. farms and small businesses). Note that rates of self-employment

are quite high for both men and women in Central Asia, and this may be an indication of the reliance on family farming or small and even home-based businesses. See Figure 11. Self-employment is also associated with less job security and fewer social protections, and it can, therefore, be considered vulnerable employment in some situations.

FIGURE 11
Proportion of female and male own-account workers, by subregion, 2019

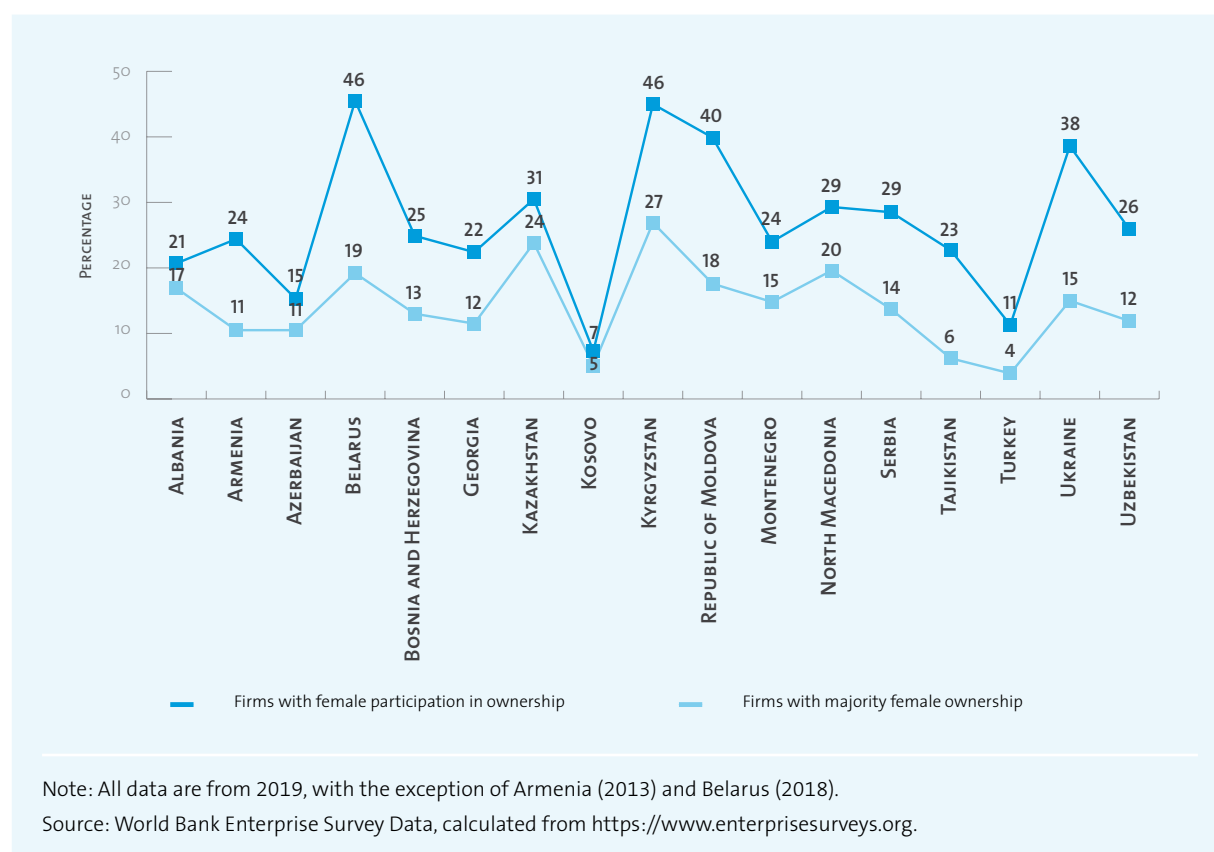


Many governments in the ECA region have adopted strategies and programmes to increase women's engagement in the private sector through support for women's small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). Nevertheless, women-owned enterprises remain the minority of private businesses. The World Bank estimates that for Europe and Central Asia as a whole, 32.4 per cent of firms have some female participation in ownership while only 14.6 per cent have majority female ownership.¹⁰⁶ Note that these figures

include several EU Member States and only firms classified as small (from 5–19 employees), medium (from 20–99 employees) or large (100 or more employees) were surveyed; so, micro-sized enterprises and individual entrepreneurs are excluded. In general, women are far less likely than men to be majority business-owners. No countries/territories in ECA have reached a level in which even half of firms have at least some female participation in ownership.

FIGURE 12

Women's engagement as owners of SMEs in the ECA region



National records on women entrepreneurs, as the registered owners of their businesses, indicate considerable variation but indicate that there may be lower engagement than that suggested by the World Bank figures (which cover any form of female participation in SME ownership). Table 2 summarizes information available from national sources to give an indication

of how the definitions of a 'woman's business' differ across the ECA region. Without a uniform methodology that would capture data about women engaged in businesses of all sizes, as the registered owner or manager, the picture of women's engagement in entrepreneurship is incomplete.

TABLE 2.

Comparison of national definitions and estimations of women's representation as individual entrepreneurs, business-owners or managers, for selected ECA countries/territory

Country/territory and definition	Women's engagement in business, as a percentage
Albania (active businesses)	25.4
Azerbaijan (private entrepreneurs)	21.5
Georgia (firms)	40
Kazakhstan (all registered SMEs)	43
Kosovo (owners of businesses)	13
North Macedonia (owners or managers of businesses)	19.4
Serbia (owners or managers of businesses)	38
Tajikistan (individual entrepreneurs, operating with a patent)	20.7
(entrepreneurs, operating with a certificate)	23.6
Uzbekistan (enterprise owners)	14.9

Note: The data presented in this table are not directly comparable as they are based on different methodologies and years.

Sources: Institute of Statistics of Albania. 2020. Women and Men in Albania. p. 125; State Statistical Committee of the Republic of Azerbaijan. 2019. Women and Men in Azerbaijan. p. 137; National Statistics Office of Georgia. 2019. Women and Men in Georgia. p. 62; Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan Statistics Committee. 2020. https://gender.stat.gov.kz/page/frontend/detail?id=108&slug=1-2018-3&cat_id=6&lang=en; Kosovo Agency of Statistics. 2018. Women and Men in Kosovo, 2016-2017. p. 6; Republic of North Macedonia State Statistical Office. 2019. Women and Men in North Macedonia. p. 67; Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. 2017. Women and Men in the Republic of Serbia. p. 198; Agency of Statistics under the President of the Republic of Tajikistan. N.D. "Time series of gender indicators to the Strategy of Enhancing the Role of Women in Tajikistan 2008-2018." <https://www.stat.tj/en/gender-database>; State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. N.D. "Share of women-owned firms." <https://gender.stat.uz/en/i-group-en/1337-share-of-women-owned-firms>.

Among the firms surveyed by the World Bank in Figure 12, above, almost all of those with majority female ownership are small firms. The exceptions are in Albania, Azerbaijan and Tajikistan, where they are medium-sized firms. In fact, women are more likely to operate very small businesses, at the micro or individual level, which have less potential for scale-up.¹⁰⁷ Women-owned businesses reflect the sectors where there is high female employment generally, such as personal and retail services, tourism, catering and handicrafts. Women also struggle to start-up or to expand business beyond the micro level due to persistent obstacles, such as limited access to capital, financial services and products, and time (due to the need to balance entrepreneurial activities with unpaid domestic work), markets and technologies, lack of specific skills (such as in marketing) and underdeveloped business networks.¹⁰⁸

SME development programmes, incentives, targets and investments to encourage women to enter the business sector appear to have had an impact on increasing the number of women-owned businesses. Yet such enterprise support often fails to take a transformative approach that removes gender-based barriers to entrepreneurship and that would open new and lucrative business opportunities for women. Quite often, women are inserted into or given additional attention within larger programmes. Some projects to encourage women's business ventures even replicate gender stereotypes by offering training in narrow and traditional sectors (such as handicrafts, baking, hair-dressing, etc.). As such, the "absence of a gendered approach to entrepreneurship programmes appears to have a limited impact in providing meaningful opportunities for women. This particularly holds true for women from vulnerable groups, including ethnic minorities and conflict-affected women."¹⁰⁹

Considerable attention has been devoted to the precarious position of gig workers during the coronavirus outbreak. Engagement in the gig economy (which refers to workers who are employed on a freelance basis, who have zero-hours contracts or who complete piece work or contracted work) is unstable work that offers limited benefits and can be demanding and taxing. There has not been an extensive analysis of the size or nature of the gig economies across the ECA region (Serbia and Ukraine are leaders in Eastern Europe in terms of gig work), nor of the gendered experiences of

gig workers. Estimations of the share of women and men engaged in the gig economy for several countries of Western Europe and North America, however, suggest that women have less engagement in gig work,

are less likely than men to work regularly in the gig economy, and that they earn less than men overall from gig work.¹¹⁰

Access to decent work

The concept of decent work refers to work that is of acceptable quality, involves opportunities for work that is freely chosen, productive and provides a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection.¹¹¹ Some of the forms of work discussed above might not be considered decent work, such as part-time or seasonal work and gig work. In the ECA region, a considerable portion of the population depends on informal employment, which itself covers a spectrum of working arrangements. Informal employment can be carried out in the formal sector or in the informal sector; it also includes underreporting of working hours or wages (note that the EU uses the

term ‘undeclared work’ to refer to informal working arrangements).

The ECA region is characterized by a high level of informal employment, a large share of which is in agriculture. Informal work is especially common in the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus, predominantly in rural areas. ILO household survey data suggest that more than 40 per cent of women and men are engaged in informal employment, but here, women are more dependent on agriculture (especially temporary seasonal work), while men find informal work in other sectors, such as construction. See Table 3.

TABLE 3.
Indicators for the size and composition of the informal economies of Central and Western Asia, 2016

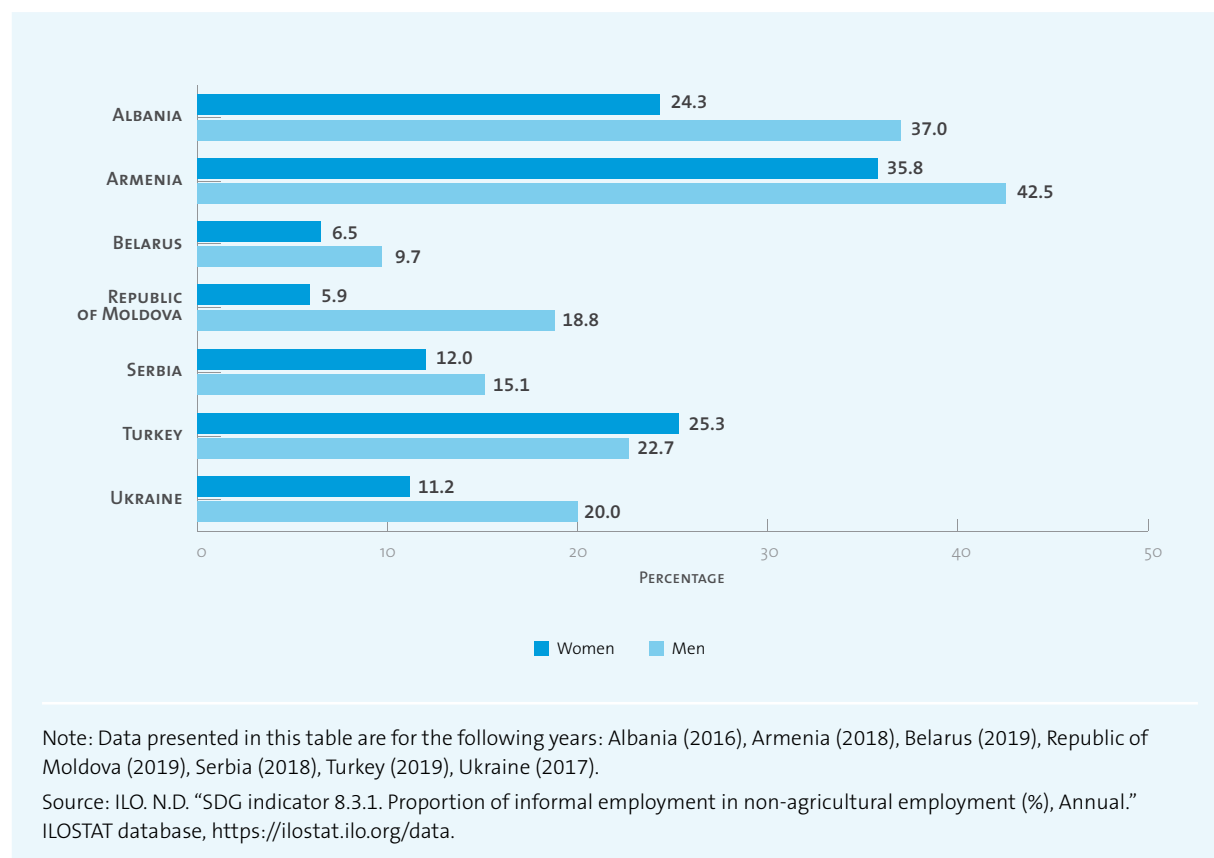
Central and Western Asia*	
Share of informal employment and its components in total employment (%)	43.4
in the informal sector	37.7
in the formal sector	3.8
in households	2.0
Share of non-agricultural informal employment and its components in non-agricultural employment (%)	31.2
in the informal sector	25.4
in the formal sector	3.9
in households	1.7
Share of informal employment in total employment by sex (%)	
Female (including agriculture)	47.3
Female (excluding agriculture)	30.1
Male (including agriculture)	41.1
Male (excluding agriculture)	31.7
By residence (%)	
Rural	73.9
Urban	40.2
*Note: The ILO grouping for Central and Western Asia includes the following countries: Armenia, Azerbaijan, Cyprus, Georgia, Israel, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.	
Source: ILO. 2018. Women and Men in the Informal Economy, A Statistical Picture. p. 40.	

Data for the region as a whole, for countries for which information is available, indicate that men are considerably more likely to undertake informal

employment than women, when agricultural work is excluded (although Turkey is an exception to this pattern). See Figure 13.

