

2026

SUBJECT: WOMEN IN  
THE MIRROR 2025



PREPARED BY:



# FROM GLOBAL UNCERTAINTY TO CIVIC INITIATIVES:

## WHAT 2025 TAUGHT US



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The year 2025 can be remembered as a long year, given the weight of events that have shaped it from the very first days. From the beginning of the year, global and local developments have been inextricably linked, creating a climate of uncertainty, reflection, and social repositioning. Ongoing crises, political changes, economic tensions, and debates over fundamental rights have brought essential questions about equality, democracy, and the role of women in society back to the forefront.

During such periods of change, systemic consequences are not distributed equally. They disproportionately affect the most vulnerable groups in society, starting with women, who often simultaneously face structural inequalities, economic insecurity, and limited space for active participation and decision-making. In this context, this editorial piece examines the year 2025 from a critical perspective, highlighting key developments and exploring how they are shaping the current reality and guiding future directions, both globally and locally.

The end of the year always offers an opportunity for broader reflection, allowing the assessment of changes and interventions across various fields, providing a clear and comprehensive “snapshot” of the current reality. In this context, The Economist’s Glass Ceiling Index (GCI) serves as a key tool for measuring gender equality in the labor market, highlighting how real women’s opportunities for equal treatment are in OECD countries. The latest data shows that progress remains uneven: Nordic countries, led by Sweden, continue to serve as global examples due to the combination of higher education for women, inclusive parental leave policies, workplace flexibility, and high representation in leadership positions. Meanwhile, some developed economies, such as Japan, Turkey, and South Korea, continue to rank low due to entrenched social norms and low female participation in decision-making.

On a broader level, the GCI indicates that, despite improvements in labor market participation and political representation, the gender pay gap and underrepresentation in management remain structural challenges. Thus, the index not only measures progress achieved but also highlights the current limits of gender equality, confirming that the “glass ceiling” remains a present phenomenon in global developments.

In a tense global situation, marked by political crises and the continual shifting of priorities, there are nevertheless positive developments, such as in Europe. Although it may seem unbelievable that in 2025 discussions about policies concerning women’s bodies are still ongoing, the European Parliament’s decision to support the right to safe and legal abortion demonstrates that reproductive health issues remain part of the public agenda. The civic initiative My Voice, My Choice provides a concrete example of how activism and civil society engagement can influence political debates and create space for change even under challenging circumstances.

In Kosovo, the year 2025 finds us facing a dual reality: great potential for women’s economic, social, and democratic development, but also structural barriers that continue to keep them out of decision-making, the labor market, and public space. In this context, this appendix aims to create a space for reflection and dialogue. This article does not aim to present new findings or information about the Kosovar context—not only because changes from previous years have been limited and the situation was affected by a year without a functioning government, but also because detailed analyses are found in each of the subsequent articles. At first glance, the topics may seem repetitive, but each piece addresses different consequences stemming from the same fundamental problem: low women’s employment and limited participation at all levels of decision-making. When decisions affecting women are made without their inclusion, structural challenges remain unresolved.

When discussing initiatives and citizen well-being, it should be emphasized that activism and civil society organizations advocating for these functions have historically played an important role in driving social and institutional change. However, in recent years, a noticeable contraction in funding for this sector has been observed, mainly due to shifts in global priorities and reduced financial support, especially for projects addressing social and gender equality. This situation has directly affected organizations’ capacity to develop long-term initiatives and maintain sustainable pressure on institutions.

Parallel to this, public discourse has created the impression that the government in Kosovo has not treated civil society and activists as equal partners in decision-making processes, but rather as peripheral actors. In this context, developments at the European level serve as a clear reminder of the importance of institutional dialogue with civil society and the critical role that organized activism plays in shaping public policies. Cases like civic initiatives such as My Voice, My Choice demonstrate that when activism is approached through partnership rather than opposition, it can contribute to more inclusive policies that are sensitive to the real needs of citizens.

Fortunately, recent developments in Kosovo have not yet produced immediate and visible consequences on the ground, but the risk that they could impact interventions for vulnerable groups,

particularly women, remains real. The lack of sustained support for civil society and activism could gradually lead to the fading of issues directly affecting women's lives from public discourse, including employment, maternity leave, and other social welfare issues. In the long term, this situation may translate into increased vulnerability, weakened women's economic independence, and limited opportunities to reach key decision-making positions, thereby deepening existing inequalities.

This appendix comes as a reflection and summary of opinions on the year 2025, and due to the timing of publication, it can also be read as a year-end greeting. Although it has not been an easy year, work and engagement have continued in every sphere, often away from public attention. At the same time, this appendix aims to open space for reflection and action, reminding us that advancing women's position cannot be limited to a single sector, but requires coordinated engagement at political, economic, academic, and institutional levels, as well as continuous support for activism and civil society.

In an era of rapid information and short texts, this special publication brings together diverse voices—from entrepreneurship and research, but especially from civil society and women activists who challenge the status quo every day and push the boundaries of what is considered possible. Through analysis, experience, and civic engagement, this appendix aims not only to document the reality of women today but also to articulate a vision for a fairer, more inclusive, and more equal future.

Happy New Year, and best wishes for 2026!

# WHEN ECONOMIC GROWTH DOES NOT TRANSLATE INTO A BETTER LIFE



Written by: Brikenë Hoxha, Executive Director, IKS

Over the past two years, economic growth in Kosovo has been relatively stable at the macro level, with rates around three to three and a half percent according to the International Monetary Fund. However, this growth has not translated into an improvement in real living conditions for young people. On the contrary, most indicators directly affecting their well-being—such as real wages, cost of living, stable employment, and access to social protections—show a significant deterioration. Within this reality, young women remain among the groups most exposed to economic insecurity due to their more vulnerable position in the labor market and the lack of protective mechanisms.

Official data shows that unemployment among youth aged 15 to 24 has increased from 17.3 percent in 2023 to around 19.5 percent by the end of 2024. However, unemployment as an indicator does not fully reflect the reality. A significant portion of employed youth remain economically insecure due to informal employment and unstable work arrangements. According to recent studies, one in three young people works without a formal contract, while over 60 percent are paid partially or entirely in cash. This form of employment, particularly widespread in sectors dominated by young women such as hospitality and services, excludes them from social security, legal protection, and any long-term financial safety.

At the same time, the cost of living has risen sharply. According to international cost-of-living platforms, a young person living alone in Prishtina faces monthly expenses of around 400 to 500 euros excluding rent, while including rent, expenses rise to 700–800 euros. When transportation, food, energy, and healthcare costs are also considered, actual monthly expenses can reach up to 1,000 euros. Meanwhile, the minimum wage in Kosovo remains 264 euros, while the average net wage for young people rarely exceeds 450–550 euros. For young women, who often receive lower wages and work irregular hours, the gap between income and expenses is even deeper.

This economic reality means that many young people work but are unable to escape poverty or family dependence. Independent living is postponed for years, while decisions about building personal and professional life remain constrained by financial insecurity. For women, this situation is often accompanied by additional social and family pressures, making economic inequality even more pronounced.

One of the most critical indicators of this reality is the complete lack of a health and social insurance system. Kosovo remains the only country in the region without a health insurance fund, unemployment insurance, and with a very limited contributory pension scheme. This means that even when young people are employed, they have no protection in the event of illness, work-related accidents, job loss, or pregnancy. For young women, the absence of these mechanisms significantly increases economic risk during periods of work interruption.

The rise in the cost of living since 2022 has eliminated any real possibility of savings. According to international institution reports, a large portion of families in Kosovo cannot save anything at the end of the month, and this situation is even more pronounced among youth. Many live month after month without financial reserves and without protection from unexpected events. In the absence of social protections, any health crisis or job loss immediately becomes an economic crisis.

Ongoing financial insecurity has direct consequences for the mental health of young people. Various studies show a significant increase in stress, anxiety, and emotional fatigue among those entering the labor market. Many young people feel tired and hopeless, because despite their engagement at work, they see no prospect of improving their lives. For young women, this pressure is often accompanied by a double burden between work and social expectations, deepening the sense of insecurity and emotional exhaustion.

This reality affects not only the individual but also the labor market and society as a whole. In workplaces where insecurity and stress are high, productivity decreases, employee turnover rises, and temporary employment without prospects becomes more common. In the long term, this produces a generation of educated but demotivated youth, who see emigration as the only path to stability. In the absence of a minimal social safety net, emigration is not just an economic choice but a survival strategy. Young people do not leave only for higher wages but for security, protection, and dignity. Until Kosovo establishes basic social protection mechanisms, formalizes the labor market in practice, and links wages to the real cost of living, economic growth will remain a statistic without social content.

An economy that grows without guaranteeing security for young people, and especially for young women, does not produce sustainable development. It produces insecurity, inequality, and emigration. And this is the real cost of growth that does not translate into a better life.

# FROM QUOTAS TO LOCAL REALITY: MATERNITY LEAVE AS A TEST OF INCLUSIVE DEMOCRACY



Written by: Saxhide Mustafa – Deputy Executive Director, Riinvest Institute and Coordinator, Kosovo Women's Economic Forum

Women's participation in politics in Kosovo is progressing at a slow pace, particularly at the local level. While at the central level women have managed to secure representation above the minimum 30 percent quota in the Assembly of Kosovo, this figure still falls short of the standard set by the Law on Gender Equality (No. 05/L-020), which mandates equal representation of 50 percent.

