

## **Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board of UN-Women First Regular Session 2021**

### **UN-Women Results and Priorities in the Europe and Central Asia Region**

***Summary:** The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities across all aspects of life for women, girls and communities. In the Europe and Central Asia (ECA) region, GDP is expected to contract 4.4 percent in 2020; the World Bank estimates that remittances will fall by 27.5 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The significant losses for the overall economy continue to have a negative impact on women's economic participation, health and social protection systems. This briefing builds on UN-Women's programming and discussions with partners, including civil society organizations, government, donors, UN and private sector. It focuses on three parts: I. The context, identifying challenges, gaps and opportunities in the region; II. UN-Women response, providing evidence of key results and impact together with our partners; and III. Moving forward, redefining our focus and priorities to achieve scale and impact.*

#### **I. Context: Challenges, gaps and opportunities across the ECA region**

In 2020, through programming, assessments, surveys, evaluations and consultations, UN-Women reached out to more than 20,000 stakeholders including representatives from governments and Gender Equality Mechanisms, women's and youth civil society organizations, private sector and UN agencies, across the region to understand persistent gaps as well as opportunities where further investment and engagement is needed to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. Addressing the lagging areas of progress will be essential in accelerating advancements and gains for women and girls across the region.

**COVID-19 risks reversing decades of progress in the fight against poverty and inequalities within and between countries across the region.** UN-Women's Rapid Gender Assessments (RGA)<sup>2</sup>, which involved more than 12,000 respondents across the region, highlighted the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on women. Among the respondents, on average 16 per cent lost their jobs with no significant gender differences. However, women were hit harder by loss of working hours than men, and in some countries, the gender gap is up to 13 percentage points; 25 per cent of self-employed lost their jobs compared to 21 per cent of self-employed men; approximately 50 per cent of women reported a salary decrease. As women's economic security was shaken, their share of unpaid care and domestic work has increased; 70 per cent of women spent more time on at least one unpaid domestic work activity compared to 59 per cent of men. According to the data, the greatest impact of COVID-19 for women has been the economic consequences and setbacks in the care economy. The pandemic has underlined the urgency of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/publication/europe-and-central-asia-economic-update>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2020/07/the%20impact%20of%20covid19%20on%20womens%20and%20mens%20lives%20and%20livelihoods%20in%20europe%20and%20central%20asia.pdf?la=en&vs=5703>

increased investment to address structural barriers and challenges affecting women's economic participation and security.

**Whilst the number of women in parliament has increased in recent years from 21.6 per cent to 25 per cent, in many countries in the ECA region progress has been slow.** Some countries have stagnated or seen a decrease in the number of women elected to Parliament. Women's participation at the local level, including in disaster response and recovery, significantly lags behind men. Increasing the number of women in public decision-making bodies will provide a different approach to governance where a small shift in representation can have a significant impact on people's and women's lives.

**Across the region, part-time employment remains low (up to 20 per cent); women constitute the majority of those employed part-time, often due to childcare and parental care responsibilities that have remained disproportionately high.**<sup>3</sup> Substantial numbers of women are still consigned to vulnerable employment, including in informal work where wages are low, savings are nearly impossible to accrue, and access to financial resources such as old-age pensions is constrained. Entrenched occupational and educational segregation sustain traditional feminized sectors and occupations and help keep women out of the top echelons of private and public organizations.

**Service providers for violence survivors are struggling to deal with the increasing and volatile demand connected with the COVID-19 pandemic.** There is a need to integrate intersectional approaches to reach women and girls, especially those at greatest risk of being left behind. Budgetary constraints combined with entrenched discriminatory gender norms and gaps in institutional capacity remain serious challenges, as highlighted by the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence in their country reports for Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and Turkey.

**Women's representation and leadership in climate change and Information, Technology and Communications (ICT) solutions remain key gap areas.** With few exceptions, women's participation in these fields remains limited, in part due to women's low representation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM). The [EU Women in Digital Scoreboard 2019](#) reveals that while women comprise 34 per cent of STEM graduates only 17 per cent of ICT specialists are women. As shown during the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for accelerated action to ensure women's participation in the future workforce which is increasingly digitalized and IT-based. Across the region, women have an excellent track record for innovative solutions in crises; therefore, feminist engagement in innovation and technology offers opportunities to reverse roles and ensure leadership by young women and to engage women at greatest risk of being left behind. Related to climate change, **few countries in the region have integrated gender into policies on**

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<sup>3</sup>UN-Women (2020): Keep the promise, accelerate the change: Taking stock of gender equality in Europe and Central Asia 25 years after Beijing, <https://www2.unwomen.org/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2020/10/beijing%20report-min.pdf?la=en&vs=313>

**environmental protection, climate change and disaster-risk reduction<sup>4</sup>** and gender integration across environmental and climate change dimensions of new United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Frameworks (UNSDCF) for ECA region also remained limited.

