

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN SERBIA: DOES IT WORK FOR WOMEN?

Key words

Gender mainstreaming; public policies; vulnerable groups; COVID-19; gender studies.

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Summary

In recent years, the Republic of Serbia has achieved an evident progress in developing the gender equality legal, policy, and institutional framework. However, the economic, social, and political position of women, particularly of those belonging to vulnerable groups, is still worse than that of men, although women and men are equal by law with respect to rights. The purpose of the article is to contribute to research on the efficiency of gender mainstreaming as a strategy for eliminating the structurally unequal power relations between women and men. The article makes two arguments. First, the evident progress that Serbia made in engendering strategies and legislation has not contributed to a transformative change regarding the subordinated position of women. Second, the gaps between reality and rhetoric are particularly prominent at times of crisis, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which gender issues are not considered important.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition process in the Republic of Serbia since early 2000s has been accompanied with two parallel and, at first sight, opposing trends: strengthening of the gender equality legal, policy and institutional framework, on the one hand, and re-traditionalisation and re-patriarchisation of the society and increasing discrimination against women, on the other. These paradoxical tendencies have also been identified by the Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). It has positively assessed Serbia's improvements regarding the gender equality legislative and strategic framework in its Concluding Observations on the Fourth Periodic Report of the Republic of Serbia on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 2019). However, the CEDAW has raised concerns pertaining to the unfavourable position of women in many areas and recommended the Government to undertake measures to improve status of women and girls and their access to rights.

The disadvantaged status of women has also been recorded in the latest report on the status of women and gender equality made by the Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit (SIPRU) of the Government of the Republic of Serbia (2021). Beker, Janjić, and Lepojević (2020), Oliver-Burgess, Babović, Popovicki, and Scippa (2020) and many other authors argue that gender stereotypes, prejudices, and misogyny are present in all spheres of public life, including politics, labour market, the media, and education, despite numerous adopted anti-discrimination policies, laws, and measures, and despite the advoca-

cy efforts of women's rights networks. The implemented neoliberal economic model has disabled emancipatory practices from the previous socialist period and contributed "to sustaining power structures that nourished the current gender regime" (Dokmanović, 2018; Đurić Kuzmanović, Dokmanović & Pajvančić Cizelj, 2020).

The Gender Equality Index (GEI) for the Republic of Serbia, calculated by using the methodology of the European Institute of Gender Equality (EIGE), indicates gender gaps in all domains covered by this instrument (work, money, knowledge, time, power, and health). The GEI based on the data from 2018 was 58.0 points (out of 100 points that presents full equality), and showed "continuous, but slow progress in achieving gender equality" (Babović & Petrović, 2021). An increase of 5.6 points was registered compared to 2014, so Babović and Petrović (2021: 10) calculate that if progress continues at this pace, "it will take 59 years to achieve full equality of women and men in Serbia" The greatest achievement has been realised in the domain of power due to increased participation of women in the National Parliament, the Government, and local assemblies.¹

This article examines whether the adopted gender mainstreaming strategy works for women and contributes to eliminating and preventing discrimination against women and girls, including times of emergencies, such as the aforementioned COVID-19 pandemic. This is a significant issue, because no society may function properly if the well-being of all citizens, both women and men, and particularly of the least privileged, is not at the centre of its policies. Thus, the position of the most vulnerable groups is the real indicator of the state of play in a society, as well as

¹ Following the elections on 21 June 2020, the National Assembly consists of 39 per cent of women. Out of 23 ministers, 10 are women (43 per cent).

of the presence of social and gender justice. Consequently, the real commitment of a government to gender equality may be assessed by its policy in times of crisis, when it shows its true capacities, political choices, preferences, and priorities. Therefore, this article examines gaps between rhetoric and reality regarding the commitment to gender mainstreaming in Serbia, by including the analysis of gender aspects of the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The purpose of the article is to contribute to a research on the position of women in Serbia and on the efficiency of gender mainstreaming as a strategy for eliminating the structurally unequal power relations between women and men. The study has both theoretical and practical implications. It is aimed at contributing to a scholarly debate on gender mainstreaming, as well as to induce a review of efficacy and efficiency of the gender equality policy in Serbia.

METHODS

The main research question is whether the gender mainstreaming strategy worked for women during the corona crisis in Serbia. The first step of the research is to collect relevant statistics, data, legislation, policy documents, reports, and scholarship related to gender equality and to the position of women. The relevant information related to the state's response to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 is also collected. The sources of the information are the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, the ministries and other governmental and state bodies in charge of gender equality, centres for social work, research institutions, independent human rights institutions, women's civil society organisations (CSOs), and international organisations that are present in Serbia (UN

Women, United Nations Development Programme / UNDP, UNICEF, the Council of Europe Office in Belgrade, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission to Serbia). The collected information and data are analysed from the gender perspective. The qualitative analysis included the assessment of compatibility of the state's measures to counter the pandemic with the commitments to gender equality prescribed in the Constitution, the legislation, and the strategies relevant in this field.

NATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY FRAMEWORK

GENDER EQUALITY NORMATIVE FRAMEWORK

Serbia has a broad gender equality normative framework. The State has ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and all other internationally agreed gender equality instruments. Serbia is a signatory to all gender equality instruments of the Council of Europe, including the Declaration on Equality between Women and Men as a Fundamental Criteria of Democracy (1997) and the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) (2011), as well as all other relevant Resolutions and Recommendations. In line with its commitment related to the status of a candidate country in the EU accession process, Serbia has committed to harmonise its legislation with the EU *acquis*, including the relevant Directives on gender equality.

The Constitution (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 98/2006) 'guarantees the equality of women and men and obliges

the State to develop equal opportunities policy' (Art. 15). The anti-discrimination legal framework has been developed under the umbrella of the Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination (Zakon o zabrani diskriminacije, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 22/2009 and 52/2021). In May 2021, this Law was amended to ensure further alignment with the EU *acquis*.

A new Gender Equality Law (Zakon o rodnoj ravnopravnosti, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 52/2021) was adopted on 20 May 2021 after several years of negotiations. It made a huge step forward in comparison to the previous Law on Equality between Sexes (Zakon o ravnopravnosti polova, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 104/2009). Amongst other things, the new legislation obliged the authorities to implement gender responsible budgeting, gender mainstreaming, and gender sensitive language, as well as to record and collect gender disaggregated data in all areas covered by the Law. It prescribes duties of state bodies, institutions, and companies (which employ more than 50 employees) to integrate gender equality in their annual plans or programmes and to report annually on their implementation to the Ministry of Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue in charge of gender equality.

Besides this umbrella law related to gender equality, Serbia has more laws that are related to this issue: the Law on Preventing Domestic Violence (Zakon o sprečavanju nasilja u porodici, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 94/2016), the Law on Prevention of Discrimination against Persons with Disabilities (Zakon o sprečavanju diskriminacije osoba sa invaliditetom, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 33/2006, 13/2016), the Law on the Protection of Rights and Freedoms of National Minorities (Zakon o zaštiti

prava i sloboda nacionalnih manjina, *Official Gazette Federal Republic of Yugoslavia*, No. 11/2002, *Official Gazette of the RoS*, No. 1/2003 - Constitutional Charter and *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 72/2009 - other law 97/2013 and Decision CC) and the Law on the Protector of Citizens (Zakon o Zaštiti građana, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 79/2005 and 54/2007). Gender equality clauses, including affirmative measures to promote gender equality and/or to prevent gender-based discrimination, have been integrated in many sectoral laws, such as on labour, employment, elections, family relations, social protection, health care, health insurance, the media, public information, education and textbooks, disaster risk reduction, sports, armed forces, etc.

A huge step forward in developing gender equality legislation was made by integrating the support to gender mainstreaming in the Law on the Planning System (Zakon o planskom sistemu, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 30/2018) and by imposing the duty on all budget-spending units to implement gender-responsible budgeting under the Law on the Budget System (Zakon o budžetskom sistemu, *Official Gazette of the Republic of System*, No. 54/2009, 73/2010, 101/2010, 101/2011, 93/2012, 62/2013, 63/2013 - corr., 108/2013, 142/2014, 68/2015, 103/2015, 99/2016, 113/2017, 95/2018, 31/2019, and 149/2020). Direct users of budget funds are obliged to include gender analysis of expenditures and expenses in proposals of midterm and financial plans (Article 37.1(3)). This obligation is also related to direct users of local budget funds. In its budget-building guidelines, local authorities should describe methods for a gender analysis of the local budget (Article 40.2(7)).

GENDER EQUALITY POLICY FRAMEWORK

In October 2021, the Government adopted the Gender Equality Strategy for the period from 2021 to 2030 (Strategija za rodnu ravnopravnost za period od 2021. do 2030 godione, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No.103/2021). Beside this fundamental strategic document, there are strategies in effect that are relevant for gender equality and eliminating discrimination against vulnerable groups of women such as victims of gender-based violence, Roma women, women with disabilities, rural women, young women, and unemployed women: the Strategy for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (Strategija za sprečavanje i zaštitu od diskriminacije, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 12/2022), the Strategy for Prevention and Elimination of Gender-Based Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2021-2025) (Strategija za sprečavanje i borbu protiv rodno zasnovanog nasilja, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 47/2021) the National Strategy for the Social Inclusion of Roma Women and Men (2016–2025) (Nacionalna strategija za socijalnu inkluziju Roma i Romkinja, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 26/2016), the Strategy for Improvement of the Position of Persons with Disabilities (2020-2024) (Strategija unapređivanja položaja osoba sa invaliditetom, *Official Gazette of the RoS*, No. 44/2020), the National Youth Strategy (2015-2025) (Nacionalna strategija za mlade, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 22/2015), the Strategy for Development of Free Legal Aid System (Strategija razvoja sistema besplatne pravne pomoći, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 74/2010), the Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (2014-2024) (Strategija poljoprivrede i ruralnog razvoja, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No.

