



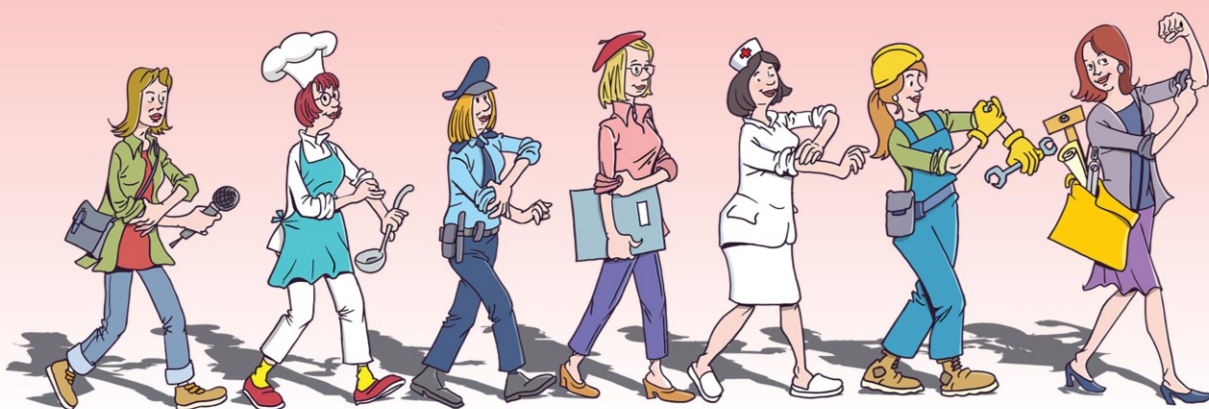
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Abbreviations

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|-----------|--|
| KAS | Kosovo Agency of Statistics |
| LFS | Labor Force Survey |
| CEDAW | International Convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women |
| CSO | Civil Society Organizations |
| CEIC Data | Financial Data & Economic Indicators |
| GDP | Gross Domestic Product |
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus disease 2019 |
| NAES | National Agency for Employment and Skills |
| OECD | The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development |
| ALMP | Active Labor Market Policies |
| VET | Vocational Education and Training |
| EU | European Union |
| SSO | State Statistical Office |
| ILO | International Labor Organizations |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| KW4W | Kosovo Women 4 Women Association |

Executive summary

Support of women for women is an unexplored field in Kosovo which requires a fundamental change in how we view this aspect of support and treatment of this support as a powerful changing mechanism.

In the NGO sector is observed that the competition in the labor market has put more pressure and focus on the skills and experience of the workers rather than the desire to employ women in particular as a sign of support for other women. Nevertheless, in the political sphere especially in local level we see the experience where women felt that they were given a harder time by other women rather than men.

Women who have already achieved their objectives feel a sort of responsibility for other women in the same sector, particularly when they recall their own personal difficulties.

Stereotypes and prejudices common to women in the workplace affect their solidarity and support for each other. The behavior of the “queen bee” is an aspect that arises in the context of these prejudices, showing a competitive dynamic and a lack of solidarity between women. This causes obstacles to create an equal and supportive environment among women in the workplace.

Some newly employed women complain of a lack of support networks when initially entering the workforce. This shows the need for initiatives and programs that promote mentoring and networking among women at work. Organizations and employers have an important role in creating an environment of support and equality at work. Their policies and practices to address sexual harassment, discrimination and promote diversity and inclusion have a major impact on women's experience in the workplace.

Women entering the labour market today have more opportunities, with increased access to internships and vocational training programs. However, they often face challenges due to the large pool of qualified candidates in the labour market, including workers with relevant knowledge and skills acquired through education abroad.

Balancing between family and professional life and advancing in career often requires women to make profound sacrifices and navigate systemic challenges. Maternity leave underscores persistent inequalities, as women often stay at home to care for their child while men use this time to advance in their careers.

Adopted stereotypes and competition are barriers to equal participation of women in the labor market.

One of the reasons women perceive themselves as enemies rather than allies is the lack of role models and authentic representation.

In environments where career advancement opportunities are limited or highly competitive, women with limited development opportunities perceive other women as rivals to their professional advancement.

The three most significant barriers to women's leadership in management in Montenegro are: family responsibilities, insufficient general experience in line with management role and society roles assigned for men and women.

Methodology

Empowered women empower other women is the third research in the series of regional partnership between D4D, GADC, CRPM, BFPE for Responsible Society and ISSP, in the framework of the project “Untapping Development: Increasing women’s access to employment”. Following the two previous researches, this research is one of the fields of gender equality in the region which was faced with lack of concrete data, which shows that this field is substantially underreported but which also shows the contribution and the impact that this research will have in the field of gender equality in the Western Balkans.

The objective of this research is exploring the experiences of women who are entering the labor market for the first time, with women in higher managerial positions. In this regard, we explore the experiences of women in business, politics, police, administration, and civil society, whether women receive more support from other women, or whether the expectations among women are higher while the support is insufficient.

The assumptions that all partnering organizations have analyzed through qualitative research methods focused/included Focus Groups and Interviews with stakeholders and women employers and employees is defined through research question as below:

- ◆ Women entering the labor market for the first time receive limited/more support by women who are in higher positions in the same field/job area;
- ◆ Women who are new at their working places receive insufficient/sufficient support by women who are at the same working place;
- ◆ It is more/less difficult for women to be employed in businesses/organizations/institutions led by women;
- ◆ Women who are in higher positions do not make enough efforts to facilitate the employment journey for other women at more junior levels;
- ◆ Women at senior levels of management ensure that new incoming women in the same field of work have easier path to receive opportunities for development;

- ♦ Women at higher managerial positions are concentrated more into quality of workers and not gender;

The main challenge of this report is the availability of deep research conducted in this field in respective countries, therefore some of the partners have decided to conduct additional surveys considering that women for women support is not a much researched and addressed problem in the field of research.

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Kosovo

Introduction

In traditional societies and societies in transition, gender equality is one of the major fields of transformation and one of the most challenging issue with long-lasting echoes. Women suffer discrimination for their natural attributes and also from the perceptions that society has developed of women's capabilities due to their biological characteristics. Historically the connection of women with motherhood has led to the perception of them as emotional, fragile, and chaste, which confines are reflected in the efforts of women to participate equally in the economic, social, and political life.

Kosovo as a young state that declared its independence only in 2008, with the youngest population in Europe according to Eurostat, paradoxically preserves deep traditional views on women, reflected in gendered roles in the family, society, labor market, politics, education, and other aspects of life which reflect in a misbalanced society where women hold inferior position in comparison to men. Kosovo stands out as the first country in the Western Balkans and Europe to have a second woman President of the state. However, the youngest state in the region Kosovo is facing the challenges such as having the highest rate of inactive, and unemployed, women in the region, as well as the lowest rate of women property ownership and inheritance. Meanwhile no women are in position of Mayors in the Municipalities.

Nevertheless, this research reflects one of the least investigated aspects of support for women, which is "the support of women for one another". Based on data gathering from interviews and focus groups, this part of the research reflects the experiences that women have with one another, while attempting to enter the labor market as already established employers, or in leading and managerial positions. It also examines their attitudes and stance towards other women in their field of work. Additionally, recognizing the uniqueness of experiences from women in different professions, including politics, business, law enforcement and education, and their path towards their economic empowerment, this research is focused on the support that women receive from other women in their path towards professional development.

Challenges faced by women in the labor market

Over the years the labor market indicators in Kosovo shows that the majority of women in working age are outside of the labor market. Kosovo Agency of Statistics in the last Labor Market Survey of the first quarter of 2023 has shown that only 22.8% of women of working age are active, while 77.2% are inactive, defined as women who are not employed nor looking for a job. In total, only 18.5% of women are employed while the rate of employment among women from the previous year has increased only by 0.6%. Taking into consideration that Kosovo in general faces high rates of unemployment due to the lack of sustainable economic development, statistics stand on the deep gap between the participation of women and men in the labor market and the concentration of women's employment in particular fields such as education, retail and health sector (58.8%). While only 22.8% of women are active in the labor market, and 77.2% are inactive, these statistics for men are 56% and 43%, respectively. ¹ Meanwhile, the KAS statistics show that the unstable employment among women has increased by 2.9 percentage in 2023 compared to the previous year. ²

While these numbers reflect a concerning absence of women in the labor market, they are also indicators of long-standing issues of the gendered labor market, which has nevertheless been a concerning issue in Kosovo in the last two decades. Nevertheless, also reflects many underlying issues of discrimination that women face in the labor market due to gender. The research has shown that women's inactivity is due to their dedication towards children and family care, elders, and their belief that there is no job for them in the labor market. D4D's research in 2023 has shown that women spend an average of 7.2 hours daily in household care. This survey moreover has shown that 39% of men are not engaged in household work, as women mainly believe that childcare and household chores are either a shared responsibility or a responsibility of women, but not a responsibility of men, showing a high prevalence of patriarchal mentality in the society.³ This mentality moreover according to Kosovo Women for Women Network research has shown that women do not believe that they "deserve" equal rights and to have an equal share in family property and inheritance as they do not contribute financially equally with men⁴ reflecting with a low awareness

¹ Kosovo Agency of Statistics – Labour Force Survey Q1 - 2023

² Kosovo Agency of Statistics – Labour Force Survey Q1 - 2023

³ Democracy for Development (2023) *"Underrated Economy – Women have no time to change the nation"* pg. 10.

⁴ KW4W – "Learning Brief – Women and Property" pg.3

on the value of unpaid work that women perform throughout their lives as a part of the definition of the virtuous figure of a woman according to tradition.

Besides the mentality that derives from cultural and traditional norms on women's and men's duties towards sharing family responsibilities and life ambition, the lack of proper legislation and implementation mechanisms have also been felt deeply by women in the labor market. This reflects in violation of women's rights to work and rights at work throughout different economic sectors. While "work - life" balance continues to be a foreign concept, in Kosovo's labor market for both women and men, this disproportionality has been reflected mostly in women's participation in the labor market. Due to the lack of proper legislation childbearing and child-caring are additional obstacles for women's economic empowerment, sustainability and independence., According to the discussion of the focus group with women employees from various sectors in Kosovo, organized by D4D for this research, participants agreed that there are three main obstacles for women in the labor market: pregnancy process, childbirth process, and child raising process. The obstacles in these processes entail additional burdens for women which occasionally can reflect lower performance at work, as women often need to leave their jobs as a forced compromise, due to the care for children and family. According to the participants, this indicates that work is only at the third level of priority for women, after childcare and household care.

