



Future of Equality She Talks #1 Report

Women's rights advocates from the Western Balkans and Turkey gathered virtually to discuss new pathways to gender equality and call for urgent action on 10 September 2020. In total, 51 participants from Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo,¹ Montenegro, North Macedonia, Serbia, Slovenia and Turkey took part in the first She Talks that kicked off a series of regional consultations that will tackle the challenges to achievement of gender equality and transformative change in the lives of women and girls.

This series of consultations are organized by the Women's Platform for Development of Serbia in cooperation with UN Women as part of the Support to Priority Actions for Gender Equality project. This project is funded by the European Union. With these discussions, activists for gender equality and women's rights also mark the 25th anniversary of the signing of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the most visionary and ambitious roadmap set for gender equality.

Starting from the commitments accepted under the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action twenty-five years ago, feminists and women's movement activists considered available analyses of progress in six broad areas: a. gender-based violence; b. economic justice and rights; c. bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights; d. feminist action for climate justice; e. technology and innovation for gender equality; and feminist movements and leadership. They further discussed how to tackle region-specific bottlenecks and dead ends and how to bolster feminist solidarity and collaboration within the region.

She Talks seek to feed voices and ideas of women from the Western Balkans and Turkey into the Generation Equality Forum, a civil society-centered, global gathering for gender equality, convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France.

¹All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).



She Talks#1 Future of Equality – key messages and conclusions:

Gender-based violence

As a sub-region, Western Balkans and Turkey are facing similar issues regarding gender-based violence (GBV): rise of the domestic and partner violence, budget cuts for prevention and GBV activities and services, and general decrease of financial allocations for civil society organizations (CSOs) working in the field of combating GBV. Millions of women and girls in the Western Balkans and Turkey suffer from physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering. Low, fragmented and ineffective funding in response to widely spread GBV that often ends in femicide, constitutes the biggest gap between Western Balkans and Turkey, on the one hand, and the European Union, on the other hand.

Women in the Western Balkans and Turkey (WBT) are still afraid to report incidence of violence to the institutions and many cases continue to go unreported. In the meantime, institutions praise themselves with decrease in GBV due to legislative and policy changes.

In order to advance substantive gender equality, governments in the Western Balkans and Turkey need to:

- 1 **Increase allocations for CSOs working in the field of combating GBV** and ensure sufficient, timely and sustainable funding schemes. This can be achieved by a more consistent application of gender responsive budgeting across budgets at all levels. CSOs are partners and key allies to governments intent on combating GBV and building a culture of nonviolence.
- 2 **Streamline national databases on GBV** including indicators and regular data availability. In countries where such databases exist, regular and consistent public availability of data should be ensured, including triangulation of data from different sources to ensure accuracy.
- 3 **Support the implementation of the Istanbul Convention.** Western Balkan countries and Turkey have signed and ratified the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul convention). Progress on harmonization of national laws has not been equal paced in the region and there are even threats and actual attempts to withdraw from it. The region must stay committed to the Istanbul convention and governments should be more vocal about the value of gender equality for development and more practical in intensifying the implementation of the Istanbul convention.
- 4 **Improve or establish crisis action plans regarding GBV**, especially domestic violence so that all actors involved are aware of their role during when violence occurs.
- 5 **Engage all stakeholders, including CSOs, media, local governments, social protection institutions, police and schools** to continue to work on awareness raising and prevention of GBV, among girls and boys, women and men, as well as empowerment of women to report GBV.





- 6 Make widely available information about the existing service providers** to women and girls who have experienced GBV, including CSO on official web sites and in premises of institutions, in social media, including information in national languages and also in Roma language.
- 7 Establish safe and easily available on-line consultations for Roma women and girls, rural women and girls, women and girls with disabilities and all other women and girls** so that they can access help and support regarding GBV even when mobility is reduced as a result of crises such as COVID-19.
- 8 Establish on-line consultations for Roma men and boys and all other men and boys** where they can get information and support about GBV and anger management.
- 9 Flood media with articles targeting women** with content such as ways to recognize GBV, ways to report it, and typical steps in dealing with GBV on an individual, community and social level. Governments need to send a much clearer message of non-violence and respect for women's rights.