85/2014), the National Employment Strategy (2021-2026) (Strategija zapošljavanja, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 18/21 and 36/21 - corr.), the Strategy for Prevention and Protection of Children against Violence (Strategija za prevenciju i zaštitu dece od nasilja, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No.. 80/2020) and the National Programme for the Preservation and Improvement of Sexual and Reproductive Health of Citizens (Nacionalni program očuvanja i unapređenja seksualnog i reproduktivnog zdravlja građana, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 120/2017).

This short overview of the normative and policy framework of gender equality indicates the State's commitment to human and women's rights and the willingness to meet its obligations derived from the relevant UN, the Council of Europe instruments, as well as its obligations derived from the process of accession to the European Union (EU).

THE STATE'S COMMITMENT TO GENDER MAINSTREAMING

Mainstreaming gender equality principle across all areas within the competence of the national institutions was set as a guiding tool of promoting gender equality since the adoption of the National Strategy for Improving the Status of Women and Promoting Gender Equality for the period 2010-2015 (Nacionalna strategija za poboljšanje položaja žena i unapređivanje rodne ravnopravnosti, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 15/2009) in 2009 and its Action Plan (*Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 67/2010). However, the desired impact failed to be achieved in the key areas. The independent evaluation of the implementation of the National Action Plan of the Strategy for Gender Equality for the period 2016-2018 indicated that "persistence

of patriarchy was still an obstacle for gender equality in Serbia” (SeCons, 2019: 7, 50).

The next Strategy for Gender Equality (2016-2020) defined gender mainstreaming as one of the three main strategic goals.² This goal was expected to be achieved by establishing functional gender equality mechanisms at all levels, including gender perspective in all strategic documents, implementation of gender analysis on policies, programmes and measures, gender-sensitive statistics and records, gender-responsive budgeting, and establishing mechanisms for cooperation with associations. Mainstreaming gender equality in public policies was defined as “mainstreaming gender in the planning, development, and implementation of public policies, laws, programmes and measures; the needs, priorities and specific position of women and men, including vulnerable groups, are integrated systematically in public policies, whose impact on the position of women and men, including vulnerable groups, is actively considered at all stages (planning, development, implementation, supervision and evaluation) and at all levels, with equal participation of women and men in these processes”.

This strategic goal was backed by the Strategy of Regulatory Reform and Improvement of Public Policy Management (2016-2020) (Strategija regulatorne reforme i unapređenja sistema upravljanja javnim politikama, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 8/2016), which establishes a coherent framework for all the phases of public policies development, as well as the necessity of an *ex ante* and an *ex post* analysis of effects of public policies on gender equality and the position of women and other vulnerable groups. The

Law on Planning System obliges ministries to do gender impact assessment within the process of planning strategies. The Decree on the Methodology of Public Policies Management and Analysis of Effects of Public Policies and Legislation and the Content of Public Policy Documents (Uredba o metodologiji upravljanja javnim politikama, analizi efekata javnih politika i propisa i sadržaju pojedinačnih dokumenata javnih politika, *Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia*, No. 8/2019) obliges the legislator and ministries to conduct a Test on Gender Equality to assess effects of draft laws and strategies on gender equality and vulnerable groups.³

Nevertheless, the SeCons’ (2019) evaluation of the implementation of the Strategy for Gender Equality (2016-2020) indicates some weaknesses, with greater effectiveness in engendering policies, institutions, decision-making, and budgeting and combating violence against women, and lower effectiveness related to improving the status of the vulnerable groups of women, economic empowerment, media presentation of women, and gender sensitive education. The weaknesses of the Action Plan (2016-2018) and the lack of the Action Plan for the period 2019-2020, as well as the lack of resources, monitoring, and reporting mechanism contributed to the low effectiveness of the Strategy. The evaluation of its implementation (SeCons, 2019) has shown that the defined set of priorities remains fully relevant for the next period, so the same priorities are kept as goals to be achieved by 2030 in the Gender Equality Strategy that has been in effect since 2021. This Strategy aims at establishing comprehensive and efficient system for developing and implementing gender responsible public

2 Other strategic goals were to change gender patterns and improve gender equality culture and to increase equality of women and men by implementing equal opportunities policy and measures.

3 It is planned that the Test for Gender Equality will be implemented as of 2023.

policies and budgets. The envisaged measures include capacity building of state officials for gender impact assessment of drafted policy documents, measures, and activities of public authorities.

