



CHALLENGING THE NORMS

– GLOBAL STORIES OF WOMEN'S
ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Photo: Julien Wintberger

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With this publication, we want to highlight the impressive work of women’s rights organisations and feminist networks to increase economic gender equality and empower women economically in conflict-affected contexts. Many of the human rights that women are denied are economic rights. These include labour rights, house, land and property rights, the right to inherit, to register a company, to open a bank account and to apply for credit on the same terms as men. According to the World Bank, women globally have only 75 % of the economic rights that men enjoy. In some parts of the world, the figure is as low as 50 %.

As long as this inequality persists, women will not be free to fully participate in society and make decisions about their own lives.

In countries with weak institutions, in conflict and post-conflict contexts, women’s economic exclusion is often greater, and women without financial means are more vulnerable. Coupled with high levels of violence, this puts women and girls at greater risk of exploitation, gender-based violence (including rape and other forms of sexual violence), economic violence and trafficking.

As the UN Secretary-General’s report on Women, Peace and Security stated this year, *“the international community’s support to women is focused on microenterprises and microcredit, while large-scale reconstruction after conflict is dominated by men and overwhelmingly benefits men”*.¹

Over the years, the women’s movement has collectively achieved, through trial and error, myriad successes. Its knowledge and experience should be shared with global and regional institutions and need to feed into governments’ policies and actions. The gap between policymakers and those on the ground who know what is needed and when, must be bridged. Increased dialogue is crucial, not least because women’s rights organisations in many parts of the world operate in increasingly hostile environments.

Kvinna till Kvinna collaborates with remarkable, brave and visionary women human rights defenders. We are grateful that they have shared their stories and learnings with us. Now we are sharing them with you through this publication.

Photo: Viktor Gördsäter



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Petra Tötterman Andorff'.

Petra Tötterman Andorff
Secretary-General, The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation

¹ UN: Women and Peace and Security. Report of the Secretary-General, 2020. <https://undocs.org/pdf?symbol=en/S/2020/946>

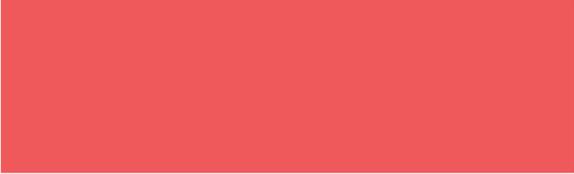


Photo: Wabobah Sali

Tupee Nagbo is the chairlady for the Fanti Town Community in Liberia. A single mother (widow) with 7 children. According to her, six of her children are out of high school and one is presently in school. Tupee is a businesswoman, she has been into fish business for over 25 years now, but due to COVID-19 she gone out of business.

Introduction

The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation is one of the world's leading women's rights organisations that work in conflict-affected areas. We offer financial and strategic support to more than 150 partner organisations in 20 countries, to strengthen women's influence and power. In the almost three decades that we have cooperated closely with local women's movements in conflict regions, we have seen the extent to which economic gender inequality holds women back. In this new publication, we illustrate how women's rights organisations around the world are working to empower women economically. The chapters that follow contain five stories that introduce you to the work of some of Kvinna till Kvinna's partner organisations. Read on, and discover how these women human rights defenders are defying the status quo.

Countless women around the world have unequal access to the labour market, few economic rights and little control over resources. Accessing work in formal sectors is difficult for them: traditional norms permeate the labour market and reserve occupations for either men or women. Men are seen as breadwinners, women as carers who look after children and the elderly. Gender-based violence, including sexual violence, further curtails women's economic opportunities. In post-conflict or conflict-affected areas – where societies tend to be fragile and institutions weak – women without financial means are even more vulnerable.

To address this problem, empowering women economically is crucial. Having an income of one's own increases one's independence, self-confidence and decision-making power, both within the household and in the community at large. This in turn increases opportunities and the ability to participate in society, including in peace negotiations. Having financial resources also makes it easier to leave an abusive relationship. As such, women's economic empowerment is key to ending gender-based violence and achieving lasting peace, meaningful participation and sustainable development. These intersecting issues are inextricably linked with each other.

As the Covid-19 pandemic worsened economic

gender inequality in recent months, we believe this publication is more relevant than ever.

Overcoming economical inequality

To reach economic gender equality, measures need to be taken on many different levels. We need to increase women's economic opportunities (access to resources and income), strengthen institutions (laws and policies) and increase women's power and agency (norms and gender roles). This not only requires women's basic needs to be fulfilled, but also calls for deep-rooted power structures, inequalities and social relations to be addressed – the two types of change go hand in hand.

In practice, efforts may include increasing women's decision-making power and resource allocation in the household; combatting gender-based violence; promoting education and skills development for girls; encouraging women's participation in politics; promoting gender budgeting; and fostering gender-sensitive macroeconomic institutions. The informal sector will also need to be prioritised:

FACTS

The global gender-based gap is 68.6 %, which is aggregated statistics in economic participation and opportunity, health outcomes, educational attainment, and political empowerment.

(World Bank, 2021, Women, Business and Law, p.6)

Globally, only 49 % of women are participating in the labour force.

(<https://www.ilo.org/infostories/en-GB/Stories/Employment/barriers-women#global-gap>)

In developing countries 92 % of women workers are informally employed.

(ILO, 2019 Women and Men in the Informal Economy – statistical brief, p.5)

Globally, less than 15 % of women are landowners.

(Women's Land Rights – Stand For Her Land Campaign (stand4herland.org))

It is estimated that the total number of people living in poverty could have increased by between 200 million and 500 million in 2020.

