

# WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWER- MENT

Areas for joint actions  
in the Western Balkans



**WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT**  
Areas for Joint Actions in the Western Balkans

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)  
and  
Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)

**UNDP and RCC are committed to leaving no one behind  
and will collaborate to uphold this principle  
with actions in line with our respective mandates**

Sarajevo, 2020

## Contents

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 Rationale for UNDP and RCC joint actions	4
1.2 About the Women's Economic Empowerment – Areas for Joint Actions in Western Balkans	5
1.3 UNDP and RCC Areas for Joint Actions – three anchor approach	6
<b>2. Women's Economic Empowerment – Areas for Joint Actions in the Western Balkans</b>	<b>7</b>
2.1 Context and objectives	7
2.2 Drivers of change	9
Driver of change 1 - Promoting women's leadership in economies and decent work for women	10
Driver of change 2 - Transforming the public and private sectors to deliver for gender equality	11
Driver of change 3 - Accelerating women's entrepreneurship	12
Driver of change 4 - Recognizing and redistributing unpaid work and investing in the care economy	14
Driver of change 5 - Closing gender gaps in digitalization and STEM	15
<b>3. Priority areas for action</b>	<b>18</b>
3.1 Principles, values, commitments	18
3.2 Priority thematic areas for regional cooperation (2020-2022)	19
3.3 RCC and UNDP priority areas for joint actions (2022-2030)	20
3.4. Potential areas for action by potential partners (2022-2030)	22
<b>4. Regional cooperation</b>	<b>23</b>
4.1 Context of EU accession and the Berlin Process	23
4.2 EU and Western Balkans two-way cooperation on gender equality	24
4.3 Regional cooperation mechanism	24
4.4 Building on the SEESAC model	24
<b>Annex: Reader</b>	<b>26</b>

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

*For the European Union, this designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSC 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo Declaration of Independence.*

# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Rationale for UNDP and Regional Cooperation Council joint actions

Gender equality and women's empowerment are fundamental to sustainable development.

**Gender equality** underpins the prosperity and well-being of economies and societies. Half of the world's available human capital has a huge bearing on the equitable growth, competitiveness and future readiness of economies and businesses.

Globally, in 2020, women held only 25.2 percent of parliamentary seats and only 21.2 percent of ministerial positions. At this rate, **it will take another century to close the gender gap in political representation.**

In recent decades, there has been global progress in narrowing gender gaps in educational attainment and health. Women on average have gained in life expectancy. But the **economic gender gap has widened.** In the rapidly changing world of work, women's participation in the labour market is stalling and income disparities are growing due to women's underrepresentation in occupations and opportunities in lucrative growth sectors and higher paid positions, a trend that has led to income gaps.

**Women are key contributors to economies** as employees in the public and private sectors, as entrepreneurs, but also as caregivers across the formal and informal sectors. Despite the remarkable contributions to the family and society, women still do not have equal access to resources and assets, services and opportunities. Experts estimate that the gender gap in economic participation will take 257 years to close.

In the Western Balkans, patriarchal values and traditional norms, along with the low priority accorded to gender equality and women's empowerment, have hampered the implementation of progressive legal frameworks. As a result, gender inequalities persist in economic and political spheres. Gender segregation of occupations, women's under-employment, large share of unpaid care and domestic work and high levels of gender-based violence impede women's full economic empowerment.

According to the IMF (2017), almost two-thirds of working-age women in the Western Balkans are either unemployed or outside the labour force – a women's labour participation rate that is about seven percentage points lower than the EU average with little improvement in the past decade. EBRD acknowledges that challenges and barriers to women entrepreneurs persist, with women's entrepreneurship and employment tending to be concentrated in traditionally female occupations, such as the public sector or services sector, with limited possibilities for access to finance or know-how. According to the OECD 2019 SME Policy Index for the Western Balkans and Turkey, the Western Balkans region scores low in the "women's entrepreneurship" dimension, with an average of 3.12, with North Macedonia, Kosovo\* and Albania scoring the lowest.

UNDP, as one of the leading development entities within the United Nations, and RCC, as an inclusive regional body in South East Europe, propose this document to bring about women's economic

empowerment. Both organizations are committed to advancing gender equality, in line with their respective mandates, as a cornerstone of sustainable development, and both have presence and strong partners in the Western Balkans.

## 1.2. About the Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for Joint Actions in Western Balkans

**Gender equality**, a fundamental human right, is essential to achieving shared prosperity, peaceful societies and developing and maintaining a culture of dialogue, reconciliation, tolerance and openness towards cooperation across borders.

**It is a comprehensive framework** that outlines high-impact interventions to **improve the status of women** and advance gender equality in the Western Balkan region. **It presents a strategic vision for long-term change**, delineating actions to strengthen the human capital of women, whose participation and leadership in politics and the economy are crucial to inclusive socio-economic development.

**The framework outlines an all-encompassing approach involving a wide array of actors and constituencies.** They include: Western Balkan governments, the European Union, the United Nations and other multilateral organizations, international financial institutions, bilateral donors, women's networks, the private sector and business associations. The aim is to accelerate gender equality and women's economic empowerment, as envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its promise of leaving no one behind.

This agenda is at risk from the multidimensional impacts of the **COVID-19** crisis, which is worsening health, social and economic achievements and deepening gender-based inequalities, given the multiple structural and pre-existing social barriers faced by women. A failure to adopt a gender perspective in COVID-19 responses will affect the resilience of societies and the sustainable and just recovery of economies.

With multilateral cooperation and coordination as its key principles to advance gender equality, the UNDP and RCC initiative sets forth priority actions to promote policies that will turn the COVID-19 crisis into an opportunity that improves the well-being of all.

The initiative represents an integrated framework for actions to ensure enabling environment towards the elimination of gender discrimination across a wide array of policy areas and the creation of thriving conditions for women in the Western Balkans. The framework encompasses seven key thematic areas - "drivers of change" which reflect the needs of the region in the area of gender equality and women economic empowerment.

While the initiative outlines key thematic areas that need to be tackled in the short- and long-run if the principal objective is to be accomplished, RCC and UNDP will specifically focus on interventions in priority areas of **women's economic empowerment.** The initiative defines this as the capacity of women to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their economic contributions and enable a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth.

