

Project “Support to Priority Actions for Gender Equality in Serbia II”  
(2021-2023)

Brief Overview of the Evaluation



## Introduction

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This brief overview presents the **main findings, lessons learnt, conclusions and recommendations** of the final evaluation of the Project “Support to Priority Actions for Gender Equality in Serbia II” (abbreviation GEF II project) implemented in the period 01/03/2021-29/02/2024 by UN Women Programme Office in Serbia.

**Context:** The legislative framework for gender equality in Serbia is guided by the obligations under the **key international legal instruments**, but also requirements of the **EU accession**. Serbia published the third edition of the Gender Equality Index in October 2021. Serbia scored 52.4 points in 2016, 55.8 in 2018, and 58.0 in 2021. This indicates **continuous, albeit not rapid**, progress in improving gender equality. Women's participation in the labor force has increased, and there have been efforts to promote gender equality in education and political representation. However, women **continue to face discrimination** in the workplace, including lower wages and limited access to leadership positions. Additionally, traditional gender roles and stereotypes **persist**, influencing societal attitudes and perceptions. Efforts to address these challenges include legislative reforms, awareness campaigns, and initiatives to empower women economically and politically, the Project being one of them.

**Project Background:** The Project is implemented in **Serbia** due to the support of the EU pre-accession funds. The Project is implemented from March 2021 to the end of February 2024, in partnership with the Government of Serbia, in particular, the **Coordination Body for Gender Equality and the Ministry of European Integration** as key political partners, and represents a continuation of the GEF I project (2018-2020). The Project aims to further support Serbia's refined execution of the EU gender equality acquis, including via the National Strategy for Gender Equality. It supports all tiers of the Serbian **gender machinery** specifically dedicated to gender equality, where an avenue is particularly directed to supporting the Ministry of European Integration and other institutions involved in the programming of EU funds provided to Serbia to also include gender perspective in the planning and programming activities. As partnering with local women's **civic groups** is crucial for UN Women's projects globally and a usual strategy of choice, the Project also promotes gender equality by fostering inclusivity and sustainability at the community level via partnering with women's CSOs.

**Approach and Methodology:** The evaluation was conducted by two independent evaluators. The evaluation purpose was to assess the **programmatic progress and performance** of the intervention from the point of view of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, impact, sustainability, gender and human rights and added values. The findings of the evaluation will hopefully contribute to organizational learning, future decision-making, and effective programming and accountability. The methodology employed **mixed methods** including quantitative and qualitative data collection methods (documentation review, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and online surveys) and analytical approaches to understand the complexity of the processes. In total, over 50 people were reached through the evaluation through surveys, interviews and focus groups, of which 16% were men. Also, over 70 documents were reviewed, including project documentation, research studies, analyses, and legal and policy documents. The evaluation adhered to **UN Women and UN Evaluation Group standards** and policies. Conclusions and recommendations are based on gender-related data and gender analysis. The evaluation considered the **UN's commitment to disability** inclusion and covered disability through evaluation questions. Any observed limitation was compensated through triangulation of data and methods.

## Evaluation conclusion and findings

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### Relevance:

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**Conclusion 1 (Relevance, key findings 1, 2, 3):** Stakeholder interviews and feedback from beneficiaries affirm the Project's **significant relevance** in the context of gender equality in Serbia. Despite ambitious goals and various complexities, that mainly dealt with understaffed line agencies and frequent leadership changes in governmental counterparts, the Project has demonstrated **consistency with its original intentions**, ensuring also continued alignment with the evolving needs and priorities of the beneficiaries. The Project's overarching objective remains consistent with its original or adapted intentions and the detailed outcomes outlined in the Project plan further spell out its anticipated trajectory.

### Conclusion 2 (Relevance, key findings 1, 2, 3):

Given that this Project is focused on policy, contextual information on policies is closely linked with the Project's relevance. The evaluation concludes that the implementation of gender equality strategies and action plans in Serbia is viewed among

stakeholders as **showing some progress yet remaining uneven and facing challenges**. While efforts have been made to develop and enact policies promoting gender equality, there remains a **noticeable gap** between policy formulation and effective implementation on the ground. Key issues such as insufficient budget allocation, limited institutional capacity, and a lack of systematic and meaningful monitoring and evaluation mechanisms are highlighted as **hindering** the full realization of gender equality objectives. Thus, while the Project's efforts are acknowledged, there is a **critical need** for stronger commitment, improved coordination, and enhanced accountability mechanisms to ensure meaningful progress in advancing gender equality in Serbia and strengthening its institutional framework.