Data from the Central Election Commission for 2025 shows that, although women constitute around 30 percent of representatives in both the Assembly of Kosovo and municipal assemblies, they remain significantly underrepresented in leadership and executive positions. At the local level, key positions are almost entirely dominated by men: there are no female mayors, no female municipal assembly chairs, and only a very limited number in leadership roles within municipal directorates. This indicates that gender quotas are applied mostly as a legal minimum, without translating into real and sustainable participation.

This situation is generally reflected across the public sector. According to the Riinvest Institute (2022), around one-third of women express interest in taking decision-making positions in the public sector. However, this interest does not translate into actual representation, as only 9.4 percent of women currently hold decision-making positions. One of the main reasons is the low perception of advancement opportunities: over half of women in the public sector believe they do not have real chances to reach leadership positions due to structural barriers and traditional norms, which become even more pronounced during periods such as pregnancy and maternity leave.

The gap between the legal framework for gender equality and institutional practice shows that institutions and political parties often fail to create conditions for sustainable women's participation, especially when they face the challenge of balancing professional and family responsibilities. In this context, maternity leave is often perceived as a break from political engagement, directly affecting the continuity of women's roles in decision-making.

At the local level, women's participation in politics depends heavily on how parties construct electoral lists, electoral calculations, and the positioning of female candidates on those lists. Women's inclusion is often the result of formal legal requirements rather than a genuine willingness to provide them with a real and influential role in decision-making.

In this reality, examples of personal sacrifices are not lacking. Today, both globally and locally, we see female assembly members, parliamentarians, and even ministers forced to bring their children to official events, or accounts such as that of an ambassador who had to attend an event just four days after giving birth because "work cannot wait." These cases are not only evidence of women's individual responsibility but also indicators of the absence of institutional support mechanisms.

Civil society organizations have consistently emphasized that despite improvements in legislation and the development of women's capacities, patriarchal norms and the lack of real institutional support continue to hinder women's advancement in politics. Reports from the National Democratic Institute (NDI) repeatedly highlight the structural lack of support mechanisms within the political system to accommodate women during personal and family periods, including maternity leave.

At the regional level, the Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation Report (2022) notes that institutional and cultural barriers continue to limit women's participation in politics in the Western Balkans, including discrimination, lack of support from political parties, and weak implementation of gender quotas. These barriers are closely linked to gendered expectations and traditional care roles.

At the same time, reports from UNDP (2023) and the Kosovo Agency of Statistics (2023) show that the burden of unpaid work and family care falls primarily on women. The current maternity leave system, which places almost the entire responsibility for childcare on the woman, directly affects her ability to engage continuously in politics. These policies, designed outside the context of political representation, produce the indirect exclusion of women on maternity leave from decision-making processes.

To change this reality, political and institutional reforms are needed that go beyond gender quotas. Within the framework of the "More Choices" project, supported by UNFPA and ADA, inclusive governance and work-life balance are emphasized, where sustainable women's representation requires concrete support mechanisms such as: parental leave, temporary replacements during maternity leave without jeopardizing mandates, functional hybrid participation in decision-making processes, and, in the absence of these mechanisms, political parties' engagement should be real support, not just symbolic. Work-life balance policies are no longer a luxury but a necessity for the functioning of democracy. Gender-responsive policies and family-friendly workplaces are increasingly demanded, especially by young people, and should be

clearly reflected in Kosovo's legal framework, including the Labor Law.

Institutions and political parties must recognize that gender barriers cannot be removed solely through quotas but require a comprehensive approach that addresses cultural, economic, and institutional realities faced by women throughout their political life cycle, including maternity leave. Only then can the narrative that sees maternity leave as an obstacle be broken, and women's participation in politics become sustainable and inclusive.

# ENABLING WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP: A DEMOCRATIC IMPERATIVE



Written by: Scott Bates, Regional Director for Europe and Eurasia, NDI, and Nancy Soderberg, Senior Director, NDI Kosovo

As we close the first quarter of the 21st century, many economies are experiencing stagnant growth and widening inequalities, political polarization has deepened in numerous democracies, and young people are increasingly alienated from core democratic principles. While the causes of these trends are often blamed on COVID-19, rising income inequality and failed governance, there is a key systematic challenge that is far too often overlooked: the marginalization of women across myriad sectors of society. Global progress depends on addressing this intersectional imperative and placing fair representation for women at the center of economic and democratic renewal.

It is time to recognize the vital link between the marginalization of women in both politics and economics. Despite often surpassing men in education, their accomplishments rarely translate into leadership roles in societal power structures. While women's representation in national parliaments has more than doubled since 2000, today it is still stagnant at just 27 percent. Women heads of state remain rare, with only one third of nations ever having one and only a few dozen states having had one in 2025, half of whom are in Europe. In business, the situation also remains challenging, with women only leading roughly ten percent of Fortune 500 companies. While women increasingly reach the top echelons of business, they face significant barriers at the C-Suite levels. Even worse, recent studies show that some women do not even try for promotions due to systemic obstacles.

Studies have long shown that economically independent women are better positioned to overcome institutional barriers to political engagement. [Naila Kabeer](#) argued back in 1999 how the acquisition of economic resources enhances women's ability to exercise agency in the political sphere. And we know that when women are at the table, policy outcomes are stronger and more inclusive. Yet, a generation later, we have not matched these insights with action. Economic empowerment alone, however, is not sufficient. Without reform in political institutions and party practices, women's economic gains do not automatically translate into political power.

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) in Kosovo undertook groundbreaking research – including nationwide surveys, focus groups and in-depth interviews – to identify root causes and

propose solutions to this challenge. Kosovo offers an excellent test case: a small, highly educated population in a vibrant yet imperfect democracy, where women's formal labor force participation hovers at just 20 percent. The country has elected two women presidents and appointed numerous women deputy prime ministers and ministers. Despite these gains, women remain sidelined in power structures across political parties, the economy, and academia. Women have exceeded the quota in their election to parliament, yet still remain far from 50 percent parity, and they lag especially in leadership at the local level.

The persistent inequalities for women in Kosovo's labor market and political representation – despite progressive legislation and women outperforming men in education – reveal critical correlations between economic participation and political power. NDI's research highlights systemic barriers, such as discrimination related to pregnancy, unpaid care work burdens, limited childcare infrastructure, and patriarchal norms. These structural and economic challenges directly impede political empowerment. Women's low formal employment reduces the pool of economically independent women able to run for office and shapes voters' and political parties' perceptions of women's "suitability" for leadership. Moreover, women's political participation is hindered by informal nomination processes, high social and economic costs to run for office, and media biases that reinforce stereotypes. The point argued by thought leader Laura Bates in her book "[We Need to Fix the System, Not the Women](#)" echoes the experience of NDI in facing systematic barriers to furthering women's political and economic participation. Our efforts to equip women with skills and training are necessary, but not sufficient without systemic reforms that remove structural barriers.

Research shows that boosting women's formal employment and economic independence expands their influence and power in the political sphere, but only when paired with reforms that open up political institutions and party systems to women. Governance reforms that integrate labor and social policies with equality goals, backed by strong implementation and accountability mechanisms, can transform politics to be more inclusive. The strategic linkages position women, not just as participants, but also as agents of change shaping democratic governance and policy.

NDI's research and analysis reveal three broad themes that are crucial for progress in women's empowerment at the intersection of economy and governance: accountability, investment, and positive disruption of patriarchal norms. Societies must hold governments, political parties and institutions accountable for implementing existing laws and regulations aimed at ensuring fair representation, including labor protections. Governments must commit long-term resources and policies to address women's barriers in employment, care work and political participation, including sustained public investment in childcare systems and targeted active labor market programs for women. Societies must also be courageous in challenging patriarchal norms, gender stereotypes and unconscious

bias through multifaceted campaigns and engagement of diverse influential stakeholders, such as campaigns that normalize shared caregiving roles for men and women or which fast-track women into visible leadership positions. Such positive disruption is critical to changing the underlying system, which inhibits the empowerment of women and thus societal advancement.

Success requires a multisectoral collaboration, including political entities, civil society, business, and the media to shift norms and create enabling environments for women's empowerment and societal advancement. This will require political parties to adopt innovative recruitment and support mechanisms for women candidates, especially between election cycles. Journalists and editors in the media must be trained to be aware of and counter biases and enhance women's visibility, especially in prime time shows and in editorial leadership. The private sector must also play a central role by promoting equal pay, fair hiring and promotion practices, flexible work arrangements, and leadership pipelines for women. It is also critical to advance women as equal participants in the marketplace by removing economic and social barriers through comprehensive childcare systems, adequate maternity and paternity leave, access to healthcare, and strong anti-discrimination enforcement in employment.

Such transformation demands an urgent, all-of-society call to action. Nations must embrace women as pivotal leaders in their economies and governance, not only for better outcomes benefiting all but also as a cornerstone of democratic fairness and fundamental human rights. It is well past time to make this shift an imperative.