These are **women's participation in shaping societies and economies, labour market participation, including access to decent work, entrepreneurship, access to finance, gender gaps in the digital and green transformation and the gender pay gap.**

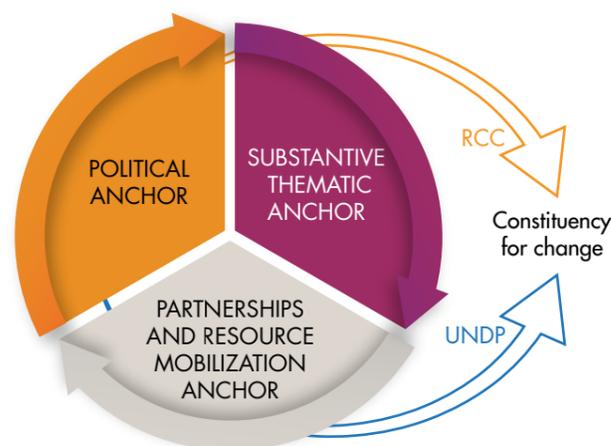
The initiative will link the dots across sectors with the objective of bringing in systemic reforms for gender equality and women's economic empowerment in the Western Balkans. It will help to forge strong partnerships and step up advocacy with stakeholders engaging in critical regional and EU platforms, such as the Berlin Process, to build bridges in the region, enhance cooperation with the EU, and co-create programmes to economically empower women and ultimately close the gender gap.

### 1.3. UNDP-RCC Areas for Joint Actions – three-anchor approach

**I. Political anchor:** this allows UNDP and the RCC to build on the political processes in the region to move forward this initiative in strong partnerships with Western Balkan governments. These are interested in deepening regional cooperation and socio-economic integration of the Western Balkan economies, while remaining committed to European perspectives and values. UNDP and RCC, together with Western Balkan economies, are seeking enhanced strategies and resources, making sure that political processes are serving relevant national institutions by ensuring they are responsive to women's economic challenges and needs, including in time of hardship caused by the pandemic.

**II. Substantive thematic anchor:** this involves articulating strategies, based on the analyses of past and current processes, and determining thematic entry points that will underpin systemic change. This in turn translates political will into policy reforms, boosts capacities and fosters a supportive enabling environment for gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

**III. Partnerships and resource mobilization anchor:** this involves merging different elements of power or influence, such as political and financial leverage, the role of experts, the business sector and civil society organizations, the impact of EU negotiations or the power of networking into partnerships around gender equality and women's economic empowerment programming to deliver tangible results and concrete outcomes. This vision is reflected in Jean Monnet's conviction that "European nations had to unite in order to survive," now more relevant than ever in the context of COVID-19.



## 2. Women's Economic Empowerment - Areas for Joint Actions in the Western Balkans

### 2.1 Context and objectives

Gender equality is a fundamental human right. It is also essential to achieving inclusive societies that allow individuals to realize their full human potential and are committed to sustainable development.

What most crises have in common is that they impact the most vulnerable and marginalized populations hardest, among whom women are disproportionately represented. As stated by the United Nations Secretary-General, "Everything we do during and after the COVID-19 crisis must aim to build more equal, inclusive and sustainable economies and societies." This includes gender-responsive economic and social policies and placing women's economic empowerment at the heart of the pandemic response and recovery plans.

The COVID-19 outbreak has shown the vital nature of the work performed by those providing essential services. It has also revealed fissures in the governance and economic systems that have poorly prioritized investments in social infrastructure and care services. The crisis makes it more urgent than ever before to decrease gender and other types of inequality, combat harmful norms and practices limiting women's access to work, and ensure that public policies and finance management systems take account of the needs of all citizens in all their diversity.

Women's economic security has been hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic. According to UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessment, over 40 percent of women did less paid work during the pandemic, with the share of women who had to reduce their working hours reaching 65 percent in Kosovo\*. This impact was most felt by younger women (in the age group 18-34), whose share varied from 33 percent in Albania to 61 percent in Kosovo\*. Self-employed women were also particularly affected due to reduced working hours or job losses.

The legislative and policy frameworks for gender equality in the Western Balkan economies are good from a macro perspective. However, institutional and organizational leadership and entrepreneurial capacities must be strengthened to improve their implementation.

A hiatus between policies and practices is frequently the consequence of a lack of political will and limited investments in human and financial resources for promoting women's empowerment. Other factors are structural impediments such as poor understanding of gender equality concepts, a lack of evidence based on sex- and age-disaggregated data and weak institutional oversight.

To prevent the erosion of gender equalities, it is important that policies in all areas are gender-responsive and formulated with an awareness of the circumstances of women. The availability and transparency

of sex- and age-disaggregated data are fundamental to these efforts. Awareness goes hand in hand with easy access to information and reliable data; the availability of data is in turn a prerequisite for evaluating and monitoring progress in gender equality policies. A better representation of women in decision-making and more consistent involvement of gender experts will strengthen women's voices and facilitate gender-responsive policy dialogues.

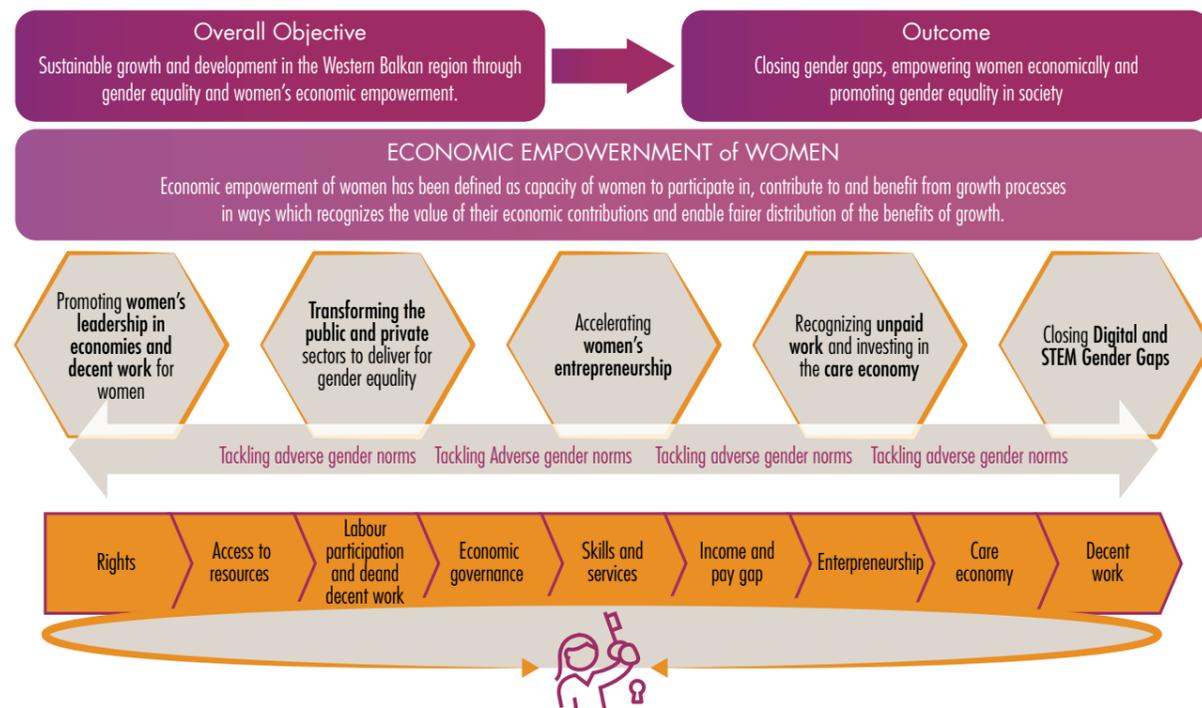
**Overall objective:** Sustainable growth and development in the Western Balkan region through gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