(Oxfam, 2021, The Inequality Virus: Bringing together the work torn apart by coronavirus through fair, just and sustainable economy, p.11)

most labour in this sector is done by women, but the sector is characterised by an appalling lack of social protection and regulation.

In recent months, Covid-19 has had devastating economic consequences for women. Space for civil society organisations (and women's rights organisations in particular) has also shrunk even further due to lockdowns and restrictions. Many organisations fear restrictions will turn out to be permanent, which would affect women's ability to organise and advocate for economic gender equality.

In this context, macroeconomic efforts play a more important role than ever. International financial institutions are investing vast sums of money into post-Covid recovery: their analyses and reform packages need to have a strong gender perspective. We urgently need a national and international feminist economy, an economy that takes into account care work and reproductive work.²

About this publication

The five stories in this publication are based on interviews with women leaders from Africa, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the South Caucasus and the Western Balkans. These women hold different positions in society: they may be farmers, educated professionals or precarious workers like grocers and traders. Some of them have experienced gender-based violence. Some live in cities, others in rural areas. All of them are affected by patriarchal structures and face discrimination on multiple fronts.

Reading through these women's stories, you will gain insight into inequalities and power relations in the labour market. You will get to see how control over in-

come is linked to legislation and state regulations. How social norms constrain women's agency, while institutional structures keep them from economic power. But you will also read about inspiring ways to expand women's livelihoods and income. The stories in this publication illustrate how change can happen both at the community level and the individual level. They emphasise the importance of creating safe spaces where women can share experiences, discuss strategies and boost their agency. And they demonstrate the importance of advocacy in paving the way to lasting structural change.

While this publication does not focus on the coronavirus pandemic per se, its different chapters clearly illustrate Covid-19's effect on women's livelihoods, paid and unpaid work, health and physical safety.

Five roads to empowerment

1) Our first case study is set in **Rwanda**, where the vast majority of women earn a living in the informal sector – a sector characterised by its lack of economic rights, scant social protection and almost non-existent possibility for workers to organise and claim rights. In this context, Rwandan women farmers, with the support of a local women's rights organisation, have taken steps to influence grassroots budgeting processes. Together, they make sure women's needs and interests are taken into account and reflected by budget allocations.

2) While many women in **Jordan** are well educated, few women are part of the formal labour market. One of the main reasons for this is the fact that women are expected to be caretakers and struggle to access childcare when they do take on employment. Jordanian law demands that companies provide childcare for their employees, but this is rarely enforced by companies or monitored by the state. That is why one women's rights organisation used advocacy and communication to raise awareness. As a result, Jordan's government has started implementing the legal provision in question, which has increased the number of childcare centres.

3) Just like in many other places, women in the **Western Balkans** frequently find themselves at the bottom of the hierarchy in the formal labour market. They are forced to take on precarious and low-paying jobs, work in abysmal conditions that violate labour rights and suffer (sexual) harassment in the workplace. The pandemic has only exacerbated this discrimination. Our third case study

² Naila Kabeer, Shahra Razavi and Yana van der Meulen Rodgers: "Feminist Economic Perspectives on the COVID-19 Pandemic." Feminist Economist, Routledge, 2021.

highlights the economic inequalities that grocery store workers, tradeswomen and textile workers face – and shows how a cross-regional coalition is using research-based advocacy to change that.

4) A story from **Syria** introduces us to the country's female journalists: front-line workers who report the news even as war rages on around them. Because of social norms and male dominance in the media sector, these journalists are undermined and not taken seriously as professionals, paid a lower salary, and harassed at work. A local women's rights network supports female journalists by helping them claim higher wages, challenging gender stereotypes in journalism, and setting an alternative example for the entire sector.

5) The fifth and final case study takes us to the **South Caucasus**, where violence in different shapes – from structural violence to violence at home – is part of daily life for many women. Conflicts in the region have also displaced many women, leaving them with few resources, in uncertain situations. Women's rights organisations and women rights activists in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia create opportunities for the most vulnerable women to survive the violence they face, by encouraging social entrepreneurship and supporting the establishment of small businesses.

Part of the work carried out by the women's rights organisations and women rights activists, is to move beyond focusing only on businesses and income-generation, and to for example address the need for childcare centres and initiate dialogue with the local government.

Lesson learnt

The women's rights organisations and women rights activists we interviewed for this publication have many things to teach us. Below, we summarise three key conclusions that stood out for us.

One of the main lessons is the **crucial role women's rights organisation play in advancing women's economic empowerment and promoting economic gender equality**. These organisations show us that there are alternatives to mainstream models of development. They have developed feminist recruitment policies, for example, which foster equal workplaces with social protection; they offer safe spaces where women can share their experiences and learn about their rights; they conduct research and provide statistics on economic gender inequality; and they have developed



participatory ways of including women's diverse interests in budget processes. To reach economic gender equality, we need real, systematic change – and women's rights organisations and women rights activists are the driving force behind that change.

Simultaneously, the stories in this publication show **that women's economic empowerment is rarely achieved in isolation**, it is closely linked to other processes of change: Preventing gender-based violence, increasing women's decision-making power in the household, strengthening their inheritance, land ownership and property rights, encouraging their political participation and influence over peacebuilding negotiations, etc. All of this both strengthens the position of women *and* empowers them to claim their economic rights and increase their livelihoods, job opportunities and income. One goes hand in hand with the other. The same applies to networking: building coalitions with other actors like trade unions goes a long way to advancing economic gender equality.