THE STATE'S RESPONSES TO THE CORONA CRISIS FROM THE GENDER PERSPECTIVE

The COVID-19 crisis had an intense influence on and consequences for everyday life of all citizens in Serbia, particularly during the state of emergency in 2020.⁴ They were widely explored and documented by many researchers, state bodies, independent institutions, and CSOs. The impact of this unprecedented situation on gender issues, women, and other vulnerable groups has also been explored and presented in the reports of the SIPRU (2020), the Protector of Citizens (2020), UNDP in Serbia (2020), the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020), the Council of Europe Office in Belgrade (2020), and UNICEF (2020), as well as in several gender analyses of the COVID-19 crisis made with the support of the OSCE Mission to Serbia (Pajvančić et al. 2020), Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020), and the Delegation of the EU in Serbia (FemPlatz & Amity, 2020). UN Women in Serbia supported several pieces of research: on the impact of the pandemic on specialist services for victims and survivors of violence (UN Women, 2020), on care economy (SeCons, 2020), on economic and social position of rural women (SeCons & UN Women, 2020), and on female entrepreneurs (SeCons & UN Women, 2020a).

The general conclusion of all these studies

is that the pandemic was confronted by an already weak social protection system, and 'the broader social impacts, particularly on vulnerable groups, are likely to be both severe and long-lasting' (Matković & Stubbs, 2020: 1). Vulnerable groups were not targeted by social response measures that, in turn, were not gender sensitive at all. Therefore, they produced different impacts on men and women, particularly on women belonging to vulnerable groups, such as Roma women, women with disabilities, poor women, and elderly women. The gender dimension of the effects of the pandemic and the state responses is significant. They highlighted the already existing structural gender inequalities in the economy, in labour market, and in care economy. UN Women evaluates that, as is the case everywhere in the world, 'women in Serbia are playing a disproportionate role in responding to the COVID-19 outbreak, including as frontline healthcare workers, carers at home, community leaders and mobilizers' (UN Women, 2020a). Experience of other disease outbreaks has shown that "this care burden also increased their risk of infection" (UN Women, 2020a).

The disbursement of the one-off benefit in the amount of EUR 100.00 to all adult citizens of the Republic of Serbia was one of the key universal measures implemented by the Government during the pandemic in 2020. In her analysis of the social safety nets in times of the COVID-19 crisis, Matković (2020: 5) learns that families with children did not receive additional support; moreover, they received 'smaller benefit amounts compared to families without children, since only adults were entitled to universal cash assistance,

4 The state of emergency in Serbia was declared on 15 March 2020, and lasted for 53 days. The introduced measures included a lockdown and restriction of freedom of movement. Decision on Declaration of the Emergency Situation (Odluka o proglašenju vanrednog stanja, *Official Gazette of the RoS*, No. 29/2020).

while the only other assistance was awarded to pensioners'.⁵ Matković (2020: 5-6) also indicated that some local self-governments (LSGs) distributed assistance packages and, with UNICEF's support, provided humanitarian aid to a number of Roma settlements., while some other LSGs approved deferred payment of public utility bills and desisted from enforcing debt collection during the state of emergency.

The UNDP's assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on key economic and human development perspectives in Serbia provides insights into the engendered impact of the crisis (UNDP in Serbia, 2020). According to this report (UNDP in Serbia, 2020: 5), in March 2020 businesses dismissed approximately 60,000 employees as an immediate consequence of the crisis, mostly men (58,400 men compared to 2,500 women), while the second quarter of 2020 overall saw an opposite trend (where, in the second quarter a net of 34,700 women lost their jobs, compared to a net increase of jobs for men by 1,500). The UNDP found that 'the crisis increased the share of already vulnerable populations whose jobs might have been significantly threatened if the crisis persisted, from 31% pre-crisis to 35% post-crisis' (UNDP in Serbia, 2020: 6). The survey conducted in mid-April 2020 by SeCons showed that during the state of emergency some 200,000 people, or eight percent of those who had been employed in February 2020 (including those who had been formally employed or self-employed), lost their jobs (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a). However, in November 2020 the Ministry of Labour, Employment, and Veteran and Social Affairs denied this figure and stated that from the beginning of the pandemic up to that point 44,105 employed persons had lost their jobs (Ministry of Labour, Employ-

ment, Veteran and Social Affairs, 2020).

The analysis of SeCons and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (2020a) of the impact of the pandemic and the state measures on employment of women and men in the period April-June 2020 showed that the level of job losses of men and women had been the same, and that the gender differences in some aspects were consequences of structural gender inequalities in the labour market. While the majority of male employees lost their jobs due to the closure of businesses, the causes of job loss of women were related to their family role and responsibilities. The closure of childcare institutions and the reduction of public transportation disproportionately hit more women than men, as women more often than men used public transportation to commute to/from work. They were also primarily child carers, so their burden of home care for children and for elderly and ill family members became doubled. Women in private companies, trade, and other services were under a higher risk to lose a job than men. With respect to sectors, men employed in constructions were particularly at risk of losing a job (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 27). After a loss of a job, only 22.4% of men and 15.7% of women applied for unemployment benefits at the National Employment Agency (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 29). This gender difference may be caused by legal provisions that provide this right to benefits to those who had been formally employed at least 12 months continuously or 18 months with breaks.