**Outcomes:** Closing gender gaps, empowering women economically and promoting gender equality in society.

**Outputs** to achieve the outcomes are the following:

- Ensuring accountable economic governance for rights, equality and wellbeing
- Investing in gender equality and women's economic empowerment
- Promoting women's leadership in economies and decent work for women
- Strengthening the public and private sectors to advance gender equality
- Closing gender gaps in digitalization and science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM)
- Promoting a culture of equality and shared responsibility between men and women

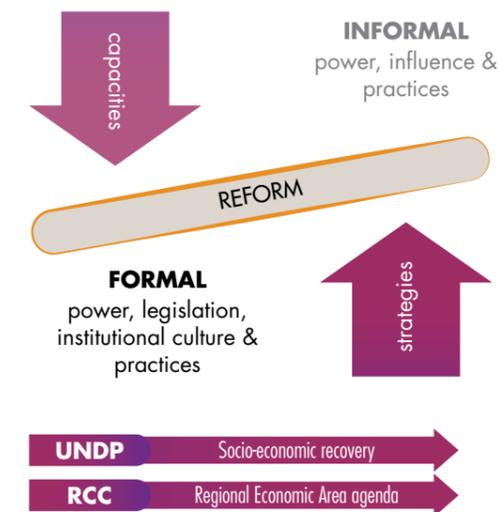
### Women's Economic Empowerment – Joint Action in Western Balkans



## 2.2 Drivers of change

Drivers of change – pathways towards achieving the intended results – recognize the context-specific economic, social and political factors required for the achievement of gender equality, their interconnectedness and power relationships from the institutional and structural levels to individuals as agents of change.

Drivers of change offer a structured set of factors, identified as critical to women's economic empowerment that can be applied flexibly across the Western Balkan region while also ensuring an economy-specific approach. Drivers of change do not present a simple set of actions to be undertaken individually; rather they propose an interconnected and mutually reinforcing set of reforms that can underpin systemic change.



A successful implementation of drivers of change depends on an understanding of the historic, political, social, economic and institutional context that better enables the identification of measures to be applied, shifting the focus from “what needs to be done” towards “how things should be done” and “with whom.”

The initiative identifies **following drivers of change**:

1. Driver of change 1 - Promoting women's leadership in economies and decent work for women
2. Driver of change 2 - Transforming the public and private sectors to deliver for gender equality
3. Driver of change 3 - Accelerating women's entrepreneurship
4. Driver of change 4 - Recognizing and redistributing unpaid work and investing in the care economy
5. Driver of change 5 - Closing gender gaps in digitalization and STEM

A substantive part of the initiative will be **tackling adverse gender norms**, recognised as the biggest transformer and enabler for achieving objectives and amplifying the impact of the drivers of change.

The joint efforts of RCC and UNDP will focus on actions to tackle women's economic empowerment with a clear understanding of the importance of continuous and synchronised attention to all drivers of change, as only by a whole-society approach can an enabling environment for gender-equal societies be achieved.

To this end, this document offers an all-encompassing framework to meet the needs of donors and potential partners needs and enables them to support and implement the actions under the drivers of change.

## Driver of change

### PROMOTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ECONOMIES & DECENT WORK FOR WOMEN

To meet their commitments on the SDGs, governments must harness the untapped potential of women and make this a part of any discussion on the status of women and gender equality. Development partners have a critical role to play in supporting the creation of an enabling environment in which women can exercise their rights. It is crucial that women are listened to, have choices and can participate in the decision-making that affects their lives and the wider society. In the economic sphere, although women are gradually making their presence in leadership felt, their full potential is still not capitalised on, a phenomenon also deeply rooted in patriarchal norms. The COVID-19 pandemic magnifies pre-existing inequalities; policymakers must therefore take account of its gender- and sex-differentiated impacts.

While the world is learning lessons in leadership from the different responses to COVID-19, there has been growing attention to how countries led by women have fared in the pandemic. There is evidence that women heads of government succeeded under these unprecedented circumstances by adopting more inclusive and diverse approaches. Women's potential for transformational leadership could become both a bellwether to better position the Western Balkan economies in the EU sphere and a key contributor to democratic governance.

#### Context

*The Western Balkans remains a region dominated by patriarchal gender norms. Extensive research identifies this as the greatest challenge to economic empowerment and gender equality. Gender stereotypes and attitudinal bias influence perceptions and the position of women in the labour market and society in general. Nearly two in five persons agree that men should have more rights than women in employment when job opportunities are scarce. There are few women mayors and bank directors.*

#### Action points:

1. Empower the regional women's movement - women's civil society, entrepreneurial, trade union, media and political networks - to confront the backlash against gender equality and women's rights and become both a force and a means to bypass the traditional gatekeepers of decision-making, and push women's economic empowerment agenda forward.

2. Establish a leadership academy to nurture women leaders to be in the vanguard of #NextGen policies, especially to ensure gender equality in economy, digital transformation and the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
3. Establish a Gender Monitor to regularly measure progress on gender gaps.
4. Increase awareness of the socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 on gender equality and highlight women's contribution to economies and societies requesting gender aware responses.
5. Revisit macroeconomic policies to reflect a gender perspective.
6. Eliminate gender discrimination in property rights, including land, housing and associated resources, and access to and control over productive resources, including labour and capital.
7. Create legal conditions for women in business to access grant schemes as part of economic recovery measures for COVID-19.
8. Assess situations and policies and advocate for decent work including assure equal opportunity and treatment in employment, decent working time, combining work, family and personal life and safe work environment.

## Driver of change

### TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS TO DELIVER FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Building a strong commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment in the work of institutions and in policy responses is critical to a just and sustainable recovery from COVID-19. It is important that government institutions integrate gender perspectives at all levels – in sector policies, budgets, research and analysis, data collection and monitoring frameworks. The public and private sectors are key contributors to these efforts. Constructive dialogues and strategic partnerships, building on principles of inclusive growth, shared prosperity, economic efficiency and social responsibility, can lead to transformational changes in the public and private sectors.

Encouraging a sense of shared responsibility and solidarity among governments and the public and private sectors can generate partnerships for gender-responsive COVID-19 measures. The pandemic has prompted fiscal policy responses, primarily aimed at supporting the health sector and addressing the immediate socio-economic impacts. But lockdown measures – in particular, extended school closures, lack of normal childcare services, increased care needs of the elderly and the sick – have had the most impact on women's paid and unpaid work. In the long run, without proactive measures, women's economic independence may become a silent victim of the pandemic. Systematic gender-responsive budgeting and gender-impact assessments, easy access to quality sex-disaggregated data and gender indicators in all sectors and skills and thematic gender expertise in public institutions would support governments in devising more equitable responses.