Finally, this publication reminds us of **the importance of advocacy**. In all four regions, case studies underline how advocacy is necessary to draw attention to economic gender inequality, improve labour rights legislation, strengthen services and make budgeting more gender-sensitive. During the pandemic in particular, women's rights activists, organisations and researchers have had to act as watchdogs, to highlight the gendered consequences of Covid-19 and call for women's interests and rights to be included in the response of world leaders and international financial institutions.



Photo: Bertine Mugabe

“Now I understand the value of budgeting”

WOMEN FARMERS AND GENDER-RESPONSIVE BUDGETING IN **RWANDA**



Photo: Aline Nwenshuti

Duhozanye is training women to do gender budgeting.

Opening up avenues for women to participate in decision-making and budgeting processes is an effective road to economic gender equality. Rwandan women’s rights organisation Duhozanye supports low-income women farmers in rural areas by showing them how local budgets are developed. As a result, women farmers have started to organise themselves in saving & lending groups in their villages – a collective way to raise their voices and increase their power. Duhozanye also raises awareness of women farmers’ rights and calls for budget administrators to respect women’s needs.

Women’s access to and control over resources, especially land, is critical to economic gender equality. But globally, women own less than 15 % of all land.³ At first sight, Rwanda appears to be a progressive outlier: by law, women have equal access to land. As a result, 26 % of the country’s land is owned by women, 14 % by men. The remaining 60 % is in the hands of married couples.⁴ Despite these equal land rights, however, challenges persist for Rwandan women farmers. They have less of a say within their family on how land should be used, and their needs are rarely prioritised. This illustrates the fact that women’s economic empowerment is not just about access to resources: it is also about control over those resources.

Budgets disregard women’s concerns

In Rwanda, local budgets are drawn up in two different phases. During the planning phase, villagers get together to discuss their budget needs. This is the

time for women farmers and other groups (like young people or farmers with disabilities) to participate and voice their priorities. During the second phase, the villagers’ demands are taken up at the district level. District administrators choose which priorities to include in the budget, and how to distribute the money.

While the process is inclusive in theory, reality is different. Women struggle to take part in decision-making and their concerns are often discarded along the way. The eventual budgets usually only allocate small quantities of seeds and pesticides to women, or low-quality supplies. Public works projects, which could be an alternative way for women who do not own land to earn a living, are usually executed by men alone.

Learning how to plan and track budgets



I always felt excluded because of poverty. Duhozanye’s trainings taught me about saving and about the value of budgeting to plan ahead for my family.”

JACQUELINE MUKAMUSONI

Rwandan local women’s rights organisation Duhozanye realised that the lack of gender-sensitive

³ <https://stand4herland.org/resource/wlr-infographic/>

⁴ Beijing+25, Rwanda country report.

budgeting and women's low participation in economic decision-making processes was a problem. To support women farmers, the organisation began to offer trainings. Women learnt about participatory budget planning and tracking through 'community score cards' (cards on which they can write down their priorities during village meetings, with space to specify their advocacy needs). Duhozanye encouraged participants to be pro-active and seek out information about economic opportunities.

“ We didn't know what a budget was. Now we understand what it is, how the planning process works and what our role is in making sure our input is taken into consideration. Most importantly, we've learned that a budget should meet the needs of both men and women.”

JACQUELINE MUKAMUSONI

Duhozanye's trainings helped women understand why it was so important for them to take part in budgeting processes. The community score cards now let them identify which of their needs are or aren't included in the budget. The women were empowered to contribute to discussions, monitor whether their needs were included in the budget, and hold local leaders accountable when budgets were implemented incorrectly. As a result, the women now receive higher-quality seeds and fertiliser and secured promises that future budgets would be more inclusive. By participating in village planning meetings, they found out about economic opportunities and community work offered by the government, which enabled them to apply for these.

Duhozanye also supported local women by highlighting different ways for them to increase their land ownership, for example through legal marriage. In Rwanda, married couples enjoy joint ownership of their land: without a marriage certificate, women in a relationship have no legal claim to the land they help cultivate.

Saving & lending groups as safe spaces

With the support of Duhozanye, many women farmers – who until then had worked alone – also joined forces and formed so-called 'saving & lending

groups'. These groups make it easier to get loans and start small businesses together. Duhozanye provided practical training on cooperative management, business planning, entrepreneurship, accounting and marketing. It also pointed the women in the direction of financial institutions that support women's small income-generating initiatives.

The saving & lending groups became safe spaces: a place for women to brainstorm, exchange experiences and talk through problems, such as gender-based violence. Thanks to Duhozanye, the women farmers' confidence soared. They were encouraged to stand up for themselves and hold duty bearers accountable. Both at home and in the community at large, women increasingly participated in decision-making.

Together, the Rwandan women farmers discovered the power of participation and raised their voices to demand economic gender equality.

“ My husband went to live with another woman, leaving me with two kids and no income. I didn't have anyone to talk to. Today, I'm in a group where I get to share ideas and experiences with other women, and I have become self-reliant.”

JEANNETTE NYIRANKUNDIMANA





“In the future, I want to be a strong woman who participates in the development of the country and in decision-making in my own home.”

SPECIOSE MUKARURANGWA lives in Nyanza in central Rwanda. Before joining Duhozanye’s project, she was a subsistence farmer who grew crops for her family. She used to be too busy trying to make ends meet to take part in any local decision-making meetings. A lack of confidence too held her back. Just like many other women, Speciose missed out on opportunities because she felt unable to attend the community meetings.

After Duhozanye’s budgeting trainings, Speciose realised that planning processes should involve both women and men. Through score cards, she learnt how to track whether leaders kept their promises.

“Duhozanye’s trainings made me aware that women were not benefiting from the opportunities that were available. Now that I understand the importance of participation, I know how to advocate for the issues we face as women.”