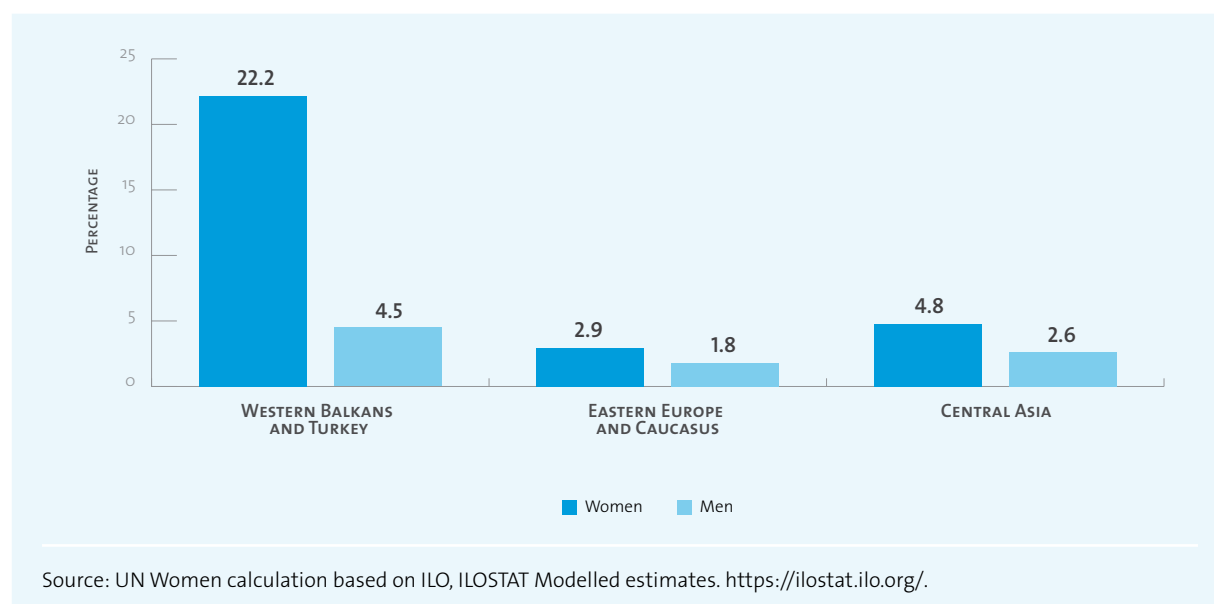
FIGURE 13

Share of informal employment in non-agricultural employment for selected ECA countries, by sex



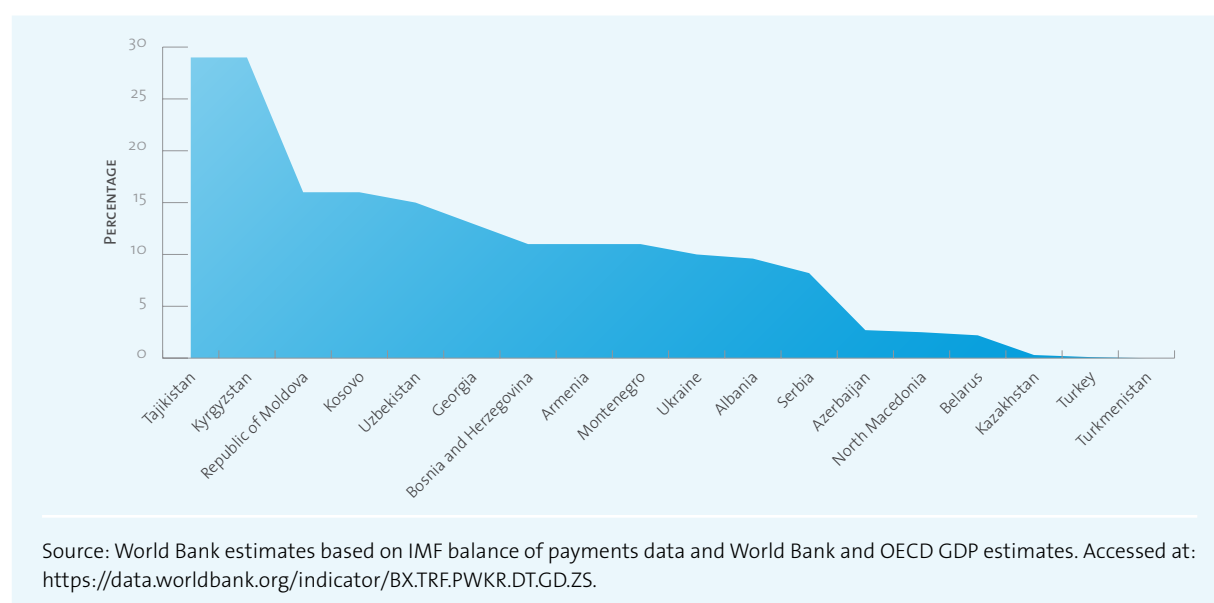
The fact that fewer women work in the informal sector contributes to their invisibility and vulnerability. Women informal workers tend to be domestic workers (e.g. house cleaners, nannies/babysitters and elder caregivers), home-based workers or contributing family members.¹¹² These categories of workers

typically do not have written contracts; the work they perform is not covered by labour laws or regulations; and they are often outside of the social safety net. Women's engagement as family workers is especially high in the Western Balkans and Turkey, at almost a quarter of all employed women.

FIGURE 14**Share of contributing family workers by sex and subregion, 2019**

A sizable share of the working population of the ECA region is engaged in labour migration, both internally and externally. Remittances are a vital lifeline for many households, but there is also very significant variation by country/territory and within subregions.

For instance, while personal remittances contribute to almost a third of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (28 per cent in each case), remittances account for less than one per cent of Kazakhstan's GDP. See Figure 15.

FIGURE 15**Personal remittances, received (% of GDP) for countries/territory of the ECA region, 2019**

Labour migration has distinct gender patterns. Historically, men have made up the larger proportion of labour migrants from the region, but patterns are changing. This is the case for Kyrgyzstan, where men account for 65 per cent of labour migrants, but the number of women migrating internally for work has been steadily increasing.¹¹³

Labour migration has its own challenges, in terms of whether migrants have opportunities for decent work,

the risks of exploitation and violence in unregulated work, the consequences of long-term absence from families, and whether migrants are able to acquire skills that could enable them to find work in their countries of origin. Patterns of male labour migration have also created the phenomenon of 'left behind' women – some of whom depend almost entirely on remittance income, while others are no longer supported by the migrating family member.

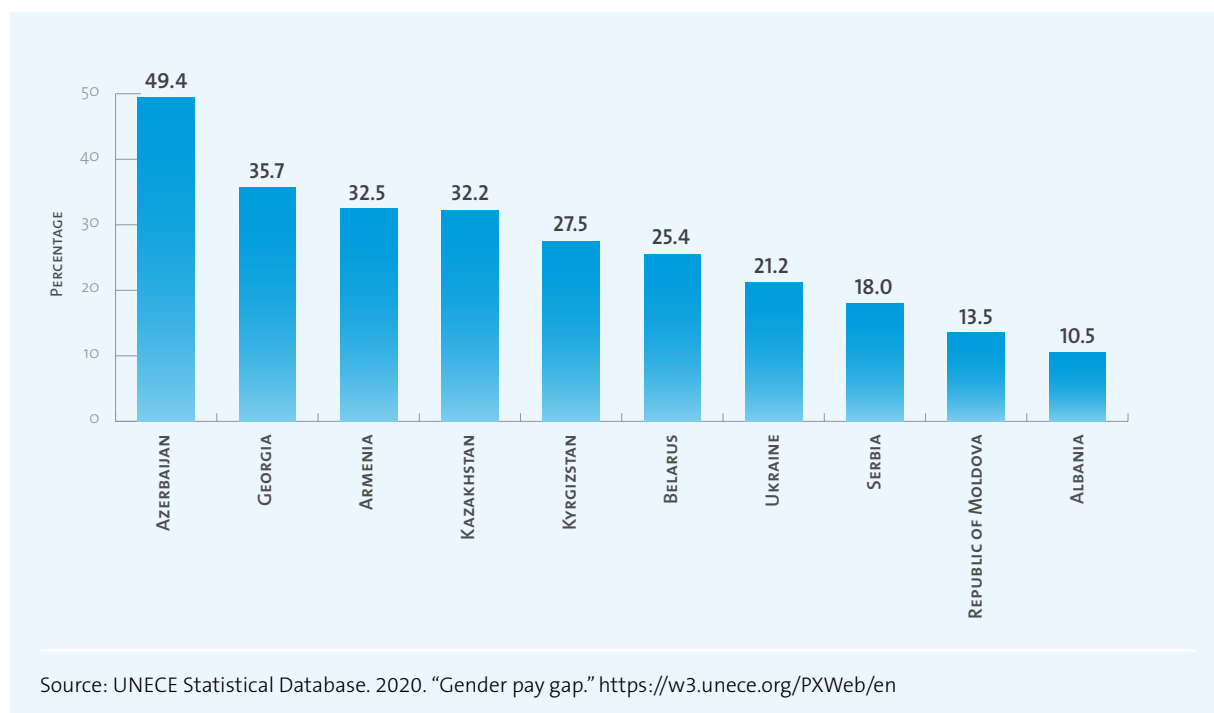
The gender wage gap

The segregation of the labour market, coupled with women's concentration in low-paying sectors and their predominance in unpaid and 'fragile' work, all contribute to women's lower economic status. This is evidenced in the considerable gender wage gap, and ultimate pension gap, that predates the pandemic and persists across the ECA region. According to the

Gender Development Index, the estimated gross national income per capita for women in the Europe and Central Asian region was just slightly more than half that of men in 2018.¹¹⁴ Figure 16 depicts the variation in the gender pay gap across the ECA region, in countries for which data are available.

FIGURE 16

Gender pay gap for selected countries of the ECA region, 2017 (as difference in average monthly earnings)



The gender wage gap is closely linked to gender roles, as seen in the fact that women's and men's salaries begin to diverge once women reach child-bearing years – a situation dubbed the 'motherhood penalty'. Women have little time to catch up in the

labour market before they are then impacted by the 'good daughter penalty' – when elderly parents or other family members require care that is mainly provided by daughters or daughters-in-law.¹¹⁵

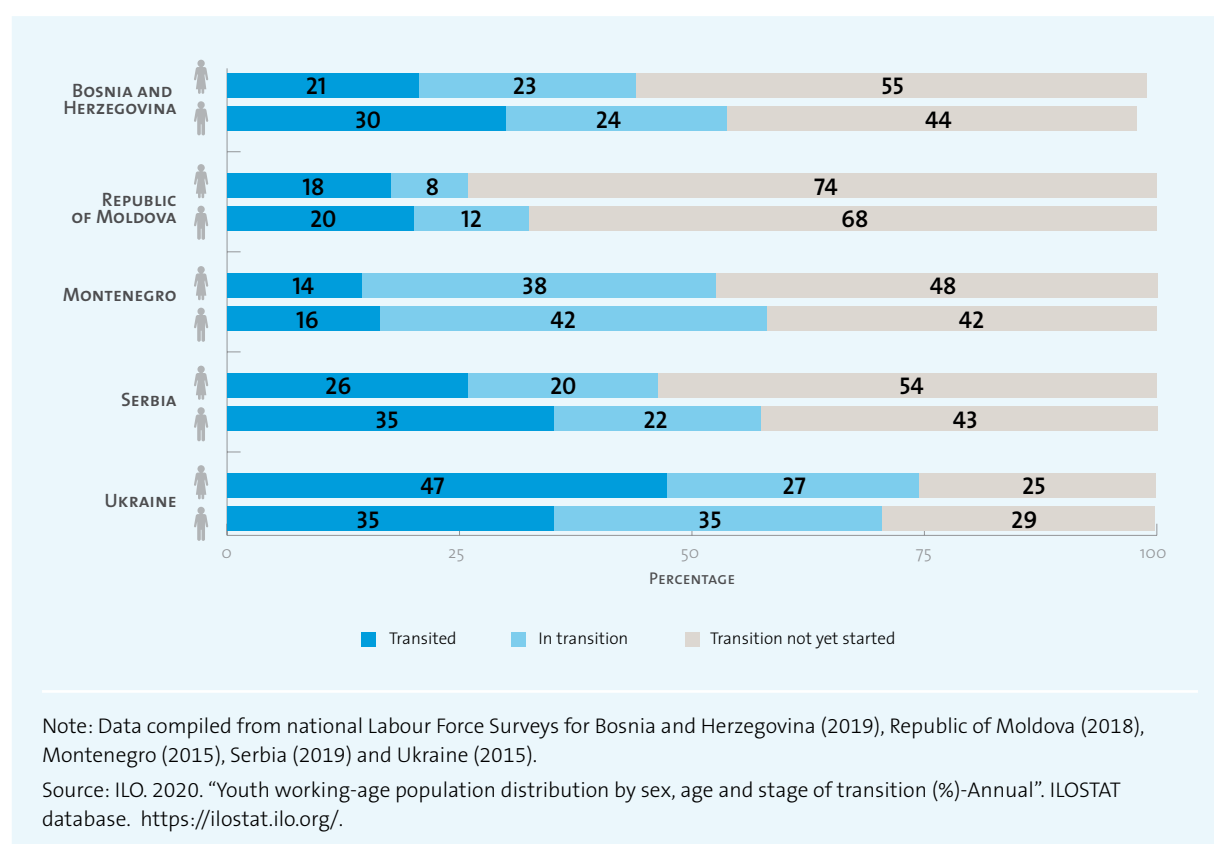
The transition from education to paid work

The time when young people leave school and enter adulthood is critical for girls because they face particular risks of joblessness and poor employment outcomes. Across the region, surveys indicate that young men are more likely than young women to have transitioned from education to their first stable job – a category of people who have a regular stable job, a satisfactory temporary job or satisfactory self-employment. Young men are also more likely to remain in transition – meaning that they might be

unemployed, employed without a contract, in unsatisfactory employment, or currently inactive, not in school, but have the intent to look for work. Young women are more likely than their male counterparts to be in the category of not having started to transition, either because they are still in education or are currently inactive, not in school or have no intention of looking for work. See Figure 17 and note that Ukraine is the exception to this general pattern.

FIGURE 17

Youth working-age population (aged 15–29), by sex and stage of transition for selected countries of the ECA region

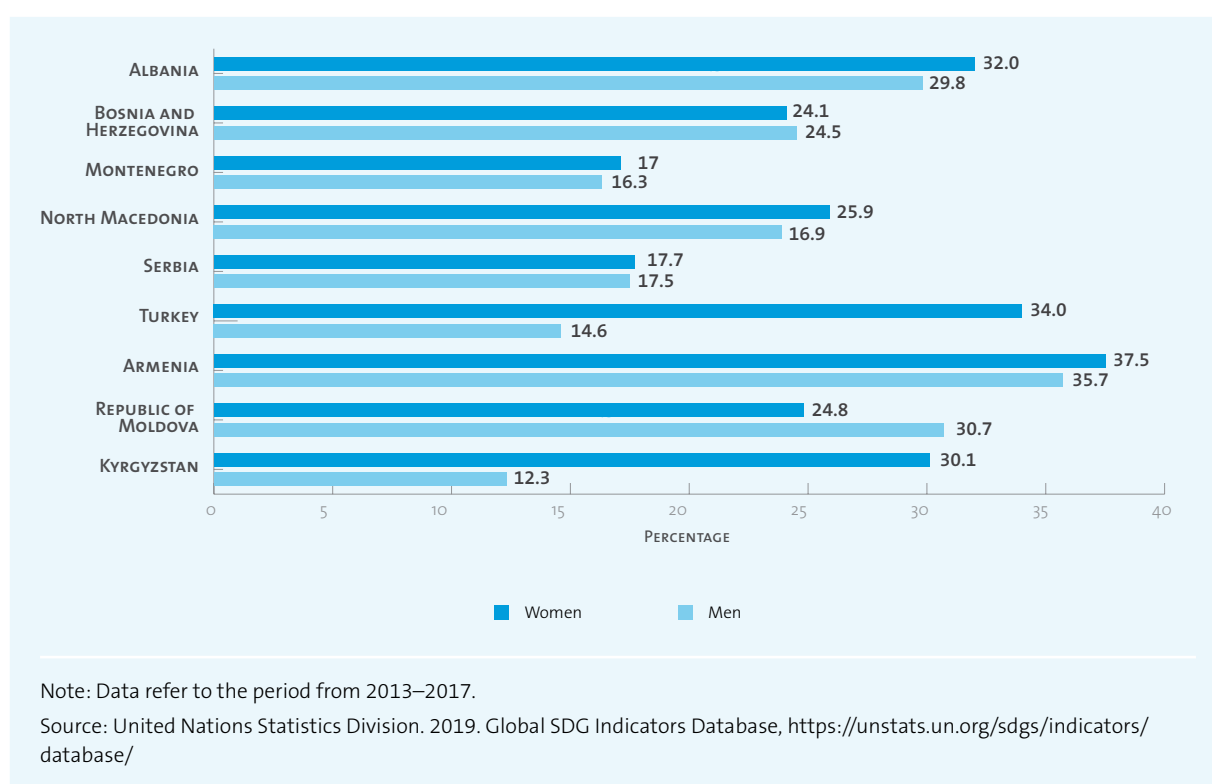


Interpreting data about youth transitions to employment is complicated because many factors influence the ability of young people to enter the labour market – such as the specific age, level of education, time since their first job and decisions to start a family. The ECA region, however, exhibits distinct gender patterns among young women who are not active in the labour market due to family reasons.

After completing compulsory education, girls and young women in the ECA region are more likely than boys and young men to be ‘not in education, employment or training’ (NEET). See Figure 18, depicting the prevalence of young people in NEET in countries for which data are available. With the notable exception of the Republic of Moldova, women tend to be in the NEET category more often than men.

FIGURE 18

Share of youth aged 15-24 who are not in employment or training for selected countries of the ECA region



Within particular subregions, the gender divide in the NEET population is especially high. This is the case in the Western Balkans and Turkey, where NEET status is linked to the fact that girls and young women are “more exposed to early school disengagement and inactivity,” especially around ages 15 to 19.¹¹⁶ In Central Asia, for instance, overall levels have changed little, but with more young women considered NEET, the gender gap has, in fact, widened. Within the NEET group, women tend to become inactive around age 25 to 29, and by far the most common reason for young women to become economically inactive is family/

household responsibilities and pregnancy. The former category hardly registers as a reason that young men are inactive. NEET status at a young age is particularly concerning because it can potentially impact girls’ lifetime abilities to find employment. If girls leave school and do not become economically active, “they are more likely to get stuck in economic inactivity than boys, who are more likely to enter the labour force.”¹¹⁷

The gender gap in NEET rates points to the influence of stereotypes and expectations that women prioritize family life over working and developing careers. Undoubtedly, a share of women chooses to remain

inactive out of a preference to devote time to their households and children. However, there is also a valid concern that young women move into inactivity due to family responsibilities and then become ‘trapped’ in this status, despite their desire to (re)enter the labour market at some point.

