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PREFACE

Respected,

As Dean of the Faculty of Law -Kicevo and President of the Conference Organizing Committee, I have the honor and pleasure to greet you at the beginning of our annual international conference under the motto "TOWARDS A BETTER FUTURE: GENDER EQUALITY, CYBERSPACE, AND LAW.

Why did we choose this topic?

Our country is part of the international community that is increasingly dealing with issues that are of interest to all citizens. I believe we all agree that equality of rights is a matter that is absolute and on which opinion is not divided. Equality and opportunities to strengthen the position of women in international documents is at an enviable level.

Along with this issue, we also treat the rise of technological development, which contributes to the visibility of problems in terms of equal opportunities, and law as science and practice is the connecting link, but also for finding appropriate solutions to overcome perceived problems in terms of finding and sanctioning violators of individual rights in cyberspace and social networks.

I believe that at this conference, in our papers, we will offer thoughts, analysis and proposed solutions that, as scientists, are the tools we can offer to our society. I invite you to carefully follow our presenters and our participants in the panel discussions on the topics relevant to the conference. In this way, we will make our contribution to global partnership and show that science should get the primacy in the country.

The idea of peace, good governance and sustainable economic and social development should be the mainstay in every society that works for the benefit of its citizens.

I hope that we have a successful conference and that the conclusions that will emerge from the presentations and discussions at it will be a motive for further scientific engagement of the authors. I also think that the wider social community must realize the role of science and use the benefits of such gatherings where we discuss as researchers and theoreticians.

*Prof. Dr.sc. Svetlana Veljanovska
Dean of the Faculty of Law –Kicevo*

Kicevo, 2024

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THE IMPACT OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS CAUSED BY THE PANDEMIC ON GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE LABOR MARKET IN SERBIA ¹

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Abstract

There is an obvious tendency that employed females have lower quality jobs and work in less favorable conditions compared to their male colleagues. Researches indicate there are no signs the situation is going to change in near future having in mind that many social, economic, and legal obstacles to the strengthening of the female population remained. Their position was further worsened by the pandemic, which neutralized long-term efforts to improve the position of the female population as a vulnerable social category. The aim of this paper is to show how the pandemic in the past two years has further deepened gender inequalities and put the female workforce in an even more unfavorable position. In the paper, a descriptive and comparative method was used to analyze the position of the male and female populations in the labor market.

Keywords: *gender inequalities, female, male, labor market, pandemic, Serbia*

¹ This paper was written as part of the 2024 Research Program of the Institute of Social Sciences with the support of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

INTRODUCTION

Inequality refers to unequal opportunities for a quality life in all respects. Social inequalities arise from discrimination at the level of individuals, communities, or institutions, which have long been present in the theory and practice of sociology and social sciences in general (Crossman 2022). The most common topics in science are educational inequality, gender inequality, social stratification and poverty, inequalities and social security, inequality and debt policy, racial inequality, inequality in the use of healthcare services, inequality and life satisfaction, and consumption inequality.

Inequality is present in all societies, while societies in which inequalities are reduced are more developed, richer, and healthier. Also, the example of Japan shows that a determined effort to reduce social and economic inequalities led to a higher educational level of the population, a higher standard of living, economic development, and high healthcare quality, which was reflected in the life expectancy of the population (Maksimović 2021). Among many inequalities, gender inequality stands out, which implies the inequality between men and women and represents an important sociological and economic phenomenon.

The pandemic has significantly contributed to the increase in unemployment and job losses, income decline, and, consequently, poverty and inequality growth, which finds its foothold in less-educated and unqualified workforce and exclusion from the labor market. In the modern division of labor, the population with a lower educational level is paid less and often excluded from the process of retraining. According to estimates by the International Labor Organization, the labor market crisis caused a loss of working hours in the previous year that is equivalent to the loss of 100 million full-time jobs, which is estimated to be significantly reduced in the current year (26 million jobs). The effects of employment growth will be manifested in the following year and will compensate for previous labor market losses (International Labor Organization [ILO] 2021).

As an instrument of social policy in the fight against poverty and a form of social protection, Friedman proposed the idea of a universal income or a negative tax program that would enable the stabilization of the labor market (Moffitt 2003). As early as 1968, an anti-poverty strategy was adopted that focused on "enhancing the poor's productive capacity" (Konkel, 2014, 299). Today, the concept of inequality is more complex and does not refer only to the issue of poverty. After the recovery from the economic crisis, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Sustainable Development Agenda was adopted, which refers to green jobs, human resources, the labor market, decent work, the protection of human rights and the integrity of

individuals. There is an effort to reduce inequalities, through retraining of workers and orientation towards industries that will be significant for sustainable development (Ostojić 2022, 57-58).

