

CHILDCARE, WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT AND COVID-19 IMPACTS: THE CASE OF SERBIA



UNECE - UN Women series:
Rethinking the Care Economy
and Empowering Women for
Building back Better

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Women for Building back Better

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFA	Association for Female Affirmation
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EECA	Eastern Europe and Central Asia
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
ESPN	European Social Policy Network
EU	European Union
EUR	Euro
Eurostat	Statistical Office of the European Union
GPG	Gender pay gap
ILO	International Labour Organization
ILOSTAT	International Labour Organization's central portal to labour statistics
MoESTD	Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development
MODS	Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
PDIFS	Pension and Disability Insurance Fund Serbia
RSD	Serbian dinar
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SeCons	SeConS Development Initiative Group
SORS	Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States dollar
WB	World Bank
WBG	World Bank Group

SUMMARY

Serbia's population of around 7 million people is declining due to emigration and a negative natural birth rate of -5.4. Given its ageing demographics, improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of formal care options — especially childcare — is a crucial element of economic growth. This is particularly important because overall, Serbia has relatively low levels of female labour force participation and childcare provision. Improved options would enable informal caregivers to reallocate their time to formal labour market activities, thus contributing to economic output and easing the costs associated with an ageing, declining population. Simultaneously, an enhanced childcare sector would advance child development via better availability of early childhood education. A number of key messages emerge from this review of childcare, women's employment and the impacts of COVID-19.

Childcare Provision

- Serbia has an integrated system of care for children from 6 months to 6.5 years old.
- Childcare coverage is generally low in Serbia, increasing by age group with 26 per cent in nurseries (6 months to 3 years), 63 per cent in kindergartens (3 to 5 years old) and around 97 per cent in the compulsory preparatory preschool programme (5.5 to 6.5 years old). The share of childcare coverage for children from vulnerable groups (including Roma children) is much lower.
- There are wide disparities in coverage between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, an insufficient supply of affordable childcare centres creates a capacity problem; in rural areas, the provision of childcare services (with the exception of compulsory preschool) is either very limited or entirely absent.
- Lack of physical capacity is only one aspect of the low coverage. Around 50 per cent of kindergarten parents say there is no need for childcare because there is someone at home to take care of the children (World Bank, 2016a). Aside from the crucial gender question as to who undertakes this caring at home, it is worrying that parents report perceiving no benefits from preschool attendance for their children's development.

- The childcare funding model is a key issue in Serbia. While funding is predominantly publicly provided, it is through local governments and municipalities, with the exception of the central government-funded preparatory preschool programme. Municipalities are clustered into educational groups that are based on enrolment rates and average number of children per group. The level of municipalities' underdevelopment correlates with coverage rates across all municipalities in Serbia. For example, more than two-thirds of children attending preschool are from the Belgrade region, while the minority are largely from Šumadija and Western Serbia regions. Further, children aged between 3 and 5 in rural areas are much less likely than their urban counterparts to be enrolled in kindergartens at just 27 per cent compared to 62 per cent (OECD, 2020).

Women's Employment

- The gender gap in labour force participation declined from 17 per cent in 2011 to 14 per cent in 2019.
- The gender difference in inactivity rates is due to women's markedly higher inactivity in the labour market; in 2020, women's 53.5 per cent inactivity rate was significantly higher than men's 38.1 per cent inactivity rate (ILOSTAT, 2020).¹ The gap is even more pronounced in rural areas, with the employment rate gap being nearly 3.5 times greater than it is in urban areas.
- Youth unemployment remains a key labour market issue; the unemployment rate among young people (aged 15 to 24) is almost 3.5 times that of adults. This is particularly acute among young women, because labour market improvements

1 It is worth noting that different sources (e.g. SORS, Eurostat, etc.) give somewhat different figures for labour force participation, employment and activity rates. The latest available data was provided by ILO (November 2020) and that is what is referenced here.

over the last decade have tended to benefit young men more than young women. Young women's unemployment rate in Serbia is 29.5 per cent. The main barriers to their labour force participation include family responsibilities, lack of childcare and low levels of education.

- The gender pay gap in the public and private sectors in Serbia is estimated to be around 11 per cent; even with identical levels of education and work experience, women have to work an additional 40 days in a year to earn as much as men do in the labour market.
- Unpaid care work is an important factor in labour-related inactivity, with 7 per cent of inactive women (compared to 0 per cent of inactive men) citing childcare responsibilities as a primary reason for their inactivity. Further, 96 per cent of those who are working part-time and who cited care responsibilities as the reason for not working full-time hours are women, whereas only 4 per cent are men.
- A plurality (41 per cent) of women with children aged 0 to 14 rely on informal childcare; 6 per cent use formal care (35 per cent use a mixture of both). Informal care is most common for children who have yet to start preparatory preschool.

Impacts of COVID-19

- The COVID-19 pandemic's gender-specific impacts on employment reflect underlying structural and gender inequalities, especially in relation to occupational segregation, social insurance coverage and the uneven distribution of unpaid care.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reduced women's employment and working hours. The overall share of employment in sectors with high labour-related vulnerabilities is around 6 percentage points higher for women than for men (ILO/EBRD, 2020).
- The increase in care burdens resulting from the closures of schools, kindergartens and nurseries has fallen disproportionately on women. The cessation of contact with elderly family members who were heretofore often informal care providers has exacerbated the situation.

- Household incomes were significantly impacted; the majority of households have reported reductions of up to 30 per cent of their monthly incomes. Over 25 per cent of households reported having unplanned expenses, mainly due to increased expenditures for hygiene items, health expenses and food. For 39 per cent of these households, unplanned expenses represented over 25 per cent of their monthly income (UNICEF, 2020).

Response and Recovery

- Overall, the Serbian government's response and recovery measures are viewed favourably (ILO, 2020). Serbia introduced some significant gender-responsive measures – that is, defined as those that seek to directly address gendered risks and challenges caused by the COVID-19 crisis (UNDP Global Gender Tracker). These include a package of support to micro-enterprises, entrepreneurs and the self-employed; a universal one-off cash payment; the temporary extension of entitlement to social assistance benefits (both conditional and unconditional); and a 10 per cent increase in the salaries of health-sector workers and care workers in nursing homes².
- Although the government issued a decree that parents with young school-age children ought to be allowed to work from home at full salary, the decree did not include an adequate legal or financial framework for practical implementation. Further, no measures were introduced that were specifically addressed at working parents who were affected by the closure of childcare services and schools.
- Pre-COVID-19 structural and societal inequalities have become more visible. The intensification of unpaid care work and the loss of working hours and income for women underlie the urgent need for greater investment in childcare provision and greater flexibility both in childcare provision and by employers in terms of flexible working hours and appropriate work-life balance policies. Achieving greater efficiency and equity entails shifting funding for public childcare and preschool needs from municipalities to the central government in order to ensure greater coverage.

² In the sector Human Health Activities, women make around 76 per cent of the total workforce, while in the sector Residential Care Activities they account for 78 per cent of the total workforce (ILO/EBRD, 2020)

1. INTRODUCTION

As is the case across the world, women in the Republic of Serbia carry a disproportionate amount of unpaid work. On average, Serbian women spend 4 hours and 36 minutes per day on unpaid household work, whereas Serbian men spend an average of only 2 hours and 5 minutes per day on the same category of work (UN Women, 2020). While the unequal distribution of unpaid work — especially care work — is pronounced across all types of families, it is most evident in families with children under 6 years of age and in cases of single parents (who are mostly women). The disparity between women and men in care responsibilities has significant ramifications for women's economic empowerment.

Similar to global trends, women's labour market participation in Serbia is lower than that of men. Despite increases over the last few years, women's employment rate in 2019 was about 14 percentage points below men's employment rate (58 per cent compared to 72 per cent) (Eurostat Database, 2021).

The difference in employment rates is mainly due to women's markedly higher inactivity in the labour market. In Serbia, women's labour market inactivity rate in 2020 was 53.5 per cent, whereas men's rate was 28.1 per cent (ILOSTAT, 2020).³ Women also take on fewer full-time roles. Among those who cited the care of children and other persons as the reason for part-time work, 96 per cent are women and only 4 per cent are men. (UN Women, 2020; SORS, 2019). Seven per cent of women cited care responsibilities as a primary reason for their labour market inactivity, compared to 0 per cent of men citing this reason (UN Women, 2020).

The simultaneous and conflicting demands on women's time for care and work activities represent a fundamental barrier to their economic empowerment. These demands generate a vicious circle of a role as primary care provider, which subsequently lowers their labour market attachment, which in turn reinforces sociocultural expectations of that caretaking role. This cycle perpetuates gender-based inequalities and women's economic vulnerabilities. Gender equality and women's economic empowerment are thus

closely intertwined; childcare provision is a key component in ensuring more balanced sharing of family responsibilities and investing in children.

COVID-19 has brought these issues into sharp relief. The pandemic has affected women's participation in the economic sphere in several ways. In terms of jobs and livelihoods, women were already paid less and held less secure jobs, often in the informal sector (informal sector employment is less likely to provide sick pay or social protection). The pandemic and related response measures have had the greatest impacts on employment sectors in which women tend to be over-represented (e.g. retail, hospitality and tourism). Finally, women already carry a disproportionate amount of unpaid care responsibilities, which have increased due to childcare and school closures, the cessation of contact with elderly family members and the provision of care to the ill.

