

Progress at risk

Gender equality in COVID-19 response in Europe and Central Asia

**A regional policy advocacy paper on the gender dimensions
of the socio-economic impact of COVID-19**



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Foreword


Across Europe and Central Asia, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a health and humanitarian crisis. It has also had multiple socio-economic impacts arising from loss of jobs and incomes, health and wellbeing, to disruptions in education and opportunity at all levels. The crisis has reinforced gender inequalities across age, ethnicity and social groups. Taken together, the pandemic's impacts jeopardize the region's progress on economic and social development goals, particularly decades of hard-won gains in gender equality, and place at risk the fundamental aim of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development to leave no one behind.

Socio-economic impact assessments, undertaken by UN agencies to support governments in the region, show that the pandemic has had a profound and disproportional impact on women and girls. They have suffered higher rates of unemployment, rising levels of violence within the home and a sharp increase in unpaid care and domestic work.

As countries build back better, we must prioritize swift and decisive gender-responsive actions that strengthen the resilience of social protection systems, enhance social infrastructure, ensure family-friendly and flexible working arrangements and redistribute care work to enable women to access employment and growth opportunities. We need to build gender-responsive social protection into macroeconomic policies and extend coverage to leave no one behind. It is critical to ensure women's voice and role in decision-making across economic sectors and in public policy as part of COVID-19 responses. Closing gender gaps in technological innovation and digital skills, especially in STEM fields, can open new vistas for young people. Every woman and every child deserve to live a life free of violence and have the right to do so. Preventing and responding to gender-based violence requires higher investments in comprehensive and multi-sectoral services that were badly affected during the pandemic. Even greater efforts are needed to address the gender biases in norms and attitudes that lead to structural inequalities and the denial of rights and opportunities for women and girls.

This report analyses the socio-economic impact assessments and other reports relevant to pandemic response from a gender perspective. It offers comprehensive policy recommendations for a gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery, which is essential to building an equitable and resilient future. In a year of deepening inequalities, we see opportunities for enhanced capabilities of communities, strong feminist activism and vital youth engagement, which will protect and promote gender equality and women's rights in the ECA region.

As we partner to support governments, we hope that the findings and recommendations of this report will strengthen the foundations of a gender-responsive COVID-19 recovery.



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Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMD	Armenian Dram
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
CSO	Civil Society Organization
ECA	Europe and Central Asia
EIA	Economic Impact Assessment
EIF	European Investment Fund
EIGE	European Institute for Gender Equality
EUR	Euro (European Monetary Unit)
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
GBV	Gender-based violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HORECA	Hotel, Restaurant and Catering
IANWGE	Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ID	Identification/Identity
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IFI	International Financial Institution
ILO	International Labour Organization
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IPC	Infection Prevention and Control
IPHR	International Partnership for Human Rights
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
LGBTQI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex
MEF	Montenegrin Employers Federation
MSMEs	Micro, Small and Medium-size Enterprises
NBER	National Bureau of Economic Research
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEIA	Socio-Economic Impact Assessment
SMEs	Small and Medium-size Enterprises
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics
UN DESA	United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
UN IBC	United Nations Issue-based Coalition
UN OCHA	United Nations Office for Humanitarian Affairs
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UNGEI	United Nations Girls' Education Initiative
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNODC	United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime
UNSDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Group
USD	United States Dollar
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WHO	World Health Organization

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*All references to Kosovo in this document shall be understood to be under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

Context

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread around the world, taking an enormous toll in morbidity and loss of lives, economies have slowed down, businesses have closed and jobs suspended or lost, schools shut down, transportation halted, and everyday lives altered with lockdown measures.

Like all crises, COVID-19 has hit specific groups and vulnerable sections especially hard. But it has exacerbated gender inequalities like no other crisis before. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres has warned that “COVID-19 could reverse the limited progress that has been made on gender equality and women’s rights”.¹ As the vast majority of healthcare workers, women have been on the frontlines of the pandemic, with greater exposure to risk. Large numbers of women work, especially as informal employees, in the four sectors most at risk of job losses and a decline in working hours: accommodation and food services; real estate, business and administrative activities; low-wage manufacturing; and wholesale/retail trade.²

Women’s loss of income and paid work has gone with an exponential rise in unpaid work at home, given extended school closures and care needs of children, the sick, the disabled and elderly. Gender-based violence has spiked, as women and girls have been confined at home as unemployed dependents with abusive relations, cut off from normal support services, and living in stressful situations of job loss and economic insecurity. The pandemic has laid bare the persistent underinvestment in social infrastructure across societies, including paid and unpaid care, and healthcare and educational systems – sectors notable for a workforce that is predominantly women.

The Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region,³ no exception to these global trends, also finds itself positioned precariously for the aftermath of the pandemic. Several of the economies in Eastern Europe, for example in

the Balkans, have long witnessed economic stagnation and have some of the highest rates globally of migration of youth and workers to neighbouring countries. This has meant a significant dependence on remittances, which have now declined or become unreliable due to job losses, especially for migrants. Key sectors like tourism in the Balkans and Turkey have also seen big declines during the pandemic lockdown. The public health and social impacts of the COVID-19 crisis have overwhelmed health systems and social infrastructure, in poorer and developed economies alike. Among other actors, United Nations agencies have undertaken economic impact assessments (EIAs) and socio-economic impact assessments (SEIAs), with the support of governments and international partners, as a diagnostic for immediate policy responses and longer-term recovery efforts. The assessments explore impacts on access to formal and informal economic opportunities, business activity of SMEs and MSMEs, macro-economic policy and access to social and healthcare protection and services, and coping mechanisms and vulnerabilities of the most affected population groups. They vary in their coverage and depth of analysis of economic and social issues, including gendered impacts.

The choices countries make now and the support they receive will affect their development trajectories in the long term. The United Nations has therefore mobilized all its capacities to support national authorities in conducting socio-economic impact assessments and developing response plans to the COVID-19 crisis. They have addressed the particularities of individual countries and territories but have not followed a common analytical framework – as a result, the documents produced are diverse and wide-ranging. Nonetheless, there are common themes that emerge from a gender perspective.

Methodology and scope

This assessment, commissioned by the UNDP Istanbul Regional Hub and the UNICEF Regional Office for Europe and Central Asia, primarily involved a qualitative desk review of SEIA materials to identify the common gender concerns highlighted by COVID-19 in the ECA region. The SEIAs reviewed in this report are from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan. In addition, this review covers other COVID-19-related documentation specific to the ECA region produced by international agencies and partners, including UNICEF's regional guidance, UN Women's rapid gender assessments and guidance from WHO and the regional UN Issue-based Coalition on Social Protection. This review is also informed by other relevant thematic assessments and studies on gender equality which are not pandemic-related, undertaken by UN agencies and partners like UNSDG, IANWGE, OSCE and ADB.

To assess the gender-responsiveness of the SEIAs, the paper examined the extent to which:

- There is an accounting of the direct and indirect impacts of the COVID-19 crisis on living conditions, livelihoods, autonomy and decision-making for women and girls, men and boys, with a focus on the gender gaps under each topic/sector.
- The SEIAs capture national and sub-national response strategies that are inclusive/responsive to gender concerns.
- Opportunities to address gender gaps and scale up women's empowerment are part of the policies and actions developed to respond to the crisis and recovery.
- Data is disaggregated and analyzed by sex and other factors such as ethnicity, LGBTQI, migrants and internally displaced persons, the elderly and persons with disabilities and informal sector workers. The effort is to demonstrate the ways in which gender inequalities intersect with particular forms of deprivation and vulnerabilities.

In this context, the paper reviewed the extent to which the SEIAs applied UNDP and UNICEF gender mainstreaming guidelines,⁴ including the use of quantitative and qualitative methods for data collection and analysis. The guidelines further recommended that:

- All quantitative indicators be disaggregated by sex, age and race/indigenous peoples, geographical location, rural/urban settings, disability, gender identity, sexual orientation, religion, migrant status, nationality, level of education, household type, and other relevant categories, and use geo-referencing methods in the assessment.
- Information be disaggregated by household composition (numbers of adults and children) with attention to households with children maintained by a single adult or child-headed households, including the use of rapid case study analysis when not possible to obtain intra-household sex-disaggregated data.
- The SEIAs look at intra-household dynamics and the impacts on women, men, girls and boys, including distribution of consumption, control of income, shifts in power/decision-making, and gender-based violence; and
- The methodology for the SEIAs engage with gender equality mechanisms and civil society organizations, such as women's rights and feminist groups and community groups, particularly women most affected by the crisis (e.g., women working in the healthcare sector, domestic workers, informal and migrant workers).

The SEIAs have covered much under challenging circumstances but have managed to address only some of these gender dimensions. Nonetheless, there are some common themes and region-wide challenges which form the basis of this review. The annex presents substantive excerpts from assessment reports produced by fourteen country offices, in collaboration with other UN agencies and research institutes.

Regional overview of key gender-related findings

In many ways, the Europe and Central Asia region performs well on gender equality measures⁵ globally – particularly in human development, health and educational attainments. On the whole the region has done better than others in lowering maternal mortality and adolescent birth rates, achieving longer mean years of girls' schooling, and increasing contraceptive use.⁶ However, it does not perform as well against other indicators of women's empowerment, voice and wellbeing, for example, the percentage of women in all areas of decision-making, women's labour market participation or the prevalence of intimate partner violence. There are also persistent gender gaps in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This means that pandemic response policies must be informed by these particular deficits. This is also a moment where social spending must be promoted as priority strategic investments in social infrastructure and services essential to resilience and gender equality. This would require creating an enabling environment for social care responsibilities. The crisis has highlighted the need to go beyond building physical infrastructure to public services and workplace measures that facilitate innovation geared towards equal sharing between men and women of unpaid work at home. Countries and territories now have an opportunity to build forward better, with new social contracts that place social production as a responsibility of all, and provisioning for universal services and social protection.

While the gender-related observations in the examined SEIAs are uneven, several point to some commonalities of the experience of risk and vulnerability. Two common themes are employment impacts in specific sectors, with a focus on SMEs/MSMEs, and the rise in gender-based violence. There is limited discussion of the care sector and the care burden during and after the first phase of the pandemic, with little attention to this critical issue in the response measures – an omission with serious implications for

resilient and equitable post-pandemic recovery.

The review highlights five emerging, yet variable regional trends from the SEIAs as well as the thematic and background materials from the region, which have important ramifications for gender equality in the diverse economies of Europe and Central Asia:

- I. Labour market participation, vulnerable employment and social protection: concentration of women workers in directly impacted economic sectors, as well as greater vulnerability and informality of employment for women workers and women entrepreneurs across sectors, with inadequate social protection coverage.
- II. Migration and mobility: regional migration and remittances as a key feature of several economies and their impact on household incomes reinforcing women's economic vulnerability, with loss of remittance receipts and earnings due to job losses, border closures and lockdown measures.
- III. Burden of unpaid care and domestic work: predominant burden of unpaid care work and housework on women and girls, further exacerbated by the pandemic's impact.
- IV. Gender-based violence: increased exposure to violence and reduced physical security both within households and in communities as a result of the lockdowns and increased economic dependence.
- V. Digital exclusion and lack of access to technology: lack of access to technology and digital skills for women and girls, with implications for education, future skills and return to the world of work.



I. Labour market participation, vulnerable employment and social protection

Farmers in Strumica River Basin, North Macedonia's main agricultural centre.

All the SEIAs reviewed focused on the impact of the pandemic and ensuing lockdown measures on the economy. While COVID-19 lockdowns have decelerated productive employment in services and upended the manufacturing sector due to disrupted supply chains, directly impacting economic activities, they have also in parallel disrupted social reproduction of everyday life – particularly in education and healthcare.