### Conclusion 3 (Relevance, key findings 1, 2, 3):

Comprehensive joint dialogues provide a platform for all stakeholders to contribute their perspectives, needs, and priorities. **By not engaging in such inclusive dialogues**, the Project may have missed opportunities to validate and refine its relevance based on a broader range of inputs. This could result in a limited understanding of the diverse needs and priorities of the target beneficiaries and stakeholders, potentially leading to gaps in the Project's design and implementation. Therefore, the absence of **comprehensive joint dialogues** may have impacted the Project's relevance by limiting its ability to fully align with the collective interests and concerns of all stakeholders involved.

#### Key finding 1

The Project demonstrates **strong contextual relevance** to Serbia's specific needs and priorities, effectively addressing diverse stakeholder priorities, needs, and gaps. Stakeholder input was successfully integrated into the project design.

#### Key finding 2

The Project encompasses three dynamic streams of actions<sup>1</sup>, each carrying significant relevance. The third stream, which focused on **engaging with CSOs**, holds particular importance for advancing the mission of UN Women and the broader gender machinery in Serbia. By addressing the **vital role of CSOs**, this stream of action also enhances the overall appeal of the Project for positive change and is perceived as the most prominent feature of the Project as a whole.

#### Key finding 3

The evaluation identifies instances of **sub-optimal collaboration**, with stakeholders indicating that the Project's relevance could have been improved by strategically integrating various capacity-building initiatives. This includes not only addressing gender mainstreaming within external development funds but also intensifying efforts to engage with and leverage domestic development funds. **Strengthening collaboration with key stakeholders** such as the Ministry for Human and Minority Rights and Social Dialogue, EU Delegation staff, and the Instrument for Pre-accession Assistance (IPA) programming consultants could have enhanced the Project's relevance. Additionally, **forging partnerships with additional CSOs** could have further increased its pertinence. Prioritizing intersectionality could have ensured a more comprehensive approach to addressing beneficiaries' interconnected layers of identity and experience.

## Coherence:

**Conclusion 4 (Coherence, key findings 4, 5, 6):** The Project aligns with UN Women's strategic framework and **clearly showcases the collective impact of UN Women's interventions**, while alignment with national strategies is evident. However, under-capacitated gender machinery hinders implementation. This is highly relevant to the Project's coherence because it directly impacts the alignment, synergy, sustainability, and collaborative effectiveness that coherence aims to ensure. An **under-capacitated gender machinery** suggests that, while strategic alignment exists, the practical alignment with the

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<sup>1</sup> Result 1 tackles the 'national' level of operation ('National gender machinery has knowledge and capacities to accomplish gender equality and women's empowerment standards and principles'); Result 2 targets, primarily, civil servants working with EU funds programming, implementation and monitoring ('Civil servants responsible for EU funds programming, implementation and monitoring strengthened their knowledge and skills to comply with principles of non-discrimination, gender equality and accessibility') and Result 3 primarily works with women's CSOs ('Women's CSOs are supported to influence development and implementation of gender-sensitive policies and programs and to promote the culture of tolerance, equality and non-discrimination').

operational capacity of key stakeholders is lacking. Under-capacitated machinery indicates a gap between the strategic intent and practical execution, highlighting a lack of coherence in operational capacities.

#### Key finding 4

The Project demonstrates **alignment with UN Women's strategic** priorities and there are internal UN-related synergies identified, however, only a **limited extent of capitalization** from other countries is observed. Direct alignment with projects of other bilateral donors was not identified.

#### Key finding 5

The Project developed **pertinent national development strategies** and achieved strong complementarity with other actors through collaborative IPA programming with various line ministries. Additionally, there's a robust alignment with nationalized Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

#### Key finding 6

The Project **encountered challenges** while collaborating with understaffed bodies and agencies undergoing leadership and institutional changes, hindering efforts to enhance gender mainstreaming processes or introduce new initiatives, such as gender testing. The **local enforcement and administrative context** emerged as critical factors necessitating careful consideration for the coherent implementation of future gender equality initiatives at national or local levels.

### Effectiveness:

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#### Conclusion 5 (Effectiveness, key findings 7, 8, 9):

In summary, the Project's overall effectiveness is evidenced by the **successful completion of targeted changes**, some of which have the potential to generate lasting value and positive impact. Across the board, the undertaken activities are in alignment with the Project's purpose, and there is **observable satisfaction** among stakeholders and beneficiaries with the progress that the Project has generated.

#### Conclusion 6 (Effectiveness, key findings 7, 8, 9):

Negative factors such as **political instability, economic downturns, and entrenched gender norms** posed significant challenges to the Project's progress. Political transitions, changes in government priorities, and bureaucratic red tape hindered the smooth implementation of Project activities, leading to delays and resource constraints. Moreover, **deeply ingrained gender stereotypes, discriminatory practices, and cultural barriers** impeded efforts to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

#### Key finding 7

The Project has demonstrated a **high level of achievement in reaching its intended goals and objectives** yielding tangible and sustainable results. A notable milestone was the adoption of the new Action Plan for implementing the National Strategy for Gender Equality until 2030, marking a significant achievement in advancing the Project's objectives. Some key achievements include developing and enacting several key policies promoting gender equality, which provided a foundational framework for future initiatives. The Project also facilitated capacity-building workshops, enhancing the skills and knowledge of local stakeholders and it established effective partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, creating a collaborative environment for gender mainstreaming.