This report explores how childcare provision (or the lack thereof) affects women's labour market participation in Serbia. It provides an overview of public and private care provision and explores the extent to which this responds to the care needs of families with children, particularly the women and girls in those families. It provides an overview of the framework of formal childcare services in Serbia, its legal and financing systems, its current provisions and the gaps therein. It examines the perceptions and barriers to the use of quality formal care in Serbia, explores the reasons behind the continued predominance of informal care provision (especially for very young children), and analyses the sharp differences in urban and rural experiences in relation to childcare provision, affordability, quality and accessibility. The report looks at the current situation of women's labour force participation in Serbia, unemployment and activity rates, the gender pay gap and the linkages between women's employment, childcare provision and family policies (including maternity and parental leave). It examines the impacts of COVID-19 response measures, especially in terms of closures and the reopening of child and early education facilities, the indirect effects on women's labour market participation and the policies

³ It is worth noting that different sources (e.g. SORS, Eurostat, etc.) give somewhat different figures for labour force participation, employment and activity rates. The ILO provided the latest available data (November 2020) and that is what is referenced here.

introduced as part of the pandemic response. The report concludes with recommendations for policies and measures on childcare and women's employment in general as well on steps Serbia can take to mitigate the worst effects the crisis has had on women with childcare responsibilities.

1.1 Political and Socioeconomic Context

Serbia is a constitutional, multiparty, parliamentary democracy with an evolving political and economic environment. After a decade of postponed reforms and blocked transformation, Serbia started intensive reforms in 2001. After a phase of economic growth, poverty reduction and increases in living standards, the 2008 financial crisis brought new challenges to further reforms and developmental processes.

Serbia opened formal negotiations with the EU for accession in 2014. The accession process has brought renewed impetus for economic, social and political development; Serbia is making significant progress in structural and institutional reforms towards that goal. In 2016, Serbia became the first non-EU country to introduce the Gender Equality Index, providing an assessment of how equal women and men are across key areas in society including health, money, knowledge, work, time and power. With a score of 55.8 points out of 100 (placing it in 22nd place), Serbia is halfway towards gender equality (for comparison, Serbia is 10.4 points behind the EU Member State average) (EIGE, 2018).

Serbia's population of around 7 million people reflects an ageing demographic and one that is declining due to emigration and a negative natural birth rate of -5.4 (SORS, 2019). Serbia is among the richest countries in the Western Balkan region as measured by GDP; its GDP per capita of EUR 5,450 is, in purchasing power parity, 41 per cent of the EU-27 average. Serbia's economic growth rate has been strong over the last few years, although this has been accompanied by a rapid increase in income inequality. In 2017, the income of Serbia's top population quintile was 9.4 times the size of the bottom quintile (for comparison, the EU average was 5.1 times the bottom quintile).

Although poverty rates have decreased in recent years, they remain very high; over one-fifth of the population in Serbia still lives in poverty. This is a higher share

than in other Western Balkan countries. The 'at risk of poverty' rate is 28 per cent, compared to the EU average of 24 per cent. After social transfers, the rates fall to 23 per cent for Serbia and 16 per cent for the EU (Eurostat Database, 2021).

Other ongoing challenges include low levels of employment, high levels of unemployment, and relatively low levels of social spending on and investment in education, health care and social protection. As with almost every other country, Serbia has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A strength of the Serbian economy is that its broad base is not overly dependent on any one sector, which suggests greater flexibility in reacting to the consequences of COVID-19. Despite that, growth rates are expected to fall by around 5 per cent due to contracted demand (especially drops in external demand) (World Bank, 2020).


Serbia has made some progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls." However, the overall picture is very mixed. For example, in relation to Target 5.5 ("ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life"), the proportion of seats held by women in the National Assembly in October 2020 was 38.8 per cent while the proportion of seats by women in the Government was 50 per cent (SORS, 2020a). In relation to Target 5.4 ("to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family"), there had hardly been any change in the proportion of time spent by women on unpaid domestic and care work prior to the pandemic and related response measures, which have intensified this already disproportionate burden. Similarly, Serbia has made limited progress towards Target 5.2 ("eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls") and Target 5.3 ("eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early or forced marriage").

On a more positive note, the monetary value of unpaid care work has been calculated and its value is estimated at EUR 9.2 billion or 21.5 per cent of Serbian GDP, out of which 14.9 per cent would come from women and 6.6 per cent from men (UN Women, 2020).

1.2 Key Indicators

Table 1 shows some of the latest key socioeconomic indicators in Serbia for women and men and, where available, for the EU as a whole.

TABLE 1:
Key Contextual Information, 2019

	Total ▼	Men ▼	Women ▼	EU-27 ▼
Population (million)	6.9	3.4 (48.9%)	3.6 (51.1%)	446,446
Life expectancy, years	76	73.4	78.6	81.3
Activity rate	68.1%	74.9%	61.3%	73.4%
Employment rate	65.2%	72.1%	58.2%	73.1%
Unemployment rate	10.5%	10.0%	11.2%	6.7%
	Total ▼			EU-27 ▼
Real GDP per capita (EUR)	5,450			27,970
Fertility rate	1.5			1.5
Birth rate	9.3			9.5
Death rate	14.6			10.4
At risk of poverty before transfers	28.3%			24.4%
At risk of poverty after transfers	23.2%			16.3%
Gini coefficient	33.3			30.2
Public expenditure as a % of GDP	42.3%			46.6%
Education expenditure as % of GDP	3.6% ⁴			4.6% ⁵
Preschool expenditure as a % of education expenditure	0.7%			

Sources: Eurydice, 2018; Eurostat Database, 2021; World Development Indicators 2020; Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Serbia

4 Data for 2018

5 Data for 2017

2. CHILDCARE PROVISION

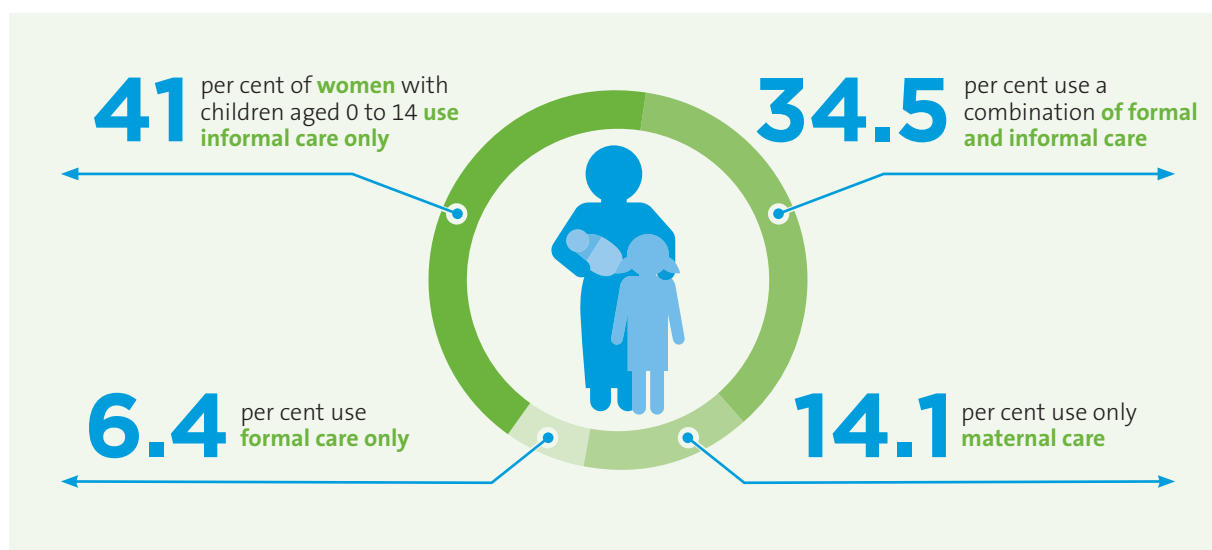
The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the long-established importance of childcare to gender equality. Globally, women do more unpaid work than men do, with women accounting for around 75 per cent of unpaid care work (King et al., 2020). As a consequence, many women are restricted in their employment opportunities. The latest available figures for Serbia show a difference of around 14 percentage points in female labour force participation for the 15-64 age group (SORS, 2019).

Because women tend to take on a larger share of unpaid care work, having children not only exacerbates this unequal distribution, but it also tends to have a negative impact on their economic situation due to the interruption of work or reduced working hours. This trend worsens with the increase in the number of children in a household (EU, 2016). These conflicting demands on women's time for childcare and work activities give rise to a fundamental barrier to their economic participation. Having access to affordable, good-quality childcare services can reduce this risk and support women and men in reconciling work and family life.

Accumulated evidence shows that support for childcare improves women's labour market participation because much of the employment rate gender gap is due to women's markedly higher labour market inactivity. Women's work in care is seen as "unproductive" in the eyes of the economy, despite society being unable to function without it. Recent analysis by UN Women estimated that the overall annual monetary value of unpaid and so-called "unproductive" household care work in Serbia is EUR 9.2 billion, or 21.5 per cent of GDP (UN Women, 2020).