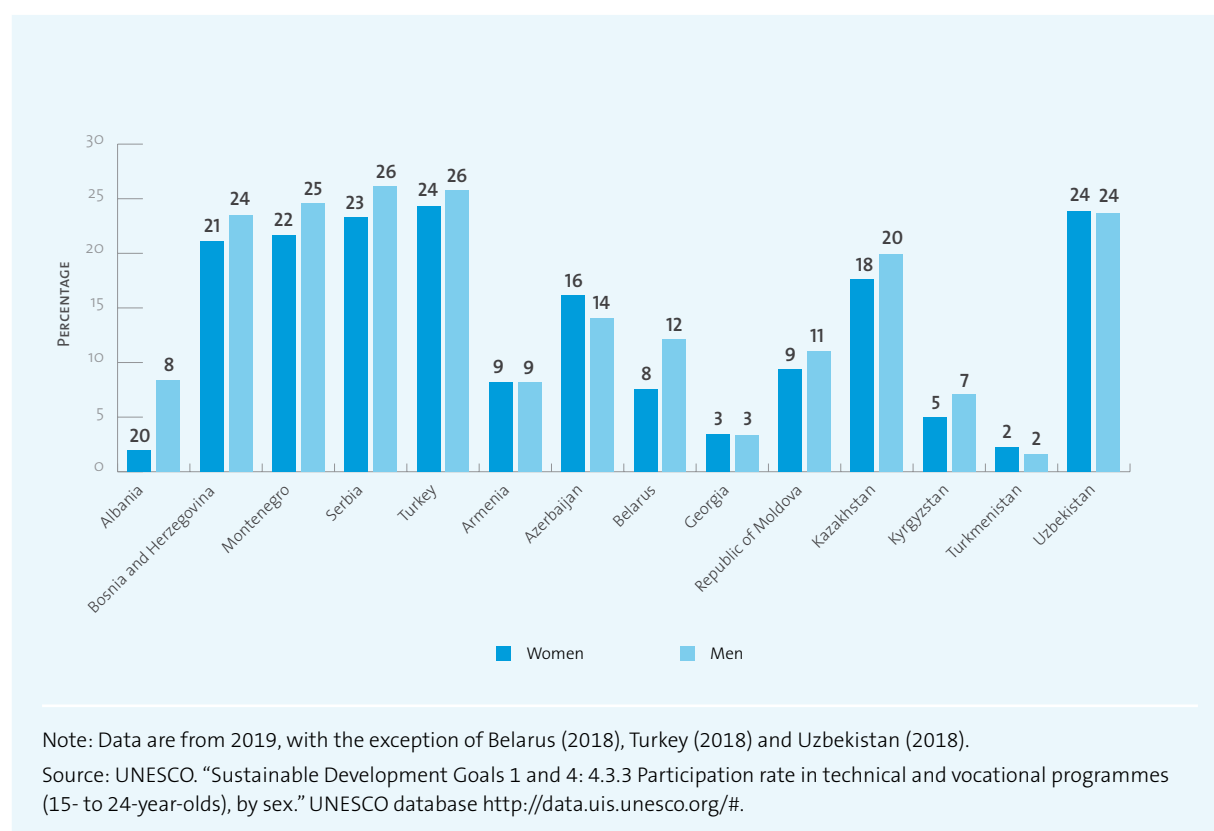
The educational pathways of young women and men also play a critical role in whether they will have decent employment opportunities in fields that match market demands. The 2030 Agenda emphasizes the need to ensure equal access not only to affordable and quality tertiary education but also, specifically, to technical and vocational education and training

(Target 4.3). TVET will become increasingly important for young people and adults in the post-COVID period as it is a means to increase the qualified workforce in developing sectors of the economy.

TVET enrolment remains low in the ECA region, but the tendency for young people to enter such institutions – either in place of secondary education or after completing secondary education – has been growing. Even within low overall enrolment in TVET, the participation of young men in vocational education is greater than that of young women in most countries of the ECA region for which data are available.

FIGURE 19

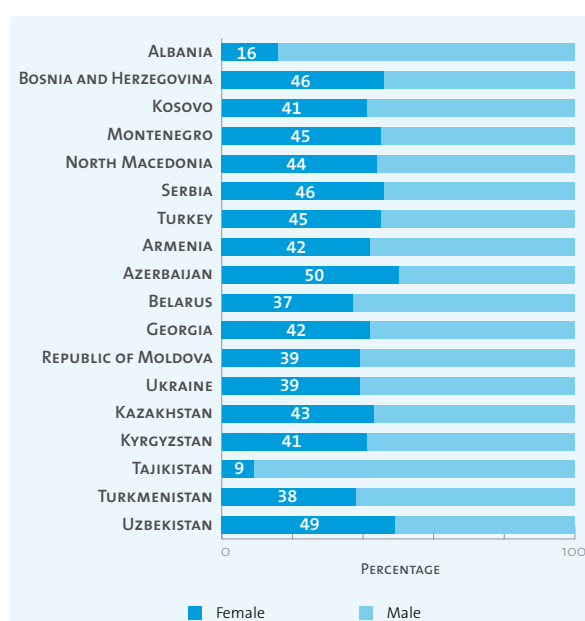
Participation rates of women and men (ages 15–24) in technical and vocational programmes for selected countries of the ECA region



When male and female enrolment in secondary vocational education is directly compared, boys/young men make up the majority (56 per cent) of all such students in Europe and Central Asia combined.¹¹⁸ Data for each country/territory indicate that there is very significant variation across the region. See Figure 20.

FIGURE 20

Proportion of female and male vocational pupils (secondary level) for countries/territories of the ECA region



Note: Data are from 2018, with the exception of Kazakhstan (2019), North Macedonia (2017), Tajikistan (2013), Turkey (2017), Turkmenistan (2014) and Uzbekistan (2017).

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, accessed from World Bank Open Data, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRL.VO.FE.ZS>; data for Kosovo from Kosovo Agency of Statistics. 2020. "Number of pupils in vocational schools and gymnasiums, 2015-2020." Ask database. https://askdata.rks-gov.net/PXWeb/pxweb/en/askdata/askdata__01%20Education__1%20Pupils%20in%20public%20education/edu09.px/?rxid=95b5a9f7-0931-4f3c-a132-15073e923257.

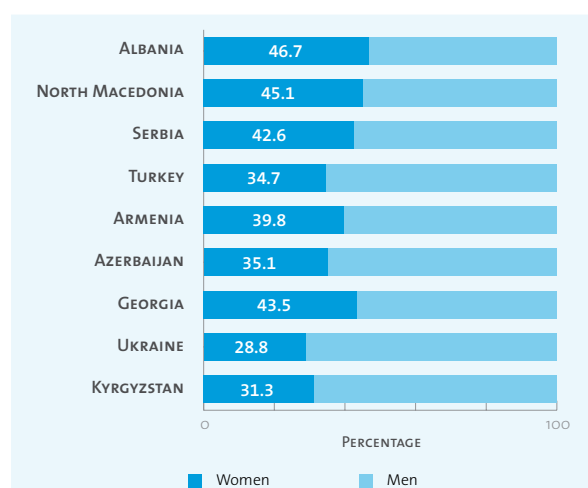
The lower engagement of girls and young women in TVET is part of a general tendency for women to be streamed towards non-technical subjects. TVET institutions tend to focus on trades that are not traditional

for women. Women are also underrepresented among teaching staff, meaning there are few female role models in TVET.

Patterns of gender segregation in occupations, discussed above, have their origins in the fact that girls and women are streamed towards educational specializations in the humanities, social sciences and communications, rather than in STEM subjects. In South-Eastern Europe,¹¹⁹ girls outperform boys, or perform at similar levels, on assessments of skills in science and math—based on scores for the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is administered at age 15.¹²⁰ Yet in 2019 in the Western Balkans and Turkey, only 24 per cent of young women entered STEM fields in tertiary education.¹²¹ Women make up a minority of STEM graduates across the region. See Figure 21. Women who do complete post-secondary education in STEM subjects tend to focus on natural sciences, mathematics and statistics, while information and communications technology (ICT), engineering, manufacturing and construction continue to be male-dominated.

FIGURE 21

Proportion of female and male graduates from STEM programmes in tertiary education, for selected countries of the ECA region, 2016–2018



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2018, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/#>.

Even within TVET, women are concentrated in a narrower scope of traditionally ‘female fields’. For instance, in both Armenia and Serbia, among students of vocational education (preliminary vocational education in the former and secondary vocational schools in the latter), girls/women predominate in a few fields, namely: personal services, textile work, food production and health and social work. In contrast, boys/men study a more diverse range of subjects, namely: construction, transport, machine-building, woodworking, electrical engineering, mechanical engineering and computer engineering.¹²² The skills acquired by men not only lend themselves to more diverse trades but are also generally associated with higher-wage jobs.

The gender stereotypes that “perpetuate horizontal segregation in both education and employment in STEM fields” stand in the way of women’s and girls’ participation in STEM education and this, in turn, limits their abilities to “engage in and benefit from the growing demand for employment with a high technological component.”¹²³ Women’s limited participation in STEM has been highlighted as a particular barrier

to their full participation in such fields as environmental protection, climate change and disaster-risk management.¹²⁴

Because young people who complete vocational training have higher rates of transition to employment than those who complete upper-secondary general programmes,¹²⁵ it would make sense to continue to improve the quality of TVET. It is important to encourage young people to pursue vocational education and, especially, to open more opportunities for young women to gain technical skills that will assist them to transition into work. Another specific characteristic that sets the Eastern European subregion apart for other regions is the similar employment rates of STEM educated women and men.¹²⁶ **Thus, women who complete their education in STEM fields encounter fewer barriers to careers in STEM than their contemporaries in other parts of the world. This finding points to the potential returns that will result from direct investments into increasing girls’ and women’s access to STEM education.**

Implications of COVID-19: What is the future for women and work?

Assessing the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on employment, such as whether part-time workers were able to retain their jobs in light of reduced working hours, is difficult at the present time. Additionally, patterns of reduced economic activity (such as loss of working hours) are not necessarily an indicator of permanent unemployment. Many workers who were unable to work during the health crisis have not lost their jobs, especially in countries/territories that implemented furlough and other job-retention schemes, or in cases where employers kept on workers. Still, “many workers will face a loss of income and deeper poverty even if partial substitute activities can be found during the lockdown.”¹²⁷ Initial

evidence from around the world suggests that women are disproportionately experiencing the economic implications of COVID-19.

Changing patterns of work

Due to pre-existing occupational segregation, the COVID-19 pandemic has had different consequences for the working arrangements of women and men after emergency measures and restrictions were put in place. Fields that saw considerable disruptions during the COVID-19 pandemic are some of those in which gendered patterns have long been apparent.

Women on the frontlines of health-care work

One of the clearest examples of how working women have been impacted is the significant role they have played as front-line workers in health-related facilities, such as hospitals, clinics and care homes. According to WHO estimates for Europe, 53 per cent of physicians and 84 per cent of nurses are women. The health-care field is even more ‘feminized’ in the ECA region. For instance, in Ukraine, women represent 83 per cent of workers in the health care and social welfare sectors combined and 83 per cent of direct employees in health care; in North Macedonia, women comprise 77 per cent of health and social work employees.

Before the current crisis, health-care work was associated with lower salaries; but now, women working in the health-care field also face the risk of exposure to the coronavirus. This has been compounded by the fact that border closures and transport restrictions have affected supply chains and procurement of personal protective equipment, and workers potentially face job loss if they fall ill and are unable to work. Around the world, women in health care have reported working long hours during the pandemic, resulting in stress and burnout. The long-term impacts on the profession are yet to be seen.

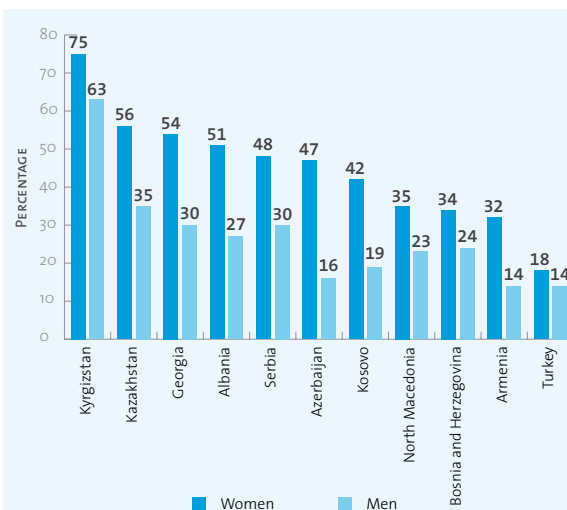
Moreover, several countries of the ECA region had already been experiencing the problem of a ‘brain drain’ of medical and health personnel to other countries, due to poor working conditions prior to the COVID-19 outbreak. If the pandemic continues to put pressure on women filling the majority of health-related jobs, the sector may experience an even greater loss of key workers.

Both women and men occupy essential jobs that were not suspended during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as in retail (food shops, pharmacies), food production, transportation, law enforcement, energy and water supply, communications and public administration. On the other hand, women are more likely to be in work that can be done remotely (such as jobs in education and the financial sector) while men predominate in work that can neither be done at home or in compliance with social distancing rules and hygiene practices, such as construction and manufacturing.

Considerably more women than men were working from home in the ECA region in April–May 2020. Among survey respondents, 44 per cent of women versus only 28 per cent of men reported that they had been able to switch to working from home. The majority of men (66 per cent), in fact, continued to work outside the home, compared to less than half of women.¹²⁸ See Figure 22, for data by country/territory that participated in a rapid gender assessment. As a point of comparison, surveys conducted in 27 EU countries in April 2020 revealed that 38.9 per cent of women and 34.8 per cent of men had started working from home as a result of COVID-19.¹²⁹

FIGURE 22

Proportion of employed respondents who switched to working from home during COVID-19, by sex and country/territory



Source: UN Women. 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's and Men's Lives and Livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary Results from a Rapid Gender Assessment. April–June.

The fact that just under half of employed women were accommodated to work remotely suggests that there is potential for flexible working arrangements that can benefit women in the post-COVID period, especially those with children or other care responsibilities, allowing more women to return to or to stay in work. It should be remembered, however, that flexible working-from-home schemes came at a time of widespread closures of childcare centres and schools, with most men continuing to work outside the home. This meant that a large percentage of women were working while juggling childcare and home-schooling, essentially adding a 'second shift' and prolonging their working hours. In the future, flexible working schemes must be implemented alongside investments in early childhood care and education in order to enable women to be fully productive.

The fact that two-thirds of surveyed men continued to work outside the home during the peak of the pandemic bodes less well for the possibility that men will also be able to take advantage of flexible work schemes. It may decrease the likelihood that men will be able to take on a greater share of domestic work and childcare, if their employment does not permit it. There is a risk that these patterns will become further entrenched during the recovery period, unless efforts are made to counteract the burdens on women's time. The impact of these arrangements on women's time and productivity are discussed later in this report.

Loss of employment and loss of income

Several trends concerning employment were observed in the ECA region during the pandemic. On the whole, more men reported that they had become unemployed in April–May 2020 compared to women, with the exception of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Turkey and Kazakhstan, in which higher numbers of women reported job losses.¹³⁰ In addition to those who lost jobs, a considerably high proportion of women and men were forced to take unpaid leave during the pandemic. Almost 10 per cent of women across the region took unpaid leave; and women outnumbered men in those taking unpaid leave in Azerbaijan and Georgia, while the reverse was true for Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Turkey.¹³¹ During

the outbreak, women were more likely than men to have experienced a reduction in paid working hours in half of the ECA countries/territories surveyed. In Azerbaijan and Kosovo, for instance, 49 and 69 per cent of women, respectively, experienced a decrease in paid work, even while retaining employment.¹³²

Self-employed men and women experienced greater job loss and reductions in working hours than those in other forms of employment. While they may represent a minority of those in self-employment, women were more severely impacted by job losses than men. A quarter of all self-employed women reported they had lost their jobs, compared to 21 per cent of self-employed men. This is a reflection of the fact that self-employed men more often experienced reductions in working hours, but not complete job loss (53 per cent of men reported reductions in working hours, in contrast with 49 per cent of women).¹³³ Loss of productivity was particularly high for self-employed women, who reported reduced working hours in the following countries/territories: Kazakhstan (81 per cent), Azerbaijan (80 per cent), Turkey (82 per cent), Kosovo (78 per cent) and Kyrgyzstan (77 per cent).¹³⁴ There were also clear correlations between the number of employed women (not necessarily self-employed) in some of these same countries/territories who also reported high levels of income loss due to decreased earnings. This occurred in parallel with significant increases in the time that they spent on unpaid domestic work.