Additionally, the lack of proper solutions offered by the government policy and current Labor Law in Kosovo for women in the field of childcare and elders cares centers shows a multi-dimensional problem: primarily, women's absence in the labor market due to childcare continues to be at the bottom of institutional priorities the current solution of maternity leaves according to the current legal provisions of Labor Law influence two major issues that continue to deepen the gendered problem in the labor market and the family. While the current maternity leave formula puts the main burden on the employer in private sector to pay 70% of the salary for 6 first months of maternity leave, and this burden is particularly unaffordable for businesses owned by women. Businesses owned by women primarily operate in sectors such as trade, professional services, agriculture, production, education, and health, and they tend to employ more women. However, approximately 10% of businesses in Kosovo are owned by women, and these are mostly micro and small enterprises.⁵

⁵ GAP Institute (2023) "Women and Minority Entrepreneurship in Kosovo": pg. 5

Based on this situation in general, women are more likely to be employed in unstable jobs. Given this fact, there is an increased likelihood that they may become involved in the informal economy, working in jobs that do not fully comply with labor legislation practices.

In parallel, in the current Labor Law in Kosovo, maternity leave is nontransferable to fathers, who enjoy only three days of paid leave upon the birth of their child and no parental leave.⁶ This obstacle besides that it does not give women any possibility to receive support from their partners in the case of earlier return in the labor market, but also keeps the figure of the father absent from the child's life in the first year, creating an additional financial burden for men in the family. Thus, in the field of legislation, it is important to note that although maternity leave might not be the sole largest obstacle for women to enter the labor market, it reinforces traditional gender roles within families, perpetuating patriarchal norms. These norms can have detrimental effects on younger generations as well.

Last but not the final issue of the list of obstacles that women face in the labor market is the issue of lack of a proper institutional approach toward women's challenges in the labor market. While maternity leave is only one issue, the lack of affordable childcare facilities and regular transport in rural areas, the need for new skills especially for women in middle age continue to be other unsolved nodes of the vicious circle of women's absence in the labor market. Women employed face different obstacles like differential salary, lack of supported for managerial position, training for new skills ect. These factors create a cycle that consciously and unconsciously collaborate and contribute negatively to deterioration of the situation for women.

Women to Women support

According to Tomas Sznyog, promotion of rights of women and girls in Kosovo can only be achieved through recognition of women's value and inclusion.⁷ Raising awareness on discrimination, celebrating and promoting women's achievements, amplifying women's voices, enriching political discourse with diverse perspectives, inclusive policies that address the unique needs of all citizens" according to Sznyog are some of the mechanisms to counter

⁶ Labor Law Kosovo – Art. 39

⁷ Tomas Sznyog - [Invest in women to empower society | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](#)

discrimination.⁸ However, the support of women towards women has a special and powerful meaning, for the entire society and for women in particular.

In this study, the investigation of the field of support for women from women, based on the motto that “empowered women empower other women”, has been based on a series of assumptions, which are carefully analyzed throughout the research process. These assumptions entail the questions:

- ◆ whether women who enter for the first time in the labor market, including women who become of working age or women who enter the labor force for the first time after many years of inactivity, or due to the lack of employment opportunities, receive more or less support by women who are in higher positions in the same industry?
- ◆ Women who have entered the labor market and are new to the industry, receive sufficient or insufficient support by women co-workers or women employers?
- ◆ If women who are in higher positions at a particular labor market industry, make enough efforts to support women at more junior levels?
- ◆ How difficult it is for women to be employed in businesses, organizations or institutions that are led by women?
- ◆ Do women at senior or managerial levels ensure that new incoming women have an easier path and receive support and opportunities for development
- ◆ Women in high managerial positions are concentrated more into quality than gender!

These assumptions and questions have been analyzed through focus groups and interviews with women in various fields and levels of expertise. From the observations in the focus groups and responses received from women in various fields, women employers from business field declare that they face particular challenges with women job seekers. Due to unregulated legislation on maternity leave that supports women’s employment, it is harder for business owned by women to employ women. According to the owner of Bardha network of Daycare centers in Prishtina, women tend to request leave for a list of various things

⁸ Tomas Sznycog - [Invest in women to empower society | EEAS \(europa.eu\)](#)

related to family care starting from pregnancy leave, maternity leave, medical leave when children or any of the family members are sick, as well as sudden termination of the contract from the employee due to family issues, which is a burden and difficult for employers particularly women employers. In the field of hospitality which includes women working in hotel business sector, it is particularly difficult for women employers to find women employees, due to prejudices that exist for women working in this field. According to A. Mehmeti – women are bound by social stereotypes on the types of work that they can do, even in the times of economic need. Moreover, she confirms that women in the hospitality sector need the approval of the family, particularly male family members in order to start working in this industry. Thus, women particularly young girls are put in a very difficult positions by their fathers and family members when they show up in interviews together with their daughters. In the meantime, women from various economic fields/profiles and businesses agree that women are more responsible and punctual however, their performance is bound to the responsibilities in the family. Meanwhile, focus group participants also observe that women of middle age are more independent although more disadvantaged as they cannot compete with younger generations in the labor market required skills.

According to Saxhide Mustafa, Senior Associate at the Riinvest Institute, drawing from her experience in both the NGO sector and at Riinvest, the organizational philosophy prioritizes enhancing staff capacity through knowledge transfer and skill-sharing across the entire team. This strategy aims to maintain a competitive edge in the labor market, despite continuous staff turnover. While recruiting qualified staff remains challenging, it is even more so in the private sector due to its dynamic nature. Ms. Mustafa notes that employee mobility is higher in the private sector than in NGOs, leading to increased demand and higher remuneration for qualified individuals, a trend seen in Western countries as well.

However, Ms. Mustafa highlights a barrier to women in managerial positions: their limited ability to support the advancement of other women due to concerns about jeopardizing their own positions, especially in male-owned companies. Additionally, despite the importance of increasing staff capacities, companies often fail to raise salaries accordingly, leading to staff exploitation and limited opportunities for development. According to Iliriana Gashi, Executive Director of Kosovo Women for Women Association, in small businesses there isn't a pronounced hierarchy and most of the cases also the managers need to increase their capacities, nevertheless, there is little to no research in this field.

Nevertheless, according to Ms. Gashi's experience with small businesses concentrated mostly in tailoring, cooking, and cleaning sectors, considered as stereotypically work that should be conducted by women, they mainly employ other women. However, this is not very much pronounced in the private sector as there are not enough opportunities for women to increase their capacities, and not enough space for women to support other women. Finally, Ms. Gashi believes that women in managerial positions are more concentrated in increasing the capacity of workers regardless of their gender, making women in higher positions more concentrated in the overall quality rather than favoring any gender.

In parallel, in the discussion with women owners of small businesses mainly focused in handicraft in the region of Mitrovica, women express the support that they have received from other women in the same field, through small grants and joint activities that has helped increase their capacities in the field of business skills and financial skills that are necessary for them to keep their businesses ongoing.

In the political sphere too women often view each other as competitors according to D.Pajaziti. In politics, the experience of D.Pajaziti Local Assembly Chancellor in the Municipality of Podujeva considers that women get the higher boycott from other women, who according to her "put intentional obstacles for other women, so that they make mistakes, which results in damaging their public authority". She recalls having received more support from men than women in the beginning of her political journey and also continues to have more support from men even in the cases when she needs support.

Nevertheless, although the number of women in the political representation in the central level has increased over the years, women politicians continue to face stigma and are often target of online violence through pronounced misogyny in the media, according to the D4D reports launched in 2023 and 2024.

In conclusion, in the interviews that Radio KFOR has conducted with women in business, two interviewed women considered that the support for women starts in the family, and after they receive support only then they are able to support other women, creating a chain of support that continues infinitely. ⁹

⁹ Gratë që mbështesin njëra tjetrën, janë më të suksesshme - Radio KFOR Shqip

Conclusions

Women's support for other women is vital particularly in the societies where women face significant difficulties to participate in the labor market. Moreover, inter-gender support is important to foster an inclusive and equitable society. In Kosovo women continue to face difficulties to enter the labor market due to a number of obstacles that they face from different aspects, starting from the unequal position of women in the family, gendered stereotypes that derive from traditional and cultural norms that women are the sole responsible individuals in the family to take care of children, household chores and elders, as well as a number of deficiencies that women face in regard to infrastructure, laws and regulations and institutional approach towards women's economic empowerment.

In this research the support of women for other women investigated from various aspects, show that women are not aware enough about the power of women for women support. Thus, women employers see other women that enter the labor market facing difficulties to receive and keep a job because of their family responsibilities and often feel powerless to support them in the ways they need. Moreover, in the NGO sector is observed that the competition in the labor market has put more pressure and focus on the skills and experience of the workers rather than the desire to employ women as a sign of support for other women. Nevertheless, in the political **realm** we see the experience where women felt that they were given a harder time by other women rather than men, nevertheless this field requires further analysis.

In conclusion it is important to note that women who have already achieved their objectives feel a sort of responsibility for other women in the same sector, particularly when they recall their own personal difficulties. In this regard, further actions are important to be undertaken in order to empower women to empower other women.

The support of women for women remains largely an unresolved matter in Kosovo, necessitating a fundamental shift in our perception of this form of support and recognition their potential as a potent agent for change.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we provide specific recommendations as the following:

Institutional:

- ◆ Regular monitoring of the mechanism of implementation the Laws in women's right, and application of the necessary changes in laws infrastructure, updating administrative instruction, regulation and change curricula that are identified as obstacles for women's economic empowerment.
- ◆ Application affirmative measures for companies/employers who implement the Labor Law and adoption equal policies/regulation in their companies, who ensure equal participation, without discrimination, without fear of prejudice, stereotypes and discrimination, equal wages.
- ◆ Provide training opportunities for skills development, enhancing their professional capabilities, based on market needs.

Chamber of Commerce/ Business associations/Businesses:

- Encouraging women to uplift and empower other women instead of competition. This is done through recognition and promotion of women's successes as the success of all women and promote the formula of success for other women who are just entering the labor market.
- Mentorship and Guidance to other women who are starting their careers in male dominated industries, through experiences, insights and networks that will help other women succeed.
- Amplify the voices of women from diverse backgrounds through promotion of successes stories.

NGOs:

- ◆ Advocacy for equal opportunities for women in all spheres of life including education, employment, and leadership positions, through the support for policies and initiatives that promote gender equality and breaking down the systemic barriers.

- ♦ Advocacy for the economic empowerment of women and legal infrastructures changes for more friendly policies for family.
- ♦ Leading by example in personal and professional life demonstrating solidarity for other women and becoming a role model for future generations of women.
- ♦ Organizing mentorship and other support through the motto "Strong Women support other women."