The SEIAs note the predominance of women workers in hard-hit sectors like health services and in education (e.g., **Azerbaijan**). These sectors are part of social infrastructure long neglected in public expenditure, and have been in decline since the transition to a market economy in several countries. In addition, the privatization and private procurement of basic healthcare services either due to lack of government investment, maintenance of health systems or entrenched corruption, have led to some of the highest ratios of out-of-pocket expenditures to total health spending levels in the world.⁷

The pandemic has highlighted the central role of women in social reproduction in society – formally whether as healthcare workers on the frontlines of a public health crisis, as

teachers who have to deliver a curriculum to students in lockdown and as workers in the care sector, or informally in households attending to unpaid work and care responsibilities. The pandemic has underlined the urgent need to invest in social infrastructure – including e.g., traditional and innovative, digitalized forms of service provision in healthcare, education, long-term and assistive care, and childcare. Health, care and education investments form the basis of social reproduction and yield returns well into the future in the form of an inclusive, educated, healthier and better cared for population.⁸ They are part of public infrastructure because they yield benefits to the whole community and not just their direct recipients.

Intersecting vulnerabilities

The SEIAs and other relevant reports have highlighted that the populations most at risk in the immediate and longer term are those that share common and overlapping vulnerabilities:

- Depend heavily on the informal economy, and risk not being captured explicitly in official statistics or qualify for social protection; a majority of these informal sector workers are women and are most

vulnerable to layoffs and loss of employment. Daily workers, domestic workers, small-scale agricultural producers, petty traders and similar groups in the informal sector who cannot access their workplace, land, or markets due to COVID-19 mobility restrictions, are unable to secure the income required to meet their basic needs.⁹

- Have inadequate or restricted access to social services or political influence and face exclusion. These include the Roma, other ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, LGBTQI, residents in informal settlements, rural areas and refugee camps, internally displaced and migrants, persons deprived of liberty or in institutionalized settings (e.g., prisoners, persons in psychiatric care, drug rehabilitation centres, assisted living facilities), who face particular risks to their health and rights.
- Generally considered dependents and thereby marginalized (e.g., the elderly and infirm, persons with disabilities).
- Vulnerable and at risk of poverty, with limited capacities, savings and opportunities to cope and adapt and thereby exacerbate inequalities. This increases the risk of negative coping strategies, including lower food consumption, selling of assets, heightened personal debt, early/forced marriage and forced prostitution. Often these persons belong to the above vulnerable categories and have little access to social protection either in insurance or assistance measures.¹⁰
- Limited or no access to digital and other cutting-edge technologies, which affects their education, employment and skills. Gender is an important determinant, as women and girls often lack skills and cannot access or use technology in households, workplaces and educational institutions.

Women's employment in hardest-hit sectors

Gender inequalities in labour markets are integrally connected with gender differences in access to social protection systems. In addition to the large size of the informal sector, the low coverage is also due to women's large presence among agricultural workers outside of the social protection system.¹¹ Women have been especially hard hit by the pandemic because they are over-represented in some of the sectors worst affected by the crisis and subsequent social distancing restrictions, such as accommodation, food, sales and low-wage manufacturing branches. Globally, almost 510 million or 40 percent of all employed women work in these four sectors, compared with 36.6 percent of men.¹² In **North Macedonia**, since the pandemic outbreak, 24,488 women lost or could not find a job. In **Serbia**, while in the early days of the crisis businesses dismissed mainly men, long-term adjustments to the crisis in the second quarter of 2020 resulted in more women being dismissed: over April-June 2020, a net 34,700 women lost their jobs compared to a net increase of 1,500 more jobs for men. In **Turkey**, 51 percent of women experienced employment disruption due to the pandemic compared to 42 percent for men, and COVID-19 related layoffs affected 26 percent of women compared to 21 percent of men.



Women have been especially hard hit because they work in large numbers in accommodation, food, sales and low-wage manufacturing – some sectors worst affected by the crisis.



The **Kazakhstan** SEIA notes that in eight sectors which also happen to have a large women's workforce, more than 75 percent of the self-employed had to close down, including those in the beauty industry (87.3 percent), the arts, entertainment and recreation (75 percent), construction (75.5 percent), educational services (76.2 percent), logistics services (76.2 percent), HORECA (hotels/restaurants/catering) (80 percent),

paid medical and routine services (77.8 percent) and 'provision of other services' (78.8 percent). Quarantine and emergency measures affected women entrepreneurs more than men: during periods of quarantine, 69 percent of SMEs of women entrepreneurs stopped their activities, compared with 59 percent of men entrepreneurs. Self-employed women suspended activities 10 percent more than self-employed men (76 percent and 66 percent respectively).

Overall, 81 percent of workers in Europe and Central Asia reside in countries where workplaces were required to remain closed due to the pandemic in certain sectors or for some categories of workers.¹³ Such closures have resulted in a reduction in working hours. The hours worked in the region are estimated to have declined by 17.5 percent, or 55 million full-time jobs in the second quarter of 2020.¹⁴ The vast majority of vulnerable and at-risk domestic workers for example, are women, ranging from 58.2 percent in Asia and the Pacific and 69.7 percent in Africa, to 86 percent in Europe and Central Asia and 88.5 percent in the Americas.¹⁵ Furthermore, domestic workers are often women migrants, who are more vulnerable given the general lack of social protection in destination countries, and their inability to return to their home countries owing to lockdown measures and travel bans. These impacts have been severe in Europe and Central Asia. According to the IOM, the Russian Federation alone hosts approximately 12 million migrants, and as of April 2020, nearly 10,000 Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow and Moscow oblast alone lost their jobs and ran out of a means of support.¹⁶ Uzbekistan has emerged as one of the world's most active transit points for migrants stranded by the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷

Impact of COVID-19 on women's entrepreneurship

Women entrepreneurs and owners of micro-businesses have been worse hit by the loss of cash flow and demand under lockdown. The Azerbaijan draft SEIA noted that women led 22.5 percent of the businesses in the micro, small and medium-sized enterprises (MSME) sector, which were up to 20 percent more affected by COVID-19 than those led by men. Most women-led MSMEs did not have the

means to operate their businesses remotely. In the period from April 1 to June 15, 2020, all-women entrepreneurs in the sample surveyed had closed down temporary or permanently their businesses altogether. Women predominate in areas such as catering, manual labour, market work, factory work, and tourism that are highly dependent on social interaction and deeply hit by COVID-19 social distancing restrictions.

Moreover, based on available data, net wages of women in **Montenegro** cumulatively dropped by EUR2,347,600 over a four-month period (end of February-end of June 2020). This drop was recorded in the following sectors: accommodation and food services; agriculture, forestry and fishing; wholesale and retail trade and repair of motor vehicles and motorcycles.¹⁸ Western Balkans and Turkey note the strong evidence of a sharp drop in demand for products and services in sectors where women predominate.¹⁹ As the **Armenia** SEIA notes, women-led SMEs were more affected in hard-hit sectors such as hospitality, beauty and well-being services. Additionally, 75 percent of women-led businesses participating in the SEIA survey are small-scale with an annual turnover of less than AMD24 million (approximately USD50,000). This segment suffered more severely than businesses with a higher annual turnover.

Women in the MSME sector are affected disproportionately in other ways, from losing access to essential services and income opportunities, to bearing additional unpaid care responsibilities and suffering greater exposure to gender-based violence. Digital and technological disruption, accelerated by COVID-19, is changing the business landscape for MSMEs, and access to assets and skills will be even more important in creating future inequalities. Future-proof and resilient businesses entail significant investment in digital skills and technological infrastructure, and agile adaptation to online and innovative forms of commerce – with women entrepreneurs generally at greater disadvantage than men.



II. Migration and mobility

A child in a migrant family to Greece has her temperature checked.

The Europe and Central Asia region has some of the highest migration rates in the world: 15 percent of the world's migrants are from this region. Outward and transit migration flows are among the highest globally, with extensive depletion of human capital for the region.²⁰

The collapse of the USSR led to large migration flows within the region as well as to Europe and the Russian Federation. For example, migration from Central Asia is almost exclusively to the Russian Federation, which is the destination country for 95 percent of migrants from Tajikistan, 83 percent from Kyrgyzstan and 60 percent from Uzbekistan.²¹ Women's migration is much higher in Kyrgyzstan than in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Women made up 31 percent of labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan in 2015, 13.4 percent from Uzbekistan and 9.6 percent from Tajikistan, with the average for the Commonwealth of Independent States and Central Asia being 15.7 percent.²² Labour migration is not without social and economic costs. It involves loosening family ties, brain drain, migrants being employed below their skill levels and problems with integration in destination countries. Individuals in remittance-receiving households are less

likely to enter the labour market, putting additional pressure on the domestic labour supply. Women migrants are particularly at risk of discrimination and exploitation in the labour and housing markets, or subject to illegal migration and human trafficking in destination countries.

COVID-19 impacts on migrants and mobility

The Russian Federation remains the major destination country in the region, with around 11.6 million international migrants in 2019. Most immigrants come from neighbouring countries, most notably members of the Commonwealth of Independent States and Central Asia. Immigrants from Ukraine comprised the largest number of foreign-born populations in the Russian Federation (over three million), followed by Kazakhstan (around 2.5 million) and Uzbekistan (1.1 million).²³ At the onset of the pandemic, an estimated 2.7 to 4.2 million labour migrants in Russia were from Central Asia.²⁴ In **Tajikistan** and **Kyrgyzstan**, for example, where the domestic private sector has not produced enough quality jobs, labour migration has been an economic lifeline for many households, with remittances accounting for around 30 percent of GDP in both countries.

The pandemic lockdown's impact on mobility and migrants has meant a projected decline of 14 percent in remittances by 2021 compared to pre-pandemic levels, and a direct impact on the disposable incomes of households that depend on them, which is of particular significance in the ECA region, where the decline in remittances is projected to be 16 percent in 2020 and eight percent in 2021, a sharper fall than all other regions.²⁵ Unexpected loss of income due to the reduction or suspension of remittances can deeply affect household livelihoods and further exacerbate women's economic vulnerability. For example, in Kyrgyzstan, remittances constitute 75 percent of recipient households' income on average, and greater concerns arise especially for households of older persons or households with no income earner.²⁶ The longer-term economic consequences of a prolonged recession in key migrant destinations are severe for many Central Asian economies, both due to the global pandemic and lower oil prices. In October 2020, the World Bank observed that remittances from Russia to Central Asian economies dropped by almost a quarter during April-June 2020.²⁷ A significant fall in remittance revenues has serious implications for recipient households, in particular women-headed households, and furthermore on Central Asian economies' current account deficits.²⁸



The pandemic lockdown's impact on mobility and migrants has meant a significant fall in remittance revenues, with serious implications for recipient households, especially women-headed households.

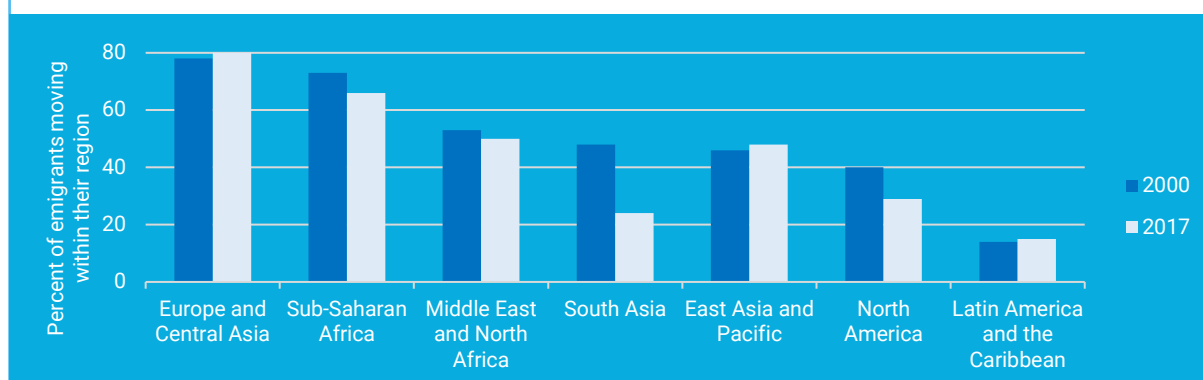


Irregular migration and social protection systems

Many labour migrants, unable to return and often stuck in or turned away from airports, have continued to work or remain unemployed in countries with high rates of infection. Migrants' poor access to healthcare and living conditions that are not conducive to safety and health protection measures, pose a risk of the virus being reintroduced to Central Asia at a later point in time. A number of governments (e.g., **Kosovo, Moldova, Tajikistan**) have planned responses or taken steps to support the repatriation of migrant workers on condition of strict quarantine measures upon their return, but these returning populations will invariably stretch already under-resourced social services. Large informal shares of the economies of Europe and Central Asia coupled with strong irregular migration outflows have put considerable strain on contributory pension schemes. They have led to large parts of the population not being covered by social protection. The coverage of social assistance and social insurance programmes in Central Asia has been limited compared to other countries of the former Soviet Union. It is the highest in Kazakhstan, with 31 percent of the population covered by social assistance programmes and 28 percent covered by social insurance programmes (e.g., pensions). However, in Kyrgyzstan, these proportions are only 8.5 percent and 30.5 percent, and in Tajikistan, they are 10 percent and 34 percent, respectively.

