

Policy Review Report

Gender Equality and Care for Relatives

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List of abbreviations

ALMP	Active Labour Market Policies
APP	Professional Parental Assistance
BB	Bridge Building
CCTF	Family Children's Home
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
MoLSP	Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of Moldova
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PES	Public Employment Service
SME	Small Medium Enterprises
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
WB	Western Balkans

1 Introduction

The Bridge Building (BB) Policy Review “Gender Equality and Care for Relatives” was hosted by the European Centre for Social Welfare Policy and Research (European Centre). It was the fifth event in a series of mutual learning events, including peer reviews and policy reviews that were offered to BB countries¹ by the European Centre, following a methodology applied and widely used within the European Union in employment, social and inclusion policies. By implementing mutual learning activities in the BB countries, the European Centre supports the development of answers to countries’ needs related to fighting poverty, especially for vulnerable groups and to the better coping with the health and social consequences of COVID-19.

Policy reviews provide expertise and promote mutual exchange of experience and knowledge transfer about the situation on a selected topic in the BB countries. The purpose of the policy review was to discuss the participating BB countries’ existing institutional structure and approach in care policies, especially childcare policies from the perspective of gender equality. The delegations consisted of representatives of the respective ministries of labour and/or social affairs, the public employment services, and social services in:

- Albania,
- Azerbaijan,
- Moldova, and
- Kosovo.

Specifically, the policy review aimed at answering the following questions:

- *What forms of financial, material and social support are available to those with caring responsibilities in the participating countries?*
- *What are the main challenges in your country regarding women’s labour market situation and the reconciliation/combination of paid work and family care?*
- *Are there any policies on tailored support for carers with specific needs (e.g., single mothers, parents caring for a disabled child)?*

1 The BB countries are Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, Kosovo, the Republic of North Macedonia, the Republic of Moldova, Montenegro, Serbia, and the Ukraine.

See this website for more information about the European Centre’s Bridge Building activities:

<https://www.euro.centre.org/domains/bridging-building>

- *How have the needs of informal carers been taken into account in policies and programmes aiming at the (re)integration of women into the labour market?*
- *What role does partnership play at all governance levels (from the municipal to the central level) and between different ministerial and other governmental and non-governmental (civil society, research, etc.) organisations?*
- *What are the next steps to reduce the gender care gap and improve opportunities for women to participate in the labour market?*

The two-day policy review attracted significant interest, with over 60 registrations and consisted of inputs from national and international experts as well as discussions in working groups.

The opening remarks to the policy review were provided by Monika Austaller, Policy Officer at the Department of Bilateral Relations and International Affairs, Austrian Federal Ministry of Social Affairs, Health, Care and Consumer Protection. Inputs contributing to this report comprised a keynote presentation by Eszter Zólyomi and Selma Kadi, researchers from the European Centre, and further presentations by:

- Tobias Auböck from the City of Vienna,
- Ardiana Gashi from the Agency for Gender Equality in Kosovo,
- Olesea Casciuc from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Republic of Moldova, and
- Nicola Duell, Managing Partner, Economix Research and Consulting.

The first working group session focused on the main challenges regarding women's labour market situation and policies for different groups of carers, while the second session focused on the needs of informal carers and the next steps to reduce the gender pay gap. The working groups contributed to a fruitful and constructive discussion about common challenges and promising policy solutions.

The evaluation of the policy review by the participants showed the following results: over 90% of participants responded that the event has increased their knowledge and that they have learned about useful approaches for their professional work. Furthermore, most participants informed that the event allowed them to openly communicate, exchange experiences, develop their professional network and receive new policy perspectives for their job. Participants especially appreciated discussing and exchanging concrete policy approaches.

This report summarises insights gained during the policy review and aims at further sharing these with a wider audience. It is structured as follows: chapter 2 describes

relevant policies for gender equality and care for relatives, including the importance of childcare services. Chapter 3 focuses on women's labour market integration and the challenges arising while combining care and employment in BB countries. Chapter 4 outlines the key messages of the event. Finally, chapter 5 presents conclusions.

2 Gender equality and care for relatives in BB countries

This policy review was a platform for the BB countries to explore their experiences and strategies related to two crucial aspects for gender equality: policies that help women integrate into the job market and policies on support systems for those in need of care.