Today, Speciose leads a group of 15 women farmers. The group plans to meet up to identify shared challenges and submit a list of them to the authorities.

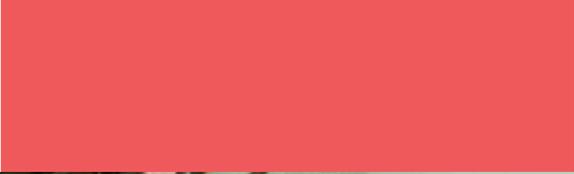
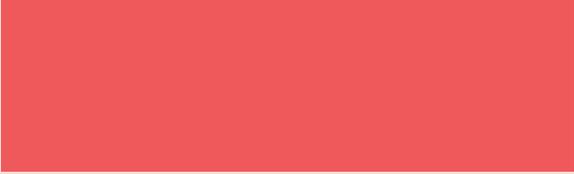


Photo: Christopher Herwig

“Advocate, advocate, advocate”

ACCESS TO CHILDCARE TO BOOST WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN **JORDAN**

In Jordan, women’s participation in the labour market is limited because of structural and cultural barriers, limited public transportation, unequal pay, discriminatory policies – and a lack of childcare. Women’s right organisation Sadaqa addresses the latter by advocating working parents’ rights, raising awareness, lobbying for legal protection, making affordable childcare available to all, and offering training and upskilling opportunities to improve the quality of childcare services.

A costly gender gap in Jordan’s labour force

Jordanian women outnumber and outperform their male counterparts at university. Despite their educational achievements, however, women are much more likely to be unemployed or drop out of the labour force than men. As a result, Jordan is one of the countries with the lowest female labour force participation, lowest productivity and highest economic gender inequality in the world.⁵ In fact, the International Labour Organization estimates

that the gender gap in the country’s labour force resulted in a GDP loss of USD 8 billion for Jordan in 2018.⁶

There are many barriers that prevent Jordanian women from entering the workforce, but childcare is a crucial one. The Jordanian childcare sector has been suffering from neglect for years. Reasons include weak public policy, a lack of governmental support and infringements of the rights of workers, who face poor working conditions and have neither social nor union protection. The childcare sector is perceived as being of little value: most of the people working in it are women, and care work (whether paid or unpaid) is still seen as an inferior kind of labour – both in Jordan and many other places.

Working mothers unite

It is in this context that the women’s rights organisation Sadaqa was founded. A group of working mothers united with the goal of increasing women’s participation in the labour market. Sadaqa’s founders identified Article 72 provision in Jordan’s

Trainings by Sadaqua.



Photo: Sadaqa

⁵ Trading Economy: Labor Force Participation Rate – Asia. <https://tradingeconomics.com/country-list/labor-force-participation-rate?continent=asia>

⁶ International Labour Organization: “Promoting Women’s Economic Empowerment in Jordan” fact sheet, 2019.

labour law that requires employers to provide free childcare if their staff includes more than 20 women. But enforcement of Article 72 was almost non-existent. Few working mothers were aware of the provision. The Ministry of Labour did not provide any implementation guidelines to companies, and employers themselves had little incentive to comply except for a JOD 500 fine (approx. EUR 600).

Sadaqa decided on a strategy for change: Advocate, advocate, advocate! Together with other women's rights actors, the organisation began to campaign for the enforcement of Article 72 and the recognition of childcare as a public good back in 2011. Eight years down the road, in May 2019, Sadaqa's efforts paid off. Article 72 was successfully amended to no longer apply to mothers only: referring to fathers as well made it more inclusive. The government also developed guidelines that describe different childcare models (from on-site childcare at work to community-based childcare) to prevent Article 72 from negatively affecting women's employment. A year later, Sadaqa managed to further strengthen social protection for families: working mothers are now entitled to six months of subsidised childcare, and childcare centres that cater to working mothers receive financial support.

Childcare centres hit by Covid-19

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out, the economic effect of lockdowns and restrictions forced many childcare centres in Jordan to close their doors – sometimes for good. This was not only disastrous for the childcare sector itself, but also reduced women's economic participation. When women returned to work once measures had been lifted, they had even fewer childcare options. Sadaqa took it upon itself to respond to working mothers' needs. The organisation financially supported 11 childcare centres to help them stay afloat. It also called on Jordan's government to create a rescue fund to support the sector during and after the pandemic.

These short-term emergency efforts paved the way for Sadaqa's current campaign, which calls for long-term structural change that meets the needs of childcare centres and caregivers. Sadaqa's continued advocacy, direct financial support and push to expand the country's childcare subsidies will help Amani and many other women in the sector sustain their projects – to close the gender gap for working families around the country.

“If it weren't for Sadaqa, I would've had to close the childcare centre.”

Single mother Amani lives in east Amman with her three children. Understanding the challenges working mothers face, she decided to establish a childcare centre in her neighbourhood. She invested years of savings and took out loans. After a year of hard work and planning, the centre could open its doors. Amani hired four caregivers and one helper: together, they welcomed 30 children in a three-room facility with an outdoor play area.

But then Covid-19 hit and Jordan went into lockdown. Parents stopped paying monthly fees as they no longer went into work. The

centre received a punishing financial blow. Amani was forced to spend the rest of her savings to cover rent and interest costs. Her staff sacrificed part of their wages to keep the workplace running. Amani, like many others, hoped Jordan's government would step in. But she found herself trying to weather the storm alone.

Eventually, Sadaqa came to the rescue: the organisation had seen the sector struggle, and knew it had been at risk of collapsing long before the pandemic. Amani's centre was one of the 11 centres Sadaqa managed to save.

