

RETHINKING, RETOOLING AND RE-ENERGISING GENDER EQUALITY POST COVID-19

Is gender mainstreaming a reality in social democratic parties in the Western Balkans? A case study of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia

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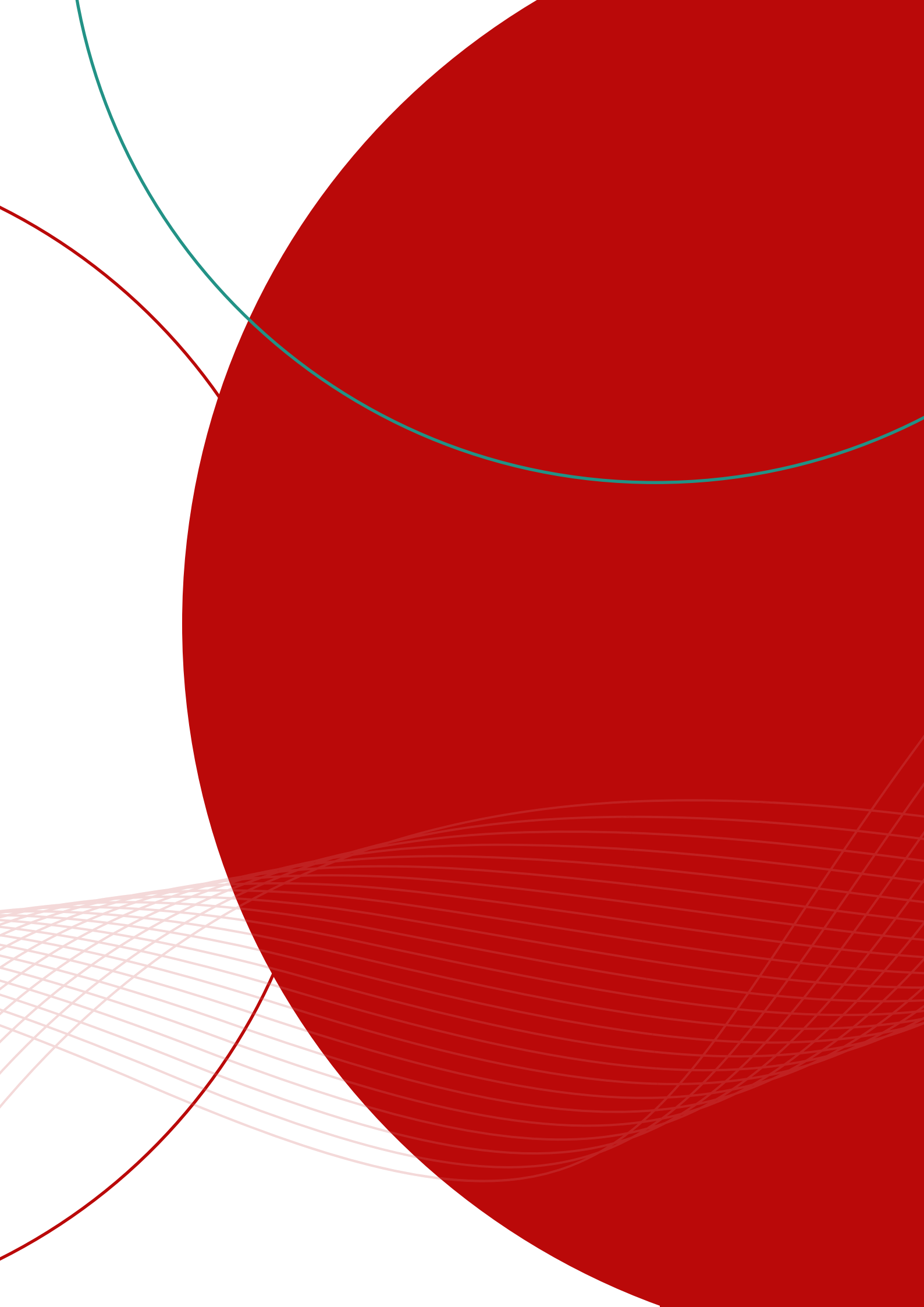
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
INTRODUCTION	8
Social context and gender equality in the country case study	11
AIM AND METHODOLOGY	20
RESULTS OUTLINE	25
Perception of women's forums	26
Perception of social democracy	32
Challenges and obstacles in gender equality	
Implementation in social democratic parties today	35
Knowledge about the Central and	
Eastern European platform for gender issues	37
Specificity of the social context in the post COVID-19 environment	38
CONCLUSIONS	42
RECOMMENDATIONS	48
REFERENCES	51
Bibliography	52
About the authors / Acknowledgements / About FEPS, and Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues	55



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What is the current situation regarding the implementation of gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties in the Western Balkan region? The aim of this research paper was precisely to determine the answer to this question based on a set of selected countries in the region, namely Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, North Macedonia and Serbia.

The transition process in the Western Balkans focused on the democratisation of society through the establishment of a multi-party system, the construction of civil society, the free market and privatisation. All these changes have been reflected in gender equality, gender mainstreaming¹ and the notion of social democracy.

Research participants were representatives of social democratic parties, academia, civil society and the media. The research included a total of 70 participants (37 women and 33 men). Data were collected through specially constructed semi-structured questionnaires and guided interviews. The research shows that all the countries have in place a legislative framework as well as the institutional mechanisms required to implement gender equality. Unfortunately, gender equality goals are not considered as state priorities, and therefore, with the political will lacking, are only being selectively and partially implemented, especially with regards to the introduction of gender mainstreaming into key country strategies and policies.

Social democratic parties in the region have been a defining and key political and ideological force in the push for gender equality, within and outside parliament, as well as in the establishment of country gender equality mechanisms for implementation. This has led to a significant internal policy shift in dealing with gender equality goals within the parties themselves, for instance in establishing the quota system and women's forums.

Gender equality in social democratic parties in the region has become a sine qua non.

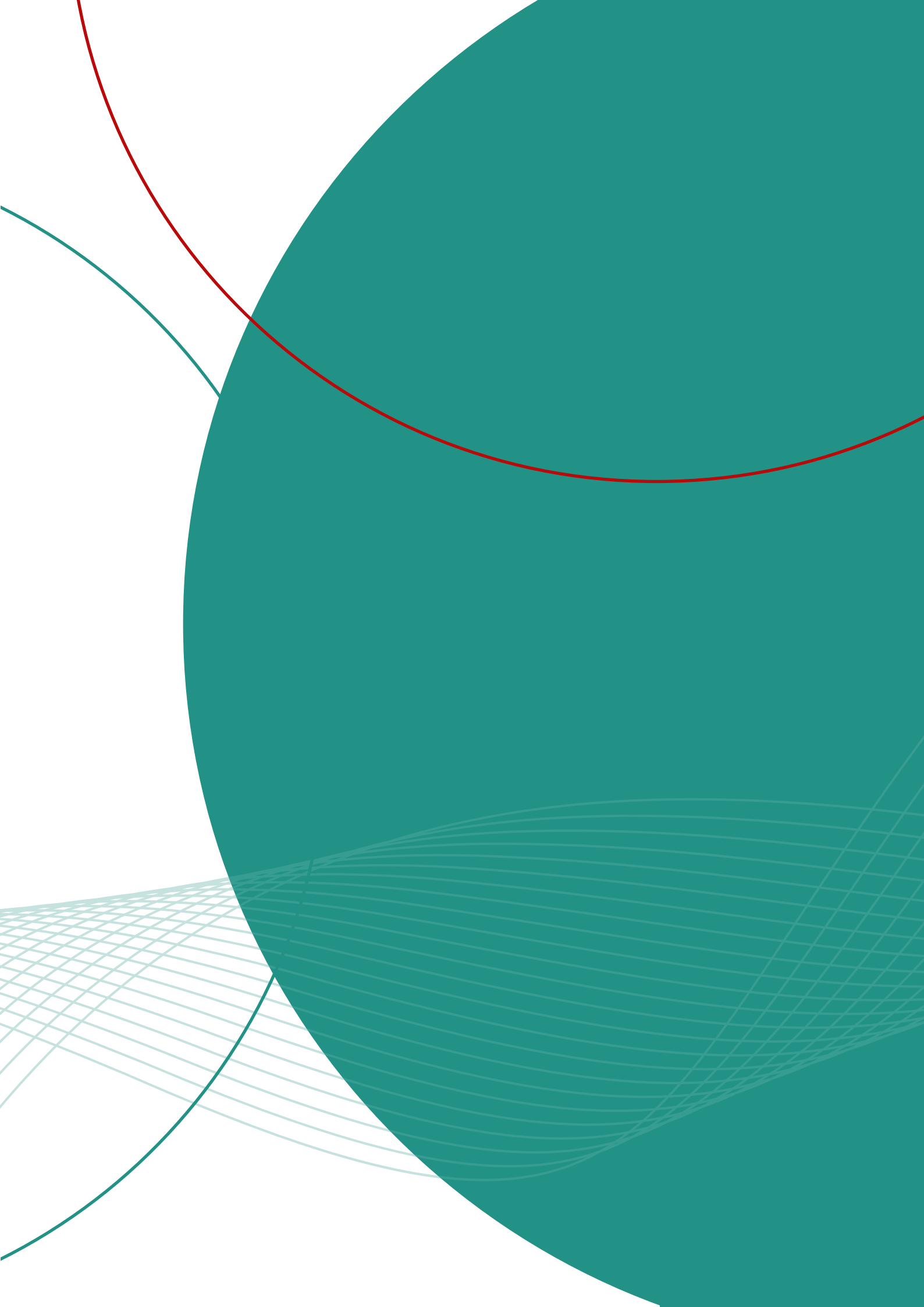
Today, women's forums are perceived as an important part of the fight for gender equality led by social democratic parties, regardless of the current difficulties that some parties are experiencing. However, despite their historical legacy and the results they have achieved in the fight for gender equality, women's forums within parties do not have a recognisable impact on the implementation of party policy and are not perceived by the public as important factors in the fight for gender equality (except in North Macedonia). Although in the Republic of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia, there are quotas and zipper systems², it has been demonstrated that women's forums do not have a strong enough political influence in the party or on activities outside the party. Although the CEE Gender Network has been accepted by social democratic parties as a regional gender equality political hub, it is still not recognised as a political instrument for developing gender equality policies.

The crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated gender inequality. The research has shown that, although women have borne the brunt of the crisis, national anti-COVID measures in the region have not been gender-sensitive.

Based on the results obtained, this policy study concludes by providing a set of policy recommendations for social democratic parties involved in the study. Acknowledging gender equality as an important challenge for the future, the objective is to raise awareness and, in turn, guarantee the implementation of gender mainstreaming through the work of women's forums and social democratic parties themselves.

1 The main goal of gender mainstreaming is to transform unequal social and institutional structures into equal and just structures for women and men, and thus eradicate gender-based discrimination.

2 Under this system, a party's list of candidates alternates between women and men.





INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

A review of previous gender equality research in the Western Balkan region shows that the existing national studies have mostly concentrated on the issue of recognition of gender equality, attitudes on gender discrimination, and women's equal opportunities. There has been little monitoring of gender policy implementation, and, in most cases, there is no relevant data on the impact of implemented activities.

At the same time, there is a lack of systematic research on the perception and understanding of gender mainstreaming within progressive social democratic parties, a gap which the Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues (CEE Gender Network) has sought to fill through its work³. Today, the concept of gender equality has gained international acceptance. However, fundamentally, it is not ideologically neutral. It relates to the heritage of the labour, feminist, progressive and social democratic political movements within the ideology of equality, social justice and solidarity. This historical heritage must be cherished and safeguarded by social democratic politics and parties.