## DEVELOPMENT DOESN'T START IN CONCRETE, BUT IN CARE AND APPROACH!



Written by: Rezarta Delibashzade Krasniqi, Executive Director at D4D

Discussions about economic development in Kosovo often focus on capital investments, highways, and large infrastructure projects. However, international experience and local reality show that sustainable development does not necessarily start with concrete, but with social investments that create real opportunities for economic participation. From this perspective, two of the most undervalued yet transformative policies for Kosovo are functional public transportation and access to early childhood care and education.

The latest report from the Democracy for Development Institute (D4D) places this debate exactly where it belongs: in the daily lives of citizens, especially in rural areas, where the lack of basic services fuels depopulation, gender inequality, and economic stagnation. Today, development in Kosovo is hindered not only by a lack of investments but also by a lack of policies connecting the economy with social reality.

Rural areas are emptying at alarming rates. Young people are leaving, women remain outside the labor market, and communities lose their economic and social functions. In many villages, the problem is not a lack of willingness to work, but a lack of conditions to do so. When a woman has nowhere to leave her child, or when a young person has no transport to get to work or training, unemployment is not a personal choice but a structural consequence.

The absence of public nurseries and kindergartens in rural areas is one of the main barriers to women's participation in the labor market. In Kosovo, the burden of childcare falls almost entirely on women. Without public and affordable alternatives, this burden becomes economic exclusion. It is no coincidence that women's employment rates are particularly low in areas where childcare services are lacking. Investment in early childhood education and care is not just social policy—it is economic policy!

Numerous studies show that every euro invested in this sector returns multiple times to the economy through increased employment, productivity, and long-term well-being. In Kosovo, this

investment has an additional dimension: it breaks the cycle of poverty and migration in rural areas, making them places where people live, not just where they are born.

Equally critical is public transportation. For many residents of rural areas, access to work, education, healthcare, or professional training depends on the existence of a bus line that operates regularly and at an affordable cost. Today, due to the lack of subsidies and public planning, rural transport is often infrequent, expensive, or nonexistent. This creates social and economic isolation, which inevitably encourages migration.

Subsidizing public transportation is not an expense; it is an investment in access and equality. When citizens can move, they can work, learn, and contribute. When mobility is limited, development is also limited. Furthermore, well-organized public transport reduces dependence on private cars, lowers costs for families, and contributes to greener urban and rural policies.

Opening jobs is not enough if people do not have physical and social access to them. Talking about women's empowerment is not enough if public infrastructure continues to ignore their daily realities.

At its core, this is a debate about budgetary and political priorities. For years, public policies in Kosovo have been designed more to react to crises than to prevent them. Investment in early childhood care and public transport is preventive investment: it prevents long-term unemployment, poverty, migration, and gender inequality.

Of course, these policies require institutional coordination, collaboration between central and local levels, and the political will to look beyond election cycles. If Kosovo aims for balanced and inclusive development, it must start from the basics: caring for children and providing mobility. These are not secondary policies—they are prerequisites for any other economic reform.

# SILENT INEQUALITIES



Written by: Nora Latifi Jashari, GAP Institute

In Kosovo, women are increasingly educated, more present in public discourse, and more active in entrepreneurship. However, compared to men, they remain significantly underrepresented in these spheres of life, in the labor market, and in formal economic activity. This is not a matter of lacking will or ability on the part of women, but the result of a combination of structural, economic, and social factors that continue to directly impact women's daily lives. One of the main obstacles for women in Kosovo relates to the traditional division of gender roles. The burden of family care, limited access to services, and insufficient institutional support continue to keep many women out of economic life, resulting in one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in Europe. These unequal responsibilities translate into long hours of unpaid work. Patriarchal cultural norms only reinforce this division, "normalizing" it, limiting women's professional ambitions, and increasing their economic dependence on men.

Gender discrimination in the Kosovo labor market remains a visible reality, despite legislation on paper guaranteeing full equality between men and women. Data from the Employment Agency show that many women are on the job-seeker lists, demonstrating that interest in work exists. In fact, women graduate at higher rates than men and make up the majority of job seekers with university degrees. Yet, they remain less employed. The issue is not qualification or willingness to work, but discriminatory barriers encountered in the labor market. One such factor is the discriminatory nature of job postings. The way a job title is written and the description of required qualifications for potential candidates affects both the application process and recruitment itself. This type of communication directly influences women's willingness to apply, how they are perceived during recruitment, and simultaneously reduces their presence in sectors traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering, energy, or construction. As a result, many women concentrate in sectors like education, healthcare, and administration, creating a gender-segregated labor market.

In the labor market, discrimination also manifests in lower wages, limited opportunities for career advancement, and low representation in decision-making positions. Additionally, limited access to affordable childcare and eldercare, the absence of flexible work policies, and the cost of maternity leave for employers often discourage private companies from hiring women.

Recent migration has continued to cause labor shortages in key

sectors in Kosovo, such as construction, trade, gastronomy, hospitality, and manufacturing. According to research by the GAP Institute, by 2023, about 22.6% of Kosovo's population had left the country. A significant portion of them are of working age, directly impacting labor availability in these sectors. This shortage is expected to deepen in the coming years. The most sustainable solution would be to activate the non-active domestic workforce, where women represent the largest untapped potential. According to the Kosovo Agency of Statistics, approximately 74% of women are considered economically inactive. This clearly indicates that women's inclusion in the labor market is not only a matter of gender equality but also an economic necessity.

Another important dimension is women's entrepreneurship. Although the number of women-owned businesses has increased in recent years, they remain primarily micro-enterprises, concentrated in sectors with lower added value and limited growth opportunities. Women entrepreneurs have demonstrated their ability to build sustainable businesses and contribute to the economy, but they face serious obstacles in accessing finance and institutional support.

According to a GAP Institute analysis of financial support for women-owned businesses, only a small portion have benefited from grants or subsidies provided by public institutions or other organizations. Most women-owned businesses rely on personal savings, while access to loans or support schemes remains limited, often due to the lack of property ownership in women's names or complex administrative procedures. As a result, women-owned businesses have significantly fewer loans and deposits compared to those owned by men.

Women entrepreneurs also face challenges in accessing markets and professional networks. Despite a significant increase in digital presence after the pandemic, many women-owned businesses struggle to manage online activities due to inadequate training and time constraints. Membership in business associations and chambers of commerce remains important for access to information and support opportunities, but participation is low due to high fees that are often unaffordable for these businesses.

Increasing women's participation in the labor market and economy cannot be achieved solely through calls for equality; it requires concrete investments in care services, employment policies, easier access to finance, and targeted support for women's entrepreneurship. Activating women is not only a matter of social justice but also an economic necessity for Kosovo.

To truly empower women entrepreneurs, it is essential to expand access to finance, provide quality training, create dedicated support schemes, and strengthen professional networks where women can receive mentoring and build new business connections. Only in this way can a fair, inclusive, and sustainable ecosystem be built for women seeking to grow a business in Kosovo.

In addition, it is essential to provide affordable and quality daycare services. Promoting remote work and flexible schedules can also help balance work and family responsibilities for both women and men. Increased awareness of job opportunities is crucial, especially in high-demand sectors, as is the creation of mentoring networks to motivate girls and women. For women entrepreneurs, establishing affirmative grant and subsidy schemes, including quotas dedicated to women-owned businesses, would support the growth and expansion of their enterprises.

# WOMEN AND MEN IN KOSOVO: ARE WE TRULY EQUAL? THE NUMBERS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES.



Written By: Mirjeta Ademi and Elirjeta Beka, Kosovo Women's Network

Kosovo has made significant progress in building a legal framework for gender equality and implementation mechanisms, including incorporating the Istanbul Convention into the Constitution, amending the Penal Code, and committing to implement gender-responsive budgeting. It has also adopted other key laws and strategies. However, implementing this legal framework and ensuring the effective functioning of mechanisms remains a challenge. Our monitoring shows that a gender perspective is still not fully integrated into practice, while gaps in enforcement and institutional capacity continue to directly affect women's lives in education, employment, transport, and access to public services.

## Education that Doesn't Challenge Inequality

Let's start with early childhood education, the stage where gender stereotypes are either reinforced or challenged. In Kosovo, existing legislation guarantees equal access for girls and boys, yet in practice, this access does not translate into (re)designed and implemented curricula, pedagogy, and policies that transform gender stereotypes for the promotion of gender equality. On the contrary, curricula, textbooks, and other materials risk reinforcing stereotypes and traditional gender roles. We have often seen and heard examples in school materials that present girls as caretakers while boys are depicted in technical professions. Yet very rarely do parents, guardians, or teachers encourage young boys to play with dolls or girls to play with cars. Ultimately, change always begins with small things.

## 24/7 Care That Goes Unpaid

We have understood the importance of early education, particularly for children under the age of three, where factors such as family income, place of residence, and access to public services are decisive. When these children are not part of the education system, in most cases, women are the ones forced to stay home and provide unpaid care. Often these women are compelled to leave their jobs or education because social norms

automatically place the burden of care on them. On the other hand, fathers, not engaging equally in childcare, spend less quality time with their children, which is crucial for early child development.

Let's also look at another perspective: providing care for a vulnerable category such as people with disabilities. Recent research shows that 70% of personal assistants or caregivers are women, either mothers or other close relatives. When asked about the challenges of providing care, these women reported offering care 13–24 hours a day, seven days a week, affecting both their physical and mental health. They reported back pain, fatigue, lack of sleep, stress, and social isolation. It is important to emphasize once again that these women's experiences remain unaddressed by current legislation—they are unpaid for the work they provide and often lack health insurance, thus violating their labor rights.