During the policy review discussions, Kosovo and Moldova presented their respective country practices and policies related to childcare policies and measures that encourage women's involvement in the job market. Other country experts providing input were from Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Albania. These BB countries presented their own policy setups to share their approaches and provide a useful perspective on how societies can effectively address the needs of both the workforce and caregivers, striving for fairness and inclusivity.

The collective efforts of the Western Balkans and Eastern Partnership countries in promoting gender equality and addressing caregiving responsibilities are notable, yet challenges persist in fully translating policy intentions into tangible outcomes. The discussion pointed out that Kosovo and Moldova have taken steps to support women's labour market participation through initiatives like affordable childcare and parental leave, demonstrating a commitment to gender-responsive policies. However, these efforts face the hurdle of deeply ingrained societal norms and gender biases, resulting in limited progress in achieving balanced workforce representation.

Azerbaijan's emphasis on disability support and social assistance reflects a commitment to inclusivity, although the implementation of these measures and their impact on caregivers and vulnerable populations remain areas of scrutiny. Similarly, Albania's provision of financial aid for families with children with special needs underlines their engagement to supporting caregivers; yet ensuring these policies result in effective relief for families requires ongoing attention.

While these countries' policy frameworks offer promise, there is a distinct need to address the gap between policy (including systems) and practice. Participants confirmed that barriers such as traditional gender roles, inadequate implementation mechanisms, and societal perceptions of caregiving hinder the transformative potential of these policies. As the discussion unfolded during the policy review, a common effort to identify and overcome these challenges can pave the way for more

comprehensive, effective, and equitable policies that genuinely benefit gender equality in caregiving responsibilities in the regions.

2.1 Childcare in Kosovo and Moldova

Kosovo

Kosovo retains its position as the country with the Western Balkan's lowest preschool enrolment rates for young children. Participants from the Agency for Gender Equality² confirmed that during the 2020/21 period, the gross inclusion rate for preschool education among the age group 0 to 5 stood at 6.7%. In the case of children aged 0 to 3, participation rates remain low, with a mere 3,755 children enrolled across public and private providers. A staggering 90% of children aged 3 to 4 do not participate in accredited preschool programmes. The scarcity of public childcare options remains a significant concern, with 15 out of 38 municipalities in Kosovo lacking public kindergartens.

As indicated in the Education Strategy³ update as of June 2021, there were a total of 177 privately licensed Preschool Institutions, along with an estimated 250 unlicensed private facilities. These private providers are primarily concentrated in urban centres and come at a high cost, considering that the average gross monthly wage in the private sector is around 420 EUR. This sector encompasses approximately 80% of Kosovo's employment landscape.

As a result, the responsibility of childcare and elderly care predominantly falls on informal caregivers, mostly women, inform the participants from Kosovo. According to a time use survey conducted in 2022, women dedicate an average of 1.92 hours to childcare tasks, whereas their male counterparts spend 0.95 hours on the same responsibilities. This disparity is perpetuated by persistent gender norms, even among younger generations, hinting at an enduring gender gap in caregiving responsibilities.

However, Kosovo is taking strides to address the challenges surrounding Gender Equality and Care for Relatives. As participants from the Ministry confirm, in Prishtina, a municipality-driven initiative has led to the establishment of public-

2 Agency for Gender Equality – Republic of Kosovo: <https://abgj.rks-gov.net/en/>

3 Education Strategy 2022-2026 (Draft) – Republic of Kosovo, available here: https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fkonsultimet.rks-gov.net%2FStorage%2FConsultations%2F14-54-14-17062022%2F3.--Draft-Education-Strategy--2022-2026_En.Doc&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK

private partnership kindergartens. These institutions determine childcare fees based on family economic conditions, offering subsidies to families from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Notably, the municipality of Prishtina recently announced a significant subsidy of 70 EUR for children from families with monthly incomes below 500 EUR.

Good practice

During the pandemic, the Agency for Gender Equality/Prime Minister's Office implemented a targeted measure supporting 115 kindergartens with expenses including rent, wages, materials, infrastructure, and subsidies for vulnerable families, benefiting 6,638 children.

