

Guest editor's introduction

Uvodna reč gostujućeg urednika

Population, Gender Equality, and Public Policies: Current Issues and Proposed Solutions

The thematic section focuses on issues of gender equality from an interdisciplinary research perspective. Starting with the social importance of gender equality, the goal is to highlight this topic as a central theme of the public policies related to population phenomena, the position, and needs of the population. This idea is based on the interdisciplinarity of the knowledge about population, which also involves discussing the gender dimension as a significant socio-cultural determinant of social and population phenomena (Hobcraft 2007; Johanson-Hanks 2007). The aim was to gather papers that would provide scientific support for the view proposing that issues related to the social position of women and men, gender differences, and behavioural patterns are fundamentally important in the creation of public policies. The belief that social sciences can and should serve as a significant support in solving practical societal problems (Bašić 2022) further motivated the theme and focus of this thematic section. Authors of the articles in this thematic section, from their research perspectives, emphasize the important social issue in scientific discussions, focusing on potential directions for action.

The United Nations has set gender equality as one of the Sustainable Devel-

opment Goals defined by Agenda 2030. Although the establishment of institutional mechanisms began six decades ago (Mršević 2011), many issues have remained unregulated, and numerous problems still need to be addressed. The development of mechanisms for gender equality in Serbia started in the early 2000s, while the Law on Gender Equality from 2021 outlines the responsibilities for institutional organization and action (Pajvančić, Petrušić and Sedlarević 2023).

The political framework for promoting gender equality includes national strategies and action plans that outline each country's specific actions. Guided by the Strategy for 2020–2025, the European Commission adopted a set of directives that clearly outline actions to reduce the gender pay gap, combat abuse of women and domestic violence, promote gender balance in the economy, harmonize work and private life, and fight gender stereotypes in both public and private spheres (European Commission n.d.). Strategic documents were also adopted in Serbia. Based on the evaluation of the 2016–2020 Strategy, Babović and Vuković (2021) proposed recommendations to improve the process of strategic planning and its implementation, as well as to identify key topics, including the development of gender

studies, improving gender sensitivity of study programs, and raising awareness, while also highlighting the importance of following cultural norms. The goals and measures defined by the Strategy for the period 2021–2030 have been directed at these issues.

To develop efficient and effective policies, a comprehensive approach is necessary, including identifying all issues, understanding the impact of the factors that hinder progress, and continuously monitoring the impact of proposed measures. Gender mainstreaming is an internationally recognized strategy for achieving gender equality. It involves integrating a gender perspective into all social activities, from policy design to evaluation, to promote equality between women and men and combat discrimination (EIGE 2025). In this context, such an approach requires recognizing gender-specific needs and characteristics within a particular social environment, as well as the activities and needs of individuals in their everyday lives, taking into account their demographic and socio-economic backgrounds. Gendering of public policies is viewed as a strategic approach to reducing gender inequality in both the public and private sectors (Antonijević 2018).

The link between demography and gender permeates all aspects of population studies. The foundations for this approach in the Serbian scientific community were established decades ago within the triangle of demography, sociology, and social anthropology. Academician Miloš Macura described demography as a science with a clear anthropological character (Macura 1997). Žarana Papić defined gender perspective as a heuristic tool necessary for a comprehensive understanding of society and social phenomena (Papić

1989). Marina Blagojević introduced the gender aspect into research on parental practices and reproductive behaviour in Serbia (Blagojević 1997). In the 2000s, the implementation of the gender perspective in Serbia intensified, and contemporary demography is now positioned as a science that, due to its epistemological specificity, considers gender differences and gender roles as key factors in understanding demographic phenomena (Šobot 2014; Devedžić 2020; Šobot 2021). A notable contribution to this field is a Collection of papers published by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) and the Institute of Social Sciences, titled *Serbia: Gender, Politics, and Population*. This volume examines the gender aspect of parenting (Rašević 2020; Bobić and Vesković Anđelković 2020; Stanojević 2020), gender differences in life expectancy and quality of life (Gnjatović Stojilković 2020), the gender dimension of elderly poverty (Matković and Stanić 2020), and the gender aspect of migration (Lukić 2020), as well as the adverse effects of gender imbalances among populations of reproductive age, both at the local level and in urban-rural contexts (Nikitović 2020).

The peculiarity of the thematic section in this issue of the scientific journal *Stanovništvo* lies in its focus on gender equality as the central topic. After the review process, five papers were included. When determining their order, I was guided by a kind of “demographic logic”, taking into account the journal’s primary research focus and the topics of the articles that passed the review process.