Childcare in Serbia is generally understood as care for children through to preparatory school age (between 5.5 and 6.5 years old) and after-school care for older children. Informal care refers to mostly unpaid and generally unregulated care, typically provided by family members (informal care can also be paid such as babysitters). Formal care refers to care that is paid and is thus regulated by some type of a contractual arrangement. The interaction between a country's institutional environment and prevailing social norms tends to determine the reliance on particular modalities of caregiving.

Most childcare needs in Serbia are met by informal care or a combination of formal and informal care.



Users of informal care are those reporting to receive regular help with childcare from relatives or friends or other people for whom caring for children is not a job. Formal care includes those reporting that they receive regular help from a day-care centre, a nursery or school, an after-school care centre, a self-organized group, a babysitter or from some other institutional or paid arrangement (World Bank, 2016a).

2.1 Legal and Regulatory Context

In Serbia, early childhood education and care is regulated by the Law on the Foundations of Education System, the Law on Preschool Education and a series of ratified international conventions and accompanying documents based on children's rights and the developmental, educational, social and health needs of preschool-age children (Eurydice, 2018). In 2006, Serbia amended the Law on the Foundations of Education Systems to include nine months of publicly funded preparatory preschool as part of compulsory education.

Childhood development and early education programmes in Serbia are mainly provided through the network of public preschool institutions. Preschool institutions can be established by the central government, autonomous province, local self-government or other legal or physical entity in accordance with the law.

In 2012, Serbia's Ministry for Education, Science and Technological Development introduced the "Strategy for Education Development in Serbia 2020." The Strategy aims to achieve four objectives: raising the quality of education, increasing coverage across all levels of education, developing and maintaining the relevance of education, and increasing the efficiency of the use of educational resources (OECD, 2020; MoESTD, 2019). Serbia's approach for increasing participation in preschool programmes was inspired by European targets established at the 2002 Barcelona summit (MoESDT, 2013). At the summit, EU States agreed that by 2010, the provision of preschool education for children under the age of 3 should reach at least 33 per cent of children in all member states, while provision for children between the ages of 3

and mandatory school age should reach at least 90 per cent. Although many EU States and accession candidates have struggled to meet these targets, newer benchmarks have even higher targets — 95 per cent of children between the ages of 3 and mandatory school age should participate in preschool education by 2020.

2.2 Funding Model

The education sector largely depends on public funding. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development directly pays the salaries of school principals and teachers, development programmes in schools and funds capital investments. Local governments (municipalities) are responsible for the maintenance costs of school facilities and utility bills, which represent a third of central public funding of education, including covering costs related to early childhood education and additional support for students with special educational needs. There are no systematic mechanisms to support disadvantaged regions, which risks further increasing regional disparities.

Public spending on education has been historically low in Serbia. In 2017, education spending was around 4 per cent of GDP compared to an OECD average of 5.3 per cent (Eurostat, 2019). From 2007 to 2017, per-student spending in primary and secondary education decreased by 6 per cent and 2 per cent respectively. In contrast, per-student spending on early childhood education saw a significant increase of 65 per cent over the same period (OECD, 2020). Nevertheless, absolute spending on early childhood education remains low by international comparisons. The share of education spending out of total government expenditure also remained low and mostly unchanged over the past decade. Moreover, spending on education in Serbia is well below the United Nations benchmark of 15 to 20 per cent of total government expenditure allocated to education (OECD, 2020).

Early childhood education and care is provided across three levels for children between the ages of 6 months and 7 years of age: nurseries, kindergartens and preparatory preschool programmes.

The first level, nursery, is intended for children between the ages of 6 months and 3 years; the second, kindergarten, is intended for children between the ages of 3 and 5; and the third, the preparatory programme, is aimed at children between 5 and 7 (no younger than 5.5 years and no older than 6.5 years upon starting). While nursery and kindergarten are optional, the preparatory preschool programme is mandatory for all children. It consists of either half-day or whole-day educational activities with optional specialized programmes according to children's and parents' interests (Eurydice, 2018).

Public nurseries and kindergartens are the responsibility of local authorities and predominantly funded by them, with a minority of the cost covered directly by the central government (OECD, 2020). But these institutions are not free for parents. Local authorities usually cover up to 80 per cent of the cost; the remaining 20 per cent is covered by fees paid by parents (Eurydice, 2019; UNICEF, 2012). The fees for public childcare services vary depending on the income and the marital status of the parents.

Private nurseries and kindergartens are fully financed by the institutions themselves and their users. While there is no systematic funding of these institutions at the central government level, some local governments offer financial support for parents who enrol their children in private kindergartens. Further, some public and private institutions offer discounts that depend on family circumstances (e.g. parental income,

number of children from the same family, whether the father is a war invalid) (World Bank, 2016a). The system of discounts and subsidies is determined on a local city/municipality level; parents usually pay about 20 per cent of the price. There are also circumstance-dependent schemes to partially reimburse parents for the 20 per cent fees paid at the nursery and kindergarten levels (OECD, 2020). For example, in a case where a child is not accepted to the public nursery/kindergarten, due to lack of capacities (i.e. if one of the parents is unemployed, the child is placed lower in ranking list), then the parents receive a rejection form that is used for getting reimbursement for private nursery/kindergarten fees. In the city of Belgrade, the monthly reimbursement varies from min RSD 11,000 (EUR 94) to max RSD 22,000 (EUR 188), depending on number of absent days of the child in one month.

With regards to preparatory preschool programmes, there is a public/private divide, with the former entirely financed through the national budget. Funds are transferred to local authorities to be distributed to their respective institutions. Private institutions that offer preparatory preschool programmes are paid for by the enrolees' parents. Recent measures, however, allow local authorities to reimburse, by special decision, part of the costs of preparatory preschool programmes in private institutions (Eurydice, 2019). The exact proportion of these remain unclear but, as Table 2 indicates, reimbursements are in the region of 20 per cent.

TABLE 2:
Model of Financing of Childcare and Preschool in Serbia

	Nursery		Kindergarten		Preparatory Preschool Programme	
	Public	Private	Public	Private	Public	Private
Central government					100%	
Local government	80%	~ 20%	80%	~ 20%		~ 20%
Parents	20%	~ 80%	20%	~ 80%		~ 80%

Source: Eurydice, 2019

2.3 Enrolment and Capacity

In 2019-2020, according to the annual statistical survey of preschool education (SORS, 2020b), approximately 225,000 Serbian children attended preschool education (48 per cent of which were girls). As Table 3 shows, 24 per cent of preschool attendees were children aged from 6 months to 3 years; 76 per cent of

attendees were children from 3 years up to the age of starting school. Almost 11,700 children were enrolled over capacity, while around 6,900 have applied for enrolment but were not enrolled due to lack of capacity (see Table 4).

TABLE 3:
Children in Preschool Education by Age

All	Up to 6 months to 2 years	From 2 to 3 years	From 3 to 4 years	From 4 to 5 years	From 5 to 5.5 years	From 5.5 to 6.5 years	From 6.5 to 7.5 years
224,563	23,835	30,300	38,524	41,195	28,672	57,227	4,810

Source: SORS, 2020b

Preschool education is organized across 466 pre-primary institutions with 2,842 facilities. Of these institutions, 162 (with 2,426 facilities) are state owned and 304 (with 416 facilities) are privately owned.

Table 4 shows preschool institutions by ownership, enrolled children, children not enrolled due to limited capacities and children enrolled in excess of the maximum norm.

TABLE 4:
Access to Preschool Education

Ownership of preschool institutions	Number of institutions	Number of facilities	Number of enrolled children in 2019/2020	Number of children not enrolled due to capacities at full	Number of children enrolled in excess of the maximum norm
Total	466	2,842	224,563	6,902	11,680
State owned	162	2,426	199,250	6,804	11,567
Private	304	416	25,313	98	113

Source: SORS, 2020b

The compulsory preparatory preschool programme was attended by 63,733 children (30,959 girls and 32,814 boys). Over half of them (55 per cent) attended full-time programmes; the remaining 45 per cent

attended four-hour programmes. Child coverage in the preparatory preschool programme is 97.36 per cent (SORS, 2020b).

Overall, Serbia shows low preschool/early childhood education attendance and high disparities in coverage. The lowest in terms of coverage is observed for children at nursery age. In 2018, only around 26 per cent of children between the ages of 0 to 3 were enrolled in nurseries; 64 per cent of children aged between 3 and 6 were enrolled in kindergartens (OECD, 2020; UN Women, 2020).

There are both supply and demand reasons for low and unequal preschool coverage in Serbia. With regards to supply, preschool capacity is insufficient and unevenly distributed geographically; disparities in preschool coverage are characterized by significant regional and urban/rural differences. In terms of regional distribution, more than two-thirds of children attending preschool are from the Belgrade region, while the minority are largely from Šumadija and Western Serbia regions. Further, children aged between 3 and 5 in rural areas are much less likely than their urban counterparts to be enrolled in kindergartens (just 27 per cent compared to 62 per cent) (OECD, 2020).

Access to early childhood education and care institutions is a particularly acute problem in rural areas. In rural areas, preschools are typically located twice as far from users' homes than they are in urban areas. For the 17 per cent of children who live more than 2 km away from a preschool institution, the average distance is 6 km. Furthermore, there is a lack of resources in these areas to build the infrastructure (primarily transport) needed to facilitate access. In a 2016 World Bank study, lack of access to formal childcare and lack of transportation were explicitly reported as an issue by participants of rural focus groups. Parents have also reported that it is difficult to meet the cost of transportation in addition to the cost of care (Pešikan and Ivić, 2016; OECD, 2020; World Bank, 2016a).

