

COVID-19: Neither Gender-Blind, Nor Gender-Neutral

The Council for Inclusive Governance (CIG) reconvened its regional roundtable for senior political party officials from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia. The meeting via teleconference took place on October 27, 2020 and was devoted to the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on women in the Western Balkans. The aim of this discussion was for the Western Balkan countries to coordinate their approaches to improving the conditions of women during the pandemic and resolving their specific problems. The idea for the topic came during the previous session on creating a Western Balkans joint approach to fighting COVID-19. This is the fifth roundtable discussion in the project supported by the German Federal Foreign Office.

The participants agreed that the challenges women in the region face are mostly neglected by the respective governments. Most governmental efforts have focused on economic stimulus bills, responding to the health crisis, and managing internal and external political crises. Little focus, if any at all, has been paid to how women have been affected by the coronavirus pandemic, both in terms of losing their jobs and in becoming subject to increased cases of domestic violence. Therefore, the fact that women have been carrying the main burden of the pandemic has been overshadowed by the above-mentioned problems. The participants also agreed that as much as the governments claim to respect gender equality by setting certain quota for representation, the issue at stake is not highlighted enough in general, whereas the coronavirus pandemic has deepened the discrimination. Good guidance exists on paper but not in practice. It was agreed that the existing laws should be adjusted to better address the factors affecting women during the crisis.

The report is based on the roundtable discussions held under the Chatham House Rule. The participants took part in the discussions in their personal capacities. We have tried to be accurate and balanced in summarizing the discussions and ask for the understanding of participants whose remarks may have not been fully captured in this brief report. The report does not necessarily reflect the views of CIG and the German Federal Foreign Office. The report is drafted by Jeta Loshaj, CIG's associate in Kosovo.

Urgent need for action

A number of participants admitted that their governments did not do enough for women during the pandemic. The effort focused to economic recovery, completely neglecting the issue of women. However, the participants suggested that the governments should look into their law on economic recovery to see how to increase support for women specifically. One way of going forward would be to analyze what criteria would need to be set to support women in this pandemic era in order to prioritize which group has been impacted the most, and then distribute the help accordingly.

It would be useful to consider what other countries in Europe have done. The Western Balkan countries are not the only ones that have witnessed cases of increased domestic violence or

women losing jobs disproportionately. Looking into how other countries in Europe have addressed this issue would be a good starting point for the region.

It was also recommended that an approach must be found how to distinguish the support for women in rural and urban areas. Women living in rural areas need more help to improve their access to services. In particular, for the cases of domestic violence, women living in rural areas are thought to have more difficulties getting access to channels of reporting abuse. The government of Albania has hence established an e-platform, through which it offers consultancy about health and social protection. This platform is intended to serve as a database for numbers of cases that are reported. Though it is not easy to receive statistics as quickly, the government welcomes the support of civil society organization in gathering data, and also pushes for coordination mechanisms between central and local governments.

The industries hit the most by the pandemic were the ones where women were employed on a larger scale. With stricter measures for preventing the pandemic, for example shifting work from office to home, women were forced back into their traditional roles. Government decision makers must not forget that women compose the majority of workers in crucial sectors, including healthcare, education, caregiving for the elderly, and the retail sector. Once this is acknowledged, economic recovery packages should take into consideration women's crucial role in the labor market.

In relation to the economy, the lawmaking process should be made more gender sensitive. This would be a direct help to women in the region. If the COVID-19 virus is not gender blind, nor gender neutral, then the financial stimulus should also be neither gender blind nor gender neutral. According to preliminary studies conducted in Albania, for example, a participant stated, women share a bigger burden at work, especially in the health sector. A participant summed this up saying that women's role is both caregiving and caretaking, and that must be acknowledged by allocating additional budgetary aid to them.

Sending a united message

Participants agreed that the pandemic has underlined the existing inequalities even more, and some suggested to look at this problem in a top-down approach. That is, each government in the region must first and foremost acknowledge that treating women equally is a matter of fundamental rights. For example, if both parents are working, states could adopt measures allowing one parent to take a paid leave during the pandemic. This policy was practiced in Kosovo for a while. Additional good practices in the region were mentioned by the participants from Albania. Given that Albania had been hit by a devastating earthquake in November 2019, the government has established a Ministry of Recovery, which has been useful to also track the damages caused by the pandemic. The staff of this ministry meets on a regular basis and is joined by the Minister of Internal Affairs. Half of the staff in this ministry are women.

Promoting gender-sensitive policies would be a good cultural shift for the entire region. Such initiatives could set the stage for reaching joint regional approaches in addressing common challenges in the future.

The participants expressed their readiness to consider the following recommendations and incorporate them in their current policy agendas.

- Review the models used in the EU for tackling issues of gender inequality and adjust them to the Western Balkan countries' context.
- Draft inclusive policies, i.e. women living in bigger cities and those in rural areas require different policies.
- Allocate funding according to criteria for sectors where women's jobs have been lost.
- Ensure that future state budgets are more gender sensitive and introduce other systematic approaches.
- Consider direct financial compensation to women and raising salaries for the sectors where the workload has increased significantly, e.g. in health and education as has been done in Albania.
- Review existing laws on discrimination and amend them in a way that fits the current pandemic situation.
- Review laws against domestic violence. Introduce state mechanisms that enable women to report domestic abuse more effectively. Governments need to offer incentives that encourage women who hesitate to report domestic violence.
- A broad united message across the political spectrum needs to be sent to women that their role in society is important and recognized. The Western Balkan countries need to draft a joint message on providing equal rights to women during the pandemic and show to the EU that the region can set politics aside when it comes to acting on critical issues such as gender equality.

Participants

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