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Perspectives on Poverty by Gender within the Republic of Serbia

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A B S T R A C T

Gender poverty is a serious factor needing further examination and monitoring as related to economics since it is a limiting factor to an economy's potential. Inequality is not only a sign of an unhealthy economy but of current and potential social discord. Serbia has tried to actively better the economic position of women by implementing its National Gender Equality Strategy 2009-2015. The paper deals with how gender affects poverty in Serbia. Using statistical data on indicators of gender poverty from 2016 to 2018, sourced from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, this paper presents an analysis of the economic position of women in the Republic of Serbia (RS). Recommendations for the advancement of women in RS in terms of their economic status are also provided.

KEY WORDS: *poverty, gender, Serbia*

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Introduction

Social satisfaction from *de facto* economic apartheid also results in substantial social problems that cannot be easily resolved. Wealth inequality itself leads to the richest controlling an unproportionate share of the economy and possessing greater political power, while the poorest are forced to eke out a mediocre existence. Policy makers have grown increasingly concerned with monitoring poverty and social inclusion indicators in order to reduce inequality and dissatisfaction. Two Eurostat surveys, the Household Budget Survey and the SILC (the Survey of Income and Living Conditions), are used to monitor indicators of inequality and poverty within the EU. The latter of these two aims to collect timely and comparable, cross-sectional and longitudinal multidimensional microdata on income, poverty, social exclusion and living conditions (Eurostat, 2014). In regard to the Republic of Serbia's wealth inequality indicators, as well as their analysis and monitoring, it is crucial to utilize the European Union Statistics on Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC) since it annually publishes data on income and living standards, as well as on poverty and social inclusion. SILC was first conducted in Serbia in 2013 (Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, SILC, 2017).

One key area in examining economic inequality is that between men and women. By some estimates, women represent 70% of the world's poor and are often less paid for their work than men (World Bank, 2018). In Serbia, from the age of 35 years males earn higher salaries than females (Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, 2018). The effects of economic inequality between genders are also felt elsewhere in society. According to Mrsevic (2011), unemployment and poverty increase domestic violence against women, worsen sexual and related harassment of females in the workplace, as well as reduce political participation and exclude women from being able to fully participate in public life.

Albeit the monitoring of poverty and inequality indicators is an issue of interest to a large number of academic researchers, there are, as of yet, few academic studies addressing poverty and inequality in the Balkans, particularly in Serbia (Ognjevovic, Pavlovic, 2019; Pantović, Bradar, Petovar 2017; Dokmanovic, 2016). Gender differences are starkly distinguished in poverty. Men are at a lower risk of poverty than women. Matkovic et al. (2015) noted that there are significant differences between the at-risk-of-poverty rates for women and men aged 55-64. The authors

concluded that women within this age group are at a lower risk of poverty due to early retirement and inheriting benefits from family pensions. Research conducted in Slovenia shows that the risk of poverty is higher for women than for men in all age groups (Leskosek, 2018). However, after the sixties there is a distinction. As a consequence of the pension system, women's work histories and their inclusion into paid work, the gender gap is higher after the age of 60. The poverty of older women is two to three times higher than the poverty of men since welfare systems worldwide insufficiently address the problem of neglecting the core issue of gender inequalities over the course of women's lives (Burkevica et al., 2015; Gianni et al., 2015). Data from the European Commission and the European Institute for Gender Equality show that women's pensions are lower than men's in all 28 EU states (Burkevica et al., 2015).

Using recent statistical data on indicators of gender poverty sourced from the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (SORS), this paper presents an analysis of the position of women in the Republic of Serbia (RS). This paper also compares some basic statistics regarding the trends of poverty and possible sources of economic inequality by gender and provides some recommendations for the advancement of women in the RS.

## Current State of Women in the Republic of Serbia

Serbia has shown its good faith to advance the status of women by being signatories to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the European Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms, the European Social Charter and the Council of Europe's Convention on the Prevention and Combat of Violence against Women and Domestic Violence. Serbia also strives to meet the UN Millennial Development Goals on gender equality and equal opportunities (United Nations, 2015).