Some of the disparity in coverage is due to ethnic divides. For example, Roma children's access to preschool services are very limited. Only 10 per cent of urban Roma children and 5 per cent of rural Roma children aged between 3 and 5 are enrolled in early childhood education (UNICEF, 2019).

Cost is another factor underlying low participation, although the evidence on this is mixed. In a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 12 per cent of parents reported cost as being one of the reasons for not enrolling their children in nurseries and kindergartens (UNICEF,

2012). Studies show that affordability is raised as an issue among parents even after the introduction of measures that allow for a system of reimbursements (World Bank, 2016a). While charging fees is a common practice across OECD countries, the relatively high poverty rates in Serbia (over a quarter of the population is at risk of poverty) even after transfers, means fees are difficult for parents to pay.

The lack of financial resources, particularly in the least developed municipalities, has led some preschool institutions to favour children from families in which both parents are employed (so-called "reliable payers"). Fees paid by these parents often constitute the only operating income available to preschools. In turn, this creates a disincentive to implement the legal requirement to give enrolment priority to disadvantaged and vulnerable children, which further accentuates inequities in access to preschool education.

Children aged between 3 and 5 from the richest 20 per cent of families have an enrolment rate three times higher than the poorest 20 per cent. With regards to children with disabilities, about 5 per cent of children between the ages of 3 and 5 have a disability, but only about 1 per cent of children with disabilities have enrolled (UNICEF, 2012). Finally, children of mothers with no formal education are also underrepresented. Only about 5 per cent of children aged between 3 and 5 whose mother has no formal educational qualification is enrolled in preschool education, and these are exclusively Roma children, compared to over 60 per cent of children whose mothers have a formal education (UNICEF, 2012).

On the demand side, general attitudes and understandings of early childhood education can act as a barrier to participation (OECD, 2020). Early childhood education and care institutions are often perceived as places for childcare rather than as an important part of child development, learning and social interaction. For example, around 50 per cent of parents in Serbia say that their child is not attending a preschool programme because he/she is taken care of at home (World Bank, 2016a). This points to critical capacity gaps among parents, who appear to lack awareness and information about the importance of early learning. However, the evidence with regards to this is mixed.


The World Bank found that among survey respondents irrespective of whether they were in an urban or rural location, children’s education and development was reported as being one of two primary motivations for seeking childcare services (World Bank, 2016a). The other primary motivation reported was specific to women that were either working or wanted to seek work but had little or no informal childcare support.

Another factor, admissions criteria, partially explains the generally low levels of coverage for children aged between 0 and 5.5 years. Programmes aimed at the 0 to 5.5 age group were designed to support working parents, and parental employment remains one of the main criteria for admission into preschools. As a result, only 10 per cent of children with unemployed

parents were enrolled in early childhood education and care institutions, compared to 61 per cent of children with parents in employment (OECD, 2020). This criterion can also cause parents to self-exclude from these programmes, as they do not apply thinking they will not be accepted (UN Women, 2020).

Inequalities reduce somewhat once children are old enough to enter preschool preparatory programmes. Because these programmes have been mandatory since 2006, they are generally well attended (around 97 per cent of children of the appropriate age groups are enrolled). As Table 5 shows, for these programmes, participation in rural areas is comparable to that of urban areas (OECD, 2020).

TABLE 5:
Regional Attendance - Preschool Preparatory Programmes

	Number of children covered by compulsory preparatory preschool programme	Attendance in compulsory preschool programme (%)
Republic of Serbia – in total	63,773	97.5
Northern Serbia	33,968	95.9
City of Belgrade	16,535	91.5
Vojvodina region	17,433	100
Southern Serbia	29,805	99.3
Šumadija region and Western Serbia	17,250	100
Southern and Eastern Serbia	12,555	97.0

Source: SORS, 2020b

Roma children are the only group whose participation is not effectively universal; only 63 per cent of Roma children participated in preparatory preschool programmes in 2014, compared to 98 per cent of non-Roma Serbian children (OECD, 2020). This is partially explained by the fact that Roma parents were

reportedly unaware of the mandatory nature of the preparatory preschool programmes (Pešikan and Ivić, 2016; OECD, 2020). Roma children are also the least likely to be enrolled in any form of preschool education. Only 6 per cent of Roma children below 5.5 years of age attended preschool (OECD, 2020).

2.4 Social Norms and Gender Stereotypes

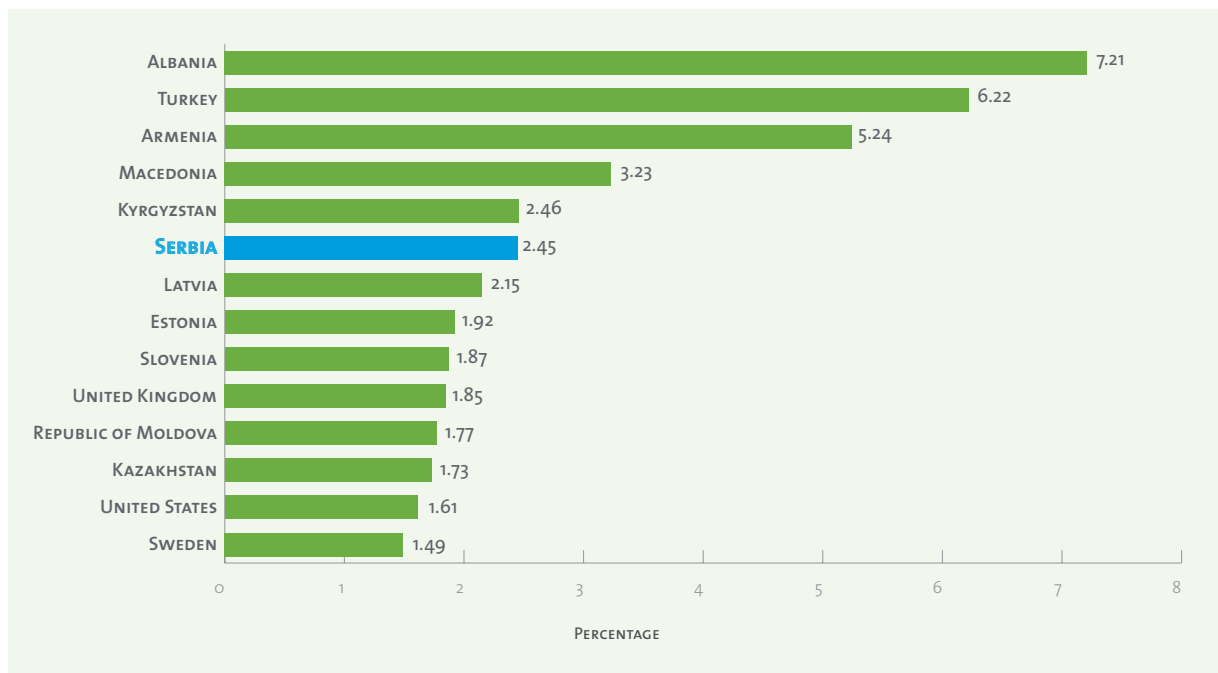
Social norms, gender stereotypes and gendered family roles are key ingredients in the high level of informal care provision in Serbia. Serbian society displays high levels of gender-unequal norms and beliefs with respect to the division of labour within households (USAID, 2020). For example, the Institute for Sociological Research found that in 2018 around 55 per cent of both women and men agreed with the statement “domestic household tasks are by nature more appropriate for women” (USAID, 2020). Even though the percentage of people agreeing with the statement declined slightly from 2012 when around 62 per cent of women and 66 per cent men agreed with it, gendered norms and expectations still exercise a pervasive influence on household unpaid labour distribution. Hence, the informal provision of childcare in Serbia is disproportionately performed by women.

The interaction between prevailing social norms and the institutional environment tends to lead to reliance on particular modalities for childcare. Factors

include the availability and affordability of formal childcare, the criteria for placement, flexibility of operating hours and the quality of care. Other institutional factors that come into play, especially in relation to employment and women’s labour market participation, include the availability of maternity and parental leave arrangements, flexible working hours and arrangements, financial support and in-kind services.

Norms on childcare, work and motherhood often play a role in shaping perceptions on the use of care centres. In this regard, Serbia is relatively progressive, although different studies suggest different attitudes. For example, a World Bank study includes few indications that norms shape negative perceptions; a majority (58 per cent) of individuals reported disagreement with the statement “a preschool child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works” (World Bank, 2016a).

FIGURE 1:
Female-to-Male Ratio of Time Devoted to Unpaid Care Work, 2014



Source: OECD Gender, Institutions and Development Database (2014)

3. WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

Women's inordinate excess of care responsibilities significantly affects their access to the labour market. The Government of Serbia recognized this in the "National Gender Equality Strategy 2016 –2020 with the Action Plan 2016–2018." The Strategy was launched with three primary strategic goals:

1. Change gender patterns and improved gender equality culture;
2. Increase equality of women and men by implementing an equal opportunities policy and measures;
3. System-wide gender mainstreaming in the policy adoption, implementation and monitoring processes.