## Context

*In the Western Balkan region, although women make up 49 percent of the public administration, they are concentrated in certain branches that tend to be lower paid. Gender inequalities are also widespread in the private sector, with women accounting for only 14.2 percent of top managers in companies. Women's high rate of inactivity in the labour market in the region is a reflection of the many obstacles they face, arising from education, family and care responsibilities and social norms. The activity rate for women is only 53 percent while for men the figure is as high as 73 percent.*

## Action points:

1. Develop accountability frameworks for gender equality in public institutions and the private sector, introducing gender standards across all levels of an organization, including mandatory gender-responsive budgeting.
2. Ensure diversification of active labour market programmes, to meet the needs of unemployed women and young girls and address the challenges faced by employers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.
3. Identify, share and promote successful experiences and innovative practices to reduce gender gaps and advance gender equality in the workplace.
4. Enhance women's participation on the supervisory boards of companies, financial institutions and other decision-making bodies, and facilitate mentorship programmes to advance women in leadership positions.
5. Introduce gender quotas in the procurement of goods and services.
6. Introduce a certification for gender equality standards in the public and private sectors to attract and retain greater diversity of talent; promote gender parity at all levels especially in leadership; improve job satisfaction, competitiveness and productivity; enhance work-life balance; endorse flexible working arrangements; and enhance women's access to non-traditional jobs.

## Driver of change

### ACCELERATING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Women remain underrepresented in the labour market even though they outnumber men as university graduates across the Western Balkans and the EU. Working arrangements for women do not automatically lead to a more balanced sharing of care and domestic work at home, so they cannot freely choose their occupations or have the same job opportunities as men. Women tend to work in low-paid sectors, earning less than men. Prevailing gender norms and the burden of care duties perpetuate gender segregation in the formal labour market and informal economy. Women's greater participation in the formal economy is essential to realize the SDG vision of decent work for all, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. But globally women are most of the workers in informal employment and informal trade. 510 million women (40 percent of all employed women) work in the sectors most affect-

ed by the crisis, compared to 36.6 percent of men. As a result, women account for an estimated 54 percent of global job losses from the pandemic. Women are underrepresented among entrepreneurs and business owners, with a tendency to operate in smaller, non-capital-intensive sectors, which often cannot generate high and sustainable incomes. Globally, an estimated one per cent of public procurement contracts go to women-owned enterprises. Gender stereotypes represent one of the main barriers to women's entrepreneurship: the most cited reason impeding women entrepreneurs from establishing a firm is that entrepreneurship is stereotyped as a "masculine task". A recent [survey](#) also showed that women-led enterprises face more prominent obstacles to the use of financial products and services. Traditional instruments, such as training and grants, do not always reach them, and need to be expanded, combined with innovative approaches.

## Context

*Women's employment in the EU countries is 67 percent, while that of men is 79 percent (12 percent gender gap). In the Western Balkans, the employment rate for women is only 45 percent, compared to 65 percent for men. Three in ten women work in the traditionally low-paid education, health and social sectors, while almost a third of men are employed in the relatively better-paid STEM fields. Gender segregation is also evident in entrepreneurship, with women setting up businesses in the informal economy and lower-paid sectors, lacking access to credit and networks. Women represent only 27.5 percent of business owners. The Western Balkans GDP could be 20 percent higher, on average, if women were to participate in the labour market at the same levels as men do; five percent of GDP loss is due to gender gaps in entrepreneurship.*

## Action points:

1. Increase access to finance for women, especially in rural areas, through grant schemes, combined with training programmes that enhance financial literacy.
2. Encourage innovation investments and soft support for women's entrepreneurship by giving them access to technical, scientific, innovative and business networks.
3. Support women-owned businesses entering the supply chain in diverse industries and transiting work towards the online economy.
4. Create gender-sensitive business training and entrepreneurship upskilling programmes to promote women in business and boost cooperation, market connections and networking opportunities for businesswomen and entrepreneurs across the Western Balkans and the EU.
5. Promote policies to empower women entrepreneurs and COVID-19- socio-economic response plans and other response measures.
6. Introduce policy reforms to address women's access to the labour market, job retention and career advancement on an equal footing with men.

## Driver of change

### RECOGNIZING AND REDISTRIBUTING UNPAID WORK AND INVESTING IN THE CARE ECONOMY

Progress on the agenda to expand women's economic empowerment depends, to a significant extent, on the success in closing the gender gap in unpaid work and investing in quality care services and decent care jobs. Globally, women shoulder most of the unpaid care work and domestic labour in the household, performing 76.2 percent of total hours devoted to these activities. In some EU countries, the uneven burden of family responsibilities, along with a lack of affordable childcare, has been noted as a key barrier for women's economic activities since it reduces their chances of growing professional networks. Gender inequality in unpaid care work is the missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes, such as labour force participation, wages and job quality. Research shows that investing in a social care infrastructure yields multiple economic and social benefits. It creates employment for men and women and promotes inclusive growth, while reducing gender inequalities and enhancing human development. The pandemic has unveiled the global crisis in care: with access to normal services cut off, women effectively subsidized the paid economy by performing unpaid care work at home, supporting the overall system's functioning at a time of crisis. Recognizing and redistributing unpaid work through social care expansion is thus a strategy to achieve several Sustainable Development Goals and advance women's economic empowerment.

#### Context

*Women in the Western Balkan region perform on average three times more unpaid work than men and spend about half as much time in paid work. Women undertake almost 80 percent of care work in their families, on average three times as much as men. During the pandemic, more women than men reported spending more time on care work at home. Many reported devoting more time to at least three unpaid domestic activities. Increased childcare responsibilities as a result of continuing school closures will result in more women leaving their jobs – a prospect that adds to the urgency of measures to redistribute care work and support those in need.*

#### Action points:

1. Promote the recognition of the volume of unpaid care work shouldered by women and its role in sustaining productive economies and societies.
2. Support public investment in the care sectors and promote workplace and social policy reforms to transform gender norms in unpaid work.
3. Facilitate public investments in affordable and reliable care facilities, especially in rural areas.
4. Tackle entrenched gender norms and stereotypes addressing disproportionate burden of unpaid care work, including promoting men as role models engaging in household and care work.

5. Ensure decent work and social protection for paid care workers, including migrant workers.
6. Introduce targeted measures to recognize and redistribute care – i) create expanded networks of trained caregivers who could build the infrastructure of social care industry; ii) increase income support to households facing increased care burdens with loss of income due to COVID-19; iii) Promote employer- or state-funded provision of childcare or tax policies that encourage both spouses to work, and support businesses investing in childcare plans with subsidies and grants; iv) Promote family-friendly policies, including flexible work arrangements, to support workers with increased care burdens during the pandemic and beyond.