The Republic of Serbia has tried to actively better the position of women within its borders by adopting a National Strategy for Gender Equality (2009). Based on improvements made in the first Strategy, a new National Gender Equality Strategy for 2016-2020 (Official Gazette of RS, No 55/05, 71/05 – corrigendum, 101/07 and 65/08, 16/11, 68/12 – Constitutional Court and 72/12, 7/14 – Constitutional Court and 44/14) was subsequently adopted to further promote gender equality. The Strategy itself

recognizes that women are encumbered by domestic roles affected from patriarchal attitudes against women's economic freedom and potential away from "traditional" roles" "the socio-economic causes of the gender gap in poverty are often cited as the retraditionalization and repatriarchalisation of society, as well as the conflict of roles of family-work which come as a burden chiefly to women" (National Strategy for Gender Equality, 2016, p.50). The Strategy states that economic equality is a key factor in achieving qualitative shifts in bettering inequality between women and men, noting specifically "Traditionalism regarding gender roles leads to greater technical illiteracy among women, later additionally marginalizing them in the labor market" (National Strategy for Gender Equality, 2016, p.20).

According to the RS' 2011 Census (Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, 2011), the share of women in the total population in the Republic of Serbia is about 51%. According to SORS estimates for 2018, there were 3,570,953 women in Serbia compared to 3,392,811 men (Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, 2011). 44.5 was the average age for all women while it was 41.7 for men.

Figure 1: Number of Degree Holders by Education Level Attained, Republic of Serbia, 2017
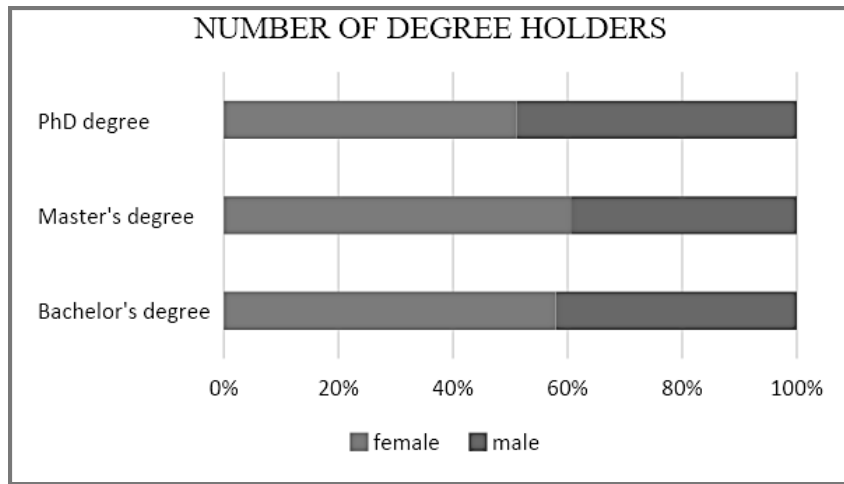
Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2017.

In Serbia, the number of male and female students who graduated from high school in 2017/2018 was almost equal (Figure 1.). While there are more female students who have completed the general secondary school

than male students (8,676: 6,569, respectively), males are three times more likely than females to complete a 3-year vocational school. The 2017 SORS data show that women are generally more educated than are men, as more women attained a higher education. In the same year, 420 women as opposed to 403 men completed their doctorates. However, at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, men occupy 90% of all memberships compared to women (Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, 2019).

In addition to the fiscal stabilization and implementing needed economic reforms, a decrease in unemployment in Serbia over the last several years has been a key positive trend. Significant progress in labor market indicators show the unemployment rate to have dropped and the employment rate to have increased by roughly 9 percentage points from 2013 to 2017 (Table 1).

Table 1: The Serbian Labor Market, Participants Aged 15 or Over

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017
UNEMPLOYMENT RATE	22.1	19.2	17.7	15.3	13.5
EMPLOYMENT RATE	37.7	42.0	42.5	45.2	46.7

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, LFS, 2107.

When deconstructed by gender, the ratio of men employed to that of women has been changing since 2016, in that women are gaining ground by having a higher presence in the labor market. However, men still maintain a stronger foothold in the labor market than do women. As derived from the 2017 LFS data, approximately 1,565,000 men and 1,229,000 women were employed.