The Action Plan for implementing the Strategy has several specific objectives for achieving the strategic goals including:

- Equal participation of women and men in parenting and economy of care;

- Equal participation of women and men in public and political decision-making;
- Improved women's economic and labour market status (particularly members of vulnerable groups);
- Enhanced role of women in the security system;
- Women and men in rural areas actively and equally contribute to development and have equal access to development results;
- Improved position of women discriminated on multiple grounds and vulnerable women;
- Improved health of women and equal access to health-care services.

Additionally, two of the expected outcomes of Objective 2 are: decreased informal employment of women and increased formal employment, activity and self-employment; and improved status for rural women, in terms of the formal status and access to resources (UN Women, 2018).

3.1 Employment, Unemployment and Activity Rates

The employment, unemployment and activity rates for women and men and the persistence of gender gaps underscore the necessity for the above-mentioned objectives. If we consider people between 15 and 64 years old, the overall employment rate in Serbia in 2018 was 65.2 per cent, with 58.2 per cent being female employment and 72.1 per cent being male employment.

The overall unemployment rate was 10.5 per cent, with 11.2 per cent being women's unemployment and 10 per cent being men's unemployment; the overall activity rate was 68.1 per cent, with 61.3 per cent being women's activity and 74.9 per cent being men's activity (SORS, 2019).

FIGURE 2:
Employment and Unemployment Rates for Women and Men, 2019 (%)



Source: Eurostat Database, 2021

Different demographic groups face different issues. The largest inactivity rate gap is among the youngest workers (15 - 24 age group) followed by the oldest workers (over 65) (SORS, 2019). The former likely reflects a lower employment rate due to young people spending time in school (94 per cent of people aged between 14 and 17 are enrolled in secondary education) (UNICEF, 2019) as well as the greater difficulties unqualified women encounter in finding a job in comparison to their male counterparts. Lack of sufficient flexible or part-time working options for students is another reason for low inactivity of youth.

The latter reflects higher inactivity rates for older women (59 per cent of the retired population of Serbia is female) (SORS, 2019), which is partly driven by the legal retirement age (63 years and 2 months for women and 65 years for men) (PDIFS, 2020) and partly reflects the more traditional gender norms and roles among older households. The smallest gap is recorded among workers between 45 and 54 years of age. At 5 percentage points, this likely reflects the fact that women in this age group are less likely to be caring for small children. Finally, gender employment rate gaps were less pronounced among those with higher educational attainment, falling to 4 percentage points (SORS, 2019).

These gaps are more pronounced in rural populations, with the employment rate gap being nearly 3.5 times as wide in rural areas than it is in urban areas (SORS, 2019). This is probably still due to higher male employment in rural areas, especially in the formal agricultural sector (World Bank 2016b) and the prevalence of informal employment arrangements in the same sector (SORS, 2109).

3.2 Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap (GPG) is closely linked to the employment data presented in Figure 2. The OECD defines the GPG as “the difference between median earnings of women and men relative to median earnings of men” (OECD, 2021). This definition refers to what is known as the unweighted (or unadjusted) GPG. Measurements conducted using this definition are useful to analyse the net differences in wages between women and men.

According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia’s analysis of the Structure of Earnings Survey (a pilot survey was conducted in 2014), the unweighted GPG in Serbia is 9 per cent, i.e. women earn 9 per cent less than men, as calculated on the bases of Eurostat methodology (Anić and Krstić, 2019; ILO, 2019). By comparison, the EU averaged an unweighted GPG of 16 per cent (Eurostat 2016 data reported in ILO, 2019), which is significantly higher than Serbia’s. The unweighted GPG in Serbia is not surprising given women’s relatively low labour market participation. It is also unsurprising because gender roles still often determine women’s and men’s occupational choices across the world and in countries like Serbia where women are over-represented in lower paid sectors.

Nonetheless, previous research has shown that part of the gender gap is not explainable by different labour market characteristics. These ‘unexplainables’ are not visible looking at unweighted GPG measurements, so weighted measurements are necessary. ILO describes the weighted (or adjusted) GPG as “the difference between wages for women and men if working women were to have on average the same labour market characteristics as working men” (ILO, 2019). The weighted GPG in Serbia is 11 per cent (EU, 2020 – 2015 data), which is comparable to the EU average (ILO, 2019).

Women in Serbia earn less in both the public and the private sector. Working women earn less than men do in almost all areas of public-sector work. The sole exception is in case of Public Local Enterprises, where the average women’s wage is slightly higher than men’s. In the public sector, the difference between women’s and men’s monthly wages amounts to around RSD 9,000 (EUR 76); in the private sector, the difference is almost RSD 6,900 (EUR 58). In the private sector, women are paid less than men in almost all sectors, with the financial sector showing the highest GPG. In the financial sector, the average monthly salary of women is RSD 91,144 (EUR 765), while the salary of men in the same position is RSD 120,518 (EUR 1,010) (SORS 2014). These wage gaps are significant given that the minimum gross wage in 2018 was RSD 30,499 (about EUR 259). Finally, a European Commission paper on Serbia, based on a 2015 study,

calculates that even with identical educational attainment, work experience and vocations, a woman would have to work an additional 40 days in a year in order to earn as much as a man with those same credentials would (EU, 2020).

3.3 Women's Employment and Childcare Responsibilities

This section of the report focuses specifically on how childcare responsibilities affect women's employment. According to the 2019 Labour Force Survey in the Republic of Serbia (SORS, 2019), only 6.5 per cent of survey respondents reported their economic status as "doing housework only". Of that percentage, 96 per cent were women. The Labour Force Survey reveals that 63 per cent of women stated that other family and personal reasons made them work shorter than full-time (UN Women, 2020). As a result, although women spend (on average) less time than men do in paid employment, when the time women spend on all work (i.e. both paid and unpaid work) is accounted for, women work one hour per day more than men do (SORS, 2016).

Unpaid care work accounts for higher levels of inactivity among women than among men. Among those that mentioned care responsibilities as a reason for not looking for jobs, 97 per cent were women (SORS, 2019). Of women who were inactive in the labour market, 7 per cent cited care responsibilities for children as a primary reason for their inactivity. In contrast, 0 per cent of inactive men cited care responsibilities as a reason (UN Women, 2020).

In 2020, inactivity rates were 53.5 per cent for women and 38.1 per cent for men. Women also take on fewer full-time roles; 96 per cent of those who work part-time and who cited care responsibilities as the reason for not working full-time hours were women (versus only 4 per cent of men) (UN Women, 2020; SORS, 2019). Having children is a key factor behind the differences, the younger the child the greater the impact.

The presence of young children in the house is reflected in comparisons of employment rate gaps for different age brackets. For example, women and men in the 25 to 34 age bracket are more likely to have

young children in the home than women and men in the 35 to 44 age bracket. As expected, the employment rate gap of the 25 to 34 age bracket (12 per cent) is higher than that of the 35 to 44 age bracket (8 per cent) (SORS, 2019). Moreover, women with children exhibited 5 to 10 per cent lower employment rates than women without children.

Data from an EU-wide quality of life representative survey (with 1,000 respondents for Serbia) found that 40 per cent of participants responded that their existing working time arrangements do not "fit very well or not at all well" with their family and social obligations. Furthermore, 85 per cent of women and 77 per cent of men in Serbia reported experiencing conflict between their work commitments and their private life. Although this study included other Western Balkan countries, participants in Serbia reported the highest percentage of experienced work/life conflicts. Inflexible working hours appear to be a significant factor (Golubović and Golubović, 2015).

Of the inactive population in the study, 57 per cent said they would like to have a paid job, indicating that more flexible working conditions and more balanced distribution of unpaid work would increase labour market participation and decrease the gender gaps. A similar, later study, with 330 employers (and 126,244 employees) revealed that only 20 per cent of employers allows for flexible working time, and only 10 per cent allows their employees to work from home (EU, 2020). This, of course, changed significantly during the pandemic; it remains to be seen if working from home or flexible working times endure.

Prior to the pandemic, provisions for flexible working arrangements were low. There are no current political debates to change legislation in order to allow for further flexibility. There seems to be, however, a political impetus to sensitize employers to the importance of flexibility. In 2017, for example, the Minister without Portfolio in charge of demography and population policy along with the Director of the Development Agency of Serbia signed a cooperation agreement to raise awareness about the need for a balance between work and parenting. It is unclear if there has been much movement on this by employers.

3.4 Maternity and Family Leave Policies

In Serbia, combined maternity and parental leave is for 12 months, broken down into three sections, pre-childbirth, childbirth and childcare. Maternity leave is for three months and then there is an additional nine months of parental leave (either parent can use parental leave). After a second child, parental leave is extended to two years for the third and each subsequent child.

Specifically, maternity leave lasts from no later than 28 days before the birth, up to three months after the birth, and only the mother has the right to use it, except in special cases (when the mother leaves the child, due to the death of the mother, if she is serving a prison sentence or for some other reason that justifiably prevents her from taking care of the baby). Parental leave lasts until 365 days from the day of the beginning of maternity leave, and it can be used by both parents, but not at the same time (Article 94, Labor Law). The compensation for maternity leave is borne by the employer from his own money in the first month (the employer pays 65 percent of the determined basis and the Republic Health Insurance Fund (RHIF) covers the remaining 35 percent at the expense of the national budget). From the second month, the RHIF takes over the payments, where 65

percent of the established amount comes from the money for compulsory health insurance, and 35 percent from the budget, from the section of the RHIF.