Source:

Information from the Kosovan participants.

Despite these efforts, a key challenge remains ensuring kindergarten access for children with unemployed parents. This limitation restricts women from seeking employment due to the lack of available childcare. To counter this, the government is planning the construction of new kindergartens and repurposing vacant schools, aiming to expand accessibility and improve the support infrastructure for caregivers.

Moldova

In Moldova, Law no. 140/2013⁴ serves as a comprehensive framework for safeguarding children at risk and children separated from their parents. This legislation outlines specific protective measures and establishes a structured process encompassing identification, evaluation, aid, referral, oversight, and documentation for these vulnerable children. The law mandates the appropriate authorities and entities to implement these procedures in accordance with its provisions.

Representatives from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection (MoLSP) confirmed that the Republic of Moldova offers a variety of protective mechanisms and social services to ensure the welfare of children temporarily without parental care. These services and benefits are tailored to uphold the rights and lawful interests of the child. They include:

- **Guardianship:** This arrangement assigns a responsible guardian to oversee the care and upbringing of a child in need of assistance.
- **Custody:** Custody pertains to the legal responsibility for a child's welfare and upbringing, often granted to a capable adult when the biological parents are unable to provide care.

4 LAW no. 140 of 14.06.2013 on the special protection of children at risk and of children separated from their parents, available here: <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/Moldova%20Law%20No.%20140.pdf>

- **Professional Parental Assistance (APP):** Professional caregivers offer specialised care and support to children in need, ensuring their physical, emotional, and educational development.
- **Family Children's Home (CCTF):** These facilities provide a nurturing and stable environment for children without parental care, aiming to foster their well-being and development.

Government Decision no. 1278/2018 specifies the financial support for children in guardianship services, professional parental assistance, and family-type children's homes. The MoLSP partners with NGOs to enhance child protection efforts. The 2022 signed Memorandum with UNICEF⁵ strengthens this commitment, increasing monthly allowances for children in APP and CCTF to align with the subsistence minimum defined by the National Bureau of Statistics, as confirmed by the representative from the MoLSP.

Furthermore, in recent years, Moldova has made significant progress in improving its child protection system. Notably, on June 1, 2022, the “*National Programme for Child Protection for the Years 2022-2026*”⁶ was approved. The programme aims to improve the governance of child protection, prevent different types of violence, reduce reliance on institutions, provide better alternative care (foster care, temporary care homes, social housing, sheltered housing), and keep families together. The programme’s goals match the government’s plans, ensuring that child protection keeps up with the changing needs and challenges faced by children. The Republic of Moldova’s legislative and social service provisions underscore a commitment to securing the rights and interests of children in various circumstances of vulnerability, with an array of care models tailored to address their distinct needs, representatives from the MoLSP confirmed. However, considering that gender inequality is prevalent in the country’s care system, one of the primary goals of the National Programme for Child Protection is to enhance the abilities of parents and families in terms of parenting and childcare. The programme places a particular emphasis on preserving gender balance within care services, achieved through various approaches in leave policies that promote gender equality.

In this context, the following section offers an overview of different leave policies for carers such as maternity leaves, parental leaves, and paternity leaves in the

5 “UNICEF Moldova and the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the protection of children's rights”, available here:

<https://www.unicef.org/moldova/en/press-releases/unicef-moldova-and-ministry-labor-and-social-protection-signed-memorandum>

6 “ACTION PLAN on the implementation of the National Child Protection Programme for 2022- 2026” (in Romanian), available here: <https://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/114079/143189/F-2059778639/MDA-114079.pdf>

participating BB countries, and their role in mitigating the social gap in the care system.

2.2 Parental leave policies and support services for carers in BB countries

During the policy review a few of the participants informed on specificities of leave policies as listed below (non-exhaustive summary):

- **Azerbaijan:** Women working during pregnancy and postpartum are granted leave as follows: 126 calendar days for normal birth (70 before and 56 after) and 140 calendar days for difficult birth or multiple children (70 before and 70 after).
- **Moldova:** Paternity leave for 14 days in the first year of the child's birth. Caregivers of children under the age of three years can work a reduced one-hour schedule per working day while keeping their salary.
- **Albania:** Mothers receive 11 months of paid leave (80% salary for 6 months, 50% for the rest), fathers can take one-month parental leave, mothers get paid breastfeeding breaks, and work hours are 6 hours instead of 8.5 until the baby is one year old.
- **Kosovo:** If breastfeeding, mothers have the right to an additional one-hour paid break during the day.