The pandemic has also intensified women's and girls' economic vulnerability, which could further expose them to human trafficking and exploitation.²⁹ Before the pandemic, women and girls were already 60 percent of detected victims of trafficking in Central Asia, and 90 percent of detected victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Eastern Europe and Central Asia.³⁰

Figure 1
Share of emigrants moving intra-regionally, by world region, 2000 and 2017
 (Source: UN DESA 2017)



Intraregional migration

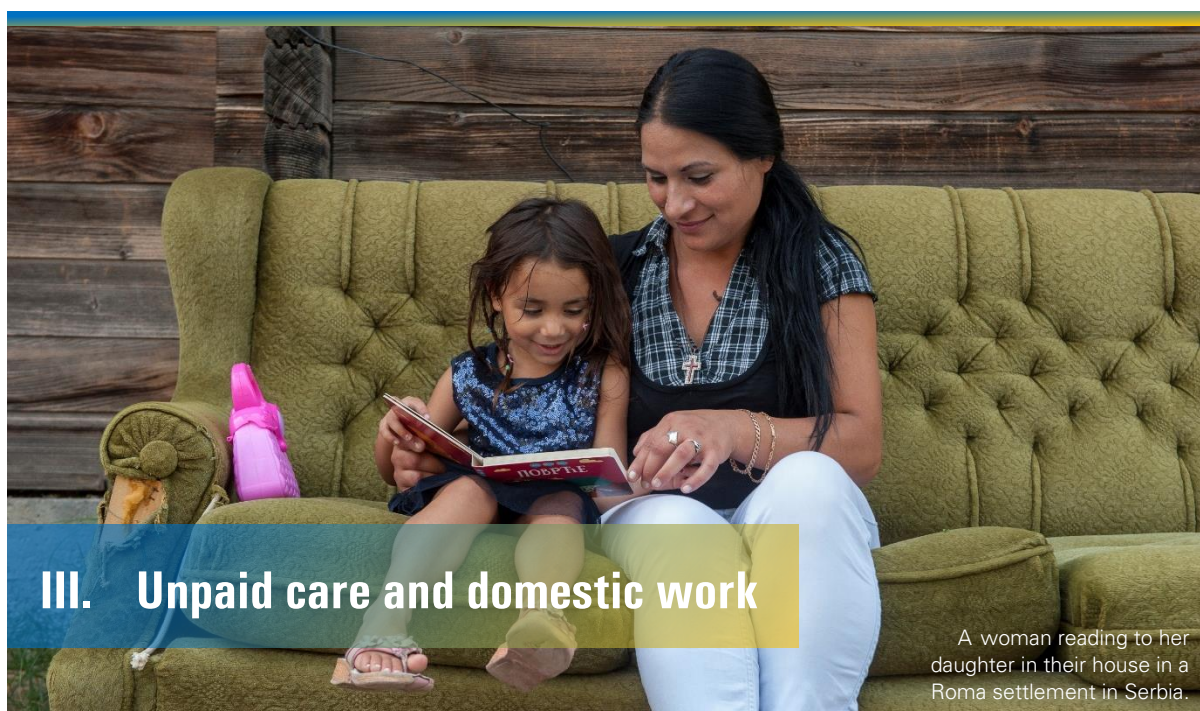
A critical migration pattern is intraregional migration stocks, which account for about a third of global migration and an even larger share in ECA (Figure 1).³¹

Despite the decline in transportation and communication costs, most migrants still prefer to move to neighbouring or nearby countries. Physical proximity, linguistic and cultural similarities, and policy preferences granted by destination countries to their neighbours contribute to such patterns. Regional migration preferences – such as the free mobility granted to residents of member countries within the European Union – are especially important for the ECA region. As a result, about 80 percent of emigrants move to other ECA countries – a share that is the largest in the world.³²

Following the onset of the pandemic, issuances of new visas and permits in OECD countries plummeted by 46 percent in the first half of 2020, compared with the same period in 2019.³³ This is the largest drop ever recorded. In the second quarter, the decline was 72 percent. Overall, 2020 is expected to have been a historic low for international migration in the OECD area. Border closures and falling demand for labour have led to large numbers of migrant workers returning to or staying in their home countries.

Impact of COVID-19 on remittances and household wellbeing

These patterns have had a tremendous impact during the COVID-19 pandemic, as outbound migration is limited due to lockdowns, and remittances have declined due to job losses abroad. As a result, pressure has intensified on family members dependent upon remittances, as noted in the SEIA for North Macedonia, where annual inflows of private transfers are expected to have declined by EUR102 million in 2020, affecting disposable incomes of recipient households. In Tajikistan, remittances amount to over 30 percent of GDP and a significant part of household consumption. Migrant households spend close to 70 percent of income from remittances on basic needs such as food, education, and health. Women bear the brunt of responsibilities as caregivers for the sick, elderly and children, particularly when the men and young members of the household have emigrated for employment opportunities abroad, and are vulnerable to rising stress and violence at home when their partners return to a lack of jobs and employment opportunities.



III. Unpaid care and domestic work

A woman reading to her daughter in their house in a Roma settlement in Serbia.

The pandemic has starkly exposed the crisis of care and the heightened burden of unpaid care and domestic work that has fallen disproportionately on women and girls. Women have had to take up additional care burdens while tending to their roles in the workplace and households (Figure 2). Closures of schools and daycare centres have massively increased childcare needs, with particular impacts on working mothers and girls, who may underperform or drop out of school to support domestic and care work. The effects of the crisis on working mothers are likely to be persistent, due to their intermittent absence from the workforce given domestic responsibilities, and the consequent career penalties. In addition, the loss in employment related to social distancing measures has a large impact on sectors with high shares of women's employment. But the critical impacts of the pandemic on women's unpaid care and domestic work have scarcely been recognized in the SEIAs or in policy responses proposed.

Yet some countries attempted to put together immediate initiatives to assist families with care responsibilities during the pandemic. The Government of **Uzbekistan**, for example, gave working parents paid leave for the duration of the closure of schools and kindergartens without affecting the regular annual paid leave schedule.³⁴ In addition, while sick leave

is normally paid at a rate of 60–80 percent of previous salary, for the duration of quarantine it was increased to 100 percent for everyone, including parents with children in quarantine.³⁵ The termination of employment contracts for parents or guardians of children under the age of 14 who contracted the virus or were placed in quarantine was also prohibited. Montenegro announced new wage subsidy measures for businesses to cover 70 percent of gross minimum wage for each employee who had to stay at home to care for a child under the age of 11 during April and May 2020.³⁶

Women's increased burden of unpaid care and domestic work

On average, 70 percent of women surveyed in the ECA region reported an increase in time spent in at least one domestic work activity, compared to 59 percent of men, and 50 percent of women reported spending more time caring for children.³⁷

In Montenegro, work done by women in the domain of unpaid care and domestic work exceeded that done by men by 92 percent in April–June 2020, and if projected to a year, their contribution in unpaid work is the monetary equivalent of 10 percent of national GDP.³⁸ Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, the Republic of Moldova and **Albania** have seen the highest increases in time devoted to

unpaid domestic work, with around four in five women experiencing an increase in at least one household chore.³⁹ Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Kosovo, Albania and Kazakhstan had the highest shares of women involved in at least two unpaid domestic work activities, but also the highest gender gaps, from 15 percentage points in Albania and Kosovo up to 26 percentage points in Turkey.



In Montenegro, women's unpaid care and domestic work exceeded that of men by 92 percent in April-June 2020 – an annual contribution equivalent of 10 percent of national GDP.

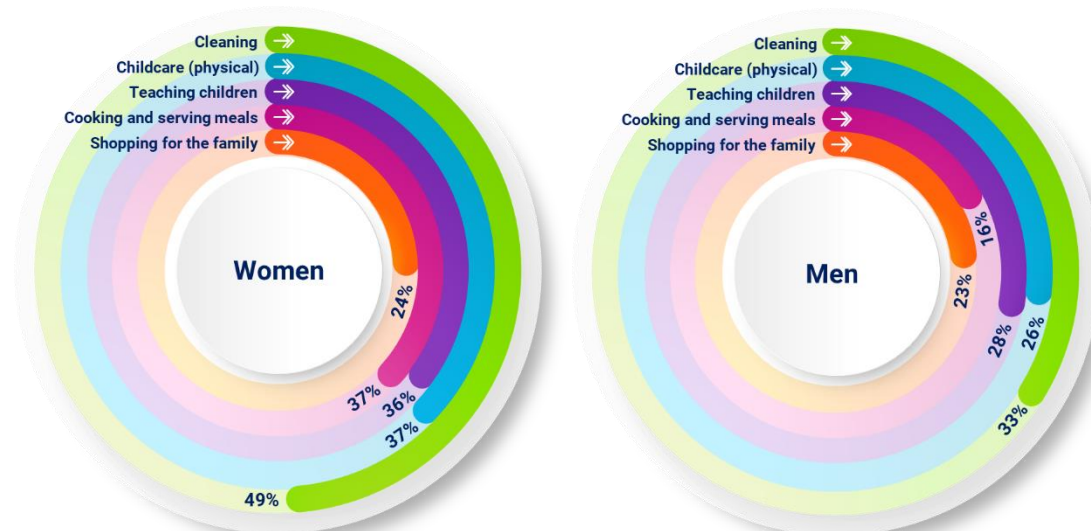


The most drastic impacts were reported in Kyrgyzstan, where there is a disproportionate burden on women, regardless of the number of counted activities, and 80 percent of women reported increased time spent on at least one unpaid domestic chore, 70 percent on at least two and 55 percent on at least three, while men reported much less involvement in household chores, with increases of 58, 35 and 20 percent for each progressive number of activities. This means that as the number of unpaid domestic activities increases in the household, men's involvement in them decreases. Studies have shown that 60 percent of inactive labour in Tajikistan is due to domestic responsibilities, compared to 35 percent in the Kyrgyz Republic and 11 percent in Kazakhstan.⁴⁰ A recent analysis also revealed that rural Tajik women dedicate much more time than men to domestic and care work.⁴¹

Figure 2
Unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic workload⁴²
(Source: UN Women 2020)

The pandemic has intensified women's unpaid care and domestic workloads

Share who reported an increase in time spent, based on 22 countries in Asia and the Pacific and Europe and Central Asia:



Men are much more likely to say they do not engage in these activities than women.

While only

6% of women

say they never engage in cleaning,

44% of men

report the same.

In Turkey, a time-use survey conducted during a lockdown week in May found that for employed women, the increase in the workday was especially striking, due to a simultaneous rise both in paid and particularly in unpaid work. For women who continued to work at the workplace (as 'most essential' and 'frontline' workers), the total (paid and unpaid) work hours were more than 10 hours per day.⁴³

Despite the widening gender gaps in unpaid and total work during the pandemic, the survey found that men's unpaid work time rose substantially in relative terms. For men who continued employment from home, there was a striking five-fold increase in unpaid work compared to before the pandemic. This was accompanied by a welcome attitudinal shift where a large proportion of women and men believe that household work should be shared more equally. This shift, along with altered circumstances within households brought about by COVID-19, could herald a more equal division of unpaid labour in the home, even after workplaces resume normalcy after the pandemic.



A time-use survey conducted in Turkey found that men's unpaid work time rose substantially in relative terms, although women's total workload was still higher than that of men.



At the same time, given pre-existing gender norms, the aftermath of the pandemic may further amplify gender disparities. This could mean a longer-lasting impact on women's formal labour force participation; care burdens, especially related to extended school closures, have forced women to withdraw from or reduce their paid work. Unless attitudes towards sharing household labour continue to change, women's underemployment could skew the labour market profile and pose significant setbacks to the advances made in the labour market towards gender parity.