The position of women in society and gender equality stem primarily from political and ideological values rooted in democracy and human rights, as demonstrated by the history of socialist and social democratic movements and parties since the early 20th century. From today's perspective, most achievements in gender equality, both at national and international level, can be attributed to the pioneering work of these movements, parties and feminist associations committed to equality.

Why is this significant? Because these political forces and ideological visions were the drivers of the process of promoting human and women's rights at the United Nations (UN) after World War II, from the establishment of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to the World Conferences on Women in Mexico (1975), Copenhagen (1980) and Nairobi (1985), and

the establishment of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Training and Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW). INSTRAW was established as a training arm for the other UN gender equality mechanisms, and its first director, Dunja Pestic Ferencić, was from Croatia/Yugoslavia. The proclamation of 8 March as International Women's Day in Mexico is clear evidence of the socialist and social democratic progressive commitment to equality and women's rights. The then non-aligned Yugoslavia was at the forefront of this process, most remarkably through the engagement of the Slovenian politician and women's rights activist Vida Tomšić at national and international level. This is important in understanding the situation in the countries included in this review, since they relate to this heritage.

However, a significant and comprehensive political shift in the perception of gender equality occurred in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, with the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action as a blueprint for promoting and fostering gender equality at national, regional and international level. This conference endorsed the notion of gender equality "as a social construct" coupled with the notion of "gender mainstreaming" as a political strategy. This is at the origin of what today causes part of the friction between progressive social democratic movements and parties and the conservative, clerical and fundamentalist right wing, friction that was especially evident in the region during the discussions on the ratification of the Istanbul Convention.

In line with the spirit of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the European Union also works to promote gender equality. In accordance with this approach, and an increased interest and commitment to equal opportunities, the Santer Commission established a new group of commissioners for gender equality. This cross-sectoral group aims to promote

3 Šilović et al., Korčula School (2011-2021); Kraljević, Marinović, Korčula School (2021)

gender mainstreaming in all European Commission services by drawing up action plans and monitoring their implementation.

Today, the strategic document of the European Commission is the Gender Equality Strategy 2020-2025 with its corresponding Action Plan. In this strategic document, the European Commission emphasises that member states must fully embrace the fundamental principle of gender equality and that the implementation of EU legislation in this area is a priority in the enlargement process. Only Croatia is a member of the European Union among the countries included in this research, while all the other countries are yet to become so. Sadly, gender equality only marginally permeates the negotiations over EU membership for the countries in question.

In the Western Balkan region, the issue of women's emancipation and gender equality was very important during and after World War II. Legislation was changed, quotas were introduced in management, women were particularly active in trade unions, reproductive rights were guaranteed by the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution, gender budgeting was introduced, especially in social policy, and there was gender equality in education. However, the issue of gender equality was dogmatised and bureaucratised by the one-party socialist self-governing system; implementation of gender policy took a backseat, and feminism was seen as something 'imported from abroad', although it was somewhat 'tolerated'. The glass was half full and half empty, but significant progress was made.

Since the early 1990s, the countries of the region have seen historical changes in the aftermath of war, with the emergence of new states, the democratisation of societies and the process of transition. During the transition process, the newly-established societies went through a fundamental identity crisis. In the transition from a one-party to a multi-party system, the new ruling parties were mainly conservative and nationalist, and this period saw the revival of patriarchal traditionalism and religious fundamentalism. Socialist and social democratic ideas were marginalised, and the issue of gender equality and the political participation of women were subject to conservative, clerical and fundamentalist ideology. This backlash has in many respects taken the region back to the basics of gender equality.

All this left a mark on the attitude towards gender equality in the countries in the region and beyond. Empowering women to become more involved in political and public life, thus strengthening social democratic parties, and fostering regional cooperation for the exchange of best practices remain ongoing tasks and challenges, as these are the basic tools in the fight for gender equality.

The processes of transition, globalisation, corruption and the lean towards right-wing policies have affected not only gender equality, but also the notion of social democracy. Faced with nationalism, chauvinism and an ideology that is not in line with a value system of social democracy, as well as with everyday problems, the region's social democratic parties have often deviated from their leftist, progressive views, causing dissatisfaction among the left-wing electorate, especially among women and the youth. Today, despite all the changes, the core values of social democracy (freedom, equality and solidarity) remain fundamental values at the centre of the newly independent states.

It should be noted that progressive, feminist and other associations, as well as social democratic and progressive parties, have significantly contributed to maintaining a positive attitude towards gender equality and preserving some of the progress in this regard. For example, reproductive rights are protected by the legislation of the countries in the region. We should not overlook the fact that this was achieved by social democratic forces and feminist associations.

Therefore, the task of social democratic parties and their women's forums is to establish a new framework for public and political action based on equality. This research examines the policy of social democratic parties in terms of gender equality, as well as the status and activities of women's forums in its implementation.

Guidelines that can be formulated based on the data collected will primarily refer to the processes and mechanisms of effective implementation and transformation of gender equality policies in terms of adequate positioning and recognition of social democratic parties. The research is based on the political engagement of the women's social democratic movement in 2021, at a time we have observed a general decline in the popularity of social democratic parties in the countries included in the research.

Conceptualising gender mainstreaming

In this research, the concept of gender mainstreaming is based on the principles of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC, 1997), which states that:

“Mainstreaming a gender perspective [gender mainstreaming] is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality”.

The definition of gender mainstreaming used in the European Commission is based on the same principles:

“Gender mainstreaming is the integration of the gender perspective into every stage of policy processes – design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation – with a view to promoting equality between women and men. It means assessing how policies impact on the life and position of both women and men – and taking responsibility to re-address them if necessary. This is the way to make gender equality a concrete reality in the lives of women and men creating space for everyone within the organizations as well as in communities – to contribute to the process of articulating a shared vision of sustainable human development and translating it into reality”.

Regarding the definition of gender mainstreaming, it should be pointed out that the term “gender policy” is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres, so that women and men alike can benefit from a policy action.

Achieving it could make the unequal social and institutional structures equal for everyone, regardless of gender. Equal participation of men and women in politics is a necessary precondition for the effective development of democracy. Those most responsible for such a change are political parties, and the task that lies before them is complex and challenging.

SOCIAL CONTEXT AND GENDER EQUALITY IN THE COUNTRY CASE STUDY

Looking at all the countries covered by this research, one can see that these are all marked by patriarchal and traditional values. The period of transition was marked by the re-traditionalisation of these societies, especially through the public role of the Church.

During the 1990s, as stated in the introduction, a change in the political and economic systems took place in the countries researched. The former socialist republics of Yugoslavia became independent states. The breakup of Yugoslavia triggered the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, and later also the systemic violence in Kosovo, which declared independence. All this put a new focus on politically-motivated nationalism and re-traditionalisation, as well as on the transgenerational transmission of the trauma and unresolved historical relationships among states. These countries were marked significantly by the public role of the Church and its influence on the government in terms of gender and gender equality. Paradoxically, this re-traditionalisation (the return of women to their traditional roles) was also accompanied by the influence of modern processes brought about by gender equality (equal opportunities and rights for all, regardless of gender). These two opposing values implied that traditional gender roles were overemphasised, presenting an obstacle to the development of a modern, democratic society and thus also triggering a backlash against gender equality.

All these countries saw a dramatic rise in poverty, and the social changes that followed dealt a heavy blow to women in particular. Their rights were disrespected, despite women's demands to participate in politics on an equal footing and to be economically independent. In the former socialist state, gender equality was an

integral part of the ideology, prescribed by the ruling party itself. The process of transition put the focus on the democratisation of society through the establishment of a multi-party system, the creation of civil society, the free market and privatisation. Over the years, the great expectations that life would be better under democracy were disappointed. In all of these countries, women were politically marginalised and their representation in national parliaments fell below 10 percent in the early 1990s. With the activation of women's and feminist associations and the pressure exerted by social democratic and other progressive parties in parliaments, the situation has gradually changed, and women now hold on average around 30-40 percent of seats in parliaments.

When talking about gender equality, we can say in short that we have gone from "equality without democracy to democracy without equality, and women as a group, due to their general social position, have become the losers in the transition, as regards their social and economic status, as well as political representation"⁴.

In the past couple of decades, numerous empirical studies have clearly shown that women's participation and active work in political life has a direct positive impact, both on public and political life, and on decision-making processes, as well as on the level of democratisation within society and on the everyday lives of citizens in this society.

In this sense, the position of women in society and the implementation of gender equality is a litmus test of democratisation and the creation of an equal society for all citizens.

4 Ulf Brunnbauer, From equality without democracy to democracy without equality? Women and Transition in Southeast Europe (South-East Europe Review, vol.3, 2020).

Faced with the challenges of aggressive retrograde social norms, it was women, members of social democratic parties, who started a political social uphill battle to ensure gender equality. In cooperation with progressive NGOs and women's trade union groups, they managed to preserve and improve the legislative basis for gender equality. They were aware and knew that when the opportunities were presented to them and mechanisms for action provided, "women are no longer passive recipients of welfare-enhancing help. Women increasingly see themselves as active agents of change: dynamic promoters of social transformations that can change the lives of both men and women".

Today, three decades later, gender equality has been accepted as one of the fundamental principles of the democratic and social order of the countries covered by this research. The situation in national parliaments has improved, as shown in the following table.

TABLE 1: Representation of women and social democratic parties in national parliaments (data collected by national authors for the study, 2021)

Country /SD party	National Parliament Total number of MPs			MPs members of SD parties in National Parliament		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Bosnia and Herzegovina/SDP	42	35 83.3%	7 16.7%	5 11.9%	4 9.5%	1 4.5%
Croatia/SDP*	151	103 68%	48 32%	14 9%	7 4.5%	7 4.5%
Montenegro/SDP&DPS	81	59 72.84%	22 27.16%	SDP 3 3.7% DPS 30 37.04%	2 66.66% 22 73.33%	1 33.33% 8 26.60%
North Macedonia/SDUM	120	70 60%	50 40%	30	11 43%	19 57%
Serbia/DP**	250	150 60.24%	99 39.96%	0	0	0

*After the 2020 parliamentary elections in Croatia, the Social Democratic Party in Croatia (SDP) had 32 MPs (17 men and 15 women). In 2021, due to intra-party differences, the SDP polarised, and some MPs separated and established the independent Club of Social Democrats. The SDP now has 14 MPs (7 men and 7 women), and the Club of Social Democrats has 18 MPs (10 men and 8 women).

**The Democratic Party did not participate in the parliamentary elections, as these were boycotted by left-wing opposition parties.

It is obvious that the number of women MPs in national parliaments has increased, but the goal of parity democracy with the equal representation of women and men in political bodies is still to be achieved.

Legislative frameworks and institutional mechanisms play a very important role in the implementation of gender mainstreaming. An overview of legislative frameworks and institutional mechanisms for gender equality in the countries researched is shown in the table below.