At the same time, the WBT region has nurtured some **good practices** that can be replicated in other countries:

- a Monitoring of referral mechanism/ protocols on GBV** (domestic violence, trafficking in women, sexual violence) and providing recommendations how to improve their implementation.
- b** There was a site of public railways company, named VLAKOZLOM, where passengers reported their mostly humorous complaints on the frequent delays and miserable state of public trains. All of a sudden some victim anonymously published her story of being sexually harassed on the train. Then many new stories of this kind followed. The management of the public railways shot the site down, but the public intervention of the NGO of young feminists, named 8th March, in support of the victims, forced the management to reopen this site and to prepare the first company policy on zero tolerance on violence and sexual harassment in public transport in Slovenia.
- c** In Slovenia, SOS phones in COVID crises finally started to work 24/7 and it is paid by the state.
In many countries in the region, during the COVID-19 crises, SOS hotlines became available 24/7 because cell phones were at home with women-service providers at home. However, women who provide the service are paid normal work hours or not at all. Women are overworked, underpaid, not employed full time but still continue to provide the service. Their dedication is good practice but this practice is not sustainable over the longer time because it erodes women's resources. In crises, additional cost of service should be budgeted for.





Economic justice and rights

The following three central questions have been deliberated:

Question 1 – **Care economy:** How to open dialogue with the state on the biggest un-tackled economic justice issue in the Western Balkans and Turkey – unpaid work?

Question 2 – **Precarious work and erosion of labor rights:** How to address the rise of precarious work, linked to the erosion of labor rights, especially in sectors where women are concentrated in the Western Balkans and Turkey?

Question 3 – **Refocusing economic objectives:** How to refocus economic objectives towards quality of life improvements for women and men as opposed to GDP growth at the detriment of natural and human resources? What can we do better for rural women, young women, women with disabilities, women entrepreneurs, women workers, women 45+ and other groups of women?

The Key Conclusions:

- 1 **Feminist movements in the WBT need to get more involved in economics and advocacy related to economic issues.** This is especially important at the strategic level to help shape the economic development agenda and include issues such as universal basic income, universal child care and long-term care for all who need it and green economy as potential alternatives to mainstream economic solutions that predominate in WBT and that are being questioned in most developed democratic societies.
- 2 **Governments and CSOs ought to develop, pilot and implement universally affordable public services to support working parents,** especially at the local level.
The Feminist movements in WBT ought to move beyond paying lip service to unpaid work and economy of care towards proposing possible solutions to this major gender gap that can work and be funded in WBT context.
- 3 **Governments in the WBT ought to pay a much greater attention to social innovations, social entrepreneurship and social economy in general.** Thus far, potential of these forms of economic activity have been more readily explored by non state actors but their achievements were constrained by an unfavorable legal and financial context. (Feminist macroeconomic study in Turkey showed, that equal amount of public money invested in child care would produce higher increase of the GTP than if invested in building the high-ways).
- 4 **Governments and judiciary in WBT ought to ensure a much stronger protection of labor rights.** Women are often let down by poor implementation of existing and often good legislation.





Bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights

By making compromises with clericalism, liberals and moderate left weakened secularism and they have given way to re-traditionalization and greater penetration of religion into governance and services in all WBT countries. This trend goes at the detriment of existing women's rights and against progress on gender equality. Whereas there are certain push-backs in all WBT countries, the situation in specific countries and on specific issues calls for feminist solidarity in defending women's rights across the sub-region.

- 1 **Governments in WBT countries need to harmonize laws and programmes** at the local/national level and to ensure alignment with the international obligations and implementation of Council of Europe documents and EU laws in the area of bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR).
- 2 **Governments in WBT countries ought to use budget funds with the intention to reduce gender-based inequalities and ensure implementation of women's rights** by investing more in services that support bodily autonomy and SRHR:
 - a. Availability of medical assistance to fertility to all women, regardless of their marital status.
 - b. Legal and safe abortion on woman's request in early pregnancy, that is easily accessible and free of financial costs or at minimal financial costs
 - c. Widely available contraception to all women, free of charge counseling and contraceptives suitable to sexually active minors, boys and girls, women from minority and vulnerable groups, including Roma women, rural women, and other under-served women.
 - d. Increasing general accessibility and availability of services for all marginalized groups.
 - e. Investing in awareness raising and preventive services for girls and boys in rural and urban areas alike.
- 3 **WBT public health systems ought to be strengthened and gender mainstreamed** with a higher emphasis on availability of gynecology and obstetrics specializations, health workers' education on gender equality, GBV-sexual violence, and sexually transmitted diseases.
- 4 **State actors ought to reach out to CSOs and specialized women's organizations** because they have a strong constituency base, access to and trust by diverse groups of women that are often not within easy reach of government actors. No effective effort to protect women's bodily autonomy and SHRS can be implemented without women's organizations, youth organizations, organizations of persons with disabilities and other CSOs.
- 5 **WBT countries ought to reinforce public promotional campaigns for women's rights** for general public and reform sexual education in schools. WBT countries should also learn from each other and be quicker to pick up on the good examples in other countries. (Great example of the new curriculum preventing sexual violence against children which has failed in Serbia, but might succeed elsewhere)