Through discussion in small groups in central and local level challenging stereotypes that perpetuate harmful norms and expectations about women based on traditions and cultural norms.

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Albania

Examining Women to Women Support in the Labor Market in Albania

Introduction

The integration of women into the labor market is influenced by various factors, including support networks, leadership dynamics and organizational culture. This report investigates assumptions about women's support in the workplace and explores relevant research questions to deepen our understanding of women's experiences in different work roles and organizational contexts.

The labor market in Albania poses significant challenges for women, from access to employment opportunities to advancement within organizational structures. These challenges include gender pay inequality, discrimination and the “glass ceiling” phenomenon, hindering women's advancement into senior leadership roles. Addressing these barriers is essential to promoting gender equality and creating inclusive jobs.

Two focus group sessions were held, one with women and young girls who have just entered the labor market and one with women managers, mainly of them in businesses. Discussions in these focus groups helped getting conclusions in this report, which must be acknowledged as having its limitations. However, this report is an initial attempt to discuss a topic that has not been discussed before in Albania or in the region.

Through these discussions, it was aimed to assess the situation and support networks available for women entering the labor market. It was also discussed whether women and girls face greater obstacles in securing employment within businesses, organizations or institutions led by female leaders. Moreover, we examined the adequacy of support provided by female colleagues to young women employed in the same workplace.

Literature Review

While there is a lots of research on gender pay disparities, sexual harassment in the workplace, occupational division of labor, sexual harassment, and other forms of gender inequality at work, few sociological studies explore women's work relationships with other women.

Solidarity or sisterly behavior involves the belief that women will stand by and stand for other women based on their shared gender identity. Women in leadership roles will actively promote and support the advancement of women at lower levels within the organizational structure, since as described by Korabik and Abbondanza (2004), solidarity behavior requires women to work together to improve social conditions and organizational for women in general. In a study of women employed at high levels of banking, evidence of solidarity behavior was found. The women who participated in the sample of this study believed that the time it took for women to advance their careers in this industry was long and very difficult, so women should support each other in whatever ways they can. However, in contrast to the concept of solidarity behavior, other studies have concluded that work relationships between women are more likely to be categorized as negative and competitive compared to men-to-men work relationships.

In a study of women in the legal field, it was found that compared to male-dominated organizations, women participating in the study perceived limited support from their female peers. Some studies suggest that women in senior positions prefer their own unique status and would not be predisposed to help other women advance their careers. This characterization of the working relationship between women is reflected as the “the Queen Bee Syndrome”. This theory was first advanced in the 1970s, and was defined as women who had achieved high levels of professional and social success or otherwise, high status at work, high pay, and successful relationships with the opposite sex. These were women who had succeeded in the male world of work while also managing the home and family. Women who occupy unique leadership roles may feel threatened by other women who ascend the career ladder. Another study found that high-status women reported feeling threatened by the fear that another woman candidate might outrank them.

Other studies concluded that participants expected a higher degree of understanding and emotional support from a female manager than from a male one. They also expect a female manager to see them as an equal, expect to understand the complexities of their lives and provide flexibility. In essence, women's interactions in the workplace are complex and influenced by gendered organizational structures. While there is evidence to suggest that women are keen to support each other's career development, there is also evidence to suggest women are reluctant to help women lower in the hierarchy. Women often face high performance expectations and internal pressures, leading to a sense of

hyper-responsibility and self-blame. Given these dynamics, it is plausible that women anticipate more career support from their female peers, both junior and senior, than they actually receive.

The topic of women's behavior toward other women in the workplace has received limited research interest. Moreover, there are conflicting findings between different studies in this area, with some studies suggesting that women tend to avoid competition, contributing to the gender gap in employment, and others emphasizing women's competitive behavior in phenomena such as feminist misogyny and the "the Queen Bee Syndrome".

Various research undertakings indicate that women in senior management positions want to be recognized for their skills and leadership, rather than as defenders of women's interests, and that most women directors do not feel responsible for to address various issues of underrepresentation of women in leadership positions or on executive boards. Other evidence comes from a study which reveals that women in organizational settings often lack cooperation and support for each other promote solidarity, women at various management levels often exhibit negative relationships within work relationships.

But if women, as some evidence suggests, often exhibit negative relationships within work settings, what is the reason behind this? In a review of sociological research on women's relationships with each other at work, three main themes are identified regarding the barriers that prevent women from supporting other women in the workplace:

The first obstacle seems to include negative stereotypes about women in the workplace, which hinder women's success and solidarity. The authors highlight the pervasive issue of gender stereotypes that label women as overly emotional, less committed, and less confident than men, contributing to their challenges in career advancement. Despite the recognition of such stereotypes, the impact on women's solidarity with each other at work has been less studied. The behavior exhibited in the "queen bee" phenomenon, where women in leadership positions can undermine other women, and which appears to contribute to the lack of support among women in male-dominated workplaces, is seen as a response to tokenism and pressures in a sexist work environment, rather than promoting the inherent qualities of women themselves.

The second obstacle is discussed in relation to the underestimation of gender inequalities as a significant obstacle to solidarity among women in the workplace, exacerbated by different ideologies. Despite evidence of gender inequalities and discrimination in the workplace, including salary negotiations and career advancement, there is a widespread belief among employees, including women, that gender does not significantly affect one's success at work. This belief is reinforced by neoliberal principles, which prioritize individual over collective action, discourage discussion of structural inequalities, and promote a culture where women compete rather than cooperate. This not only undermines efforts to address gender inequalities, but also discourages feminist organizing and solidarity among women, especially in male-dominated fields and professional settings.

As a third barrier to women's support for each other in the workplace, researchers pinpoint the undervaluing of women's networks and affinity groups at work. The authors point out that societal and workplace biases favor masculine qualities over feminine ones, causing women to distance themselves from behaviors and groups perceived as too feminine to avoid career disadvantages. While affinity groups and networks are designed to offset gender inequalities and promote equality, their effectiveness is questioned. Women often perceive participation in women's groups as underlining their marginalized status, fearing that it may reinforce stereotypes that women need special help. This perception discourages women from seeking support from other women, ultimately affecting their career advancement opportunities and undermining solidarity efforts. The researchers suggest the need to reassess how affinity groups, networks and informal relationships can be structured to truly support women's solidarity and career advancement in the workplace.

Findings and insights from the focus group discussions

Below are some findings from focus group meetings with young women and girls who have just started their careers as well as some women and girls entrepreneurs or leaders of various institutions.

Findings from focus group sessions with young women embarking on their professional journeys into the labor market are detailed below:

Participants articulated a spectrum of experiences related to support from women occupying higher positions upon entering the labor market. While some praised the invaluable mentoring and guidance they received early on, others lamented the lack of support networks when initially entering the workforce.

The adequacy of support provided by female colleagues within the same workplace varied between participants. While some said they felt warmly welcomed and helped by female co-workers, others noted that they encountered barriers to fostering relationships and receiving guidance, reflecting a disparity in support dynamics within workplaces.

Participants also offered different perspectives on the ease of employment within women-run businesses. While certain individuals perceived such establishments as favorable environments for female employees, others noted biases and potential barriers that hindered equal opportunities within these environments.

During the meeting, important issues such as workplace harassment, gender-based discrimination, and the role of the employer in this regard were discussed. The participants emphasized the lack of work culture in general, internal communication as well as the lack of procedures for cases of harassment or conflicts in the workplace.

In summary, the discussions shed light on the nuanced and multifaceted nature of women's labor market experiences. They also underscored the importance of continued dialogue and concerted action to address prevailing challenges and foster a more equitable and inclusive workplace environment. Focus group discussions highlighted the different experiences of women in the labor market, especially during their initial entry and early stages of employment. While some participants indicated positive encounters with supportive women in senior positions, others expressed frustration at the lack of networking and mentoring opportunities. These insights underscore the critical need for proactive measures to create comprehensive support structures for first-time entrants, including formal mentoring programs and networking initiatives to facilitate smoother transitions into the workforce. Furthermore, the variability in support provided by female colleagues within the same workplace highlights the importance of fostering inclusive cultures where all employees feel welcome and valued. Implementing formalized onboarding processes and mentoring programs can help bridge gaps and provide consistent support for new hires, thereby increasing retention and morale within the organization. It is also of significant

importance to create mechanisms for reporting sexual harassment or conflicts in the workplace or the code of ethics and instructions at work.

The findings from the focus group sessions with women and girls entrepreneurs or managers are detailed below:

Focus group discussions with female employees provided valuable insights into the dynamics of support provided to new entrants into the labor market. Participants shared their perspectives and experiences, highlighting positive practices and areas for improvement.

- ◆ First, participants emphasized the importance of creating a welcoming and supportive environment for young female employees. They discussed the importance of mentoring, support and informal networking in facilitating the onboarding process and helping new employees navigate the complexities of the workplace. Participants highlighted the need for proactive grassroots initiatives and inclusion to ensure young women feel valued, respected and supported from the start.
- ◆ Second, the discussions delved into the challenges and barriers faced by young women when starting a job and accessing support within the workplace. Participants identified factors such as organizational culture, lack of visibility, and implicit biases as potential barriers to building meaningful relationships and accessing mentoring opportunities. They highlighted the importance of addressing these barriers through awareness raising, training and targeted initiatives aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion.
- ◆ Overall, the focus group discussions highlighted the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive environment for young women in the labor market. Participants emphasized the need for collaborative efforts to break down barriers, foster meaningful connections, and provide opportunities for mentorship and professional development. By leveraging the knowledge and experiences shared in the focus group, organizations can take proactive steps to increase support for young women and promote gender equality and inclusion in the workplace.
- ◆ From the discussions, it became evident that the topic of workplace development, especially in terms of implementing policies and practices to prevent and address harassment and discrimination, had not been actively addressed by women employers. However, when prompted by the

moderator, there was unanimous agreement among participants that such measures are essential.

- ◆ They recognized the importance of establishing clear guidelines and procedures to deal with any form of harassment or discrimination promptly and effectively. Furthermore, they emphasized the need for a culture of accountability within the organization, where inappropriate behavior is not tolerated and consequences are consistently applied.
- ◆ This highlights the recognition by women employers of the critical role proactive measures play in fostering a safe and inclusive workplace environment. Moving forward, it is imperative that these sentiments are translated into action, with the implementation of robust policies and practices aimed at preventing and addressing harassment and discrimination in the workplace. Through open communication and a commitment to accountability, organizations can create an environment where all employees feel valued, respected and empowered to thrive.
- ◆ Additionally, leadership actively promotes diversity, inclusion and equal opportunity for all employees. Recruitment, promotion and performance appraisal processes are transparent and merit-based, ensuring that individuals are judged solely on the basis of their skills, qualifications and contributions to the organization.