IV. Gender-based violence

Violence against women and girls has surged during the pandemic lockdown.

An alarming trend that emerged during the pandemic globally and in the ECA region has been the increase in violence against women and girls in households. The Europe and Central Asia region has long suffered from insufficient institutional capacity and low policy attention to the scourge of gender-based violence. The enforced confinement of families during the pandemic has had severe implications for women's safety at home, with a surge in domestic violence throughout the region.

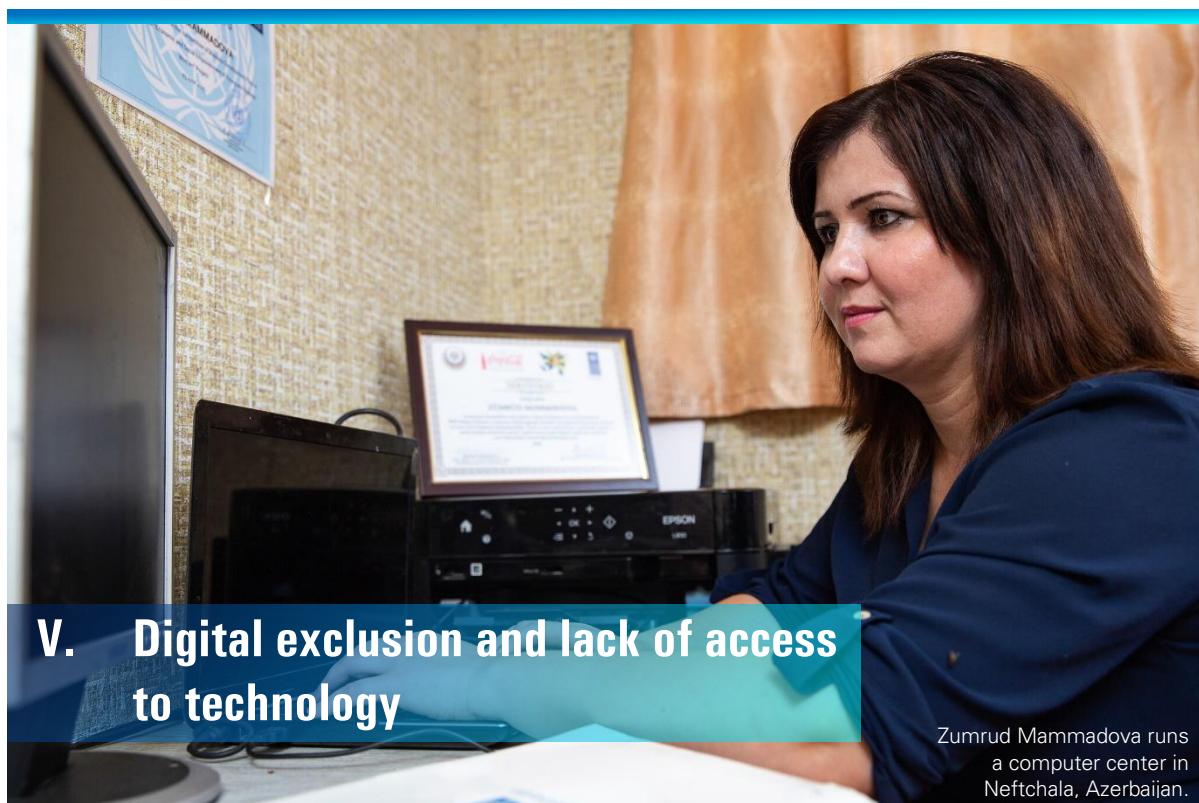
In Kazakhstan, calls to support hotlines tripled,⁴⁴ and in Kyrgyzstan, cases of domestic violence increased by 65 percent. In **Ukraine**, the Government has established a 24-hour hotline providing legal and psychological support to survivors of domestic violence.⁴⁵ Seasonal migration usually tends to reduce intimate partner violence, but with cross-border migration of men reduced, women and girls face greater insecurities at home. An increase in gender-based violence in the Balkans led to a new mobile application, 'Be Safe', developed by UNDP in Montenegro,⁴⁶ and replicated in North Macedonia, which enables swift alerts to the National SOS helpline by survivors.



The enforced confinement of families during the pandemic has led to a surge in domestic violence: in Kazakhstan, calls to support hotlines tripled, and in Kyrgyzstan, cases of domestic violence increased by 65 percent.



Lockdowns also mean access to medical services and support to people affected by gender-based violence may be cut off or considered less important in healthcare structures, which are overburdened with COVID-19 response. To address this, in Tajikistan for example, the Ministry of Health continues to run victim support rooms at health facilities and is exploring the option of increasing the number of medical facilities hosting these rooms.⁴⁷ And in Georgia, the Government ensured non-stop access to shelters and crisis centres to survivors of domestic violence.⁴⁸ Lockdowns and lack of prioritization of response services mean many women face forced pregnancies. Confinement also increases risks of intimate partner violence for women and girls, while worsened socio-economic conditions expose refugee women and girls to increased risks of sexual exploitation and trafficking.⁴⁹



V. Digital exclusion and lack of access to technology

Zumrud Mammadova runs a computer center in Neftchala, Azerbaijan.

The challenge of conducting everyday transactions during the pandemic lockdown has highlighted the importance of access to technology and digital inclusion for all. The ECA region is well equipped to enable gender equitable usage of technology as it has a large, well-educated and scientifically trained population compared to other regions.

Women make up 48.5 percent of researchers in Central Asia, and 39 percent for Central and Eastern Europe compared to 32.9 percent of women in North America and Western Europe and 25 percent in East Asia and the Pacific.⁵⁰ Women represent the majority of researchers in Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Armenia compared to 16.6 percent in Japan. Rapid industrialization in these countries increased demands for a qualified labour force. For many girls from poor families, taking up a career in STEM-related industries was a strategy to exit poverty. Some of this can be attributed to the legacy of Soviet times, when communist regimes made scientific careers for men and women a national priority.

However, there are some concerning developments that are widening the gender gap in access to technology and digital inclusion. For example, although the gender gap in mobile internet use in Europe and Central Asia is lower than in other regions, it has increased over the last year, in contrast to a global downward trend.⁵¹⁵² In 2020, more than 60 million women in Europe and Central Asia had no access to the mobile internet.⁵³ When pursuing online learning or working from home, boys and men can generally access technology more and easier, while girls and women are often preoccupied with domestic chores and unpaid work responsibilities, much of which fall along gendered lines. For instance, as noted in the Turkey SEIA, internet usage among men is significantly higher than among women (81.8 percent for men compared to 68.9 percent for women). These stereotypical patterns of behaviour have longer term consequences for girls' future skills and women's ability to return to the workplace. They set the pathway for women's attrition from education and productive employment and keep work opportunities away from millions of women, who participate in the labour force less (48.6 percent)⁵⁴ than men (69.8 percent) in the region.⁵⁵

Women also have unequal access to land ownership and other financial resources, which impedes their entrepreneurship opportunities, especially in STEM-related industries, which represent the future of economic opportunities in the region.⁵⁶ Yet COVID-19 recovery holds the possibility of building forward better with attitudinal shifts around domestic roles, women's and girls' participation in STEM fields and improved access to technology and digital inclusion.



Boys and men generally access technology more easily than girls and women, who are tasked with domestic chores and unpaid work—stereotypical patterns of behaviour with consequences for girls' future skills and women's ability to return to the workplace.



Gender disparities in digital transformation

Today's digital transformation opens avenues for the economic empowerment of women and can contribute to greater gender equality. The internet, digital platforms, mobile phones and digital financial services offer "leapfrog" opportunities for all and can potentially help women earn additional income, increase their employment and networking opportunities, and access knowledge and general information.

Yet, women are under-represented in ICT jobs, top management and academic careers.⁵⁷ For instance, they represent only 32 percent of information and communication technology (ICT) professionals in Armenia,⁵⁸ and 31 percent in Moldova.⁵⁹ At 15 years of age, on average, only 0.5 percent of girls wish to become ICT professionals, compared to five percent of boys. Women-owned start-ups receive 23 percent less funding and are 30 percent less likely to have a positive exit compared to men-owned businesses.⁶⁰ Furthermore, many stimulus programmes targeted at individuals or small enterprises depend on reliable identification and digital channels to reach the intended beneficiaries,

something that has often proven to be challenging for women to provide independently, as most official welfare models are premised on heads of households and breadwinners who are men.⁶¹

Closing the digital gender gap is an urgent priority during and after the pandemic. Many essential products and services are now available online, therefore requiring digital skills in the day-to-day business of living.⁶² Countries that had embarked on digital transformation and had computerized their support services, particularly public employment services,⁶³ have responded more effectively to the challenges posed by COVID-19. Investing in service digitalization and promoting digital inclusion should therefore be considered a priority; in the near future, it will be crucial to provide practical remote support and access to services to clients, particularly women.

COVID-19 is also accelerating the transition to teleworking, and enhancing the use of independent-work platforms. These forms of flexible and remote work could have positive implications for women workers and entrepreneurs, who could take advantage of the flexibility that these platforms offer.⁶⁴ For example, digital skills have helped women in Turkey maintain an income during COVID-19 despite stay-at-home measures and periodic lockdowns. Syrian and Turkish women are selling handicrafts and other products online, thanks to coding, computer literacy and Internet marketing skills they learned at Multi-Purpose Community Centres.⁶⁵ In Azerbaijan, the Women's Resource Centres, established with support from UNDP and the State Committee for Family, Women and Children Affairs, are providing online business development training for rural women, and organizing regular virtual individual and group psychotherapy sessions.⁶⁶

The proliferation in virtual working platforms enables organizations to ensure that workforces remain productive. This trend has the potential to reduce operating expenses and normalize flexible working arrangements, with more equal sharing of household responsibilities.

Impact of COVID-19 on learning opportunities

As the Montenegro EIA notes, the lockdown has forced communities to discover the possibilities of distance education for their youth, and assess the future prospects for the educational system. The pressure on the existing network of schools should lead to further modernization of teaching models. That is why the introduction of distance learning for one school day is recommended, as well as defining additional curricula for talented children in various fields.

In several places like Kosovo and Turkey, teachers and students have turned to distance learning to mitigate interruption, with several countries and territories having provided learners with some type of online platforms with educational resources for students as well as training materials for teachers. Conversely, the testing phase to launch online classes in Kazakhstan showed that internet bandwidth could not support the online learning of 2.5 million children,⁶⁷ whereas, according to a PISA 2018 assessment, approximately 74 percent of students in the country have access to a computer at home.⁶⁸ Similarly, in **Tajikistan**, where internet costs are among the highest in the region,⁶⁹ the Government stated that the country would not implement distance learning. In light of connectivity challenges, some countries and territories have resorted to educational broadcasting on national television.

Access to learning and education opportunities for all children, adolescent girls and boys, should be prioritized, including remote learning strategies in low connectivity or high connectivity settings, accessible to children and adolescents with disabilities or others who may be at risk of exclusion. For instance, in Montenegro printed materials were distributed for those, including marginalized and Roma children, who do not have access to the internet and/or the television. Online learning opportunities must observe best online safeguarding practices to protect girls from abuse and predatory behaviors. It is important to ensure girls' social support networks with peers and mentors are maintained through digital or other platforms to facilitate interconnectedness and empowerment.

Strengthening the use of sex-disaggregated data is also paramount to analyzing the gender-differentiated impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on learning outcomes, addressing gaps in access to remote learning among girls and boys, and identifying targeted support where needed.

Policy recommendations

COVID-19 is an opportune moment to take stock of existing trends, and to reorient public priorities and policies to be able to meet the challenges of building resilient, shock and gender-responsive employment and social protection systems to prepare for the challenges of the future world of work. This includes making public investments in social infrastructure to build resilient economies and societies. It is essential to ensure that policy responses, whether undertaken as assistance packages or relief measures, are not gender-blind, and integrate diverse insights in their formulation and impact.



Most SEIAs classify all women as a vulnerable group, which they are not; women are half the population – gender intersects with class, ethnicity, disability, migrant status, occupation and income to perpetuate and produce vulnerabilities.