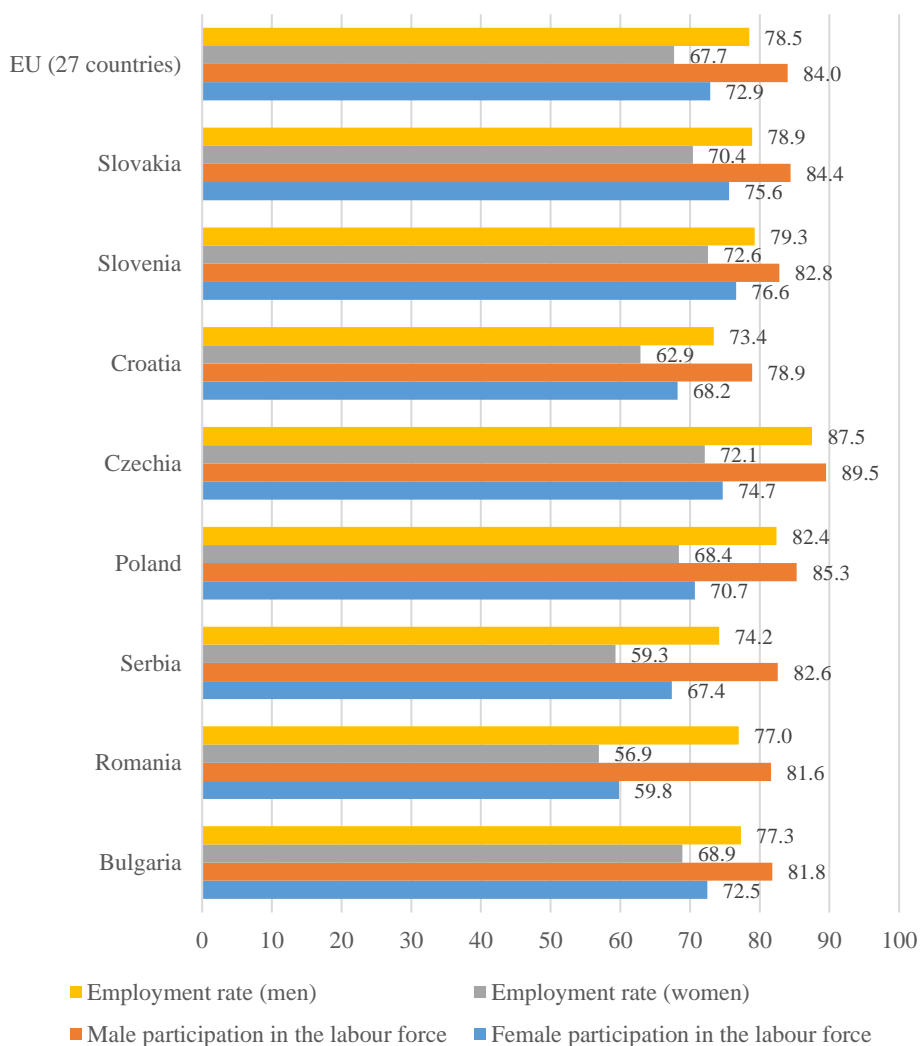
In the following, gender inequalities in the labor market will be analyzed, with a focus on the participation of men and women in the labor force and employment, engagement of the female population in senior management positions in the organization and national parliament, and the gender pay gap. Also, the subject of the research is the analysis of the impact of the pandemic on the increasing of deep-rooted gender inequalities and the deterioration of the position of the female workforce in the labor market.

GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE LABOR MARKET

Questions of the position, place, and role of women in the social system arise from a defined framework of ethical and cultural values, which are also reflected in the field of law, while today their interdependence with the established public policy direction of society's development is increasingly highlighted (Ostojić, Maksimović and Stojković-Zlatanović 2022, 254). Generally speaking, women are faced with significantly higher obstacles when looking for a job that meets standards of decent work than men. There is obvious tendency that employed female have lower quality jobs and work in less favorable conditions compared to their male colleagues (ILO 2022). Researches indicate there are no signs the situation is going to change in near future having in mind that many social, economic, and legal obstacles to the strengthening of the female population remained. During the pandemic female position was further downgraded resulting in an additional increase in gender inequalities thus neutralizing perennial efforts on upgrading the position of females as a vulnerable social category. At the same time, the implementation of the fifth sustainable development goal – Gender equality was slowed down as well (United Nations 2022).