Because employed women were already working fewer hours on average than employed men, they have less job security overall and they are especially vulnerable to job losses as a result of COVID-19. There is a particular concern that "women's lesser status in the labour market leaves them more exposed and easier to lay off"¹³⁵ as the risk of economic recession builds. As the prospects for growth in employment appear to be limited, women who were already facing higher rates of unemployment before the pandemic may be doubly impacted. It is also worth noting that during previous crises, sectoral segregation of the labour market "shielded women from the worst of the employment impacts," yet the specifics of the current health crisis are putting women at higher risk.¹³⁶ For

example, young women between the ages of 18–34 most often reported reductions in paid work in rapid gender assessments.¹³⁷ This is a reflection of the fact that sectors that employ large numbers of women were drastically curtailed during periods of lockdown (the service sector, for example).

In the short-term of the COVID-19 recovery period, some sectors of the economy will be much slower to recover – specifically the very sectors that employ large numbers of women (tourism, hospitality, food and beverage services, leisure and retail services, real estate, personal services, the garment industry, textile manufacturing, etc.). In both Eastern and Southern Europe, around 40 per cent of all working women are employed in sectors considered at the highest risk of income and job losses.¹³⁸ In contrast, there are examples of male-dominated sectors, such as construction, being among the first to reopen as restrictions have been lifted, or for these industries to receive State support in efforts to spur job creation.

While the pandemic has posed risks to employment overall, given their historically better position in the labour markets of the ECA region, men are also better placed to benefit from economic recovery schemes. Conversely, working women are at a greater risk of being pushed towards economic insecurity. According to the ILO: “Women are typically the first to be laid-off and the last to return to employment, as the barriers to entering the labour market exacerbate – in particular, lack of care services – and they are relegated when new opportunities for employment arise.”¹³⁹

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought about significant shifts in how employers approach the provision of goods and services, and in the long-term there is a risk that women will struggle to find their place in the job markets of the future, especially those women who have been out of paid work while raising children or caring for other family members.

Economic insecurity

Representatives of gender equality mechanisms in the ECA region drew particular attention to the fact that **women entrepreneurs have been put in a very precarious position during the COVID-19 health crisis.** The

vulnerability of women business-owners stems from the fact that they faced many pre-existing obstacles to opening, operating and building their businesses that have been significantly magnified during the outbreak.¹⁴⁰ Furthermore, women entrepreneurs are concentrated in particular sectors that are among those that have been hardest-hit by forced closures and reduced economic activity during the pandemic. For instance, in Armenia, a socioeconomic impact assessment revealed that almost half of all registered SMEs operated in sectors that were severely impacted by the pandemic.¹⁴¹ Among these, women business-owners reported the greatest negative impacts, due to the fact that the majority operate in hospitality, beauty and well-being services and are micro in scale, with low annual turnover. Furthermore, social enterprises run by CSOs that support home-based non-registered businesses for vulnerable groups of women (e.g. single parents, women with disabilities, women subjected to domestic violence, etc.) were especially hard hit. Such businesses, particularly those that are micro or unregistered, may well fall outside the scope of post-COVID government support and relief schemes.

Targeted support for women entrepreneurs that addresses gender-based barriers, both for start-ups and for established businesses, was much needed in the region prior to the pandemic. At present, the impacts of the pandemic are very severe for all small business-owners and own-account workers. Workplace closures have already put them at risk of insolvency, and “once containment measures are lifted, surviving enterprises and own-account workers will continue to face challenges given that recovery is expected to be uncertain and slow.”¹⁴² Women’s businesses are in an even more precarious position, given that they are more likely to have lost incomes already. Due to their small size, turnover and profits, concentration in sectors that appear to be slow to recover, and women’s limited access to key financial, material, relational and time resources, women’s enterprises will struggle to make the adjustments needed to restart after quarantine periods. Women-owned businesses are far less likely to be able to weather economic shocks than those owned and operated by men.

The domino effect for women's employment is also considerable, as practice has shown that women-owned enterprises tend to create more jobs for women. Thus, there is an ever greater need to invest in developing women's entrepreneurship through initiatives that both support women and remove critical barriers to their success.

During the pandemic, gig workers have been severely impacted by job loss and reductions in working hours, due to decreased demand, or have had to make the difficult decision to continue to work while potentially putting their health and safety at risk. This situation would apply, for example, to taxi drivers, delivery persons and domestic workers, whose services were needed during lockdown periods and could not be performed while social distancing. A global survey of gig workers found that almost 70 per cent reported having no income during the pandemic, and support from employers and governments has been scarce.¹⁴³ In theory, the gig economy has the potential to offer flexible work to women and men alike, and especially for young people. However, without legal regulation, people who have lost work and turn to the gig economy in the post-COVID period will be especially vulnerable without the protection of unemployment benefits, health insurance, sick leave, pension payments or maternity/paternity leave.

Work suspension, combined with widespread closures of international borders, have had severe consequences for labour migrants. Large numbers of migrants have lost their jobs and have been unable to return to their home countries. For instance, an estimated 40 per cent of migrants to Russia (predominantly men from Central Asia) have lost work.¹⁴⁴ Female migrants from Central Asia, especially those with children, have faced hardship when stranded in destination and transit countries without work, and are also at risk of food insecurity and exposure to the coronavirus in unsafe living conditions.¹⁴⁵ Approximately 45,000 Moldovan women migrants were previously working in the domestic care sector in Italy, often living with host families. During the pandemic, many such migrants simultaneously lost work, accommodation and the right to remain in the host country (when visa-free time limits expired).¹⁴⁶ The work performed by labour migrants is very often

low-paid and informal, thus it does not offer social protections such as unemployment benefits. When borders reopened, the result was a large number of migrants returning home, without employment and in conditions making it difficult to find work. There is incomplete information about countries that have addressed job creation for returning migrants in the ECA region. However, the Government of Uzbekistan's programme to create jobs for more than 500,000 labour migrants that have been unable to travel to destination countries where they would normally find employment appears to be oriented towards male workers in as much as the programme predominantly provides jobs in construction.¹⁴⁷

Loss of remittance income has had a particular impact on women who rely on migrating family members. More than half of women respondents to a rapid gender assessment (who mentioned remittances as one of their income sources in Albania, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Turkey) reported that their remittances had decreased in April-May 2020.¹⁴⁸ The gender gap was particularly wide in Kyrgyzstan, where almost twice as many women as men stated that they mainly lost income from lack of remittances (22 per cent of women, compared to 13 per cent of men).¹⁴⁹ The loss of a primary source of household income, combined with travel restrictions and growing unemployment, suggests that many households, especially those headed by women, could be pushed into poverty.

The ILO has estimated that, globally, the gender gap in the proportion of informal workers in sectors that have been hard hit during the COVID-19 pandemic is large: 42 per cent of women were working informally in these sectors when the outbreak began, in contrast to 32 per cent of men.¹⁵⁰ In Europe and Central Asia, 45 per cent of domestic workers are considered at risk of losing jobs or work during the pandemic.¹⁵¹ Moreover, women working in causal and informal employment arrangements – who were already in vulnerable positions in terms of their lack of coverage by employment-based social protection in non-emergency conditions – may have been overlooked by government measures that aim to preserve jobs or provide employees who cannot work with wage subsidies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One dire consequence of the pandemic is a high likelihood that living standards will decline, especially for vulnerable households. A UN Women-led rapid gender assessment found that more women than men anticipated having difficulties paying their rent and utilities as a result of emergency measures taken to address COVID-19.¹⁵² Women living with children expressed significantly greater concern for meeting basic needs than those without. Civil society organizations have raised the related issue of food insecurity within vulnerable households during the lockdown period. Food insecurity can result from disruptions to agricultural supply chains and food production, but it is also an indication of lost income and purchasing power. Given long-standing gender wage gaps in each country/territory of the ECA region, women have become especially vulnerable to falling into income poverty or being pushed into deeper insecurity. The risks are especially great for certain groups, such as female-headed households with children or family members with disabilities, older women or women in households that are dependent on remittance income.

Prospects for youth employment in new job markets

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the TVET systems of the ECA region were facing the acute need to upgrade curricula and methodologies in order to provide both marketable and foundational skills to young people. With lockdown measures in place, some countries have been better positioned to offer continuity in TVET. These include: Azerbaijan, which had invested in upgrading its digital teaching infrastructure in 2018; Kazakhstan, which was conducting a mapping of the capacity for distance learning in TVET institutions in each region; and Kyrgyzstan, where already

established competency centres had developed distance learning materials for vocational schools.¹⁵³ In other countries, such as Albania and Ukraine, practical and work-based training was suspended due to the coronavirus, and insufficient video tutorial and online resources, poor Internet access and a lack of teacher training have meant that the continuity of training has been declining. In these situations, the ability of disadvantaged students to access vocational training has been compromised, and there is a risk that dropout rates will increase with a “knock-on effect of increasing economically harmful skills shortages.”¹⁵⁴

The long-term and gendered impacts of the coronavirus pandemic on disruptions to technical skills training are not yet clear. However, the fact that young women were already underrepresented among vocational students in many countries, and that they tend to concentrate in a more limited number of academic subjects that do not correlate with high-growth sectors, is a cause for concern. Even at this point, it can be surmised that each country/territory will face challenges to ensuring that young people have continued access to training and education that will provide them with the skills needed in the changing labour market. But they must also work in parallel to improve gender parity in TVET in order to maximize opportunities for women.

Amid a global pandemic that saw the expansion of remote work and virtual business platforms, the importance of digital economies has become increasingly apparent. The requirements for a workforce with STEM skills will only expand. It is critical that barriers to women entering STEM fields of study and employment in ‘non-traditional’ jobs be broken down, by changing mindsets, improving teacher training and providing girls with internships, role models and mentors.

Conclusions and priority actions

The coronavirus has had severe consequences for the economies of every country/territory of the ECA region. While men and women have experienced job losses, reduced working hours and loss of income as a direct result of measures taken to contain COVID-19, because men previously occupied more stable and lucrative positions in the labour market, they are likely to be more resilient. Past crises have demonstrated that women are disproportionately impacted by economic downturns, whether as employees or business-owners. A specific feature of the coronavirus pandemic has been its impact on 'non-essential' sectors (such as hospitality, tourism and personal services), which employ large numbers of women, and especially young women. The factors that underpinned women's lack of economic empowerment before the pandemic must be addressed if women are to fully contribute to the economies of their countries.

The COVID-19 pandemic has also demonstrated the vulnerability of unskilled workers when the economy is faltering. Because many sectors will struggle to recover, and high numbers of young people have already lost work, it will be vital to ensure, first, that the mismatch between education and training and the demands of the labour market is corrected. Second, it will be essential to ensure that women and girls have equal access to high-quality and vocation-oriented educational opportunities, especially in STEM subjects. No State will be able to recover from the coronavirus outbreak without a highly skilled workforce, nor can any country/territory afford to exclude women from fully participating in the economy.

PRIORITY ACTIONS SHOULD THUS SEEK TO:

- ▶ Increase support for women who have been out of work due to care responsibilities, so they can return to the job market through, for example, (re)training in occupations and sectors that will be in demand, post-COVID.
- ▶ Use active labour market measures, such as working with employers to adopt policies on work-life balance, on flexible working schedules (such as telework), and for the provision of childcare, in order to adapt to the post-COVID reality. Labour law and

policy should also institutionalize working arrangements that came about during the pandemic that can benefit women to enter or return to the labour market in the future.

- ▶ Include dedicated programmes to support women's entrepreneurship within recovery plans. Such programmes should be gender-sensitive and address unresolved barriers to women's engagement in business as well as newly emerging challenges that have disproportionately impacted women business-owners. Priority areas should include increasing access to markets and capital and tackling discriminatory gender stereotypes.
- ▶ Within recovery planning, improve social safety nets for women and men who work in the informal sector and the gig economy. Measures could include the provision of a universal basic income to people deemed at-risk, as well as the formalization of undeclared work and informal activities.
- ▶ Prioritize the reintegration of labour migrants in ways that are gender-sensitive – such as providing wage subsidies, and in the long-term, ensuring access to education/training and work opportunities.
- ▶ Ensure the protection of households that depend on remittances from falling into poverty through training, income-generation and employment schemes, especially initiatives that target women in order to increase their potential to (re)enter the labour market.
- ▶ Increase support for young women in the NEET category. Existing barriers that prevent girls and young women from entering TVET and STEM should be identified and addressed in post-COVID recovery planning. Specific activities could involve: educational institutions, including in TVET (e.g. to develop scholarships, introduce gender-sensitive materials and methodologies); employers (e.g. to create internships, mentoring, job placements, grants for women to pursue STEM studies and enter STEM jobs); as well as on confronting stereotypes and changing gendered expectations for girls and women.



PRIORITY 4:

ADDRESSING UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK

PRE-EXISTING GENDER GAPS AND CHALLENGES:

- ▶ Women in the ECA region spend on average 2.5 times more time on unpaid household and care work than men. Women's unpaid domestic duties are rarely recognized as 'work' even though they contribute significantly to national GDP.
- ▶ The lack of accessible or affordable early childhood education and care in the region is a significant factor limiting women's opportunities to return to work, or enter the workforce, after having children. Increasing public investment in early childhood education and care can have a multiplier effect in allowing more women to enter the workforce and creating job opportunities for women.
- ▶ Arrangements for paid paternity leave are underdeveloped in the ECA region, resulting in very low uptake by fathers.

OBSERVATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

- ▶ The COVID-19 outbreak, and imposition of emergency measures (social distancing, working from home, and the closure of childcare centres and schools) increased the burden of unpaid domestic work, childcare and home-schooling dramatically, with the greater share of the burden falling on women.
- ▶ During the pandemic, the critical role played by the social safety net in enabling women to participate in the labour market became apparent.
- ▶ The increased care burden on women, combined with loss of work observed during the pandemic, creates a high risk of women dropping out of the workforce and undoing progress that has been made towards gender equality.
- ▶ Men have also increased the time they spend on domestic work and childcare as a result of COVID-related restrictions. It is still unclear whether these positive trends will continue in the post-COVID period, and therefore the opportunity should be used to strengthen change in gender norms through policy.

The time that women devote to unpaid work is one of the most significant and pervasive impediments to their engagement in the labour market. Unpaid care and domestic work also leave them with little time for running a business as well as other pursuits, such as education or entering politics.

The ILO describes unpaid work as “work that is undertaken to maintain the wellbeing of household members, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children, or elderly and sick family members. Much unpaid work is unrecognized, both statistically and

economically.”¹⁵⁵ Unpaid work also includes contributory family work (such as in a family business or farm), as well as producing goods for household consumption (e.g. food from kitchen gardens, firewood/fuel, water) and volunteer activities.¹⁵⁶ Women's responsibility for unpaid work explains their overrepresentation in insecure and lower-paid employment and their reliance on public services such as nurseries and schools.

