

# Mapping the Territory for the Gender Aspects of COVID-19 Response in Serbia

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*Creation of this rapid brief was initiated by the GBWN (Gender Budget Watchdog Network<sup>1</sup>) and its member organizations with the purpose to call attention to gender aspects of the COVID-19 epidemic and the need for gender responsive measures that will, to the greatest extent possible be adjusted to the needs and the challenges faced by women, but also vulnerable and marginalized groups.*

*The brief was prepared on the basis of the available data and the challenges indicated by various actors, notably women's organizations and international development agencies. It also included some of the main findings of an online consultations with civil society representatives held on 04/04/2020 and organized by the Women's Platform for Development of Serbia and UN WOMEN.*

*The situation is changing on a daily basis, as are the measures that are being implemented and announced. In this sense, this brief is “work in progress” and the document that will be continuously updated and amended with available data, and an in-depth gender analysis of the measures adopted is yet to come.*

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<sup>1</sup> Within the project of the same name, supported by the Austrian Development Agency and implemented by 7 organizations from the countries of the Western Balkans and Moldova, including the Gender Knowledge Hub in Serbia.



## Key findings and recommendations

1. In Serbia, women make up the majority of persons older than 65 years and 2/3 of single-person households headed by persons 65+;
2. Women make up the majority of single-parent families, particularly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, which are reinforced by isolation and epidemics.
3. Women do the majority of unpaid jobs in the household, including hygiene, child care, elderly and sick person care, food preparation, so in the situation of epidemic outbreak and measures taken, including isolation, the load of unpaid work for women is increased. Also, women make up the majority of employees in the health sector, globally, as well as in Serbia.
4. The poor and informally employed persons are at the highest risk of poverty and material deprivation due to limited work opportunities. In vulnerable positions are also so as self-employed, freelancers and entrepreneurs, particularly in micro and small companies.
5. Women in rural areas engaged in agricultural production are particularly at a disadvantage due to difficult product placement.
6. Women are also at higher risk of domestic violence due to isolation with restricted mobility. Data show that globally the number of cases of violence against women has



increased, while in Serbia, according to official data, it has not increased, which actually may imply that reporting of violence is made more difficult due to isolation.

7. Measures taken by the government, aimed at supporting the economy, with special focus on entrepreneur liquidity, small and micro companies, are particularly important for women, as well as the option of working from home with the full salary, especially important for parents of children under the age of 12.
8. Additional income (10% salary increase) for workers in the health sector is very important, so are the public calls for additional employment in social care facilities.
9. Still, there is a lack of measures for unemployed persons, users of social help and poor families with kids, especially Roma families.
10. Additional support is needed for elderly and single-headed households and persons with disabilities.

## Introduction

There are "humorous" statuses circulating on social media that Coronavirus must have been invented by women because men die more, there is no football, they cannot go to "inns" and "you have to be home with a wife", and "there is no worse punishment than that"<sup>2</sup>, that much has

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<https://mudrolije.org/volish-ovaj-korona-virus-mora-da-su-zene-izmislile-1-samo-muskarci-umiru-2-ukinut-fudbal-3-ne-smijes-ici-u-kafane-4-moras-biti-kuci-sa-zenom-kud-ces-gore-kazne/>





changed for men and nothing for women - cooking, ironing, cleaning the house, "as always". Although such jokes are misogynistic, and based on stereotypes, they illustrate the fact that the consequences of the pandemic and isolation measures, related to gender roles and the inequalities caused by them, are different in size, intensity, type and consequences for women and men. Not just in case of (this) pandemic, but states of emergencies in general (natural and other disasters). This was unfortunately documented in Serbia in 2014 after the floods, but the gender aspects of crises and emergencies are both globally recognized and included in the crisis response guidelines developed by states and governments at different stages of emergencies. In this case, measures can be classified as those related to 1. **immediate response** (for example, epidemiological measures of isolation, quarantine, movement restrictions, work from home, school closures, financial compensation and a moratorium on loans, etc.), 2. **post-crisis recovery** (primarily in economic terms, measures to be taken after the epidemic has ended, such as developing innovative economic models) and 3. **long-term resilience** (which would be an investment in society's resilience to some possible epidemics in the future, as **more investments in scientific research work, health system, digital literacy of different population groups, etc.**).