The employment rate among males is higher than that of females, by as much as 13%. The overall employment rate progressed from 2016 to 2018 by as much as 4% in both men and women. The unemployment rate in 2018 for women was approximately 14%, whereas for men it was roughly 12%. Most disadvantaged are women between the ages of 15 and 24, whose unemployment rates were as high as 70%. The activity rate of women who possess a higher education is slightly higher than the activity rate of men of the same educational level, while the activity rate of women who have no educational credentials or have only attained a lower level of education is less than the activity rate of men of the same educational level.

Table 2: Labor Market of Serbia, 2016-2018

		2016		2017		2018	
		age 15-24	age 15-64	age 15-24	age 15-64	age 15-24	age 15-64
Activity rate	total	30.3	65.6	30.6	66.7	30.0	67.8
	male	36.8	73.1	36.8	73.8	36.3	75.1
	female	23.4	58.1	24.1	59.6	23.3	60.6
Employment rate	total	19.7	55.2	20.9	57.3	21.1	58.8
	male	24.9	61.9	26.1	63.9	26.0	65.6
	female	14.2	48.4	15.3	50.8	15.9	52.0
Inactivity rate	total	69.7	34.4	69.4	33.3	70.0	32.2
	male	63.2	26.9	63.2	26.2	63.7	24.9
	female	76.6	41.9	75.9	40.4	76.7	39.4
Unemployment rate	total	34.9	15.9	31.9	14.1	29.7	13.3
	male	32.2	15.3	29.2	13.5	28.3	12.5
	female	39.5	16.7	36.3	14.8	32.0	14.2

Source: Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, LFS, 2018.

The number of unemployed women with secondary education or higher decreased in 2018 in comparison with 2017. Among all women who are unemployed, 50% of them possess a secondary education or higher; 30% of all unemployed persons are unskilled women.

Table 3: Unemployed Persons by Educational Attainment, 2017-2018

	2017	2018	Women, 2017	Women, 2018
Total	618 827	552 513	324 977	294 978
University, vocational higher, and secondary vocational education	270 584	244 274	162 638	148 207
Highly skilled and skilled	143 535	123 621	58 253	51 296
Semi-skilled and lower professional education	21 609	18 617	10 955	9 549
Unskilled	183 099	166 001	93 131	85 926

Source: Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018.

Methods and Data

The analysis conducted in this paper primarily uses data from the SORS. Data of two nationally representative surveys are used: the LFS and SILC, covering 2016 to 2018 (depending on data availability). Other official registers, where pertinent, are also studied, such as those from the National Employment Service on the number of unemployed in the Republic of Serbia.

A common indicator of poverty for all the countries included in EU-SILC (Eurostat, 2014) and the main indicator of poverty used in this study is the at-risk-of-poverty rate. In statistical terms, the rate represents the percentage of the total population whose equivalent income lies below the at-risk-of-poverty threshold, defined as 60% of the equivalent income denominated in national currency. Equivalent income is calculated by using the OECD modified equivalence scale:

$$EDI_{Hi} = \sum w_i * DI_{Hi},$$

where DI_{Hi} is equivalent income of a household's members equalized by weighting each member by age, whereas $w_i = 1$, 0.5 or 0.3 for each household head, every adult member of the household 14 years of age and over, and children, respectively.

In this paper, the at-risk-of-poverty rates are observed by age, labor market status, occupational status and education.

The comparative approach is used where the main findings for Serbia are discussed from the perspective of other studies or data concerning the impact of implementing changes to social policies related to poverty.

Women in Poverty from 2016 to 2018 in the Republic of Serbia

According to data from SILC (2018), the at-risk-of-poverty rate (the share of persons earning income below 60% of the median of the equivalent income of the total population) was 24.3% and, despite slight fluctuations (25.5% (2016), 25.7% (2017) and 24.3% (2018)), remained largely unchanged from SILC 2013 when it was 24.5%.