Time spent on unpaid work

Before COVID-19, gender disparities in unpaid domestic and care work were significant in the ECA region. Women were spending on average 2.5 times more time on unpaid household work than men.¹⁵⁷ The largest gender gaps were seen in countries with stricter adherence to traditional gender norms, but the same patterns can also be observed in countries that “express strong and progressive attitudes towards gender equality.”¹⁵⁸

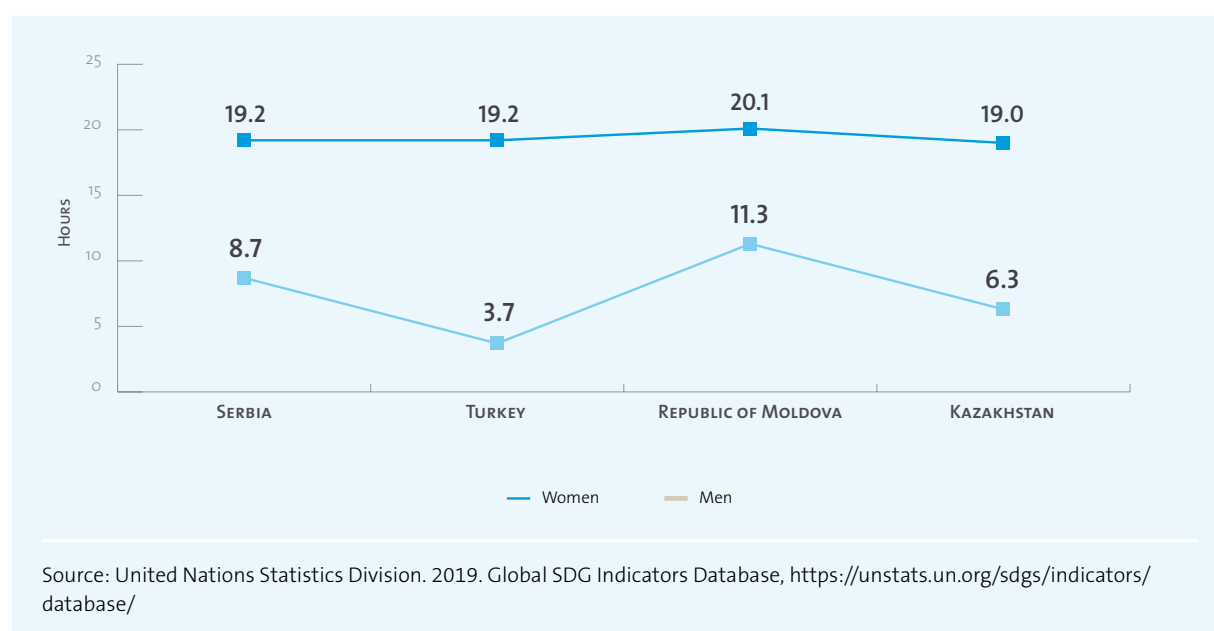
Women’s unpaid reproductive labour is not without costs. In fact, women’s unpaid work “subsidizes the cost of care that sustains families, supports economies and often fills in for the lack of social services.”¹⁵⁹ Yet, at the same time, such activities are rarely recognized as ‘work’; rather, they are often characterized as

‘natural’ duties of women, even though unpaid care and domestic work contribute the equivalent of 10 to 39 per cent of the GDP globally and “can contribute more to the economy than the manufacturing, commerce or transportation sectors.”¹⁶⁰

Time-use studies are essential for identifying where the burden of unpaid work falls, but such studies have not been widely conducted in the ECA region. A review of several countries, however, indicates stark gender disparities in time devoted to unpaid work. Figure 23 illustrates the time women spend on unpaid work, and it gives a sense of the fact that women have fewer hours per week that they can devote to paid work, in contrast to the time men have.

FIGURE 23

Proportion of average time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex and in hours per week, for selected countries of the ECA region (2011–2018)



The distribution of unpaid work also depends on family composition. Single-mother families “face particular deficits both in terms of time and money, and a higher risk of poverty compared to two-parent

families.”¹⁶¹ In multigenerational families, which are more common in Central Asia than other subregions, much of the domestic and care activities fall on the young women in the household.

Availability of early childhood education and care

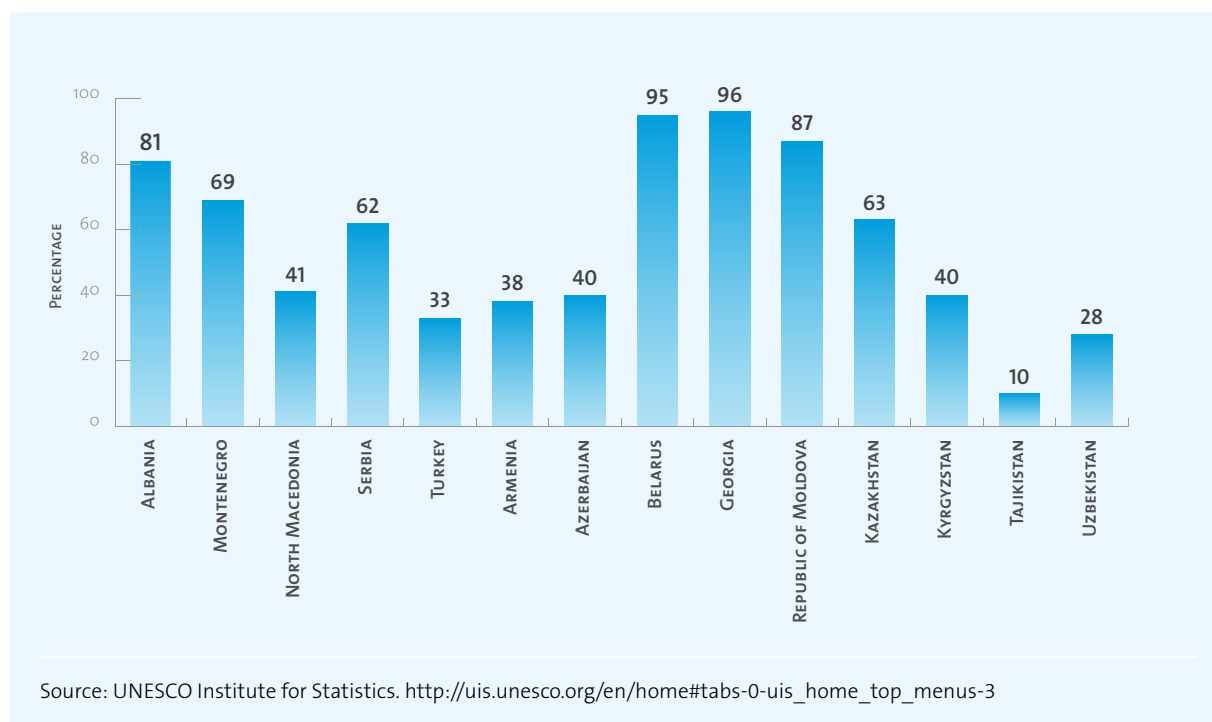
Early childhood education and care is not only important for every child's development, but it is a determining factor for whether a woman will return to work, or will enter the workforce, after having children. Information from the Republic of Moldova illustrates this situation well. According to recent estimates, the employment rate for women (aged 25–49 years) with at least one preschool-aged child is 39.1 per cent, compared to 59.5 per cent for women of the

same age without preschool children – a difference of 20 per cent.¹⁶²

For the ECA region as a whole, fewer than 50 per cent of children, on average, attend early childhood education (defined as nurseries, kindergartens and preschools).¹⁶³ However, the accessibility of early childhood education and care varies significantly by country, as well as between urban and rural areas. See Figure 24.

FIGURE 24

Enrolment rates in pre-primary education of children aged 3–5/6, for selected countries of the ECA region, 2018



The insufficiency or unavailability of childhood education generally reflects the fact that governments have not prioritized investment in such facilities. When such services are not provided for, either through public funds or subsidies, the “lack of public intervention not only reinforces inequality among children

and parents (especially for mothers) by socioeconomic status, it also entrenches gender gaps in the labour market.”¹⁶⁴ In contrast, studies suggest that investment in this sector brings important returns by increasing the number of women in the workforce and by generating revenues (see below).

The returns on investment in early childhood education and care

Early childhood education and care is beneficial to children's development and well-being. There are also wider economic implications when children miss out on early education. Studies examining the economic returns and consequences of increased investment in childhood education and care facilities in both Kyrgyzstan¹⁶⁵ and Turkey¹⁶⁶ have noted a number of positive impacts, such as:

- ▶ the generation of new jobs both directly in the early childhood education and care sector and indirectly in other sectors (both of which would bring considerable benefits to working women);
- ▶ easing women's unpaid care work and time constraints would boost women's employment generally and would contribute to a demand-driven narrowing of the gender employment gap while raising the overall employment rate;
- ▶ increased payrolls, raising government revenue through social security payments and taxes. This, in turn, means that there is potential for the early childhood education and care sector to become self-financing.

Both Kyrgyzstan and Turkey have low female labour force participation rates. The lack of early childhood education and care facilities directly contributes to the wide gender gap in employment, as does the lack of sufficient decent jobs for women. Modelling based on investment in the early childhood education and care sector compared to identical spending in the construction sector, indicate that:

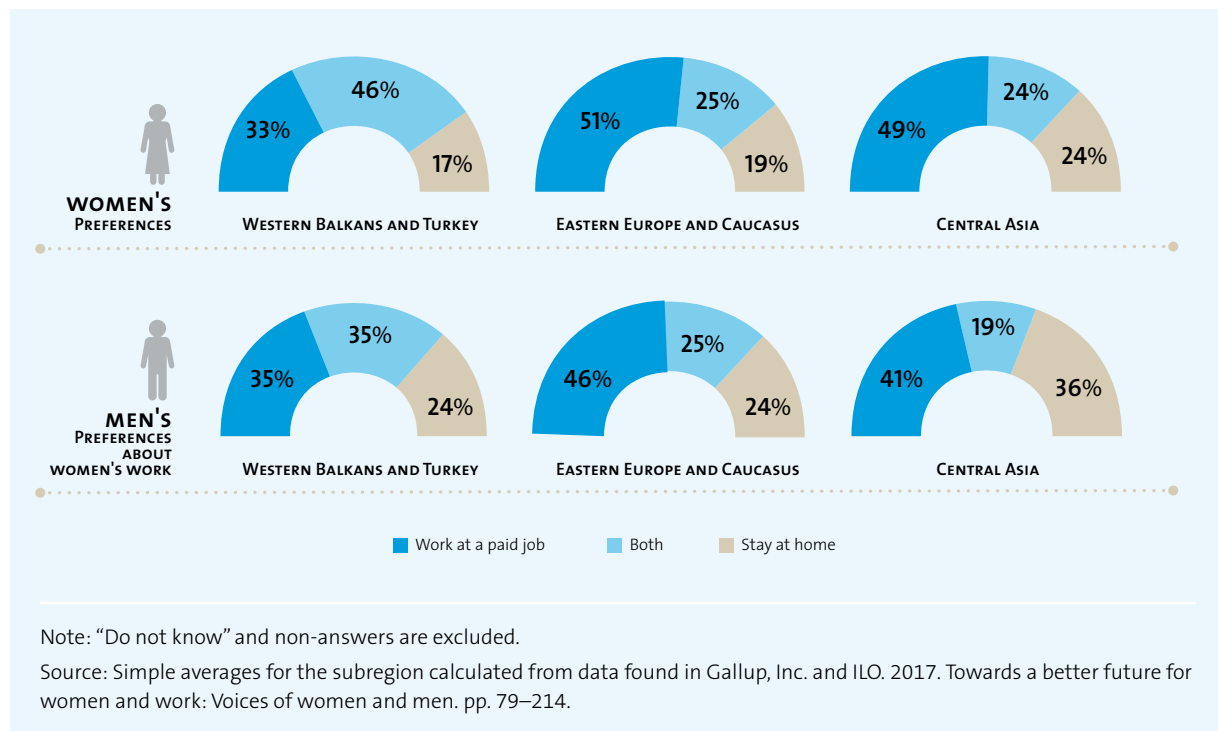
- ▶ In **Kyrgyzstan**, early childhood education and care has the potential to generate almost 30 per cent more jobs (with as many as 72 per cent going to women); meanwhile, projections based on investment in construction showed the opposite effect, with the gender gap in employment widening by 3.5 percentage points, in favour of men.¹⁶⁷
- ▶ In **Turkey**, investing in the early childhood care and preschool education sector was projected to generate 2.5 times the number of jobs as investment in the construction sector, with approximately 73 per cent of the jobs going to women (as compared to only six per cent in construction).¹⁶⁸ Job creation in early childhood education would also create more decent jobs, meaning they are more likely to be permanent and to be formal (they are contracted) and therefore would include social security benefits.

Not only do the lack of facilities and their affordability affect whether parents will place their children in early education, but gender norms and expectations are also at play. The results of a 2017 Gallup poll on attitudes towards women and work illustrate that there is a considerable split in the expectations of women and men about whether women should work outside the home, devote themselves to domestic responsibilities or combine the two. Female respondents to the poll were asked "Would you prefer to work at a paid job, or stay at home and take care of your family and the housework, or would you prefer to do both?"

and male respondents were asked "Would you prefer that the women in your family work at paid jobs, or that they stay at home and take care of your family and the housework, or would you prefer that they do both?" In Europe and Central Asia, women were more likely to express a preference to work at a paid job than were men to express the same opinion for the women in their families. Men more often preferred women to stay at home and take care of the family and household than did women.¹⁶⁹ See Figure 25 for an indication of how women's and men's viewpoints also differ by subregion.

FIGURE 25

Preferences for women to work at a paid job, to stay at home or to do both, by sex and subregion, 2017



The existence of paid and shared parental leave schemes is also an important factor in whether men take up childcare responsibilities. Unfortunately, to date, there has been little institutionalized support for fathers to take paid paternity leave in the ECA region. Such entitlements were only recently introduced in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the Republic of Moldova,

for example. Other countries, such as Belarus and Kyrgyzstan, have less-flexible options to allow fathers to take paid leave.¹⁷⁰ The lack of paid leave for fathers undoubtedly reflects social norms, and the result is very low uptake by men and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes.

Implications of COVID-19: How can progress towards an equitable distribution of unpaid care work be sustained?

The effect of stay-at-home measures on women's workload

In response to the coronavirus pandemic, the closure of schools, day-care facilities for children and older people, recreational facilities and many shops and restaurants meant that women had to take on extra responsibilities for "care of children and support to their schooling needs, as well as care of elderly, family

members with disabilities and other vulnerable family members who [could] no longer access social and health services."¹⁷¹ Regardless of the specific working arrangements in individual households in the ECA region, on average 70 per cent of women spent more time on unpaid domestic work in April–May 2020, as compared to 59 per cent of men who reported such an increase.¹⁷² The burden on women was especially high in several countries – namely, Turkey, Kazakhstan,

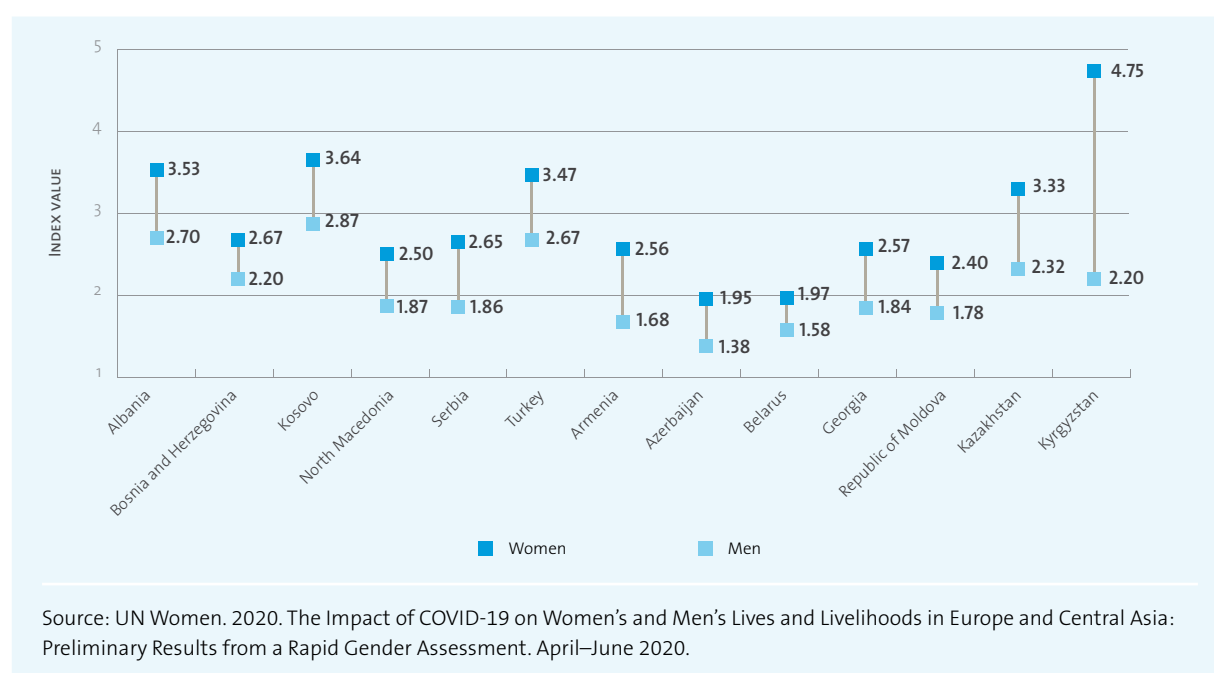
Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova and Albania – which is likely a reflection of the fact that in some of these countries, men more often continued to work outside the home. Moreover, alternative arrangements may not be as prevalent (such as the availability of online shopping/delivery), and social norms and gender roles may be particularly rigid in these countries. The gender gap in involvement in domestic work during the pandemic increased with the number of unpaid domestic activities that women and men were undertaking, meaning that women not only spent more time on such work but also took on a greater number of domestic activities. These activities included shopping, cooking and serving meals, laundry and house-cleaning as well as collecting firewood and water¹⁷³ – the latter chores may have intensified for

women during lockdown periods due to restrictions on movement or because more household members were at home and daily water and fuel requirements increased.