1. Immediate financial and tax support measures

There is a need to rebalance financial support packages with more extensive measures for small and micro-enterprises, and among them, targeted support for women entrepreneurs.⁷⁰ Governments and central banks play a crucial role in providing liquidity to businesses, in particular women-owned SMEs, which are more vulnerable to financing fluctuations and, therefore, less prepared to withstand a sharp disruption. Central banks can provide quantitative easing policies, and relaxed loan security standards, to support banks and non-bank financial companies to foster lending to financially distressed businesses. They include: deferral of loan repayments, especially for loans disbursed by SME funds; the creation of loan distress funds, possibly financed by the state and IFIs; and the development of emergency credit products and guarantees, preferably to be

channeled by SME agencies in partnership with banks.⁷¹

The fact that women entrepreneurs face hurdles in accessing credit, finance, banking services and loans should be incorporated into policy measures to avoid widening gaps. These can explicitly target women-run enterprises and self-employed informal sector workers, many of whom are women. For instance, in **Georgia** the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development expanded economic support programmes, allowing more women to apply. In addition, extra points are awarded to women-run businesses and women applicants during the assessment of applications.⁷² To be gender-responsive, micro-finance institutions must engage directly with their clients, listen to their needs, be flexible and creative in offering appropriate financial instruments to support them and ensure that the recovery packages are focused on supporting viable businesses experiencing liquidity problems due to disrupted operations, while seizing opportunities for the transformation/alignment of businesses to the new economy. In planning a transition to a green economy, the effort should be to incentivize business planning and processes to overhaul their existing models along green technology and sustainable pathways, keeping gender equality as an indispensable component.

Countries should provision for compensating for lost income through temporary basic income disbursements. Countries should also design new or scale up existing cash transfer programmes (horizontally, with more beneficiaries and vertically, with larger transfers), and urgently consider specific design and implementation features that may be adapted inclusively. Cash transfer programmes can be gender-transformational when delivered alongside substantive gender equality messaging, including information on rights for parents/caregivers, promoting positive health-seeking behaviours, and sharing unpaid care responsibilities equally among people of all genders.⁷³

2. Investing in social infrastructure in healthcare and education

Recognizing the contribution of the health and education sector workforce and supporting them with public policy and public expenditures is imperative to build the social infrastructure that must underpin COVID-19 response. Sectoral spending, therefore, should be boosted to assist all workers in these social sectors, while considering the fiscal stimulus to rebuild the economy. Besides, the issue of workplace safety for women employees needs to be incorporated – women frontline workers are at increased risk of abuse and violence, and their particular exposure to risks needs to be addressed.

Low levels of government spending have led to an unusually large share of the cost of healthcare being transferred to households, putting further downward pressure on consumption, with Central Asia having some of the highest ratios of out-of-pocket healthcare spending to total health expenditure in the world.⁷⁴ Women, in particular, have poorer access to healthcare, especially in rural areas. Given the general slowdown in the economy, this is a crucial time to invest in building social infrastructure in health and education, with attention to gender-differentiated needs.

3. Family-friendly and flexible working arrangements

Social policy and workplace measures can together encourage flexible working arrangements, reduction of working time, and increased paid leaves for employees with care responsibilities, both for women and men, which will be critical for them to perform their duties. Interventions could include the following measures:⁷⁵

- Family-friendly policies, including flexible and part-time programmes, to support workers experiencing increased care burdens during the pandemic and beyond. If properly designed, flexible work arrangements give workers greater freedom of when and where to fulfil their job responsibilities. Such work arrangements are particularly necessary in the context of widespread school closures, extended remote learning, limited childcare options. However, not

all work allows for home-based working, and this is true for those who work in essential and frontline services. Ensuring the continued functioning of childcare services and the provision of childcare vouchers for essential workers is critical to allow parents to perform essential services without concerns about children's safety and wellbeing.

- Access to basic infrastructure, which in the long run can reduce the time spent on unpaid work; for example, improved transport connectivity to markets, schools and medical facilities.



The pandemic has exposed the need for a professionalized social care sector in the region. The aim should be to create professionalized and integrated social care systems that rely less on the unpaid work of women and more on shared work enabled by employers and supported by governments.



4. Redefining care work in society and the economy

It is evident that care work – whether childcare or eldercare or of other dependents – will be a persistent feature of societies. Care policies should be aligned with, and supportive of family-friendly policies and flexible working arrangements, as much of the demands on households have to do with the burden of care work. While these tasks fall predominantly on women and girls in households, it is vital for gender equality that there is greater burden sharing by men, enabled by employers and supported by governments. The pandemic has exposed the need for:

- A professionalized social care sector in the region with public-financing support: this would not just enable many women to work but create decent work for many others.⁷⁶ Childcare along with eldercare and care for the long-term ill is an integral part of family-friendly policies by supporting parents in providing stimulation and responsive care for young children while they work. In the context of widespread school and

childcare closures, governments and employers can provide fundamental support to parents who are faced with limited or no childcare options.⁷⁷

- Employer- or state-funded provision of childcare or tax policies that encourage and incentivize both spouses to work. Equally crucial are measures to change social norms about who bears care responsibilities. Along with enhanced family-friendly employment policies, these would go a long way in enabling women's return to waged employment and decent jobs, strengthen their position in the household and boost their economic contribution. The aim should be to create integrated care systems that rely less on the unpaid work of stretched families and individuals and more on collective and solidarity-based solutions. In addition, for longer-term efforts to build back more resilient social infrastructure, supportive family policies such as childcare services and care services for dependents – critical in enabling working adults, particularly women, to return to waged employment – will need to be explored and designed. This needs to be supplemented with changing attitudes and cultural norms that enable a greater sharing of housework between men and women, and greater accommodation of care responsibilities by the introduction of flexible working arrangements by employers for all employees. While some attitudinal shifts are underway due to the adaptations necessitated by the pandemic, these should be further supported by governments and employers through flexible workplace measures and childcare provisioning.

5. Building gender-responsive social protection into macroeconomic policy

COVID-19 underlines the urgency of establishing national social protection floors with social protection guarantees and/or temporary basic income that are gender-responsive.⁷⁸ These could ensure universal access to healthcare and income security at least at a nationally defined minimum level, with the progressive achievement of higher levels of protection within comprehensive social protection systems. For longer-term

resilience, societies could consider plans to establish a universal basic income, ensuring that women receive it in their own right. Efforts should also be made to establish universal child benefits, especially for most vulnerable households, and to rebalance financial support packages with more extensive measures for small and micro-enterprises, ensuring equal access for women and men. Universal monetary disbursements can ensure family income security and help to maintain consumption, enabling small enterprises, the principal source of goods for low-income families, to survive.

6. Extending social protection coverage⁷⁹

Measures to extend social protection during COVID-19 have included anticipating payments of cash transfer programmes, often on a one-off basis (such as in **Serbia, Armenia** and **Turkey**); increasing the coverage of existing pension and other social protection schemes (**Azerbaijan** and **Ukraine**) and public works (**Uzbekistan**); increasing social insurance sickness benefits and extending health insurance coverage temporarily (**Kazakhstan**) to guarantee access to healthcare services. These all need to address the differential needs of women and men, to be able to most benefit those vulnerable by removing all conditionalities in the cash plus and social protection expanded benefits – for example, designing access for women workers in informal and vulnerable sectors.

Gender-responsive budgeting is one recommended strategy to incorporate gender equality in public expenditure management and policy. For instance, an OECD study has shown that in several countries, gender-budgeting has stimulated the adoption of policy developments to improve gender equality in many areas, including health, welfare, childcare and family care.⁸⁰ It is necessary to strengthen national capacities to generate and use sex- and age-disaggregated data for gender analysis that underpins gender-responsive macro-economic and social policy and programme.

It is particularly important to address the gaps on data on time use. National statistical agencies need to improve data collection to allow full mainstreaming of gender in macroeconomic policies. For social protection, both contributory and non-contributory social protection measures need to be developed, which will respond to the immediate needs – whether it is a minimum basic income or primary health insurance coverage. Both tax-financed assistance benefits, especially if universal in nature (such as universal child benefits), and social insurance schemes, are highly relevant in this regard. Where universal healthcare is not in place and social insurance models exclude many, governments need to consider automatic enrollment, waiving co-payments, and advocate for women and children's needs alongside emergency COVID-19 needs. This would be critical for informal sector workers, pregnant women, single parents (mothers and fathers), and widows who will continue to need essential healthcare.⁸¹

7. Enhancing women's voice and role in decision-making across economic sectors and in public policy

Missing from discussion in the SEIAs is the explicit recognition of the importance of women's voice, agency and leadership in determining the pathway to recovery in the COVID-19 response. Women have little to no involvement in determining policy responses, even in sectors where they are most affected, often due to their lower levels of representation and lack of leadership roles. This oversight risks making policy responses inefficient and inadequate. Furthermore, most SEIAs classify all women as a vulnerable group, which they are not; women are half the population – gender intersects with class, ethnicity, disability, migrant status, occupation and income to perpetuate and produce vulnerabilities, which must be addressed with attention to root causes.

In the Europe and Central Asia region, women's average representation in parliaments has been rising over the last 25 years and is close to the world's average (25.2 percent).⁸² However, it is still discouragingly low at 24.4 percent, and far from parity.⁸³ There is a wide diversity in the

composition of the public administration workforce in countries and territories across the region, and only a few countries have attained or exceeded parity at the workforce or decision-making levels (Table 1).⁸⁴ Nonetheless, there is limited evidence of women's participation in COVID-19 response mechanisms or taskforces, which needs to be redressed, and their participation actively sought out at different levels.



Missing from discussion in the SEIAs is the explicit recognition of the importance of women's voice, agency and leadership in determining the pathway to recovery in the COVID-19 response.



According to civil society organizations in the ECA region, there has been insufficient engagement of women's organizations in national COVID-19 response planning in all sub-regions.⁸⁵ This has contributed to the imposition of social distancing without recognition of its devastating effects upon already disadvantaged groups. Women's organizations in the Western Balkans and Turkey and the Eastern Partnership countries reported that none of the countries and territories in both sub-regions called for inputs from civil society in drawing up their response plans. They suggest that in the absence of consultation, the work to overcome COVID-19 is taking place on two parallel fronts, led by national authorities and by civil society organizations. This results in inefficiencies, and seriously diminishes the impact of efforts on both sides. Women's organizations are filling gaps in governments' attention to disadvantaged groups and to women's concerns in their pandemic response. To this end, the Kosovo SEIA recommends supporting women's participation in designing pandemic-related responses.

Table 1

Total employees and decision-makers in public administration in the ECA region

(Source: UNDP 2020)

Country/Territory	Percent of men		Percent of women	
	Employees	Decision-makers	Employees	Decision-makers
Central Asia				
Kazakhstan (2018; 2009)	45%	91%	55%	9%
Kyrgyzstan (2018; 2015)	70%	91%	30%	9%
Tajikistan (2018)	69%		31%	
South Caucasus and Western CIS				
Armenia (2018)	73%	85%	27%	15%
Azerbaijan (2018)	72%	90%	28%	10%
Belarus (2017)	44%	50%	56%	50%
Georgia (2019)	71%	64%	*29%	36%
Moldova (2018; 2011)	57%	84%	43%	16%
Ukraine (2008)	25%	48%	75%	52%
Balkans and Turkey				
Albania (2019)	68%	56%	32%	44%
Bosnia and Herzegovina (2015; 2019)	48%	54%	52%	46%
Bulgaria (2018; 2019)	49%	46%	51%	54%
Kosovo (2019)	79%	80%	21%	20%
Montenegro (2018; 2019)	59%	54%	41%	46%
North Macedonia (2019)	71%	58%	*29%	42%
Romania (2018)	42%	47%	58%	53%
Serbia (2019)	54%	61%	46%	39%
Turkey (2019)	81%	83%	19%	17%

*These countries were in the range of 27%-32% between 2015-2019.

