

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



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

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This report is the result of a collaboration between UNECE and UN Women in the frame of the United Nations Development Account tranche 13 project: Strengthening Social Protection for Pandemic Response, in particular its workstream on strengthening care policies with a gender lens, implemented with the participation of UN regional commissions and cooperating partners, including UN Women regional offices.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

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

SUMMARY

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

Childcare Provision

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

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

Women's Employment

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

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

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

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

Impacts of COVID-19

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

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

Response and Recovery

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

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

1. INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

This report explores how childcare provision (or the lack thereof) affects women's labour market participation in Serbia. It provides an overview of public and private care provision and explores the extent to which this responds to the care needs of families with children, particularly the women and girls in those families. It provides an overview of the framework of formal childcare services in Serbia, its legal and financing systems, its current provisions and the gaps therein. It examines the perceptions and barriers to the use of quality formal care in Serbia, explores the reasons behind the continued predominance of informal care provision (especially for very young children), and analyses the sharp differences in urban and rural

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