One-fourth of employees were directed to work from home, and this mostly included those working in education, ICT sector, those performing expert, scientific, and technical jobs, or administrative and service-based jobs (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a:

5 One-off assistance (EUR 35) was awarded to all pensioners.

21). In the period of April-June 2020, 40.6 % of employed women worked from home, in comparison to 31.8% of employed men (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 24). Although majority of both women and men possessed adequate technology to work from home (96.6% of women and 99.3% of men), the survey shows that women, more than men, faced difficulties related to working from home, due to difficulties to separate professional responsibilities from the private sphere and interference by family members (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 22). On the other hand, women worked from home more than men (13% of women in comparison to 7.3% of men) because there was more work due to increased workload, particularly in the education sector (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 23).

The majority of employed women who continued to work at their workplace were employed in health care (27%), retail (22%), and manufacturing (15%), while the majority of men working at their workplace were employed in manufacturing (25%), retail (18%), and transportation (10%) (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 25). Out of this number of women, 21.7% experienced far more workload than before the pandemic, in comparison with 12.6% of men. The increased workload was particularly experienced by employees in health care and retail, who were also at the frontline when it comes to the exposure to health-related risks. Women bore the brunt of the burden and the highest risk during the COVID-19 crisis as they accounted for as much as 86% of the 'frontline workers facing the risk of infection' (SeCons & Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, 2020a: 3).

The UNDP's socio-economic impact

assessment of COVID-19 has shown that this crisis particularly affected 'informal workers, small farmers, families with children, single parents, children, the elderly, and residents of Roma and other substandard settlements' (UNDP in Serbia, 2020: 6). As indicated in this report (UNDP in Serbia, 2020: 6), the stimulus state measures (except for, in some instances, the one-off distribution of EUR 100.00 per person) did not reach all the poor and vulnerable and did not include incentives to support environmental priorities. UNICEF in Serbia reports that almost a half of families with children experienced a decrease in earnings (30% in average) (Prodanović, 2020). Matković (2020) reveals that, out of this number, 20% of families with children experienced more than 50 % fall of monthly earnings in comparison with the period prior to the pandemic. This author (Matković, 2020) noted a particularly difficult position of the poorest households which had no savings, 'while they were facing additional expenses for the purchase of masks, hygiene products, non-prescription medications, etc'.

The findings of the survey conducted by the SIPRU (2020) in cooperation with CSOs have shown that all members of vulnerable groups, without exception, reported deterioration of all the living standard segments.⁶ The survey indicated that women victims of violence, the homeless, and the Roma particularly faced difficulties to earn a living, settle their monthly dues, and provide for a healthy diet (SIPRU, 2020: 2). 'Most respondents from vulnerable groups (single parents, women victims of violence, migrants, IDPs, Roma, youth, and all homeless respondents) stated that their household would not be able to cover unexpected costs amounting to EUR

6 The survey included 2,006 persons belonging to vulnerable groups (homeless, single parents, migrants, women victims of violence, persons with disabilities, elderly, internally displaced persons, youth, Roma, and the LGBTI population) in Belgrade, Novi Sad, Niš, Šid, Kruševac, Trstenik, Vranje and Bujanovac.

100.00' (SIPRU, 2020: 2).

The SIPRU's survey (2020) shows that the COVID-19 crisis had a significant impact on the structure of the vulnerable population's income, consumption, and access to services. Persons with disabilities, single parents, and elderly particularly had difficulties in accessing health and social care services (SIPRU, 2020: 3). With respect to the effects of the state measures in response to the pandemic, 'more than half of the respondents belonging to the LGBTI+ group (75%), persons with disabilities (66%), Roma (64.5%), single parents (56%), elderly (55%), and homeless (43%) stated the measures were inadequate' (SIPRU, 2020: 3). On the other hand, 'women victims of violence (45%), youth (41.6%), migrants (52%), and internally displaced persons (59%) estimated these measures as justified' (SIPRU, 2020: 3). With reference to lacking support services during the COVID-19 pandemic, 'women victims of violence and persons with disabilities were the groups at the highest risk, as almost 40 % of them reported that the services they needed were suspended' (SIPRU, 2020: 4).

The thematic Report of the Protector of Citizens (2020) on the conditions in Roma settlements indicated that Roma women, men, and children were among the most vulnerable groups adversely hit by the pandemic. In most of the settlements, hygienic conditions were poor, and no inhabitants wore protective equipment. Their access to drinking water, electric energy, and disinfection materials were limited. Roma children in these settlements faced difficulties in accessing distance education.