One of the characteristics of the female population is a lower activity rate compared to the male one, on a global scale. According to International Labor Organization data, the share of women in the total labor force (women that are employed or actively seek a job) is 47%, while the activity rate for the male population is 72% (ILO 2022). The significant difference in activity rates in favor of men (25%) is even higher in some countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Jordan reaching 50% (ILO 2022). Data on activity and employment rates of the male and female population aged between 20 and 64 in Serbia as well as in neighboring countries and transitional countries are presented in Graph 1. In all observed countries, women have lower rates of both activity and

employment than men. In the EU the average activity rate for females is 73% while the average rate of activity for males (working age) is 84%. Moreover, the average rate of women's employment in the EU is nearly 68% compared to men's average employment rate of 78.5%. In Serbia, the female activity rate is 67.4% which is 15% lower than the activity rate for males. Furthermore, the male employment rate is 15% higher than the female one, which is 59.3%.



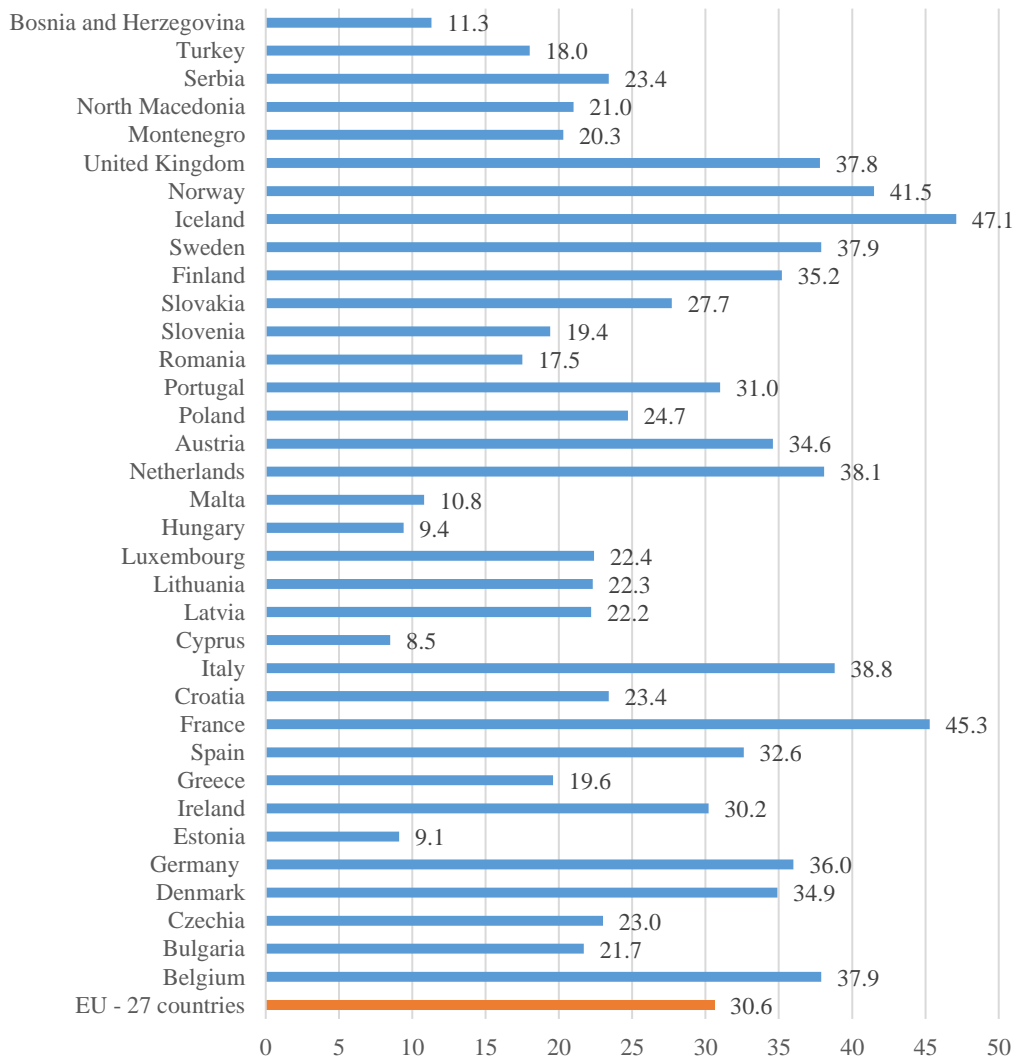
Graph 1: Activity and employment rate by sex, 2021