Conclusions

Findings and evaluations of the focus group discussions, highlight some key points stand out:

- ♦ **Stereotypes and prejudices:** Stereotypes and prejudices common to women in the workplace affect their solidarity and support for each other. The behavior of the “queen bee” is an aspect that arises in the context of these prejudices, showing a competitive dynamic and a lack of solidarity between women.
- ♦ **Gender inequalities:** Gender inequalities at work, including discrimination in pay and career advancement, are major challenges that hinder women's advancement. This causes obstacles to create an equal and supportive environment among women in the workplace.
- ♦ **Lack of support networks:** Some newly employed women complain of a lack of support networks when initially entering the workforce. This shows the need for initiatives and programs that promote mentoring and networking among women at work.
- ♦ **The role of the employer(s):** Organizations and employers have an important role in creating an environment of support and equality at work. Their policies and practices to address sexual harassment, discrimination and promote diversity and inclusion have a major impact on women's experience in the workplace.
- ♦ **Need for action:** Ultimately, the conclusions of this study emphasize the need for concrete actions to improve the situation for women in the labor market in Albania. These actions include establishing mentoring programs, implementing gender equality policies at work, and fostering a culture of support and respect in the workplace.

In conclusion, by addressing these challenges and promoting the necessary measures to help women in the labor market, a more equal and inclusive environment for all employees can be created.

EMPOWERED WOMEN
EMPOWER WOMEN

North Macedonia

Introduction

Gender equality is one of the fundamental values of the European Union and represents a necessary precondition for equality, social justice, sustainable growth, and development of societies. As such, this value must be integrated into the accession process to the EU which means that countries must ensure equal representation of needs and interest, as well as providing equal opportunities for both women and men. The Republic of North Macedonia is diligently working towards implementing the necessary reforms for EU membership. On this path towards improving policies and implementing reforms, the state must take into account gender perspectives, integrating and applying them at all necessary levels.

North Macedonia on this path has made considerable improvement in promoting gender equality through legislative reforms aiming at achieving equality, mainstreaming gender perspective into broader policy frameworks, and implementing action plans and strategies aimed at fostering the development of women. Despite legislative advancements, which aim to promote gender equality and safeguard women's rights, North Macedonia continues to grapple with deep-rooted patriarchal norms that hinder progress and sustain gender disparities, particularly within the labour market and political spheres.

Social norms play a crucial role in perpetuating gender roles, particularly within the labour market. Women often face obstacles in securing full-time employment and advancing their careers due to caregiving responsibilities and a lack of workplace flexibility. Additionally, disparities in property ownership hinder women's access to capital for entrepreneurship. Moreover, their underrepresentation in decision-making roles at both national and local levels limits their participation in public life. In the Republic of North Macedonia, women encounter significant challenges in meaningfully engaging in public life, particularly in top-level decision-making positions and in starting or leading companies on their own. Ensuring equal representation of women at all decision-making levels is paramount, along with promoting their participation across all levels to ensure the most informed decisions for society. Furthermore, women's involvement in public life is crucial not only for advancing gender equality but also for influencing the political agenda and the types of solutions proposed for societal issues.

Previous reports have provided insights based on official and secondary data collected through specific methodologies. However, this report aims to delve deeper into the first-hand experiences of women across various positions within companies and at different stages of their careers. It specifically examines the experiences of young women entering the labour market and compares them with those of women who own companies or hold higher managerial positions.

The research also focuses on assessing the level of support women receive in their careers from other women in higher positions, as well as their experiences with both female and male managers and colleagues. Furthermore, the report explores whether women in diverse professions feel adequately supported and identifies the challenges they encounter along their career paths.

General indicators of the Macedonian Labour Market

According to estimates from the State Statistical Office, in 2022, the Republic of North Macedonia's population of 1,829,854 is nearly evenly split between men and women. Women slightly outnumber men, comprising 50.4% of the population compared to 49.6% for men.¹⁰ Despite constitutional and legislative provisions ensuring equal opportunities for all citizens, the position of women in the labour market is still workers and it fails to reflect this balance. Women feel discriminated due to enduring gender stereotypes in both public and private sector.

Analyzing the working-age population (aged 15 to 64) in 2022 reveals a nearly balanced gender distribution. Women constitute 49.8% of this demographic, while men comprise 50.1%.¹¹ However, despite this equilibrium, a significant gender gap persists in labour force participation, with only 54.2% of women compared to 77.4% of men being economically active in 2022Q4.¹² This disparity extends to employment rates, with 47.6% of women compared to 65.8% of men being employed during the same period. Additionally, there remains a gender

¹⁰ MakStat database. Total estimated resident population of the Republic of North Macedonia. 2022.

¹¹ See previous footnote.

¹² MakStat database. Active population by gender and activity rates, quarterly. 2022.

pay gap, with estimates from 2014 and 2015 suggesting a disparity of between 17-20% in earnings between men and women.¹³

Based on the latest available data for 2022,¹⁴ an analysis of the statistical categories of the inactive population reveals that 62.7% of this group are women. A significant portion of inactive women, approximately 41%, are classified as housewives. This designation indicates that they are not actively seeking job opportunities or pursuing careers but instead engage in unpaid household work. Unfortunately, this means their potential as workers remains untapped, hindering both economic growth and their own empowerment. Extended periods of absence from the labour market diminish human capital quality, as individuals may lose acquired skills from formal education or previous employment experiences. Consequently, re-entering the job market becomes more challenging. These indicators highlight systemic employment barriers and the phenomenon of "discouraged workers," leading to worker passivity and reluctance to pursue or accept new job opportunities.

State of play in the Republic of North Macedonia

The country's Constitution prioritizes fundamental human rights and freedoms, guiding national legislation towards providing equal opportunities for women and men. Despite comprehensive laws promoting gender equality and combating violence against women, traditional norms persist. Additionally, inadequate enforcement of the laws amplifies gender disparities, resulting in a disadvantaged position for women in both economic and political spheres. The World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index, which evaluates gender disparities across economic, political, educational, and health domains, ranked North Macedonia 73rd out of 146 countries in 2023, reflecting a decline from the previous year's 69th position.¹⁵

Women's access to entrepreneurship opportunities is an issue, given the significant gender gap in property ownership, particularly in rural areas. Statistics reveal a significant gender disparity in property ownership, with

¹³ Petreski Marjan; Mojsoska Blazevski Nikica and Petreski Blagica. Gender wage gap when women are highly inactive: Evidence from repeated imputations with Macedonian data. 2014 and Petreski Marjan; Mojsoska Blazevski Nikica. The gender and motherhood wage gap in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia: an econometric analysis. 2015.

¹⁴ MakStat database. Inactive population by categories and age. 2022.

¹⁵ World Economic Forum. Global Gender Gap Report. 2023.

women owning only 27.3% of registered property, and less than 6% in rural areas.¹⁶ Limited property ownership hampers access to capital for women, hindering their ability to start businesses. Furthermore, women remain underrepresented in public life, despite some progress in the National Assembly representation. Out of 120 representatives, women constitute 42.5%,¹⁷ while in the top positions in the executive power, prior to the establishment of the technical Government in January 2024, the Government had only 5 female ministers and two deputy ministers.¹⁸ A similar pattern emerges at the local level. There is lack of female leadership, with only two female mayors out of 80 municipalities and the City of Skopje.¹⁹ The 2021 elections saw a stark gender disparity in mayoral candidates, with only 26 out of 301 being women, indicating a need for increased opportunities for women in political leadership roles. This disparity is compounded by the low level of interest or given chances to women to candidate for mayors in the 2021 elections. Out of 301 candidates for mayor only 26 were women.

Challenges faced by women in the labour market

Women entering the labour market say that parents typically encourage young girls to pursue education, providing support throughout the process without imposing their preferences on their choice of secondary or higher education. While they as parents may offer suggestions, they generally respect their daughters' decisions regarding their educational path. Parents without university degree tend to provide substantial encouragement for young women to complete college. This support is often pronounced from mothers, who advocate for their daughters to "study so you don't face the challenges I did." This sentiment hints at their own less-than-ideal work experiences, possibly involving a variety of precarious and low paid jobs. Parents support daughters in achieving as much success as possible to ease their path to employment.

Education institutions have the potential to play a crucial role in preparing women for their careers, yet often fall short in offering tailored career counselling.

¹⁶ Agency for Real Estate Cadastre of the Republic of North Macedonia. Table with number and percentage of registered rights by gender and cadastral department. 2019 and MLSP. Annual Report on the activities undertaken and the progress achieved for the establishment of equal opportunities for women and men in the Republic of Northern Macedonia for 2017. 2018.

¹⁷ Official website of the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. www.sobranie.mk. 2024.

¹⁸ Official website of the Government of the Republic of North Macedonia. www.vlada.mk. 2024.

¹⁹ VOAnews. Only 2.46 percent of mayors in Macedonia are women. www.mk.voanews.com. 2023.

However, through partnerships with companies, typically initiated by the companies, valuable opportunities for internships, vocational training, and job placement are provided. Many young women seize these opportunities by attending job fairs organized within educational centres, using them as platforms to acquire relevant experience and equip themselves with the skills needed to navigate the challenges of the labour market.

In various economic sectors, young women often commence their journey into the labour market through internships, gradually immersing themselves in their chosen career paths. Preferences vary among individuals, with some favoring large corporations while others thrive in smaller companies, and each adapts differently to the gender composition of their colleagues. Despite these differences, most young women can readily find employment opportunities and gain practical work experience. However, despite the expanded opportunities available to young people today, for some, entering the labour market can still appear daunting. This is particularly true due to the experience requirements often stipulated in job vacancies. While the IT sector holds promise for many, there exists an oversupply of labour and heightened competition for vacant positions.

On the other hand, the perspectives of more experienced women differ slightly, with many noting that young women today have access to a wider range of career-building opportunities. There has been a notable improvement in working conditions across various industries, including the IT sector, which has become increasingly attractive. A decade ago, women entering the labour market often faced challenges, such as difficulty in finding decent work (within their field of expertise and educational background), precarious or informal work, discrimination, insufficient appreciation, and low-paying jobs. Today, however, companies offer more competitive salaries and prioritize employee well-being, a stark departure from the past when lots of Macedonian companies lacked human resource departments.