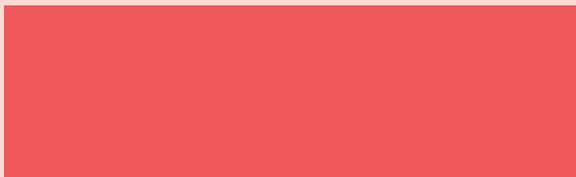


Photo: Miro Jurevska Ilieva

LTW activists Ristovska and Dishoski distribute brochures among textile workers.

Gender-based discrimination of workers

WESTERN BALKANS ADVOCACY DURING THE PANDEMIC

Economic gender inequality persists across the Western Balkans. Structural barriers prevent women from finding secure, long-term employment, gender-based discrimination is rife, and women's labour rights are regularly violated. Local women's rights organisations are at the forefront of the fight to address this. Globally, the pandemic served to exacerbate these issues, putting women in even more precarious positions than they were already in. In 2018, a coalition of six Western Balkans organisations was formed within the 'Furthering Women's Labour Rights' project.⁷ From the local to the European level, they use advocacy and evidence-based research to empower women economically.

“At a job interview, I was told that the work the company did could not be performed by women, because women are less intelligent than men.”

WOMAN, NORTH MACEDONIA⁸

In recent months, the Coalition has focused on the gendered aspects of the coronavirus pandemic. Just like elsewhere, Covid-19 put women workers across the Western Balkans in a more precarious position and highlighted pre-existing inequalities. So-called 'front-line workers', for example (like grocery store employees and food workers – most of which are women), were forced to keep going to work during the pandemic, which put them at particular risk of contracting the virus. The Coalition lobbied key stakeholders across the region to put women's economic empowerment on the agenda during the pandemic. Their advocacy initiatives were rooted in evidence-based research and the years of experience of the Coalition's members. women's economic empowerment on the agenda during the pandemic. Their advocacy initiatives were rooted in evidence-based research and the years of experience of the Coalition's members.

“In my job as a legal representative at a bank, I have been paid €150 less than my male colleagues in the same position for the last three years.”

WOMAN, KOSOVO⁹

Advocacy at the national and European level

Advocacy is an important part of the Coalition's work. The regional partner organisations that together make up the Coalition advocate towards relevant stakeholders and decision-makers and raise public awareness through campaigns.

In Montenegro, for example, the Women's Rights Centre submitted a written appeal to owners of consumer goods stores, demanding that the stores' cashiers – most of which were women – would be given safety equipment to protect themselves from contracting the virus.

Across the border, the Kosovo Women's Network (which heads the Coalition) organised a discussion with government officials, based on its analysis of Covid-19's impact on women's labour participation. It presented a series of policy recommendations¹⁰ for gender-sensitive Covid-19 relief efforts.¹¹ The government, the Kosovo Women's Network suggested, should institutionalise gender-responsive budgeting and consult women's rights organisations when designing coronavirus measures. Recommendations towards municipal governments included making budget hearings public and consulting with civil society on how to reach diverse/marginalised groups of women.

“I'm a construction engineer. When I worked in the private sector, I was never given any facilities to manage, because – according to my bosses – women cannot lead projects.”

WOMAN, KOSOVO¹²

⁷ The coalition unites six organisations in Albania, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro and North Macedonia. Kvinna till Kvinna implements additional activities in Serbia. The 'Furthering Women's Labour Rights' project is part of a regional programme funded by the EU and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency.

⁸ Leshoska, V. et al.: Gender-Based Discrimination and Labour in North Macedonia, Reactor - Research in Action, 2019.

⁹ Leshoska, V. et al.: Gender-Based Discrimination and Labour in North Macedonia, Reactor - Research in Action, 2019.

¹⁰ <https://womensnetwork.org/publications/the-pandemic-knows-no-gender-2/>

¹¹ This was done in partnership with civil society organisations in the region and the Gender-Responsive Budgeting network.

¹² Banjska, I.: Gender-Based Discrimination and Labour in Kosovo, Kosovo Women's Network, 2019. https://womensnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/GBD-Labour-Kosovo_ISBN-978-9951-737-31-9_FINAL.pdf

In Albania, the Gender Alliance for Development Centre organised a series of advocacy activities that addresses women's labour rights. Its focus was on textile workers, as Albania's textile industry mainly employs women. Activities included a regional 'open forum' on women's employment status, a report¹³ (distributed across the country) with women's stories, a survey on the pandemic's consequences¹⁴, and a national conference¹⁵ on challenges women face in the labour market, especially during the pandemic.

At the European level too, the members of the Coalition took up women's economic empowerment in the context of the pandemic. Much of the input the six partner organisations submitted to their countries' European Commission Progress Reports¹⁶ for 2020 focused on Covid-19.

Turning research into reports in Serbia

Partner organisations in the Coalition continuously collect data and conduct research to document economic gender inequality in the Western Balkans. A 11 Initiative for Social and Economic Rights (A 11) conducted interviews with Serbian women who worked on the front line of the pandemic, like those in the food or trade industry. These women often face precarious conditions. As Covid-19 broke out, their lot appeared to be all but forgotten by the government. A 11's report, 'The Position of Tradeswomen During the Pandemic of Covid-19'¹⁷, showed how these frontline workers endured longer working hours during the pandemic and had little to no access to public transportation during lockdown, while employers implemented neither social distancing nor health & safety measures.¹⁸ Despite these infringements, many of the interviewed women confessed to being willing to put up with almost anything for fear of losing their jobs.