6 Advocacy campaign for legislative changes for removal of structural barriers.

Positive developments are noted in the area of improving health outcomes of women and girls. WBT governments accomplished the following progress:

7 Governments in WBT countries ought to use budget funds with the intention to reduce gender-based inequalities and ensure implementation of women's rights by investing more in services that support bodily autonomy and SRHR:

- a. **Promoted women's access to health services** through the expansion of universal health coverage or public health services although actual services may still be more restricted or unavailable for some groups of women (e.g. rural women, Roma women, women with disabilities, etc.).
- b. **Expanded specific health services for women and girls**, including sexual and reproductive health services, mental, maternal health and HIV and other sexually transmitted disease services, and harmonized on the territory of the whole country.²
- c. **Provided gender-responsive training for health service providers** and / planned specialization for health workers
- d. **Provided refugee women and girls as well as women and girls in humanitarian settings with access** to sexual and reproductive health services.
- e. **Improved sex desegregated data and availability of gender analyses**
- f. **Some WBT countries strengthened comprehensive sexuality education** in schools or through community programs and others need to prioritize this in the next five years.
- g. **Some WBT countries undertook gender-specific public awareness** rising/health promotion campaigns in educational institutions and others need to prioritize this in the next five years.

² Example Bosnia and Herzegovina





Feminist action for climate justice

“Climate justice and gender equality” is an understudied theme within the WBT sub-region. For this reason, it is paramount to start a conversation within the women’s movements. This session sought to identify ways in which discussions on climate justice can be more included in feminist spaces and agendas so that advocacy work in this area can be more sustainable and effective.

Participants discussed the following questions:

- a. **How to push governments to prepare and enforce a gender- inclusive climate action policies?** The majority of governments only focus on the vulnerability of women in cases of natural disasters. How can we shift the focus from disaster risk reduction strategies, to a more comprehensive, holistic approach over climate change? Who are the stakeholders?
- b. **What are the biggest barriers before and best practices of climate activism led by women and youth?**

Key conclusions:

- 1 **There is very little ecofeminist mobilization in WBT sub-region.** Very few groups are exclusively focusing on feminist climate activism. Also, legal and strategic frameworks regarding climate justice and environmental protection are fairly new and incomplete in the WBT sub-region. A push is needed to speed up mobilization.
- 2 **Definition of ecofeminism as the ideological and conceptual driver of feminist action in climate & environmental justice**³ needs an update. Feminists need to rethink and reclaim ecofeminism. Also, there is a need to have a more intersectional and holistic approach while fighting against structural barriers.
- 3 **WBT feminists ought to secure the space for deeper conversations** on the grounding principles and philosophies behind contemporary ecofeminist action, which would mean having younger generation at the forefront of climate justice movement. The WBT feminist movements are a little bit behind some of the other sub-regions in this sense.
- 4 **The main obstacles and structural barriers** regarding climate justice and gender equality are: **a. Militarism; b. Financialized Capitalism, c. Patriarchy,** and most importantly, **d. Extractivism.**
- 5 **Feminist action in WBT to shift to transformative actions that address root causes by deconstructing and destabilizing the restraining factors** and away from predominant focus on the consequences of environment change and climate injustice.

³The definition from 1970s reflects an old, essentialist approach. According to this understanding, the mistreatment of women is mirrored in the mistreatment of nature. And women are associated closely with nature based on their identities as women.