## Driver of change

### CLOSING GENDER GAPS IN DIGITALIZATION AND STEM

Digital technology has impacted our lives significantly. It is transforming the labour market, changing the way businesses and political networks function, and affecting education and other social spheres. Such a transformation can worsen pre-existing gender-based inequalities. The greatest challenge to closing the economic gender gap is occupational segregation, resulting in women's underrepresentation in emerging tech and digitally driven jobs. For example, in cloud computing, only 12 percent of professionals are women. While the Fourth Industrial Revolution poses new challenges for gender equality, it also offers opportunities to reduce gender inequalities. Making use of these opening spaces requires urgent measures to ensure that workplace strategies and policies are driven by gender-equality norms, and to equip women with the skills to deal with the data and digital transition.

#### Context

*In the Western Balkan region, the share of women in STEM occupations is as low as 14 percent. Widespread gender pay gaps, unchallenged gender stereotypes, gender bias in technology (e.g., in design, production and research) characterize the tech sector in general, resulting in economic losses. Gender inequality is also highly visible in asset ownership. Worldwide, some 327 million fewer women than men have a smartphone. Moreover, only 48 percent of women use the internet, compared to 58 percent of men. Women-owned start-ups receive 23 percent less funding and are 30 percent less likely to have a positive exit compared to male-owned businesses.*

#### Action points:

1. Encourage employers and policymakers to adopt an ecosystem approach to assess how women are progressing along the digital inclusion continuum and enable women to shape digital, financial and property products, services and policies.
2. Develop a sub-regional online advocacy platform to promote gender equality in STEM fields engaging partners in multilateral organizations, private sector, universities and women's networks.
3. Promote formal and non-formal STEM-related education among girls and women.

4. Introduce education, training and mentorship programmes on the digital economy for women entrepreneurs including traineeship programmes for young women offering digital spaces, exposure to leadership debates and innovation opportunities.
5. Introduce gender dimensions into policies and systems for automatization, digitalization, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies and ensure women's participation in designing, developing and managing STEM products/services.
6. Introduce measures to accelerate women's empowerment in the online economy and develop affirmative measures for work-from-home opportunities – such as online mentorship.
7. Support women's entrepreneurship in STEM, by facilitating access to online networks for mentoring, coaching and provision of business support services, access to start-up finance, and innovative web-based instruments for women entrepreneurs to access financial capital.
8. Introduce measures to support older women to overcome the digital gender gap and benefit from employment opportunities.
9. Reduce gender discrimination in recruitment, promotions and gender pay gap in STEM occupations, supporting businesses in adopting strategies and policies that reduce discriminatory practices and promote and expand women's participation in STEM.

## **Priority areas for UNDP and RCC Areas for Joint Actions**

**2020 - 2030**



## 3. Priority areas for joint action

### 3.1 Principles, values, commitments

There is a growing understanding that the unprecedented economic crisis caused by the pandemic affects different groups in societies differently. Women disproportionately carry the burden of unpaid care work. They also serve as frontline health and social workers during the pandemic. Structural gender inequalities and continuously widening gender gaps in economic empowerment make gender-responsive socio-economic measures and the targeted economic empowerment of women urgent imperatives.

UNDP and RCC are keen to **establish game-changing partnerships**, as gender equality and **women's economic empowerment are more than ever a top priority**.

#### Principles, values and commitments in co-designing the Areas for Joint Actions

- **Establish** coordinated and mutually reinforcing **partnerships** of national, regional and international stakeholders, committed to women's empowerment and embracing game-changing approaches.
- **Take advantage of the multiple links** between the Western Balkans and EU member States under the Berlin Process, to achieve the goals of the EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 by strengthening regional cooperation.
- **Promote a two-way approach** and peer learning, merging good practices from the Western Balkans with the most progressive EU policies on gender equality, generating new productive energy for women's economic empowerment and allowing all parties involved to acquire knowledge.
- **Enable modular programming** by creating a common regional framework that enables economy-level flexibility determined by their specific needs.
- **Co-design a systemic approach** targeting social and institutional change that leads to sustainable development, by **making gender equality a strategic value** and encouraging a critical and holistic analysis of the opportunities, constraints and power relations.
- **Jointly galvanize leadership** for women's economic empowerment and investment in closing gender gaps.
- **Jointly initiate a leadership programme** for young women to effectively advocate for their needs and act as agents of social change.
- **Jointly initiate regional cooperation** in empowering individuals and communities, by developing national capacities for systems thinking, by scaling competencies for the future of work and by advancing gender policies for the next generation.
- **Collaborate with political institutions** to diminish mistrust and increase social cohesion, engaging the media to promote responsible journalism.

- **Co-design innovative catalytic interventions** with **women, men and youth** to encourage participation, entrepreneurship and foster employment opportunities, education, capacity development and social and economic inclusion, creating a culture of gender equality.

### 3.2 Priority thematic areas for regional cooperation (2020-2022)

Through a regional approach UNDP and RCC will make optimal use of limited resources to maximize the impact on women's rights and gender equality in the Western Balkan region. Engaging a multitude of partners throughout the Western Balkan region allows both organizations to use their capacities more effectively, sharing knowledge and capitalizing on the advantages inherent in a regional approach, and collaborating to strengthen the capacities of national and regional stakeholders to deliver on gender equality.

**Driver of change 1** - Promoting women's leadership in economies and decent work for women

**Driver of change 2** - Transforming the public and private sectors to deliver for gender equality

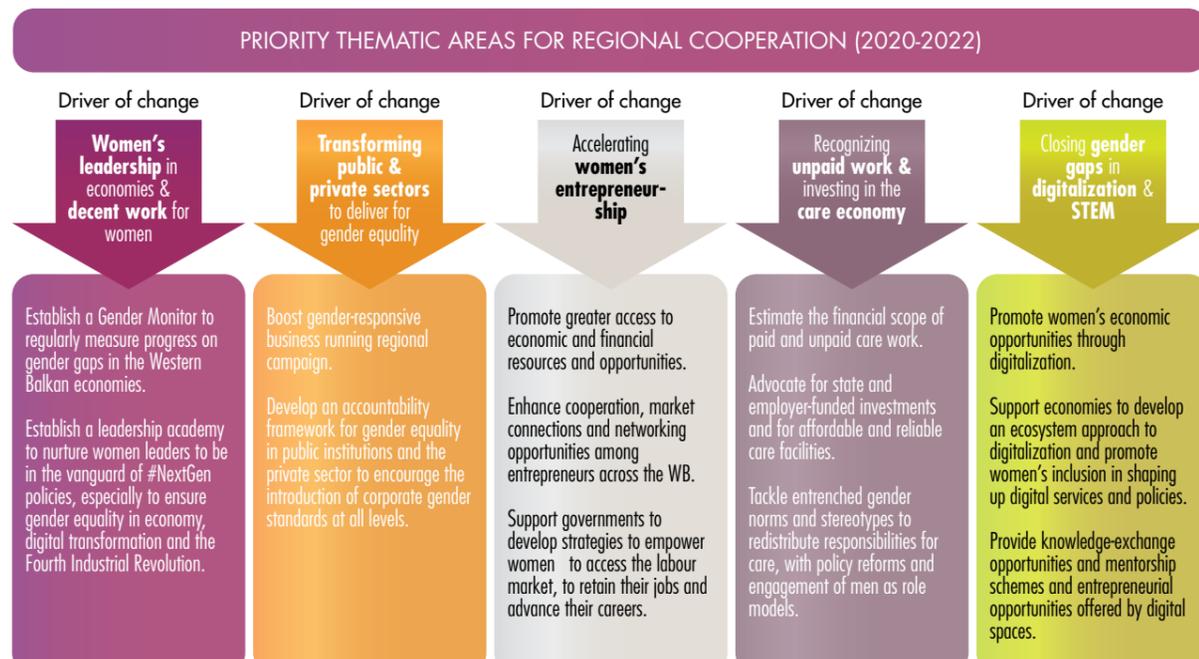
**Driver of change 3** - Accelerating women's entrepreneurship