The COVID-19 virus (Corona virus) epidemic was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020. In Serbia, on March 15, 2020, the President of Serbia declared a state of emergency with 48 persons infected (those with Corona virus confirmed) 23 of which were in hospital and no deaths.

Before and after the declaration of the state of emergency, the Government of the Republic of Serbia had adopted a series of measures as a response to the epidemic. Some of these measures



are epidemiological, while others are economic and social, designed to reduce the negative effects of the epidemic and epidemiological measures<sup>3</sup>.

## Health risks, unpaid work and daily life

At the beginning of April (April 2, 2020), the number of persons infected by Corona virus in Serbia exceeded 1000, and the death toll was 31. Out of the total number of deaths, 8 were women and 23 were men. The average age of deceased women is greater than the average age of men. Data on the number of infected persons (confirmed cases) are not yet available by gender.

*Table 1. Data on the sex and age structure of the deceased, Serbia, 02/04/2020.*

	<i>women</i>	<i>men</i>	<i>total</i>
The Number of Deceased	8	23	31
Average Age	73.12	58,6	62.3

According to the World Health Organization and other available data people at highest risk of getting infected by COVID-19 are the elderly, who are also at the highest risk of fatal disease, as well as people with other chronic diseases (diabetes, hypertension, heart disease, malignancies, kidney diseases, etc.) For this reason, one of the very first measures taken by the Government of Serbia was to restrict the movement of persons aged over 65.

<sup>3</sup> All legal acts that have been adopted are available on the following page:  
<http://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/fp/covid19>





According to the latest census in Serbia, women make up 51.4% of the population, but women also make up the majority of the population older than 65 years. Two-thirds of single-person households are headed by women over the age of 65<sup>4</sup> indicating that older women, especially those who live alone, are the most affected by this measure and are at highest risk, but also the ones who need additional support measures.

Senior citizens need the support of family members. Bearing in mind the data concerning the use of time and research "Gender Barometer in Serbia"<sup>5</sup>, most of the care for older family members is provided by women. There is no information on the availability of procurement services for elderly people living alone.

Healthcare professionals, especially nurses and technicians, are also at high risk of exposure to viruses, and their workload and work patterns has changed dramatically due to the heavy workload of the health care system. Women globally make up 70% of healthcare workers<sup>6</sup>.

Access to reproductive health services can be difficult, especially for pregnant women, who have to go to regular check-ups, but also for other women, due to the overloaded health system, isolation measures, etc. These risks are particularly highlighted by a document on gender aspects of the pandemic prepared by UNFPA<sup>7</sup>, which emphasizes the importance of adequate protection for pregnant women and women in childbirth, as well as the need to provide other services in the field of reproductive health.

<sup>4</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Women and Men in Serbia, 2017. <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2017/Pdf/G20176008.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.eiz.hr/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/Rodni-barometar-u-Srbiji-web-istovil.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.who.int/news-room/commentaries/detail/female-health-workers-drive-global-health>

<sup>7</sup> [https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19\\_A\\_Gender\\_Lens\\_Guidance\\_Note.pdf](https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/COVID-19_A_Gender_Lens_Guidance_Note.pdf)





One of the measures taken at the outset of the epidemic in Serbia was the closing of schools and kindergartens. In addition, there are bans on for those aged over 65, ban on public gatherings, closure of certain facilities such as beauty and hairdressing salons, fitness centers, etc., movement restrictions from 5 pm and 3 pm, and on 2 April a movement ban was introduced from 1 pm on Saturdays to 5 am on Monday<sup>8</sup> on the weekends.

Data of Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia concerning the use of time have shown that women, regardless of level of education, anyhow spend 4.5 hours a day on unpaid jobs, mostly on childcare, food preparation and home hygiene, while men, on average, use two hours a day for unpaid work, while highly educated women spend more time in paid jobs<sup>9</sup>.

Regarding distance education and stay-at-home children, including young children, this measure certainly has increased the time needed to care for children during the day, as well as the already mentioned care for elderly family members, who live in the same household or independently.

Inner-city public transport was discontinued on March 21, as well as inter-city public transport.