Women often face significant sacrifices when balancing family aspirations with career ambitions. They are aware that when starting a family, compared to men, they might lose over a year of continuity in their careers. While the husband or partner uses that period for personal development and career advancement, they are on maternity leave or take care for the sick child. Even in the IT industry, their

male colleagues progress in their careers during the period when the woman is unable to work due to maternity leave. Despite efforts to strike a balance, women desiring motherhood often find themselves lagging behind their male counterparts in career progression.

Experiences with using maternity leave and returning to work can vary significantly depending on the workplace environment. In some companies where the job position doesn't involve substantial technological advancements or frequent changes, returning from maternity leave might feel seamless. Employers may not push pressure on her to take time off, and the transition back to work can be relatively smooth. However, in other cases, women may feel pressure to avoid falling behind and maintain productivity. Some opt to work from home or to come to the office for a couple of hours during the week (while still on maternity leave), even if the company's culture is supportive to mothers and providing equal opportunities. This decision stems from a desire to remain engaged professionally and keep pace with colleagues, despite the challenges of balancing work and family life.

Some women encounter discrimination or challenges when returning from maternity leave. Despite efforts to promote gender equality and protect women's rights to maternity leave, the law enforcement is obviously missing, since some women still face unequal treatment compared to men, highlighting the need for continued efforts to foster inclusive workplaces.

"I had a very hard time finding my first job. I searched for months and years. My first job was an unpleasant experience, and I didn't last long there. At my second job, I used maternity leave, and when I returned, I started hearing from the general manager that they wanted to hire a man in my position because as a mother with a young child, I would often be absent from work. For those reasons, I terminated the maternity leave."

Such unpleasant experiences are usually not found in new companies, according to women. Newer companies or corporations try to establish inclusive and

supportive environments for women. For example, the IT sector stands out for its supportive measures for women, including private healthcare benefits and flexibility policies. However, such support is not universal across all companies, particularly smaller domestic firms that may lack these resources or awareness among business owners and managers who do not care about women's wellbeing at work.

"I was not promoted when they found out I was pregnant.
They told me what's the point of promoting me."

Support from partners is crucial for young women, although they often fear that they will bear the primary responsibility for childcare and household responsibilities. The lack of adequate public childcare services further complicates matters, particularly for women re-entering the labour market after periods of unemployment. In many cases, access to kindergarten services requires both parents to be employed, presenting a significant challenge for women who have lost precarious jobs, such as fixed-term contracts, due to maternity leave. This situation often leads to difficulties in finding new employment opportunities. Young women are consequently forced to navigate the delicate balance between work and childcare responsibilities or as they say rely heavily on support from family members, adding additional strain to their professional and personal lives. Unlike men, who may not experience the same pressure, women find it significantly harder to manage these competing demands. While men may tend to provide assistance, the circumstances make it more challenging for women.

"I've always known that I want to be a mother and have children, but it's frustrating that society doesn't offer the necessary support, such as accessible day-care services and a reliable healthcare system. It's not just about balance with my work; there are significant gaps in ensuring proper childcare beyond the workplace."

Women often face pressure from various angles, including societal expectations regarding their ability to excel both in their careers and as mothers. For young women, the challenge lies in striking a balance between these roles while also seeking understanding and support from their partners. Sharing the household workload between spouses is essential for women to maintain equilibrium between their professional and personal lives. For them, it is crucial for partners to collaborate and support each other in navigating these challenges, fostering a more balanced and fulfilling life for both individuals.

Challenges and obstacles faced by women in leading positions

In our efforts to understand the personal struggles of women business owners and those in top management positions, we engaged in discussions with successful women. What became apparent is their perception of being in a less favorable position compared to men, primarily due to prevailing stereotypes. Whether they inherit a family business or enter into partnerships, women often find themselves having to exert much greater effort to establish their authority within the business, especially when working alongside predominantly male colleagues. They believe that dedication, education, and hard work are key to establishing authority. Regardless of whether they operate in male-dominated or female-dominated industries, authority is recognized as a quality inherent to a woman. Although women face more challenges in proving themselves in the business world, they are ultimately valued and never underestimated.

"Upon completing my studies, I joined a small company with ambitious visions and unwavering faith in its success. Despite the correctness of my three male partners, there seemed to be a reservation regarding my status as an equal partner."

Women emphasize the significance of support from partner and the existing social stigma in navigating the dual challenges of professional and personal fulfillment. Women often feel the pressure to prove themselves in both spheres, fearing society judgment if they fail as a businesswomen or as wife. Therefore,

family support is crucial from the inception of a woman's business venture until it evolves into a success story.

In their leadership roles, they embrace new methodologies and naturally become adept mentors. They prioritize fostering critical thinking, open communication, and transparency. Women set high standards for others while providing encouragement and support to newcomers in their respective fields.

"In my company, I am the one who takes the initiative to engage more women. In the metal industry, predominantly, men hold the positions of power. We had a visit from a company from America, and the owner told me that for the first time in his career, he was sitting in a meeting with a female business owner. It is very rare for men from the metal industry to have meetings with women. Usually, women are in lower positions, but not in top management."

Women to Women support

Women in managerial positions prioritize qualifications, education, work experience, and willingness of the person in the hiring process, regardless of gender. They champion anyone deserving and eager to advance, emphasizing the importance of learning and growth. In some economic sectors, like the IT industry, companies are actively fostering gender equality, including transparent salary structures and promotion of workers to combat financial gender disparities. Female leaders believe that women's financial independence is vital for societal equality.

"Women should have equal opportunities and equal rights in the labour market. Having equal opportunities and equal rights should not mean priority in employment."

In the IT sector, companies led by women tailor support to address women's specific needs, striving to reduce discrimination and facilitate work-life balance. The IT industry's attraction for women lies in its potential for financial independence and career growth.

"Through our strategy and internal plan for the promotion of qualified women, we currently have five women and two men in top management positions. We prioritize and support individuals who demonstrate dedication, a desire for further training, and a commitment to advancing their careers, regardless of gender."

Women receive support from fellow women leaders, who prioritize enhancing women's capacities and competencies in the labour market. Companies led by women foster open communication and provide external support to meet employee needs. Initiatives such as flexible working hours, career development plans, and support during maternity leave underscore their commitment to gender equality. To institutionalize gender equality efforts, some companies appoint Gender Equality Officers responsible for implementing gender equality plans and addressing workplace issues like violence and harassment. Mentorship programs further encourage young girls to pursue careers in IT, promoting economic independence and gender parity.

"I actively support my colleagues through various initiatives that they themselves initiate, which our company wholeheartedly backs. These include flexible working hours and arrangements, personalized development and promotion plans, structured return-to-work programs after maternity/paternity leave or sick leave, and assistance in achieving a healthy balance between work and family commitments, as well as maintaining overall health."

Empowering women to embrace their capabilities and assert themselves is undeniably a challenging journey. As women in managerial positions say, with the necessary knowledge and skills, they can establish their presence and showcase their ability to thrive in their pursuits. **Creating an environment that promotes women's education and offers suitable role models is essential.** Mentorship and support from accomplished women can guide aspiring individuals toward self-discovery and empowerment, laying the groundwork for their success.

The fact that women are less represented in the industry stems from the transition period in the 1990s when the industry was not competitive in the market and there were no suitable companies offering decent work and good working conditions. Many of those companies were closed in the process of privatisation, but today, things are quite different. Factories are becoming competitive again, and perhaps for these reasons, many more women are encouraged to become engineers. However, the initiative and support of the management in an enterprise are also important. In a company where only the owner was a woman and the manager, now 20% of the employees are women, and she is dedicated to increasing the number of women in the production sector where only two female engineers are currently engaged. She believes that it is important to engage women, especially in conditions of labour shortages, and it is necessary to utilize this potential, considering that the industry is currently ready to absorb more workers. The fact that situations in the metal industry are changing is also evident from the fact that in the largest steel company and a large company in the metal industry, two directors are women, which, on the other hand, is not the case in many developed countries where men hold the highest positions.

Support in the workplace, whether from male or female colleagues, or male or female manager is often influenced by cultural norms within the company. While many women in the research reported receiving equal support regardless of gender, there were notable exceptions. For example, one young woman shared her internship experience as a psychologist, where she received significant mentorship from three out of five female mentors, while the others hindered her progress and even viewed her as competition. Another woman recounted potential discrimination from her male director, who favoured hiring a male worker over her due to her childcare responsibilities. The research aimed to understand how women support each other in achieving gender equality within companies. There's a perception that younger generations, both men and women, are more inclined to offer support in the workplace. However, it's important to

note that having a female supervisor doesn't always guarantee a positive experience for women. The effectiveness of support from a supervisor, regardless of gender, depends on various factors such as leadership style, communication skills, and individual preferences.

Young could women benefit greatly from support from role models and mentors who can guide them through their career growth and development. Employers must also recognize and accommodate the diverse needs of both men and women, fostering environment at work to give as young women said flexible working conditions. Additionally, it's vital for them to work in a company that cultivates a workplace culture where individuals, regardless of gender, do not feel isolated or undervalued, but rather appreciated. They tend to work in a company where the manager or owner of the company regardless if it is a men or a woman provides opportunity for personal growth and has ideas for HR policies that lead to satisfied workers.

Conclusions and recommendations

Women entering the labour market today have more opportunities, with increased access to internships and vocational training programs. However, they often face challenges due to the large pool of qualified candidates in the labour market, including workers with relevant knowledge and skills acquired through education abroad. This stiff competition is challenging for young women, especially as many positions require extensive experience they may lack.

Balancing between family and career often requires women to make profound sacrifices and navigate systemic challenges. Maternity leave underscores persistent inequalities, as women often stay at home to care for their child while men use this time to advance in their careers. While some workplaces support a smooth transition back to work post-maternity leave, others inadvertently place pressure on women to maintain productivity at the expense of their well-being. Instances of discrimination upon returning to work further emphasize the ongoing need for robust enforcement of gender equality laws and efforts to foster truly inclusive workplaces.

Women in managerial positions prioritize qualifications, merit, and commitment to advancement irrespective of gender, advocating for equal opportunities in the labour market. Particularly in sectors like IT, companies led by women actively promote gender equality through transparent salary structures and support measures aimed at fostering work-life balance. By fostering open communication, providing support during life transitions like maternity leave, and instituting mentorship programs to encourage girls' entry into the field, these companies demonstrate a commitment to institutionalizing gender equality efforts and nurturing the next generation of female leaders in the IT industry.

