



POTENTIAL GENDER IMPLICATIONS OF COVID-19 IN KOSOVO

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Introduction

The spread of the global pandemic Coronavirus (COVID-19)¹ has not spared Kosovo. Economists and public health experts claim that the developing countries as well as countries that are in humanitarian crisis are the worst hit by the pandemic spill – as a result of severe shortage of resources and sanitation infrastructure to prevent the spread of the virus and frail public health systems to treat cases of infection.

Since the spread of the COVID-19 virus in early 2020, the health, social and economic effects have started to be recognized at both the individual and community levels across the world and at a very fast pace. In particular, research shows that women are extremely vulnerable to such health emergencies.² In the public health crises, most of the state resources are committed towards public health management and maintenance, while neglecting specific needs of women (such as access to medical services, access to work and income, psycho and social counseling, and access to public transportation).³ As of the result of the pandemic, world-wide data shows that due to increased family tensions of economic anxiety and panic from the virus, there is an increase of domestic violence as well.⁴ Failure to address such issue will threaten the physical and mental health of women, and in the worst case, it will endanger their lives.

In Kosovo, dealing with this public health crisis gets even more serious considering the lack of social justice and gender equality in the country. Given the existing situation - with economic stagnation, school closures, work from home and social distancing - due to gender roles and expectations, women face additional family responsibilities and household chores, and greater need to provide care for family members, especially children and the elderly. Therefore, COVID-19 seriously endangers the wellbeing of women in Kosovo, where there is significant economic hardship, greater risks of domestic violence, limited access to public services, and difficulties of resuming the labor market.

¹ World Health Organization. *Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic*. Cited from: <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

² Wenham C., Smith J., Morgan R. (2020). *COVID-19: The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak*. Cited from: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)30526-2/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)30526-2/fulltext)

³ Care International. (2020). *Gender implications of covid-19 outbreaks in development and humanitarian settings*. Cited from: https://www.care.org/sites/default/files/gendered_implications_of_covid-19_-_full_paper.pdf

⁴ Fraser E. (2020). *Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Violence against Women and Girls*. Cited from: <https://www.svri.org/sites/default/files/vawg-helpdesk-284-covid-19-and-vawg.pdf>

The experience from previous pandemic outbreaks across the world, but also Kosovo's experience of humanitarian crisis after the last war, demonstrates the importance of inclusive and gender-based strategies and policies designed to mitigate such pandemic. By meeting the needs of women during and after the public health crisis, such preventive measures will be more effective in managing the situation. While it is early to assess the real and long-term effects of COVID-19, this brief analysis tries to shed light on possible gender implications amid the existing public health crisis while taking into account the socio-economic wellbeing of women in Kosovo.

An Overview of the Socio-Economic Wellbeing of Women in Kosovo

In Kosovo, its workforce is defined by a low employment rate for women as well as a high percentage of women inactivity in the labor market. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, the un-employment rate among women is 34.3%, while women's inactivity remains virtually unchanged over the years at 78.9%.⁵ Among the main reasons that keep Kosovar women out of the labor market are the responsibilities of caring for children and the elderly in the family, lack of employment opportunities, gender discrimination in the employment process, low wages, lack of shared parental leave, and deep patriarchal culture and society regarding gender roles and expectations.⁶

In addition, the number of businesses owned by women is small - about 11% of active businesses registered [in the country] are owned by women.⁷ One in three women (30%) employed in the private sector in Kosovo do not have an employment contract, while half of those (50%) have fixed-term contracts.⁸ In such situations, women with inadequate employment contracts, same as those without contracts, risk of being easily fired by their employers. In Kosovo, 17.6% of the population lives in poverty, while 5.2% of them live in extreme poverty. Poverty in terms of percentage is higher among households headed by women at 23.7% compared to households headed by men at 17%.⁹

In Kosovo, gender inequality in the labor market affects other spheres of society. For instance, regarding time use, according to the Millennium Challenge Corporation, women in Kosovo spend about 7 hours a day on activities such as food preparation, childcare, maintenance and home repairs, compared to men spending about 1 hour and 10 minutes for the same activities.¹⁰ With the high percentage of women inactive in the labor market, women's unpaid work in the house would far outstrip the amount of paid women work in Kosovo.¹¹