Data on the number of holders of a driving license show that women are more or more dependent on public transport. The lack of public transportation is a particular problem for healthcare professionals and other people going to work, especially women from rural areas, but also, for example, oncology patients who have to travel to other places for treatment.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/30526003.html>

<sup>9</sup> Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, Women and Men in Serbia, 2017 <https://publikacije.stat.gov.rs/G2017/Pdf/G20176008.pdf>



Measures taken and announced:

- RTS, in cooperation with eGovernment, organized online classes and television classes for all grades of primary and secondary schools. This measure has been prepared and implemented in a very short timeframe and enables students to maintain a daily routine, make progress in knowledge, attend classes, so they can get grades and complete the ongoing school year.
- On March 1, the Innovation Fund of the Republic of Serbia<sup>10</sup> launched a call for project proposals intended to control the epidemic. The call was open lasted until March 24, 2020 due to the need for a quick response and projects which will be supported with the amount of 6 million dinars were selected. Identifying innovations, investing in innovations and innovative solutions is good practice that must be maintained even after a state of emergency and pandemic.

Recommendations:

- It is necessary to organize safe and accessible health care for pregnant women and women in childbirth;
- Instructions should be issued regarding the contacts of children and parents not living with children;

<sup>10</sup>

<https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/455052/podrska-inovativnim-projektima-preduzeća-za-suzbijanje-efekata-covid-19.php>



- Volunteer, procurement and other services should be organized for persons over 65 years, especially those living alone and persons with disabilities, while, of course, complying with all measures to protect health;
- It is necessary to organize alternative modes of public transport in order to make it accessible to the employed and to other persons in need;
- Measures and protocols for protection against violence, as well as adequate support for vulnerable population groups, need to be implemented in quarantines and health centers;
- Information on the number of infected persons should also be sorted by gender.

## Economy, social benefits and social services

The female unemployment rate is half that of the male unemployment rate. In Serbia, 44% of women are employed while 54.3% of women are unemployed. Fewer women than men are formally employed and women work more informally, which is also reflected in the high rates of inactivity of women. 79% of single-parent families are mothers with children.

Data on average incomes in Serbia show that the incomes of single-person households, single-parent households and households with two or more children are lower than the average, that is, they are at higher risk of poverty.<sup>11</sup>

The lack of childcare services makes carrying out of economic activities even more difficult for parents living alone with their children.

<sup>11</sup> Gender Equality Index for Serbia, 2018

[http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indeks\\_rodne\\_ravnopravnosti\\_u\\_Republici\\_Srbiji\\_2018\\_eng.pdf](http://socijalnoukljucivanje.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Indeks_rodne_ravnopravnosti_u_Republici_Srbiji_2018_eng.pdf)





Considering the ban on certain activities, as well as the inability to carry out certain activities due to isolation, the ban on public gatherings and the like, informally employed persons, self-employed, entrepreneurs, micro and small enterprises are at particular disadvantage and at risk of poverty because they are anyway dependent on a steady flow of money. In order to respond to these challenges, the Government of Serbia, as part of a package of measures to support the economy, envisaged the payment of three minimum wages to entrepreneurs, lump sums tax-payers, micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, for each employee in these enterprises, which is estimated by the Ministry of Finance to be around 900,000 people.

Through the Development Fund of the Republic of Serbia, subsidized loans at one percent interest will be available for micro, small businesses and entrepreneurs, including farms and cooperatives. These measures are intended to ensure the liquidity of economic operators.

In addition, a measure was introduced to defer payment of payroll taxes for at least three months, as well as corporate income tax for the second quarter of 2020, as well as a VAT exemption for those donation companies.

Taking into account the current situation, the National Bank of Serbia has put a moratorium on loans, and executions based on court decisions (under the Law on Enforcement and Security) have been suspended for the duration of the state of emergency.

The payment of 100 euros to all adult citizens upon termination of the state of emergency was announced in order to support the economy and boost consumption<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> A list of all measures to mitigate the effects of the epidemic on the economy is available here: <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/456168/za-ublazavanje-posledica-epidemije-na-privredu-51-milijarda-evra.php>



Due to epidemic, the Post of Serbia suspended payments of social benefits, pensions and child benefits on 20 March, 2020. The Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs has issued a statement stating that it was a mistake and that payments will be normalized, and payment of pensions to people over 65 will be organized at home address<sup>13</sup>.

Children from disadvantaged groups and poor families receive free meals at school, which are not available to them due to closure of schools, as is the case with children of kindergarten age. It would be necessary to increase the amount of child benefits for the poorest families with children, in order to neutralize this disadvantage as much as possible.