- 6 **WBT governments, in most cases, are part of the problem.** COVID-19 teaches us how important it is to **shift the narrative and practice from hard infrastructure to economy of care** (elderly care, transport, public health services) to address broader more holistic landscape of different needs of different groups of women, and of different generations.
- 7 **Civic support infrastructure** (international development support and academia) has led to compartmentalization of activism in niches and by competences (“environmentalists” vs. “feminists”). There is a need in WBT to break the walls between entry points and/or specializations by introducing environmental concerns into feminist movements and vice versa, including feminist policies into environmental movements. Horizontally and vertically there is a need for creating spaces to discuss joint new synergies and new approaches, a new **sisterhood on the intersections of feminist and environmental justice movements**.
- 8 **CSO and governments in WBT must address the growing inequalities**, along with the local and regional impacts of the crises. Rural women and women with disabilities must not be left behind throughout these discussions. **Social injustice must be at the core of climate justice discussions.** To get a seat at the table, women should “stop being good girls” and be weary of gender mainstreaming as a process that soothes the consciousness of bureaucracies while doing little for women and/or gender equality.
- 9 **Further discussions are needed regarding CSO–government collaboration for climate justice.** EBT contexts are politically tense, corruption is pervasive and government actors are often part of the climate crisis. Still, integration of ecofeminist concerns in policies requires a mix of advocacy and collaborative approaches and tactics.
- 10 **In WBT policy, women are only mentioned in the context of disaster risk reduction, and they are depicted as potential victims.** In reality, women play a leading role in mitigating impact of climate change. Local level actions related to DRR should be taken into account in bigger policy-making, since local approaches in DRR have a better understanding of vulnerable communities’ needs. A more prominent role is needed for local governments.
- 11 **Other stakeholders, including private sector actors and media must be involved in activities for climate justice.**
- 12 **Generation Z can be the driver of change.** The feminist movement to open dialogue with younger activists. For example, there is a lot to learn from Fridays for Future movement. Women need to build solidarity with youth.
- 13 **Increased funding for women’s organizations, youth organizations, sustainable agriculture and renewable energy** sources is a way to speed up and deepen change. Climate budgeting ought to be restructured in order to dedicate funds for solving and preventing the problems.





Technology and innovation for gender equality

The issue of technology and innovation in relation to gender equality was considered in two prongs:

- 1 How to ensure that more women in WBT take part in and benefit from innovation and technology? As a post-Beijing+25 issue, innovation and technology has not really penetrated feminist agendas in WBT and there is a need to change that, but how? and
- 2 How to ensure that innovation and technology in WBT is used to advance gender equality and drive change towards closing the gender gap?

Key conclusions:

- 1 **Technology and innovation offer the greatest chance for advancing gender equality in WBT at a quicker-than-organic pace.** In order to rely on technology/innovation as tools for real progress, this new post Beijing +25 issue ought to become part of women's movements' work in WBT. Technology is everywhere and women and men have to be able to use it in order to function. **Encouragement is needed for some women and some men in WBT.** As a sub-region, WBT has a vital need of technology and innovation to help bridge the services gap.
- 2 **WBT governments do not invest in innovative solutions and technologies that help to resolve gender issues,** meet the needs of women and other underserved groups, and close the gender gap. Public funding is provided to ideas that seek rapid commercialization rather than improvements in quality of life for women and men. Technology and innovation are not used as tools to solve problems. Rather they are used as tools for redistribution of wealth away from women and underrepresented groups.
- 3 **In WBT women are highly represented in science and research but not as highly in innovation and technology.** A generally low overall investment in R&D & IT is gender blind in WBT. Social innovation is under-recognized and technological innovation is favored. Across WBT however, women are more readily responding to the needs for social innovation. Rural and underrepresented women's role in reinterpretation of tradition is not recognized at all as innovative contributions in WBT. Therefore, the **women's knowledge capital, ideas and solutions are underfinanced and undervalued** and their needs are underserved by innovation and technology.
- 4 **In WBT a gender blind transition into a digital economy is ongoing:** more jobs, better services and faster economic growth are not going to benefit equally women and men in different segments of the population. **Digital Agenda for the Western Balkans (and Turkey?) is gender blind.** It focuses on broadband connectivity and infrastructure in the region without consideration of gender aspects; cybersecurity, trust and digitalization of industry excludes gender concerns; digital economy and society involves women and girls as a marginal concern; research and innovation are underfunded and excludes gender considerations. If gender considerations are not urgently included, poor services for women and underserved groups will remain poor even when digitalized. There is very little concern for preconditions to women's access to digital services.