⁵ Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2019). *Labor Market Survey TM4. 2019*. Cited from: https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5365/afp-tm4-2019.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1e0qicGGEbpbEQnW_kACBcECIEVovker-cFjFIBSJwN2Q7nSZanaEFq0o

⁶ Morina L., Delibashzade R. (2017). *Inactivity of Women in the Labor Market*. Cited from: https://d4d-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/D4D_PI_12_W4D_SHQ_WEB.pdf

⁷ Open Data Kosovo. Open Businesses. Cited from: www.biznesetehapura.com/sq

⁸ Mehmeti I., Dobranja D., Hashani A. (2017). *Women in the Workforce*. Cited from: <https://advocacy-center.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Women-in-the-Workforce.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3zCQ2k2aSV217PgexCVsv8KR9BaL07Mc7dHF3KF-BH7YICOrdPxKpijNI>

⁹ Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2019). *Statistical Yearbook of the Republic of Kosovo 2019*. Cited from: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5359/vjetari-2019.pdf>

¹⁰ Millennium Challenge Corporation. (2018). *Kosovo Labor Force and Time Use Study Research Report*. Cited from: https://millenniumkosovo.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/MCC-Kosovo-Labor-Force-and-Time-Use-Study-Final-Research-Report-1.pdf?fbclid=IwAR2orggGM905tV_nUWsLYP5flu0Dks7cxAii5Qvq_FwPuk9yei46q8ErNPE

¹¹ Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2019). *Labor Market Survey TM4. 2019*. Pg. 23. Cited from: <https://ask.rks-gov.net/media/5365/afp-tm4-2019.pdf> It has been calculated based on the data taken from the net average salary for women in Kosovo where one hour of work is paid 2.25 €.

High number of cases of gender-based violence in Kosovo remains a concern. Over half of all women in Kosovo have experienced physical, psychological, or sexual violence from a close partner since the age of 15.¹² In 2019 alone, 1,915 cases of domestic violence were reported, out of which 1,557 were against women and girls. Despite the prevalence of gender-based domestic violence, specialized support services and shelters for women survivors of domestic violence are scarce and lack resources.¹³

Many economic and social barriers and, in particular, the violence exercised against women in the family, lead to women being extremely marginalized [in the society]. More importantly, they are most vulnerable at this point in time – not to say that the entire population is not affected – when most of economic activities are closed and social distancing policies are applied as they come proposed by the Government of Kosovo.

Potential Preliminary Gender Implications in Kosovo

The potential direct implications during and after the public health crisis include:

- ◆ **Unpaid work and excessive work for women working at home.** Staying home usually means more family obligations for women in taking care of family members, especially children and the elderly, and increased unpaid work at home. As a result, lack of quality in the family and unequal share of responsibilities leads to women being overwhelmed, feeling physically exhausted and psychologically and emotionally burdened.
- ◆ **Neglecting the needs of single mothers.** The fact that the category of single mothers has not been specifically stated in the Government's Decision to grant one parent the right to work from home [in the case of the virus outbreak] in order to take care of their children could endanger the health and the wellbeing of children and single mothers.
- ◆ **Increase in unemployment.** With 78.9% of women inactive in the labor market, the deepening economic crisis could adversely affect women's employment growth or even their return to the labor market.
- ◆ **Strengthening gender stereotypes and roles in the labor market.** Emergency policies of a large number of private businesses that allow only mothers to take childcare leave affect the deepening of gender segregation and stereotypes that reinforce social norms where women are seen as primary caregivers of children. In the long run, the return of these women in the workplace may be jeopardized by a prolonged absence from the workplace, where work from home is not possible.
- ◆ **Domestic violence.** Long stay at home for women and girls in abusive families increases the prevalence of physical, emotional, and psychological violence by men in families. While data in Kosovo are currently scarce, the small number of reports released by the Kosovo Police daily reports of the week of March 16 signals serious concern about the situation of women in abusive environments. During social distancing, vulnerable minorities include sexual minorities as well, who in the absence of support from the family, long stay at home without the support networks may, among other things, trigger them to be emotionally and physically violent and result in negatively in mental and emotional health. The focus of health and law enforcement agencies in preventing and managing the spread of

¹² Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE). *Survey on the Wellbeing and Safety of Women in Kosovo*. Cited from: <https://www.osce.org/sq/mission-in-kosovo/439790?download=true>

¹³ Ibid.

the virus may discourage women and sexual minorities from reporting domestic violence cases, and much less seek protection from abuse.