Source: EUROSTAT 2021

On a global scale, men earn 20% more than women on average (ILO 2020a). Public policies that are focused on the gender wage gap reduction

promote “equal salary for equal work” aimed to neutralize disparities within workplaces as well as encourage “equal salary for work of equal value” to neutralize disparities within the organization (Ministry of Labour, Employment, Veterans and Social Affairs 2018). The gender pay gap is larger in the private sector than in the public one with the biggest divergences reported in the financial and insurance sectors. In the EU, female gross earnings per hour are 13% lower than their male colleague's earnings on average (EUROSTAT 2022). In all European countries, the share of the female population aged 18-24 with at most lower secondary education who were not involved in any education or training (early leavers from education) was decreasing and presently is below 10%. At the same time, the share of the population aged 25-34 who have successfully completed tertiary studies is increasing in the EU. In some member states such as Ireland, Cyprus, Luxemburg, Holland, Slovenia, and Norway the share exceeds 60%, while in Serbia it is 41% which is close to the EU average (EUROSTAT 2022a; EUROSTAT 2022b). However, the increased representation of women in the labor market and their more favorable educational structure proved not to be sufficient factors that would reduce discrepancies in earnings between men and women in the context of diminishing gender inequalities. Less representation of women in leaders and managerial positions is one of the key factors that keep female average salaries at a lower level than the male one. In other words, fewer women in higher, better-paid positions lead to gender inequalities (Fortin, Bell and Böhm 2017).

In 2003, Norway was the first country in the world that introduced fully transparent recruitment procedures in companies and adopted the law that required minimal representation of 40% for both genders on the board of directors of limited liability companies (Maida and Weber 2022). Moreover, in cases when candidates applying for a job position are equally qualified preference would be given to the gender that is in the minority. Full transparency of procedures and candidate's competencies for a job position as major selection criteria are key features of employment policy with foreseen sanctions for non-compliance with the defined appointment policy of the board of directors (Deloitte 2022). In the strategy Europe 2020 European Commission recommended to member states adopt laws requiring that women's participation in the executive boards of listed companies has to be 40% at least (European Commission 2010). Until October 2020, France, Belgium, Portugal, Greece, Austria, Italy, and Germany introduced mandatory national quotas for insufficiently represented gender on executive boards of listed companies (Deloitte 2022).



Graph 2: Positions held by women in senior management positions, 2021

Source: EUROSTAT 2021a

The tendency that has been observed for years is that women in management positions are more often employed in positions of the lower level of management, which is most often associated with the administration or human resources, while men are mostly employed in the highest leadership positions in organizations (top management) that are connected with the decision-making process. Graph 2 shows the share of women in

senior management positions in European countries (EUROSTAT 2021a). According to the latest available data for 2021, a woman is employed in every third managerial position (European Union average). Among the countries with an almost equal share of men and women in senior management positions, Iceland (47%), France (45%), and Norway (41.5%) stand out. Also, according to the data for the countries of the European Union, in 16 countries there are at least 25% of women on the boards of listed companies, while the number of countries with a minimum one-quarter female participation in 2018 was 14 (Deloitte 2022). In Serbia, 23.4% of women occupy management positions, while Hungary and Estonia stand out for the lowest female participation (less than 10%). Having in mind that in 2010 the share of the female population in leadership positions in Serbia was 12.4% there is a clear tendency of improvement (EUROSTAT 2021a). From advanced neighboring transition countries, Slovakia is closest to the European average (27.7%). The share of women in the national parliament of Serbia is about 40%, while the average value for the countries of the European Union is 33%, and rates close to 50% are achieved by Iceland, Sweden, and Finland (EUROSTAT 2022c).

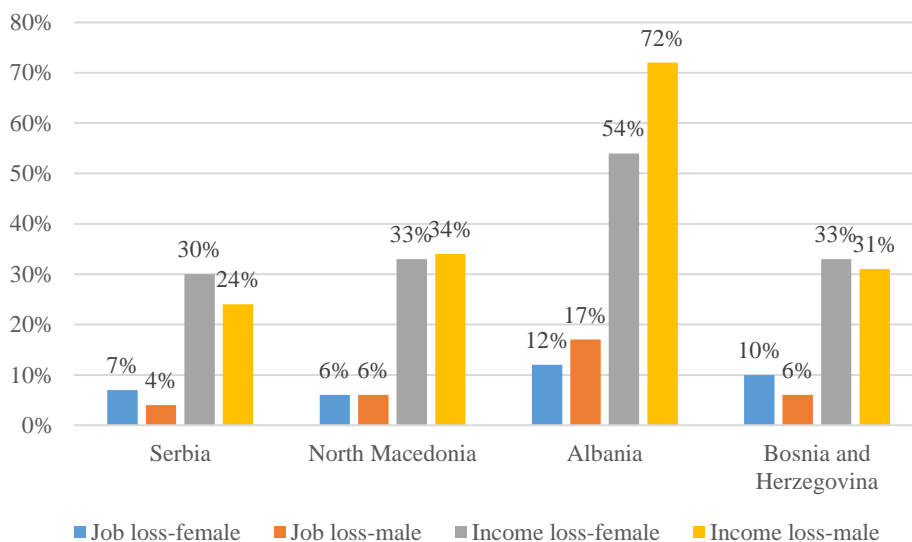
More than half of the gender pay gap is due to the lack of women in corporate management. (Fortin et al. 2017). Also, it has confirmed that a positive change as a decline in vertical segregation, which refers to barriers to the advancement of employees of a certain gender within a company or sector, contributed significantly more to the improvement of the position of women in the labor market than positive changes in horizontal segregation manifested through reduction of limited opportunities for women in certain professions in which the dominant position is achieved by the male (Fortin and Huberman 2002). Also, the main reasons for the decline in vertical segregation are found in the growth of education, knowledge, work experience, and expertise of the female population.