If a woman worked in the previous year, then her base for maternity leave income is a twelve-month average (it is not necessary that the employment in the last 12 months was with the same employer). If a woman does not have 12 months of employment before going on maternity leave, then the basis for her compensation is the minimum for all months in which she did not work. When it comes to parental leave income, the base of salary compensation for a woman who is employed is calculated by taking the average base on which contributions were paid for the last 18 months.

In 2019, only 328 men availed themselves of parental leave, reflecting traditional attitudes and stereotypical gender roles. Scope exists to introduce more flexible and innovative possibilities of using leave for childcare that would allow parents to choose different combinations of the duration of leave. Equal parenting and encouragement of fathers to take parental leave was focus of the National Campaign “Half-half” conducted by UN Women and initiatives implemented by its local partners (such as SeCons and AFA) in late 2020.

4. THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The Serbian government, like many others across the world, responded to the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020 with lockdowns and restrictive measures to contain and/or ameliorate the spread of the virus. Common measures included border closures, travel restrictions, school shutdowns, bans on large gatherings, curfews and the closure of non-essential services. From 21 March, public transportation within and between cities was suspended (ESPN, 2020).

These measures began easing on 21 April, with further relaxations introduced on 7 May. From 5 June, limits on the numbers of people gathering publicly were eliminated. On 21 June, a general election was held, which was won by a landslide and widely celebrated (Balkan Insight, 2020). By the end of June, however, cases started to rise again, so new measures were introduced on 1 July. These included mandatory mask use in public transport and indoor spaces. On 7 July, the reintroduction of a curfew was announced, but following an almost week-long citizens' protest, it was never enacted (ESPN, 2020).

With specific regards to labour, the government set out a series of instructions for employers through the "Decree on the Organization of Employers During the State of Emergency," which said that employers should organize work-from-home for all employees where possible. Employee's earnings should stay the same as before, but they would not be entitled to transportation reimbursement. The decree also outlines occupational safety measures that employers are required to ensure (OSCE, 2020).

The Ministry of Public Administration and Local Self-Government also issued a recommendation for organizing work in public organizations. Under this recommendation, the needs of people with chronic diseases, people older than 60 and parents of children under 12 (especially single parents or if one of the parents has work obligations) should be prioritized. It also recommended that employers organize flexible shift work to suit the needs of the families (or single parents) with children under 12. However, these measures were not mandated through a decree, and as such employers had flexibility in their application.

4.1 Kindergartens and Preschool Institutions – Reopening

The Ministry of Health and the Institute of Public Health announced a relaxation of certain measures starting from 11 May 2020. The measures, aimed at reopening kindergartens and preschool institutions, were initially directed at children whose parents could prove they had to go to work. The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development recommended the creation of class groups at 50 per cent of the usual size, strict regulations in relation to disinfection and safety rules and more widespread distribution of hygiene and disinfection products.

More than 30 measures were set in practice upon the return of children to kindergartens and preschool institutions, including measures on ventilation; washing; cleaning and disinfection of facilities, surfaces and equipment; toys before and after working hours; placing a disinfection barrier and disinfection liquid at entrances; rules for parents; maintenance of physical distance; use of masks; different age groups of children not placed in the same space; furry and other toys that cannot be washed and disinfected; keeping distance among children during snack, lunch and nap time; and physical distancing on organized transportation of children.

4.2 Impact on Women's Labour Force Participation

The COVID-19 pandemic hit Serbia after a year of unprecedented job growth; almost 70,000 jobs had been added to the economy (ILO/EBRD, 2020). While there is not yet a comprehensive picture of overall and ongoing labour market impacts, estimates show that as of July 2020 there were around 518,000 registered unemployed, out of which 287,000, (55 per cent) were women — 4,000 more women were unemployed as compared to before the crisis.

The gender-specific impacts of the pandemic on employment reflects underlying structural and gender inequalities in Serbia, especially in relation to occupational segregation, social insurance coverage

and the uneven distribution of care provision. As shown in Table 6, women make up the majority of

people working in the service industries that have been particularly affected by lockdown measures.

TABLE 6:
Employees of Working Age (15-64) by Sector and Sex, 2018 (in thousands)

Sector	Total	Men	Women	Women %
Services	1,294.4	584.9	709.5	54.8
Wholesale/retail/repairs	370.8	166.5	204.3	55.1
Education	176.9	48.3	128.6	72.7
Health care and social protection	154.4	38.6	115.8	75.0

Source: SORS, 2019

Women are also most likely to be the owners of enterprises and micro-enterprises in sectors that were banned or restricted from operating during the lockdown. For example, women made up for the majority of the self-employed population of skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers (54.9 per cent self-employed women versus 53.4 per cent of men); service and sales workers (16.6 per cent self-employed women versus 6.7 per cent of men); technicians and associated professionals (3.3 per cent self-employed women versus 3.2 per cent of men). Men dominated in sectors such as elementary occupations, pant machines operators and assemblers, craft and related trades workers, and managers (SORS, 2019).

Another striking impact is that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a decline in working hours during the second quarter of 2020, equivalent to the loss of 510,000 full-time jobs. Already economically vulnerable workers (informally employed, self-employed, etc.), as well as women and young people are at the highest risk of suffering from this economic downturn.

Over 700,000 workers are at immediate risk because of the characteristics of their jobs. According to analysis conducted by ILO on workers and enterprises at risk, almost 314,000 individuals work on their own account and over 267,000 are informal workers. There are also over 735,000 workers in micro-enterprises and more than 100,000 workers with only fixed-term

and temporary contracts. When gender-specific considerations are brought into the sectoral analysis, the overall share of employment in sectors with high labour-related vulnerabilities increases by around 6 percentage points. On the other hand, the large share of young people employed in vulnerable jobs in retail, food and beverages, consultancy and related activities may have a larger negative impact on jobs compared with the baseline scenario (ILO/EBRD, 2020).

Among the numerous reasons behind job loss during the pandemic, a major difference between women and men was the conflicting demands of commuting to/performing work and taking care of their children and other family members. Around 15 per cent women reported this as a cause of job loss, while only 5 per cent of men did so (SeCons, 2020a).

Although employees in all four regions of Serbia were almost equally affected, loss of jobs was slightly more frequent in rural areas than in urban areas; 11 per cent of women in rural areas lost their job, compared to 7 per cent of women in urban areas (SeCons, 2020b). Among women in rural areas, 24 per cent stated they were forced to leave their jobs in order to take care of children and the elderly at home (compared to 11 per cent in urban areas).

Women who started working from home had different experiences; around 30 per cent of them stated they did not have an adequate work area at home to fully dedicate to work, 5 per cent did not have

the necessary equipment (e.g. computer or Internet access), 44 per cent reported working during night hours to finish work and 28 per cent felt frustrated at being interrupted during work by family members (SeCons, 2020b).

4.3 Impact of the Pandemic on Women and Families with Children

The closures of nurseries, kindergartens and schools meant an all-day care burden that fell disproportionately on women. This burden was exacerbated by the cessation of contact with elderly family members — family members who are often informal care providers.

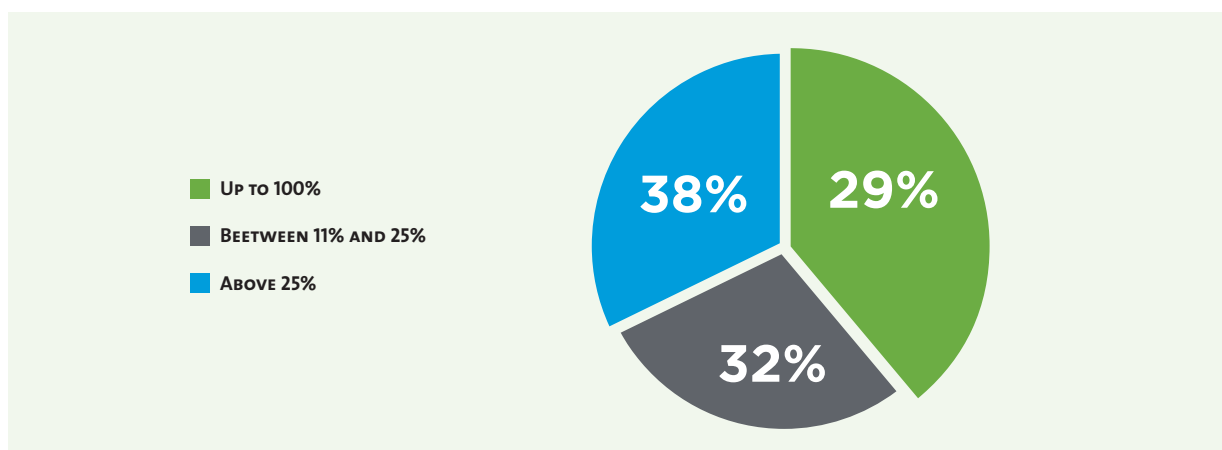
An ongoing UNICEF study has tracked the social and economic effects of the pandemics on households with children aged 0 to 17. The study conducted interviews with households in several different points in time starting from April 2020. In total, 1,823 households participated in the study and data was collected for 3,149 children.