## Gender-Based Violence: A Constant Alarm; Justice Delayed

Gender-based violence (GBV) is one of the most serious violations of human rights, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Data from an OSCE survey conducted in 2019 indicate that 54% of women in Kosovo have experienced psychological, physical, or sexual violence from an intimate partner since the age of 15, while nearly 30% have experienced sexual harassment. Another worrying statistic is that only 2% of women reported cases of violence to the police, indicating deep mistrust of institutions and fear of social stigmatization. Moreover, half of Kosovo's women (48%) consider violence, especially domestic violence, to be a private matter. OSCE found a clear link between women who have experienced violence and those who believe domestic violence is a "private matter" or that "a woman should be obedient and submissive."

In this context, the natural question is: what is the institutional response? Data show some improvements, but they are insufficient. For example, the Kosovo Police, courts, and victim advocates still have a limited understanding of the nature of gender-based violence, victim-blaming tendencies, and the belief that violence should be resolved within the family or social circle. Traditional efforts to "reconcile couples" under the pretext of "keeping the family together" continue through institutions. A reflective question for the reader: why are women and young girls continuously victims of GBV? The answer lies partly in the fact that gender stereotypes in our country legitimize male control and dominance in families, relationships, or elsewhere. We all—men and women—play a role in reinforcing these harmful patriarchal norms, which is why it is our responsibility to inform and educate ourselves on how to prevent them.

## Equality in Transport... Not a Reality

Although transport is often presented as a neutral service, data show it functions differently for women and men in Kosovo. Women make up only 32% of driver's license holders and own just 32% of vehicles, compared to 68% for men, making them far more dependent on public transport. However, public transport is often unsafe, inadequate, and inaccessible, especially for women in rural

areas, women from non-majority communities including Serb, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian women, and women with disabilities. Public transport infrastructure and pedestrian areas are widely perceived as inaccessible, limiting mobility for persons with disabilities and parents with children. Sexual harassment remains a serious problem on buses, causing many women to avoid public transport after such experiences. The consequences are direct and measurable: 50% of women have declined job opportunities due to lack of transport (compared to 37% of men), 13% have interrupted their education, and 26% have been discouraged from participating in politics. These figures clearly show that inequality in transport is not only an infrastructure issue but a structural barrier limiting women's access to work, services, education, and public decision-making.

### **Informal Work and Agriculture: Participation Without Security or Ownership**

In Kosovo, informal work and agriculture represent a deeply gendered "shadow economy," where women are overrepresented while men benefit more from formalization and ownership. Although women constitute about half of the population, they make up 65% of informal workers, while men account for only 35%, making women nearly twice as likely as men to work without contracts, social security, or legal protection. This risk is particularly high for rural women and women aged 46–64, while men in the same areas are more likely to be registered as farmers or engaged in formal employment. In the agricultural sector, women make up 49% of the workforce, but mainly as unpaid family labor or in informal forms, whereas men dominate ownership and decision-making positions. Women own only 17% of property and just 4.9% of agricultural land, compared to 83% of property and over 95% of agricultural land owned by men, and account for only 5.8% of registered farmers versus 95.2% men. This inequality is also reflected in public support: women receive only about 17% of agricultural subsidies and grants, while male-owned businesses receive the overwhelming majority of funds—up to 25 times more. These disparities are deepened by the traditional division of gender roles: women spend an average of 7.1 hours per day on unpaid care work, compared to 2.3 hours for men, severely limiting their opportunities for formal employment, economic security, and long-term social benefits.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, we all have a role in creating a society where women and men, girls and boys, are equal, treated equally, and have equal opportunities. Reading this article is an important step the reader is taking toward building an equal society. Applying even minimal lessons from this article—participating in activities that discuss and demand gender equality in Kosovo or contributing even small donations—is a significant step in forming a fair and equal society.

# DISCRIMINATION AT THE FRONT DOOR: WHAT MYSTERY SHOPPING REVEALS ABOUT EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES IN KOSOVO



Written by: Arbër Nuhiu,  
Executive Director, CGSD,  
and Rajomnda Sylje,  
Director of Programs, CGSD

Access to Employment in Kosovo is formally regulated by one of the most comprehensive equality frameworks in the region. The Constitution, the Law on Protection from Discrimination, the Labor Law, and the Law on Gender Equality collectively prohibit unequal treatment based on gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity. However, evidence of how these guarantees work in practice—particularly during the earliest stages of recruitment—has largely been lacking. It is precisely at this stage that discrimination is hardest to detect and easiest to deny.

A recent study on employment practices in Kosovo directly tests this blind spot. Conducted as a pilot between November 13 and 30, 2025, the research employed matched-pair testing to document how companies respond to candidates who are equal in qualifications, experience, and motivation but differ in only one protected characteristic. Instead of relying on complaints or self-reported experiences, the study replicated real recruitment processes and recorded employer behavior as it happened, capturing decisions that usually leave no documented trace and never reach institutions.

The testing involved 18 companies and 25 job positions in Pristina, mainly in the hospitality, administration, logistics, and cleaning sectors. Jobs were selected from online employment platforms and limited to positions that allowed controlled applications via email or online systems. Senior professional roles were excluded to avoid ambiguity between discrimination and genuine qualification mismatches. Within these parameters, the study used profiles based on gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation or gender identity at different qualification levels.

Methodologically, the research followed international best practices in discrimination testing. Each job received applications from matched candidates whose CVs, cover letters, and work histories were similar in structure and quality. Differences were introduced only through carefully operationalized indicators: names and pronouns signaling gender, addresses from Roma

neighborhoods or engagement in civil society for ethnicity, and indirect references to LGBTIQ+ volunteer work or equality activities for sexual orientation or gender identity. Employers were never explicitly informed of these characteristics; they appeared only through signals normally present in real applications.

Findings, although based on a limited sample, reveal consistent patterns of unequal treatment that cannot be explained by merit alone. Roma women faced the most visible barriers during interviews. In some cases, interviewers repeatedly questioned their education, raised concerns about transport, or presented logistical difficulties as obstacles, despite identical or stronger qualifications than non-Roma candidates. In one illustrative case, a highly qualified Roma woman was not offered the position and was instead directed to a job outside Pristina, while a non-Roma woman applying for the same role was immediately offered employment in the city center without any logistical concerns raised.

Gender-based inequalities were also clearly evident. Male candidates were more frequently directed to higher-paying or more responsible roles, while women were steered toward lower-paying or lower-status positions, even within the same companies. In one interview, a female candidate was asked whether her family would “allow” her to work—a question entirely unrelated to professional capacity—while a male candidate was offered better terms and encouraged to discuss long-term employment prospects. These interactions reflect deeply ingrained assumptions about gender roles that continue to influence hiring decisions.

Differentiated treatment based on sexual orientation was particularly pronounced among male applicants. Heterosexual men received faster responses and more concrete job offers, while gay men often experienced longer interviews that did not convert into equal opportunities. Among women, differences were less overt but closely tied to gender expression. Lesbian test applicants who presented in stereotypically feminine ways were treated similarly to heterosexual women, suggesting that conformity to gender norms may mitigate—but not eliminate—bias. This finding illustrates the layered nature of discrimination, where visibility and expression interact with identity.

Beyond individual interactions, the study highlighted systemic weaknesses in recruitment practices. Many companies did not respond to applications at all, and those that did often bypassed formal application channels, contacting candidates directly via phone or messaging apps instead of email. Once contact was made, decisions were taken quickly, with little evidence of standardized procedures or transparent criteria. These informal practices increase the role of subjective judgment and create fertile ground for discriminatory filtering.

Although the study does not claim statistical representation, the recurrence of similar behaviors across companies and sectors suggests these are not isolated cases. Rather, they reflect structural features of Kosovo’s labor market: weak oversight during recruitment, informal employment practices, and persistent stereotypes related to gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The findings closely align with concerns raised in EU Enlargement Reports and by local institutions, which have long highlighted the gap between Kosovo’s legal commitments and their implementation.

The study also underscores the limitations of existing enforcement mechanisms. Labor inspections usually begin after employment has started, while anti-discrimination bodies rely heavily on complaints, which are difficult to prove when exclusion occurs silently at the application stage. In contrast, scenario-based testing produces real-time evidence of unequal treatment and provides institutions with a concrete basis for intervention.

Recommendations emerge from these findings. Public authorities should strengthen guidance and oversight specifically on discrimination during recruitment, clarifying employer obligations and integrating hiring practices into equality monitoring. The Ombudsperson’s Office could initiate thematic investigations on employment access, using scenario-based testing as a complementary evidence tool. Employers, especially in the private sector, should adopt structured and transparent recruitment procedures that reduce discretion and bias. Civil society and media play a critical role in keeping public attention on discriminatory practices that would otherwise remain invisible.

As a pilot, the significance of the study goes beyond immediate results. It demonstrates that employment discrimination can be documented rigorously, ethically, and convincingly in the Kosovo context. By shedding light on what happens at the front door of employment, the research provides a foundation for broader testing cycles and a stronger, evidence-based response to labor market inequality.