The same findings related to unfavourable position of Roma women and children are

found in the report of the Council of Europe Office in Belgrade (2020) and in the gender analysis of COVID-19 responses supported by the OSCE Mission to Serbia (Pajvančić, et al. 2020). This report (Pajvančić, et al. 2020: 13) highlighted disadvantaged position of Roma women, 'not only due to living in informal settlements, but also because of the lack of sources of income from informal work and increased obligations related to children's education, which proved to be difficult for Roma children due to the lack of technical and other conditions'. What made the situation specific for Roma women was 'the lack of money for hygiene products, food, medicines, difficulties in helping children with education due to inadequate conditions and technical equipment in their households, and the inability to earn income from informal work' (Pajvančić, et al. 2020: 92). They carried more burden than men with respect to duties within the family and the household, as household maintenance and family members' hygiene were women's responsibility. Responding to this task was particularly challenging in the settlements without adequate infrastructure. The OSCE's report also indicated that assistance through social welfare centres did not reach all Roma families (Pajvančić, et al. 2020: 13). The termination of work for 120 health mediators created additional health and safety risks for Roma and their children (Pajvančić, et al. 2020: 52-53).

Women older than 65⁷ also faced increased difficulties due to the restriction of freedom of movement. During the declared state of emergency (March-May 2020), the elderly's freedom of movement was suspended for 35 days (164 hours weekly). In the cases where additional support by the family or neigh-

7 On 31 December 2020, there were 828,944 women older than 65. Almost every fourth woman (24.4%) in Serbia was older than 65, in comparison to 19.5% of men of that age. Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia. Estimation of population by age and sex, 2020. Available at: <https://data.stat.gov.rs/Home/Result/18010403?languageCode=sr-Cyrl>

bours lacked, the services of volunteers were mostly unavailable. The change that fundamentally altered their lifestyle, forced isolation, and restricted movement and contacts with family members and others was a potential trigger for health problems, depression, and loneliness, particularly for women suffering from multiple chronic diseases and living alone (FemPlatz & Amity, 2020). They also faced restrictions in accessing social and health services and psychological support, as well as increased risk of impoverishment, marginalisation, stigmatisation, and ageism (Ćopić, 2020).

The survey on the impact of the pandemic on families with children, implemented by the UNICEF in Serbia (2020), has shown effects with respect to accessing social services. Out of total number of children in Serbia, 15% were users of social services; out of this percentage, every 15th child could not receive social services due to discontinuation in the services' provision by centres for social work, restrictions in public transportation, or decision of parents to ask for services due to the pandemic (UNICEF in Serbia, 2020: 18).

The UNDP's report (2020) shows that the lockdown and the imposed measures contributed to increased risk of domestic violence with limited opportunities to report violence. The psycho-social support to women in situations of violence provided by CSOs via emergency helplines increased by 30% compared to the pre-COVID period (UNDP in Serbia, 2020: 10). No change was noticed in the forms of domestic violence against women. However, it was identified that women vulnerable to domestic violence faced new challenges and difficulties to access support services due to the pandemic crisis (UN Women, 2020). Elderly women became completely isolated during the lockdown, so their risk of experiencing violence became very high. Similarly

to the findings of other relevant analyses, the UNDP report (2020) also reveals that Roma women, rural women, and women with disabilities were particularly negatively affected by the restriction of movement and other anti-pandemic measures due to the limited access to services and benefits.

On the other hand, the access to support services for women victims of domestic violence was restricted not only due to the overloaded activities of centres for social work, but also due to a decrease in financial and other resources of the CSOs that provided this kind of support (Brejtvejt, 2021). They continued to work largely depending on the staff's own private resources, which was not sustainable (UN Women, 2020). The Protector of Citizens (2020a) shed light on the fact that the living conditions imposed by the pandemic increased the risk of violence against women and stressed that rural women, women with disabilities, and Roma women, who had been in a vulnerable position before the pandemic, faced the most challenges.

The report of SeCons & UN Women (2020: 33) shows that women in rural areas employed in agriculture were particularly hit by the pandemic and emergency measures with respect to job loss. Majority of them had been employed in private sector, and '20% had to commute to/from work, so they lost their jobs due to closure of businesses or had to resign due to increased burden of care economy and restrictions in public transportation (SeCons & UN Women, 2020: 33). Socio-economic position of rural women was particularly hindered due to the lack of equal access to social services and benefits. Two thirds of rural women working in agriculture and family households did not have pension and disability insurance, and 10 % did not have their health care insurance paid (SeCons & UN Women, 2020: 28).

The overview of the measures at local level during the state emergency done by the Standing Conference of Towns and Municipalities (2020), as well as an analysis supported by the OSCE (Pajvančić et al. 2020), reveal that the State's response to the COVID-19 crisis was not gender sensitive. Most social protection measures were either suspended or provided with restrictions and under changed conditions, which negatively impacted many of their beneficiaries (Pajvančić et al. 2020: 125). No special measures were adopted for the most vulnerable groups of women, such as single mothers with small children, Roma women (especially those living in informal settlements), women and girls with disabilities, elderly women (especially those living alone), and women victims of domestic violence and homeless.