Empowering women to embrace their capabilities and assert themselves is indeed a challenging journey, but women in managerial positions attest that with the right skills and knowledge, they can thrive. Establishing environments that promote education and provide positive role models is crucial in this endeavour. Mentorship from accomplished women plays a pivotal role in guiding individuals toward self-discovery and empowerment, ultimately paving the way for their success. Industry leaders emphasize the importance of engaging and motivating women, particularly in conditions of labour shortage, to harness their potential for economic growth. Women can make significant contributions to

industries, and it's essential to provide them with opportunities to excel and thrive.

- ◆ **Invest in Education and Training:** Increase investment in education and training programs that empower women with the skills and qualifications needed to compete in the labour market. Providing access to quality education, vocational training, and lifelong learning opportunities can enhance women's employability and career prospects.
- ◆ **Expand Access to Childcare:** Develop and expand affordable childcare services to support working parents, particularly women, in balancing work and family responsibilities. Accessible and high-quality childcare facilities can enable more women to participate in the labour market and pursue career advancement opportunities.
- ◆ **Foster Female Entrepreneurship:** Implement initiatives to foster female entrepreneurship and support women-owned businesses. This includes providing access to financing, business development support, and networking opportunities to help women overcome barriers to starting and growing their own enterprises.
- ◆ **Implement Affirmative Measures:** Introduce and enforce gender quotas at local level or affirmative action measures in political representation at both national and local levels.
- ◆ **Promote Work-Life Balance:** Encourage employers to adopt policies and practices that promote work-life balance, including flexible working arrangements, parental leave, and support for caregiving responsibilities. Creating a supportive work environment can enhance employee morale, productivity, and retention.
- ◆ **Combat Gender Stereotypes:** Launch awareness campaigns and educational initiatives to challenge gender stereotypes and promote cultural change. By challenging traditional notions of gender roles and expectations, society can create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all individuals.
- ◆ **Support Mentorship Programmes:** to mentor and empower one another is one way that women can support each other. In the country there are many successful women in the business and politics that with carefully tailored mentoring programs can provide valuable direction for young women. By

exchanging experiences, knowledge, and connections, female mentors can help their mentees gain self-assurance, improve their abilities, and seize opportunities for growth.

- ♦ **Strengthen Enforcement Mechanisms:** Strengthen enforcement mechanisms to combat gender-based discrimination and harassment in the workplace. This includes enhancing legal protections, improving reporting mechanisms, and providing support services for victims of discrimination or harassment.

EMPOWERED WOMEN
EMPOWER WOMEN

Montenegro

Introduction

Every other citizen believes that women and men are different to the extent that it makes it impossible to fully achieve gender equality. Also, half of the citizens believe that the employer has the legal right to request a certificate that the job candidate is not pregnant. Three-quarters of the employees in state institutions would support the introduction of quotas for women in high-ranking management positions in the Government.

These are the findings from the research on the attitudes and perceptions of citizens and public administration employees on gender equality, which was conducted on a representative sample and presented at the conference of the United Nations Development Office (UNDP) in Montenegro "Equality at the Heart of Government".

When it comes to the attitudes of citizens, the research shows that about 60 percent believe that for the benefit of children, it is more desirable for a man to work, and for a woman to fully commit herself to the family.

Although gender inequality and discrimination against women are clearly perceived in the public administration, two-thirds of employees believe that the issue of gender equality is excessively imposed today as an unnatural and unachievable goal that does not significantly improve the position of women in Montenegro. Despite the fact that women make up only one-quarter of the total management staff in public administration, two out of three men believe that women are adequately represented in governing bodies, while women hold a different opinion. Namely, one in two women believes that there should be significantly more of them. As many as 60 percent of public administration employees are not sure whether a gender analysis has been conducted in their institution in the last year.

"It is indeed one of the strategic imperatives of our team. We believe that diversity and equality in inclusion are essential for a successful organization and that it is crucial for our team to reflect the diversity of the public we serve. Our goal is to increase access, remove barriers, develop skills, and empower people who might in some way be marginalized and excluded from creating and implementing government policies, programs, and services. We are committed to promoting an inclusive environment in which all individuals will feel free to express themselves fully, where their uniqueness will be valued and where they will feel

part of the team," - Tamara Srzentić, Minister of Public Administration, Digital Society and Media

Daniela Gašparikova, UNDP Resident Representative in Montenegro, reminded everyone of the Conference on Women in Beijing, which was adopted 26 years ago, and which highlights that women's participation in all spheres of society represents the basis for achieving equality and development.

"Many of us would think that a quarter of a century is enough to achieve the goals set in Beijing. The reality, however, is different. Women globally, and thus in Montenegro, are still underrepresented in decision-making positions and leadership positions. The road to gender equality is long and challenging one and requires a comprehensive approach, responsibility and joint action of all: private and public sector institutions and individuals," said Gašparikova, adding that UNDP intends to continue its long-term work with partners to empower women in all spheres of life and influence better design and implementation of gender-equality policies.

Herman Spitz, head of the cooperation section of the EU Delegation to Montenegro, believes that Montenegro needs to strengthen its efforts to integrate a gender perspective into its policies and reforms, including in the public administration sector.

"Elimination of gender inequality in public administration is important for the ongoing public administration reform in Montenegro, which is crucial for the of Montenegro's EU integration process. The EU will continue to support and monitor gender-responsive reforms in Montenegro," said Spitz.²⁰

Women's position in private and public sector

Women in Montenegro make half of population (50.61 per cent) but also almost a half of unemployed persons.²¹ Activity rates are highest for 25-49 age groups amounting to 86 per cent for men and 73.6 per cent for women (Monstat, 2016).

Montenegro has not yet seen a fully accomplished economic contribution of women, particularly not to the extent corresponding to their real potential. Less

²⁰ Half of the citizens believe that full gender equality is impossible to achieve June 16, 2021 UNDP

²¹ Monstat, Women and Men in Montenegro, 2016

than 10 per cent of companies are owned by women, women earn around 14 per cent less than men doing jobs of equal value, management positions in both public and private sector are held by substantially less women. Compared to men, and despite evident progress and positive shifts that have taken place over the last years, women still represent a minority in social, economic and political life. This is especially striking having in mind the changes that have happened in the educational structure of population –to the benefit of women.

Women in public sector

When it comes to legislative branch of government, the Parliament of Montenegro has 81 members of whom 19 are women (or 23.45 per cent) which represents an increase compared to the previous convocation. A President and two Vice-Presidents of the Parliament are men. On the other hand, of 15 Parliament permanent working bodies, only three are headed by women: a Legislative Board, a Gender Equality Board and an Anti-Corruption Board. Concerning the executive branch, only 4 women are in the top Government positions: three of them manage ministries of Public Administration, Science and Economy and one is the minister without portfolio. Judicial branch data say that there are 58.04 per cent of women judges in Montenegro and 60 per cent of female prosecutors in the Prosecutor's office.

Of 23 local governments in Montenegro only two are headed by women – Kolašin and Tivat. In cooperation with the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights, councils for gender equality were founded in 11 municipalities, gender equality coordinators (female and male) were nominated in 20 municipalities, 5 municipalities opened gender equality offices, 10 municipalities adopted local action plans for gender equality while gender equality decisions were adopted by 13 municipalities. It is also worth mentioning that 6 local governments have special budgetary sources reserved for activities in the area of gender equality.

Women make a majority of employed in education (75.3 per cent). However, they are the absolute minority in decision making positions in education institutions with the exception of pre-school education (Monstat, 2016).

Women in business sector

Merely 12.4 women were self-employed in 2015, which is more than twice less compared to men. Gender pay gap between men and women in Montenegro is 13.9 per cent which means that women earn 86.1 per cent of the average male wage for the work of equal value.

Women own only 4 per cent of houses, 8 per cent of land and 14 per cent of vacation houses (weekend cottages) in Montenegro which tells about their dependent position and limitations concerning the possibilities to start their own businesses.

Since 2015, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) has been collecting data for Montenegro, for both public and private sector, i.e. for 50 top ranked national constituents according to bluechip index of national stock market of each of the countries. EIGE data reveal that in 2015 head of management board positions in companies in our country were “reserved” exclusively for men (100 per cent) in contrast to 2017 when happened to be certain changes in the sense that 90 per cent of positions of board chairs in companies were held by men opposed to 10 per cent being held by women, which is 3 per cent more compared to EU28 average. Although still insufficient, positive shifts are evident when we talk about female members of management boards in companies – women participation in these bodies in 2015 was 18.3 per cent while in 2017 women participated with 23.3 percent in regard to a total number of boards’ members.

In Montenegrin companies, women are often represented in management positions in administration, human resources, communications and PR as well as CSR sectors, which is a practice confirmed by MEF (Montenegrin Employers Federation) survey findings. However, according to ILO, such grouping of women into certain management sectors creates so called “glass walls” that prevents women to move down the central hierarchy paths usually leading them neither to top management positions nor to the CEO role.

Conclusions and recommendations

According to available statistics, women in Montenegro earn 13.9 per cent less than their male colleagues (for the same work), they own just 9.6 per cent of businesses and only 4 per cent of houses, 8 per cent of land and 14 per cent of weekend houses in the country, as mentioned earlier in the report. Women are less represented in legislative and executive power and only in judiciary they outnumber their male colleagues.

Unlike men, women are the absolute minority in the positions of presidents of local governments as well as in decision making positions in education – except for pre-school education.

The fact that gender equality in the labor market has still not been achieved is proven by figures telling that women mostly do jobs that carry less responsibility; they are paid less and advance more slowly in the hierarchy.

Still, from the perspective of the structure of educated population, women with higher education degree in Montenegro are the majority compared to men – among students of both sexes that acquired a bachelor degree there are 62.2 per cent of women whilst 63.3 per cent of female students acquired master degree (2015). Nevertheless, women still face a number of barriers in their professional career, especially in terms of their advancement and access to management positions in companies and their decision making bodies. In simple words – better education have not ensured better paid jobs for women. The latter is confirmed by EIGE figures on women positioning in the largest Montenegrin companies at the stock exchange market which reveal that there are 23.3 per cent of women in the boards whilst only 10 per cent of women are chairs of the boards (June 2017).

This mismatch between the number of women with higher education degree and their insufficient presence at management and decision making positions points to the fact that a significant number of companies in Montenegro deliberately gives up of knowledge, skills and potential of specially qualified staff and thereby of good business results and numerous other benefits that stem from engaging such staff. It should be highlighted thereby that the negative effects of rejection of staff with higher education degree from corporate ladder, are particularly felt by the state (lower GDP) but also by the overall Montenegrin society (lower productivity and living standard).