Evidence-based recommendations

Serbian organisation A 11's research fuelled its advocacy efforts to convince Serbian decision-makers to implement a more gender-sensitive response

 I don't even know what my wage base is or how much I earn per working hour. Especially because I work more hours than stated in my contract. Some months, you might get a 20 % raise but still earn less money than the month before when you didn't get a raise."

WOMAN, SERBIA¹⁹

to Covid-19. Among other things, the organisation recommended:

- Amending existing discrimination laws to allow institutions like the Labour Inspectorate or the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality to lodge complaints on behalf of discriminated parties, to prevent employers from retaliating;
- Giving trade unions and civil society organisations that promote the rights of workers a significant role in advancing structural change. These actors are currently the only voices that warn against prioritising economic progress over labour rights;
- Securing access to sustainable core funding for civil society. This allows coalitions and networks to contribute to a more diverse, knowledge-based women's movement and exchange experiences with each other.

Together, the members of the Coalition (which also includes the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly Banja Luka, Bosnia & Herzegovina and Reactor - Research in Motion, North Macedonia) have performed the essential role of watchdog in recent months. They have kept key stakeholders from the municipal to the European level on their toes and reminded them of the importance of women's economic empowerment – even in times of global chaos.

¹³ http://www.gadc.org.al/media/files/upload/Raport_Grate%20e%20varfera%20te%20Fasonerive.pdf

¹⁴ https://www.gadc.org.al/media/files/upload/GADC_PPT%20Conference%20OPI%2019.1.2021_FINAL.pdf

¹⁵ <https://mailchi.mp/449568cb098e/press-release-women-workers-rights-in-the-textile-and-footwear-factories-covid-19-and-the-2021-perspective>

¹⁶ EC Country Progress Reports are published on an annual basis as part of the EU Enlargement Package for each of the candidate countries. The annual reports assess the situation in these countries, evaluate whether the countries have implemented the necessary reforms and monitor whether they meet the accession criteria.

¹⁷ Mitrović, M. et al.: The Position of Tradeswomen During the Pandemic of COVID-19, A 11 Initiative for Economic and Social Rights, 2021. https://www.a11initiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/The-Position-of-Tradeswomen-During-The-Pandemic-of-Covid-19_Spreads_FINAL.pdf

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Training of journalists in Turkey.



Reporting from the frontline

GENDERING JOURNALISM AND MEDIA IN SYRIA AND BEYOND

The media can play a transformative role in societies – including for gender equality. That is why the Syrian Female Journalist Network (SFJN) challenges gender stereotypes in journalism and the media. As a feminist employer, they provide not just training and support but an alternative business model for the entire sector. SFJN's goal is to create a nurturing environment, provide women journalists with economic opportunities and advocate their rights.

The gender gap in global media

Mass media and social media have a significant influence on how we view gender issues. According to the Global Media Monitoring Project, progress on closing the gender gap in media content remains extremely slow around the world. Global media still communicate images and messages that perpetuate gender inequality and women remain underrepresented in news coverage. This hampers efforts to end economic, political, social and cultural discrimination against women.

In some countries, journalists' security is an additional obstacle to gender equality in the media sector. Many women journalists and media workers face harassment both at work and in society. Online violence is on the rise as well. In Syria, which is still an active war zone, even journalist's physical safety is often at risk.

“Journalists who work in conflict-affected areas can suffer from trauma and leave the sector because it isn't safe. All of the work done to empower them professionally and economically can be lost in a second. That is why it's so important to ensure women journalists' security and offer them psychosocial support, so they can stay in the sector and advance their career.”

RULA ASAD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SFJN

Changing society by changing the media

In 2013, Syrian journalist Rula Asad co-founded the Syrian Female Journalist Network (SFJN) to contribute to change in her country. The idea was to set up an alternative media outlet that would lead by example and challenge male dominance in the sector.



Realising how important intersectionality and inclusivity were, the organisation decided from the start to not only work with academically trained women journalists. SFJN also welcomed so-called 'citizen journalists': private citizens-turned-activists who report the news and produce content without being professional journalists. When war broke out in Syria in 2011, these citizen journalists fulfilled an important reporting role.

Initially, SFJN intended to mainly focus on social change. As the years went on, however, the organisation realised the extent to which its activities contributed to women's economic empowerment as well.

Fair pay and capacity-building

As an employer, SFJN itself has created a nurturing environment that allows women media workers to grow. Rula, who is now the organisation's Executive Director, is very proud of the new business model SFJN has developed: a model based on protection and fairness. The organisation practices feminist recruitment, for example, prioritising women during recruitment processes. It also provides its employees with maternity leave, acknowledging how challenging it is for mothers to re-enter the labour market after giving birth.

Fair salaries are another priority for SFJN, as women are often underpaid in Syria's media sector. SFJN pays its employees well – partly to assure that, if a worker ever leaves SFJN, her next employer will pay her the same or more. The organisation also lobbies for higher salaries for women in the sector at large and works to stamp out the practice of employers asking women to work for free. Rula and her colleagues at SFJN believe fair remuneration is particularly important in Syria because

many women journalists and media activists in the country produce content on the frontline of battle zones. They risk being threatened or even killed because of what they write. In the case of citizen journalists, being paid for the work they do helps women become economically independent.

SFJN also provides plenty of capacity-development opportunities. It shares job opportunities with women journalists, offers them training and facilitates networking with media outlets and press offices in other organisations.

One content creator, for example, was coached and mentored by SFJN for years. Today, she produ-

“This is sensitive work because it highlights gaps in media institutions. We work hard to build trust with these institutions and avoid shaming them.”