In Italy, after the introduction of mandatory quotas, the representation of women on corporate boards increased four times (Maida and Weber 2022). On the other hand, it was investigated how the introduction of quotas contributes to women in other positions in the company and whether there is a spillover of positive effects. In the case of Italy, it was confirmed that the quotas contributed to a moderate increase in the number of women in the highest managerial positions in the company and thus to their moderate representation in the workplaces that bring the highest earnings. In the same way, the companies that had the most women on the boards also had the largest number of newly appointed women general directors. However, if we look at women who are employed in hierarchically lower positions, the positive effects of the introduction of quotas did not contribute to a significant improvement in their status (Maida and Weber 2022). Similar

conclusions were reached in research on the introduction of quotas in Norway, as the first country that decided on this reform to improve the position of women in the labor market and reduce gender inequalities (Bertrand et al. 2019). Compared to Italy, Norway has a higher representation of women in the workforce and in better-paid positions with a lower gender pay gap which indicates more gender egalitarianism. However, the increased number of women on executive boards did not affect the improvement of women's positions working at lower-ranked workplaces in the corporate sector. At the same time, mandatory quotas had a positive impact on younger women at the beginning of their careers that perceived the measure as an important incentive in their career development toward top positions in companies (Bertrand et al. 2019).

THE INFLUENCE OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE DEEPENING OF GENDER INEQUALITIES

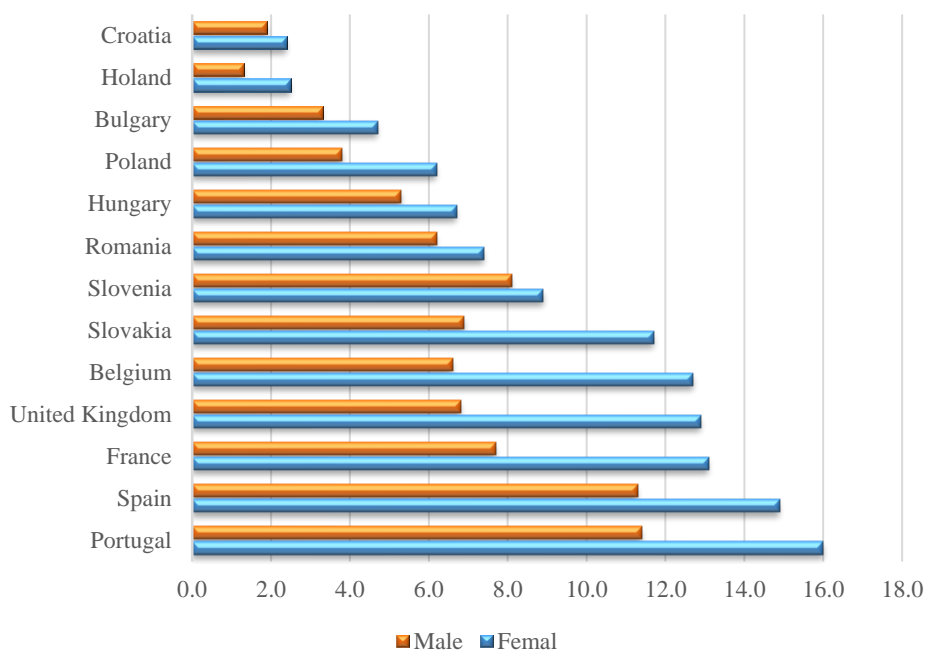
The public health crisis caused by the pandemic also affected the labor market, reflecting a decrease in employment, but also in the loss of jobs, working hours, and workers' income. The estimated loss of working hours at the global level is 12%, while labor income recorded a drop of 10.7% for the first three quarters of 2020 compared to the same period of the previous year (ILO 2020). The economic crisis caused by the pandemic contributed to more women losing their jobs than men. Globally, 26% of women reported job loss following the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, compared to 20% of men (Flor et al. 2022). The data from Graph 3 indicate the situation in Serbia and neighboring countries. In Serbia, 7% of women reported being unemployed after the onset of the public health crisis, compared to 4% of men. More women lost their jobs in Bosnia and Herzegovina (10% of women and 6% of men), but in North Macedonia, an equal share of both sexes are represented at 6%, while only Albania registered more unemployed men (17%) than women (12%) of the observed countries (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women [UN WOMEN] 2021). Also, if we look at how many percent of the female and male population reported the loss of at least one source of income after the outbreak of the pandemic, in Serbia women are also in the lead (30%) compared to men (24%). In North Macedonia and Bosnia Herzegovina, the share is equal between the sexes and amounts to around 30%, while in Albania 72% of men reported the loss of at least one source of income compared to 54% of women (UN WOMEN 2021).