During the discussion examples of services were shared that support people with care responsibilities including both with or without specific needs (single mothers/children with disabilities). These comprised caregiver assistance, childcare programmes, family support initiatives, and community resources. In *Moldova*, for instance, early childhood development is supported through daily centres with professional staff, including psychologists and speech therapists, catering to specific groups like low-income families and vulnerable children. Selection criteria apply, and while only a few urban centres are available, they operate with support from local governments through cross-funding.

In addition, social aid and winter aid serve as the central monetary support to combat poverty in the country. Normally, adults are required to inform on their occupational status or inability to work to qualify. However, a woman in her 30th week of pregnancy is recognised as having an “occupational status,” making her exempt from work, and thus, eligible for benefits.

In *Azerbaijan*, women have the right to take breaks or reduce daily working hours for breastfeeding. The specifics, including duration and process, are considered paid working time and are in line with the national laws, confirm participants. However, the private sector still has difficulties to reconcile work and care. In the country, state

social assistance is given to low-income families in cases of a family member caring for a first-degree disabled person, a child under the age of eight, or a child under 18 with limited health capabilities. As of January 1, 2022, the need criterion limit is 200 manat (120 EUR), according to the Law dated December 3, 2021 “On the limit of the need criterion for 2022 in the Republic of Azerbaijan”⁷.

During the discussions in the policy review regarding the situation of childcare services in the participating BB countries, it became clear that comprehensive childcare policies and services are absent. This imposes a significant challenge for women who assume caregiving responsibilities for their family members or children. Furthermore, the existing, often suboptimal, leave policies of a few of the countries are a barrier to women's active participation in the labour market (see upcoming chapter).

3 Gender equality and women’s labour market integration in BB countries

3.1 Gender employment gap

Western Balkan countries

The policy review revealed that several factors are key for existing gender inequalities in the labour markets of the Western Balkans. The participants agreed that first and foremost deeply ingrained gender stereotypes perpetuate unequal treatment. Moreover, the scarcity of accessible and top-tier child-care and long-term care services for older people contribute to the disparities. Working hours and working arrangements are not flexible enough; thus, limiting the opportunities for women's participation in the labour market.

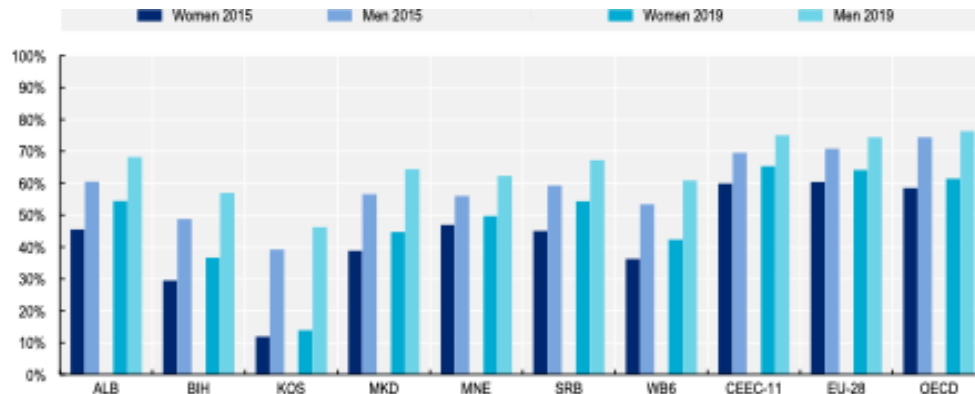
Occupational segregation, notably, the overrepresentation of women in low-paying sectors and jobs, also plays a significant role. The lack of access to finance and entrepreneurship support hinders women's ability to engage in business ventures on an equal footing. Discrimination in recruitment and the subsequent hindrance in career progression also persist as major obstacles. The lower retirement ages within

⁷ Law of the Azerbaijan Republic of December 3, 2021 No. 405-VIQ – About limit of criterion of needs in the Azerbaijan Republic for 2022, see here: <https://cis-legislation.com/document.fwx?rgn=138723>

several Western Balkan countries' economies contribute to the gender gap, as women often retire at an earlier age than men.