8. Addressing gender-based violence

While appropriate legal frameworks are usually in place to combat gender-based violence, the pandemic has underlined the need for intensified efforts to eliminate barriers to women's and girls' access to services, including health services, by considering mobility constraints, opening hours, presence of and access to women staff and service providers, safety concerns, childcare responsibilities, and social distancing restrictions. Several recommendations have been made for provisioning services for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.⁸⁶ In anticipation of increased demand in a crisis context, it is important to advocate for additional human and financial resources for essential GBV services to the extent possible. There is a need to adapt and expand services such as shelters, safe spaces and essential housing, along with psycho-social support and advice for individuals experiencing or at risk of violence. These require approaches that integrate gender-based violence in national and sub-national COVID-19 response plans

and ensure that response services, including justice services, are designated as essential and remain open and accessible, including through online and digital platforms. An example of digital innovation is the 'Be Safe' mobile app developed in **Montenegro** and replicated in **North Macedonia** during the pandemic, which allows survivors of gender-based violence to contact help and access resources.⁸⁷

Budgeting support is needed to, at minimum, ensure human and financial resources are not diverted from essential GBV and maternal health and reproductive services. Periods of confinement or lockdown can heighten the need for justice and the rule of law institutions as some rights and freedoms can be rolled back or threatened in the context of COVID-19 response (e.g., through discriminatory measures targeted at LGBTIQ persons and vulnerable populations and reduced access to sexual and reproductive health services).

Strategies and investments to combat GBV need to be integrated into operational plans of the justice and security sectors throughout COVID-19 preparedness, response, and recovery including in national recovery plans.

Data – disaggregated along sex and age – is essential to understand how and why pandemics such as COVID-19 increase gender-based violence. Data can help identify GBV risk factors, and document the impact of COVID-19 on the availability of services for women survivors of violence. It can help examine how women's access to such services and help-seeking from formal and informal sources is affected, as well as identify new short- and medium-term needs. These data are critical to designing evidence-based policy and programmes that respond to women's needs, reduce risks, and mitigate adverse effects during and after the pandemic.

It may not be possible to collect data on GBV prevalence (as such surveys need to take proactive measures to ensure the safety, confidentiality and privacy of respondents),⁸⁸ so it is important to identify alternative options. Qualitative data from women's organizations can provide rich, context-specific and timely information. Citizen-generated data, such as electronic and social media data, may also be a source of timely data. When no other data is available, "data mining" of social media can be a useful tool. At a minimum, all data should be disaggregated by sex, age and disability. When possible, it is important to disaggregate data to give visibility to LGBTIQ persons.

9. Enhancing digital skills and closing gender gaps in STEM fields

COVID-19 is an opportunity for designing remote learning opportunities and upgrading skills, particularly through investments in the fiscal space that improves skills for teachers, the majority of whom are women. This is also an opportune moment to address gender gaps in education at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels and high specialization by subjects in tertiary education. Intra-household allocation of computer resources for homeschooling and at the community-level might be redirected to boys over girls, while women might have less access to the internet than men.⁸⁹ These dynamics need to be considered in efforts aimed at offering homeschooling and teleworking, by addressing the digital gender gap and enhancing digital inclusion of women and girls across all fields. Besides, it will be important that caregivers are provided with resources to help support the learning and education of children.⁹⁰ Support to teachers conducting formative assessments of girls' learning will also help identify gender gaps, and inform gender-responsive teaching practices.⁹¹ Investments in girls' education and nurturing a gender-balanced system of tertiary education will be vital for reducing gender-based industrial and occupational segregation.

Countries in the region are making progress when it comes to achieving gender parity in STEM. Yet, research shows that gender stereotypes, biases in recruiting, promoting, and evaluation processes, inflexible work schedules, and a lack of women role models in STEM professions are primary barriers to gender equality. Despite high numbers of women with tertiary education in the ECA region, women are less likely to enroll in STEM fields and pursue STEM careers.⁹² Men are more than double the number of women as managers in ECA, including in STEM companies.

Women's underrepresentation in STEM occupations is often linked to wide gender pay gaps. For instance, in North Macedonia the gender pay gap varies from 22 percent in software development to 44 percent in digital marketing, while in the technology sector, women occupy low-paid positions – only 21

percent of executives are women.⁹³ Structural barriers as well as pervasive biases work to keep women out of STEM fields of work. Cultural norms and practices reinforce the tertiary education specialization of men and women, which leads to occupational segregation both as a concentration of employees across industries (horizontal) and as percentage of women in different positions within the industry (vertical). Advocacy, awareness and support are key in bringing about these normative shifts in gender biases in recruitment materials and strategies, hiring, retention, promotion, and pay. Women's role as carers is seen as disadvantageous in the workplace, and costs them in terms of employment, career growth and earnings. In Montenegro, survey participants in the Gender Equality Index 2019⁹⁴ reported the following challenges preventing women from gaining leadership positions in companies: women have greater family responsibilities than men; women lack sufficient work experience and managerial competence; and men are not encouraged to take leave for family reasons.⁹⁵

In addition to digital skills enhancement through STEM education for women, there needs to be support for digital/technology readiness of women-led MSMEs. For example, UNDP in collaboration with the European Investment Fund (EIF) have developed a joint financing instrument, which aims to promote employment of people with vulnerabilities as well as digital transformation of MSMEs, including through skills development. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, a Digital Pulse solution has been implemented by UNDP with the objective of assessing companies' digital performance/maturity, followed by an advisory feature in six different areas: digital communication, management use of digital tools, human resources and their digital skills, IT security awareness and practices, use of digital tools in business operations, use of digital technologies in manufacturing and/or service provisioning. These can be made gender-sensitive and inclusive to effectively support women entrepreneurs.

Beyond improving the productivity and working conditions of agriculture and rural economy, access to technology, and new technologies are essential for women living in

rural areas, who are likely to be engaged in manual labour and cannot switch to remote work, especially in mountainous and remote areas. Online platforms and mobile phone providers are frequently unavailable in rural areas, and most rural women do not have access to electronic devices or knowledge of how to use information technology. The region will benefit from promoting women's access to networking opportunities by facilitating women's access to credit through innovative financing and market information. Information sharing is possible through digitalized as well as other communications means, such as radio, particularly during the pandemic for public health advisories. Promoting women's and girls' access to technologies and upgrading their digital skills can use the following steps:⁹⁶

- i. Increasing digital infrastructure and accessible services, particularly in emerging economies.
- ii. Addressing gender stereotypes that inhibit women's access to and use of technology and extending services to improve women's and girls' digital literacy.
- iii. Adopting measures to promote women's occupation and entrepreneurship, including eliminating biases in recruitment and selection processes for incubators or accelerators.
- iv. Adopting tools assessing the digital performance of women's enterprises, and developing platforms supporting women's businesses, especially MSMEs, to transform their business models.
- v. Building foundational, enabling technologies ensuring that women have access to means of identification through high-assurance digital-ID systems with simple, inclusive registration processes, use cases that meet critical needs in the time of the pandemic, and a rigorous regulatory framework to ensure the protection of privacy.

An inclusive effort to enhance women's voice and decision-making in designing the digital future can only serve to improve the outcomes for more gender-balanced and equitable systems. This should include efforts towards digitalization of governance and business processes, where women's contribution can go a long way in reducing gender bias in systems design.

Annex

Gender perspectives in socio-economic impact assessments: select examples

Armenia

The SEIA notes that the labour force participation rate grew by 0.7 percent to reach 57.7 percent in 2019. The corresponding rate for women was 47.8 percent, with the highest concentration of women workers in the agricultural (28.3 percent), education (18.7 percent) and trade (11.5 percent) sectors. The lowest share of women employees is in mining, construction and real estate branches (0.1- 0.2 percent). The largest share of employment is concentrated in low productive sectors, while manufacturing, which notes the highest rate of productivity, provides only 9.9 percent of employment. The distribution between men and women in informal employment is almost even. Armenia has a high labour migration rate (most migrant workers are men), and remittances played significantly in the economy, constituting over 11 percent of GDP. Almost half the registered SMEs were working in sectors hit hardest by the crisis, and the majority of women-led SMEs were operating in the very sectors impacted by the lockdown restrictions. SMEs experienced immediate strong shocks, the magnitude of which depending on the fields of operations. Women-led SMEs were hit harder. More women-led businesses operate in hard-hit sectors such as hospitality, beauty and well-being services. Additionally, 75 percent of the women-led businesses participating in the survey are small-scale with a turnover of less than AMD24 million (approximately USD50,000). This segment suffered more severely than businesses with a higher annual turnover.

A larger share of women than men, 7.4 percent and 4.2 percent respectively, reported that as a result of circumstances due to COVID-19 they had experienced physical illness. Women working in educational institutions, health and social services, frontline services and the manufacturing industry are at higher risk of physical and mental stress. Approximately 44.5 percent of women and 32.7 percent of men said that their mental and/or emotional health had been affected (e.g., stress, anxiety, etc.). Issues with access to women-specific healthcare support were identified as well, with more than seven percent of women household survey respondents in Aragatsotn, Ararat and Tavush reported facing difficulties in accessing gynaecological services. Ten percent of Armenian households are dependent on remittances from abroad and more than 80 percent of survey respondents highlighted cuts in transfers. Every third young employed person (aged 18 to 24) reported having lost their job since the spread of COVID-19. This rate was three times less across all respondents. About 39 percent of young employed men and 23 percent of young employed women respondents lost jobs or requested to take leave.

Due to the lockdown restrictions people spent more time on household chores and teaching, caring for and instructing children, which caused additional stress on both men and women. A higher percentage of women devoted more time to household activities, such as cooking, cleaning, household management and shopping, than men after the COVID-19 outbreak, as reported in the household survey. A qualitative assessment revealed that time spent by women on care for elderly, sick and disabled adults also increased. About 15 percent of young men and eight percent of young women aged 18 to 24 reported being engaged in helping older persons in the community after the spread

of COVID-19. About eight percent of women stated that they had felt or heard about an increase in cases of domestic violence during the pandemic, compared to five percent of men. CSOs and the Human Rights Defender's office reported a 30 percent increase in cases in March and a 50 percent increase in June. Employers in all sectors should adopt gender-responsive flexible work arrangements and telecommuting practices to ensure a better work-life balance. This is equally important for both women and men to promote the concept of shared responsibilities of domestic work and care responsibilities in the post-COVID-19 period as well. Gender-responsive policies and programmes should be undertaken to promote the concept of shared household and care work between women and men.

Azerbaijan

The draft SEIA notes nearly 74 percent of women work in the field of education, and 76.5 percent work in health and social services. Women often accept substandard employment conditions, low paid formal jobs, or informal employment to ensure that their jobs are not in conflict with their family-related responsibilities. Women's disproportionate burden of unpaid domestic work significantly increased during the lockdown. The share of women spending more time in domestic work was greater than for men (62.9 percent and 55.8 percent respectively). The majority of women (86.4 percent) working from home also experienced an increased burden of all household chores. Some vulnerable populations were also experiencing increased domestic violence, psychological distress, and stigma, especially women dependent on others, the LGBTIQ community, children below 18, the elderly (especially those above 65 and not working), the physically disabled, and internally displaced persons. The SEIA also noted that an examination of the impact of COVID-19 on the micro, small and medium-size enterprises sector, showed that 22.5 percent of the businesses were led by women and they were up to 20 percent more impacted than those led by men. Most of the women-led MSMEs did not have the means to operate their businesses remotely. In the period between April 1 to June 15, 2020, all-women entrepreneurs in the sample surveyed had closed down their businesses altogether. Although women are relatively more vulnerable due to pre-existing conditions of marginalization and lack of assets and power, the government's current intervention strategies and responses remain largely gender-blind. There may be an additional need to examine the intersectionality criteria and offer additional support to women who are older, disabled, are IDPs/refugees, pregnant/have children, or who are informally employed.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The EIA notes the disproportionate direct impact on firms owned by women, which on average declared significantly higher turnover drops from February to March 2020. These trends partially result from a large proportion of women being employed in directly impacted sectors, particularly accommodation and food services. The sectors in Bosnia and Herzegovina bracing from direct impact by the pandemic also have large women employees – e.g., human, health and social activities (71 percent); education (69 percent); arts, entertainment and recreation (66 percent); financial and insurance activities (63 percent); other service activities (58 percent); wholesale and retail trade, and repair of motor vehicles (50 percent); accommodation and food service activities (50 percent).