TABLE 2: Legislative framework and institutional mechanisms for gender equality

Institutional mechanisms	Bosnia and Herzegovina	Croatia	Montenegro	North Macedonia	Serbia
NATIONAL BODIES					
Government Office for Gender Equality	X	X	There is only a department within the Ministry of Justice, Human and Minority Rights	X	Coordination Body chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Construction
Parliamentary Committee on Gender Equality	X	X	X	X	X
Ombudsperson for Gender Equality	NO	X	There is only a Deputy Ombudsperson dealing with gender discrimination cases	There is only a Deputy Ombudsperson for gender equality	There is a Commissioner for the Protection of Equality (which also includes gender equality) and the OMBUDSMAN has an expert advisory body for improving gender equality
NATIONAL LEGISLATION					
Gender Equality Act	X	X	X	X	X
Anti-Discrimination Act	X	X	X	X	X
Protection Against Domestic Violence Act	X	X	X	X	X
NATIONAL ACTION PLANS/STRATEGIES					
National Gender Equality Plan	X	NO	X	X	X
National Plan for Combating Discrimination	NO	X	NO	X	X
National Plan for the Implementation of Resolution 1325	X	X	X	X	X
National Plan for Protection Against Domestic Violence	X	X	X	X	X
National Plan to Combat Sexual Violence and Harassment	NO	X	NO	X	X

INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS (RATIFICATION STATUS)					
UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)	X	X	X	X	X
Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (Istanbul Convention)	X	X	X	X	X
Security Council Resolution 1325: Women, Peace and Security	X	X	X	X	X

All countries have legislative frameworks in place, as well as institutional mechanisms for the implementation of gender equality, but the interviews reveal that, in some countries, these exist only on paper. There is a lack of political will to implement the adopted legal acts and strategic documents in practice. Furthermore, the very notion of 'gender equality' is insufficiently recognised in society and the level of awareness on this issue is insufficient. Namely, in most cases, this is not even perceived as an issue. All this prevents women from fully enjoying their rights to full participation in society. Interviewees also state that there is no political will to change the still dominant traditional social values.

Over the last decade, various political processes have affected the respect for and implementation of the legislative framework in the context of human rights protection, especially in the case of women's human rights and achieving gender equality. Below, we have highlighted the main findings of national female researchers regarding 'gender equality' in the countries covered by the research, based on the national reports produced in each country.

Serbia

"In Serbia, many gender equality mechanisms have been suspended at local government level, and there is no precise information on how many of these are active today... The pressure of the huge financial and economic crisis is reflected in the national budget – the reduction and redistribution of resources intended to ensure gender equality mechanisms function. This discontinuity, their modest capacities and financial resources indicate that the resources to produce, coordinate and implement effective and efficient gender mainstreaming are in a highly fragile state. Changes in the attitudes that represent norms and values in the context of gender roles and gender equality are slow but noticeable. We could say that traditional values are becoming less important, but are still omnipresent in society.

The reason for the low participation of women in political life at various levels of government lies in the lack of internal election processes within political parties that would ensure the participation of women at all levels; a transparent database of female members of the party, and of various key policy-making bodies and committees (e.g., economy, legislation, security, etc). There have been no qualitatively significant changes in the awareness of gender equality among party members, and/or they only pay lip service to women. Given such a turbulent political

period, women's motivation and participation in politics are very low. A considerable number of women, who used to be recognised as representatives of women's forums and the political organisation itself, have withdrawn from politics or left these parties".

Montenegro

"In August 2020, after three decades of political domination of the Democratic Party of Socialists, there was a change of government in Montenegro. Regarding the goals of gender mainstreaming and the topic of political participation of women, the change of government has not brought about any concrete improvements. On the contrary, the political and public discourse advocating 'traditional values' has strengthened, as has the influence of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the community".

Bosnia and Herzegovina

"One gets the impression that the established gender mechanisms do not lead to significant social change and that 'democratisation without gender equality' is taking place⁵". This is because there is no true political will to change the patriarchal social structures in the sphere of productive and reproductive labour, the patriarchal state, male violence against women, the patriarchal culture and patriarchal relations in the sphere of sexuality⁶. This patriarchal modus operandi and the lack of political readiness to implement the adopted legal acts and strategic documents in practice continues to prevent women from fully enjoying their rights to full participation in society.

If we consider the level of gender equality in relation to various indices that measure disparities in social achievements of women and men at global level, we

will see that women are noticeably invisible and marginalised in Bosnia and Herzegovina⁷. Women are exposed to gender discrimination and inequality in the labour market; according to labour statistics, the employment rate for women is twice as low as it is for men; women make up the majority of unemployed and inactive citizens (Agency for Statistics, 2020). Unemployment and their vulnerable economic position result in rising levels of poverty and social exclusion among women⁸. The feminisation of poverty is intensifying, especially in the context of the economic and social consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Violence against women in public and private spheres (gender-based violence, including sexual harassment, stalking, partner violence) is persistent, affecting almost half of the female population (Agency for Gender Equality, 2013, and OSCE, 2019).

North Macedonia

"The Republic of North Macedonia is a country that is making a progress towards ensuring gender equality and well-being, but there is still much room for improvement....In the latest electoral campaigns (2020), we could see that only one ideological option, namely the social-democratic one, promoted the concept of gender equality for the first time, through the 50/50 platform. Consequently, the ruling coalition adheres to gender commitments such as equality and non-discrimination, which will undoubtedly lead to national strategies for gender equality and protection against discrimination. Given Macedonia's conservative environment, it is not easy to promote progressiveness in any form, including in gender equality".

5 Ulf Brunnbauer, From equality without democracy to democracy without equality? Women and Transition in Southeast Europe (South-East Europe Review, Vol.3, 2020).

6 Sylvia Walby, Theorizing Patriarchy, Sociology (Vol. 23, No. 2, 1989).

7 S. Bašić, and V. Repovac Nikšić. Ekonomija i rodna ravnopravnost (2019).

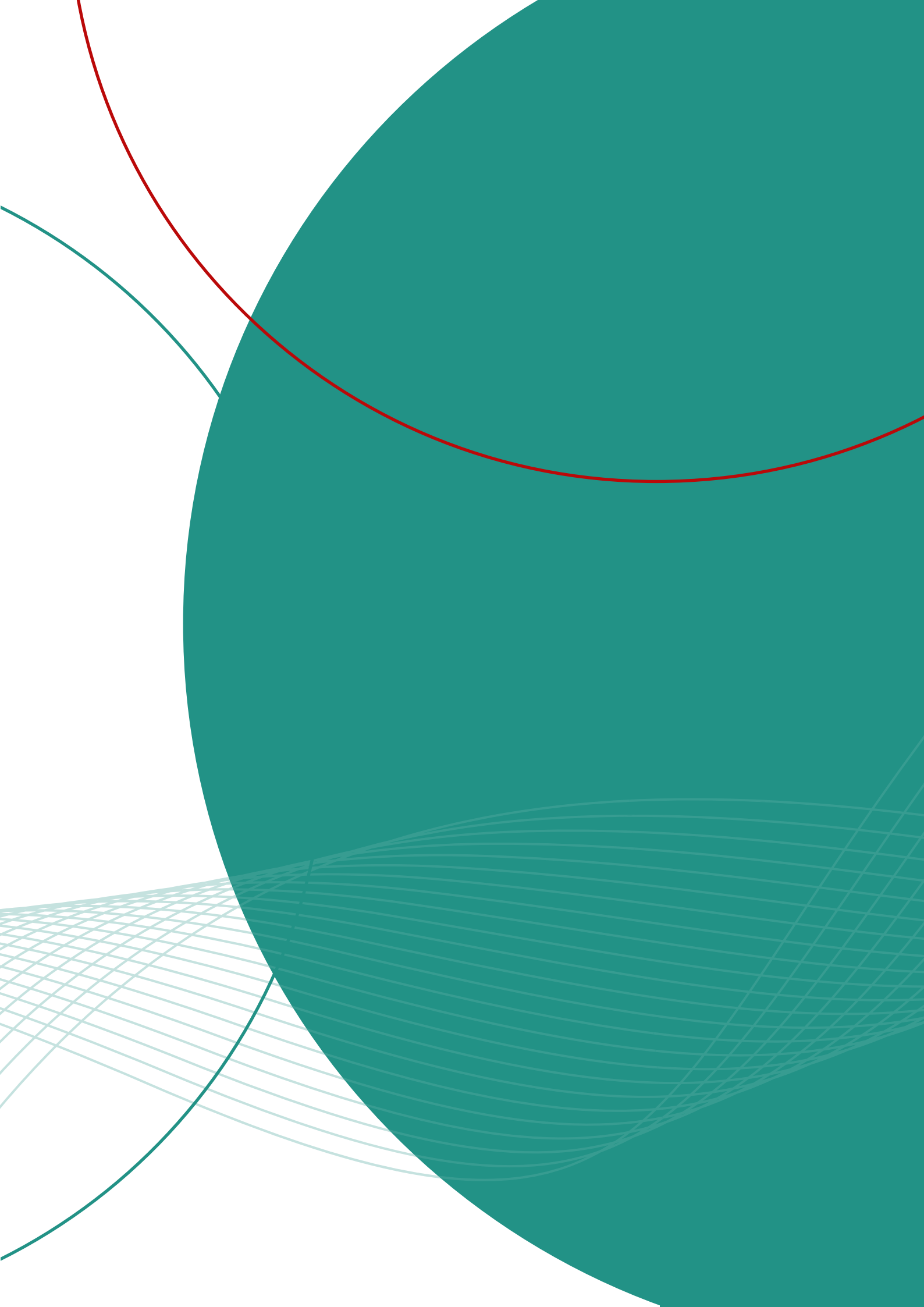
8 S. Bašić, 2013. Društvene nejednakosti, društveno raslojavanje i siromaštvo u BIH (Dijalog – Časopis za filozofiju i društvenu teoriju, 1-2, 62-83, 2013).

Croatia

In the Gender Equality Index 2021 published by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE), Croatia is in 19th place with 59.2 points, 8.8 points below the EU average. This makes Croatia the 9th worst ranked country in the Index. In the 2020 Report, the Gender Equality Ombudsperson stated that most discrimination complaints came from the field of labour, employment and social rights, that there has been a significant increase in domestic violence punishable by criminal law, and that a trend of anonymous reporting of sexual harassment has been noted. Women find it more difficult to find employment, they work in lower-paid sectors, and on average work longer hours than men, including unpaid domestic work. On average, they earn 13 percent less than men and their pensions are 21 percent lower. Women are underrepresented at all levels of political participation. Gender inequality is present in all spheres of society. The research participants point out the following:

“One gets the impression that established gender mechanisms have not resulted in significant social change. This is because there is no general true political will to change traditional social structures in the sphere of productive and reproductive labour, the patriarchal state, male violence against women, the patriarchal culture and patriarchal relations. The lack of political readiness to implement the adopted legal acts and strategic documents in practice continue to prevent women from fully enjoying their rights to full participation in society”.

Based on all this, the question remains as to why the established legislative framework and institutional mechanisms of gender equality, which are conceived as agile, creative, politically powerful and influential instruments for improving the status of women and democratisation of society are not achieving the set goals. This research will try to answer this question, among other things.





AIM AND METHODOLOGY

AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Intending to provide support to the continuous development of intra-party democracy through gender equality and women's empowerment, as well as to political social democratic parties in their efforts to continue the strategic process of achieving gender equality, this research aims to identify and gain an overview of processes, relationships, motivation, effects and influences, as well as the context of the time in which social democracy finds itself today. Special emphasis is placed on gender equality and the work of women's forums.

The subject of this research is gender equality in the social democratic parties of selected countries in the region (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Croatia, North Macedonia and Serbia).

The research aims to define the current situation regarding the implementation of gender mainstreaming in the parties with all the advantages and limitations, and to get a clear picture of what needs to be done to strengthen the capacity to implement gender mainstreaming in the parties. In line with the defined goal, three specific objectives have been set:

- 1) resource assessment
- 2) creating a sustainable framework for the effective implementation of gender equality
- 3) defining the starting points and recommendations for planning future activities.