The findings of all the aforementioned assessments of the State's response to the pandemic have confirmed that these were not gender sensitive despite political commitments to gender mainstreaming in all policies, and despite warnings and recommendations given by women's CSOs, research institutions, and international organisations to address gender issues. The State's policy to combat the pandemic was not in line with its obligations related to gender equality and protecting vulnerable groups of women that derived from the Constitution, the Law on Equality between Sexes, and the National Gender Equality Strategy (2016-2020). Consequently, the State's policy to combat the pandemic contributed to widening the gender gaps in many sectors (access to health care, preventive health care, protection against domestic violence, education, social protection, etc.) and increased vulnerability of the least privileged groups to poverty and social exclusion.

DISSCUSION

This article examined gaps between the rhetoric and reality regarding the commitments to gender mainstreaming in Serbia by analysing the gender aspects of the State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The State failed to fulfil its obligations that derived from the Constitution, legislation, and strategies related to gender equality. In the unprecedented state of emergency, the State did not consider women's issues as a priority. This indicates the low level of gender awareness of policy makers and the lack of efficient coordinating, monitoring, and reporting procedures. Moreover, the low level of gender awareness of state officials has been detected among the causes for failures to implement the gender equality legislation and policies efficiently in the past 15 years (Commissioner for Protection of Equality, 2018; Commissioner for Protection of Equality, 2016). The gender perspective was not mainstreamed across all relevant strategies, partly due to the lack of consistent and effective management.

Yet, Serbia is not an exception with respect to disregarding gender issues and the vulnerability of the least privileged social groups during the pandemic. This was also the case in the EU member states, as it was documented in the Report of the Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality on the gender perspective in the COVID-19 crisis (2020). Governments' policies to the pandemic have been widely documented by feminist organisations worldwide (Feminist Response to COVID-19). In all the observed cases, the main findings have been the same: there was a lack of gender awareness of public authorities and policy makers, and a gap between the rhetoric and reality with respect to commitments to human rights and gender equality. These findings have also been

in line with arguments made in the previous research of Bacchi and Eveline (2003), Harris Rimmer and Sawyer (2016), Elomäki (2015), Günseli Berik, Van Der Meulen and Seguino (2009), Elson (2002), and many other feminist economists that claimed that gender equality policies in the EU and developed countries have always been “embedded in the logic of the market”, while the neoliberal economic context is contrary to these policies.

Many scholars in Serbia also argue that “the current neoliberal economic priorities and policies are detrimental to gender equality” (Đurić Kuzmanović and Vuković, 2011; Đurić Kuzmanović, 2010; Dokmanović, 2017; Đurić Kuzmanović, Dokmanović and Pajvančić Cizelj, 2020). Therefore, this lies behind the paradoxical tendencies in Serbia with respect to gender, noted at the very beginning of this article. The trend of progress in developing a legal and policy framework for gender equality has not been accompanied with the expected progress in advancement of women and gender equality.

This tendency is reflected in a shutdown of enrolment for Gender Studies at the University of Novi Sad in January 2020. Women’s studies have been embedded as interdisciplinary sciences in the regular higher education in Serbia since the 2004/05 academic year as Gender Studies within the Association of Centres for Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary Research (ACIMSI) of the University of Novi Sad, offering both a master’s degree and a doctoral programme. The then establishment of this Centre was considered as a significant success of women’s movement in Serbia. Until then, women’s studies functioned as an informal network of women’s studies in several cities (Belgrade, Novi Sad, Subotica, Pančevo, Sombor, Zrenjanin, Vršac, Niš, Užice, Kraljevo, Valjevo, and Novi

Pazar). They were organised and implemented by women’s CSOs as an interdisciplinary alternative higher education programme that combined lecturing, research, and publishing. In Belgrade, women’s studies were introduced at the Faculty of Political Sciences, University of Belgrade, within in the programme of specialist studies, and later as a master’s degree programme (Centre for Women’s Studies, 2022). During its 15 years of existence, until 2020, Gender Studies at the University of Novi Sad ‘produced’ two specialist, six master’s (pre-Bologna Declaration system), twenty-eight master’s theses (according to Bologna Declaration system), and 24 doctoral dissertations (Savić, 2020: 191). Gender Studies have significantly contributed to raising gender awareness in the society by dissemination of the findings of research on the position of women and vulnerable groups in the society, and the causes and consequences of discrimination and violence against women and girls. Students of this Centre increased their expertise and knowledge on tools of achieving gender equality (gender mainstreaming, gender-responsive budgeting, gender analysis, gender impact assessment, etc.). Thus, Gender Studies have increased human potential and expertise necessary for implementing and developing gender equality strategies and action plans and for providing technical assistance and support to gender equality mechanisms. In addition to its educational programme, Gender Studies contributed to enabling local gender equality mechanisms. The National Strategy for Gender Equality (2016-2020) has recognised the significant role of gender studies in changing gender patterns and improving gender equality culture, so developing visibility of academic results in gender studies has been pointed out as a specific strategic goal.⁸ The Strategy targeted

8 National Strategy for Gender Equality for the period 2016-2020, strategic goal 1.3.

to increase number of students, scholarly articles, master and doctoral thesis by 2020. In reality, that was the year when the enrolment of students at Gender Studies was shut down.