- ◆ **Lack of shelters for women victims of domestic violence.** Shelters for women and girls who are victims of domestic violence, as well as limited resources, such as psycho-social services, run the risk of closing and not addressing new cases due to lack of funds and human resources. Also, since the institutional priorities have shifted towards the virus outbreak, the risk of not handling domestic violence against women is even more serious.
- ◆ **Suspending projects on women empowerment.** Civil Society Organizations (CSO) programs and projects in Kosovo, as well as those of International Organizations and Agencies designed for economic empowerment of women are suspended considering the nature of field work which is limited for a specific time period. At a time when women are most in need of economic and social support due to the public health crisis, most small and large grants dedicated to women can be suspended or postponed, endangering the well-being of women and girls who benefit from grants.
- ◆ **Risk at work in the wholesale and retail sectors.** Women in the private sector, particularly women working in the wholesale and retail food stores and health pharmaceutical shops, which make up the largest number of employees in the sector, are the most vulnerable workforce during the public health crisis considering the extended work hours, exposure to the virus due to lack of protective equipment, lack of health insurance, and job security at work.
- ◆ **Informal economy.** About 30% of women in the private sector (in various economic activities) who do not have employment contracts may risk remaining unemployed in case of a deepening economic crisis.

Recommendations

Clarification: The following recommendations are relevant for the current state of emergency and for their use immediately after end of the crisis. Following the crisis, it is necessary that an in-depth field analysis is conducted, which may require additional measures and policies.

All Stakeholders

- ◆ The efforts to manage the health crisis situation and the economic recovery measures once the crisis ends have to be comprehensive and based on a thorough gender analysis to serve the needs of women and girls.

Government of the Republic of Kosovo

- ◆ Ensure that all preventive and preparatory measures taken by the Government for crisis management are based on a thorough gender analysis considering the state of existing inequality in Kosovo, and thus to not amplify such inequality when measures are taken.
- ◆ Ensure that gender experts who are specialized in economic development and domestic violence are included in the Commission for the Prevention of COVID-19 Virus.
- ◆ Ensure that all ultimate decisions, particularly the measures restricting the movement of citizens, consider their impact on marginalized groups and adjust to their needs.
- ◆ Inspect working conditions in key businesses (stores and pharmaceutical shops) to ensure that workers' conditions and needs are respected.
- ◆ Create an emergency plan to cope with the economic effects of COVID-19, with particular emphasis on assistance provide to women during and after the end of the pandemic, including women from ethnic minorities, who are underrepresented in the labor market and economy.
- ◆ Ensure the extension of shelter services for women and girls who are victims of domestic violence by funding the emergency revenues and engaging additional staff for such services.
- ◆ Ensure that the law enforcement (i.e. Kosovo Police) prioritize, identify and respond promptly in addressing cases of domestic violence.
- ◆ Organize public awareness campaigns to prevent gender-based domestic violence during the health crisis situation.
- ◆ Provide psycho-social [counseling] services through the existing helplines while adjusting to the restrictions set by COVID-19 for victims of domestic and gender-based violence.
- ◆ Provide qualified counseling by telephone or other electronic forms to women and sexual minorities during times of crisis.

Local Civil Society Organizations and International Agencies in Kosovo

- ◆ Continue to identify needs, especially for marginalized groups, during and after the end of the public health crisis [caused by the virus outbreak].
- ◆ Prepare projects and strategies designed to help women and girls affected by the pandemic crisis to become more economically powerful.
- ◆ Introduce small grants to finance economic recovery programs to support self-employed women, women businesses, and local organizations that work with women and girls.
- ◆ Redesign and reallocate funds of existing projects through donor coordination in order to reduce and mitigate socio-economic effects of the pandemic outbreak against women and girls.
- ◆ Initiate advocacy activities through televised and online campaigns to promote equal sharing of responsibilities between two parents with respect to childcare and preventing domestic violence in the family against women.

International Donors in Kosovo

- ◆ Be flexible in redesigning existing projects implemented by local partners in Kosovo, especially those benefiting women.
- ◆ Encourage work from home and identify methods of work that do not cause project disruption, which could potentially lead to many women being unemployed and without any support.
- ◆ Initiate calls that are specific for tackling socio-economic problems affecting women and girls in Kosovo during and after the end of the public health crisis.

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