This policy study seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What is the perception of women's forums and social democracy?
- 2) What international and national legislation defines gender equality in the specific countries included in the research?

- 3) What are the challenges and obstacles in the implementation of gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties today?
- 4) How can the perception and work of social democratic parties in the area of gender equality be improved?
- 5) What are the specificities of gender equality at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic?

The conceptual framework of the research is designed based on the study of relevant national and international literature on gender equality. The research process was conducted in line with the main goal, which is to strengthen the capacities to coordinate activities and create gender mainstreaming in the social democratic parties in the region.

The survey was conducted in five countries in the region (Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Northern Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro), from 15 December 2021 to 15 January 2022. Respondents were the representatives of social democratic parties, academia, civil society/NGO sector and the media. The survey included a total of 70 respondents, with equal representation of women and men. The survey included 37 women and 33 men respondents.

The respondents formed a convenience sample. The response rate was satisfactory. No-one refused to participate in the survey, and the respondents showed motivation to participate. Some of them perceived the research as important for redefining the role of social democratic parties in their future activities. Table 3 shows the structure of respondents from social democratic parties and outside the parties.

TABLE 3: Structure of survey participants

Countries	Respondents from social democratic parties								Respondents outside the parties					
	Party leadership		Women's forum leadership		Representatives of local organisations		Representatives of youth forums		Academia		NGOs		The media	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Bosnia and Herzegovina	2			2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Croatia	2			2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Montenegro	1DPS 1SDP			1DPS 1SDP	1DPS 1SDP			1DPS 1SDP	1	1	1	1	1	1
North Macedonia	2			2	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Serbia	2	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1 1trade union	1	1	1

The average age of respondents from social democratic parties by country was 43 (men 39, women 47), whereas the average age of respondents outside the parties was 44 (men 41, women 47). All the respondents were friendly, approachable and interested. They saw the research as a step towards finding the answer on how to redefine the work and improve women's organising within a political party.

The survey was conducted in five countries in the region (Republic of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia and Montenegro) from 15 December 2021 to 15 January 2022. Data were collected through specially developed semi-structured questionnaires and guided interviews. Responses were registered, and in the case of some participants, even recorded. Some of the interviews were conducted in person, while others were conducted online, which at the time was in accordance with the prescribed epidemiological measures in the surveyed countries.

The researchers who conducted the national surveys were previously selected based on their many years of experience in the field of gender equality.

In a joint Zoom meeting, the researchers were familiarised with the purpose and subject of the research, and they also learned how to use the questionnaire and implement the survey process. This was done with the aim of harmonising the survey process and data collection, as well as the representativeness of the research. The survey was individual and in the form of a semi-structured interview, which lasted on average from 45 minutes to an hour.

The research was preceded by an analysis of available reports on gender equality in the parties. The reports were used to create the questionnaire for research into gender equality, but also to help the researchers get a better grasp of the subject and goals of the research. It is important to point out that the researchers' suggestions, based on their experience in the field, made an important contribution to creating the survey questionnaires.

Three semi-structured questionnaires, each adapted to the survey respondents, were created to provide a realistic picture of the situation. One questionnaire was intended for the members of the parties, and the other for respondents outside the parties. The

third, semi-structured questionnaire was intended for political parties, and it aimed to collect statistical indicators within the parties and learn how they perceived the women's forum within the party.

All three questionnaires contained quantitative and qualitative questions adapted to the target group (within/outside the party). Basic data on the respondents (gender, age) were collected through quantitative questions. Qualitative questions were administered in the form of a structured interview and collected for each respondent individually.

The questionnaire intended for the respondents from social democratic parties consisted of 15 questions. The questions referred to the weaknesses and strengths of the women's forum, and the main obstacles and challenges to implementing gender mainstreaming in the parties, and possible ways to overcome them. They also covered the impact of the women's forum on the decision-making processes in the party, the impact of current changes and restructuring in the parties on gender equality and the work of the women's forum, and the availability of financial support to implement activities. Then, they related to the recognition of the women's forum within the party and the wider social context. Finally, they sought respondents' opinions on quotas and the zipper system, skills that could strengthen and educate members of the women's forum, and topics/issues they consider relevant for gender equality during the COVID 19 pandemic.

The second questionnaire, intended for respondents outside the party, consisted of nine questions related to the respondents' perceptions of the main features of social democracy, the visibility of the impact of the women's forum on social democratic policies, the social democratic party's recognition of gender equality, and the topics that social democracy should address in general and those relevant to gender equality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

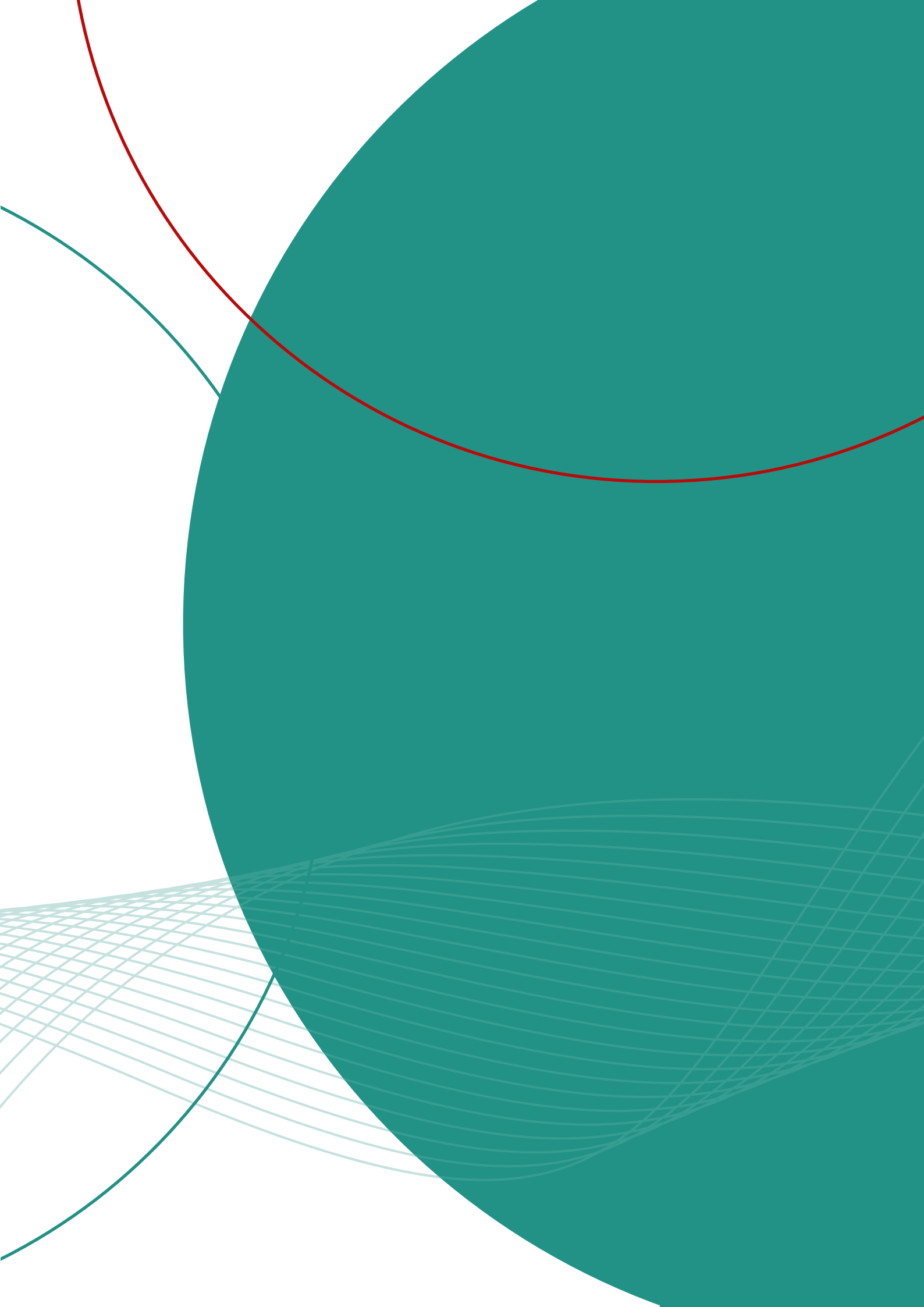
The third questionnaire was filled in by party representatives. The first part of the questionnaire referred to the age and education of women in the party, the percentage of women in party bodies, na-

tional and local institutions, and the activities of the women's forum (assessment of the most important activities, assessment of the representation of public relations policy in the party and the work of the women's forum).

The second part of the questionnaire included 12 questions related to obstacles to implementing gender mainstreaming, redefining the goals of social democracy and parties, the impact of the women's forum on decision-making, providing funding to support the women's forum within the party, the recognition of women's forum activities in the community, and empowering and educating women within the party.

The task of the respondents was to express their opinions on each question.

Other relevant data from the existing internal documents and reports on gender equality in the parties, as well as legislation and institutional mechanisms, were also collected through desk research. Statistical data and findings of the research conducted in the spring of 2021 for the Korčula School Think Thank were used, along with other relevant research in the field of gender-based violence at national and international level.





RESULTS OUTLINE

The results of the research were considered in line with the defined objective and research questions. It is important to note that this research does not focus on identifying differences in the perception of the research topic between different groups of respondents, but on a more comprehensive overview of gender equality in the field of social democracy. Part of the collected data was processed using descriptive statistics, and part using qualitative analysis. The results obtained

are presented in relation to: the perception of the women's forum and social democracy, the perception of gender equality and familiarity of research participants with the Platform for Gender Equality of the Central and Eastern European Network for Gender Issues (CEEGN), challenges and obstacles in implementing gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties, and the specificities of gender equality during the COVID-19 pandemic.

PERCEPTION OF WOMEN'S FORUMS

Regarding the perception of women's forums, the results obtained were considered in terms of strengths and weaknesses, visibility within and outside the party, gender equality, ways of educating and empowering, and ways of financing women's forums.

Strengths of women's forums

Participants perceive women's forums as an important part of social democratic parties, regardless of the difficulties currently faced by individual parties. According to all research participants, the fundamental values of social democracy and social democratic views in understanding social issues are recognisable strengths.

The inclusion of women in the party is seen as an important strength of the women's forum, according to a female research participant from Macedonia. The motivation that currently drives women to get involved (i.e., become active within the party), is related to the lack of justice and the rule of law, degradation of fundamental values of society, growing inequality in a society driven by corruption and degradation of democratic institutions, and lack of social justice.

The contextual social factors that directly or indirectly affect gender equality demand change and action.

Women recognise this, as research on the role of women in Serbia shows that they sincerely recognise that women have the role of "gatekeepers", that they have an important role in contributing to positive change. This is also the reason why an increasing number of women enter politics and become active in political parties.

One of the recognised strengths also lies in the fact that women's forums exist and operate as internal interest organisations, at all levels with a clear functional position within party structures. "The greatest strength is precisely the existence of this forum based on interest, which is recognised and established through official documents and party structure. This provides legitimacy for action on various grounds and specifically based on the interests of women in the party. The strength also lies in the fact that all women who are members of the Social Democratic Party are automatically members of the women's forum, which creates a critical mass, always a very important element (votes, hands, support)", said a respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina. As well as the fact that "the presidents of women's forums at all levels are, by their function, also members of the decision-making bodies, with the right to participate in the decision-making and policy-making processes", stated a research participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina. The base consists of recognisable women, women politicians, as a legacy of the Social Democratic Party.