Statistics show that the poverty rate in Serbia is decreasing. The risk of being at poverty was measured by a rate of 25.5% in 2016, but it decreased to 24.3% in 2018. Poverty rates for women are also noticeably lower,

where, in 2016, it was 24.6% but 23% in 2018. By age group, the most vulnerable are women between the 18 and 24 years of age, where their rate was around 30%. The biggest gap between men and women is between the ages of 55 and 64, where, according to 2018 data, the poverty rate for women was 6.6 percentage points lower than for men. For those over 65, there is a considerable difference between men and women, as men are at a lower risk of poverty than are women. For men over 65, the poverty rate is 16.9%, while for women of the same age it is 24.3% in 2018.

Table 4: The At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate by Gender and Age, 2016-2018

At risk of poverty rate, %, 2016	Gender		total
	Male	**Female**	
	25.8	25.2	25.5
18 – 64	27.4	24.6	26.0
18 – 24	33.3	32.0	32.7
25 – 54	25.8	24.5	25.1
55 – 64	28.4	21.5	24.8
65 +	15.2	22.0	19.1
At risk of poverty rate, %, 2017	Male	Female	Total
	25,4	26.0	25.7
18 – 64	26.0	25.3	25.7
18 – 24	27.3	32.3	29.7
25 – 54	24.6	25.1	24.9
55 – 64	29.3	22.5	25.8
65 +	16.9	24.7	21.3
At risk of poverty rate, %, 2018	Male	Female	total
	24.6	24.0	24,3
18 – 64	25.1	23.0	24.0
18 – 24	29.9	28.2	29.1
25 – 54	23.4	22.8	23.1
55 – 64	27.4	20.8	23.9
65 +	16.9	24.3	21.1

Source: Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, SILC, 2016-2018.

In Serbia, poverty in men and women remains relatively equal in scope up to 65 years of age, after which there is an extreme shift where those living in poverty dramatically increase among women. The origins of this

sudden change are not entirely clear. However, Babovic et al. (2017) noted that the most vulnerable among the elderly are women who are single mothers, retired, the disabled, outside the labor market or those who come from rural communities or socially marginalized (i.e., Roma) communities. Measured at the individual level, women are far more likely than men to be in privation for every indicator, from clothing and footwear to the availability of personal finance.

The composition of the household can further explain certain differences in poverty between genders. For example, the tendency in poverty of the single-person households depicts reverse trends between genders. According to SILC data, men (38.1%) were at a higher risk of poverty than women (31.8%) in 2016, while in 2017 with the rate of 34.4% women were more exposed to poverty than men (31.1%). This trend continues in 2018. In part, this can be explained by ageing of the population, a lifespan gap between men and women and lower survivors' pensions due to a discrepancy in the gender employment rates. The gap in at-risk-of-poverty rates is particularly deep when single-parent households with one and more children are observed by gender. In sociological studies, the risks are nowadays associated with the global increasing trend of nonmarital parenthood and rising births outside of marriage (Schubert, Deimel, 2016; Harrington Meyer, Parker, 2011). Serbian experience shows that it might be particularly troubling for single mothers to cope with the poverty due to inappropriate child support allowances, irregular alimony, etc. (Government of the Republic of Serbia / Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction Unit, 2018; Stanković, 2014).

The at-risk-of-poverty rate shows a slow reduction in poverty among both the employed and non-employed which is a similar trend as in the total population (Table 5). The risk of being at the poverty rate for the employed was reduced from 11.9% in 2016 to 10% in 2018, while at the same time poverty of those not in employment decreased by 0.6 percentage points and reached 31.5% in 2018. Attachment to the labor market affects disproportionally the poverty of active participants. The poverty of employees is more pronounced among the self-employed in comparison with wage earners, while unemployed among those not in employment or inactive are at the higher risk of poverty. It is expected due to ineffective beneficiary support to the unemployed, significant portion of those searching for a job more than 12 months and lack of eligible training programs. All other non-employed/inactive persons have some other

possibly continuous sources of income, such as pensions, social assistance, etc. When the poverty of men and women in the labor market is compared, similar trends can be noticed. The poverty is slightly decreasing over the years; however, female employees are less exposed to poverty than their male counterparts, probably due to a better structure of household income. For example, women are more likely to live in households where both spouses are employed, have stable sources of income, etc. This is also why unemployed women and those who are beneficiaries of pensions are under the lower risk of poverty than unemployed men. However, dependent members of the household or unable to work are in a much more difficult position if they are women.