# NO, WOMEN ARE NOT MISSING. WHAT'S MISSING IS JOURNALISM THAT SEES THEM



Written by: Naile Demaj, Journalist

When you turn on the TV during political debate hours, most of the time, you already know what you'll see: a table full of men, a moderator, and, at best, a woman sitting at the edge, often included as "balance," rarely as a voice leading the narrative.

This image isn't just an aesthetic issue. It reflects a deeper reality: women exist in the system, work in media, report from the field, but are rarely seen as protagonists, decision-makers, or experts. A study on women in media in Kosovo shows that while they make up the majority of field journalists and news presenters, very few are included in debate panels, and almost none hold managerial positions.

So, women are visible, but not always heard. And this is where positive journalism comes into play.

During my years in the studio, I've seen many scenes like the one I often describe: a candidate suggesting my question is "emotional," another guest choosing to answer male colleagues even when the question is directed at me, a panel where women are invited only when the topic concerns "women's issues": family, education, gender-based violence. Whenever budgets, dialogue, economy, or security are discussed, the scene turns into a men's arena.

And it's not only a matter of mentality—I believe it's also about how we do journalism.

If our news, panels, and editorial choices continue to confirm a world where men are always at the center and women at the periphery, we cannot claim to merely reflect reality; consciously or unconsciously, we are reproducing it. If our headlines highlight conflict, harsh language, scandal, and the same political faces, while stories of women creating meaningful change remain buried on page three or at the end of news editions, we are feeding a democracy that operates with only half a voice.

I often ask myself: what would happen if we systematically practiced positive journalism—not as a "good news" segment at the end of the broadcast, but as a daily editorial philosophy?

Positive journalism is often misunderstood. Some think it means ignoring problems, "softening" reality, or turning a blind eye to corruption, violence, and failures. In fact, it's the opposite.

Positive journalism means putting people at the center, not just conflict; showing the problem but also the people working—or who should be working—to solve it; giving a voice to those usually left out of studios: women, youth, local activists, experts, women from small municipalities quietly making a difference; not reducing women to victims, but portraying them as actors, leaders, and professionals.

When we talk about positive journalism and gender representation, it's not just about the topics we choose, but also the people we select as sources.

An editorial team that includes only male professors, analysts, or institutional leaders as sources, while remembering to invite women only for "soft topics," creates a false reality: as if only men have anything to say about economy, law, security, or technology.

Of course, demanding positive journalism in an environment where journalists face sexism, pressure, and risk is unfair unless we also address their safety. The AGK report on the position and security of women journalists in Kosovo describes an environment where sexism is widespread, and many female journalists have experienced various forms of violence or harassment, both online and offline.

On the other hand, networks like SafeJournalists have recently adopted regional statements to protect women journalists in the Balkans, including legal, psychological, and public support.

So, we're not talking about a sterile environment, but a battleground where positive journalism must be combined with real protective policies and editorial teams that do not trivialize violence against journalists.

A UN Women and AGK project in Kosovo has trained journalists and students on gender-sensitive reporting and the role of media in promoting equality. This shows that the ground for change exists but needs continuity and integration—not just in training, but in daily editorial routines.

Sometimes, a small change is enough to start a new narrative. Imagine a news edition where, instead of a long insert with three men debating why women "don't enter politics," there's a positive story about a municipal councilor who successfully pushed a decision for safe transport for girls to school.

Imagine a talk show on judicial reform where two female lawyers working in the field, seeing firsthand how the law works (or doesn't) for women, are invited, instead of the usual panel with the same political figures.

Imagine a portal that, besides reporting on violence against women, has a dedicated section showing how violence was prevented thanks to a functioning mechanism: a police force that acted appropriately, a court that prioritized the case, a journalist reporting ethically and giving the victim a voice without stripping away dignity.

This is the positive journalism I envision: not “sweet,” but fair. It says: yes, there is crisis, violence, inequality. But there are also women changing municipalities, institutions, professions. There are success stories that should be news, not exceptions. There are strong voices that should be invited not once, but systematically. In countries with developed media, positive journalism has become part of editorial design. It has been shown to increase public trust, reduce cynicism, and expand space for gender inclusion.

Kosovo can't wait any longer!

# WHY WOMEN MUST BE AT THE DECISION-MAKING TABLE — NOT TOMORROW, BUT NOW!



Written by: By: Shkëndije Himaj,  
Executive Director, Women on  
Boards – Kosovo

For a very long time in my professional career, I have been the only woman in offices where important decisions were made. I was the only woman in board meetings, strategic committees, and discussions that determined the direction of institutions and organizations. This experience, beyond being fundamentally unfair, has also been extremely challenging in practice. Not because of a lack of competence, but because of the invisible weight carried by professional isolation and structural exclusion.

Being the only woman at a decision-making table means being constantly observed, feeling the need to prove yourself twice as much, measuring every word, and facing expectations rarely imposed on male colleagues. In these environments, a woman's voice is often perceived as an exception, not as an integral part of the process. And this is not just a matter of personal feelings; it is a reality that directly affects the quality of decision-making.

The absence of women in decision-making positions is not merely a matter of equality or symbolic representation. It is a matter of effectiveness, sustainability, and institutional justice. Decisions made in homogeneous environments, dominated by similar perspectives, risk being biased and detached from the complex realities of society. Women bring different life experiences, alternative ways of thinking, and a broader sensitivity to the social impact of decisions.

From my experience, I have seen how often important decisions are made without fully considering the consequences for half the population. When women are not part of the decision-making process, we are not only physically absent; our voice, our experience, and our knowledge of realities often invisible to those who do not live them are also missing.

Women's participation in decision-making positions should not be seen as a favor or privilege. It is the result of merit, professionalism, and a real need for better decisions. Yet, for many women, the path to these positions is longer and more difficult. Barriers are not always written in regulations or laws; in fact, Kosovo has some of the most advanced laws ensuring gender

equality, but in practice they are rarely realized. Take, for example, the Law on Business Organizations, which specifies quotas that have never been implemented. Thus, barriers are silent, embedded in organizational culture, informal networks, and deeply rooted stereotypes.

Being the only woman on a board often means having no natural allies, not being part of informal decision-making networks, and facing constant doubts about your competence—even when experience and qualifications speak for themselves. This creates ongoing professional and emotional fatigue, which is often unrecognized and unacknowledged.

Nevertheless, despite these challenges, my experience has also convinced me of another truth: when women are present at decision-making tables, dynamics change. Discussions become more inclusive, questions more probing, and decisions more balanced. It is no coincidence that numerous studies show that institutions and companies with greater women's representation on boards and management perform better, manage risks more carefully, and enjoy higher public trust. The importance of women's participation in decision-making is particularly high in sectors such as finance, public policy, and corporate governance, where decisions have long-term economic and social impacts. When women are excluded from these processes, a huge development potential is lost. Societies that do not leverage this potential are, in fact, limiting themselves.

It is important to understand that including women does not mean excluding men. On the contrary, it means building a culture of decision-making that is fairer, more transparent, and more accountable. Diversity does not weaken institutions; it strengthens them. It creates balance, improves the quality of debate, and reduces the risk of poor decisions. Today, more than ever, we need women in decision-making positions not only as participants but as leaders. We need women's presence on boards and committees to be the norm, not the exception. We need young girls to grow up knowing that decision-making rooms are for them too.

My experience has taught me that change does not happen by itself. It requires institutional will, clear policies, mentoring, networking, and, above all, the courage to challenge the status quo. But most importantly, it requires women not to remain silent and not to withdraw, even when the path becomes difficult.

This experience has also shown me that the problem is not the absence of qualified women. The problem is the lack of mechanisms that bring them to the table. Women exist, expertise exists, experience exists. What is missing is access.

It was precisely this experience of being constantly the only woman in decision-making rooms, and the immediate need for real, not declarative, change, that motivated me to establish the

organization "Women on Boards – Kosovo." This organization was not born as an abstract idea but as a concrete response to a real and urgent problem.

"Women on Boards – Kosovo" has a clear mandate and operates on three foundational pillars:

First, building the capacities of women to take on decision-making positions. This means targeted professional preparation for board and management roles, knowledge of corporate governance, risk management, finance, strategy, and the legal responsibilities that come with these positions. It is not enough to say women should be on boards; they must be equipped with the right tools to be effective and impactful.

Second, mentoring women during their tenure in these positions. Entering a board is only the first step. Women often find themselves alone again in these structures, facing difficult power dynamics. Continuous mentoring is key to building confidence, managing challenges, and ensuring their presence is not merely formal but substantial.

Third, connecting prepared women with companies and organizations willing to place them in decision-making positions. This is a critical element, as many appointments occur through informal networks from which women are often excluded. Women on Boards – Kosovo aims to create concrete bridges between supply and demand, between qualified women and institutions that need better governance.

The work of the organization cannot and should not replace institutional responsibility. Clear policies, regulatory guidance, and serious commitment from government, regulators, and the private sector are needed to set minimum targets for gender representation on boards. Without this commitment, progress will remain slow and dependent on individual champions.

My personal experience has taught me that change does not come by waiting. It comes by acting. And today, the most important action is clear: bold quotas, open boards, and systems that make women's inclusion the norm, not the exception.

