

OVERCOMING THE GENDER GAP IN THE CEE+ REGION

Reflections from CEE Her Workshop, 12-14 September 2022, Bratislava

While no country in Europe is close to achieving full gender equality, this is particularly true in the CEE+ region¹, where women and men face different realities, in the workplace, in public and in their private lives. According to [research from McKinsey & Co](#), the greatest gender inequalities in CEE relate to leadership positions, unpaid work, legal protection, and political representation. Although women make up more than 60% of college graduates in CEE, only about 37% of all managers are female. Women hold about one-fifth of executive roles in CEE and 8% of CEO positions. Furthermore, 44% of the leading companies in CEE do not have a single woman in an executive role. Along with the unequal share of paid and unpaid work and the role played by culture, traditions, expectations, and norms in the region, women in the EU [earn on average 14% less per hour](#), making the challenges to overcoming the gender gap manifold. Overall, women earn less, spend more time on unpaid work, and face a glass ceiling that few succeed in breaking.

As part of GLOBSEC's CEE Her Initiative, a 3-day workshop was held with 14 women from the CEE+ region from various professional backgrounds related to international relations. While discussing issues of gender equality and inclusion in the workplace especially, the group found common personal experiences with challenges related to gender equality, despite being from different countries in the region, such as Albania, Belarus, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Serbia, Slovakia, and Ukraine. Several reoccurring challenges and potential solutions were identified. While the lists are non-exhaustive, the reoccurrence of the challenges suggests a need for change.

CHALLENGES

"The significant over-representation of women in higher education (...) creates demographic problems..." - 2022 [Report](#) by the Hungarian State Audit Office (page 19).

1. Work/Life Balance and Motherhood

The first challenge relates to the lack of equality in how work/life balance issues impact women and men. There is still an inherent expectation among CEE+ populations that women should be mothers and bear most - if not all - responsibilities in the household. Besides growing expectations to enter the workforce to have double-income families, women are also expected to cook, clean the house and take care of children and the elderly, thus working double shifts of paid and unpaid work. [These expectations were particularly exacerbated during the COVID-19 crisis](#), as it became evident how household gender inequality impacted women, challenging them both mentally and physically. Although both women and men were forced to stay at home, the burden of household tasks remained on women, who were given an additional unpaid role as teachers (during online schooling). On top of [rising poverty among women](#) and an [increase in domestic violence against women](#), the COVID-19 crisis also highlighted the ["glass cliff"](#) phenomenon, which states that women are more likely to be appointed to leadership and decision-making roles in times of crises because the risk of failure is the highest.

These issues of work/life balance become particularly relevant to women when reaching the crossroads of motherhood and career development. Many [women in the CEE+ region consider having kids around the ages of 28-30](#) - a turning point for women in the workforce, as that is when they tend to get promoted. However, the societal expectations placed on women make them reconsider their choices, often forcing women to either give up their professional aspirations or motherhood altogether.

2. Pay Gap and Lack of Self-Confidence

A second challenge includes the persistent pay gap between men and women in the workforce. As mentioned above, on average, women in the EU earn 14% less per hour than men and are more likely to do more unpaid work than men. Interestingly, the participants at the workshop identified women's lack of confidence as a plausible contributor to the pay gap, along with other systemic issues.

¹ The CEE+ region comprises countries in Central and Eastern Europe in the EU, Western Balkans and the Eastern Neighbourhood, namely Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Estonia, Georgia, Hungary, Kosovo, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Ukraine.

[Although research has found that women show the same interest as men in getting promoted](#), they experience more barriers to achieving such results. There is evidence of a lack of confidence among women in the workforce when negotiating salaries, struggling to self-evaluate their worth. Research conducted by McKinsey & Co. found that 43% of interviewed women attributed their inability to make it to the top due to a personal lack of necessary skills. In contrast, men mainly claimed it was because promotions were not based on merit, demonstrating a lack of confidence on women's part. Whether because of societal discouragement, expectations, education, or other external reasons, women seem more often than men to show insecurity, thus not always pursuing promotions, salary increases, or appointments to leadership positions.

3. Stereotypes, Society and Lack of Implementation

Overcoming set stereotypes and traditional gender roles remain a serious challenge for women from the CEE+ region. Although some countries in the region have policies targeting gender inequality (such as [recommendations for gender quotas for boards of companies](#), as in the case of Estonia, Poland and Slovenia), and the EU framework for the protection [of gender equality](#) in the workplace is rather extensive, these protections appear to remain only "on paper", as implementation remains incomplete. The strong perception of women in the workplace as less valuable than men and stereotypes regarding women's abilities and contributions hinder any potential for implementing gender equality policies. In general, it seemed to be a common experience for the women in the workshop that their opinions in the workplace are less respected than those of men, and their voices less heard. Even when they are at the table, they are often not part of the conversation. In the CEE region, men are also less involved in the fight against inequality than in other regions of Europe, as women often talk to other women for fear of being "blamed" or from a perceived lack of interest and understanding from men. The persistence of stereotypes thus still appears to override any attempts at policy implementation. This issue shifts our focus to solutions, as it suggests that government intervention is not enough to fight inequalities.