Graph 3: Proportion of people who reported loss of job and loss of at least one source of income since the spread of COVID-19, by sex, 2021

Source: UN WOMEN 2021

The factor that determines women's lower earnings is certainly working time. Namely, according to research by the International Labor Organization, in almost all countries there is a higher proportion of women with part-time work than men. Also, it is estimated that the pandemic contributed to a disproportionate decrease in the earnings of men and women. Women's earnings fell by 8.1%, while men's earnings fell by 5.4%, which was significantly more affected by reduced working hours than the increased number of layoffs and job losses (ILO 2020). Graph 4 shows the loss in earnings of men and women after the pandemic. In all countries, women's wages fell more than men's wages. Those differences are most visible in Portugal, where women's wages fell by 16%, while men's wages fell by 11.4% between the first and second quarters of 2020. A similar situation is characteristic of Spain, where women's salaries have decreased by 15%, compared to men's salaries, which have decreased by 11.3%. The lowest decrease in wages was recorded in Croatia, namely for the female population by 2.14% and 1.9% for the male population (ILO 2020).

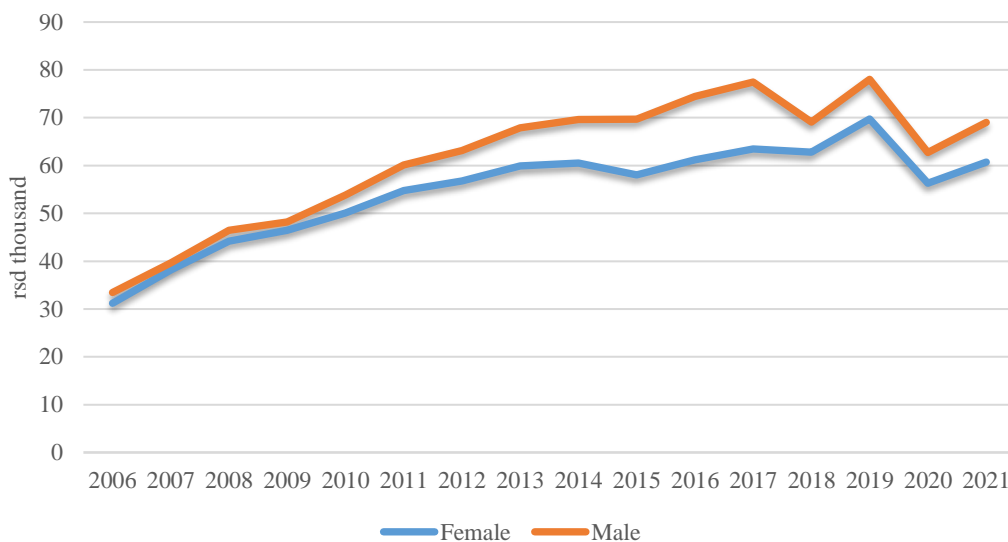


Graph 4: Total wage losses by gender between the first and second quarters of 2020, by sex (%)

Source: ILO 2020

If a more detailed analysis of the gender wage gap were conducted, according to whether work status implies full-time or part-time work, it would be seen that for men and women employed in a full-time job, according to the available data for 2020, the gender pay gap in the EU countries ranges from -1.8% in Italy (the female population earns more than men by 1.8% on average) to 24.6% in Latvia (EUROSTAT 2022d). The gender wage gap from the perspective of part-time employment also takes a negative value of -4.8% only in Italy, while high positive values in favor of the male population were recorded in Portugal (20.1%), where women's wages fell the most, followed by Spain (20.7%) and Croatia, where despite the lowest and almost uniform reduction in wages of the male and female population of around 2%, the gender wage gap reaches a value of 23.1%, the highest among European countries (EUROSTAT 2022d). Analyzing the data of the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the wage gap between men and women was the most pronounced in 2017, amounting to 14000 dinars in absolute terms, as shown in Graph 5. The current difference in earnings in favor of the male population is still present and is almost 50% lower than the

difference that was reached in 2017 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia [SORS] 2020).