# WOMEN AND KOSOVO'S MINES: FORGOTTEN CONTRIBUTIONS AND UNTAPPED OPPORTUNITIES



Written by: Shqipe Neziri Vela, Chair and Co-Founder, Women in Energy and Mining

While the mining sector is valued at over €13 billion and offers opportunities for investment and jobs, women continue to be excluded from key positions, losing not only equality but also the potential for sustainable industry development.

The mining sector has been and remains one of the main pillars of Kosovo's economic development. The country's mineral resources—including coal, base metals, and other strategic minerals—not only contribute to local energy and industry but also offer significant potential for new investments, job creation, and regional development. In a small economy like Kosovo, where labor and capital are limited, the mining sector represents an extraordinary opportunity for economic growth and social stability.

However, this potential has not been exploited equally. Women's role in this sector has historically been limited—not due to a lack of skills, but because of institutional structures, cultural barriers, and societal stereotypes that have kept their participation marginalized. In the main Trepça mines, since mining activities began in 1926, women have worked as engineers, been present in technical laboratories, and held important administrative roles. This historical fact shows that women have always had significant potential to engage in the sector, yet the lack of comprehensive policies and gender stereotypes have hindered their advancement.

During the former Yugoslav period, Trepça was one of the largest industrial complexes in the region. At its peak, the company employed tens of thousands of workers and served as an economic pillar for entire communities, offering stable employment and social services for surrounding towns such as Mitrovica. Although women found space primarily in administration, laboratories, and supporting engineering roles, operational underground work and decision-making positions remained male-dominated. This disparity was not a result of lacking abilities but of cultural and structural limitations that determined which roles were "suitable" for women.

After the 1990s, and especially after the 1999 war, the mining and energy sectors faced the challenge of reconstruction and

modernization. Legally, there are no barriers preventing women from working in mines, but practical, structural, and cultural obstacles continued to hinder their full participation. In the main public enterprises, such as the Kosovo Energy Corporation (KEK) and Trepça, women make up only a small percentage of the operational workforce. At KEK, out of approximately 3,952 active employees, only 204 are women—about 5% of the total. They are mostly concentrated in administrative and support roles, while operational and managerial positions remain almost exclusively male.

Gender stereotypes continue to play a key role. Mines are perceived as dangerous and harsh environments unsuitable for women. This perception often starts in school, where girls are rarely encouraged to pursue technical fields such as mining engineering, geology, or industrial mechanics. Even when they do pursue these fields, the lack of specialized programs and limited mentoring hinders their advancement.

Data from the Faculty of Geosciences at the Public University of Mitrovica shows a pronounced gender imbalance. In Bachelor programs, about 65% of students are women, while men make up 35%. This indicates strong initial interest among girls in earth sciences and mining technologies. However, at the Master's level, this ratio changes drastically: only 19% of students are women, while men comprise 81%. This decline reflects the lack of support, institutional barriers, and societal stereotypes that impede women's continuity and advancement in technical careers.

Furthermore, women's participation in the private mining sector is even more limited. According to the number of active licenses from the Independent Commission for Mines and Minerals, women own less than 0.1% of mining businesses—a clear indicator of the lack of participation in decision-making and capital-intensive positions. The Kosovo Chamber of Mines, established in 2024 to represent the sector's interests, currently has no member companies led by women. Overall, only 18% of businesses in Kosovo are owned by women, most of which are micro-businesses with fewer than 10 employees, while large and capital-intensive enterprises remain almost entirely in male hands. This economic gap underscores that women's potential remains largely untapped, even in economic terms.

Another major barrier is social and economic structure. Women in Kosovo bear the primary burden of unpaid domestic work, including caring for children and the elderly. Mines require long hours and often shift work, making it difficult for women to balance family responsibilities and professional demands. In the absence of institutional support policies, many women are automatically excluded from the sector—not due to lack of interest or skill, but because of structural conditions.

# NOT JUST BUSINESS: THE INVISIBLE COST OF SUCCESS FOR WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS



Written by: Bleta Zeqiri, Head of  
Chocolate Corner

Recent years have seen some positive initiatives. Women's networks in energy and mining, such as the Women in Energy and Mining initiative, together with mentoring programs and empowerment efforts in technical sectors, have begun to challenge the status quo. Although numerical impact remains limited, these programs are strategically important: they change the narrative and create role models for younger generations. The presence of women as engineers, geologists, or project managers demonstrates that the mining sector is not unattainable for women but requires sustained support and comprehensive policies.

Increasing women's role should not be viewed solely as a gender equality issue but also as a necessity for sustainable industry development. Gender diversity enhances workplace safety, improves decision-making, and contributes to a more transparent institutional culture. In a high-risk sector such as mining, this is not a luxury but a necessity. Excluding women from key operational and managerial positions is a direct loss of human and economic potential, especially in a small economy like Kosovo.

In conclusion, the history of women in Kosovo's mines is a story of limited presence but undeniable potential. Women have been there—as engineers in Trepça's three main mines, in laboratories, administration, and supporting roles—but have had little space to influence the sector's structure or advance their careers. Today, with statistics in hand, we see that female participation in early technical education is high, but the path to advanced levels is blocked, and women's ownership of mining businesses is almost nonexistent.

The question is clear: it is not whether women can work in mines—they already have. The question is whether Kosovo is ready to build a mining sector that harnesses the full human potential and reflects a fair and sustainable society. Continuing to exclude women is not tradition; it is a choice. And it is a choice Kosovo cannot afford to make.

Empowering women in business in Kosovo is not just a theoretical concept or a political goal—it is a reality built on the personal experiences, sacrifices, and resilience of women who strive every day to build their dreams. Since 2007, when I began my journey as a woman entrepreneur, I have witnessed the ongoing challenges women face in maintaining and growing businesses in an environment that still does not treat them equally. As the founder and owner of Chocolate Corner, my path has been marked by real difficulties, but also by unwavering confidence in my work and potential.

In the early days, being a woman in business often meant facing a lack of trust from others and a constant need to prove my professional value. Every decision had to be justified more thoroughly, every success earned with twice the effort. Beyond these professional challenges, women often face societal expectations that place the primary family responsibilities on them, making the entrepreneurial journey even harder.

One of the most challenging periods in my professional and personal life was the birth of my first child. At that time, unlike employees who receive paid maternity leave, as a business owner, I had neither a replacement nor institutional support. My absence immediately affected the pace and sustainability of the business. I can confidently say that had I received adequate institutional and social support during that period, business growth would have been faster and less hindered. Amid all this pressure to succeed, I realize now that I don't fully remember enjoying that beautiful period with my child, because my mind was constantly focused on business survival. This is an invisible, yet very real, cost that many women entrepreneurs silently bear.

This is where the heart of the problem lies: even though family support was always there for me, women's potential is often slowed down by the lack of institutional, social, and structural support. When such support exists, women can fully focus on growing their businesses, creating new jobs, and contributing more to economic and social development. Support does not mean privilege; it means creating equal conditions that allow women to

contribute fully, humanely, and sustainably.

In my case, despite the lack of structural support at key moments, personal will and perseverance were the driving forces that kept me going. However, it must be emphasized that not every woman can navigate this path without external support. Many great ideas, potential businesses, and valuable contributions to society remain unrealized precisely because institutional and social support is lacking.

Beyond women's contributions to economic and social development, as a dedicated taxpayer, I want to stress that I love my country and strive through my business to contribute to the state as well. Furthermore, I ensure that everyone who enters Chocolate Corner benefits and feels respected, making every visit a positive and enjoyable experience. This commitment to clients and society is part of my vision for a business that not only generates profit but also has a positive and meaningful impact on the community. This reality shows that taxpayers—and especially women entrepreneurs—must be valued and supported, because their dedication is a direct investment in society's and the economy's development.

When women receive real and structural support, it benefits not only the individual but society as a whole. An economy where women are active, secure, and supported is a more sustainable, innovative, and inclusive economy. Women in business are not just profit-bearers; they are creators of social value, family stability, and long-term development.

Today, with nearly two decades of business experience, I firmly believe that change begins with personal will—but it cannot end there. Women must believe in themselves and keep moving forward, while society and institutions must create real supportive mechanisms. Women's potential is immense and proven. When this potential is supported and valued, it transforms into a force that drives not just one business forward, but society as a whole.

This article is a personal reflection, but also a clear message: women have the capacity to achieve far more than they are often allowed. With real and structural support, they not only move faster—they go further. And when a woman moves forward, she does not do it just for herself; she opens the path for other women and directly contributes to the development of her society and country's economy.

# WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN KOSOVO: BETWEEN CULTURAL NORMS AND ECONOMIC SURVIVAL



Written by: Arta Istrefi, Researcher

In Kosovo, women's entrepreneurship remains one of the most discussed, yet simultaneously one of the most misunderstood forms of women's participation in the labor market. It is often presented as an individual success story or as a solution to women's unemployment, without sufficiently analyzing the cultural, structural, and institutional context that shapes this reality. In this sense, women's entrepreneurship cannot be treated in isolation from culture, gender roles, and the way Kosovar society conceptualizes work, family, and economic power.

We are still far from a reality where women entrepreneurs are considered simply as "entrepreneurs." Cultural norms, social expectations, and gender stereotypes continue to position women closer to caregiving roles than as creators of economic value. This perception directly affects women's confidence to enter the labor market, take economic risks, and build businesses with long-term vision.