The study shows that during the COVID-19 pandemic, children aged 0 to 6 were cared for by mothers (81 per cent), grandparents (10 per cent) and fathers (8 per cent). The percentage of care provided by fathers

drops to 5 per cent in rural areas. Most of the mothers (70 per cent) spent more than three hours daily on playing, reading and other activities with their children. In the case of children aged 7 to 12, 27 per cent spent over two hours daily helping their child(ren) in the learning process. The situation regarding children aged 13 to 17 is significantly different, with 46 per cent of parents reporting zero hours spent on helping their children, followed by 23 per cent who spent up to one hour on these activities (UNICEF, 2020).

In terms of employment impacts, the study shows that mothers and caregivers were affected in 33 per cent of households, and about 30 per cent of mothers/caregivers reported income reduction. The crisis has significantly affected household incomes; 47 per cent of interviewed households reported reduced income, although this had fallen to 30 per cent of households by July 2020. The majority of households reported income reductions that represented up to 30 per cent of their monthly incomes. Over 25 per cent of households reported having unplanned expenses, mainly due to increased expenditures for hygiene items, health expenses and food. As Figure 3 shows, for 39 per cent of these households, unplanned expenses represented over 25 per cent of their monthly income (UNICEF, 2020).













FIGURE 3:
Unplanned Expenses as a per cent of Monthly Income



Source: UNICEF, 2020

As a result of reduced income with unplanned expenses, households reported introducing savings measures, which included the reduced spending on toys, education, tuition and books (see Table 7).

TABLE 7:
Reductions in Spending as a Saving Measure

CATEGORY	REDUCTION IN SPENDING
 TOYS	40% 
 CHILDREN'S EDUCATION	34% 
 CHILDREN'S TUITION AND BOOKS	29% 
 HEATING	18% 
 ELECTRICITY	14% 
 FOOD	12% 

Source: UNICEF, 2020

4.4 Effects of the Pandemic on Children

A report by the Network of Organizations for Children of Serbia (MODS, 2020) shows that the restrictive measures introduced during the state of emergency significantly affected children. In addition to lockdowns, closures and other measures discussed above, restrictions on their mobility and inability to see friends had particularly acute impacts. Teaching was mostly conducted online through various applications and over the Radio Television of Serbia public broadcast service.

School closures posed a real threat to a deepening inequality in learning for marginalized children, particularly national minorities, Roma students and children with disabilities. The socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 are also felt hard by the most vulnerable children. Many already live in poverty, and the consequences of COVID-19 response measures risk plunging them further into hardship (UNICEF, 2020).

5. SOCIOECONOMIC RESPONSE AND RECOVERY MEASURES

Overall, the Government of Serbia's response is regarded as being "one of the most generous and comprehensive economic packages among the Western Balkan economies" (ILO/EBRD, 2020). The Serbian government announced two financial packages to support the economy through the COVID-19 crisis. Overall, the government spent around 11 per cent of GDP (EUR 5.1 billion/RSD 608.3 billion). The recovery packages contained earmarked budget funds for direct cash subsidies to the private sector, for a programme of favourable loans and for state-guaranteed loans. Additional financial aid through support schemes was announced for particularly affected sectors, such as tourism and transport. Furthermore, the government paid a minimum salary for employees of small- and medium-sized enterprises for three months and deferred tax payments and social security contributions. The latter two measures were prolonged in July 2020 and were complemented by the establishment of a new programme granting state support for each newly created job for a period of nine months. Business taxes were deferred until January 2021, and people with housing loans had an option to freeze the repayment of their monthly mortgage over a period of six months.

5.1 Income Support Measures

The ILO/ERBD assessment report on the Serbian response to the COVID-19 pandemic details the income support measures introduced:

➤ **One-off universal cash transfer to all adults.** In addition to measures aimed at supporting jobs and enterprises, the government introduced a one-off universal cash transfer of EUR 100 to all citizens.⁶ While pensioners and social assistance

beneficiaries received the amount automatically, other adult residents had to apply for this transfer.

- **One-off financial assistance to pensioners and temporary benefit beneficiaries.** All pensioners and temporary benefit beneficiaries who had exercised their rights were paid a one-off financial assistance in the amount of RSD 4,000 (about EUR 34).
- **Assistance to the most vulnerable women.** More than 14,000 of the most vulnerable women in 50 municipalities across Serbia had received assistance worth EUR 100,000 in hygiene packages and essential foodstuffs as part of the EU support to Serbia in the fight against COVID-19.
- **Financial assistance to freelance artists.** The government announced that it would spend approximately RSD 212 million (EUR 1.9 million) from the state budget as financial assistance to independent artists in Serbia. It was announced that 2,353 independent artists would receive RSD 30,000 (EUR 260) per month net, for a period of three months, through local self-governments.
- **Increased wages in the health sector by 10 per cent.** Employees in health care institutions received a supplement to their basic salary in the amount of 10 per cent.
- **Increased employment in the health sector.** More than 2,500 doctors and nurses, who were previously doing residencies or had fixed-term contracts, have been employed. Additionally, the government approved the employment on an indeterminate basis of 455 caregivers and 127 health workers at social care institutions who were hired on a temporary basis during the state of emergency.

⁶ In March of 2021, the Government of Serbia announced further cash transfers: one of EUR 60 to all adult citizens (in two installments), EUR 60 to all unemployed citizens registered at the National Employment Service on 15 April, and RSD 3,000 (EUR 25) for all citizens who receive at least one dose of vaccine against COVID-19 by the end of May 2021. This study was in the final design phase at the time new transfers were announced and, thus, it does not provide detailed information about these transfers.

5.2 Support to Micro-enterprises

Micro-enterprises were hit very hard by the pandemic, with more than 25 per cent completely ceasing to operate. Micro-enterprises also have the least access to savings, assets or credit to support recovery. With the exception of those operating in the textile, transport and tourism sectors, micro-enterprises have generally managed to keep the dismissal of workers below 9 per cent (ILO/ERBD 2020). In doing so, they remained eligible for the most generous and powerful financial assistance measure offered by the government: employment retention subsidies which, for micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises, amounted to about 65 per cent of total labour costs.

The Serbian Innovation Fund introduced a tailored call for proposals for micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises that are developing new products, technologies and prototypes that could help to cope with the crisis in the short term. By the end of the first month of the pandemic, the Serbian Innovation Fund had already signed 12 contracts; in May, the selected companies had to develop their products and services (for example, reusable protective masks, devices for disinfection).

In order to support tourism and hospitality, transport and logistics, the government distributed 160,000 holiday vouchers for destinations within Serbia. The government announced its readiness to provide further assistance to enterprises in vulnerable sectors, including hoteliers, travel agencies and bus companies. Direct aid to the Hotel and Leisure sector was one of the measures included in the package designed to help the economy in response to COVID-19 crisis: the amount is of approximately RSD 1.4 billion or EUR 350 per bed and EUR 150 per room.

Overall, the support through wage subsidies (which were renewed in September 2020 for the hardest-hit sectors) and the universal EUR 100 payment have had a positive impact on containing the expansion of poverty. Indeed, microsimulations show that the cash

grant alone has been able to bring down the Gini coefficient by one full point (ILO/EBRD, 2020). However, it remains to be seen if the effects will be short- or long-lived. Critics, including the Serbian Fiscal Council, have argued that because these two measures were not targeted, they consumed a lot of public resources and only postponed the effects of the COVID-19 crisis.

5.3 UNDP/UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker

The UNDP/UN Women COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker⁷ shows that governments across 206 countries and territories undertook 3,112 measures in response to COVID-19. Of these, 1,299 (almost 42 per cent), are deemed gender sensitive insofar as they seek to directly address the specific risks and challenges that women and girls face as a result of the pandemic.

Serbia introduced 15 measures, 10 of which were deemed gender sensitive. As elsewhere, a significant proportion of these measures were in relation to violence against women (832 measures globally with five such measures in Serbia). In looking only at gender-sensitive social protection and labour market measures, (i.e. measures that target women's economic security or address unpaid care) the Serbian response compares quite favourably.