That women in Montenegro have still not got the opportunity to express their economic potential in appropriate way and give their full economic contribution we can see from the survey findings. Some of them are:

- ◆ Both horizontal (so called grouping of women into typically “female”, lower paid occupations) and vertical segregation (limited professional advancement and few women in so called “positions of power”) are noticed in the labor market in Montenegro.
- ◆ Companies in Montenegro are characterized by men supremacy over women at all management and decision making levels – except for middle one (where women prevail with 50.1 per cent). The analysis reveals that the share of women in companies’ top management positions is only 36.6 per cent; that the CEO role is held by 26.4 per cent of women while merely 6.1 per cent of women perform duties of board chairs.
- ◆ Women prevail in positions of managers for communication and PR (82.1 per cent) as well as in positions of human resources managers (75.6 per cent). One should have in mind that these figures, among other things, point to gender segregation among management occupations, i.e. to the phenomenon of “glass walls” in Montenegrin companies.
- ◆ Very few companies in the country monitor and report on the ratio of women to men at different levels in the hierarchy (18.3 per cent). Namely, although the majority of interviewed companies reportedly have the Equal Opportunity Policy (75 per cent), less than a half of large companies and only one in ten small enterprises monitor and report on the above.
- ◆ During exit interviews with employees who leave the company, gender equality issues are usually not brought up (68.4 per cent).
- ◆ The least implemented initiative aimed at promotion of equality of men and women taken up by Montenegrin companies is the access to executive training for women (46.7 per cent).
- ◆ According to respondents, the three most significant barriers to women leadership in management in Montenegro are: (1) women have more family responsibilities than men, (2) women with insufficient general and line management working experience and (3) roles assigned by society to men and women.

- ♦ The three most significant measures to promote position of women in business and management recognized by respondents are: (1) assigning visible and challenging tasks to women managers, (2) executive training for women and (3) exposing women to all company operations and functions.

Establishing of structured and transparent system of human resources management, based on equality and non-discrimination principles, can help Montenegrin companies to respond to everyday business challenges and the major of them all – a fight to attract talents. The ability to attract and retain the best workers – both women and men, is the key to productivity, innovations and business success of a company. To this end and in order to plan future activities and launch initiatives targeted to support economic empowerment, leadership and professional development of women, companies in Montenegro along with other organizations (in public and civil society sector as well as in media) are advised to:

- ♦ provide support to development of organizational culture that ensures diversity and equal opportunities for leadership of both women and men;
- ♦ introduce regular practice of analyzing the situation and changes originating from economic empowerment of women at workplace;
- ♦ publicly promote potential, role and importance of women managers as well as the importance of having the greater share of women in different structures and levels of management. It includes public promotion of successful women managers and business results they accomplish;
- ♦ give active contribution and help women managers and leaders to develop their careers in a way which, among other things, include the following support models: encourage and stimulate women to invest in their career development, enable women to fully access skills upgrading and professional development programs (especially those in middle management positions), involve women in mentorship programs, create family-friendly policies, promote the importance of networking and encourage women managers to active participation and membership in women business networks and associations, etc.

Changing of mindsets and traditional attitudes referring to gender equality and positive shifts such as closing the gender gap in the labor market are the processes that take time, full commitment and engagement of all segments of society. On

the road to achieving the above which certainly is ahead of Montenegro, the attention should be given to encouragement of economic empowerment, leadership and professional development of women which will take place not only at management level in companies but also in organizations existing in other spheres of public, political and social life. A special contribution to the above can be given by media which have an important role in acting proactively, focusing on generating awareness about the importance of gender equality and especially on the activities of promoting successful business women and everyday results they achieve.²²

²² Women in Management in Montenegro, Podgorica, December 2017

EMPOWERED WOMEN
EMPOWER WOMEN

Serbia

Introduction

The level of women's emancipation is an important indicator of a democracy, which is why integrating gender aspects into all major political trends is crucial to Serbia's democratic transition.

The Republic of Serbia has advanced in promoting gender equality through legislative reforms, the integration of gender perspectives into broader policies, and the implementation of targeted initiatives aimed at fostering women's development. Nevertheless, despite these efforts, gender discrimination persists in various spheres in Serbia.

Equal representation of women at all decision-making levels is essential, as is the promotion of their participation at all levels to make the best decisions for society. In addition to their efforts to advance gender equality, women's involvement in public life is important because it affects the political issues that are debated and brought up for discussion, as well as the kinds of solutions that are put forth.

The purpose of this report is to examine the various experiences of women who are just starting their careers and the support they get from other women, as well as the experiences of those who have advanced to higher managerial positions and how they assist their female co-workers and colleagues. In addition, it looks into whether women in a variety of professions—including business, law enforcement, politics, administration, and civil society—find themselves adequately supported or burdened with high expectations without the support they need.

General overview on women in the labor market

The population in the Republic of Serbia in 2022 is estimated at 6,664,449 (estimates are based on the results of the population census). Observed by gender, 51.4% are women (3,423,627), and 48.6% are men (3,240,822). Although women and men in Serbia have the same rights, the position of women is still worse, women are still discriminated against based on sex and gender, and they are in a significantly worse position than men in the public and private sphere, they are exposed to gender stereotypes and violence.

According to the World Economic Forum's annual measurement of the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)²³ from 2022: Serbia ranks 23rd out of total 146 analyzed countries. This index is calculated as a sum of results from the following sub-indices: economic participation and opportunities, level of education, health and survival, and political empowerment.

Research of the National Employment Agency from the 2023²⁴, verifies that out of total unemployed population 404.977, we have officially 227.396 registered unemployed women, compared to 177.581 registered unemployed man.

To help address the issue of female labor force participation, several laws and regulations have been passed. Nonetheless, various laws and rules are unconnected to one another and even contradict one another. Gender is still not acknowledged as a crucial factor in any laws or strategies designed to support and promote women's participation in the labor force. The normative framework is intricate, and certain laws that are crucial for elevating women's status are not in line with one another. However, gender equality laws ensure that men and women have equal standing in the workforce.

When it comes to women holding positions of decision-making authority, the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality keeps track of these developments through its annual report.

Challenges and obstacles faced by women in the labor market – results of the quantitative research

Most of the data in Serbia showed in the previous reports that there is no sufficient support for women entering the labor market or re-entering the labor market. There are several obstacles they face when they are in the labor market such as discrimination, education, gender blind policies, mismatch between education and labor market demands, and balance of private and professional life. In addition, despite all of these barriers, we lack information about how

²³ World Economic Forum (WEF), 2022, *Global Gender Gap Index*, 10

https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2022.pdf, Accessed on 13/07/2022, 11.11

²⁴ Monthly statistical bulletin. *Unemployment and employment in the Republic of Serbia*. February 2024. Page 10.

<https://nsz.gov.rs/filemanager/Files/Dokumenta/Statisti%C4%8Dki%20bilteni/2024/Bilten%20NSZ%20FEBRUAR%202024.pdf> Accessed on 09/04/2024

women in leadership, management, and other higher positions within organizations, institutions, etc., have affected women's status in the labor market.

The research included data collected through an online questionnaire, the organization of 2 focus group discussions, as well as information obtained through in-depth interviews with 5 women in specific positions of power. A total of 300 respondents participated in the research.

The online questionnaire was designed in a way to collect relevant information on the support the women gain in their professional career.

Focus groups were organized involving two groups of women: one group consisted of employees from various sectors, ages, and statuses, as well as from different cities and regions; the other group consisted of women in positions of employer. The primary goal was to gather information about the support they received early in their careers, as well as whether or not it changed as an employer.

In-depth interviews were conducted with various women stakeholders who are in decision-making positions in different sectors (politics, academia, CSOs, business, etc.) to gather valuable and important information and to test some of the assumptions and findings based on the data analyses from the online questionnaire and focus groups.

Results of the online questionnaire

The online questionnaire which was conducted with 276 respondents aimed to explore various aspects related to formal mentoring programs, equal opportunities for advancement, support from women in higher positions, and efforts made by female leaders to facilitate the professional growth of other women.

In response to whether they have access to formal mentoring programs at their workplace, 67.6% of the 256 respondents said no, while 32.4% said yes.

Among all respondents, 37.5% indicated that there are equal opportunities for men and women in terms of advancement at their workplace, while 42.6% disagreed, and 19.9% were unsure.

Regarding the level of support newcomers receive from women in higher positions in their sector, 28.9% found it somewhat supportive, 24.6% were neutral, 22.7% found it somewhat unsupportive, 16% found it very supportive, and 7.8% found it not unsupportive at all.

When asked if women in higher positions make sufficient efforts to facilitate the employment of other women at lower levels, the results were as follows: 41.8% were neutral, 32.4% disagreed with this statement, 14.5% agreed, 7.4% strongly disagreed, and 3.9% strongly agreed.

Respondents were asked to what extent women in higher management positions ensure that new female employees have easier access to development and advancement opportunities. The results were: 30.5% believe it's to a small extent, 29.3% believe it's to some extent, 27.3% were neutral, 9% said not at all, while only 3.9% believe it's to a great extent.

While progress has been made in some aspects, like formal mentoring programs, significant challenges remain, such as disparities in advancement opportunities and varying support from women in leadership roles, underscoring the necessity for targeted interventions to cultivate an inclusive work environment, necessitating prioritization of initiatives promoting gender equality, diversity, and inclusion at all levels.

Results of the focus group discussions

Two focus groups were organized and divided into three sections for women who are employers and employees. The first section concentrated on the support they give and/or receive from other women when entering the labor market. The second section concentrated on the specific support they offer to their female co-workers, including how they ask for help and support. The third section explored how women ensure support and mentorship to new women entering the labor market and if there are any specific ways of supporting and encouraging women.

In the focus groups 30 women, who came from different cities and different ages participated.

Support received from women when entering the labor market

The majority of people working in civil society or particular institutions were committed to issues outside the purview of power; women in particular were particularly committed, supportive, and capable of taking the initiative. However, women who work in academia and business—particularly small, family-run businesses—feel that they are largely ignored and receive little genuine support from other women.

Focus group participants from various fields of work identified several aspects of the assistance they were given when they initially became part of the labor force. Four of them acknowledged the very specific support they received in a variety of ways, including open spaces for discussion and exchange, direct advice, and involvement in various work-related activities, from the women in the highest positions.

The participants understood the distinctions between the various sectors when we discussed the support. Individuals involved in the cultural industry or civil society acknowledged early, hands-on assistance from women, providing specific instances of such support. But on the other hand, that support wasn't always recognized in the business sector or other sectors.

When questioning women employers, those coming from the older generation also lacked firsthand experience because most of their employers were men and there weren't always women in managerial roles. Even though there was no female leadership at first, four of them gained the backing of their employers and took advantage of the opportunity that was presented to them.