Women's increased time spent on unpaid care work followed a similar pattern to that of unpaid domestic work. In more than half of the ECA countries included in a rapid gender assessment, women and girls took on the larger share of extra care responsibilities, spending more time than men and boys on the care of children and/or elderly family members.¹⁷⁴ Women's engagement in unpaid care work, as compared to that of men, also increased with each additional care activity and in relation to the size of the household and presence of children.

FIGURE 26

Unpaid domestic and care work burden index, during COVID-19, by sex and country/territory



Civil society organizations have pointed out that women's increased responsibilities also coincided with a large number of women working from home in a general context of reduced access to food, medicine and other critical goods.¹⁷⁵ Not only has this burden impacted women physically, emotionally and psychologically, but it has also meant that women have been

forced to reduce their working hours or to “extend total working hours (paid and unpaid) to unsustainable levels.”¹⁷⁶ Unpaid household and care work has correlated with declines in productivity for women who have been working remotely – even more so in households where men continued to work outside the home during lockdown periods. Women's absence

from work has translated into lost productivity and earnings. It also has the potential to jeopardize their career growth in the long-term.

Single mothers and even women in two-parent households experienced an intensification of unpaid workloads. For many families, the typical child-care-givers that working women rely on – grandmothers – were unavailable due to the potential risks to their health and the need to self-isolate. Even in multi-generational families, where there is more support on-hand, UN Women’s rapid gender assessment revealed that 66 per cent of women reported that household members other than their partners assisted them with domestic and care work during the COVID-19 outbreak – mainly sisters, mothers and mothers-in-law.¹⁷⁷

Men’s contributions to unpaid domestic and care work

While men’s participation in unpaid work was less than women’s in all categories – and women were more engaged in assisting their partners than were men in all but one country of ECA¹⁷⁸ – it is nevertheless worth acknowledging the positive phenomenon that in every country/territory in Europe and Central Asia, men reported that the time they spent on unpaid domestic and care work had increased during the lockdown period, compared to before. Of course, the time that men devoted to unpaid work depended

on whether they were able to switch to remote employment and the specific activities they were undertaking.

In general, men most often reported that they spent additional time teaching or instructing children as opposed to time devoted to children’s physical care, such as feeding and bathing.¹⁷⁹ These are small steps, but they are nevertheless important as they indicate that the distribution of childcare responsibilities is improving in households. This trend could help overcome some of the barriers that have previously prevented men from taking on domestic work and childcare, even in countries with paid paternity leave schemes. Studies of fathers who have taken parental leave (predating COVID-19) suggest that when men are exposed to domestic and care work, the impact on their engagement in unpaid work is long-lasting.¹⁸⁰ Some of the challenges men face include overcoming societal expectations and gender stereotypes as well as a lack of support from employers. Further information is needed to understand whether men’s increased involvement during the pandemic is limited to households where men were working from home, furloughed from work or had lost their jobs. Such information would be helpful to identify whether men’s increased involvement in unpaid care work is also linked to attitudinal changes and therefore is more likely to continue once restrictions are lifted and men return to jobs outside the home.

Conclusions and priority actions

The unequal role that women and girls take on in unpaid care and domestic work was a critical barrier to their economic opportunities and educational prospects before COVID-19.¹⁸¹ Despite concerted efforts across the region to facilitate women's and girls' access to employment, entrepreneurship, education and even leadership positions, addressing the burden of unpaid work is often overlooked. The 'invisibility' of such work, or even the lack of recognition that it is, in fact, 'work' may be behind the reluctance to push for greater gender balance in this area.

Adherence to traditional norms may also be especially strong. Indeed, conservative movements have advocated for precisely such a return to 'traditional' roles for women and men. **While the current health crisis has made it impossible to ignore the role women play in essential domestic and care work, there remains a danger that such patterns, rather than changing, may become even further ingrained.** The OECD has warned that "it may be a challenge to return even to the pre-crisis situation, and nearly impossible to achieve an equitable distribution of the unpaid care and domestic work between men and women by 2030"¹⁸² – the target date for achieving SDG 5.4.

AS SUCH, PRIORITY ACTIONS SHOULD REFLECT THE FOLLOWING CONSIDERATIONS:

- ▶ Post-COVID recovery planning must include measures to increase women's labour market participation. To this end, dedicated investments should be made in early childhood education and care that would allow women to (re)enter the workforce, while also providing employment for women.
- ▶ Special attention should be dedicated to establishing childcare services that would increase employment opportunities for women with multiple children and for single mothers. Given the fiscal constraints that have resulted from COVID-19, employers should be engaged in developing and implementing schemes for affordable childcare, paid parental leave policies and flexible working arrangements for women and men workers with care responsibilities.
- ▶ The increased role that men have taken on in unpaid work in the home during the COVID-19 pandemic requires further analysis. Entry points should be identified and used to capitalize on the trends observed during the pandemic, in partnership with employers and also working with the general population.
- ▶ Activities are needed to promote the benefits of an equitable distribution of unpaid care work, change gendered expectations about the roles that women and men play in their households (at work and in the community at large), and increase awareness of the contribution of unpaid care work to economies.



PRIORITY 5:

ELIMINATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

PRE-EXISTING GENDER GAPS AND CHALLENGES:

- ▶ Violence against women and girls (VAWG) is one of the most significant threats to gender equality, directly impacting around a quarter of all women in the ECA region.
- ▶ Important progress has been made in strengthening the legal and policy frameworks to address VAWG, yet critical shortcomings also remain. Key gaps include incomplete national coordination on VAWG and mechanisms for multisectoral and coordinated response that are not effectively implemented in practice.
- ▶ Significant shortcomings in specialized services for victims and survivors of VAWG result in needs far outpacing the capacities of existing service-providers.

OBSERVATIONS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:

- ▶ The measures taken to contain the spread of COVID-19 required social distancing, which put women and girls at a high risk of being isolated at home with their abusers at a time of increased stress and economic pressure.
- ▶ Risk assessments for VAWG were not part of the initial planning for emergency measures to address COVID-19, and a lack of systems for either top-down coordination or multi-agency cooperation meant that new response systems and protocols had to be devised. Countries/territories in the ECA region have put in place a number of measures to improve outreach to survivors of VAWG and to expand services for their protection (such as temporary shelters).
- ▶ The pandemic has put service-providers, many of which are CSOs, on the front line and stretched their capacities to meet the basic needs of survivors, while having to adopt remote and technology-based techniques. CSOs in the Western Balkans and Turkey reported that they will likely only be able to continue to provide services for another year, at best, based on the current needs and available funding.
- ▶ Ensuring the continuity of such services for survivors in the post-COVID-19 period is critical in order to prevent the reversal of successes that have been reached in gender equality. Because it is far costlier to react to VAWG than to prevent it, it will be important to invest in primary prevention and early intervention, post-COVID.

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, violence against women and girls was one of the most serious threats to gender equality and to the well-being of women and girls in the ECA region. It is not only a violation of fundamental human rights, but the impacts of VAWG are both immediate and long-term and have multiple physical, sexual and mental health consequences for women and girls, even including death. The negative consequences of VAWG are far-reaching, for women and girls throughout their lives, for their families, and extending to the community at large.

Recent CEDAW Committee recommendations provide further guidance on States' obligations to take positive measures to eliminate all forms of VAWG, as enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. Recommendations cover all areas of prevention, protection, prosecution and punishment, redress, data collection and monitoring and international cooperation.¹⁸³ The CEDAW Committee emphasizes the importance of approaches that centre around the rights, needs and safety of victims/survivors, "acknowledging women as right holders and promoting their agency and autonomy."¹⁸⁴ Moreover, combating VAWG requires long-term commitments and measures that both increase the coordination of multisectoral response systems and simultaneously eliminate factors that

underlie VAWG – such as patriarchal attitudes, stereotypes and prejudices.

For the European region, the Council of Europe (CoE) Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) is an additional authoritative source. The Convention consolidates standards on the prevention of violence against women, the protection of women from violence, the prosecution of perpetrators and integrated policy approaches. The standards set forth in the Istanbul Convention are important benchmarks even for countries that are not parties.



Prevalence of violence against women and girls before COVID-19

This section provides context and focuses on several critical shortcomings observed before the global health crisis that are particularly relevant to VAWG responses during the COVID-19 outbreak.¹⁸⁷

Estimates of the prevalence of violence against women and girls in Europe and Central Asia are based on subregional or national surveys. There is no comparable data set that includes each country/territory that would indicate the scale of the problem for the region as whole. Still, existing surveys suggest that domestic violence, or intimate partner violence (IPV), is one of the most commonly occurring forms of VAW, impacting around one in four women.¹⁸⁸

In the Western Balkans and Eastern Europe subregion,

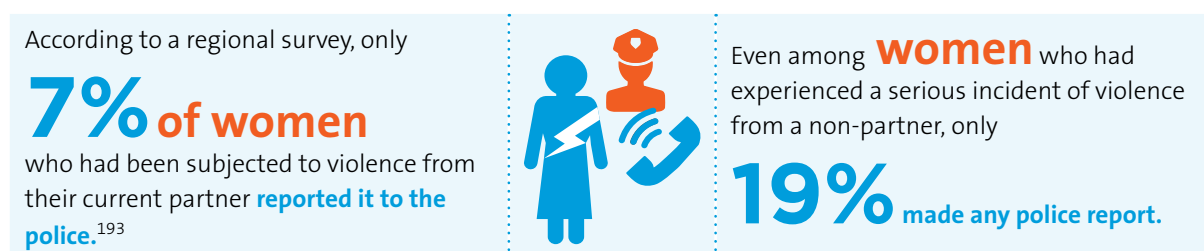
70% of **surveyed women** have **experienced some form of violence since the age of 15.**¹⁸⁹

23% of **surveyed women** have been subjected to **physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner.**¹⁹⁰

Separate surveys on IPV conducted in Albania, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Moldova, Turkey and Ukraine indicate that prevalence rates are consistently high but differ depending on the form of violence being studied. Among ever-married or partnered women, the lifetime prevalence of physical and/or sexual violence ranges from 15 per cent of women in Ukraine to 37.5 per cent of women in Turkey.¹⁹¹ Other national surveys confirm that a large share of women have experienced domestic violence in their lifetimes. For instance, 24 per cent of surveyed women in Tajikistan and 14 per cent in Georgia reported that they had been subjected to domestic violence in some form, which includes physical, sexual or psychological violence by a partner.¹⁹²

Before the pandemic, emerging forms of VAWG were increasingly being discussed and studied, such as technology-related violence, or cyberviolence. However, in the ECA region, there have been few prevalence studies conducted on cyberviolence, in addition to other forms of VAWG such as stalking and femicide.

Prevalence studies are especially needed because administrative data, from law enforcement or the health-care sector for instance, are not reliable in terms of capturing the full scale of the problem. For various and complex reasons, most women and girls who have experienced VAWG do not report the incidents.



While VAWG has been characterised as a “shadow pandemic,” running alongside COVID-19, in fact it was a latent and underestimated problem before the health crisis.

Coordination and cooperation mechanisms

Coordination and multi-agency cooperation are essential principles that underpin an effective response to VAWG. Coordination is required at several levels. Foremost, a specific mechanism or body with a mandate to coordinate, monitor and assess the national, regional and local implementation and effectiveness of specific measures to address VAWG should be established or designated within the Government.¹⁹⁴ Between institutions, coordinated policies and multi-sectoral referral mechanisms are instrumental to ensure that survivors of violence are able to effectively access comprehensive services.¹⁹⁵ It is a recognized good practice for such coordination mechanisms to

include non-governmental women’s organizations, along with law enforcement, the criminal justice system, the health-care system, social services and other relevant agencies and organizations.

In the ECA region, progress has been made in strengthening legal frameworks and adopting national and subnational strategies (through action plans, for example), primarily focused on addressing domestic violence. An important feature of stand-alone laws and national strategies is the introduction of coordination mechanisms to standardize the approach to VAWG and to improve cooperation across sectors. Most, but not all, of the countries/territories in the

ECA region have established bodies for national-level coordination and implementation of national policies on VAWG – taking the form of inter-agency commissions or working groups, or within line ministries (typically ministries for health and social protection or ministries of justice). A missing piece for the region as a whole, however, is a cross-cutting approach to VAWG including a broader range of State structures and communication across relevant ministries and between State institutions and service-providers, to coordinate the response to VAWG at the national level.

The implementation of standards for a multisectoral response to VAWG varies across the ECA region. In the Western Balkans subregion, several countries have formalized multi-agency responses to VAWG with standardized processes that include risk assessment, safety and support for victims/survivors (Albania and Serbia, for example).¹⁹⁶ National referral mechanisms also exist in Georgia and the Republic of Moldova. In several other countries, similar multisectoral coordination systems are foreseen in national legislation and are under development (e.g. in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan).

Considerable progress has also been made in the adoption of standard operating procedures or protocols that describe the roles and responsibilities of individual institutions in addressing VAWG, most often domestic violence. Such standard operating procedures have been introduced for law enforcement, front-line health-care and social service-providers as well as CSOs, and in some cases specific protocols cover multisectoral cooperation and risk assessment/management in domestic violence cases. Such standard operating procedures have been introduced in Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Republic of Moldova, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Ukraine.¹⁹⁷ They are also in use in Kosovo and North Macedonia and being developed in Turkmenistan.

Nevertheless, despite significant progress, many countries still lack a “sustainable, comprehensive and holistic approach” to, and integrated policies on, VAWG.¹⁹⁸ Mechanisms for cooperation, either among State bodies or between the State and civil society, have not been fully institutionalized in most countries, and therefore they are often not effective in practice. This lack of coordination and communication “seriously affects the quality and effectiveness of the system of protection.”¹⁹⁹

Protection and support for survivors of violence

Even before COVID-19, significant shortcomings were apparent across the region, concerning the complex protection needs for victims and survivors of VAWG. Inadequate allocation of financial and human resources limits the provision of vital support services.²⁰⁰

A large share of services are provided by women’s CSOs, whose operations still rely heavily on financial support from international donors. As a result, the number of such services is considered insufficient and their funding is “extremely volatile.”²⁰¹ Furthermore, specialist women’s support services – that aim to assist, rehabilitate and empower survivors of all forms of VAWG by addressing their specific needs, as opposed

to generalized social services – are still underdeveloped in the region. Specialized services include, *inter alia*, outreach, short- and long-term counselling of various types, temporary housing/shelter and support for job-seekers.

In 2019, the Women Against Violence Europe (WAVE) network conducted an assessment of 18 non-EU-member European countries to determine the availability of specialist services for survivors of VAWG, as measured against international standards enumerated in the Istanbul Convention.²⁰² Their findings indicate that for much of the ECA region, the needs of survivors of VAWG outstrip available services.

TABLE 4
Standards for VAWG service-provision and availability of specialist services in European countries

Standards*	Findings for 18 European countries
Existence of a national telephone helpline that operates 24/7, is free-of-charge and serves survivors of all forms of VAW.	Among the countries surveyed, 14 have national telephone helplines for women. Only nine operate free-of-charge and on a 24/7 basis.
One family space is available in a women's shelter per 10 000 inhabitants. Shelter spaces should also allow immediate and safe accommodation, ideally accessible around the clock.	Among the countries, there are 436 shelters accessible to women survivors of violence. However, when the number of existing beds is compared to the need (based on the total population), 79 per cent of the needed beds are missing (representing almost 26 000 beds).
For provision of non-residential services to survivors of VAW (i.e. counselling services), one centre is available per 50 000 women.	There are 729 non-residential specialist centres that support women survivors of violence across the 18 countries, which means that 79 per cent of the recommended number of such centres are missing (more than 2 000 centres).
One specialized centre for the provision of support to survivors of sexual violence is available for every 200 000 inhabitants.	With only 19 rape crisis centres or centres that specialize in sexual violence operating in the surveyed countries, there is a 99 per cent gap in such services. More than 1 600 rape crisis centres would have to be established to meet the standard.
<p>*Note: These standards are derived from: Council of Europe. 2018. Combating violence against women: minimum standards for support services and Council of Europe. 2011. Explanatory Report to the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.</p> <p>Source: WAVE. 2019. Country Report 2019 Statistical Factsheet.</p>	

Note that the data compiled by the WAVE network concerns only the existence of helplines, centres and shelters for survivors of VAWG. It does not assess whether the actual services provided meet standards of good quality and best practices. In fact, in the ECA

region, standardized protocols for service-provision are not common, and service-providers may operate on differing core principles (i.e. some recognize the gendered aspects of VAWG, while others take purely family-focused approaches).²⁰³

Implications of COVID-19: What lessons can be learned from the “shadow pandemic”?