Labour Law in Serbia – Systemic Gender Inequality

Most barriers related to women in the workplace in Serbia concern maternity leave. Under Serbian law, there is no statutory entitlement to parental leave, implying that the burden of leaving the workplace (and suffering the consequences of such a decision) always falls on the mother. Although the legal framework for maternity leave in Serbia is rather generous, implementation remains an issue. As a [2019 report carried out by the Kvinna Foundation](#) demonstrates, from the respondents who were pregnant during employment (22%), 28% of them had been denied their right to paid maternity leave, 38% felt they were treated differently upon return in the workplace for having taken maternity leave, and 15% had a lower pay upon return. It was found that employers in Serbia often take advantage of loopholes in the labour legal framework to bypass their legally binding responsibilities, thus highlighting the gap between regulations existing "on paper" but not being implemented by private and public institutions.

Besides issues of implementation for the protection of female employers in Serbia, the existing legal framework in the country also poses considerable limitations to female entrepreneurship. In a country, entrepreneurship drives economic growth and is an important means of deconstructing gender roles, expectations, and stereotypes within society. Moreover, in a framework where protections for female workers are often ignored or illegally bypassed, female entrepreneurship provides a guarantee for women as they can dictate their terms and conditions of work. Statutory limitations to female entrepreneurs are thus a cause of concern, as they limit all the benefits mentioned above. According to research conducted by [Cenat Za Mame in 2022](#), the most significant issues within the Serbian labour legal framework which negatively impact female entrepreneurs include:

- ▶ The inability to take maternity leave and childcare leave of up to two years for the third and subsequent children (unlike employed mothers, who have such a right);
- ▶ The inability of the father to use the mother entrepreneur's maternity leave in agreement with her instead of her (unlike employed mothers, who can come to such an agreement legally);
- ▶ A reduced basis for remuneration for female entrepreneurs in Article 18 of the law on financial support for families with children (unlike employed mothers, who are not affected by this);
- ▶ The inability to receive minimum earnings, regardless of past financial contributions (unlike employed mothers, who have such a right);
- ▶ The inability of women entrepreneurs to have full health insurance while unable to work, as well as the inability not to deregister their activity during that time (unlike employed mothers, who are fully ensured during the entire absence and face fewer barriers to reintegration into the workforce post-leave).

SOLUTIONS

1. Education

First and foremost, a societal shift in the perception of women has to be addressed at its roots; through education. New educational models should teach inclusivity and refrain from instilling stereotypes. Female students should be encouraged to consider their career aspirations as a possibility rather than a dream while being reassured that motherhood and a career are not mutually exclusive. Similarly, male students should be encouraged to respect female voices and support their female counterparts without adopting sexist stereotypes. On the same note, educators should themselves be educated on gender equality and inclusion, proper communication, and gender-sensitive language and visuals. A revolution in education is the first step in the fight against stereotypes, expectations put on women in household responsibilities, and harmful expectations put on men.

2. Policies

Good policies are vital to closing the gender gap in CEE+, even if not sufficient. Some possibilities to explore include:

- ▶ Making parental leave more accessible - in many countries, parental leave still falls on women. Paternal leave should be encouraged through state and private company policies implementation, and any form of exclusive paternal or maternal leave should be excluded. As paternal leave becomes more widespread, there would also be an inevitable shift in the perception of women, as men would relate more personally to their struggle and efforts in the household, thus shifting societal views.
- ▶ Including action plans for gender equality in the workplace. Action plans are strategic tools to help organisations achieve gender equality at work; having such frameworks in the workplace should thus become a commonly accepted pre-requisite for any institution.
- ▶ Creating motherhood and children-friendly policies in the workplace. For example, being able to bring a child to the office or on a business trip would make women's careers less complicated, especially those of single mothers, as they would not have to rely on family, friends, or babysitters for these issues. Another option would be for the maternity financial support to be transferred in payment to a babysitter, thus allowing the woman to return to work but at the same time have the child's expenses fully financed by the same funding scheme.
- ▶ Having a gender-sensitive approach to foreign investments. In some cases, foreign investments focus on specific industries which are female-dominated, such as textile industries. The non-regulation and monitoring of such investments sometimes lead to gross human rights violations suffered by female employees. Having a gender-sensitive approach would thus help prevent the occurrence of such incidents.

3. Raising Awareness, Mentorship and Leadership Workshops

Raising awareness about the challenges women face in the workplace while also highlighting opportunities and solutions is essential. Well-communicated and inclusive campaigns are necessary, with the involvement of women and men in the conversation. An increase in targeted funding to grass-root organisations, together with horizontal and vertical societal collaboration, can lead to impactful changes (collaboration between public and private sectors, NGOs, academia, expert community, CSOs, management and employees, etc.).

Mentorship schemes and leadership skills workshops are other tools for closing the gender gap. Having role models that women can empathise with is important for their career progression and for receiving valuable advice from women that have been in the same situation. It is also essential for leaders to be better mentors and to be better educated to encourage their employees at work, as healthy environments can only lead to better output and, thus to more career progression potential for women. This issue resonated with many women at the workshop, as they have struggled to find proper mentorship. Lastly, more leadership skills workshops should be put in place in both the public and private sectors, as women's lack of confidence can sometimes be resolved with a few valuable trainings. Competence-building measures and sensitive capacity-building should thus be at the top of all companies' and institutions' agendas so that women can feel part of the same encouraging and inspirational working environments as men.