#### Key finding 8

There are **various unforeseen results**, some of which had a catalytic effect, including the local social dialogues around gender-sensitive language, that gained public popularity, putting the inheritance topics on the public agenda which further developed into a stand-alone civil society initiative, and particularly effective communication activities, gaining a large audience and involving prominent public figures as message conveyers.

### Key finding 9

Identified factors contributing to the Project's dynamics include **engaged civil society and media/public figures**, along with, some, stakeholder commitment. Conversely, challenges stem from **leadership changes** in key governmental institutions, new mandates from local authorities due to legal system alterations, and **limitations in funding and resources** at both national and local levels, including within national agencies and ministries.

## Efficiency:

### Conclusion 7 (Efficiency, key findings 10, 11):

The Project has demonstrated **solid efficiency in resource allocation**, strategically deploying financial, human, and technical support to achieve outcomes, albeit it will still require a no-cost extension (which was being dealt with at the time of this evaluation). The overall conclusion is that the Project **maximized the use of available resources**, such as time, budget, and personnel, to achieve its objectives and desired outcomes with minimal waste or redundancies. Tasks were successfully completed and there is evidence of cost-effectiveness.

### Key finding 10

The Project's management and leadership exhibit efficiency, **demonstrating strong capacities** in planning, organizing, and monitoring implementation. They adeptly coordinate diverse stakeholders, fostering very good collaboration throughout the Project. The grant administration mechanism, however, can be further optimized.

### Key finding 11

It appears that **deliverables have been consistently achieved**, on time. Despite various constraints, the Project has shown resilience and has overcome challenges, including political, practical, and bureaucratic obstacles, showcasing a proactive approach to ensuring success.

## Impact:

### Conclusion 8 (Impact, key finding 12):

**There are long-term effects** and changes resulting from the Project that go beyond the immediate and short-term results, some of which are broader, sustainable and transformative.

- At the individual level, there is **heightened awareness and understanding of gender equality**, evidenced by increased participation of women in income generation, economy, family inheritance, culture, business and farming networking.
- Communities have experienced **improved social cohesion** through enhanced dialogue on gender-related issues.
- Institutionally, the adoption of a new Action Plan for the National Strategy for Gender Equality until 2030 marks a significant achievement, **aligning policies with contemporary gender perspectives**.
- Pre-accession processes of Serbia have also **championed gender**.
- Systemically, the Project has contributed to institutionalizing gender considerations, with policy revisions reflecting a more **inclusive framework**.
- **Civil society action and civic participation** have been strengthened.
- The Project has also paved the way for **social entrepreneurship** among women.

These accomplishments collectively underscore the Project's substantial and multi-level impact on its target groups and beneficiaries.

### Key finding 12

**Impacts** were observed at the individual level, within communities, institutionally and systemically.

Grants have proven to be **particularly impactful**, offering a platform for the exploration of new and innovative themes. They have facilitated meaningful local collaborations, fostering partnerships that extend the Project's reach and effectiveness. Moreover, the **grants have played a pivotal role** in skills/knowledge/attitude development, empowering individual women and girls (and women's organizations) with the resources and tools necessary for sustained impact. The direct support provided to vulnerable women through some of these grants has not only addressed immediate needs but has also contributed to their long-term **resilience and empowerment**.

## Sustainability:

### Conclusion 9 (Sustainability, key findings 13, 14, 15, 16):

Concerning sustainability, a **modest horizon unfolds**, with moderate institutional capacity, resources that fluctuate or vary over time, and a **visible void** where policy aspirations await full implementation. While the Project has secured certain ongoing sustainability, the imperative is also highlighted for additional efforts in strengthening both national and local institutions. The current scenario reveals that policy and practice changes have only been **partially institutionalized**, suggesting a strong **residual overreliance** on external support, especially around policy and IPA gender mainstreaming (or any other developmental effort). This observation underscores a **crucial remaining gap** that warrants further attention and intervention and addressing this gap continues to be essential for fostering sustainable institutional development and ensuring a more self-reliant and resilient framework within national and local gender equality machinery, within the EU accession processes.

#### Key finding 13

The Project proactively **initiated dialogues encompassing pivotal themes**, including but not limited to women's inheritance rights, gender mainstreaming in donor funding, and the incorporation of gender perspectives into critical domains such as climate change, energy, and the construction sector. Notably, the Project engaged in a **strategic and innovative collaboration** with the media to amplify these discussions, thereby enhancing public awareness and discourse on these crucial gender-related issues.