Globally, social protection and jobs responses have been largely gender-blind: out of a total of 1,310 measures, only 18 per cent are gender sensitive. In contrast, over 50 per cent of Serbia's social protection and jobs responses have been deemed gender sensitive. Furthermore, only 25 countries — one of which is Serbia — have had what the Global Gender Response Tracker terms a holistic response (i.e. measures that span violence against women, women's economic security and unpaid care work). Table 8 shows the social protection and labour market measures deployed by the Government of Serbia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

7 UNDP/UN Women Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker, available at: <https://data.undp.org/gendertracker/>

TABLE 8:
Social Protection and Labour Market Measures

Policy Category	Policy Type	Policy Description
Social Insurance	Pension	All pensioners receive one-off support in the amount of RSD 4,000 (EUR 35).
	Pension	The government issued a decision for the new method of pension payment. The pensioners are able to give special authorization to someone to raise pension instead of them. The other option is that the pension is delivered to pensioners in cash and the cost of the delivery is covered by the government.
	Unemployment benefit	The government issued a decision for the new method of submitting applications for unemployment benefit and for registering with the National Employment Service. The applicants can submit their requests via email or by post. The decision-making for the received requests is also extended.
Social Assistance	Family/Parental/ Childcare leave	Expansion of cash transfers allocated for beneficiaries who are carers, have children or are on maternity leave.
	Cash transfers (conditional and unconditional)	For social assistance beneficiaries whose entitlement to social assistance benefits expired, the government extended their entitlement on the basis of previously issued decisions for a maximum of three months (during a state of emergency). The decision applies to: financial social assistance, caregiver allowance, child allowance, and maternity leave benefits for the purpose of childcare.
	Universal one-off cash payment	All adults received a EUR 100 one-off payment. This was the only measure that has encompassed women working in the informal economy or on a service contract, it included marginalized women, and although one-off and instantaneous, this assistance also contributed to the survival of those women who have seasonal jobs or who were unable to work.
	Salary increase	A 10 per cent increase in salary of health sector and care workers in nursing homes (the majority of whom are women).
	Remuneration of salary	Remuneration of 100 per cent salary during sick leave or in self-isolation for medical staff, care workers, police and military infected by COVID-19 during their duty.
Labour Market	Wage subsidy and relevant support for entrepreneurs/self-employed	The government's new package of support includes: support to large enterprises - 50 per cent of the minimum wage to all employees whose contract ended; cover for three months wages in micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises.
	Deferred payment of labour taxes and social insurance contributions	Labour taxes and social insurance contributions were deferred for a three-month period. These are to be repaid in 24 instalments beginning in 2021.

Source: UNDP/UN Women Global COVID-19 Gender Response Tracker

All of the social assistance measures were deemed to be gender sensitive. Although the other measures were not specifically deemed as gender sensitive, they may still benefit women. For example, the one-off cash transfer was paid to all citizens over the age of 18 at the end of the state of emergency. This was the only measure that has encompassed women working in the informal economy or on a service contract, it included marginalized women, and although one-off and instantaneous, this assistance also contributed to the survival of those women who have seasonal jobs or who were unable to work. In addition, some women reported that this was the first money ever they received in their name, to their own account.

The decision to distribute this sum on such a large scale was highly debated within the government. The Fiscal Council argued it was not a social measure because high-income citizens were also entitled to it. Furthermore, the measure cost twice as much as the planned expenditure for social protection benefits for families with children in the 2020 revised budget (ESPN, 2020).

Despite the favourable overall and gender assessment of the Serbian response and recovery measures, the focus on the care economy (both paid and unpaid) has

been minimal. From a gender perspective, the primary response measures of interest were the package of support to micro-enterprises, entrepreneurs and the self-employed; the universal one-off cash payment; the temporary extension of social assistance benefit entitlements (both conditional and unconditional); and the 10 per cent increase in salary of health sector workers and care workers in nursing homes.

However, no measures were introduced that were specifically addressed to working parents who were affected by the closure of childcare services and schools (such as leave days or working time flexibilization). There was a government decree advising that parents of children in kindergartens and lower-age primary school children ought to be allowed to work from home with full salary, but it fell short of providing an adequate legal framework for practical implementation. Public-sector entities largely implemented the decree, but private-sector enterprises barely implemented it, largely due to the absence of financial support from the government. As was the case in many other countries, despite the overall positive response and recovery measures, the Government of Serbia did not respond to the intensification of care work that fell primarily on women during the pandemic.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Serbia has relatively low levels of both female labour force participation and childcare provision. Improving the accessibility, affordability and quality of formal childcare is a crucial element for increasing women's labour market activity and for economic growth. Improved childcare options would allow informal caregivers to reallocate their time to formal labour market activities, thus contributing to measured economic output as well as easing the costs associated with a declining, ageing population. Further, it would allow for the important recognition of care work. Unpaid work has become a critical part of the SDGs as advanced by the 5R framework (Recognition, Reduction, Reward, Representation and Redistribution of paid and unpaid work) to facilitate women's empowerment and to shape analysis and policy development.

The gender-specific impacts of the pandemic on employment reflect underlying structural and gender inequalities, especially in relation to occupational segregation, social insurance coverage and the uneven distribution of care. The pandemic has increased the visibility of these pre-COVID-19 structural and societal inequalities. The burden of care work, especially childcare, on women intensified as childcare facilities, schools and kindergartens closed. The highest economic risks from the crisis' impacts fell on already vulnerable workers, the majority of which are women, including the informally employed, the self-employed, low-wage earners and employees with non-permanent contracts.

The impacts of the crisis on workers and micro-enterprises already in a vulnerable position in the labour market are exacerbating poverty and existing inequalities (IZA, 2020). The intensification of unpaid care work and women's loss of working hours and income underline the urgent needs for greater investment and flexibility in childcare provision and for employers to offer flexible working hours and appropriate work-life balance policies.

A number of key areas of concern have emerged in this review of childcare provision, women's employment

and COVID-19 in Serbia. These include the extent of the rural-urban divide in relation to the provision of childcare, labour market opportunities, the distribution of unpaid care work as reinforced by social norms, women's low labour force participation high inactivity rates, the distribution of unpaid work in general and of care work in particular and the funding of childcare provision through local municipalities rather than central government.

The current network of childcare/preschool institutions is inadequate in terms of geographic coverage and physical capacity. Preschool institutions are frequently absent where there is the highest need for them, as in underdeveloped and rural areas. Higher enrolment rates are associated with children from better-off families, parents with higher educational attainment and those from urban environments; lower enrolment rates are prevalent among the poorest, rural and Roma children.

Where there is childcare provision and yet participation rates remain low, other variables, including public transport, affordability and social norms all play a role. In particular, more needs to be done to inform parents of the social, development and educational benefits of childcare/preschool education, as many parents appear to not recognize value of preschool education for the development of their children (UNICEF, 2016).

This report demonstrates the clear link between women's employment opportunities and childcare provision. Women's employment continues to lag around 14 per cent behind men's, with childcare responsibilities being a primary constraint. The unemployment rate for young women aged 15 to 24 in Serbia is especially high at 29.7 per cent (SORS, 2019) with the main barriers to labour force participation identified as family responsibilities, lack of childcare and low levels of education (World Bank, 2019).

In light of the pandemic increasing an already high rate of youth unemployment, the Government of Serbia has announced a new wage subsidy and on-the-job training programme, My First Salary. It is

intended to provide direct subsidies to around 10,000 first-time employees with a secondary school or university education. Given the considerable resources being devoted, it is essential that it incorporates a specific gender focus and targets. To this end, the government should engage with institutions that have a gender remit, including UN Women, in programme design.

The central government should make much greater investments in state-sponsored childcare facilities, especially for children under 3 years of age. At present, local governments bear 80 per cent of current pre-school education costs. Given the current inequalities in coverage related to levels of municipal development, the current funding model is a key policy issue for Serbia in relation to childcare and its impact on women's employment. It is highly recommended that the central government intervene and support underdeveloped municipalities to reach higher childcare/preschool coverage rates.

Finally, state-mandated employer flexibility to improve the work-life balance and flexible childcare provision (half-day as well as full-day options) are crucial issues for working mothers and youth. Such flexibility is key to a range of issues, from addressing income inequality, to improving women's labour force participation rates, to strengthening the family unit through enhanced work-life balances.

The Government of Serbia was performing well prior to the pandemic, which allowed a relatively good emergency response and a better possibility for growth to resume over 2021/2022. In contrast to other Western Balkan countries, Serbia's pandemic response has relied on two key measures: generous, near-universal employment retention measures and a one-off cash grant for all adults. Measures were largely aimed at maintaining the existing employment levels and liquidity of economic actors. These have proven to be effective ways to support, at least temporarily, the old and newly poor and vulnerable during the pandemic (ILO, 2020).

A lesson learned regarding micro enterprises, where there are more women owners than in larger business entities and which have the largest share in all areas of work, is that making budget support conditional to maintaining employment levels according to linear parameters that apply to all entities, regardless of

size, is not suitable for micro companies and entrepreneurs. This crisis has shown that it is necessary to increase, intensify and expand support for women's entrepreneurship through additional measures and programs. However, to date, no special measures have targeted women-owned businesses and women entrepreneurs in response to COVID-19, although there is a need for them.

From a care perspective, however, the response has been disappointing, with no measures introduced that were specifically addressed to working parents who were affected by the school and childcare closures. There was only the increase in salary of mostly female care workers in nursing homes and the government decree, which was largely fulfilled by the public sector but ignored by the private sector. There were not any care-specific measures, such as leave days, mandated working time flexibilization, employment protections or leave to take care of a child sent into mandatory quarantine, or incentives or tax measures to facilitate working from home.

As the fiscal space in Serbia becomes narrower, the government needs to focus future policies on those population groups that are the most vulnerable and most affected by the crisis. The absence of specific response and recovery measures that address care and women's disproportionate responsibility in performing this work is not the sole reserve of the Government of Serbia.

Globally, care work is long undervalued and often invisible. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed how the labour market depends on gender roles that require more work from women than from men. The conflicting demands on women's time for care and work activities represent a fundamental barrier to their efficient and equitable labour force participation.

Gender equality and women's economic empowerment are closely intertwined; the provision of affordable, quality childcare is a key component to ensuring a more balanced sharing of family responsibilities. COVID-19 has brought these issues into sharp relief, providing a unique opportunity to advocate for policies that address the vicious circle of low labour market attachment and primary care provider roles that perpetuate gender-based inequalities and women's economic vulnerability.

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