According to OECD 2021 data, the highest female employment rates were recorded in Albania and Serbia in 2019 in the six WB countries, whereas Kosovo had the lowest employment rate among women (OECD, 2021).

Gender employment gaps in the Western Balkan countries (2015-2019)



Source: (Eurostat, 2020[18]), *European Union Labour Force Survey: 2019 dataset* for EU, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia; Instat (Instat, 2020[7]), *Women and Men in Albania 2020* for Albania; (ASK, 2020[8]), *Labor Force Survey in Kosovo, 2019* for Kosovo; (BHAS, 2019[9]), *Labor Force Survey 2019* for Bosnia and Herzegovina; (WIIW / World Bank, 2020[52]), *Western Balkans Labor Market Trends 2020* for Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo (for 2015); (OECD, n.d.[10]), *Labour Force Statistics* for OECD average.

Source: OECD 2021

Male emigration in Kosovo presents an additional challenge, altering the gender composition of the workforce. Seemingly generous maternity leave regulations might paradoxically discourage employers from hiring women. This counterintuitive outcome underscores the complexity of addressing gender inequalities in the labour market. Nevertheless, discussions highlight that in Kosovo, active labour market measures encompass vocational training, internships, wage subsidies, and on-the-job training. These measures are not exclusively targeted at reintegrating women caregivers, but focus on women in general. Moreover, collaboration with non-governmental organisations (NGOs), coordination between central and local government, and partnerships with international development agencies play crucial roles. An illustrative instance during the COVID-19 period involved the agency issuing calls, and Public Employment Services (PES) collaborating with municipalities. Examples of partnership also include cooperation of the PES with UNDP regarding Active Labour Market Policies (ALMP) and with GIZ (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*).

From 2015 to 2019, progress in narrowing the gender employment gap was made only in Albania and Serbia (OECD, 2021). Notably, the gender employment disparities

are most significant among individuals with lower educational attainment, and women in this category are more frequently engaged in providing unpaid care compared to their male counterparts. In comparison to the EU average, women in the Western Balkans are less likely to work part-time, although they continue to surpass their male counterparts in this aspect. The unemployment rate for women is generally higher than that for men, with Albania being the exception to this trend. Albanian law incorporates specific measures to ensure a minimum of 30% representation of the underrepresented gender in political and public decision-making roles (RCC, 2020). Moreover, the country safeguards against discrimination in various sectors, including education, employment, and media.

Eastern Partnership countries

In the Eastern Partnership countries, the number of employed persons varies regarding sex, too. In Moldova, just over one-third of women (38%) and less than half of men (47%) are part of the workforce (Gardner, 2022). While Armenia and Georgia have the largest gender employment gaps with a 24- and 19-percentage-point difference, respectively, Azerbaijan has the smallest gender employment gap with only a 6-percentage-point difference. In Azerbaijan, 63% of women and 70% of men are in the workforce. Interestingly, these gender employment gaps did not change much over the past two decades. In 2000, Georgia had an 18-percentage-point gap, based on old employment standards. By 2019, using the new statistical standards, the gap was still similar at 19 percentage points (Gardner, 2022).

During the discussions, participants from the Moldovan Ministry of Labour and Social Protection informed about an upcoming National Programme on Gender Equality for the Years 2023-2027. Gender-neutral career integration measures are uniformly applied to both men and women in the new plan. The measures encompass professional training, including workplace internships and courses via vouchers, subsidising job generation, initiating businesses through grants, employment of women with disabilities, and provision of employment allowances, which also cover travel expenses.

3.2 Challenges of combining care and employment

Balancing caregiving responsibilities with employment entails several significant challenges in the BB countries, as was discussed during the policy review:

- *Inadequate access to affordable childcare services* is a common issue in the BB countries, with some regions like Kosovo prioritising working parents,

often excluding the unemployed from such services. This disparity can create obstacles for those seeking employment opportunities.