**Further efforts are needed by countries across the region to adopt fiscal policies that promote gender equality and to invest in sectors which directly influence the life of women and girls.** Although, gender equality policies are in place, they are not always costed and budgeted for properly. Governments need to strengthen their investments in evidence-based policy analyses and make gender equality central to national development planning and budgeting. The response of governments to the COVID-19 pandemic reinforced again that if gender is not placed at the centre of the budget discussions, the negative impact on women and girls and gender inequalities are increased.

## **II. UN-Women’s Response. Key results and impact together with our partners**

Against the above context, UN-Women, in partnership with governments, civil society, donors and UN partners, continued to deliver across its mandate areas to make a difference in the lives of women and girls.

### **Governance and Leadership**

**Women’s representation in the parliaments of the region has increased from 21.6 per cent (in 2018) to 25 per cent<sup>5</sup>** with gains for women in parliament achieved in Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Georgia and Serbia. Furthermore, women are currently the Head of State or Head of Government in three ECA region countries (Georgia, Moldova and Serbia). **Gender quotas to advance women’s representation in local politics and decision-making were adopted in two countries**, Ukraine, and in Kyrgyzstan where UN-Women partnered with civil society organizations to successfully advocate for improved legislation resulting a 30 per cent gender quota for local councils.

**Millions of budget dollars have been allocated using a gender lens, in particular in Albania where the total State budget allocations for gender equality will increase to 9 per cent under the 2021-2023 Medium Term Budget programme, up from 4 per cent in 2015 when UN-Women started GRB work with Ministry of Finance.** In Serbia, a gender perspective is included in 2021 budgets of 42 budget users at the national level with all 26 budget users at the provincial level resulting in financing for gender equality under 109 budget programmes, 315 budget objectives and 584 gender sensitive indicators. In Albania, 11 municipalities addressed priorities raised by more than 950 women, including rural women, women from ethnic minorities and women with disabilities in their local programmes. In North Macedonia, UN Women supported 21 municipalities to apply gender-responsive budgeting to better understand the specific emergency needs of women and make their budgets more effective for them. As a result,

<sup>4</sup> UN-Women (2019) Regional Assessment of the Progress of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in Europe and Central Asia, <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eca/attachments/publications/2020/03/b25%20assessment%20report.pdf?la=en&vs=5437>

<sup>5</sup> UN-Women calculation using IPU data accessed 10 January 2021, <https://data.ipu.org/>

municipality interventions better targeted women priorities, including single mothers and vulnerable women from rural areas, with specific budget allocations.

## **Violence against Women and Girls**

In partnership with governments, women's organizations and UN sister agencies, **UN-Women helped launch a far-reaching drive to end violence against women.** In the Western Balkans this has propelled important legal and policy advances and strengthened women's organizations to monitor and advocate for continued changes. In Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), domestic violence is now considered a criminal act, not just a misdemeanor and in North Macedonia, a new Law on violence against women and domestic violence, aligned with the standards of the Istanbul Convention, is currently in parliamentary procedure. Kosovo<sup>6</sup> amended its Criminal Code to improve protections around divorce, signed the first Policy against Sexual Harassment in Public Administration and launched an integrated database of domestic violence cases which is now supporting strengthened coordination and improved the response of law enforcement, judiciary, and social and rehabilitation services.

**To support national governments and service providers to effectively respond to the needs of women and girl survivors of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic,** UN-Women, in cooperation with the first sub-regional civil society platform on ending violence against women, launched guidelines which have been adopted by more than 60 service providers to-date. Further guidelines for risk assessment and risk management to prevent recurrence and escalation of violence against women in times of crisis were also developed together with over 100 representatives from the protection sector.

## **Women, Peace and Security**

**Ten countries affirmed their commitment to the active inclusion of women in peace and security processes and five countries were supported by UN-Women to adopt their first-ever National Action Plan (NAP) to implement UN Security Council resolution (UNSCR) 1325.** Women mediators have increased capacity to engage in conflict response and prevention efforts including 243 women activists from Tajik and Kyrgyz cross-border communities trained as community mediators. In collaboration with the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, UN-Women supported the engagement of 220 women peacebuilders and mediators in regional dialogues on Women, Peace and Security.

## **UN Coordination**

**UN-Women has been at the forefront of leading and influencing the roll-out of regional UN reform.** UN-Women ensured that gender equality is effectively integrated in UNSDCF's across the region. As a result, all the new UNSDCF's integrate gender equality (with 55 per cent including a stand-alone outcome on gender), a significant increase from the past UNDAF cycle where only 8.3 per cent of outcomes were gender-specific). Together with UNDP, UN-Women led the review of the Regional Issue-based Coalitions (IBCs) that have been active in the region for the past five

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<sup>6</sup> All reference to Kosovo shall be understood to be in full compliance with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

years. The IBC on Gender Equality (IBC-Gender), co-chaired by UN-Women and UNFPA, has been cited as a good model to inform the implementation of reforms. UN-Women also co-chairs the Regional Operations Management Team together with UNDP and has been the coordinator of the Common Chapter Agencies in the region. In 2020 there was a significant increase in cooperation between Common Chapter agencies through joint programming, especially under the Joint SDG fund and the COVID-19 Response and Recovery with 26 new projects involving two or more Common Chapter agencies. Notably, the introduction of gender targets has enhanced the gender-responsiveness of the UN's joint programming, particularly regarding the COVID-19 Multi-partner Trust Fund.