In Montenegro, the greatest recognised strength is women's political perseverance, "women's commitment to building a civil democratic society as advocated by the party's programme", the multinational and multi-confessional structure of female party membership, and strong infrastructure that enables the mobilisation of women and acts as an open channel for mediation of their political ideas and ambitions.

In Croatia, respondents believe that the opportunity to talk about gender equality has increased as society has matured. The strengths are the "activities and exclusively political work", along with networking. The tradition of the Social Democratic Party that has been built since its establishment and which played an important role in society with regards to the emancipation and promotion of women in politics is still an important strength of the women's forum. There are quality organisations that deal with this issue both at national and international level.

Weaknesses of women's forums

When it comes to weaknesses, the respondents mention both internal and external factors that have weakened the impact of women's forums in the parties in recent years. In North Macedonia, many respondents think that the women's forum is still strongly influenced by traditional values and that the party lacks young members.

Participants in Montenegro point out the lack of activism among female members, the lack of political determination and the disinterest and potentially, often unintentional, will of the party leadership to create the conditions for revitalisation and open a space for dialogue on the position of the women's forum. Women's forums have become "anaemic", and, according to the participants, they have fallen into a "continuous identity crisis". At the same time, the party wastes all its energy fighting "over elementary political issues".

The weaknesses highlighted by the research participants from Bosnia and Herzegovina refer to the insufficient number of women in the party, a lack

of political activism among women or stimulation thereof from party structures. Equally, existing potential is insufficiently exploited. There are also problems with the lack of funds, and there is little interest in volunteering, which is also understandable due to the economic situation many women are in, and the domestic and care work they perform.

In Serbia, many members with years of experience at the level of legislative/executive power in the work of the women's forum have left the membership. So, it turns out that at present, most female members have no previous political experience or did not play an active role in developing the forum's political organisation. Thus, "institutional memory and continuity is missing".... "The number of Party members is fluid, it is not possible to maintain the continuous payment of membership fees, and other funds that were once available no longer exist, in accordance with the Law on the Financing of Political Parties that participate in parliaments at all levels (national, regional and local)".

Participants in the Republic of Croatia state that weaknesses include organisational problems and insufficient use of the space that has opened up for gender equality issues. A participant from the Republic of Croatia thinks that "the women's forum does not achieve its purpose, because, instead of content, it provides a form for winning positions on electoral lists". She also stated that "the women's forum is not recognised as a political factor, but exclusively as logistical support in men's pre-election activities. It has lost its strong political role in the party. In recent years, due to internal party problems, many women have become passive, so only a small number are active. Today, the women's forum is a parallel wing of the party, which is not good, and deals exclusively with so-called "women's issues" and mostly humanitarian and "commemorative activism". Nothing is being done to get out of the rut and into political action, there is no contact and cooperation with the civil sector or society, with few exceptions, no approaches towards citizens, progressive professionals, academia". "We are missing the political-social democratic stamp to make it clear that we have social-democratic po-

litical views”, stated a participant from the Republic of Croatia.

It is worrisome that some research participants outside the parties stated that they have never heard of the existence of the women’s forum (a participant from Montenegro) and, at the same time, are aware of the existence of some women’s organisations. Some of the participants who know about the existence of the women’s forum are not familiar with its vision and mission. “I know that the women’s forum contributes to the work of the Social Democratic Party, especially when it comes to developing pre-election plans. However, this is not enough”, said a respondent from Bosnia and Herzegovina. A respondent from Serbia shares a similar view: “... all available resources focus on the activities that serve as logistical support for the preparation of members of electoral committees for the upcoming elections...” Only a small portion of research participants recognised the work of the women’s forum as “advocacy for gender equality through the work of the political party”.

According to this research, the Women’s Forum and its activities are best recognised in North Macedonia: “Everybody is familiar with the existence of the WF in SDSM⁹”.

However, the research shows that several weaknesses are associated with the women’s forum. These are primarily the lack of energy for self-representation and more effective action in the field of gender equality in the current social circumstances.

Getting new, younger members to join women’s forums could foster new democratic potential in the implementation of activities. Numerous studies have shown that young people are detached from politics (especially institutional). As a result, they are less interested in politics and political affairs than previous generations, and generally participate less in political institutions and processes¹⁰. Topics of interest corresponding to their concerns could

drive their potential engagement in the party. The period of democratic transformation, which in the researched countries began almost two decades ago, is undoubtedly a socio-historical framework within which there is room for the increased social and political engagement of young people and advocacy for a more just society.

Quotas, participation and the zipper system

Quotas should be seen as a necessary tool to achieve parity democracy. This is certainly not an ideal solution, but in current society, in which awareness regarding gender equality is still low, this is a kind of transitory measure that could address the problem. All survey participants share this opinion. All the parties have regulated quotas, but the percentages of participation vary from state to state, at local and national level.

A researcher from North Macedonia states that the SDSM within the coalition for national elections “... promoted the concept of gender equality for the first time, through the 50:50 platform. Consequently, the ruling coalition adheres to commitments such as equality and non-discrimination, which will undoubtedly reflect on national strategies for gender equality and protection against discrimination”. In October 2021, the party congress adopted the provision on 50:50 parity in all SDUM executive bodies, from local to national level.

The SDP in Croatia has a provision laid down in the statute on the 50:50 parity of women in all party bodies at county level, with a zipper system on electoral lists of 50 percent of each gender. They also stated that going forward, they will work on introducing parity at the local level.

9 Social Democratic Union of Macedonia is a social-democratic political party and the main centre-left party in North Macedonia

10 V. Ilišin, Zagrebački studenti o demokraciji i političkom aktivizmu mladih (Sociologija I proctor, 46 (2008) 181–182 (3–4): 311–340, 2008)

TABLE 4: Explanations by country regarding the importance of the existence of quotas

COUNTRY	Views on quotas
Bosnia and Herzegovina	<p>Without a legal solution on quotas and distribution of women on the lists, there will be no greater participation of women in politics or progress.</p> <p>Quotas defining a more equal representation of women in party decision-making bodies and the positions of legislative, executive and judicial power are of key importance to improving the position of women within the party and in the sphere of political activity.</p> <p>Affirmative measures that promote equality of opportunity are not sufficient because the electorate is biased in favour of men...although there are quotas, electoral lists are open, and more men are being elected.</p>
Montenegro	<p>All the respondents recognise the importance of increasing the participation of women and support the quota policy as a strategy that is needed “in this phase of political development”.</p> <p>Without quotas, the current number of women would decrease, and even with quotas, the Montenegrin parliament failed to reach 30 percent of women in its composition.</p>
North Macedonia	<p>All agree that quotas are a necessary prerequisite for gender equality, but also insufficient to ensure effective gender equality, for which a considerable amount of ground still needs to be covered.</p> <p>If there are no quotas, a small number of women will be included and this will be an excuse for their low response rate.</p>
Croatia	<p>The zipper system has had a positive impact on the party, as the number of women in national and local party bodies has increased. Women now have the opportunity to profile themselves and show their qualities and potential. But at the same time, some party colleagues have been resistant...they think that the zipper is an imposed obligation and do not understand that this is a real social democratic value.</p> <p>Quotas are still needed because they will ensure equal representation of men and women in political decision-making, which is an important prerequisite for effective democracy and good governance.</p>

Source: views supplemented by statements from the survey conducted in spring 2021 for the Korčula School Think Thank

The parties have clearly accepted the principle of introducing quotas and parity for the entire party, but this has remained at the level of political correctness and has not become an essential part of gender mainstreaming.

Funding of women’s forums

According to the respondents, only Montenegro has special financial resources through which women’s forum activities are funded. In all other countries, the forums do not have a stand-alone account,

sub-account or independent budget. In practice, members can apply for funding for certain activities, and these applications are generally approved.

In Croatia, the respondents state that, in line with legal regulations, the SDP has one account. In previous years, the women’s forum used to submit a proposal of activities and a budget, and this was taken into consideration when planning the annual budget. However, due to the financial consolidation of the party, this year it has been agreed that funds will be requested for each separate activity and funds will be allocated as decided by the Chief Financial Officer.

TABLE 5: Separate funds for the activities of the women’s forum

COUNTRY	YES	NO
Bosnia and Herzegovina		x
Montenegro – SDP CG	x	
Montenegro – DPS CG	x	
Republic of Croatia		x
North Macedonia		x
Serbia		x

Source: survey conducted in spring 2021 for the Korčula School Think Thank

The members of the women’s forum point out that the majority of their activities are implemented with the support of left-wing NGOs, SD foundations and networks, and by applying to individual projects. A survey participant from Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that: “a common and acceptable mode of action is cooperation with the NGO sector, given that there are numerous organisations dealing with the issues of gender-based violence, the position of women, and their representation in politics and on the lists”.

The funds provided for the activities of the women’s forum should undoubtedly help them work more proactively in the field of gender equality. On the other hand, networking at national and international level is very important in providing the necessary funds for their work.

Education and empowerment

In the research on the current condition of education and knowledge acquisition of women’s forum members, the majority of respondents in all the surveyed countries commented that “women are main-

ly the ones who attend education programmes”, that “women are sufficiently educated and that the problem of women is not in their education, but in the space and tools provided for their work”. The exception was Serbia, where they think that “the constitution of the women’s forum has only had a modest impact on the basic knowledge of gender issues, that they did not have training on these topics or if they did – the approach and methodology of the lecturers was questionable; there was no training on intraparty organisation, the importance of the structure of the organisation, opportunities for advocacy and lobbying that would help raise awareness of key issues and gaining trust through the intraparty structure”.

It is clear that political education has been conducted for years by party social democratic foundations and that within the parties, there is a programme of education (training programmes, schools, academies, seminars), supported by international foundations. However, there is a lack of coordination and monitoring of their effectiveness through actions and activities in the field of gender mainstreaming. Monitoring needs to be introduced, and evaluations conducted regarding the application of acquired skills and knowledge. Otherwise, it will not be possible to achieve the necessary empowerment of women.

The choice of thematic units for women should also be considered. The prevailing opinion is that training programmes remain at the level of general political correctness or feminist theory, and do not go deeper into the core issue of gender mainstreaming on the principles of social democracy. Special emphasis should be placed on relevant and specific political topics related to the further development of social democracy and gender equality, and ways to advocate related ideas. These topics should be aligned with the current social context and provide the participants with the opportunity to communicate/present them to citizens in an acceptable way.

The respondents think that the possibility of including male participants along with female participants in education related to social democracy,

feminism and gender equality should be considered. Acquiring this knowledge strengthens the opportunities for both women and men to adopt the basics of social democratic policies, interpret them clearly and actively participate in politics. Here, we should keep in mind that changing the attitudes that represent norms and values in the context of gender roles is a demanding task, but not impossible. The transformation of gender-rooted attitudes is also possible through greater engagement and acquisition of knowledge in the field of persuasion communication.

A more comprehensive approach to education with the involvement of experts who base their experience on relevant academic research knowledge enables women to boost their visibility and become more relevant in all areas of social action.

A new challenge is undoubtedly the introduction of measures to better integrate women in the ICT sector and teach them the skills necessary to master new communication technologies.

PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

Regarding the perception of social democracy and its basic characteristics, we have listed some of the answers divided by the countries involved in the research below.