**Driver of change 4** - Recognizing and redistributing unpaid work and investing in the care economy

**Driver of change 5** - Closing gender gaps in digitalization and STEM



The regional thematic focus will adapt to the needs and demands of governments and other key stakeholders. The current context requires a regional focus on the following priorities:



### 3.3 RCC and UNDP priority areas for joint actions (2022-2030)

#### PROMOTING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP IN ECONOMIES AND DECENT WORK FOR WOMEN

- Further reform and enact legislation with affirmative measures for gender equality and introduce mandatory gender-responsive budgeting.
- Create legal conditions for women-owned businesses to access grant schemes as part of economic recovery measures for COVID-19.
- Develop legal and regulatory measures for the operational and financial resilience of women's organizations as part of COVID-19 recovery measures.

#### Gender mainstreaming in socio-economic recovery plans (COVID-19)

- Develop an economic regulatory framework for mainstreaming gender in socio-economic support measures and recovery plans, including gender-responsive budgeting.
- Empower women leaders and women's associations to develop legal and regulatory measures to address gender discrimination and provide immediate support to women during crises.
- Expand the coverage of socio-economic support measures to informal wage workers in formal and informal establishments.
- Recognize economic violence as a form of gender-based violence and introduce mechanisms to prevent and reduce harm.

#### CLOSING GENDER GAPS IN DIGITALIZATION AND STEM

##### Education for future jobs

- Strengthen women's access to opportunities in education and careers in STEM fields.
- Introduce education and training programmes in the digital economy for women entrepreneurs, and better equip younger generations with the skills to succeed in the future world of work.

##### Close gender gaps

- Introduce gender dimensions into the policies and systems for automatization, digitalization, artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies.
- Develop tailored digital platforms to support the online economy and strengthen digital offers to expand women's business networks.

#### ACCELERATING WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

##### Access

- Increase women's access to finance through grants and concessional loans.
- Set up a fund to support women's transition towards the online economy.
- Enable access to resources for rural women and develop training programmes that unlock the business potential of rural women.

##### Support women entrepreneurs

- Create business training and entrepreneurship upskilling programmes to boost cooperation, growing market connections and networking opportunities for businesswomen and entrepreneurs across the Western Balkans and the EU.
- Partner with multilateral institutions to support governments in strategies to empower women to access the labour market, retain their jobs and advance their careers.
- Enable networks of women entrepreneurs, in their professional capacities, to become part of the supply chain in COVID-19 response.
- Unleash women's entrepreneurial and leadership potential in the hi-tech and innovation sectors.

### 3.4. Potential areas for action by potential partners (2022-2030)

#### TRANSFORMING THE PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTORS TO DELIVER FOR GENDER EQUALITY

##### Institutional transformation

- Introduce certification for gender equality standards in public institutions and the private sector to recognize corporate contributions to gender equality across all levels of the organization.

##### Create awareness

- Tackle stereotypes and promote gender equality.
- Create awareness about the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on gender equality and address stigmatization.

##### Change the business culture

- Pilot with institutions that are able and willing to integrate gender perspectives at all levels, including through sector policies, budgets, research, data collection and analysis, and introduce gender quotas in management and in procurement of goods and services, particularly in COVID-19 response.

Identify and promote innovative practices to reduce gender gaps in the workplace, with attention to the COVID-19 context.

##### Leadership for gender equality in the context of COVID-19

- Support region-wide campaigns to create positive cultural change and promote role models for gender equality.

#### RECOGNIZING AND REDISTRIBUTING UNPAID WORK AND INVESTING IN THE CARE ECONOMY

##### Care economy investment

- Facilitate governments' investments for affordable and reliable care facilities.
- Advocate for policies to increase men's contribution to unpaid care work.

##### Recognition of unpaid work

- Promote the recognition of women's paid and unpaid contribution to the care economy and tackle entrenched gender norms and stereotypes to redistribute responsibilities for care.
- Promote labour-saving technologies and digitalization.

## 4. Regional cooperation chapter

### 4.1 Context of EU accession and the Berlin Process

The major international human rights conventions and EU treaties recognize equality between women and men as a fundamental right and a common value. The importance of gender equality has been emphasized in various EU policy documents, including in European Commission progress reports for the Western Balkan economies. These documents also recognize numerous challenges to gender equality in the region, from gender stereotyping and gender-based violence and the lack of gender mainstreaming, to discrimination in the labour market, political participation and decision-making.

The promotion of gender equality is a core value of the EU, aimed at increasing efforts at the local, regional and national level. Being a core value of the EU, the fundamental right and key principle of the EU pillar of social rights, gender equality is considered not only to be an essential condition for an innovative, competitive and thriving EU economy, but also part of the accession conditions. During the accession talks, the EU monitors the implementation of these fundamental rights in candidate countries through chapter 19 (social policy and employment) and, more importantly, chapter 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and chapter 24 (justice, freedom and security).

The highest political commitment to different policy areas of regional importance is demonstrated by Western Balkan leaders through the intergovernmental cooperation initiative, the [Berlin Process](#), an initiative to boost regional cooperation among the Western Balkan economies and their European integration.

The Berlin Process Summit 2020 reinforced the EU perspective of the Western Balkans and maintained the dynamics of the EU integration process. Co-chaired by Bulgaria and the Republic of North Macedonia, Sofia Summit brought about the endorsement of Common Regional Market (CRM) 2021-2024 Action Plan by Western Balkan Leaders, aimed to increase the attractiveness and competitiveness of the region and to reduce the distance to EU markets. CRM Action Plan sets out a transformative agenda for enhanced regional economic integration in the region based on the EU four freedoms and enriched with trade, digital, investment, innovation and industry areas.