- Difficulties exist in the private sector, especially in SMEs, for instance, in Azerbaijan, when employees aim at *taking maternity or paternity leave*. Staff shortages could make it challenging for SMEs to grant leave, making it more complex to strike a balance between caregiving and work responsibilities.
- *The lack of formal long-term care services for older individuals* is another pressing challenge. In many cases, informal caregivers, typically female family members, bear the primary responsibility for elderly care. This situation can place significant burdens on caregivers and limit their ability to fully engage in the workforce.
- *Persistent gender stereotypes and societal norms* continue to shape caregiving responsibilities in the BB countries. Traditional gender roles often dictate that women should bear a greater share of caregiving duties, perpetuating gender inequalities and hindering women's full participation in the labour market.
- The prevailing expectation that women will primarily undertake caregiving responsibilities is also a notable aspect regarding work-life balance. The absence of adequate parental leave provisions within the applicable labour law (i.e., case of Kosovo) further reinforces the situation. Insufficient access to affordable childcare facilities adds to the challenge, alongside the scarcity of initiatives aimed at facilitating women's integration into the workforce.
- *Discriminatory practice of factoring maternity leaves* into recruitment decisions impacts women's labour market integration negatively. In addition, programmes designed to support women returning to the labour market after a period of leave are in short supply. Examples of programmes include return-ship programmes, flexible work arrangements, childcare support, family-friendly policies, etc.
- Additionally, *the deficiency of accessible public transportation* limits the mobility of women, increases their dependency on private transportation and adds to the childcare challenges (i.e., getting children to daycare).

Addressing these multifaceted challenges requires taking comprehensive approaches encompassing policy reforms, increased support for caregivers, and efforts to combat gender stereotypes and discrimination. So far, the BB countries have undertaken a number of steps to address these challenges and these steps are summarised in a textbox of promising practices below (see chapter 4). Such steps are essential in order to promote greater inclusivity and economic participation for all, regardless of caregiving responsibilities. However, the policy review discussions pointed out the necessity of more targeted policies that would help ensure gender balance and care for relatives in the BB countries. The following chapter presents key messages/recommendations on the matter.

Promising Practices

- National policy framework for gender equality in place (Moldova National Programme on Gender Equality 2023-2027)
- Public/private initiative to improve access to low-cost childcare services in Kosovo (Pristina)
- Possibility for parents returning to work from childcare leave to keep cash allowance (Moldova)
- Women empowerment programmes in collaboration with international organisations (UNDP programme on women's participation in SMEs in Azerbaijan)
- Quota measures to guarantee women's participation in political and public decision-making positions and protection from discrimination (Albania)

4 Key messages

Key message 1: Need for policies that promote gender-inclusive employment and skills development.

Efforts should be made to create a more gender-inclusive labour market by responding to specific needs of individuals, such as carers and women with incomplete education. Initiatives of this kind include skill development programmes tailored to women, equipping them with the necessary tools for integration into the labour market.

Key message 2: Fostering women's labour market participation through childcare support and professional care services that are available, accessible, affordable, and adequate.

A significant emphasis should be put on providing free childcare services, including early childhood care for children under the age of three, as a pivotal factor in promoting women's labour market participation. Policies and practices from EU and other BB countries are recognised as valuable references for local adaptation in a number of other BB countries. Further research on childcare policies is deemed essential to ensure that they effectively support working mothers, contributing to a more gender-inclusive workforce.

Key message 3: Addressing stigmas, discrimination, and promoting public relations efforts with a gender lens.

The presence of stigmas, marginalisation, and discrimination is acknowledged as essential barrier to the integration of women and underrepresented groups in the labour market. A call for stronger public relations efforts, particularly targeting small enterprises, is made to counter discrimination and create a more gender-inclusive and welcoming work environment. Building awareness and understanding of gender-specific challenges and opportunities is vital in this process.

Key message 4: Collaboration and strategy development for gender inclusivity.