<i>North Macedonia</i>	The interviewees have a shared view of classical social democratic values. Mostly, they relate social democracy with ensuring equality, fighting poverty, and promoting social justice, working rights and human rights. However, only one person mentioned gender equality as a social democratic value.
<i>Bosnia and Herzegovina</i>	The Social Democratic Party should inherit and advocate for the fight against all forms of social inequality, including gender inequality, both within party structures and at the level of society at large; it should advocate public policies that have the capacity to improve the position of women in society.
<i>Montenegro</i>	<p>The key categories of social democracy are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social justice, including humane and fair working conditions; • reducing the social gap among different categories of the population; • employment and economic security of citizens; • care for socially vulnerable categories of the population; • breaking with neoliberal capitalism through appropriate social policies; • respect for human rights, including the rights of women, sexual and national minorities; • tolerance and respect for national and other differences; • peace policy; • combating fascism, aggressive clericalism and other right-wing tendencies; • strengthening democratic institutions and democratic principles at all levels, creating conditions for the development of civil society and a society of equal opportunities for all citizens; • insisting on the emancipation of all members of the community through education and culture.

<p><i>Serbia</i></p>	<p>Although the women’s forum and the Party itself adhere to formal social democratic principles, advocate for the reduction of social and economic inequalities and support the redistribution of public funds in line with the principles and ideological orientation, these topics are barely visible in their party programme.</p> <p>Modest initiatives do exist...[such as the] creation of local public policies and the introduction of gender-sensitive language, but only through the engagement of women, and not strategically through the structure of the women’s forum.</p> <p>On the other hand, several respondents think that social democracy has never clearly built a moderate-left platform, ie centre-left on the political spectrum, and members do not even know what the ideological direction of social democracy is today. A representative of the academic community adds that this shows inertia when it comes to implementing the social democratic values in the environment of neoliberal capitalism, where the topic of inequality is being ignored; the problem of the existence of the middle class is not debated or even if it is, only in closed groups – the academic environment.</p>
<p><i>Republic of Croatia</i></p>	<p>According to the surveyed participants from Croatia, the fundamental goals and postulates of social democracy – solidarity, unity, equality and social equality – have not changed; they must not be overlooked, but the methods of achieving these goals, as well as communication, need to be modernised – especially in relation to citizens:</p> <p>“... we live in a society that is not fair and it is difficult to maintain focus. One should not abandon these principles, but some things should be redefined and modernised using new methods (digitisation of society), in accordance with the context in which we live. New topics should be introduced: green economy, environment, lifelong learning, silver economy...Unfortunately, the Social Democratic Party has put itself in a position where it follows trends instead of setting them”.</p>

It is evident from the above that most of the respondents from the researched countries think that the fundamental goals of social democracy should be focused on the complete democratisation of society. Men should also be allies in the fight for gender equality. The participants support equality in every sense, as well as the rule of law. At the same time, they think that there should be organised party action to promote gender equality, including the advocacy and promotion of democratic and gender values and cooperation with NGOs, the media and other relevant national and international subjects.

The research conducted shows that the fundamental principles of social democracy are recognised in all these countries. However, one gets the impression that the internal recognisability stems from the party’s historical heritage, but further developmental changes that have taken place within the party remain invisible. The only exception in this research is North Macedonia, where developmental party changes are also visible. The turmoil and changes in the parties have

also affected the perception of the women’s forum and made it even less visible, except in the example of North Macedonia mentioned above. Social democratic parties have the task of defining the possibilities and role of women in shaping party policy.

The aim of this research was to find out how the participants see the connection between the role and impact of the women’s forum on social democratic policies. The answers obtained are highlighted in Table 4.

TABLE 6: How do you see the special role and impact of women and women’s forums on social democratic policies?

COUNTRY	RESPONDENTS’ ANSWERS
North Macedonia	“The women’s forum has an impact on the party, which relates to the inclusion of women in party structures”.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	<p>“Their work is not clearly visible within the broader society, the information on their work rarely make the news or gets attention”.</p> <p>“The impact of the women’s forum is very weak when it comes to deciding on important issues”.</p> <p>“The women’s forum does not have a significant impact on social democratic policies”.</p> <p>“Women’s forums are an important space for articulating the political views of women within the party”.</p>
Montenegro	<p>“...there is a connection between social democracy and participation of women in politics... they see this connection as self-evident and logical”.</p> <p>“social democracy as the politics of equality must be open to the participation of women in political decision-making”.</p> <p>“social democracy is measurable by the political participation of women”.</p>
Serbia	“there is low participation of women in political life at different levels of government in the parties due to the lack of internal election processes”.
Republic of Croatia	<p>“The political struggle of the women’s forum has resulted in a change in the statute – 50 per cent women on electoral lists, zipper system at county level and in all party bodies”.</p> <p>“The women’s forum has not imposed itself/is not recognised as a co-creator of party policies...Gender policy has been reduced to mere numbers, ie equal representation and no content”.</p> <p>“The impact of the forum has generally weakened. The party is faced with a challenge, and women should therefore be seen as the insufficiently used potential for progress.</p>

We can draw from the above that respondents see a strong connection between the women’s forum and social democracy. Women can be the bearers of change in terms of gender equality and social democratic development. As quite tellingly stated by one of the respondents: “social democracy is measured through the participation of women”.

CHALLENGES AND OBSTACLES IN GENDER EQUALITY IMPLEMENTATION IN SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC PARTIES TODAY

In the data obtained, participants mentioned numerous obstacles to the implementation of gender mainstreaming. First of all, there is a lack of understanding of the term “gender equality” and insufficient commitment to this issue, as well as a failure to understand the value of gender equality within and outside the party.

A respondent from Serbia referred to the “parties’ deficit of political and ideological solutions, inertia in the environment of neoliberal capitalism in which the topic of inequality is being ignored”. Therefore, the “concept of gender equality has remained an isolated topic, and women from the forum are less visible...gender equality as a concept is not the party’s primary agenda”.

Research participants from Macedonia denounce that “there are still traditionalist and patriarchal party members, and they have the impression that gender equality is declarative rather than substantive”. Following this, the challenge is “to constantly raise awareness of the gender-sensitive politics and the importance of gender equality, as well as the fact that men should be the main allies in securing such equality”.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, research participants point out that a step forward has been made in gender mainstreaming in party documents and electoral programmes. The SDP programme, statute and rules of procedure stipulate the application of a gender quota for the under-represented sex and equal representation of women and men (50:50 within the party organisation, at all levels of executive, legislative and judicial power).

According to research participants, however, the implementation of such policies in practice faces difficulties primarily due to women’s unwillingness to engage in political life. A participant stated: “not enough quality, competent and motivated women want to stand for election”. The participants also state that there is no “male” interest in promoting gender mainstreaming, insufficient lobbying by women and a lack of coordinated action within the party. The challenge, they say, is: “that they no longer want to be isolated in special policies, but they want to fight for the gender dimension to be articulated in all segments of the electoral programme”.

Research participants from Montenegro generally think that their parties are open to women, but that there is still a lack of understanding of gender policies and the importance of women’s political participation in the party. As the party deals more with the issues of identity profiling, this leaves no room for gender equality issues.

As ways of overcoming these obstacles, the participants propose greater political openness and work on increasing gender sensitivity and knowledge of gender policies.

In the Republic of Croatia, research participants state that despite the adopted parity, “...a large number of colleagues are still opposed to parity on the pretext that there are not enough qualified women meeting the criteria, even if these are rarely required of male candidates”.

Although there are basically no ideological or political obstacles within the party, there is still a small

number of women in high positions within the party willing to actively work on the implementation of gender mainstreaming. Women come to leading positions according to their order on electoral lists, which is determined by the party leadership.

A young respondent thinks that the cause also lies in “the members who are uneducated about the specific issues of gender mainstreaming”. The challenge the party is faced with is to become aware that women offer potential for progress that is not sufficiently exploited.

In conclusion, one gets the impression that the established “gender mechanisms” are failing to trigger significant social change and that “democratisation without gender equality” is taking place¹¹. This is because there is no true political will to change the traditional social structures in the sphere of productive and reproductive work, the patriarchal state, male violence against women, patriarchal culture and patriarchal relations¹².

The data obtained show numerous weaknesses and obstacles in the implementation of gender mainstreaming. According to research participants, the main obstacles relate to a lack of awareness among the leadership and members about the importance of implementing gender mainstreaming. Participants see the political context in which parties operate as the biggest obstacle within the parties themselves. The parties are mostly preoccupied with their new profiling, while gender equality remains a secondary issue.

The biggest challenge certainly lies in the greater involvement of women and strengthening their national and international networking. Following this, members must be trained for women’s and human rights advocacy by increasing their action and mobilising their capacity, teaching them ways to build coalitions, initiate and lead, as well as focusing on certain important issues arising within the social context.

Exchanging experiences on overcoming obstacles at both national and international level is also very important. There is a need for more intensive promotion of activities in society and, of course, the exchange of best practices related to gender equality. Such examples of best practice could drive new activities in the field of gender equality.

The main goal of gender mainstreaming is to transform unequal social and institutional structures into fair structures for both women and men. This is currently lacking within the parties.

11 Ulf Brunnbauer, From equality without democracy to democracy without equality? Women and Transition in Southeast Europe (South-East Europe Review, vol.3, 2020).

12 Sylvia Walby, Theorizing Patriarchy, Sociology (Vol. 23, No. 2, 1989).

KNOWLEDGE ABOUT THE CEE PLATFORM FOR GENDER EQUALITY

Created in 2015, the CEE Platform for Gender Equality constitutes the first document signed by all the presidents of social democratic parties in the region. It is the basis on which party programmes were supposed to be built, and it was up to women's forums and party leaders to present and activate it among the membership. CEE Gender Network members were willing to participate in these activities. This research showed that only a small number of participants are familiar with the Platform and that it has not been widely presented to the membership.

In Serbia, there are currently new, politically inexperienced politicians in the women's forum and they are not sufficiently familiar with the concept of introducing gender equality or the Platform for Gender Equality. Thus, the president of the women's forum is the only one familiar with the content of the Platform. The situation is no better in other countries either. In Montenegro, 67 percent of participants stated that they have heard of the Platform, whereas 33 percent had no knowledge about it. Those who have heard about it do not have information on the Platform's content. In North Macedonia, only three respondents out of 14 state that they have heard of the Platform. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the data obtained show that higher levels within the party know about this document and its adoption, but there is no knowledge about it at lower levels and outside the party (NGOs, the academia, the media). The women's forum of Bosnia and Herzegovina is familiar with the document Platform for Gender Equality thanks to its participation in the long-term work of the CEE Gender Network. In Croatia, higher levels within the party are familiar with the Platform, but due to poor communication

within the party, the members are not familiar with the Platform's content and goals. They think that the Platform implies alignment of gender equality goals and that it would be important and positive to familiarise the broader membership with the Network's goals and work.

All of the above points to a deeper problem of implementing gender mainstreaming in the parties, as in line with how they have worked previously, familiarisation is confined to the highest levels. This also relates to insufficient intraparty communication and transparency, as well as of the status of women's forums, which do not have the political capacity to fight for the essence of gender mainstreaming. It also shows that the engagement of women's forums in the work of the CEE Gender Network is important and that this process should be deepened.

In conclusion, we can say that there is still a lot of room for improvement, and work on familiarising not only women but also the members at large with the CEE Gender Network Platform must continue. Without substantial knowledge of the Platform, it cannot be implemented, and they cannot fight together for gender equality. Equally, the CEE Gender Network should undergo an advocacy political process among party leaderships and engage with the women's forums in reviewing the Platform.