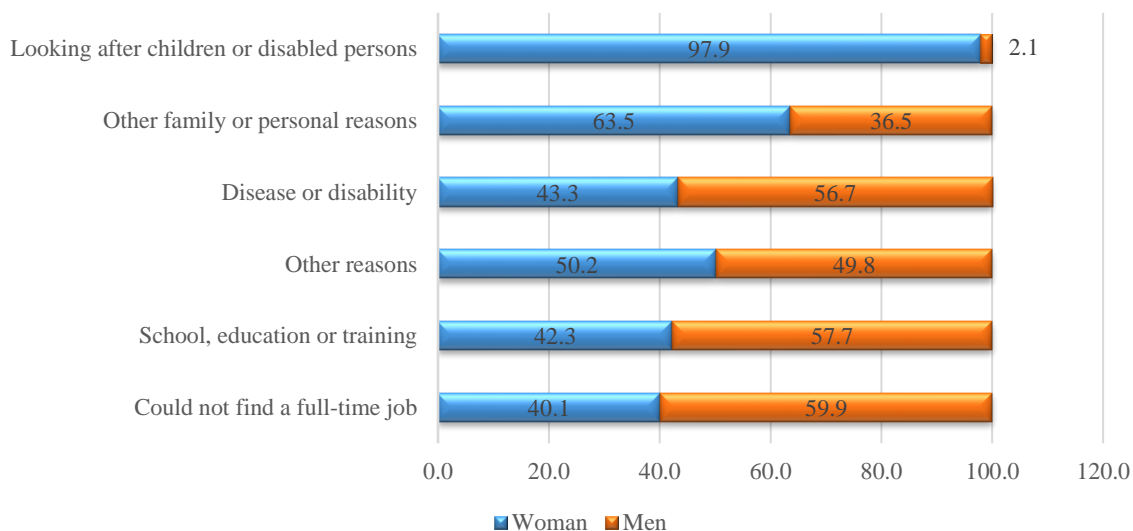


Graph 5: Average net earnings of employees by sex, 2006-2021

Source: SORS 2020

Significant participation of women in part-time jobs that bring them benefits disproportionate to those available to full-time employees is linked with their higher involvement in care for family members. In Serbia, care for family members is a cause for a part-time job in 98% cases for women and only in 2% cases for men, which is indicated by Graph 6. Motives for a part-time job may be illness, education or training, or inability to get a full-time job. Also, among the inactive population, which is out of the labor force and does not seek employment due to taking care of family members, with a share of 90%, women are the most represented (SORS 2022). Of the total number of women who lost their jobs due to the impact of the pandemic, almost 16% were forced to resign and terminate the contract with employer due to taking care of family members, compared to only 5% of men (SeConS 2020). This fact raises concerns that care about family members may become a significant obstacle to the economic strengthening of women and their integration into the labor market, particularly after the COVID-19 crisis. During the pandemic, the dominant factor for losing jobs for both men and women was cease of business operations of companies where they were employed. The second important factor that increased unemployment during the pandemic was the expiring of work contracts that were not extended (SeConS 2020). Moreover, women were much more involved in unpaid

housework than men. During the pandemic, household activities were much more intensive than before thus creating additional responsibilities and burdens for women (SeConS 2020a).



Graph 6: Reasons for employment in part-time jobs in Serbia by sex, 2021

Source: SORS 2022

In Serbia, women's employment prevails among administrative officers (60%), professionals and artists (59%), service and commercial jobs (57%), professional associates and technicians (53%) (SORS 2020a). According to the latest data for 2018, the Gender Equality Index in Serbia is 58 points², achieving a slight increase of 5.6 points compared to the previous value of the index from 2014 (Babović and Petrović 2021). Also, what attracts attention is that the greatest growth was achieved precisely in the domain of power (9.2 points), especially in the subdomain of political (5.2 points) and social power (17.7 points), while a decrease was recorded in the subdomain of economic power (-1.8). These results indicate that the quotas, which stimulate the representation of women in legislative bodies, as well as the greater representation of women on the boards of organizations, had a positive effect on strengthening the social and political power of the female population. On the other hand, due to the absence of appropriate economic policies that would stimulate the economic empowerment of women, progress in the sub-domain of women's economic power was also absent (Babović and Petrović 2021). Likewise, even though education is one of the