### **III. Moving Forward: Redefining our focus and priorities to achieve scale and impact**

UN-Women will continue to work with partners to deepen its work in areas where it has yielded most results, in particular in the areas of women's participation in decision-making, peace and security, ending violence against women and girls, ensuring that laws and budgets are gender-responsive and reducing economic insecurity. Through our lessons learnt, we will ensure that innovation and technology; data evidence and knowledge; addressing discriminatory gender norms and financing for gender equality can be transformative and lead to results.

Across the region, UN-Women will continue to deepen partnerships, including with regional bodies, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe and the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE). Cooperation with UNECE will be expanded beyond intergovernmental processes (e.g. B+25 reviews) and will involve joint programmatic work on improving policies, such as to address unpaid care work, gender data collection and analysis and gender responsive standards. Strategic partnerships will continue and be broadened with government bodies and institutions, including through collaboration on normative processes, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, as well as multi-stakeholder initiatives like the Generation Equality Forum and Action Coalitions. We will also strengthen our private sector strategy – leveraging our work through the Women's Empowerment Principles.

UN-Women will continue to strengthen women's voice and agency to advocate and support governments in implementing international and regional commitments on ending violence against women including into policy frameworks, plans and packages to address the impact of COVID-19. Through our joint programming with UNFPA at the regional and national level in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, we will continue to partner with government bodies, civil society organizations and different non-traditional partners to strengthen equal rights and opportunities for women and men, through shifting social perceptions, negative gender stereotypes and increasing men's participation in caretaking. HeforShe national campaigns will be further facilitated to expand a network of prominent male advocates for gender equality and support their increased engagement and advocacy.

We will also continue to enhance women's leadership and engagement in conflict prevention and peace processes, prevention of violent extremism and to respond to the urgent needs of women and girls in marginalized and vulnerable situations due to conflict, health or natural disasters, through women's economic empowerment, improved access to livelihood opportunities, skill development, income generation and gender-responsive socio-economic policies. In line with recent recommendations from the Corporate Thematic Evaluation of UN-Women's support to National Action Plans on Women, Peace and Security we will also ensure that our continued work and support in this area is fully aligned to country contexts and the increased engagement of civil society organizations.

UN-Women will increasingly position itself as a thought leader by generating cutting-edge knowledge in priority areas related to the pandemic such as care economy, digital transformation and establishment of a Centre of Excellence on gender responsive budgeting. UN-Women will also invest further efforts and resources to increase the quality of knowledge products and services that enable UN-Women to deliver across all areas of its mandate and enable it to bring important expertise and data to complement and enhance inter-agency efforts at the regional and country level. In Central Asia, we will engage with partners to establish Knowledge Centre on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment aimed at providing technical assistance and advisory services, facilitating knowledge generation and leadership on issues relevant to the sub-region for further evidence-based informed policymaking.

UN-Women will continue to engage directly with Resident Coordinators and UN agencies (in line with the Management Accountability Framework) to ensure that our collective efforts are coordinated and aligned to support countries to meet the goals of the 2030 Agenda. We will deepen our collaboration with other UN agencies to ensure system-wide integration of gender equality and women's empowerment in programming by continuing to bring important data, knowledge and technical expertise especially in areas where significant gaps remain such as climate change and environmental protection and innovation and technology. Building upon findings from the COVID-19 Socio-economic Impact Assessments and Gender Assessments, UN-Women will continue to effectively position gender equality at the centre of COVID-19 response and recovery based on a Leaving No One Behind approach. Through our ongoing programming on women's economic empowerment, we will seek to address the key challenges women are facing, including unpaid domestic and care work, loss of incomes and decrease in working hours and women's entrepreneurship initiatives to support women to recover faster from the pandemic.

UN-Women will continue advance its efforts to remain fit for purpose and respond to the demands of national counterparts. To this end, UN-Women follows a number of internal global, regional and country led change management reforms and business transformation efforts. UN-Women will continue to respond to increased demand for technical support and assistance including using different presence modalities for engagement. These efforts are undertaken in concert with other ongoing UN-Development System reform efforts and amongst other include the deployment of gender coordinators, regional and sub-regional programming, working closely with UN Resident Coordinator Offices including in countries where UN Women is not currently present with an office on the ground.