Table 5: The At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate by Gender and Labor Market Status, 2016-2018

	Gender		Total
	Male	**Female**	
At-risk-of-poverty rate, 2016, %			
Employed	13.9	9.3	11.9
Employees	8.9	6.7	7.8
Self-employed	34.9	33.4	34.4
Non-employed	33.3	31.2	32.1
Unemployed	52.5	46.2	49.6
Retired	14.7	18.0	16.6
Other non-employed	30.0	37.4	35.3
At-risk-of-poverty rate, 2017, %			
Employed	12.2	9.1	10.8
Employees	6.5	7.1	6.8
Self-employed	38.4	28.6	35.5
Non-employed	32.3	32.4	32.3
Unemployed	52.3	48.7	50.7
Retired	14.3	19.9	17.5
Other non-employed	26.1	36.4	33.4
At-risk-of-poverty rate, 2018, %			
Employed	11.3	8.3	10.0
Employees	6.9	6.6	6.8
Self-employed	32.7	26.5	31.0

| | Gender | | Total |
	Male	Female	
Non-employed	33.1	30.4	31.5
Unemployed	54.1	43.7	49.0
Retired	14.7	18.9	17.1
Other non-employed	30.8	37.6	35.7

Source: Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, SILC, 2016-2018.

As it was already elaborated in the previous paragraph, the self-employed are under a higher risk of poverty than those employed in the companies. But, who are those more deprived among the self-employed? As the data in Table 6 shows there are certain differences among the employed depending on the main occupational status. Men are more likely to run a business than women, because barely 30% of women are classified as self-employed with employees. Similar distribution is present among those self-employed who do not employ other persons (sole traders, freelancers, artists, etc.); in this group of the self-employed women are represented by more than one third of the total. There is almost equal distribution of both genders among the employees, while women are more likely to be family workers than men, probably because this position in the household is very rarely paid and because there is an offended view that men are the breadwinners of the family.

Table 6: Employment and At-Risk-of-Poverty Rate by Gender and Occupational Status, 2017

	Self-employed with employees	Self-employed without employees	Employees	Family workers
Employment indicator, %				
Male	70.8	65.7	50.9	19.3
Female	29.2	34.3	49.1	80.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
At-risk-of-poverty rate, %				
Male	22.5	41.6	18.5	43.7
Female	27.4	34.6	15.6	46.2
Total	23.9	39.2	17.1	45.8

Source: Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, SILC, 2017.

The second panel of Table 6 shows that although women are less likely to run their own businesses, they are more likely to be at a higher risk of poverty than men. However, when women decide to be self-employed without employing other workers, they are in a bit better position than men. The at-risk-of-poverty rate for women is 34.9% which is 7.1 percentage points less in comparison with the same indicator for men. The interesting finding is that the difference between the at-risk-of-poverty rate for male and female family workers is only 2.5 percentage points, showing that women might be only slightly deprived than men when holding this position in the household. They do not earn "monetary" income, but instead they help maintain stable sources of total household income (Ognjenović, Pavlović, 2019).

Figure 2: The At-Risk-of-Poverty by Gender, 2017
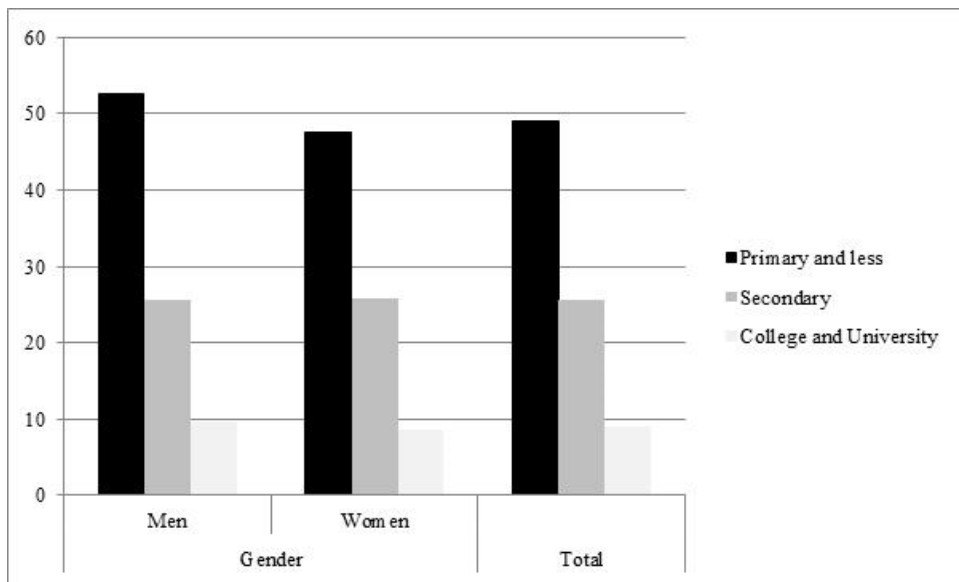
Source: Statistical Office of Republic of Serbia, SILC, 2017.