RULA ASAD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SFJN

Photo: Mohan Dehne



Rula Asad

“The international community needs to reassess its lack of short-term and project-based funding: to allow organisations to have a long-term impact on unstable contexts, offering sustainable core support is crucial.”

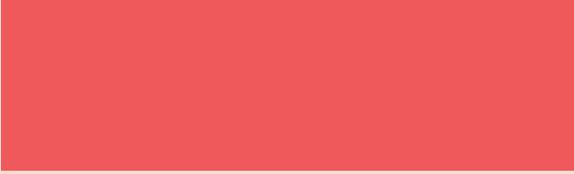
RULA ASAD, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF SFJN

ces her own shows and is head of her department. Another woman, a photojournalist and activist from Idlib, was trained by SFJN to become a trainer herself. Today, she works for the organisation herself, coaching women activists who are interested in reporting from hard-to-reach areas. Many of the women she trained went on to get journalist jobs in Idlib. Successes like this may be slow in the making, but are precisely the kind of sustainable stepping stones needed to create lasting change:

Transforming the entire media landscape

With the support of The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, SFJN implements the Gender Radar project. It focuses on making the Syria media sector as a whole more gender-sensitive, both in terms of content production and in terms of the inner workings of media outlets. That way, individual women are empowered while women's representation in general improves. Through Gender Radar, SFJN assesses the extent to which media outlets' HR policies promote diversity. It checks whether women have short-term or annual contracts, whether they are given maternity leave, how their salaries compare to those of male colleagues and whether women occupy decision-making positions. In terms of media content, SFJN monitors output, evaluates editorial policies, analyses whether there are any patterns that contribute to oppression and work to change these.

Over the years, SFJN has turned from an informal support network of women journalists into an organisation that provides a new model for the entire media sector in Syria. Thanks to SFJN, journalists across the country are learning to produce content not just from a journalistic perspective, but from a feminist perspective. To make the media sector more inclusive, Syria doesn't need gender experts, SFJN argues: it needs journalists who are gender-aware themselves.



Photos: Spivak, Manushkin

Businesswomen defying expectations

SUSTAINABLE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN
THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

The pandemic and the consequences of the second Nagorny-Karabakh war heightened gender inequality across the South Caucasus. Many women were dealt a harsh economic blow, losing their jobs and struggling to keep their businesses afloat. This chapter combines three stories of women's rights activists and organisations in Azerbaijan, Georgia and Armenia. Throughout the pandemic, these actors kept working to end violence against women and support peacebuilding in the region by strengthening women's economic empowerment.

AZERBAIJAN – Digital marketing amid a pandemic

The combination of the coronavirus and violence in Nagorny-Karabakh made 2020 an extremely difficult year for many women in Azerbaijan. With the support of the individual women's networks and self-support groups like Sumgayit Discussion Club (SDC), however, they found opportunities to grow and succeed economically.

For almost two decades, women activists, GBV survivors and women human rights defenders are supporting each other in a self-organised community-driven self-support group in Sumgayit, the second-largest city in Azerbaijan, located near the Caspian Sea, about 31 kilometres from the capital, Baku. After the First Nagorny-Karabakh War, the city became home to a number of Azerbaijani internally displaced persons. The independent self-organised women's network has three main goals: empowering women economically, combatting gender-based violence and contributing to the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It sees its goals as interconnected, with women's economic empowerment a solid foundation for achieving the rest.

“Being economically independent makes it easier for women to escape violent environments and participate in and contribute to peace talks.”

SEVDA MAMMADOVA, WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVOCATE AND ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF THE INDEPENDENT NETWORK FOR WOMEN IN SUMGAYIT

For internally displaced women in particular, economic gender equality can make all the difference. Sevda Mammadova, women rights activist from Sumgayit, says many women who had to flee their homes in recent months worry their needs will be

forgotten as peace talks are held. If they had economic power, they would be more likely to get a say in peace negotiations.

When lockdown was enforced in Sumgayit, a town outside of Baku on the shores of the Caspian Sea, women faced painful economic consequences. Many local women run small and medium-sized businesses: they ended up with virtually no income, indebted to banks and unable to pay their employees. Ever innovative and entrepreneurial, the women of Sumgayit decided to go digital. They created social media accounts for their businesses and moved their operations online. This proved particularly efficient for food and delivery services. As the pandemic dragged on, women used digital channels not just to keep their businesses afloat but even to expand them.

Sevda was impressed by the entrepreneurs' inventiveness. She had always worried about Azerbaijani women's lack of marketing success: while the women produce high-quality projects, they struggled to sell them and make their businesses sustainable.

“During the pandemic, we got better at strategic thinking. Now, the women are focused on achieving meaningful and lasting economic empowerment by themselves.”

SEVDA MAMMADOVA, CHAIR OF THE SDC





Roleplays debates for school children arranged by SDC to challenge gender norms.

GEORGIA – An ambitious To Do List

In 2019, the Anti-Violence Network of Georgia (AVNG) founded Anastasia, a social enterprise that provides catering services during training and events. Anastasia is the first social enterprise in Georgia to employ victims/survivors of domestic violence to support their fledgling economic independence.

Many Georgians don't take businesses run by women seriously and scoff at the idea of women as entrepreneurs. But AVNG defies expectations: it has thrived in the two years since it was founded. By continuously developing new skills and working towards financial independency, the organisation reduces economic gender inequality.

During the pandemic, AVNG rebranded and finetuned its business plans. The organisation's To Do list now includes developing specific skills (cooking, digital and financial literacy), gaining business and marketing experience, strengthening its network, establishing relationships with key stakeholders and local authorities, and becoming better at drafting project proposals to diversify its donor base. The latter item already has a checkmark in front of it: AVNG recently found three major corporate sponsors. During the pandemic, the organisation also expanded its online presence, which boosted its visibility.