The COVID-19 pandemic unfolded against a backdrop in which ECA countries/territories had not fully implemented commitments to prevent VAWG, protect survivors, prosecute and punish perpetrators or conducted consistent data collection and monitoring. The imposition of stay-at-home orders and social distancing measures effectively isolated a large number of women and girls, many of whom had already experienced violence in their homes. Many were thus confined with a violent partner, spouse or other family member at a time of high stress and uncertainty. At the same time, support systems – including social services, law enforcement, the legal and health-care systems – were largely inaccessible. Almost immediately, alarm was raised about an emerging parallel “shadow pandemic” of violence against women and girls.²⁰⁴ In consultations with UN Women, national gender equality mechanisms and women’s CSOs in each country/territory of the ECA region expressed grave concern that the pandemic, combined with restrictions on movement, “increased stress and economic pressure due to job losses, non-operational or narrowed networks for interaction, and reduced services all put women and children at acute risks of domestic violence.”²⁰⁵

Assessing the scale of the “shadow pandemic” in violence against women and girls

The absence of comprehensive data before COVID-19, including on prevalence, has created challenges to estimating the increased needs that have resulted from measures taken to address the coronavirus.

Preliminary data, primarily based on records of contacts with telephone helplines and women’s crisis centres, suggest a sharp increase in domestic violence during lockdown periods. The rates of increase in domestic violence range, but the trend is consistent for a number of countries/territories in the ECA region. In the Republic of Moldova, one NGO-run hotline reported a 30 per cent increase in calls in March–April 2020.²⁰⁶ The total number of psychological

consultations provided by Ukrainian NGOs to people affected by domestic violence increased by 35 per cent from March to April 2020.²⁰⁷ Meanwhile, in Uzbekistan, a hotline dedicated to VAWG reported a five-fold increase in calls during the first week of lockdown.²⁰⁸ In some cases, law enforcement records support the observations of NGOs. Police reports in Kosovo show a 22 per cent increase in cases of domestic violence when comparing records from January–April 2019 with the same months in 2020.²⁰⁹ In Kyrgyzstan, the Ministry of Internal Affairs reported that the number of complaints of domestic violence made to police increased by more than 65 per cent when comparing January–March 2019 with the same period in 2020.²¹⁰ The Ministry of Internal Affairs in Kazakhstan reported that police registered 25 per cent more cases of domestic violence in the first eight months of 2020, as compared to 2019; however, the police maintain that only 2 in 10 victims ever report such violence.²¹¹

Records of law enforcement and service-providers have not yet been compiled to provide an estimate of the extent to which emergency measures resulted in spikes in domestic violence, or other forms of VAWG. It should also be kept in mind that even before the pandemic, a high percentage of VAWG incidents went unreported to authorities (making administrative data an unreliable estimate of the true scale of the problem). Additionally, existing data may not be reliable because during the pandemic the typical avenues through which survivors report violence, when they do report it – e.g. hotlines, women’s crisis centres, medical professionals, the police, and even friends and family members – have been far less accessible. These options also posed risks to victims’ and survivors’ security, if they were under the scrutiny of the perpetrator of violence, for example. This situation may explain why in some countries (Serbia, for example²¹²), reporting of domestic violence to the police decreased during lockdowns.

Still, the pandemic has revealed the latency of VAWG and made a pre-existing problem visible to a greater number of people. It was already known before the pandemic that reporting data represents only the tip of the iceberg of the true scale of VAWG. It is possible that, as the issue has become more prominent, more survivors of violence may seek help as emergency restrictions are lessened and it becomes safer for them to do so. While available data and information are sufficient to alert duty-bearers to the problem, reliable incidence and prevalence data on all forms of VAWG are still needed for every country/territory once it is possible to conduct such research.

It appears that the COVID-19 pandemic has also exacerbated the risks of specific forms of violence. With social distancing and lockdown measures in place, work, education and socializing have been transferred to digital spaces, resulting in a much greater number of people relying on ICT than ever before. This, in turn, has corresponded with surges in ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls around the globe. Reports are emerging of perpetrators of domestic violence exploiting ICTs to intimidate victims,²¹³ of partners and ex-partners using revenge porn to shame and exercise control over women,²¹⁴ of women being subjected to online harassment and ‘sex trolling’ (posting unsolicited and sexually explicit materials),²¹⁵ and of children, especially girls, being sexually abused or exploited (being exposed to sexual coercion and grooming tactics, for example) through social media.²¹⁶

Experts have also raised the alarm over new risks that COVID-19 has created for victims of trafficking. The pandemic is also deepening the vulnerabilities of groups that had previously been in risky situations.²¹⁷ The gender-specific vulnerabilities to trafficking are complex. On the one hand, economic inequalities and hardships are key push factors for labour migration that leave women and men alike vulnerable to traffickers. Gender-specific vulnerabilities of women and girls, such as lifetime histories of violence, put them at risk of trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation. The coronavirus pandemic has also been linked to the movement of criminal networks towards online means of recruitment, in spaces where women

and girls are unprotected. In addition, disruptions to sex work, whether it is criminalized or regulated in a particular country, due to travel restrictions and lockdowns, has driven such work further underground – a situation that has increased the risks of exploitation and trafficking.²¹⁸

Weak mechanisms for early warning and coordination of State responses

Globally, very few countries anticipated and prepared for the management of VAWG, and domestic violence in particular, when COVID-19-related emergency measures were being developed and enacted. The Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences expressed concern that measures to combat COVID-19 have been largely gender-blind: “with many States failing to consider measures to combat gender-based violence against women as essential services and as basic human rights that should not be restricted.”²¹⁹

The pandemic has revealed shortcomings in prevention efforts at the national level – specifically, the lack of early warning systems that would help to predict the potential risk that VAWG would increase during lockdown periods, in order to take steps to mitigate this risk. For instance, in Kyrgyzstan in late 2019, work had commenced on drafting a unified interdepartmental directive on measures to be taken by the civil protection authorities in response to gender-based violence in emergency and crisis situations (an initiative of the Ministry of Emergency Situations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Labour and Social Development).²²⁰ However, it does not appear that there were any protocols or standard operating procedures in place to coordinate the response to VAWG when the lockdowns went into effect in March 2020. Similarly, it has been reported that in Armenia²²¹ and Serbia²²² there were no procedures in place to deal with VAWG in emergency situations.

Likewise, national-level coordination and multi-disciplinary responses were weak, even in countries which apparently had mechanisms in place to address VAWG. Examples of shortcomings in coordination from a number of countries include: the initial exclusion of

services and protection mechanisms for women and girls who had experienced violence as ‘non-essential’; the reduction or suspension of temporary shelter services; the de-prioritization of law enforcement prevention work on domestic violence (including issuing and monitoring protective orders); and the lack of public awareness campaigns or outreach to potential survivors about protection mechanisms that were still in place (e.g. in several countries, reports emerged that women survivors had not sought police protection due to fears that they would be sanctioned for violating stay-at-home orders).

Once the need was clear, however, countries/territories of the ECA region²²³ responded by introducing a number of measures, including: launching or expanding existing helplines and providing remote support to survivors of VAWG (e.g. in Armenia, Georgia, Tajikistan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan); supporting service-delivery by CSOs (e.g. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Tajikistan and Turkey and specifically for survivors of sexual violence in Albania); creating alternative temporary housing for survivors of VAWG (e.g. Kosovo, Tajikistan); classifying judicial processes concerning domestic violence as essential (e.g. Serbia; in North Macedonia measures were taken to ensure that women experiencing domestic violence would not be sanctioned if leaving their home). Other steps have included: the development of guidance and protocols on how to provide services to survivors while complying with emergency restrictions (e.g. Albania, Kyrgyzstan and the Republic of Moldova); recommendations for amendments to the laws that established emergency measures to increase protections for survivors of VAWG (Serbia); special training for relevant professionals (e.g. Azerbaijan); and conducting rapid assessments of the situation (e.g. Republic of Moldova).²²⁴ CSOs have played a significant role in advocating for such measures.

In terms of strengthening national responses to VAWG, the pandemic has provided a road map of weaknesses in prevention and coordination across sectors. **It will be essential that the momentum created by COVID-19 to increase avenues of support for and outreach to survivors of VAWG be continued even after the health crisis has subsided.** In a few cases,

initiatives such as hotlines or the requisitioning of hotels to serve as shelters have been envisioned as temporary, only to last during lockdown periods or states of emergency. Such policy measures should, in fact, become the new standard as they are filling gaps in services that predated the pandemic.

Accessibility and long-term sustainability of services for survivors

A UN Women rapid gender assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 in the ECA region raised questions about whether survivors received sufficient information about how to obtain protection if experiencing domestic violence during periods of lockdown. Across the region, knowledge about where to seek help for domestic violence appears to be considerably low for both women and men, with older women being the least likely to know where to find such support.²²⁵ The finding reinforces the theory that reports of increasing contacts with helplines and law enforcement are most likely an underestimate of the true scale of the problem. A large number of VAWG survivors may be unaware of how to access help and are thus simply not reporting violence.

The accessibility of specialist services has become especially critical during the pandemic, when service-providing organizations have been unable to carry out much of the work they ordinarily perform. For instance, emergency measures have meant that justice, health and social services have all been disrupted. For example, counselling must be offered remotely, while shelters and safe houses may not be operational under quarantine conditions. In some cases, courts are closed to all but ‘essential’ legal proceedings, which has meant that ‘non-essential’ hearings – such as for protection orders or divorce and child custody, that often include elements of domestic violence – are generally being heard remotely. A survey conducted among front-line anti-trafficking organizations (some of which may also address other forms of VAWG), indicates that the pandemic is complicating their outreach and support work with vulnerable groups.²²⁶ For instance, almost half of surveyed shelters for victims of human trafficking had been closed, and a majority of organizations reported insufficient funds to fully

address needs.²²⁷ This has also meant that coordination and cooperation (for example, through national referral mechanisms) has been constrained.

COVID-19 has compounded an already untenable situation for women's crisis centres and shelters that were struggling to address the complex needs of survivors of VAWG before the pandemic. Without interventions, women's CSOs may be reaching the limits of their capacities to operate and to meet newly arising challenges. Most service-providing organizations are small in terms of permanent staff, and they rely heavily on volunteers (surveyed CSOs in the Western Balkans and Turkey have three times the number of volunteers as staff on average).²²⁸ The loss of staff and volunteers during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that such organizations are in tenuous positions in terms of their workforce. The majority of women's organizations receive financing from international or bilateral organizations (80 per cent of those surveyed) or international NGOs (70 per cent), while only 30 to 40 per cent receive at least some funding from either local government or state budgets.²²⁹ With limited funding already constraining the operation of CSOs and donor priorities being redirected away from VAWG, many women's organizations are facing the possibility of closure.²³⁰ Just over half of surveyed CSOs in the Western Balkans and Turkey reported that they would only be able to continue to provide services for up to one more year, based on the current needs and availability of funding.²³¹

Women's organizations have had to adapt swiftly to new circumstances, switching to remote service-delivery wherever possible and suspending some client-based activities (including assisting survivors to access medical services or to complete personal safety plans, participating in local multi-agency coordination meetings, and running programmes for perpetrators). Because CSOs have prioritized the immediate needs of

survivors of violence, many of their other crucial functions, such as prevention and advocacy, professional training, outreach, research and even fundraising have been placed on hold.²³² The reduction of all but core services has been necessary, but there will inevitably be a very high demand for increased service-provision once emergency measures are eased.

As discussed above, rapid gender assessments in the ECA region suggest that women who may be at risk for violence are further disadvantaged by their lack of knowledge about the support services that are available to them. In light of this finding, service-providing organizations will be challenged to also increase outreach to a broader segment of the population and to raise awareness of the assistance that can be offered. CSOs have pointed out that the transfer of key services to remote delivery has meant that many women, particularly those in especially vulnerable situations, are excluded. Moreover, CSOs say outreach to such groups as older women, ethnic minority women, rural women and women with disabilities has been problematic.²³³

The pandemic may well offer important lessons about the need to consistently prioritize VAWG in national and local planning and budgeting. The strong likelihood that social isolation measures will have to be imposed periodically, combined with the growing needs of survivors and their families for comprehensive support, require clear strategies for addressing violence against women and girls. These strategies should include social services, law enforcement and the justice system, and be underpinned by adequate financing. In the wake of the pandemic, it is very likely that the need for specialist VAWG services will only increase, overlapping with the threat of widespread economic downturns. Thus, during the recovery period, every country/territory will face budgetary constraints while also trying to meet the diverse social welfare needs of the population.

What is the cost of violence against women and girls?

The financial costs of violence against women and girls are staggering – for victims and survivors and also for national economies. In the EU, for instance, the cost of intimate partner violence reaches EUR 109 billion annually. The cost to the EU of violence against women on the whole surpasses EUR 225 billion each year.²³⁴

Costing exercises conducted in Europe and Central Asia indicate that response and support services account for a large proportion of the costs of VAWG to the State. In contrast, expenditures for the prevention of violence against women and girls are thought to be far less than those needed to address such violence once it has occurred or when it has escalated. Without early intervention, the costs associated with protecting survivors and their rehabilitation increase considerably over time.

Economic losses can be quantified in terms of lost economic output (e.g. due to the survivor's absence from work or inability to work), health sector costs (including both the cost of immediate treatment and long-term care), legal sector costs (including both the criminal and civil justice systems), social welfare costs, the costs of specialized services (such as the cost of running shelters, telephone hotlines, therapeutic programmes, etc.) as well as high personal costs to the survivors and to their children or dependents.

Analysis conducted in diverse countries/territories before the pandemic illustrates the high costs of domestic violence:

Bosnia and Herzegovina:²³⁵ The total annual economic costs of domestic violence have been estimated as the equivalent of over EUR 33 million, with the highest share of costs borne by social work centres (37 per cent), followed by the police (25 per cent), prosecution services (18 per cent), the courts (16 per cent) and health-care institutions (4 per cent).

Kosovo:²³⁶ The cost of services related to addressing domestic violence are equivalent to EUR 3 million annually (around a third of which is funding from donors), with 68 per cent of the total expenditures used for protection of victims (which includes the services of police, medical forensic examiners, prosecutors, judges, victims' advocates, legal aid lawyers and social services).

Kyrgyzstan:²³⁷ State expenditures for a single domestic violence case range from approximately EUR 25,000 (murder) to around EUR 3,500 (sexual violence) per case.²³⁸ When administrative costs, the payment of social benefits and legal costs are added, the total expenditure for one case increases by over EUR 6,000.

Republic of Moldova:²³⁹ Public sector spending on domestic violence has been estimated at approximately EUR 1.85 million (with the highest government spending on health care at around EUR 815,000, followed by legal services at approximately EUR 771,000, and social services at EUR 270,000).²⁴⁰ These figures do not represent the total costs of domestic violence cases. More than 60 per cent of the costs of all social services provided to survivors are covered by CSOs. Individual survivors also bear the cost of hospital treatment and legal fees.²⁴¹

Turkey:²⁴² The costs of health care, police and justice systems, social services and productivity loss are estimated at between EUR 4.8 and 47.1 billion – which is equivalent to between 1 and 10 per cent of Turkey's GDP.

Ukraine:²⁴³ The total economic costs of VAWG are estimated at EUR 170 million per year, or 0.23 per cent of national GDP. The costs of response services for survivors of VAWG are USD 14.1 million (EUR 11.5 million), with the largest proportion of these expenses for law enforcement and penitentiary systems.

Conclusions and priority actions

COVID-19 did not create an epidemic in violence against women and girls. The problem long predated the coronavirus, but it has remained a shadowy issue, and in many countries its full scope is still not known. The pandemic has, however, highlighted critical shortcomings in identifying causes and risks for VAWG, including those triggered by emergencies, and in preventing and detecting VAWG at the earliest stages, to prevent escalation. The pandemic is likely to have created new challenges or changed patterns of VAWG. This includes a potential overall increase in cases of domestic violence and the intensity of such violence at a time when survivors have few means to escape. In the post-COVID period, functional multi-agency cooperation and coordination will become even more important for the protection of survivors, and also for the maximization of resources.