SPECIFICITY OF THE SOCIAL CONTEXT IN THE POST COVID-19 ENVIRONMENT

During the COVID-19 pandemic, gender inequality deepened in all segments of society and requirements from women have increased both in their professional and private lives. Women bore the brunt of the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic, and in many aspects demonstrated a readiness to take on both social and political responsibilities at all levels. At the same time, they were exposed to significant health risks because they work in predominantly female professions such as social welfare, healthcare, education and service industries.

At the same time, in the labour market, sectors with the highest female employment rates experienced the largest job losses. Due to the increased need to care for children in the period when preschools and schools were closed, mothers, including those with jobs, bore a greater burden, with a significant increase in the scope of household chores, care for other household members and emotional strain seen during the pandemic.

In the week following the implementation of lockdowns around the world and in some EU countries, the number of cases of domestic violence increased by a third. Women in violent relationships were forced to stay at home, trapped with their abusers for long periods of time. It was, therefore, more difficult for them to call emergency services because the perpetrator was always nearby.

The participants in this study agree that the vulnerable position of women in society was even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. They list the following issues as important for gender equality:

- work from home and care for family members
- overlapping of professional and private roles as an additional burden
- increase in the rate of domestic violence against women
- overexposure to risk of job loss
- rising poverty and economic hardship
- unavailability of healthcare
- increase of physical and mental issues

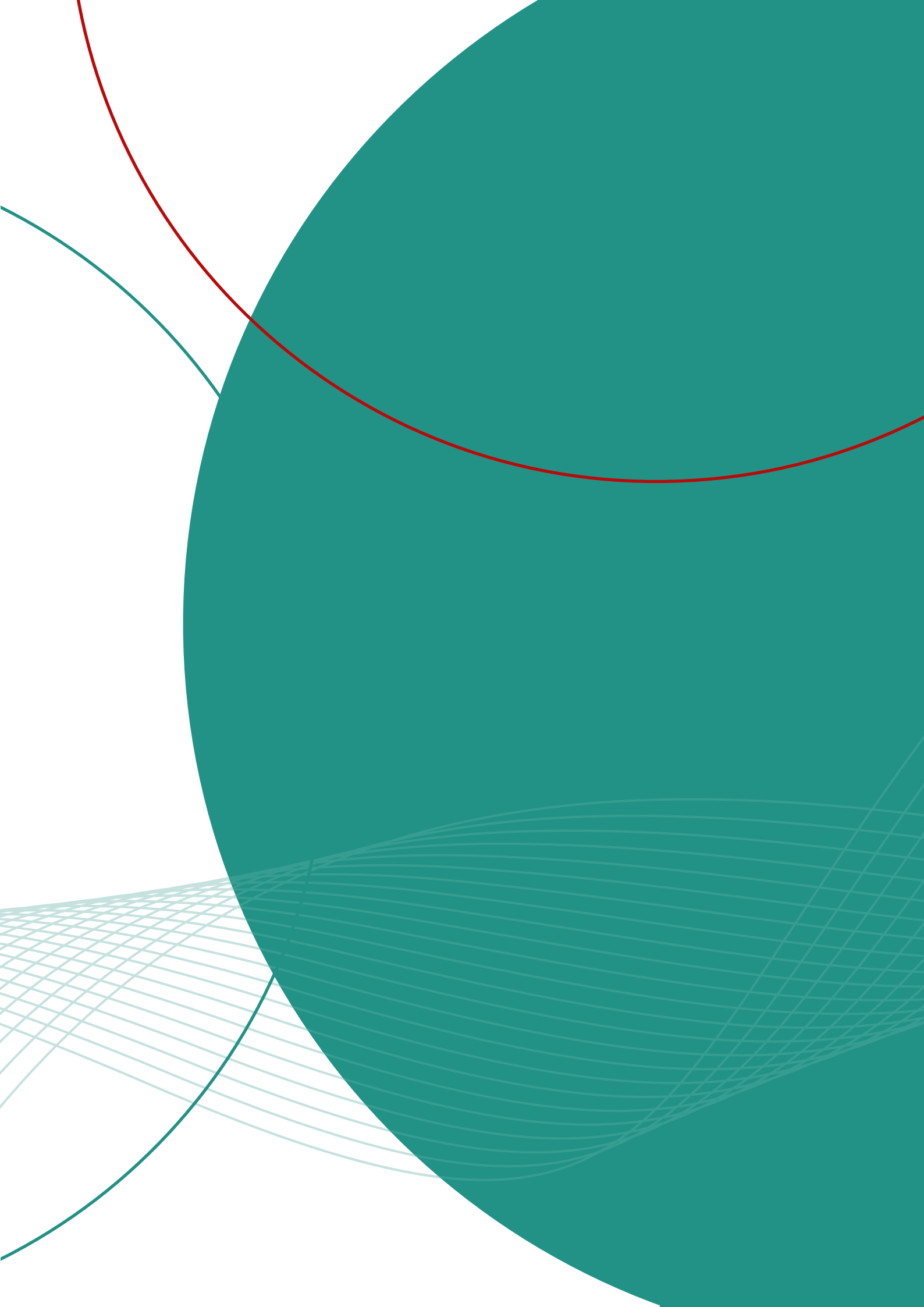
It is important to note that COVID response measures implemented at national level failed to include a gender-sensitive approach. This research has confirmed the findings from literature, specifically that there are strong disparities between women and men in crises such as COVID-19. Thus, women are expected to be more responsible in family duties and charitable work, whilst also receiving less recognition for their contribution to society in general, regardless of whether or not they are paid for it. Still, very often, values typically associated with so-called male traits have a higher status, forming a dominant and visible culture of society and providing a standard for “normalcy”.

Moreover, there are differences in the perception of roles within the family. In the Republic of Croatia, the distribution of chores within the family

is less pronounced than in some other countries where a more traditional approach prevails, which was especially pronounced during the pandemic. This statement by one of the interviewees from the academic community in Bosnia and Herzegovina regarding unpaid housework is quite illustrative of the general situation:

“The issue of gender equality within the home relates to the question of who did all the work that needed to be done, online schooling and care for the household at a time when the whole family was together at home. This question has re-emerged as a hot topic: who does this type of work, which is not perceived as such, and yet necessary to sustain everyday life? We are dealing with the issues dating back the second wave of feminism [in the 1960s] about who does the housework and how this is valued”.

A respondent from the Republic of Croatia warns about the importance of maturity and awareness of society regarding gender equality in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. She points out that parties need to pursue continuous political action in this regard, which in this case, unfortunately, was missing. So, the crisis requires preparation and gender-sensitive prevention plans.





CONCLUSIONS

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research was to determine the current situation regarding the implementation of gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties, with all its advantages and limitations, and to get a clearer vision of what needs to be done to strengthen the capacities to implement gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties following five main research questions:

- What is the perception of women's forums and social democracy?
- What international and national legislation defines gender equality in individual countries included in the research?
- What are the challenges and obstacles to implementing gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties today?
- How can the perception and the work of social democratic parties in the field of gender equality be improved?
- What are the specifics of gender equality during the COVID-19 pandemic?

First, the research showed that participants, both inside and outside the party, perceive women's forums as important constituents of social democratic parties, regardless of the current difficulties that some parties are experiencing. The fundamental values and principles of social democracy and social-democratic goals, as the heritage of these parties, are recognisable strengths in all the countries included in the research.

However, the positive and negative changes and transformations experienced by the parties have remained invisible in most of the surveyed countries, except in North Macedonia. These processes have also affected the perception of the women's forum and made it even less visible, as mentioned with the exception of North Macedonia. The traditional objectives and role of social democratic parties has been significant in the emancipation and promotion of women in politics, and as such remains an important strength of the women's forum. The main obstacles perceived by the participants are the insufficient awareness among the leadership and membership of the importance of implementing gender mainstreaming. The biggest barrier within the parties, according to the participants, is the overall political context, in which parties are largely preoccupied with their new profiling, while gender equality remains a secondary problem.

Second, the research showed that all the countries have legislative frameworks as well as institutional mechanisms in place to implement gender equality. Yet, the participants stated that these mostly exist on paper. There is a lack of political readiness to implement the adopted legal acts and strategic documents in practice. In the past decade, various political processes have resulted in a lack of respect for and implementation of the legal framework in the context of human rights protection, especially in the case of women's rights and the achievement of gender equality. However, these tools are still not sufficient to establish gender equality at all levels. Women's forums are still strongly influenced by traditional values, and parties lack younger members.

Third, when it comes to the challenges and obstacles to implementing gender mainstreaming in social democratic parties, there needs to be a higher degree of awareness regarding the importance of gender equal-

ity, and a constant fight against traditionalism and patriarchalism within (and outside) the party.

Survey participants identify a number of obstacles to implementing gender mainstreaming. Furthermore, this research has shown that there is a lack of political activism among female members and of political determination at party leadership level to create adequate conditions to open a space for dialogue on the position of the women's forum. There is also a lack of energy to promote self-advocacy and foster more effective action in the field of gender equality in the current social circumstances.

Additionally, there are issues relating to insufficient funding. Although life imposes complex problems that require greater political engagement, there is a lack of interest in volunteering, declining motivation and low levels of voluntary work for the common good, except for those of a humanitarian nature, which is in line with the social context in these countries. The social democratic stamp that would clearly indicate social democratic political views is missing.

It will undoubtedly be a challenge to adopt a new approach to creating policies and implementing concrete measures to achieve gender equality. Contact and cooperation with the civil sector and society, citizens, progressive professionals and the academic community must be intensified.

The greatest challenge is undoubtedly to foster greater engagement among women in politics and public life, and strengthen their national and international networking. Following this, they need training in women's rights advocacy and on the core social democratic values, in order to ensure they can act and mobilise effectively. Ways must be found to teach them to forge coalitions, initiate

and lead. This is also a framework that, in principle, opens a space for increased social and political engagement among young people and advocacy for a fairer society.

Fourth, the perception and the work of social democratic parties in the field of gender equality can be improved through quotas. Quotas should be seen as a transitory tool necessary to achieve parity democracy. This is certainly not an ideal solution, but at present in society, when there is still a low level of awareness related to gender equality, this can offer a transitory solution to the problem. All research participants share this opinion.

Some progress regarding gender equality in the parties has been made at functional level (eg quotas), but gender mainstreaming has not effectively become a reality in the membership and party forums. This points to a deeper problem of implementing gender mainstreaming in the parties, which remains at the highest levels, and speaks of insufficient intra-party communication and transparency. This also points to the status of women's forums, which do not have the political capacity to fight for gender mainstreaming within the party or at a broader social level.

Education is widely present through training, academies, political schools at national and international level. However, when it comes to the current state of education and acquisition of knowledge among women's forum members, survey participants think that these training programmes remain at the level of general political correctness without going deeper into the issue of gender mainstreaming based on the principles of social democracy. Besides, they often lack contextualisation regarding gender equality in specific countries. Special emphasis needs to be placed on relevant and specific political

topics related to the further development of social democracy and gender equality, as well as ways to advocate for ideas related to this. These training programmes should be political and ideological, and not only skills-oriented.

Introducing measures to promote the integration of women into the ICT sector and teaching the skills required to master new communication technologies and social media can also contribute to a better presentation of the work of social democratic parties in the field of gender equality.