” Our goal is to make our social enterprise sustainable and contribute towards meaningful economic empowerment. Financially independent women can escape gender-based violence – and we are determined to achieve that!”

NATO SHAVLAKDAZE, CHAIRWOMAN AT AVNG

AVNG does more for its target group (victims/survivors of domestic violence) than simply offering job opportunities: it also works to offer social protection. In Tbilisi's Gldani district, the organisation is currently trying to secure funding to set up a childcare centre. During the pandemic, many of the AVNG's employees struggled to combine work with taking care of their family. This highlighted the vulnerability of Georgian women's position in the labour market. If they had access to childcare, AVNG's employees could work full-time without having to worry about the wellbeing of their children.

Photo: Maja Brand



Women are producing food for the AVNG's catering service.



Photo: Spitak Manushak

Oil produced by Spitak Manushak

ARMENIA – Producing eco-friendly oils

Just like other countries in the South Caucasus, Armenia was pushed off the path of progress by Covid-19 and conflict in the region. In Spitak, a small town in the northern province of Lori, many women who worked in the service industry were laid off. Others who used to take care of the household while their husbands worked in Russia suddenly had to juggle both household tasks and financial stress, as border closures left families without an income.

In this context, the human rights organisation Spitak Helsinki Group redoubled its efforts to support vulnerable groups in the community. Eleven years ago, Ashkhen Babayan helped found Spitak Manushak, a spin-off of Spitak Helsinki Group. The small, eco-friendly business employs local women to produce and sell natural herbal oil – an alternative way for them to become financially independent. Earning their own income is not just a way for women to have more freedom: it also allows those who are trapped in an abusive relationship to leave their abuser. But setting up a small business as a woman in Armenia is extremely hard: women entrepreneurs are rarely prioritised, so getting state support or access to financial institutions is a struggle. Ashken hopes Spitak Manushak will soon be able to start marketing its oils abroad.

Over the years, Spitak Manushak has managed to forge strong ties with local authorities and

engaged in successful partnerships. All of this has helped make the green business more sustainable. The organisation also works to promote regional cooperation between women entrepreneurs: sharing best practices across borders can reduce economic gender inequality in more than one country. Still, Ashken knows a lot of work remains to be done.

“I want to bring expertise to Armenia, visit factories in Bucharest or Cairo to learn from them. I want to gain business knowledge and make our oil production as green as possible. My aim is for Spitak Manushak to be a sustainable business.”

Both in Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia, these past twelve months have been hard on women. And yet, women have displayed a seemingly indefatigable spirit of entrepreneurship. Defying expectations, they used this past year to make their businesses even stronger. All of their actions are based on an understanding that economic empowerment, peacebuilding and ending gender-based violence go hand in hand.

Recommendations to key stakeholders

All actors should ensure **women's meaningful inclusion in economic decision-making processes** at all levels. Failing to design recovery plans, programmes, loans and policies in a gender-sensitive way will cement existing injustices.

All actors should adopt a **long-term perspective to increase women's economic empowerment** in low-and middle-income countries in the aftermath of the pandemic.

All actors involved in **designing and implementing recovery programmes, loans and policies** (whether short- or long-term) should meaningfully and regularly liaise with local civil society, including women's rights organisations, to ensure measures benefit rather than harm women. All programmes and policies should have a clear gender perspective and be reviewed by gender experts.

Governments should implement **gender-responsive budgeting and monitoring** mechanisms, making sure relevant staff have the capacity to do so.

Governments should **adopt and implement labour laws** to promote fair wages and abolish the wage gap between men and women, prevent gender-based discrimination in the labour market, and address workplace sexual harassment and violence.

Governments should abolish legal provisions that hinder women's **equal rights to housing, land and property**, and work on both the local and national level to change norms and expectations that stand in the way of women's access to housing, land and property.

Governments should include women's economic rights and take a gender perspective on economic decision-making in their National Action Plans on Women Peace and Security. NAPs can monitor women's legal economic rights and include provisions to demand international financial institutions include a gender analysis in their post-conflict reconstruction loans and programmes.

Governments, and international organisations and development finance companies should **closely monitor whether** disruptions of daily life, repressive and undemocratic policies or militarised responses to crises (such as pandemics) lead to social unrest or violent conflict. This is particularly important in post-conflict and fragile contexts. Local civil society (including women's organisations) can be crucial partners to prevent this from happening.

Governments, and international financial institutions should **combat all forms of corruption** that hinder women's equal participation, deprive women of economic security and expose them to sextortion.

International financial institutions and development finance companies should demand **gender-aggregated statistics** from governments in all sectors.

The World Bank should permanently **include research on childcare** in the analyses and data for its yearly publication "Women, Business and the Law", which assesses laws and regulations that affect women's economic opportunities in 190 economies.

International financial institutions, development finance companies and other major donors should increase and **prioritise the implementation of policies on gender equality**, women's rights and support of civil society organisations.

Donors should **finance programmes that increase human security** (like health, education, social security and employment opportunities) rather than helping increase military capacity.

Donors should significantly increase **financial support for women's rights**. Women's rights organisations and feminist movements are crucial actors for economic gender equality and women's economic empowerment, but they receive only 0.5 % of bilateral ODA.²¹ These organisations need long-term funding so they can establish sustainable structures, build in-depth knowledge and engage with public policy processes in a meaningful way.

²¹ OECD: Aid in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, 2021. <https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/aid-in-support-of-gender-equality-2021.pdf>

**For all women's rights,
in every corner of the world.**