The study on which this article is based was conducted as part of a doctoral research project and uses a case study approach to analyze the impact of culture on women's entrepreneurship in Kosovo. The research relied on individual interviews with 15 women entrepreneurs aged 20–60, from various sectors (IT, textiles, food processing, beauty, marketing) and from both urban and rural areas of Kosovo. The size of their businesses ranged from 2 to 50 employees. The goal of the study was to understand not only the obstacles but also how women experience entrepreneurship within their family and social roles.

## Experiences differ based on region and cultural influence

The results show that women entrepreneurs' experiences in Kosovo vary according to region and cultural influences. Some women benefit from family support, which eases cultural challenges, while others, especially in rural areas, face shame and traditional barriers. Women supported by their parents manage multiple roles and have a global vision, whereas Generation X women in rural areas often run businesses for family purposes and are hesitant to step beyond their immediate circles. Millennials are generally more modern and open to technology. The COVID-19 pandemic increased workloads

but highlighted the importance of digitalization. Family support and education allow women to overcome cultural barriers and achieve success.

### **Work does not start from the same point for all women**

One of the main findings is that culture acts as a “filter” determining who enters the labor market, in what form, and with what ambition. Women from supportive families, especially those who grew up seeing mothers active professionally, show greater confidence and willingness to build businesses aimed at growth and formalization. Conversely, women raised in more traditional environments perceive entrepreneurship as deviation from the norm, often accompanied by guilt or fear of social judgment.

Significant differences were observed between urban and rural areas. Women in rural areas are more risk-averse, less technology-oriented, and have limited access to markets and professional networks. Their businesses often remain small and focused on family economic survival rather than growth or employment creation. In contrast, women in urban areas are more likely to invest in business development, digital marketing, and medium-term strategies.

### **Finance, property, and structural inequality**

A central barrier identified by all interviewees is access to finance. In Kosovo, inheritance traditions favor men, leaving women without collateral for bank loans. Only about 16% of property is registered in women’s names, excluding them from the formal financial system and pushing them toward self-financing or family support. This situation directly affects the types of businesses women can start and their potential for growth.

With significantly lower participation in the labor market and ongoing structural barriers, many women in Kosovo experience entrepreneurship more as a necessity than as a free economic choice.

### **Unpaid work and family roles**

The study confirms that the burden of unpaid work—caring for children, the elderly, and managing the household—remains one of the main factors limiting women’s participation in the labor market and entrepreneurship. According to D4D data, over 53% of women report that family obligations prevent them from starting a business. Women entrepreneurs often operate on a “double shift”: running a business during the day and household work without interruption.

The COVID-19 pandemic deepened this inequality. Women entrepreneurs, particularly those with young children, reported that working from home did not bring flexibility but significantly increased their workload. Only a small number reported changes in family responsibility distribution during the pandemic, mostly in households with older children.

### **Digitalization: an unequal opportunity**

Another important finding relates to technology use. Around 70% of women interviewed started using social media for business in the last three years. However, women over 40 in rural areas often perceive themselves as “too old” to learn new technologies, while younger women view digitalization as integral to business. In rural areas, the digital gap remains particularly pronounced.

### **From individual stories to public policy**

From these findings, we can conclude that women’s entrepreneurship in Kosovo is shaped by culture, family structure, and access to resources. Women with higher education and from urban areas are better able to organize family care through external support and invest in business growth. These are the “exceptional women” who manage to overcome traditional norms.

In contrast, most women-owned businesses remain micro or small-scale, without clear growth strategies, reflecting a lack of structural and cultural support. Opportunities in rural areas are perceived mostly as short-term grants rather than platforms for network building or entrepreneurial ecosystems.

This research and the experiences of the interviewed women show that women’s entrepreneurship is not simply a matter of individual motivation. It reflects how the labor market, culture, and public policies interact. For a more inclusive economy and a fairer labor market, Kosovo needs policies that address property rights, childcare, digital education, and social norm change. Ultimately, women’s economic empowerment is not only a gender equality issue but a matter of economic development, social stability, and the country’s future vision.

# THE LOW-COST MYTH: WHY EXCLUDING WOMEN COSTS KOSOVO DEARLY



Written by: Erisa Kallaba,  
Researcher, Riinvest Institute

Excluding Women and Girls from the Labor Market Remains One of the Most Discussed Topics in Our Society.

Women make up 50% of Kosovo's population, yet only a quarter (25.9%) participate in the labor market. While these figures are discouraging, they reflect a social structure built over decades. In a society where gender roles are assigned from childhood, women and girls are primarily responsible for caregiving, while men carry the financial burden of the household. In this same society, girls are still often considered "for someone else's home," which is reflected in lower investments in girls' education compared to boys and in the unequal distribution of property. Despite current legislation, women and girls still represent only 21% of real estate owners.

Gender norms and caregiving responsibilities are the main barriers preventing women from fully participating in the labor market. Because women must balance careers and caregiving, they often enter professions with flexible hours, lower pay, and slower economic advancement. As a result, men remain overrepresented in high-growth sectors with high labor demand, contributing to the gender pay gap. Men earn more than women not only because of higher education levels or greater skills but also due to uninterrupted career trajectories, allowing them to focus more on professional development, work in sectors with growth potential, and more frequently advance into decision-making positions.

Women, on the other hand, face lifelong discrimination and continuous career interruptions. Families influence the education girls pursue, steering them toward flexible careers that require less professional commitment. Women also have less time for education and professional development due to unpaid household and caregiving responsibilities. Moreover, they must often find work close to home to reduce commuting time, further limiting career opportunities.

Parental leave policies further discriminate against women: they are entitled to up to 12 months of paid maternity leave, whereas fathers receive only up to 10 unpaid days. Being out of the labor

market for such an extended period reduces human capital, work experience, responsibilities, and ultimately salary upon returning to work. The lack of childcare facilities further hinders women's labor market participation. Public kindergartens cannot meet demand, while the high cost of private childcare discourages women from seeking employment. It is often "cheaper" for mothers or grandmothers to provide care, reflecting policies that limit women's individual choice to enter or remain in the labor market.

Systematic discrimination within families, society, and workplaces has created a vicious cycle, keeping women underrepresented even in leadership and decision-making roles. However, demographic trends and socio-economic changes are increasingly pressuring society to include women in the workforce. But what exactly do women bring to the country's economy?

## The Untapped Economic Potential of Women in Kosovo

Although the benefits women can bring to Kosovo's economy have been discussed for years, the Riinvest Institute has, for the first time, modeled what the economy would gain if the gender gap in employment and workforce participation were closed. Using the latest Labor Force Survey data, results show that closing the gender employment gap could increase Kosovo's GDP per capita by 21.1% in the long term—equivalent to roughly €2 billion more per year. Closing just the gender gap in workforce participation could raise GDP per capita by approximately 5.9%. These staggering figures demonstrate how much potential Kosovo is losing by underutilizing women.

Such numbers demand immediate policy action. Investments in childcare centers, education and training for women and girls in high-growth sectors, provision of safe and accessible transportation, and reforms to make workplaces family-friendly are relatively low-cost compared to the economic and social gains from greater female labor market participation.

More women in the workforce means more taxpayers and a broader base to fund pension schemes. It also means greater investment in children's education, improved decision-making within households, and better socio-economic conditions for families. If Kosovo wants sustainable economic growth, women are the cornerstone. Educated women not only increase tax revenue and economic returns but also raise children with higher aspirations and education, driving long-term national economic development.

# WOMEN LEADING THE FIGHT AGAINST CLIMATE CHANGE IN KOSOVO



Written by: Uran Haxha,  
Investigative Journalist

*In the face of the impacts of climate change in Kosovo, several women have stepped to the forefront of the battle for a more sustainable future and a cleaner environment. Through their work in renewable energy, nature protection, and the reforestation of hills and fields, these women are helping change perceptions by showing that everyone can make a big difference. They have become inspiring examples, demonstrating the power of dedication and innovation to halt environmental degradation and educate future generations.*

The summer of 2024 will long be remembered for the consecutive days when temperatures hovered at 40 degrees Celsius or higher. The same was said of the summer of 2023, but the memory lasted only a year. Thus, year after year, summers are becoming hotter, drier, and more dangerous for people. Although citizens—some with the help of the Government of Kosovo—have installed air conditioners in their homes, parts of the ecosystem, such as flora and fauna, remain at the mercy of the climate.

Yet the source of the electricity used to cool indoor spaces is one of the main causes of these changes. These same changes are also making winters no longer cold and snowy as before, but at best merely cold and without snow.

Kosovo is one of the economies most dependent on fossil fuels, and the transition to renewable energy sources is slow, as according to data from the Energy Regulatory Office, the vast majority of electricity still comes from coal. This situation makes strong engagement from all sectors of society essential to accelerate the shift to clean energy sources and to protect ecosystems threatened by unplanned and harmful development.

In this context, several Kosovar women are leading a sometimes quiet, sometimes very difficult—but powerful—revolution to reduce the impact of climate change. Their steps are as innovative in practice as they are courageous in shaping a greener and more sustainable future. Through initiatives ranging from solar energy installations to environmental protection and reforestation of hills and fields, these women are helping change perceptions by showing that everyone can make a significant difference.

One of these women is Gentiana Alija Shala, who has chosen to challenge industry norms and lead a company that designs and installs solar panels in a sector still largely dominated by men. She is helping Kosovo develop renewable energy sources and contributing to efforts to reduce pollution.