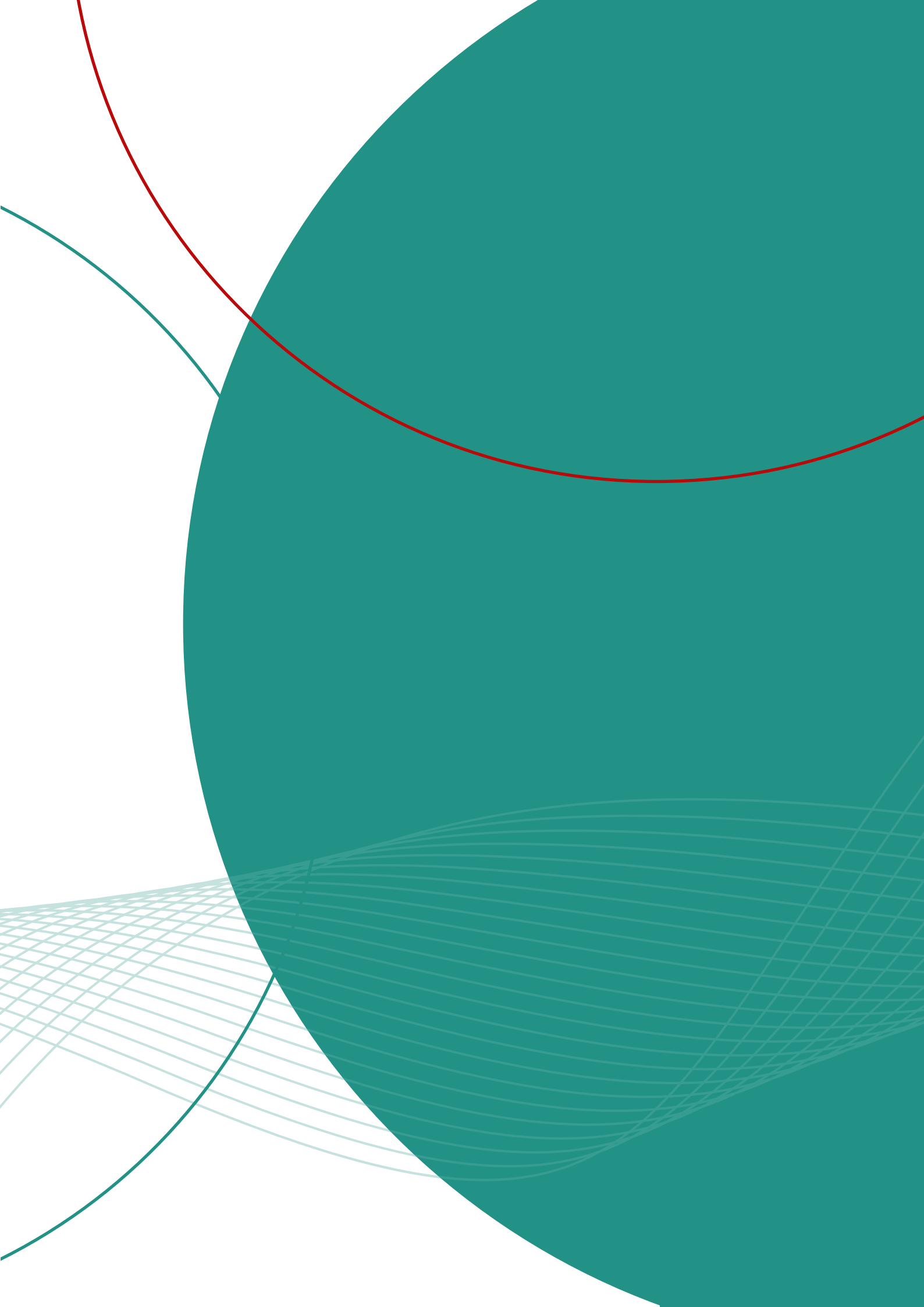
The research has shown that only a small number of participants are familiar with the CEE Gender Network Platform, although the Platform was the first joint document signed by all the party leaders in the region on any subject, and on gender equality in particular. This leaves a lot of room for action in terms of visibility of the women's forum and social democratic parties in the fight for gender equality. Without a substantial knowledge of the Platform, neither its implementation nor the fight for gender equality based on social democratic values will be possible.

Lastly, survey participants agree that the vulnerable position of women in society became even more visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 response measures implemented at national level failed to integrate a gender sensitive approach. The research has confirmed earlier findings from literature, ie that there are strong disparities between women and men in crises. The COVID-19 pandemic harshly exposed gender inequality in all its forms.

Women have borne the brunt of the crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic and have shown readiness to take on both social and political responsibility at all levels in a number of fields. At the same

time, they were exposed to significant health risks because they work in predominantly female professions such as social welfare, healthcare, education and the service industries. Research has shown that we need to prepare for crises and have gender-sensitive prevention and resilience action plans.

In conclusion, it can be said that the issue of gender equality is still not perceived as a priority political issue either in public discourse or within social democratic political parties that took part in this research, or at the level of individual political leaders. Women's forums have lost their political character over time, so they do not significantly influence party policies. Thus, women's forums are not perceived as a necessary and important instrument for articulating women's political opinions and voices that can help shape the contemporary agenda of social democratic parties through advocating and representing public policies. Their role therefore can either be enhanced and strengthened or new forms of gender equality-related instruments can be introduced.





RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results obtained in this research, we have formulated the following recommendations to enhance gender equality in the work of women's forums and social democratic parties.

1. Practice what you preach: political will and commitment

Parties should show more commitment and political will to implement adopted legal acts and strategic documents on gender equality in practice. An action plan and regular monitoring on gender and age-balanced representation should be adopted within the party. Building and cultivating an encouraging environment is also important for effective gender equality strategy implementation.

2. Capacity building

After the adoption of a formal, procedural framework for the implementation of gender mainstreaming (both at wider social level and within the party), capacity needs to be built regarding how this can be implemented from a social democratic perspective. In view of fluctuation within the party leadership and membership, continuous education should be provided for both women and men on social democracy and gender equality and the importance of this issue for public political life and party-political activism at various levels of the party organisation, based on parity (from local to state). This would in turn improve the capacity to communicate gender equality concepts and goals to the electorate.

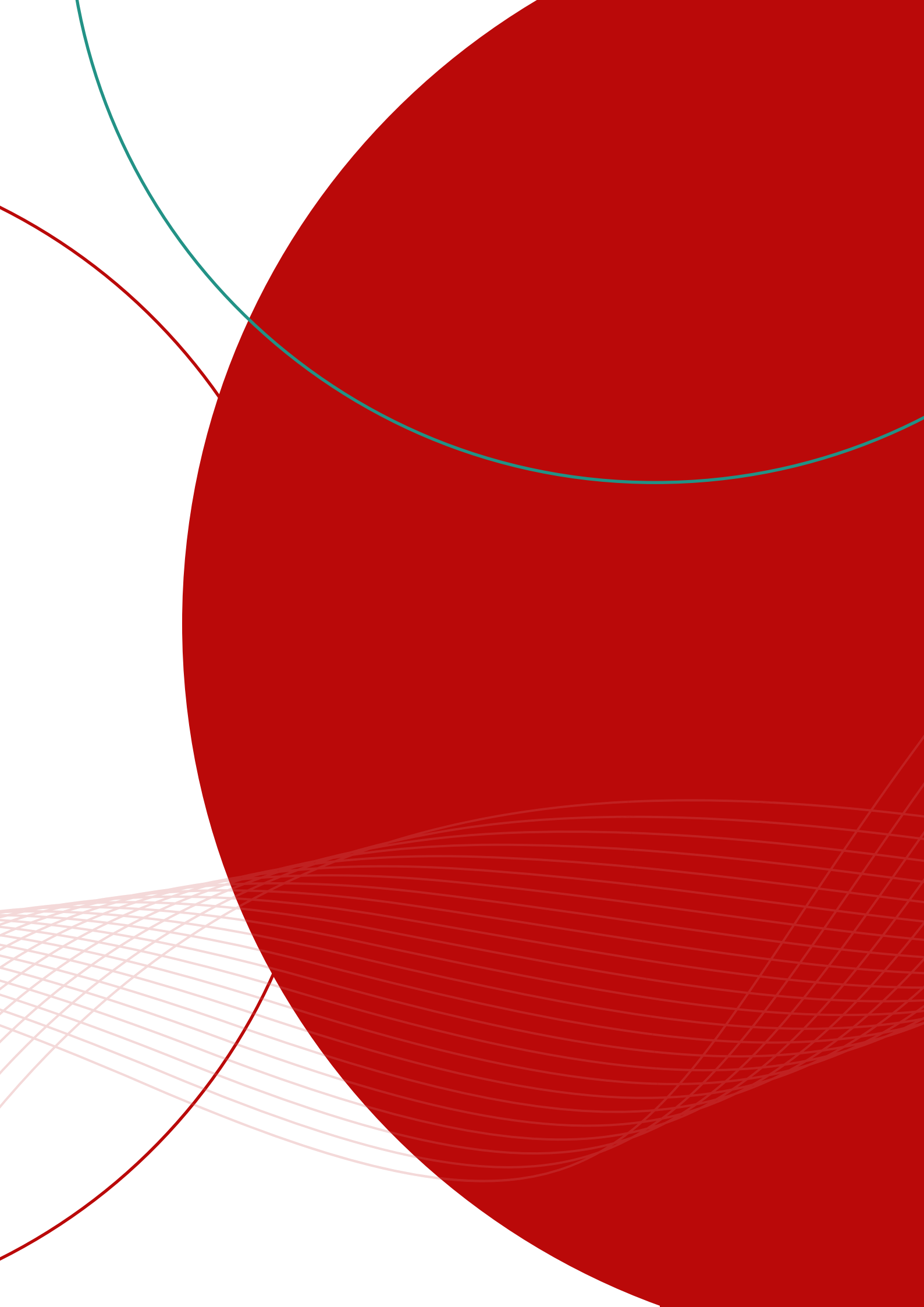
A more comprehensive approach to education is needed, with an emphasis on relevant and specific topics (health, just transition, green economy and ecology) related to the further development of social democracy and gender equality. This should include experts who base their experience on relevant academic research knowledge. Moreover, it is crucial to deconstruct and eliminate stereotypical presentations of the role of women in society and politics.

3. Role and positioning of women's forums

These should be more visible and more active outside the party, challenging the general perception of their role as only declarative and instead profiling themselves as politically substantive. To this end, women's forums need an independent budget for their activities. Capacity building and measures for skills training on campaigning and the use of social media must be a priority, so they can learn how to encourage the media to raise awareness of gender equality in political life.

4. The Regional Social Democratic Gender Equality Platform

The CEE Platform for Gender Equality needs to be promoted in political dialogue with party leaderships, and serve as a platform for capacity building within the parties on gender equality.



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She was one of the youngest founders of the Women's Political Network in Serbia (2000), and took an active role in advocating for the adoption of a new Electoral Law.

Recently, she created the first report on the Post-Legislative Scrutiny of the Gender Equality Law in Montenegro, supported by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy.

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Established in 1994 by the European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity, the CEE Network for Gender Issues has been active in support of social democratic and progressive parties in the region, and has gain traction and respect within these parties and their leadership.

All social democratic party leaders, including a number of European politicians, have signed the 2015 Regional Gender Equality Platform (<https://ceegendernetwork.eu>) proposed by the CEE Network for Gender Issues. The Network coordinated its drafting, signing and dissemination.

For a decade, the Network's annual Korčula School Think Tank "Transforming Politics through a Gender Lens" has brought together high-level social democratic and progressive male and female political leaders and progressive civil society representatives. It has served as a policy-making and strategising tool on gender equality on key issues of relevance to social democracy in the region. <https://ceegendernetwork.eu>

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