Measures taken:

- There has been a call for additional involvement of workers in social care institutions whose beneficiaries are members of vulnerable groups at increased health risk during the epidemic. The recruitment of 199 caregivers, 53 nurses, four medical technicians, three doctors and 16 security workers has been announced<sup>14</sup>. As part of this measure, which will improve the quality of services and increase employment in these institutions, it is necessary to ensure equal employment conditions for women and men in all workplaces.
- Salaries of health workers have been increased by 10% to respond to the increased workload and epidemic burden borne by healthcare professionals, which is a very good measure. On the other hand, health care workers who are infected and quarantined will

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.minrzs.gov.rs/sr/aktuelnosti/vesti/saopstenje-za-javnost-21>

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.srbija.gov.rs/vest/456317/angazovanje-dodatnih-radnika-u-ustanovama-socijalne-zastite.php>

get decreased salaries, which should not be the case. Instead, it is important to provide healthcare professionals with adequate protective equipment and protocols that would minimize the risk of exposure to the infection.

- A number of very good business support measures have been adopted by the Ministry of Finance and the National Bank of Serbia, which particularly respect and recognize the challenges facing entrepreneurs and micro and small businesses, including women.
- The Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs has announced a decision on full salary for employees working from home, which is especially important to provide for single parents and parents of children aged under.

#### Recommendations:

- The full salary should be provided for people who are on sick leave due to Corona virus infection (confirmed cases), including healthcare professionals who are ill or quarantined;
- It is necessary to encourage employers to provide single parents (persons living alone with children) opportunities to work from home, even if this involves a reallocation of work, but also to ensure that the decision to work from home for one parent of children under the age of 1 by supervising if employers abide by decision;
- The poorest households and households without permanent employment (either in the private or the public sector) need to be provided with a minimum wage for the duration of the epidemic in order to compensate for any eventual income from informal work.



## Violence against women

In January 2020, 1323 cases of violence against women in the family and family context were registered in Serbia. Out of these, 53% of the perpetrators are their husbands<sup>15</sup>. During 2018, police imposed 8065 measures to temporarily remove (evict) perpetrators of violence from a shared home. Immediate measures are difficult to enforce, especially if the perpetrators, for example, are over the age of 65 or in isolation.

Data on the number of reported cases of violence since the beginning of the epidemic are not available, but two femicides occurred during the month of March, that is, since the beginning of the epidemic and the state of emergency<sup>16</sup>.

Data from China, the United States, France<sup>17</sup>, indicate an increased number of cases of violence against women since the epidemic outbreak and the isolation measures that accompany it<sup>18</sup>. Women's organizations around the world, as well as in Serbia (Women's Network Against Violence, Autonomous Women's Center) point to the risk of increased violence against women in a family context, not only physical but also economic and physical.

Measures taken:

<sup>15</sup> <https://iskljucinasilje.rs/>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/dva-hica-iz-lovacke-puske-jedan-ispalio-u-devojku-drugi-u-sebe-ranjenu-je-na-podu-u/yq45ygt>, <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/hronika/uzas-u-nisu-ubio-suprugu-sakrio-telo-pa-se-obesio/8s8b4yq>

<sup>17</sup> In France, violence against women increased by 30%

<https://voxfeminae.net/vijesti/obiteljsko-nasilje-poraslo-za-30-od-uvodenja-karantene-u-francuskoj/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://ba.boell.org/bs/2020/03/24/nasilje-prema-zenama-u-vreme-epidemije>



- The Ministry of Internal Affairs stated that it will continue to react to cases of domestic violence, and that in each individual case an appropriate solution will be adopted.
- The Deputy Prime Minister of the Republic of Serbia and the President of the Coordination Body for Gender Equality emphasized that institutions will respond to all cases of domestic violence, as well as that local self-governments should continue to work with coordination and cooperation groups.
- Centers for social work in the modified mode of operation, but are available on mobile phones given by the Ministry of Labor, Employment, Veteran and Social Affairs.

#### Recommendations:

- Women's organizations which have been providing support to women in a situation of violence for years issued a statement outlining the danger of an increase in cases of violence against women and urging state institutions to continue to provide adequate support to women and children in a situation of violence and to continue providing services via SOS phone. It is necessary for the state to provide resources for the functioning of SOS phones and the smooth functioning of safe women's homes.
- It is necessary to inform women about the possibilities of reporting violence and the protection measures available during the state of emergency or the duration of the epidemic, including alternative forms of reporting - applications, SMS messages and the like.