² The Gender Equality Index in the European Union is 67.4 points.

factors that contribute to differences in the gender pay gap, it is important to emphasize that progress has not been achieved only in the domain of knowledge and education (-0.9 points), which indicates a decline in the participation in the education of both men and women and increase in the gender gap in favor of women. What is missing is better representativeness of women in professions such as engineering, mathematics, and technology, which bring higher earnings and contribute positively to overcoming gender income inequalities. Traditionally in those professions, women are less represented than men and are in a disadvantageous position when trying to get a job or to keep it although they have the same qualifications as their male colleagues (ILO 2020a). In Serbia, approximately 70% of women were employed in the service sector (commerce, education, health, and social protection) which was hardest hit by the pandemic (Bradaš, Reljanović and Sekulović 2020). The COVID-19 crisis put the health sector and its employees under enormous pressure. Almost two-thirds of all health and social workers are women that were on the front lines during the pandemic (United Nations 2022; UN WOMEN 2020). The crisis hit hardest micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises where most women entrepreneurs work (Srdić 2021).

According to an International Labour Organization study, it is necessary to reduce gender inequalities in the labor market and enable the female population easier access to sectors with higher productivity that are expected to contribute to an increase of the labor force by 5.4% at the global level, raise of employment by 5.3%, gross domestic product growth of almost 4%, raise of tax revenues by 1.5 trillion dollars as well as poverty reduction in underdeveloped regions (ILO 2017). Women in Work Index³ reflects the extent to which the pandemic affected the reduction of women's participation in the labor market and the increase in unemployment, thereby causing significant damage to the female population (Price Waterhouse 2022). In order to neutralize the negative effects of the Covid-19 crisis and compensate for the missed progress in gender equality and the economic empowerment of women, the employment and participation of the female labor force in the labor market must grow faster than before pandemic.

³ Women in Work Index represents a weighted average of indicators related to the economic empowerment of women in OECD countries, which is expressed by the ability of women to participate in the labor force and to be employed, as well as by gender wage parity. The average result for OECD countries in 2020 is 64, while in 2019 it took the value of 64.5. It is estimated that without a pandemic the value of the index would be 65.9, which is expected to be realized during this year, with the condition of a faster recovery of the labor market. The first three countries, according to the value of the index, are New Zealand (76.7), Luxembourg (76), and Slovenia (75.6).

Among the countries with high index values, Slovenia should be singled out, as an advanced neighboring transition country, which records a high share of 90% of full-time employed women, as well as a gender gap in labor force participation of only 5% (Price Waterhouse 2022).

CONCLUSION

The pandemic has made a significant impact on the further deepening of widespread labor inequalities. In order to make up for lost progress in gender equality and women's economic empowerment, employment and female participation in the labor market needs to grow faster than before the pandemic. Factors that strongly contribute to the gender wage gap are the underrepresentation of women in management positions in organizations, part-time employment, caring for family members that inhibit their participation in the labor market and professional progress, the lack of educated female workforce in better-paid professions, etc. Likewise, the public health crisis caused by the pandemic contributed to more women than men losing their jobs and canceling their employment contracts so that they could take care of their families in the new conditions that brought them an additional burden. The largest percentage of women are employed in the service sector, which is most strongly affected by the crisis, namely in the trade, education, health, and social protection sectors, and women, as the most numerous representatives of health and social workers, were in the front lines in the fight against the pandemic. Also, the largest number of women entrepreneurs is registered in the sector of micro, small and medium enterprises and entrepreneurs, and it is important to indicate that this sector suffered the most intense negative consequences of the Covid-19 crisis. In order to reduce the gender pay gap, it is necessary to increase the representation of women in quality and better-paid workplaces. To promote a work-intensive business culture, it is necessary to support policies that promote active women that participate in the workforce, women that are well-educated, trained, economically empowered, and women that are not discouraged when looking for new employment after losing a job. In addition to the aforementioned, health conditions, as well as work in the informal economy also contributes to reduced activity of women in Serbia. According to estimates, it will take almost 60 years to achieve full gender equality in Serbia, taking into account the current trends and future projections of the Gender Equality Index. Women, as a vulnerable category in the labor market, are significantly more sensitive and more affected by crises. Therefore, it is important to take care of their social rights in the private and public sector, enable the absence of a partner to provide support and share family responsibilities so that women can commit to work and professional

advancement, significantly stimulate female entrepreneurship and provide it with adequate support in crises.

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