Stability and quality of partnerships from the gender roles perspective are the subjects of empirical research, and the findings are presented in the article titled **“The Relationship Between**

Gender Equality in Household Labour, Marital Stability and Quality” by Jelena Šakotić-Kurbalija, Dragan Kurbalija, and Nikolina Kukulj. Through statistical analysis, the authors examined how satisfaction with the distribution of housework influences perceptions of marital quality. The research focuses on both women and men, observing their differences not only in activities, but also in satisfaction, as well as how the relationship is expressed. The authors highlight methodological directions for further research and simultaneously point out the possibilities for practical contributions by experts in psychology to develop a work program aimed at promoting gender equality within the partnership.

The involvement of fathers in raising children is the topic examined in the article titled **“Gender Balanced Parenting Support: Fathers’ Perceptions of Healthcare System Support”** by Ivana Mihić, Katarina Mašić, Miljana Marić Ognjenović, and Anja Žujović. Since this issue is important for both children’s development and family relationships, the authors explore fathers’ perceptions and experiences of the support they receive to realize the role of involved parents in caring for their children from birth. The focus is on the support provided by the healthcare system, which begins from the first days after the birth and continues through follow-up services. Additionally, the authors highlight examples of best practices from countries with more experience in various programs and identify obstacles and deficiencies. Addressing these issues requires not only interventions within the health system, but also broader activities and support.

In the article titled **“Barriers to Work-Family Balance in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Gender Implications”**,

Jelena Čeriman, Ljiljana Pantović, and Marija Radovanović explore the mismatch between legal regulations and real-life situations in a social context that is close to the neighbouring countries that share a similar cultural heritage and social development. In addition to discussing the institutional framework of key aspects of work-family balance, the authors base their analysis and conclusions on empirical research involving employed women with at least one child over the age of one. They focus on intra-regional and socio-demographic differences concerning professional status, family responsibilities, institutional support, and perceptions of discrimination in the workplace.

The employment of women and policies aimed at improving their economic status are the focus of the article titled **“Employment Policy Measures to Improve the Economic Opportunities of Women in Serbia”** by Kosovka Ognjenović. The author analyses the impact of the implemented measures on women’s position in the labour market through a descriptive approach. The emphasis is on gender differences based on recent labour market statistics, with education level considered a key factor. In addition, the author pays attention to the situation of young people in the labour market, including those aged 15–24 not involved in education, employment, or training (NEET), as well as to the examination of the gender pay gap as a separate aspect. Drawing on the policy analysis and statistical data, conclusions are made regarding the effectiveness of the strategic framework in enhancing women’s position in the labour market, the status of employed women, and gender equality in wages.

In the article titled **“Gender and Its Impact on Work Engagement and**

Research Productivity of University Teachers in Serbia”, Ivana Simić, Biljana Đorđević, and Sandra Milanović Zbiljić explore gender differences among employees in higher education through empirical research. Using statistical methods, the authors examine hypotheses about potential differences in work engagement and productivity between female and male university teachers, reflecting gender norms, while also verifying the relationship between work engagement and productivity. The conclusions support gender equality in higher education and efforts to strengthen the capacity of the academic community, improving the position and effectiveness of university teachers for both women and men.

These papers address relevant aspects, each contributing to its respective topics. This thematic section demonstrates the readiness of one demographic journal to provide strong arguments and make gender equality a key part of public policies across various sectors. In light of the growing prevalence of negative narratives and the spread of anti-gender discourses worldwide, including in Serbia (Bobičić and Stojičić 2023), I consider it important for a scientific journal that addresses population and development issues to emphasize gender equality and contribute to advancing it through recommendations based on evidence. The research and discussions presented in the articles are grounded in scientific principles, which should encourage policymakers to take them into account. This represents a meaningful contribution by the authors.

Nonetheless, it is important to note that the original goal of this thematic section has not been fully achieved. The complexity and multidimensionality of gender equality, together with the interconnections between gender and various population and social phenomena, call for a broader range of topics and approaches. Greater integration of feminist discourse, gender and masculinity studies, and insights from critically oriented scientific research are needed to strengthen both the theoretical and practical contributions. Although the academic and scientific community recognize the importance of gender equality, improving cooperation, fostering joint research on a wider array of issues, and engaging in high-quality discussions are essential to support more effective policy solutions. Researchers should actively share knowledge and collaborate in identifying challenges and developing recommendations, thereby enhancing both the robustness of their arguments and the practical application of their scientific findings.

As the editor of this thematic section, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the authors for their valuable contributions, as well as to the reviewers for their constructive feedback. I also wish to thank all those who contributed, directly or indirectly, to the development process, from the initial idea and thematic conceptualization, all the way to the section's completion. Finally, my sincere thanks go to the Editorial Board of the Journal for the trust they invested in me and the opportunity they provided for this thematic section to be published.

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