Participants noted differences in support when we compared larger cities to smaller towns. In small towns, there is a lack of any kind of support and solidarity.

“The boss and my first employer set a great example for how to grow people and be supportive. However, my female boss after that was completely the opposite.”

During their early careers, half of the participants had supportive and encouraging employers who encouraged them. They also had positive experiences and strong female allies. However, the other half also experienced terrible things, including being harassed by female employers. Therefore, there are differing opinions on whether or not women are generally seen as supportive. These opinions are largely based on personal experience as well as that of close friends, coworkers, and family members. While there are many examples of women who support other women in the face of adversity and whom they follow and acknowledge, there is also a group that holds the opposite view.

“When I returned to work after my maternity leave, my boss was unsupportive, the communication was bad and closed, and I felt like I was being mobbed multiple times.”

“I have a very good relationship with my boss, she is very supportive and she is leading me through the processes. Similar is with my colleagues.”

All of the participants in the focus groups agreed that women who lack self-worth or confidence are the primary source of their lack of support from other women. This lack of self-worth leads to frustration, which in turn causes them to act in a non-supportive manner toward other women. They all agree that when women are at comfortable in their own skin, they stop competing with others for the position and adopt a much more open and flexible approach since they are not under pressure to prove anything to anybody but themselves. On the other hand, when women are constantly eager to prove to others that they are valuable and capable of performing tasks just as well as men, their frustration builds and is typically directed at those who are in a lower position.

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“Self-assurance is in the root of the willingness to mentor someone else and are the source of all the support.”

“If, as a woman, you aspire to be like the man in the same position, you typically take your competitive nature to the workplace and alienate every employee, particularly those you perceive as rivals.”

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The general conclusion was that women are generally not supportive of other women because they simply don't always feel confident in the roles they have taken on and frequently feel as though they don't belong.

How they ask for or offer support from women in the labor market

All participants stated that they are used to asking for support from those who are in higher managerial positions, but usually, that is not the situation among the other women. The fear of asking stupid questions has again been raised because there is a non-supportive surrounding in the different institutions, organizations, companies, etc. The atmosphere in the business sector especially is to do your job and not ask more than you need to ask. In academia, also a lot of space is dedicated to the hierarchy and whom you can ask questions and how, and in general surroundings are not supportive of raising important questions. But also, it's not a general conclusion depending from person to person, and from experience to experience.

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“As I grow, I'm more willing to seek out alternative forms of assistance rather than just asking for direct assistance. Experience also helped me identify the people I can ask for anything from. That is a commendable sign of achievement.”

“I constantly request more help and opportunities for growth, but my employers are insensitive to this kind of request, which demotivates me greatly.”

“Despite being a feminist and fighting for women's rights for more than 20 years, I still find myself doing things alone and adhering to transgenerational stereotypes that say I must do things on my own.”

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When offering support to their female colleagues, all of the participants said that, based on their experiences from the start of their careers, they typically recognized the needs of their co-workers and encouraged them to approach them for assistance or advice when we asked about the support they provide. Additionally, they are trying to encourage, motivate, and support their co-workers in every situation by providing them with ongoing support.

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“I always try to be there for my team because they count on me for support having in mind the specificity of our job. Women are primarily concerned with maintaining their sense of self-worth and confidence. Despite this, I assisted them all even though they didn't ask for it. More male coworkers seek advice which was not the case before.”

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Everyone who took part additionally highlighted how women in senior managerial positions care more about each team member and go above and beyond to provide various forms of support and protection. Women also tend to

be aware that men and women have different needs, and they try to find ways to support men in particular and to encourage each worker's ongoing personal development.

The entire group agreed that every employee has different goals and doesn't require the same kind of support. Employers need to understand that employees have a variety of needs, so support must be tailored to each person specifically.

“All support needs to be what a woman at the beginning of her career needs and not what we as employers think they need”

It has been noticed that women who ask for assistance typically have unpleasant experiences after which they stop asking for assistance because they believe it will harm their ability to advance in their careers and find new employment.

“In the previous company, when some of my coworkers asked for assistance, they were not given it, and their employer's treatment of them was changed, which was taken as a direct warning to not ask for help because doing so is bad. Then, they put up the walls.”

How women help other women to have an easier time chasing their careers

It was stated and almost all participants agreed that cooperation with women in more cases is easier, clearer, and faster and that all things are done smoothly. Mutual understanding and support are also very present, and women recognize the importance of helping those women who are at the beginning of their careers. Every participant expressed their willingness to assist new coworkers, their ongoing efforts to form new teams, and their willingness to mentor individuals who are entering their workplace. They can try to support others who are

entering the job market for the first time by drawing on their varied experiences—both positive and negative. Those women who already have and received that kind of support at the beginning of their career, and feel all the benefits or had female mentors and role models used all the lessons learned and they are supportive employers.

“You will support your employees after you have a clear understanding of what women's support meant to you personally once you were in the beginning. Listen, and consider their needs.”

They all concluded that each person requires a different kind of support and that the best outcomes come from taking an individualized approach. They also agreed that different types of support are not always necessary because sometimes people prefer to work independently. Therefore, without the person who will utilize it, no support of any kind can be created.

“My supervisor was very kind and open, but she didn't put any pressure on me to do things her way. I needed some time to figure out how I could handle my daily work and didn't know where I needed support. Thus, I've discovered the ideal balance between my work and the knowledge and abilities I require.”

However, the group acknowledged that there are numerous other instances of hostile environments in which women fail to assist other women. The group identified several examples, including the company's leadership that is setting the standard for traditional leadership techniques, profit before people, particularly when discussing foreign companies, and loyalty to those who can protect their jobs when discussing institutions and certain businesses.

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“It is important to learn how women can support other women. Often, this is not the case because women assume male leadership roles and then forget that they face the same challenges as their female coworkers who are either returning to or entering the workforce for the first time.”

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Participants also recognized the importance of education and how we are thought about our roles in our society. Still, there is a high influence of the traditional roles in society and prejudices about women leaders. Positive examples are needed to break up with our heritage and our roles as women in society, like a hero of being on ourselves.

Results of the in-depth interviews

To deepen the understanding of the position of women, and the degree of support in general women gave to women through the perspectives of various actors, 5 in-depth interviews were conducted with women who are recognized as leaders in politics, civil society, business, security sector, and academia.

Depending on where they are from, they make independent career decisions and receive significant family support. Despite all the challenges they face in their professional lives, they follow their lead and create something totally unique. They speak up for themselves, which enables them to subsequently follow their instincts when allowed to take the lead. While developing their leadership model, they were completely conscious of the knowledge, abilities, and types of labor market battles they were facing. Also, most of them had to work harder because they were performing in roles that have historically been filled by men.

Because they all apply the new methods of leadership, they are all naturally gifted mentors. They are fostering critical thinking, feedback, open communication, and transparency. Additionally, they promote individualism and uniqueness, encouraging people to make their shoes rather than fitting into others. They all know how to set high standards for others, but they also encourage and support newcomers to their areas so they may achieve their goals.

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“I wait for my employees to approach, but I follow them all. Instead of forcing them to step outside of their comfort zone, I encourage them to be independent and follow their gut feelings.”

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Although nearly all of them had negative experiences and received little encouragement from other women, their self-worth and confidence enabled them to get past all of the challenges and figure out a way to move past them without letting them tear them apart.

Conclusions

Adopted stereotypes and competition are barriers to equal participation of women in the labor market. Women have taken on cultural norms and stereotypes that set them against one another and promote rivalry rather than cooperation. Furthermore, women may experience pressure to fit in with the power dynamics that are present in male-dominated environments or industries. As a result, they may be reluctant to support other women out of concern for criticism or the possibility of endangering their success.

One of the reasons women perceive themselves as enemies rather than allies is the lack of role models and authentic representation. Women may find it difficult to identify mentors and role models who are relatable in their fields, which can cause them to feel alone and confused. When there aren't any prominent examples of accomplished women in leadership roles, it can be difficult for women to see themselves reaching similar success levels.

In environments where career advancement opportunities are limited or highly competitive, women with limited development opportunities perceive other women as rivals to their professional advancement. Usually, this results in a sense of inadequacy and a reluctance to support one another.

Different organizations, institutions, etc. can put the bases and foster an inclusive and equitable labor market where women can prosper together by tackling the fundamental causes and putting proactive strategies in place to support, collaborate, and stand by one another among women.

Recommendations

Women still confront particular difficulties in the lively labor market of today, such as pay inequality, career advancement opportunities that are limited, and discrimination based on gender. Even with the advancement of programs promoting gender equality, women still must act quickly to help one another succeed in and navigate careers. Women's advocacy, collaboration, and mentoring can be crucial in breaking down structural barriers and promoting an inclusive and equitable work environment.

Actively looking for opportunities to mentor and empower one another is one-way women can support one another. Women-specific mentoring programs can offer direction, encouragement, and insightful advice on overcoming obstacles in the workplace and succeeding in life. Through exchanging experiences, knowledge, and connections, female mentors can assist their mentees in gaining self-assurance, improving their abilities, and grasping prospects for progress. It's necessary to establish women-to-women mentoring programs that put women in the position of experienced mentors and offer networking and career-development opportunities.

Furthermore, it is imperative to promote a culture of solidarity and alliance among women in work environments. Women can support one another's accomplishments, give each other's voices more weight, and confront prejudices and stereotypes that inhibit advancement. Establishing forums for open communication, teamwork, and mutual support can foster a feeling of inclusion and empowerment in women, allowing them to succeed in the workplace and jointly achieve their goals. Through diversity training, educational initiatives, and awareness-building workshops, we need to empower women to address and eliminate accepted prejudices and stereotypes. It's crucial to inspire an environment that values cooperation and support amongst people and not to see another woman as rivals.

Women can also use their combined power to push for systemic change and advance gender equality in the labor market. Women can create more inclusive and supportive work environments that benefit all employees, regardless of gender, by advocating for policies and initiatives that address parental leave, pay equity, flexible work arrangements, and opportunities for career development. By encouraging women to identify and confront their prejudices by providing training and workshops on inclusive leadership practices and unconscious

prejudice awareness. Establish guidelines that support equity and fairness, such as open promotion standards and performance evaluations.

In addition to helping each other advance professionally, women's support in the labor market is essential for promoting gender equality and building a more diverse and equitable society.

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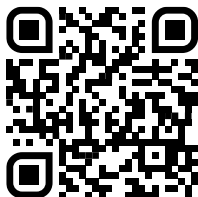
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