PRIORITY ACTIONS SHOULD THUS FOCUS ON:

- ▶ Immediate efforts to mitigate the risks that the emergency measures are posing to women and girls of all forms of gender-based violence, especially in light of the fact that periodic lockdowns/quarantines may be implemented on an ongoing basis in many countries/territories.
- ▶ Continuity of essential protection and services for survivors of VAWG during emergency situations, regardless of the lack of available data to indicate the scale of the problem. Steps must be taken to reinstate face-to-face consultations and provide safe alternative housing for women and girls. Priority should be placed on ensuring that survivors of VAWG can remain safely in their homes without the presence of perpetrators.
- ▶ Scaling up and formalizing special measures adopted during the crisis period for the protection of survivors of VAWG (e.g. improved identification and referrals of survivors, expanded outreach pathways – via apps, protocols and standard operating procedures for online service-delivery, alternative forms of temporary housing, specialized training and rapid assessments). Priority should be given to strengthening mechanisms for coordinated multisectoral interventions, with protocols and standardized operating procedures that cover emergency and non-emergency situations.
- ▶ Continued and flexible financial support to enable CSOs to increase their capacities to respond to the changing situation, accelerate the provision of services to existing beneficiaries and meet the demand for additional services that will likely emerge as emergency restrictions are eased.
- ▶ Integrating risk-mitigation measures into interventions related to controlling the spread of COVID-19. Likewise, VAWG should be a central focus in post-COVID recovery plans, with dedicated situational analysis, programmes and budgets. Investment in primary prevention of VAWG should be scaled up, especially in light of downturns in national economies.
- ▶ Integrating investment in VAWG programmes into the funding priorities of international organizations and the lending priorities of international financial institutions.

CONCLUSION

The topics addressed in this gender analysis centre around the potential for the pandemic to push women and girls towards greater insecurity, poverty and disempowerment. While the risks of backsliding on progress in protecting women's rights and promoting gender equality should not be ignored, the potential opportunities the pandemic may provide should also be considered. For example, during lockdowns, many daily activities (learning, working, shopping) moved to the digital space, indicating the increasing role that information and communication technologies will play. As governments support digitization, more opportunities could arise for women and men, in terms of access to jobs and education.

The streaming of women towards traditionally 'feminine' fields of study, rather than into STEM subjects, coupled with women's lower engagement in technical and vocational education and training, mean that they have faced difficulties gaining the knowledge and technology-based skills that are in demand in today's labour markets. Ever more so in the post-COVID context, women may not be in the optimal position to compete for jobs in emerging technology-related fields, unless steps are taken – by governments, educational institutions, employers and even parents – to close the gender gaps in STEM. Doing so is urgent, particularly considering that there are fewer wage gaps between women and men employed in such jobs, which are decent work.

However, women's more precarious position in the labour market, in terms of the likelihood that they are not in paid work or are employed in low-paid jobs or 'fragile' work, all contribute to women's lower economic status – a situation that predated the pandemic. As seen after other global crises, women tend to be the first to be laid off and they spend longer periods out of work. Thus, without specific interventions, women are positioned to be impacted to a greater degree than men by the economic slowdowns resulting from the pandemic. Trends observed in the context of COVID-19 point to the high risk of women falling

into income poverty or of being pushed into deeper poverty. The risks are especially great for certain vulnerable groups, such as single mothers, older women, women in households that depend on remittance income, women with disabilities, as well as women living in rural areas and from minority groups.

The unpaid domestic and care burden shouldered predominantly by women compromises their abilities to enter or re-enter the workforce and to continue their education. The pandemic has increased this burden and reinforced such gender roles, so efforts are needed to change such patterns, lest they become even further ingrained. The flexible working arrangements organized during quarantine periods, mainly in remote working, have the potential to enable women to better balance work with other responsibilities in the future, but only if the social safety net is improved to reduce their care obligations. In parallel, schemes that promote flexible work for men are still needed to facilitate their greater engagement in unpaid child-care and domestic work.

Women's limited influence over formal decision-making, while a critical concern of the past, has also become ever more important in light of the fact that national emergency task forces did not effectively engage with women leaders or consult with women experts in other fields when developing their first responses to the COVID-19 outbreak. As a result, many measures were gender blind and failed to address the multiple vulnerabilities of women and men. As ECA countries/territories develop post-COVID recovery plans, there is a potential to address such disparities and vulnerabilities, but only if there is an active promotion of women's leadership and other methods of consultation. During the pandemic, CSOs have been active in addressing the needs of women and girls at the grass-roots level. Along with national gender mechanisms, they have also been sharing their experiences and advocating for gender-sensitive measures to address the impacts of COVID-19. This momentum should not be wasted.

Persistent violence against women and girls is not only a threat to their safety and a drain on national resources, but it also serves to disempower them more broadly. The global pandemic has increased the urgency of ensuring that survivors of violence against women and girls can access specialized services. However, the lack of effective systems to coordinate multisectoral responses to VAWG, combined with the unmet needs of survivors for comprehensive long-term treatment, were already threatening the health and economic independence of women and girls. The special measures adopted during the crisis period for the protection of survivors could be formalized and scaled up, both to meet the increased need and close existing gaps. Administrative data collection and analysis should be strengthened and protocols for the collection of sex-disaggregated data on all forms of VAWG are also necessary.

Moreover, so that policymaking can be evidence-based, more data are needed on the full range of gender-specific impacts of the pandemic. Recovery efforts should thus increase capacities to capture comprehensive data – on impacts, as well as the policies and programmes that have aimed to mitigate the pandemic's impacts.

COVID-19 has not created parallel or shadow pandemics, such as in gender-based violence or increased unpaid domestic workloads for women and girls. Rather, it has made visible gender gaps that have been slow to change in the ECA region. On the one hand, the pandemic is putting at risk the progress that countries/territories have made towards gender equality. On the other hand, the measures that each country/territory will take to mitigate the most serious consequences of this health crisis are opportunities to reverse the pre-pandemic situation and to at last eliminate long-standing inequalities between women and men, girls and boys.

There are multiple opportunities to engage and look more deeply into the various ways that the pandemic has increased gender inequalities – not only to make sure that no further ground is lost but to make use of the crisis to accelerate progress towards gender equality. As the UN Women Executive Director reminds us all: **“We must utilize the windows of opportunity created by the pandemic to avoid further rollback, by placing women’s leadership and contributions at the heart of resilience and recovery.”**²⁴⁴

Annex 1.

Selected UN Women resources on COVID-19

[COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker Factsheet: Europe and Central Asia, December 2020](#)

[From insights to action: Gender equality in the wake of COVID-19](#)

[Gender equality and the COVID-19 outbreak: Key messages and advocacy points from the Europe and Central Asia Regional Issue-Based Coalition on Gender](#)

[The impact of COVID-19 on women's and men's lives and livelihoods in Europe and Central Asia: Preliminary results from a Rapid Gender Assessment](#)

[Six months later: Women at the forefront of COVID-19 response in Europe and Central Asia](#)

[Voices of gender equality mechanisms on COVID-19](#)

[Voices of women's organizations on COVID-19: April 2020 sub-regional consultations](#)

EVAW COVID-19 Briefs

[COVID-19 and ending violence against women and girls](#)

[COVID-19 and ensuring safe cities and safe public spaces for women and girls](#)

[COVID-19 and essential services provision for survivors of violence against women and girls](#)

[The COVID-19 shadow pandemic: Domestic violence in the world of work: A call to action for the private sector](#)

[Online and ICT-facilitated violence against women and girls during COVID-19](#)

[Prevention: Violence against women and girls and COVID-19](#)

[Violence against women and girls data collection during COVID-19](#)

COVID-19 Policy Briefing Series

[Addressing the economic fallout of COVID-19: Pathways and policy options for a gender-responsive recovery](#)

[COVID-19 and the care economy: Immediate action and structural transformation for a gender-responsive recovery](#)

[COVID-19 and conflict: Advancing women's meaningful participation in ceasefires and peace processes](#)

[COVID-19 and violence against women and girls: Addressing the shadow pandemic](#)

[COVID-19 and women's leadership: From an effective response to building back better](#)

Annex 2.

Overview of indices measuring gender equality and findings from UN Women rapid gender assessments

TABLE 1.
Gender Development Index (GDI) (2019)

Region / Country	GDI value	HDI value		Life expectancy at birth (years)		Expected years of schooling		Mean years of schooling		Estimated gross national income per capita (2017 PPP \$)	
				Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Europe and Central Asia	0.953	0.768	0.806	77.7	71.1	14.5	14.8	9.9	10.7	12 373	23 801
OECD	0.978	0.887	0.907	82.9	77.7	16.6	16.0	11.9	12.1	34 593	55 679
Albania	0.967	0.780	0.807	80.2	77.0	15.5	14.0	9.7	10.6	11 004	16 885
Armenia	0.982	0.766	0.780	78.5	71.3	13.6	12.6	11.3	11.3	9 737	18 574
Azerbaijan	0.943	0.730	0.774	75.5	70.5	13.0	12.8	10.2	10.9	8 919	18 664
Belarus	1.007	0.824	0.819	79.6	69.7	15.7	15.2	12.2	12.4	14 911	22 721
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.973	0.753	0.803	79.9	74.9	14.1	13.5	8.9	10.9	10 567	19 357
Georgia	0.980	0.800	0.817	78.1	69.3	15.5	15.0	13.2	13.1	9 475	19 864
Kazakhstan	0.980	0.807	0.823	77.7	69.2	15.8	15.1	10.9	11.9	16 791	29 296
Kyrgyzstan	0.957	0.677	0.707	75.6	67.4	13.2	12.7	11.2	11.0	2 971	6 798
Republic of Moldova	1.014	0.754	0.744	76.2	67.6	11.8	11.3	11.8	11.6	11 994	15 477
Montenegro	0.966	0.814	0.843	79.3	74.4	15.4	14.7	10.9	12.3	17 518	25 368
North Macedonia	0.952	0.753	0.791	77.8	73.8	13.8	13.4	9.4	10.2	11 698	20 027
Serbia	0.977	0.797	0.815	78.6	73.4	15.3	14.2	10.8	11.6	13 990	20 525
Tajikistan	0.823	0.586	0.712	73.4	68.9	10.7	12.6	10.2	11.3	1 440	6 427
Turkey	0.924	0.784	0.848	80.6	74.7	16.0	17.1	7.3	9.0	17 854	37 807
Turkmenistan	...	...	...	71.7	64.7	10.9	11.5	...	...	10 493	19 461
Ukraine	1.000	0.776	0.776	76.8	67.1	15.3	14.9	11.3	11.3	10 088	16 840
Uzbekistan	0.939	0.695	0.740	73.8	69.6	11.9	12.2	11.6	12.0	5 064	9 230

Source: UNDP. 2020. Human Development Report 2020: The next frontier: Human development and the Anthropocene. p. 356.

TABLE 2.
Gender Inequality Index (GII) (2019)

Region/country	GII value	Maternal mortality ratio (deaths per 100 000 live births)	Adolescent birth rate (births per 1 000 women aged 15–19 years)	Share of seats in parliament (% held by women)	Population with some secondary education (% aged 25 years and over)		Labour force participation rate (% aged 15 years and over)	
					Female	Male	Female	Male
Europe and Central Asia OECD countries	0.256	20	27.8	23.1	79.9	88.1	45.0	70.0
OECD countries	0.205	18	22.9	30.8	84.1	87.0	52.1	69.1
Albania	0.181	15	19.6	29.5	93.7	92.5	46.7	64.6
Armenia	0.245	26	21.5	23.5	97.3	97.2	47.1	65.9
Azerbaijan	0.323	26	55.8	16.8	93.9	97.5	63.4	69.7
Belarus	0.118	2	14.5	34.9	87.2	92.5	57.7	71.8
Bosnia and Herzegovina	0.149	10	9.6	21.1	74.0	89.3	35.4	58.1
Georgia	0.331	25	46.4	14.8	97.2	98.6	57.4	80.8
Kazakhstan	0.190	10	29.8	22.1	99.3	99.6	62.7	75.5
Kyrgyzstan	0.369	60	32.8	19.2	99.1	98.3	44.8	75.5
Republic of Moldova	0.204	19	22.4	25.7	96.6	98.1	40.5	46.0
Montenegro	0.109	6	9.3	28.4	88.0	98.2	46.5	62.8
North Macedonia	0.143	7	15.7	39.2	41.8	57.7	43.0	67.3
Serbia	0.132	12	14.7	37.7	86.3	93.6	47.4	62.8
Tajikistan	0.314	17	57.1	20.0	93.3	95.7	31.3	52.8
Turkey	0.306	17	26.6	17.4	50.2	72.2	34.0	72.6
Turkmenistan	...	7	24.4	25.0	...	...	51.4	78.3
Ukraine	0.234	19	23.7	20.5	94.0	95.2	46.7	63.1
Uzbekistan	0.288	29	23.8	16.4	99.9	100	52.4	78.1

Source: UNDP. 2020. Human Development Report 2020: The next frontier: Human development and the Anthropocene. p. 361.

TABLE 3.

Impact of COVID-19 on employment and working arrangements – ECA countries

Country/ territory	Loss of employment, (%)		Reduction in paid work hours, (%)		Change in working arrangements: % of respondents who switched to work-from-home	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Albania	12.1	17.4	30.9	28.2	50	27
Armenia	9.4	9.1	23.7	24.5	32	14
Azerbaijan	8.3	23.8	48.5	35.1	47	16
Belarus	22.3	22.1	2.8	3.3	n/a	n/a
Bosnia and Herzegovina	32.7	37.0	10.1	6.3	34	24
Georgia	25.9	30.6	30.9	31.5	54	30
Kazakhstan	39.0	36.1	26.3	21.5	56	35
Kosovo	22.9	21.4	5.1	9.4	42	19
Kyrgyzstan	42.0	43.7	9.6	10.4	75	63
Republic of Moldova	40.2	40.6	9.6	11.4	n/a	n/a
North Mace- donia	45.8	46.7	5.9	6.0	35	24
Serbia	22.1	27.9	7.3	4.3	48	30
Tajikistan	7.5	10.3	37.2	42.5	31	36
Turkey	46.0	57.1	18.8	14.2	18	14
Ukraine	4.0	4.8	21	24	n/a	n/a

Source: UN Women. 2020. Rapid Gender Assessment Survey on the Impacts of COVID-19. April–June.

TABLE 4.

Impact of COVID-19 on unpaid domestic and care work (UDW) – ECA countries

Country/ territory	Proportion of respondents with increased time spent on at least one UDW activity (%)		Proportion of respondents with increased time spent on at least three UDW activities (%)		Proportion of respondents with increased time spent on at least one UCW activity (%)		Proportion of respon- dents with increased time spent on at least three UCW activities (%)	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
Albania	76	66	27	20	72	62	33	21
Armenia	54	36	24	8	44	37	28	21
Azerbaijan	46	35	9	5	47	39	19	12
Belarus	43	32	8	8	58	50	18	13
Bosnia and Herzegovina	66	56	23	16	52	49	21	19
Georgia	45	35	22	7	62	57	28	23
Kazakhstan	61	46	31	15	65	49	33	26
Kosovo	71	59	38	26	67	58	33	26
Kyrgyzstan	80	58	55	20	69	44	49	14
Republic of Moldova	59	46	19	12	41	38	24	16
North Macedonia	53	50	38	21	32	27	16	13
Serbia	64	53	27	16	48	38	19	10
Tajikistan	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Turkey	86	65	41	25	52	51	21	18
Ukraine	75	59	24	14	74	61	41	31

Source: UN Women. 2020. Rapid Gender Assessment Survey on the Impacts of COVID-19. April–June.

ENDNOTES

Introduction

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Conclusion

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UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide.

UN Women supports UN Member States as they set global standards for achieving gender equality, and works with governments and civil society to design laws, policies, programmes and services needed to ensure that the standards are effectively implemented and truly benefit women and girls worldwide. It works globally to make the vision of the Sustainable Development Goals a reality for women and girls and stands behind women's equal participation in all aspects of life, focusing on four strategic priorities: Women lead, participate in and benefit equally from governance systems; Women have income security, decent work and economic autonomy; All women and girls live a life free from all forms of violence; Women and girls contribute to and have greater influence in building sustainable peace and resilience, and benefit equally from the prevention of natural disasters and conflicts and humanitarian action. UN Women also coordinates and promotes the UN system's work in advancing gender equality.





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