The position of Gender Studies within the University reflected the marginalised position of women in the society. The institutionalisation of gender studies was not provided adequate state support regarding the provision of infrastructure, publishing, and scholarships. The Gender Studies Centre had no premises of its own and had no full-time employees, functioning not as an independent legal entity but as a part of the Rectorate (Savić, 2020: 193).

The National Strategy for Gender Equality for the period 2016-2020 recognised that 'academic-study programmes of social sciences, outside of interdisciplinary studies, are not gender-sensitive and do not contain subjects that include the introduction of the gender perspective in other studies'. For example, gender responsible budgeting is not included in economic studies; thus, graduates do not possess expertise on this subject, although the Law on Gender Equality obliges public bodies to implement gender responsible budgeting.

In conclusion, two arguments came out as the results of this analysis. First, the evident progress that Serbia made in the previous period in engendering strategies and legislation has not contributed to a transformative change of the current gender regime and the subordinated position of women. Second, the gaps between reality and rhetoric are particularly prominent during the emergency situations, such as during the aforementioned pandemic, when gender issues were not considered a matter of importance. The Serbian response to the past pandemic was a litmus test for the State's real commitment to improving position of women and enhancing

gender equality.

There are slim chances that the situation could improve in this regard in the future. The positive expectations are based on two major gender equality instruments that were adopted in 2021: the Gender Equality Law and the Strategy for Gender Equality for the period from 2021 to 2030. Both the instruments brought significant novelties with respect to improving implementing, protecting, monitoring, and coordinating the gender equality policy. The Strategy for Gender Equality acknowledged that the gender aspects of the past pandemic were not fully recognised; thus, it imposed a duty on state bodies to take them into consideration in future planning and designing of policies and measures, particularly with respect to vulnerable groups. In addition, the Law on Planning System and the respective Decree oblige legislators and policy-makers to perform a gender impact assessment within the process of drafting strategies and legislation. The positive expectations are supported by the advocacy efforts of women's movement and knowledge produced by gender/women's studies.

However, the main obstacles to achieve *de facto* gender equality remain as follows: the strong patriarchal structure embedded in all spheres of public and private life, and the neo-liberal economic policy based on discrimination and exploitation of the working class, the poor and the powerless, which includes both women and men. The shrinking social role of the State has additionally contributed to the subordinated and disadvantaged position of women. Furthermore, the achievements in gender mainstreaming public policies so far have been threatened by recent further right-wing radicalisation of the society (Stojčić & Bobičić, 2023). Thus, proclaimed gender mainstreaming could not work for women

without a high level of gender awareness, particularly of public authorities, and full respect of human rights and dignity of all.

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URODNJAVANJE JAVNIH POLITIKA U SRBIJI: DA LI RADI ZA ŽENE?

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Rezime

Od 2010. godine sistemsko uvođenje rodne perspektive u donošenje, sprovođenje i praćenje javnih politika je jedan od glavnih strateških ciljeva Republike Srbije u oblasti unapređenja rodne ravnopravnosti. Evidentan napredak učinjen je u pogledu razvijanja normativnog i strateškog okvira rodne ravnopravnosti, naročito poslednjih godina usvajanjem Zakona o rodnoj ravnopravnosti (2021), Strategije za rodnu ravnopravnost za period 2021-2030 i Strategije za sprečavanje i borbu protiv rodno zasnovanog nasilja prema ženama i nasilja u porodici za period 2021-2025. Zakon o planskom sistemu i Zakon o budžetskom sistemu obavezuju budžetske korisnike da primenjuju rodno odgovorno budžetiranje. Uprkos tome, nije došlo do pomaka u ostvarivanju de facto rodne ravnopravnosti.

Rad ima za cilj da doprinese ispitivanju efikasnosti strategije urođnjavanja u pogledu eliminisanja rodnoeg režima koji počiva na strukturnoj neravnopravnosti žena i muškaraca. Zaključak je dvojak: prvo, evidentni napredak koji je država učinila u pogledu razvijanja normativnog i političkog okvira rodne ravnopravnosti nije doprineo rodno osetljivim transformativnim promenama; i drugo, jaz između proklamovanih politika i stvarnosti je naročito izražen u kriznim vremenima, kao u slučaju pandemije COVID-19, kada se pitanja veza-na za položaj žena i rodnu ravnopravnost po pravilu zane-maruju. Strategija urođnjavanja nije efikasna, jer je država ne sprovodi dosledno, a donosioci odluka ne smatraju rodnu ravnopravnost važnim pitanjem. Uočena je tendencija da će se ovaj jaz između normativnog i stvarnog u budućnosti nastaviti s obzirom na jačanje desnice i radikalizacije u društvu i nastavljanje vođenja neoliberalne ekonomske politike koja počiva na strukturnim nejednakostima i neravnoteži moći. Proklamovane politike rodne ravnopravnosti ne mogu da rade za žene sve dok se smatraju sporednim pitanjem, nevažnim za razvoj društva.