As part of regional actions, CRM agenda encapsulates activities dedicated to encouraging women to pursue entrepreneurship careers, increase their participation in education and STEM careers, take part in digital upskilling, establish women entrepreneurs' networks and women-led innovative teams. Women can play a crucial role in maximizing human capital development, in improving innovation, inclusion and growth in the economy, in attaining the competitive Common Regional Market in the Western Balkans and in boosting the attractiveness of the regional market. By endorsing the CRM 2021-2024 Action Plan, the Western Balkan Leaders acknowledge the importance of addressing and advocating for pertinent socio-economic challenges women are facing throughout the Western Balkans.

## 4.2 EU and the Western Balkans: two-way cooperation on gender equality

The [EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025](#) represents a reference framework for a more gender-balanced and integrated approach to a range of policies. The importance of raising awareness of gender equality not only EU member states but also EU neighbours and potential candidates, including the Western Balkan economies. The EU supports candidates and potential candidates in developing gender equality policies aligned with EU priorities.

Against this background, two-way cooperation between the EU and Western Balkans will be pursued with the objective of achieving common standards and devising policies pertinent to women's needs and challenges in the region. This initiative will focus on two elements, encompassing, on the one hand, public administration reform and economic reforms and, on the other, working towards women's inclusion in STEM education and professional careers, with a strong focus on the digitalization sector in the post-COVID-19 context.

## 4.3 Regional cooperation mechanism

Given the success of regional cooperation among Western Balkan economies in many spheres, setting up a platform for lasting and sustainable cooperation on gender-related issues offers untapped potential for the region. Ensuring gender equity and equality in all spheres contributes to inclusive growth, shared prosperity and sustainable development.

The region can profit from existing regional cooperation mechanisms across a range of policy areas, including fostering regional cooperation and good neighbourly relations, adapting them to address gender inequalities. A priority of regional cooperation is to reach a common understanding of the importance of designing tailor-made actions to achieve regional objectives on women's empowerment in the Western Balkans.

## 4.4 Building on the SEESAC model

To use the SEESAC model to ensure synergy and encourage political engagement throughout government structures, contact points/counterparts within relevant ministries need to be established. One possibility would be to identify a single contact point in each government to ensure a regular flow of information and bring the contact points together on a regular basis (e.g., twice a year) to present the progress made by their governments in implementing the areas for joint actions. This would provide the basis for a comprehensive regional cooperation mechanism.

Additionally, contact points from individual ministries (e.g., labour, human and minority rights, science and education) could be brought together to exchange experiences on individual aspects of the initiative, and explore possibilities for tangible regional actions. Together, all the focal and contact points could provide a platform for training sessions/seminars to present the most effective approaches for the implementation of the areas for joint actions, which may then be disseminated in ministries.

Similarly, the legislative dimension can be addressed through cooperation and coordination among parliaments in the region and their relevant committees. This may also involve a supporting role of keeping the legislatures aware and ensuring that the proposed areas for joint actions are presented in national parliaments.

# Annex

## READER

### Gender equality and women's economic empowerment

#### Key regional issues framing the Areas for Joint Actions

#### The Western Balkans from a gender perspective: untapped human capital potential

Achieving gender equality in the Western Balkan economies and territory<sup>1</sup> has been a continual challenge, despite improved legal frameworks that are broadly compliant with the international standards. Conflicts in its recent history, nationalism, chauvinism, a lack of trust in electoral processes and institutions, misogyny in public discourse and media and the recent rise in the influence of religion and of religious leaders have been additional obstacles to gender equality and women's empowerment.

The [Beijing+25 Regional Review Meeting](#) in Geneva in 2019 revealed that the Western Balkan economies have achieved much progress since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. But a growing **backlash against women's rights** has overshadowed these achievements, with uncertainty as to their sustainability. Right-wing and populist trends are jeopardizing women's hard-won gains for equal rights and opportunities. For example, abortion is a frequently challenged women's right, while rising birth rates for boys as the preferred gender reveal a trend in female foeticide. Gender-based violence in all forms predominantly affects women. Furthermore, some women in politics are increasingly advocating more for measures that support motherhood than for the economic empowerment of women. This warps public perceptions and impairs a progressive feminist agenda for women's political participation and gender equality principles that are aligned with the global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and SDGs 5, 10 and 16.

Within the political and policy development dynamics throughout the Western Balkan economies, gender equality is generally accorded low priority in any debate. The **most important challenges** to gender equality **are traditional values, perceptions, attitudes and social norms** among both women and men. These are deeply rooted and contribute to gender inequalities in the region, as manifested through larger-scale feminized poverty; women's insecurities in the labour market; a growing share of unpaid care work; wide gender pay and pension gaps; and uneven progress on tackling harassment and violence. Together, these depict women as chronically underrepresented in virtually all facets of public life and decision-making.

Political and economic decisions made by governments and overseen by parliaments as key governing pillars often ignore gender equality dimensions and continuously fail to allocate sufficient financial resources. There has been progress in women's representation in parliaments across the Western Balkan economies. But if we **look beyond mechanisms for the representation of women in decision-making**, and

<sup>1</sup> Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Republic of North Macedonia, Kosovo (references to Kosovo shall be understood to be in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999), Montenegro and Serbia.

#### Women's Economic Empowerment: Areas for joint actions in the Western Balkans

analyse policies, the legislation, institutional culture and knowledge on gender equality, discrepancies abound between the gender equality narrative and the political actions and results achieved in gender equality. An understanding of the multidimensional nature of gender inequalities and their implications for the work of governments and parliaments in the Western Balkan economies is missing.

Women in the Western Balkans are more likely than men to **become and remain unemployed**, have fewer chances to participate in the labour market and must often accept lower quality jobs. An important determinant of gender inequalities at work is the unequal distribution of **unpaid care and household work** between women and men. Women undertake three times more unpaid work than men and spend about half as much time in paid work. At the local level, structural barriers, including a lack of adequate infrastructure and access to services and markets, exacerbate gender gaps and prevent women from participating fully and equally in the economy.

The International Monetary Fund, in its [paper on increasing the role of women](#) in the Western Balkan economies, revealed that economies in this region have some of the **lowest rates of women's labour force participation** and employment across Europe. Almost two-thirds of working age women in the Western Balkan region are either inactive or unemployed, a trend that has a negative impact on the availability of human capital in a region that faces high emigration and a declining working-age population.

An overall **lack of decent jobs** impacts women's ability to earn pensions. The **gender pay gap** for the Western Balkan economies is 18 percent, which means that women only earn 82 percent of the average salary paid to men for equal work performed. Furthermore, the low participation of women in the labour force raises questions about the adequacy of social protection systems, whose payments and entitlements are linked to formal employment. Women's lower rates of labour force participation compared to men results in an average 40 percent gender gap in pensions.