The SEIA notes that the presence of women in high-contact occupations in the service sector makes them particularly vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19. Women also face high shares of vulnerable employment, and carry a disproportionate share of the increased household and care responsibilities. Preliminary data also showed that 76.4 percent of women business owners feared that they would be forced to close their businesses because they are more reliant on self-financing and thus have fewer resources. Recovery efforts must therefore address the special needs of women employees, especially in a country where, for instance, the European Commission has identified the low availability of childcare and elderly-care as particularly obstructive to women's employment.

Kazakhstan

The SEIA notes that women, people with disabilities, the unemployed and self-employed were among the most affected by the pandemic – the report estimates that 51 percent of the unemployed, 45 percent of low-income people, 42 percent of persons with disabilities and 36 percent of the economically active population will see a deterioration of their financial situation due to quarantine measures. Women entrepreneurs were more affected by quarantine measures and the state of emergency than men: during the period of quarantine, 69 percent of SMEs stopped their activities among women entrepreneurs, compared with 59 percent of men entrepreneurs. This is attributed to the nature of women's businesses, most of which operated in the most heavily affected sectors of the economy. Among self-employed women, activity was suspended by 10 percent more than among self-employed men (76 percent and 66 percent respectively). Similar to the case of SMEs, this can be attributed to the specific business types operated by women entrepreneurs. There are various sectors which also happen to have a large women's workforce. More than 75 percent of the self-employed had to close down, including those in the beauty industry (87.3 percent); art, entertainment and recreation (75 percent); construction (75.5 percent); educational services (76.2 percent); logistics services (76.2 percent); HORECA (hotels/restaurants/catering) (80 percent); paid medical and routine services (77.8 percent); and 'provision of other services' (78.8 percent). Among self-employed women, nine percent more applied for state support than men (76 percent versus 67 percent) and the level of approval of state support is six percent higher for women than for men (66 percent versus 60 percent).

Kosovo

According to a SEIA survey after the COVID-19 outbreak which covered 1,412 individuals, in all households surveyed, 49 percent said that their household income had decreased (52 percent were men and 46 percent women) and their income decreased on average to the amount of EUR400 per month. Domestic work and family care were not barriers to employment for men, in contrast to 21 percent of women. Women's time on unpaid domestic work increased much more than that of men. Women dedicated more hours (57 percent) to cleaning than men (39 percent). Moreover, 56 percent of women and 27 percent of men declared they spent more hours for cooking and serving meals. Besides, women (37 percent) also spent more time with children through games, reading and discussions, compared to men (29 percent). Further disparities between men and women were revealed, where 53 percent of women and 46 percent of men have had difficulties in accessing food and 57 percent of women and 51 percent of men have had difficulties accessing medical supplies for personal use.

Kyrgyzstan

The assessment highlights the disproportionate burden of negative impacts being borne by sections of the population that were socio-economically vulnerable prior to COVID-19, as well as by emerging groups that have become vulnerable during COVID-19 due to unemployment, escalating food prices, and restricted access to goods and services. The assessment considers gender dimensions, poverty, and social stability as cross-cutting priorities. National data indicate that 71 percent of the workforce (1.69 million workers) in 2018 were employed in the informal sector, of whom about 40 percent were women. It is estimated that the informal sector accounted for 61 percent of women's and 77 percent of men's employment. There is a strong gender divide in the employment structure by sector. Women workers tended to be concentrated in relatively low-wage government services (32 percent of all employed women compared to the sector's share of 18 percent in total employment). While informality was particularly pronounced in rural areas (accounting for 76 percent of total rural employment), it was also strongly present in urban areas (62 percent of total urban employment). Women in the informal sector are often engaged in more vulnerable work (e.g., as caregivers, as street and market vendors, and in agriculture) – sectors in which earnings are below national averages. Additionally, 32 percent of respondents (29 percent of men and 34 percent of women) had heard of an increase in domestic violence or experienced it themselves.⁹⁷ The number is twice as high in urban over rural areas. During January-March 2020 reported domestic violence cases rose by 65 percent compared to the same period in 2019; 21.6 percent of respondents said COVID-19 affected their emotional and mental state. But the rate is much higher among women from vulnerable settings – with 96.6 percent reporting they felt stressed, including 90.7 percent of women living with HIV.

Moldova

The SEIA notes that women are affected by the pandemic due to job or income losses or are overwhelmed by remote working and taking care of children. More than 30 percent of women were affected in some way by the pandemic at the workplace, versus 18.5 percent of men. The highest income loss (of 75-100 percent of income) was suffered by returning migrants (22 percent), followed by vulnerable women (16 percent). Severe losses (50-75 percent of income) were the highest for poor households (24 percent) and vulnerable women (24 percent). One in four women lost their job. This further exacerbates inequalities, as women already faced a gender pay gap of 14.1 percent before the pandemic outbreak (2019). The higher share of NEET women (35.5 percent versus 19.4 percent NEET men) suggests that they will face worse job market prospects, as a result of the pandemic. Older people reported a decrease in income. This particularly affected older women, as 42 percent of those surveyed cited at least some decrease in income, versus 18 percent of older men.

The SEIA also notes the increase in domestic violence, with six percent of women in the sample admitting that they suffered it during the pandemic. The violence was physical and psychological/emotional and all respondents declared that they pressed charges. Of the sample surveyed, 60 percent of participants engaged in housework and 90 percent engaged in childcare were women – indicating continuing conventional gender roles in households. They also face heightened risks of violence, exploitation, abuse or harassment during times of crisis and quarantine. In addition, the Labour Force Survey found as early as March that the pandemic affected women more than men in the workplace. As in most countries in the region, the impact of the epidemic stems from

two sources – external and internal – a decline in exports, remittances and Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), coupled with strict containment measures with its impact on economic productivity and revenues. An IOM study found that for 118,000 households remittances constitute more than 50 percent of disposable income, highlighting the importance of migrants for the whole of society. Furthermore, seasonal migrant workers are expected to return home due to job losses, with no possibility to return to the jobs abroad that feed their families, no savings, and difficulties in finding employment at home. Men often leave behind women-headed households with dependents, whose remittances are increasingly at risk of being cut off due to job losses.

Montenegro

The EIA examines the impact on small and medium scale enterprises noting the slowdown in the economy with growing unemployment rate, which is reversing the previous positive trend of declining unemployment in the country. The EIA notes that the pandemic has led to increased informality, and a shutdown in productivity suspended operations as well as declining tourism revenues. Restrictions on mobility and reduced incomes meant that 36 percent of women in Montenegro reported limited access to healthcare during the pandemic. The Government focused its efforts on developing short-, medium- and long-term responses to boost the economy. These include addressing important sectors like tourism to stop declining revenues and preparedness for business continuity, supporting economic activity and addressing liquidity problems for small- and medium-scale enterprises – these can be further sharpened to target the needs of women entrepreneurs who are represented in significant numbers. Reforms in the education sector should also look into the gender dimension of distance learning and digitalization, as a majority of the primary school educators are women who are juggling responsibilities for children's distance learning and virtual classrooms and the household.

The SEIA notes that lockdown measures led to a surge of domestic violence: between March 16 and June 1, 2020, the Women's Safe House received 46 percent more calls, compared to the same period of the previous year. During May 2020, their shelter provided accommodation to 60 percent more survivors of gender-based violence than during May 2019. The National SOS line reported an 18 percent increase in requests for their services, while in May 2020, it received 32.5 percent more calls over May 2019.

The report 'Women's contribution to the economy of Montenegro' notes increased daily hardship – 56 percent of the newly unemployed between February and June 2020 were women, two out of five women faced financial difficulties such as the payment of rent and utility costs, while 38 percent of women reported challenges in reduced financial capacity to cover basic living costs such as food or hygiene supplies.⁹⁸ The EIA notes that nearly 20 percent of women reported that they had asked friends and family for financial support to overcome financial difficulties. During the pandemic 36 percent of women reported a reduction in or complete absence of access to health services. Work done by women in the domain of unpaid care and domestic work exceeded that done by men by 92 percent in April-June 2020, and if projected to a year, their contribution in unpaid work is the monetary equivalent of 10 percent of national GDP.⁹⁹

North Macedonia

The SEIA notes the higher levels of unemployment for women workers since the onset of the pandemic, and remittances and foreign exchange cash operations are expected to fall as migrants' income abroad shrink. September 2020 was the first month when the overall number of unemployed women surpassed the overall number of unemployed men in the last decade. Annual inflows of private transfers are expected to have fallen by EUR102 million in 2020, affecting disposable incomes of recipient households and putting upward pressure on the poverty rate. North Macedonia already has one of the lowest women's labour force participation rates in Europe, and being economically insecure, women are vulnerable during economic downturns. They are also more likely to be victimized (i.e., suffer domestic violence, stay in an abusive relationship, etc.). Men are overrepresented in the informal sector at 67.4 percent, but women are highly exposed to low-quality informal jobs. Women are often found in the lower parts of the informal employment hierarchy (domestic workers in private homes, informal sellers on agricultural products' markets, contributing family workers, etc.) – which were all directly impacted during the lockdown.

Serbia

The SEIA notes that the pandemic had two peaks, in April and July 2020, and while these were contained, the impact on health systems, financial security and regular life and work has been severe. The initial fiscal support package for easing the negative impact of COVID-19 to help businesses keep employees by providing them with liquidity, helped secure workers with a certain minimum salary, and allowed for postponement of payment obligations for individuals with debt. But, it did not include incentives to support environmental priorities and did not reach all the poor and vulnerable, e.g., informal workers, small farmers, families with children, single parents, children, the elderly, and residents of substandard settlements, particularly the Roma population. The pressure on health systems meant that approximately 27 percent of women and 19.9 percent of men experienced difficulty accessing health services, and the barriers were even more pronounced among young people, 54 percent of whom confirmed that they had restricted access – 31 percent of women and 19.7 percent of men reported psychological, mental or emotional strain due to the crisis. The psycho-social support to women in situations of violence provided by CSOs via emergency helplines increased by 30 percent compared to the pre-COVID-19 period. Systemic gender gaps in accessing social services were observed, with women frequently reporting difficulties in accessing benefits and services. The lack of public transport during the restrictive period particularly affected rural households, women and commuting workers.

Women account for 76 percent of jobs in the health and care sector, and are on the frontlines of this crisis. They are also over-represented in the informal service sector and in labour-intensive manufacturing sectors (e.g., 81 percent in apparel manufacturing), and 53.9 percent of women workers are in high-vulnerability sectors. After the pandemic outbreak in March 2020, firms dismissed mostly men (a net 58,400 men lost their jobs during the first quarter of 2020 compared to a net 2,500 women), while during April-June 2020, a net 34,700 women lost their jobs compared to a net 1,500 job increase for men, displaying an opposite trend. Furthermore, impacts on working conditions due to the pandemic included a higher workload (affecting 22 percent of women compared to 16 percent of men) and longer working hours (eight percent of women compared to seven percent of men).

Tajikistan

The socio-economic response framework notes that the poorest households in Tajikistan, often women-headed and with a high dependency ratio as well as casual labourers and petty traders, suffered disproportionately. As remittances are one of the primary sources of income in the poorest regions of the country, job losses among migrants may force poor and food-insecure households resorting to selling productive assets and reducing expenditure on health and education. Remittances amount to over 30 percent of GDP and a significant part of household consumption. Migrant households spend close to 70 percent of income from remittances on basic needs such as food, education, and health. Women remain particularly vulnerable as caregivers of the sick, elderly and children. Large-scale migration of Tajik men working overseas has had a profound impact on the status of women. Most rural households typically have at least one man working abroad. Restrictions on cross-border movements, coupled with limited possibilities to return home voluntarily, may push migrants into pursuing unsafe and irregular migration. In the crisis, the closure of borders further limited regular migration options, and exposed migrants to increasing risks of being exploited by smugglers, traffickers and opportunists.

It is estimated that informal employment in Tajikistan is the highest in the region, with every third informal worker in the non-agriculture sector employed in construction. Social distancing and lockdowns have meant that informal workers lost their livelihoods almost immediately. Without any social insurance, informal workers have been left with no income. Among others, informal workers are typically unregistered individual private entrepreneurs, individuals providing informal paid services (e.g., taxi drivers, street vendors, maintenance and construction workers, housekeepers, homecare providers, unregistered labourers in agriculture, household members working on family farmlands or making livelihoods from farming on their homestead land). Often women and youth (15-24 years) are at a higher risk of losing their jobs. A higher proportion (25 percent) of women are involved in the informal sector and unpaid jobs compared to men (13 percent). Around 73 percent of household income is earned from informal economic activities. Women account for 58 percent of people producing goods for own use.