The level of education is a key factor in alleviating poverty, but the effect of education differs across regions and countries. In general, from a gender perspective additional educational achievements may help more to those women with no previous education or with low level of education. Some relevant studies confirm a close connection between education and poverty from a global perspective by studying the achievements of the

Millennium Development Goals in low-income countries (Unterhalter, 2012), or in transitional economies (Matković, 2006). Poverty and characteristics of tertiary educated women in the EU and how they are successful in the labor market are studied by Aisa et al. (2019). Their analysis confirms that higher educated European women cannot successfully materialize their achievements in the labor market due to occupational choices or types of employment because of the skewness towards fixed-term contracts.

At-risk-of-poverty rates by gender and educational attainment for Serbia, using the 2017 SILC data, are given in Figure 2. In general, almost a half of those with primary education or less are at a high risk of poverty. However, men (52.6%) with this level of education are more exposed to poverty than similarly educated women (47.6%). Women in Serbia have higher rates of higher education in comparison with men (343,410:308,824, respectively)[3], but lower rates of risk of poverty (8.6%:9.6%, respectively). Only women with secondary education have higher rates of risk of poverty than men. This finding is complementary with their status in the labor market, i.e. these women are disproportionally more represented among the unemployed than men of the same level of education. Similar findings are confirmed by previous analyses using the 2013 SILC data for Serbia (Matković et al., 2015).

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that women 55 years or older are at a greater risk of falling into poverty than do men at the same age. Furthermore, a contributing factor to women being at higher risk of poverty is their being less likely to run their own businesses than men are, as demonstrated by the finding that when women do decide to be self-employed (without employing other workers) they are in a slightly better position than men. Women who are self-employed are under the highest risk of poverty than salaried employees, showing that a woman's means of employment may be a determining factor in whether she is at the poverty rate or not. Furthermore, since barely 30% of women are classified as self-

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[3] The estimates are given for the population aged 15 years and over, according to 2011 Census data. See the Statistical Yearbook for 2018, p. 42 (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2018).

employed with employees, it is also found that men are more likely to run a business than women.

Poverty in women appears to stem from the wage gap between men and women accompanied by less convenient employment options, as well as domestic factors, such as the expectation that women should be primarily responsible for harmonizing work and home life (Leskosek, 2018). While women in Serbia are more educated than men, they still earn less. Albeit the majority of employees in Serbia, both men and women, earn insufficient salaries to keep them from poverty, women are by far more disadvantaged. Whether it be in the public and private sector and at the same educational level, gender inequalities in earnings are seen in almost all sectors of activity for the same occupations.

Reducing gender equality chiefly stems from the synergy of multiple actors such as decision makers, civil society representatives and business representatives. Even though women are more skilled and more educated than men, women are still more likely to be unemployed. It should therefore be necessary to align strategies such as the Gender Equality Strategy and the Employment Strategy in Serbia to more significantly contribute to reducing gender's effect on poverty. As such, it is also within the public's general interest to support the reconciliation of work and care responsibilities through the social services offered and gender equality policies in place, as it will assist in raising wages for women as well as having a net-positive effect on improving poverty overall. Poverty among older women shows that such measures are currently falling short of meeting their aims.

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