Women are overrepresented in the **informal work sectors and in vulnerable employment** that is often poorly paid, involves long working hours, with insecure jobs, hazardous working conditions and with no or poor labour rights. Women working in the informal economy lack social protection, which is a challenge both for women and for the societies they live in. For societies, the lack of social protection coverage undermines inclusive growth, weakens social justice and challenges the realization of human rights.

Furthermore, **digitalization** has transformed the nature of the labour market and changed the way we interact thereby impacting the future of work. All present new challenges, but also offer opportunities to address gender inequalities. The utilization of these opening spaces for the economic advancement requires timely and effective action, including by ensuring that the workforce strategies and policies are gender-equity driven and by improving women's skills to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the **Fourth Industrial Revolution**. However, the gender division in the STEM fields in education in the Balkans is mirrored in labour market divides, where the share of **women in STEM occupations is 14 percent**, with almost no change over the past decade.

**Women's entrepreneurship** plays a significant role in the development of national economies and growth. But considerable challenges and barriers for women entrepreneurs have kept de facto gender

*Gender inequality in the labour market leads to untapped talent and potential that limits economic growth prospects. GDP in the Western Balkan economies could be almost 20 percent higher if women were to participate in the labour market at the same levels as men do.*

equality [lagging significantly behind](#), with women's entrepreneurship and employment tending to be concentrated in traditionally female occupations such as the public sector or services sector and more limited access to the finance and know-how they need to develop and grow their businesses. With little support from communities, women themselves tend to believe that they lack entrepreneurship skills. The OECD finds that all six economies tend to score lower than Turkey in Entrepreneurial learning and women's entrepreneurship. All these reduce women's chances for self-employment and economic empowerment.

*The EU accession process includes gender equality as a prerequisite for accession – an essential element in making the democratic transformation of a country more resilient. However, some estimates point to the fact that some societies will need another 170 years to reach gender equality.*

### Western Balkan gender equality in the EU context

Some Balkan countries are members of the EU, while the majority aspire to EU membership. While women in the Western Balkans struggle for equality in complex and demanding post-socialist and transitional democracies, some EU countries are also making [slow progress](#) in achieving gender equality.

The [Gender Equality Index for the EU](#) shows that **progress must be accelerated**. Political pressure and legislative actions have improved the gender balance in political and economic decision-making, with advances in women's representation most evident in private company boards. However, progress on gender equality in financial decision-making in the EU is barely moving forward, in particular among the Western Balkan economies. Men dominate in positions of the national central banks and finance ministries. Similarly, in the Western Balkans, the share of women on the boards of national central banks has risen by just three percent over ten years (from 16 percent in 2005 to 19 percent in 2015).

**The gender gap** in employment in the EU, including in the Western Balkans, is extensive and persistent. The full-time employment rate for women in the EU is 40 percent and 56 percent for men. The phenomenon of **gender segregation** in employment is especially resistant to change. Although women's employment rate is gradually increasing, their paid working hours are decreasing. Women-dominated occupations in education, health and welfare remain highly segregated and relatively low-paid fields, with no change in the last decade. While STEM is the fastest growing sector, **the number of women in STEM is declining**. Men represent over 80 percent of workers in STEM occupations, while women comprise 70 percent of workers in education, health and welfare occupations. Less than one percent of 15 year-old girls have an interest in ICT careers.

While Sweden and Denmark are consistently the most gender-equal societies, others like Slovakia and Hungary are still finding their way to ratifying the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence.

In response to the above challenges, the EU is increasing its demand for a proper response on gender equality concerns, including through its [Gender Equality Strategy 2020](#) pursued as a clear agenda for action by its member States and candidates.

Merging good practices from the Western Balkans with the most progressive EU policies on gender equality can generate productive energy for women's economic empowerment, spearheading a new generation of policies and strategies for gender equality during the last Decade for Action of the SDGs.

### Gender and COVID-19 – what have we learned so far?

#### **A pandemic magnifies all existing inequalities.**

COVID-19 could be the first crisis where gender dimensions are openly recognized by policy-makers. It is also an opportunity to acknowledge that the care economy, sustained mainly by women's unpaid work, serves and subsidizes the paid economy, supporting entire societies in times of crisis.

Nevertheless, the **care economy has not received the attention** it should have in the current policy discussions and debates. A significant share of unpaid labour, such as child-care, elderly care and care for sick family members at home, falls on women. Women are also disproportionately concentrated in paid care employment sectors like education, health systems and social welfare systems, and account for almost 80 percent of the workforce in these sectors.

**COVID-19 has triggered a crisis in care** in many ways: a) Pandemic measures are like physical distancing are incompatible with caring labour for the elderly or children; b) The pandemic expands the demand for care at home due to school closures; c) it reduces time for income-generating activities, increasing the number of working hours in unpaid work and reducing paid working hours; and d) it leads to shrinking household income and affects household dynamics. A falling demand for labour in the private sector due to the closure of businesses is primarily affecting jobs in the service sector where most women work.

*The COVID-19 crisis is a multidimensional crisis. It is a health, care and economic crisis. An effective response has to address all three dimensions.*

*The health crisis affects social, economic and political inequalities, and gender inequalities are in particular danger of escalating.*

*The pandemic has intensified existing economic inequalities and vulnerabilities, amplifying the existing structural barriers experienced by women.*

*Policy responses have to take the gender dimension into account. Failure to adopt a gender perspective will have an impact on the future economic recovery.*

*International cooperation and coordination need to be ensured to advance gender equality principles and to put forward priority actions promoting equality-oriented policies. Only then will the COVID-19 hardship turn into an opportunity to improve universal well-being.*

*COVID-19 might smash the centuries-long struggle for women's economic independence, making it a silent victim of the pandemic.*

**Decreasing household income** is changing the household power dynamics. One of the direct consequences of these **shifting dynamics** is **gender-based violence**, which significantly increases women's vulnerability. Quarantine measures reduce women's mobility, thus further constraining the options for an escape from abuse.

As **social protection** programmes and systems are being reformed in response to the COVID-19 crisis, gender considerations are usually overlooked in the urgent need to **save lives and provide critical economic support**. However, this has longer-term consequences. Women, who constitute most of frontline health and social workers, are at greater risk of infection, stigma and loss of income in case of illness. Pandemics also make it more difficult for women and girls, youth and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Intersex and Queer+ persons to access health services. Pandemics force the diversion of resources from sexual and reproductive health, including maternal health, contraceptives and comprehensive abortion services.

Thus, **expanding social protection** during the COVID-19 and adapting existing schemes and social protection mechanisms, including targeting, are evident priorities. Decisions around gender-sensitive response should be **informed by socio-economic impact assessments**, with gender dimensions clearly emphasized.

## Contact information

Kaca Djurickovic: [kaca.djurickovic@undp.org](mailto:kaca.djurickovic@undp.org)

Tahmina Anvarova: [tahmina.anvarova@undp.org](mailto:tahmina.anvarova@undp.org)

Bojana Zoric: [bojana.zoric@rcc.int](mailto:bojana.zoric@rcc.int)