As noted by the SEIA, since the COVID-19 outbreak, only 16.8 percent of women and girls had been seeking paid jobs, compared to 34.1 percent of men. For nearly 10 percent of women, childcare was the main reason for not seeking a job, while none of the men surveyed reported this reason. According to the Labour Force Survey 2016, the great majority of the sample population (2,757,272 persons) was engaged in household activities, out of which 82.7 percent were women. Women are more constrained than men, because of domestic responsibilities and lack of required skills and qualifications, which significantly restricts their employment opportunities. Moreover, 36.7 percent of household survey respondents who reported having a job during the first phase of the pandemic (March-May 2020) worked informally, without a contract or for an unregistered enterprise. A sharp decline in monthly salary was reported by many respondents to the survey. Although this seems to have affected men (37.5 percent decline) more significantly than women (19.8 percent decline), the difference may be attributed to existing pay differentials between men and women. Women earn on average 34.6 percent less than men, while women-headed households earn 10.8 percent less than households headed by men.

The socio-economic response framework notes that gender inequality also fuels high levels of violence against women and girls, which remains one of the most widespread human rights abuses. Nearly a fourth of women between the ages of 19 and 49 reported

experiencing physical or sexual violence. Furthermore, almost 30 percent of youth are not in employment, education or enrolled in training (NEET), around 90 percent of them young women. Young people and adolescents, especially girls, have limited access to education, knowledge, and skills. There is a widening gap between what the education system provides in terms of learning achievements and skills, and what children, young people, communities and the economy need. These are some factors contributing to poverty and social exclusion among youth. Women find it difficult to play a more active role in political life. Overall, women make up only 22 percent of parliament members and only 14.7 percent of high-ranking government officials. Women are also underrepresented in civil services (25 percent), especially in a managerial role (19 percent). Women face exclusion in the economic sphere, earning less than men, and women-owned SMEs make up less than one percent of all SMEs in the country. There is limited investment in women's vocational education. Many women are employed in low-paid jobs in agriculture, education, and healthcare.

Turkey

The Turkey SEIA notes that in 2019, on average, the labour force participation rate for women (ages +15) was 34.4 percent compared to 72 percent for men. Moreover, the proportion of working women in informal employment was more than 11 percentage points higher than that of men (42.2 percent for women compared to 30.9 percent for men). The highest rates of informal employment for women were registered in the agriculture sector, where women's informal employment was 95.7 percent compared to 79.5 percent for men. Women's informal employment outside agriculture was 24.2 percent compared to 22.4 percent for men. The working poor, particularly women, in the informal economy have low-paid jobs without social protection. Casual workers (domestic workers, home-based workers, waste pickers, freelancers and platform workers) are increasingly vulnerable, as their wages depend on the total number of days worked or piecework. They have already struggled against the socio-economic difficulties in labour market, but increased COVID-19 based issues aggravated their situation. Social protection assistance from governmental measures like the ones in the registered sectors is not possible for informal women employees to access. Women's employment is between 25 percent and 45 percent in the tourism, commerce and textile sectors, most affected by COVID-19 with rising unemployment rates. Especially in these sectors, women's unemployment rates are expected to further increase. In April 2020, among self-employed women, 20 percent lost their jobs, compared to 8.7 percent of self-employed men. Among those employing others/employers, the rate of job losses was 26.9 percent for women as opposed to 16 percent for men; 17.6 percent of women working in the private and public sector lost their jobs, compared to 15.5 percent of men.

There has been an increase in the burden of unpaid housework for women: two-thirds of women respondents, versus one-fourth of men, said they spent more time on cooking and serving meals. Similarly, 78 percent of women respondents declared that their housework at home increased during the COVID-19 outbreak, while only half of men reported a similar increase in housework. In Turkey, household internet access is 88.3 percent, and internet usage among men aged 16–74 is almost 13 percentage points higher than among women (81.8 percent for men compared to 68.9 percent for women). Although women and girls have used the internet with greater frequency during the pandemic for teleworking, homeschooling and social activities, they were also at higher risk of cyberviolence, which may impede women's and girls' access to services and their active participation as digital citizens. Violence against women is widely prevalent, as is

child marriage: 15 percent of women aged 20-24 are married before age 18. This figure is close to 40 percent for young Syrian women. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, 36 percent of ever-married women between the ages of 15 and 59 experienced intimate partner physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime, and, according to the Turkish Federation of Women's Associations, there was an 80 percent increase in reported incidents of physical violence in March 2020 over March 2019.

Ukraine

Workers in high-contact sectors and occupations were the most affected by containment measures, because working remotely is rarely an option for them. The implications were more severe for low-skill and seasonal workers. Confinement measures had a regressive impact on income distribution and a disproportionate impact on women, youth and other vulnerable people, such as undocumented migrants, as they are more often engaged in informal, low paid jobs. Main impacts included: income contraction and increased poverty levels, rise in unemployment, women's increased burden in the care economy and unpaid work, and diminished access to education by children and youth, who could not avail of distance learning. The social protection system has limited coverage and outreach and is burdened with difficult access procedures; the pension system does not guarantee minimum levels and is financially unsustainable while the education system has limited capacity for an inclusive online learning programme. Forty-five percent of working age people worked with protection guarantees of their labour rights in 2019. The remaining 55 percent worked unprotected. The latter include the most vulnerable workers of the Ukrainian society. MSMEs generate 80 percent of employment and 20 percent of GDP. Eighty percent of all MSMEs are self-employed individuals in a context where 75 percent of women participating in labour force are self-employed. The limited representation of women and social policy and human rights institutions in response coordinating bodies resulted in discrimination as lockdown measures affected some groups more than others.

The impact of emergency measures on fundamental freedoms and human rights was pervasive and diminished access for certain groups in particular – the most disadvantaged ones. The most vulnerable include older persons and persons with disabilities: eight million older persons (+65 years), three million men and five million women, about half with disabilities; of these two million live alone. There are also over three million registered persons with disabilities (the actual number may be higher, up to 15 percent of the population) and between a fourth and a third of Ukrainians live with some chronic health conditions. Other vulnerable populations include people living in poverty: 18-21 million persons living below the poverty line, including children (additional 6-9 million as a result of COVID-19, including 1.4-1.8 million children); households with more than three children and households with children below the age of three are especially vulnerable. Nineteen million women (15+ years), especially single mothers (20 percent of all families), pregnant and lactating women (0.3-0.4 million), survivors of domestic and sexual and gender-based violence, particularly women and girls with disabilities who experience higher rates of abuse and violence; single, older women in rural, isolated or conflict-affected areas and adolescent and young women, particularly those living in conflict-affected areas, are also particularly vulnerable. First responders, healthcare workers and social workers (healthcare workers alone are over 400,000), caretakers of persons with disabilities, staff of medical and related facilities, including nursing homes and residential care facilities face additional risks.

More than one woman in three aged 59 or older could not receive medical attention, buy medicines or medical products already before the pandemic. Field surveys report that older women in rural areas, women diagnosed with chronic diseases and/or HIV were not able to access the necessary health services because of the lack of public transport and low mobility. Women make up the majority of healthcare workers and social workers (82.8 percent). Because of their jobs, the lack of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) programmes at hospitals and the scarcity of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), they are at a higher risk of exposure. The higher rates of infection for COVID-19 among women (58 percent) compared to men (42 percent) recorded so far. Closing schools and freeing hospital beds – the unpaid domestic work and care economy was predominantly on women's shoulders. Women workers of all essential sectors faced greater challenges in balancing work and family responsibilities in the context of increased intensity of professional activity and lack of adequate rest, as partners would not share domestic and care work. They found themselves as sole carers of children and older or sick relatives and at the same time full-time frontline or essential workers. Women essential workers raising children alone were particularly under pressure – working in crisis conditions, providing care and education for children, sometimes leaving children home alone or taking them to work, as childcare support was provided only to a small segment of society (SME owners).

Uzbekistan

The assessment of the impacts of COVID-19 on small and medium-sized businesses was based on a very limited sample (887 respondents). With such sampling size, the margin of error was ± 3.26 percent, and the response rate 37.5 percent. Managers of enterprises who took part in the survey were between 18 and 79 years, the vast majority (79 percent) among them were men. Women – managers of small and medium businesses – constituted a fifth of the total number of respondents (21 percent). Ninety-five percent of entrepreneurs reported no pandemic-induced layoffs, and 98 percent reported no layoffs of women. Gender-specific data show that the share of women managers in small and medium-size enterprises in urban areas is almost twice as high as in rural areas (25.3 percent and 12.7 percent respectively). With regard to different sectors, the share of women in leadership positions in the information and communication industry is only seven percentage points lower than the share of men (53.3 percent). The proportion of women is 16 percent in the manufacturing and construction sectors, while this figure is minimal in the agriculture, forestry and fishery (10 percent), and in the transport and storage (13 percent) sectors. The share of households that reported having an income in the form of wages in the previous 30 days returned on average to the level of June 2019 in May-June, after a decrease of 16 percent in April. The unemployment rate for women reached a peak of 17.4 percent in the first half of 2020.

The report 'Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 in Uzbekistan: perspectives of mahalla representatives' notes that women are still underrepresented in decision-making positions in almost all sectors. For instance, women constitute only 22 percent of the members of the Legislative Chamber and 14 percent of the members of the Senate of the Oliy Majlis (Parliament). Just 23 percent of members of local parliaments (kengashes) are women. As of 2018, the share of women in the Cabinet of Ministers was 6.5 percent, and among the leadership of the executive power it was 15.3 percent. Women occupy only ten percent of senior management posts (heads, deputies) in ministries, state committees and agencies and 24 percent of the mid-level positions.

Small-scale studies conducted in rural areas found that women report that about 60 percent of their day is devoted to tasks such as cooking, cleaning, laundering, ironing and repair of clothing. Men report that they spend about 11.5 percent of their time on such activities. Women in rural areas calculate that they spend approximately 14 hours per day on unpaid household chores and childcare. Representatives of mahallas in the Fergana region, followed by the Tashkent and Bukhara regions, were the most likely to report that women's domestic workload had increased (over 42 percent of respondents in Fergana, followed by over 40 percent in the other two regions). Respondents from the Republic of Karakalpakstan, Khorezm, Kashkadarya and Navoiy regions were less likely to have observed such an increase in the domestic workload (less than 30 percent of respondents). The respondents in Tashkent city were the most likely to describe a significant increase in the burden on women (28 percent of Tashkent respondents versus 15 percent in most regions), followed by the Syrdarya region (20 percent) and Andijan region (17 percent). Despite significant developments in social and legal protections of women and girls who have been subjected to violence, research has uncovered serious weaknesses in the response at the community level (specifically a 2019 study conducted in 100 mahallas in Tashkent and the Samarkand and Bukhara regions). The following gaps have been identified: limited support for survivors of violence, limited effectiveness in preventing domestic violence, lack of cooperation among responsible agencies working on violence against women, lack of awareness among women about their rights, especially in the context of domestic violence, and persistent discrimination against women, both in society and in the family.

The report finds that the pandemic has significantly increased poverty risks within communities, especially in urban areas, as a result of a significant drop in income, loss of jobs, labour migrants who returned without work and the emergence of hidden unemployment. The pandemic has had the most negative impact on small and medium enterprises in catering, trade, construction, transportation and paid services. COVID-19 has expanded populations with vulnerabilities, including low-income families (48 percent of responses), multi-child families (40 percent), and returning labour migrants (34 percent). The problem of low-income families is notably high in the Samarkand and Namangan regions (more than 55 percent of responses). Multi-child families as the most affected group were more often reported in the Tashkent region (49 percent). Labour migrants as the most affected category were mentioned in the Jizzakh and Kashkadarya regions (47-48 percent). COVID-19 had a disproportionately negative impact on the economic, social and psychological wellbeing of women. According to the survey, women were the most likely to approach mahalla centres for assistance (89 percent of responses).

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