- 5 **Future of Equality She Talks propose to initiate a Western Balkans and Turkey Innovation Coalition** that will trigger and nourish interest and engagement by feminists and civil society activists, academics and experts in gender responsive innovation and technology. **CSOs are excluded from policy and practice of technology and innovation.** Although they are often social innovators, CSOs are not considered as contributors or partners in his area in WBT countries. Innovation is conceptualized as the domain of private sector and individual (male) innovators. The role of communities is undervalued and under-recognized.
- 6 **Women's movements ought to conquer space in innovation and technology for their own values and creative solutions. Activism is always a solution: opportunities ought to be snatched by feminists who should develop platforms in which more women are interested.** Currently, women's creative potentials are fragmented and lost under the mainstream voices that are predominantly male and/or not actively seeking to close gender gap. **Feminist engagement in innovation and technology offers opportunities to reverse roles and ensure leadership by young women and/or elderly women.** Both of these groups can lead the way for gender responsive innovation and technology in WBT.
- 7 **Women's movements ought to provide new solutions to the changing world.** The pandemic is changing the circumstances even more and it is presenting **opportunities in terms of accessing actors** who would not be as open under the business as usual circumstances, including decision makers at all levels and private sector actors. **Women in WBT have an excellent track record for innovative solutions in crises.**
- 8 **Women's movement ought to invest more energy in ensuring access to accurate, relevant and timely information.** Ultimately, the promise of freedom through internet never became true and online information never became free. **Protection of privacy, mind and body is a modern feminist issue** and solutions on offer are very few and they are not localized enough.
- 9 **WBT governments are called upon to finally commit resources for the development of stable gender machineries and gender institutions** and to ensure that there is **constant dialogue with women's organizations, other CSOs and women and men in academia working on gender responsive science development, innovation and technology.**
- 10 **Contributions by male allies should be solicited and welcome.** In the fields on technology and innovation, there are many brilliant men who are willing to contribute and should be engaged.





Feminist movements and leadership

The operating environment for women's groups and the situation for women in WBT has changed since 1995 and the creation of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action:

- Twenty-five years ago, there was a global political consensus on how to deal with gender equality in the future.
- Today, there is a broken consensus: very well-organized conservative pushbacks are present in the WBT region, strong autocratic leadership is prevalent and the conservative movements are much better resourced and organized than before.⁴
- Today, there are lots of stereotypes on women's leadership and increasing violence against women in public positions, that discourage women to pursue leadership roles.

Key conclusions:

1 A different type of leadership is needed. The key characteristics of this new leadership include:

- Cross-regional cooperation and networking that fosters solidarity between regions and countries;
- Open to peer learning and exchange – different generations of women should share their experiences, international collective mentoring and sponsoring is needed, combined by one-to-one mentoring and sponsoring programs.
- Reliant on stronger organizations that have tackled the issue of shrinking space and funding austerity;
- Stronger partnerships between women in political parties and in all public environments where we have active feminist individuals or groups. (academia, media, NGOs, judiciary, parliament, government, local governments)
- Feminist solidarity, instead of repeating the competitive patterns of neoliberal capitalist system.

⁴ Some examples include: radical right-wing government that jeopardized basic women's rights, new generations of women and men are being wrongly thought on Istanbul convention and its values, etc.





2 There is a need for the development of a collaborative Platform

- Collaboration of allies is key – to discuss further issues among activists but also with citizens who are not involved; collaboration between academia, civil society & policy makers ought to be reinvigorated through mutual learning, since there are numerous great examples of women's leadership in the WBT sub-region.
- Focus should be transferred to people, advocacy and policy changes that are of utmost importance. Also, it is crucial to always keep women and men, girls and boys in mind and to always maintain the connection with them:
 - the majority of women should be connected to the movements in order to be in the position to negotiate the right needs of civil society, actors based on the consultations. It is important not to leave anyone behind and to include all women, especially those that are vulnerable.
 - MP's & Youth meetings on pushing forward agendas – example of such an approach exist in WBT sub-region.
 - Opportunities: Action Coalitions – Generation Equality Campaign, Women's Platform for the Development of Serbia, Dialogue for the Future, Follow us – example of feminist international reconciliation process, Other CSOs, movements, informal groups.

3 New strategies – that are appealing to younger generations

- Previous strategies deemed to be too slow for younger activists and there is a need to rethink feminist action in order to include young feminists. Also, elderly women should be included and since COVID-19 and online work, some of them are excluded from the processes based on their lack of experience in online engagement.
- Reorientation of the feminist movement to social and economic rights of women is the only way of getting involved those
- Social media provide opportunities that should be utilized, especially in COVID-19 times. They can be used for mobilization, for public discussions and consultations on a variety of issues and as a common voice that is autonomous and independent.

4 Line of interventions should be organized and led BOTTOM UP.





women's
platform
for development
of Serbia 2014-2029



GENERATION
EQUALITY



Future of
EQUALITY



Western Balkans
and Turkey Feminist talks

#shetalks





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¹All references to Kosovo should be understood to be in the context of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).





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