Likewise, Egzona Shala-Kadiu, head of the non-governmental organization “Eco Z,” has been engaged in protecting Kosovo’s ecosystems and national parks, questioning capital investments that have negative environmental impacts.

Meanwhile, Indira Kallatozi has built a strong career in reforestation, using innovative technologies such as drones to disperse seed balls to restore forests damaged over the years. She leads the organization “Sustainability Leadership Kosova,” which engages youth and businesses in building a cleaner and more sustainable future.

## Successful Environmental Campaigns Led by Women

On July 25, 2023, when the thermometer read 45 degrees Celsius, Egzona Shala-Kadiu found herself amid a concerned crowd in Klina, surrounded by residents fighting to protect their homes and community from a cement factory that would pollute daily with noise and pose risks to water resources. While many spoke in scientific terms, Egzona chose to speak in a language people understood and felt.

“Why should someone take something from my home while sitting in an office? If they want it, let them take the factory and move it next to their own house and see if it’s good for them. And in the end, what does Germany have more than Klina?” she told a large group of citizens, many of whom were members of the diaspora.

Egzona, who today leads the environmental organization Eco-Z, describes that moment as one of the most important in her career as an activist. But it was not the first time she had fought to protect nature and community rights. Her path to activism began much earlier, rooted in a deep connection with the environment from childhood. She humorously recalls that her mother was pregnant with her while studying biology, joking that perhaps she learned about ecology even before she was born.

In the early years of Eco-Z, challenges were endless. It was a time when the word “environment” sparked little interest, and “climate change” sounded like a distant concept to most. Donors did not prioritize it in their calls, but Egzona and her organization integrated environmental topics into projects on culture, youth, and even the prevention of extremism and radicalization, trying to find a connection everywhere.

Compared to today, 2016 marked a significant difference in perceptions of climate change for Egzona. She led many environmental protection campaigns that often clashed with business interests.

“And that is the worst part, because you are against an investor. In Kosovo’s development, the investor is seen as bringing money to people, while nature is the last thing on their minds. But when people are affected, the situation changes,” she explains.

One key lesson for Egzona was the importance of directness and sincerity in communication. Training in Japan through JICA taught her that the best way to earn community trust was to speak from the heart, listen carefully to concerns, and offer achievable solutions. This strategy helped Eco-Z build a strong reputation on the ground, becoming a leading voice against pollution and environmental abuse.

One of Eco-Z’s biggest battles has been against the construction of hydropower plants in protected areas. The fact that these areas are designated national parks means nothing should be built there, let alone hydropower plants. “Sharr National Park, NO DAMS” was written across a mountainside in Brezovica to raise the alarm about water abuse, and during that time they received major news.

“Advocacy is very unpredictable. You never know when the change you’re advocating for will come. While we were laying out the letters in Brezovica, we received news that approval for hydropower plants had been revoked,” she recalls with a smile, while insisting that hydropower plants are among the worst things to have happened to the country.

Egzona warns that the damage caused by these projects is irreversible and will affect decades to come, with consequences such as flooding and ecosystem destruction. Her activism has resulted in important victories, including the cancellation of permits in several areas. Most recently, she and her colleagues filed a complaint with the Energy Community in Vienna against four hydropower plants in Sharr National Park. Kosovo has been a member of this Community since 2005, and organizations have called for an investigation into how these plants were built and operate.

The world knows Greta Thunberg, the Swedish girl who became synonymous with the fight against climate-changing activities. Bringing this into the Kosovo context, Egzona says women are the backbone of this struggle—not only in educating younger generations, but also in the determination they show on the ground.

“The community has a certain belief that you can work more effectively with women. I can say that if a woman leads a campaign, the fieldwork will be more successful,” she says, adding that whenever she goes to meet communities, she wears boots and field clothes “because they want you like themselves, not coming to give empty lectures.”

**Drone Reforestation: A Dream Realized Through Hard Work**  
Indira Kartallozi, a name perhaps still unfamiliar to many in Kosovo, is an unstoppable force in the fight against climate change and in

regenerating nature in her homeland. Despite having spent more than three decades in England, she decided to return and contribute to a cause close to her heart and childhood: protecting nature and creating a sustainable future for Kosovo.

Indira grew up in Kapeshnica, a beautiful neighborhood of Peja, where nature was an inseparable part of her life. Laughing, she recalls how as a child she would wander the mountains with her brother, following neighbors’ goats.

“Our parents always taught us to respect nature, to leave it as we found it,” she says. This early love for nature, even without awareness of climate change at the time, has followed her throughout her life.

Her work in human rights and dedication to refugees and marginalized communities in England helped her understand the close link between climate change and migration.

“Climate change displaces more people than wars,” she says, recalling that when she left Kosovo, she felt like a failure for leaving behind a country at war.

Yet returning home was always there, tucked away in a corner of her mind. After several activities with youth in Peja, she founded Sustainability Leadership Kosova (SLK) in 2018, beginning a new journey to support young people and address climate challenges in Kosovo. Project by project, applying a creative approach to activism, she and her team began working to combat deforestation. “Between 2000 and 2022, Kosovo lost nearly 16,000 hectares of forests. With my team and attractive technology, we launched a creative campaign against deforestation. We called it ‘Don’t Take the Mountain,’ and now it is a platform that raises awareness and mobilizes communities,” she says, recalling telling her colleague Faruk Foniqi that at the end of the project they would reforest using drones.

“Indira, that’s far from us,” Faruk had replied. Today, together with Indira, they are preparing nearly 50,000 seed balls containing around 800,000 seeds of various plants, which they disperse by drone over deforested areas. Four years of relentless work on this project have given Indira an indescribable feeling, as the wait was difficult.

She has faced challenges, especially initial skepticism from some people in Kosovo. “I realized I cannot come with a Western mindset, but as a Kosovar sharing the same problems,” she says. Nevertheless, the support from young people has filled her with optimism.

They are simply part of the solution and give hope for the future. The reactions are very positive. Personally, I have been excited every day. We’ve had calls and volunteers from everywhere not only youth, but also the private sector bringing employees to work with

us,” she says, noting that the London–Prishtina route has now become frequent for her.

Equally frequent is the impression that a change in mindset has begun, with more people joining the fight to halt deforestation, which directly contributes to increased carbon emissions, since without forests there is nothing to absorb carbon.

### The Only Woman Leading a Renewable Energy Company

Most carbon emissions in Kosovo come from the Kosovo A and Kosovo B power plants. These plants could be replaced by energy production from renewable sources.

Kosovo already has many companies designing and implementing such projects, but the industry is dominated by men. However, one woman—Gentiana Alija Shala—stands as an inspiring example with her company “Alfa Solar Energy.” She has built a career that is more than a personal achievement; she has become someone nearly all young female engineers ask about internships at her company.

Gentiana did not dream of becoming an engineer. Her goal was medicine, but an unexpected turn led her down a different path.

“I wasn’t accepted into medical school, and without much thought, I passed by the Technical Faculty, saw where there were more available places for students, and applied to industrial power engineering. It was a random choice, but it became the beginning of a journey I never imagined,” she says.

Despite early challenges and limited preparation in mathematics and physics, she did not give up.

“My father told me I didn’t know math and physics, but I replied that I would learn them. He arranged private courses, and I managed to get accepted,” she recalls.

Her dedication to renewable energy emerged just as spontaneously as her choice of studies. A casual conversation with a colleague inspired her to explore the power of solar energy.

“Kosovo has extraordinary potential for renewable energy. We have nowhere else to go—it’s the future. Just look at the air we have in winter,” says Alija-Shala.

After graduating, she began an internship at a local company. Growing ambitions later pushed her to found her own company together with a former employer from another industry.

“I had worked in the IT industry. I called my former boss and said, you have the money, I know what to do—let’s start,” she recalls. That’s how everything began in 2020.

“I’ve always wanted to be part of a bigger change. When facing climate change, you don’t have the luxury to wait,” she says.

Through her projects, Gentiana helps reduce pollution and promote sustainable energy sources. The company initially grew through small projects in the agricultural sector. Step by step, with an explosive character and never being satisfied with what she has achieved, Gentiana reached the international market.

“I went on LinkedIn and wrote to all the CEOs of companies in Germany. I got three responses, and with all three I continue to work across Europe,” she says, laughing, adding that being a woman never stopped her at any step. She even says that the renewable energy industry community welcomed her very well.

“In Kosovo, the support has been extraordinary. I’ve had colleagues who always helped me when I needed it,” she says, often finding herself serving as an inspiring voice for other women who wish to follow this path. Her professionalism crosses borders, as in 2024 Gentiana was selected among the 100 most successful women in the world in the field of renewable energy.

In facing the climate crisis, Gentiana also believes that women’s determination and vision can blossom into assured success.

“I believe women have extraordinary potential to lead positive change in every sector. I want to see more women in this industry, because renewable energy is not just technology—it is our future,” she concludes. Although her operations in Kosovo are of smaller capacity compared to those abroad, she does not hide her wish that Kosovo should open its doors even more to large projects as a solution to moving away from carbon.

*Articles were first drafted in Albanian and later translated into English. Where interpretation issues arise, the Albanian version is considered authoritative.*

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