

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWER- MENT:

Areas for joint actions
in the Western Balkans



#listentowomen

#WBWomenPower

Goals

The Women's Economic Empowerment: areas for joint actions is a comprehensive framework designed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) aimed at fostering women's economic empowerment in the Western Balkan region, and advancing gender equality as envisioned in the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#).

Globally and in the Western Balkans, COVID-19 is worsening health, social and economic achievements and deepening gender inequalities. The pandemic's combined impacts – of increased unpaid care work, reduced working hours and employment opportunities, losses of jobs, incomes and livelihoods – have disproportionately affected women.



Economies of focus

Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo*, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

Given the urgency of the challenges to gender equality posed by the pandemic, this initiative proposes an integrated approach to these issues across the Western Balkans with the objectives of:



→ Bringing in reforms for long-term and systemic change

A mutually reinforcing set of reforms and actions is necessary to foster women's participation and leadership in politics and the economy. These are crucial for systemic change, inclusive socio-economic development and gender-responsive recovery in the aftermath of COVID-19.



→ Fostering regional cooperation and partnerships

Strong partnerships among different stakeholders committed to addressing gender inequalities are essential to build bridges in the region and create space to co-design initiatives on women's economic empowerment. Partners include Western Balkan governments, the European Union, the United Nations and other multilateral organisations, the Council of Europe, international financial institutions, women's organisations and business associations, the private sector and academia.

*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.

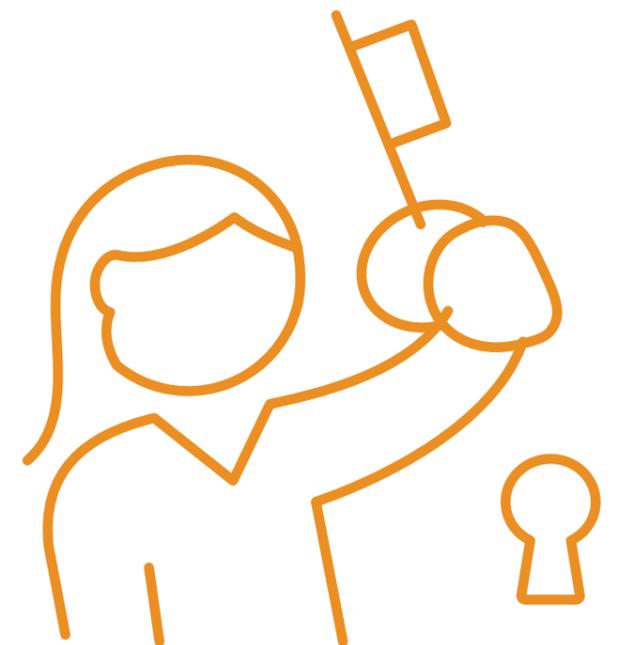
Key priorities

The initiative identifies five key interlinked priorities to achieve the goal of women's economic empowerment:

- 1 Promoting women's leadership and access to decent work.
- 2 Bringing transformational changes to gender equality in the private and public sectors.
- 3 Supporting and accelerating women's entrepreneurship.
- 4 Investing in the care economy and promoting more equitable distribution of unpaid care work.
- 5 Bridging the digital gender divide and promoting participation of women in STEM careers.

Overall outcome

The strategies and actions presented in the initiative will help to close gender gaps and empower women in the economy. These steps towards the achievement of SDG 5 on gender equality will generate multiplier effects. An increase in women's labour force participation and entrepreneurship could increase GDP in the Western Balkan region by up to 20 percent. Women's leadership in politics and the economy could also contribute to boosting innovation and growth. Empirical evidence shows that higher women's representation increases the quality of governance, while companies with higher shares of women in top-management positions are more likely to have sustained profitable growth.



Regional context and entry points for action

Despite significant progress towards gender equality in the Western Balkan region, women's participation in the labour market remains low, with overrepresentation in the informal sector and in vulnerable employment. Gender stereotypes and traditional barriers to entrepreneurship impede women's economic opportunities, along with wide gender pay gaps and labour market divides, which are particularly visible in STEM occupations.



The initiative proposes the following actions in line with the principal objective and key priorities to advance women's economic empowerment:

Accelerating women's entrepreneurship

Considerable challenges and barriers limit women's entrepreneurship opportunities: women represent only 27.5 percent of business owners and tend to operate in smaller, non-capital-intensive and low-income sectors, often lacking access to credit and networking opportunities.

Key actions

- Increase women's access to finance, especially in rural areas, through grant schemes, combined with training programmes that enhance financial literacy.
- 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 European Union.
- Encourage innovation investments and support women-owned businesses entering the supply chain in diverse industries and transiting work towards the online economy.

Closing gender gaps in digitalisation and STEM

Gender stereotypes prevent many girls and women in the region from choosing education and career paths in STEM fields: the share of women in STEM occupations is as low as 14 percent. Gender pay gaps and gender bias in technology further impede women's economic empowerment.

Key actions

- Promote formal and non-formal STEM-related education among girls and women, and support women's employment in STEM fields, including by reducing gender discrimination in recruitment, promotions and gender pay gaps.
- 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.
- Develop a sub-regional online advocacy platform to promote gender equality in STEM fields, engaging stakeholders in multilateral organisations, the private sector, universities and women's networks.

Transforming the public and private sectors to deliver for gender equality

Women are nearly half of all public administration employees but 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.

Key actions

- Develop accountability frameworks for gender equality in public institutions and the private sector, introducing gender standards across all levels, including mandatory gender-responsive budgeting.
- Step up women's participation in the boards of companies and financial and governing institutions and facilitate mentorship programmes for women to advance in leadership positions.
- Introduce a certification for gender equality in the public and private sectors to inter alia attract and retain greater diversity of talent, promote gender parity in leadership, and institute flexible work arrangements.

Promoting women's leadership and access to decent work

Women make up only about 40 percent of the total employed in the Western Balkan region, while more than 23 percent hold insecure jobs. With the exception of North Macedonia and Serbia, women are also underrepresented in decision-making positions at local and national levels: they hold less than a third of ministerial positions and parliamentary seats.

Key actions

- Assess policies and advocate for decent work, including by ensuring equal opportunities and treatment in employment, flexible work arrangements, and a safe work environment.
- Establish a gender monitor to regularly measure progress on gender gaps in the Western Balkan economies.
- 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.

Recognising and redistributing unpaid work and investing in the care economy

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. They also account for almost 80 percent of workers in low-paid care sectors (i.e. education, health and social care).

Key actions

- Promote recognition of the volume of unpaid care work shouldered by women and its role in sustaining productive economies and societies.
- Support public investment in care sectors and ensure decent work and social protection for paid care workers, including migrant workers.
- Promote employer- or government-funded provision of childcare or tax policies that encourage both spouses to work, encourage the adoption of flexible work arrangements and support businesses investing in childcare plans with subsidies and grants.

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