The need for collaboration among relevant departments and agencies is emphasised to develop comprehensive strategies that address career development, skill-building, and gender inclusivity. This collaborative approach extends to the review and potential adaptation of current policies to better suit the local gender context. An open attitude toward learning from neighbouring regions' gender-inclusive practices is demonstrated to contribute to a more gender-inclusive labour market.

Key message 5: Data-driven decision making for gender equality inclusivity.

There is a need to recognise the importance of data-driven decision-making processes. Data on women's labour market participation, the effectiveness of gender-specific skill development programmes, and policy impact should be systematically collected and analysed. This gender-focused data-driven approach enables the continuous monitoring of progress on gender inclusivity and the identification of areas that require improvement. It also supports evidence-based decision-making, facilitating the enhancement of gender inclusivity within the labour market.

5 Conclusions

The aim of the policy review on *Gender Equality and Care for Relatives* was to facilitate an exchange among BB countries and experts on existing institutional structures and approaches in care policies, especially childcare policies from the perspective of gender equality. The discussions held during the policy review (online, 5-6 June 2023) highlighted a number of ongoing efforts in the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries to improve the labour market participation of women and persistent challenges like the lack of adequate childcare and long-term care services which hinder gender equality. During the policy review, representatives of the respective ministries from Albania, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Kosovo exchanged experiences about ongoing policy reforms and insights with experts from Austria, Kosovo and Germany about some promising practices of measures to support women's labour market participation. In order to enhance gender equality, resources (money), time (leave schemes) and services (childcare, long-term care services, etc.) are equally important. The policy review focused on leave schemes and support services, and to a lesser extent, on monetary benefits.

There are substantial variations in support systems practiced in care leave policies across different countries. While Albania offers an extensive 11-month paid maternity leave, Kosovo balances 9 months of paid leave with 3 months of unpaid leave, whereas Moldova primarily relies on individuals taking holidays at their discretion. This diversity in policy and support services underlines the importance of considering local contexts and diverse needs when developing comprehensive caregiving policies. The private sector, especially SMEs in Azerbaijan, faces difficulties accommodating maternity and paternity leave due to staff shortages, making it challenging to strike a work-life-care balance.

The discussion highlighted that the combination of caregiving responsibilities with employment poses challenges, particularly due to inadequate access to affordable childcare services, including those accommodating children under the age of three. Furthermore, the absence of formal long-term care services for older individuals places significant burdens on informal caregivers, perpetuating gender stereotypes and hindering women's full participation in the labour market. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy reforms and cross-sectoral efforts to combat gender discrimination and promote greater inclusivity in the labour market.

During the policy review countries presented their actions and recommendations to advance efforts in reducing the gender care gap. For instance, the Albanian

government approved the National Strategy for Gender Equality.⁸ However, this Action Plan must be effectively implemented with adequate resource allocation and regular progress monitoring. In Moldova, transforming the current 14 days of unpaid paternity leave into a paid benefit, as proposed, will encourage fathers to take a more active role in caregiving. Simultaneously, awareness-raising campaigns and educational programmes can inform fathers about their rights and the benefits of paternity leave, contributing to changing societal norms. In Kosovo, expanding parental leave options beyond what is outlined in the labour law can better support shared caregiving responsibilities and gender equality in families. Complementing this effort, Kosovo should address occupational gender segregation through targeted policies, including training and support for women entering traditionally male-dominated fields and addressing hiring and promotion biases.

In conclusion, across BB countries, governments should actively engage civil society organisations, employers, and trade unions to gather input, share best practices, and ensure a collaborative approach to reducing the gender care gap. International cooperation, including collaboration with international organisations and neighbouring countries, can offer valuable insights and support in implementing effective gender equality policies. Sharing experiences and lessons learned can benefit all involved parties. Collaboratively, the Western Balkan and Eastern Partnership countries can achieve substantial progress in reducing the gender care gap and advancing gender equality within their societies.

⁸ “Vendim Nr. 400, datë 30.6.2021, PËR MIRATIMIN E STRATEGJISË KOMBËTARE PËR BARAZINË GJINORE, 2021–2030”, (National Strategy for Gender Equality, in Albanian), available here: <https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fshendetesia.gov.al%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2021%2F07%2FStrategjia-Kombetare-per-Barazine-Gjinore-2021-2030.docx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK>

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