#### Key finding 14

Overall, identified key elements that hamper sustainability primarily include:

- **Insufficient financial resources** allocated to sustain Project activities beyond the funding period can hinder sustainability.
- **Weak institutional capacity** within partner organizations still impedes their ability to continue Project initiatives independently.
- There is **over-reliance on external support and expertise** without building local ownership and capacity which can hinder sustainability.

Overall, the evaluation finds that *frequent institutional changes, unclear and overlapping mandates, competition between different governmental bodies, as well as high fluctuation of the personnel in the public administration* are **major risk factors for sustainability**.

#### Key finding 15

The Project has demonstrated positive sustainability efforts in promoting **replication and up-scaling of successful practices** (examples include obstetric violence issue addressing, strategically embedded gender perspectives into critical domains like climate change, energy, and the construction sector, etc.).

#### Key finding 16

**Stopping grant support for women's CSOs poses a significant risk**, as UN Women stands as the primary and, in many cases, sole financial supporter for these organizations, crucial for the realization of their missions. Ensuring **sustained grant assistance** is not only imperative for the continuity of their operations but also strategically aligns with UN Women's pivotal role in advancing the empowerment and objectives of women's civil society organizations.

## Human rights and gender equality:

### Conclusion 10 (Human rights and gender equality, key findings 17, 18):

The Project's design **explicitly incorporates gender and human rights** principles by prioritizing equal opportunities, challenging stereotypes, and promoting non-discrimination. Evidence suggests that the Project largely ensured equal opportunities for all, **challenged area-based and gender discrimination**, and promoted rights and dignity. Further improvements could have taken place around disability inclusion and overall, around inclusive consultations including within the intersectionality approaches.

#### Key finding 17

Gender and human rights principles and strategies **are at the core** of the Project (apart from multiplicative *intersectionality*), which is reflected in the initial design of the Project, all the way through its implementation.

#### Key finding 18

The Project **generally follows** the UN Women's strategic commitment to fully dedicate to mainstreaming disability inclusion throughout its work, in line with disability inclusion strategy and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. However, the evaluation evidence **has not identified any structured corresponding measures** of it within the Project's execution so far. For example, the Project has not demonstrated a commitment to disability inclusion through accessible communication materials, adaptive technologies, and tailored interventions that accommodate diverse abilities and also such actions were not budgeted.

## Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

Recognizing the role of the UN Women Office in Serbia and position in Europe and Central Asia Regional Office, and the fact that this recommendation requires additional funding, this is to suggest to UN Women and donors, including EU Delegation/EU, **to continue providing support to UN Women with an aim to keep on building capacity of the CSOs.**

Hence, it is recommended to ensure **stronger consistency and continuity of engagement with civil society** in Serbia including via a) maintaining open and regular communication through consultations and feedback loops that can ensure responsiveness to the dynamic context, b) creating forums for knowledge sharing and mutual learning, c) investing in the in-kind capacity-building of CSOs to enhance their sustainability, d) establishing long-term collaboration frameworks with CSOs that can provide a stable framework for sustained collaboration.

The recommendation to UN Women and the donor community to ensure stronger consistency and continuity of engagement with civil society in Serbia is of **high urgency** given the dynamic context and the critical role of civil society in advancing gender equality.

### Recommendation 2

**Enhance stakeholder involvement to ensure inclusivity, collaboration, and a comprehensive understanding** of diverse perspectives, via regular consultations with a wider array of actors (employment agency, line ministries tasked with labor, health, education, safety, etc., CSOs not associated with grant funding, sector development experts, etc.) to gather feedback, insights, and recommendations, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and considered in the decision-making process and by including groups such as EU Delegation staff, IPA programming consultants, and sector development experts in the gender mainstreaming teaching and technical assistance programs and other capacity building interventions.

The recommendation to UN Women to enhance stakeholder involvement for inclusivity, collaboration, and a comprehensive understanding of diverse perspectives is of **utmost urgency** given the complexity of gender issues and the need for inclusive decision-making processes.

### Recommendation 3

It is strongly recommended that grant programs to women's CSOs be sustained and prioritized through continued support or alternative funding mechanisms. This will ensure the ongoing empowerment of women's organizations, fostering their vital contributions to gender equality initiatives and wider community development.

The recommendation to sustain and prioritize grant programs for women's CSOs is **of high urgency** due to the crucial role these organizations play in advancing gender equality and community development.

### Recommendation 4

Conduct a **thorough needs assessment of governmental counterparts**, including those that address gender equality horizontally, but also those whose sectoral policies are important for ensuring gender equality (e.g., employment, social affairs, climate change, transport, health, safety, education, etc.), to identify specific areas of gaps, underperformance, deficiency, and understaffing. Tailor the support program accordingly, addressing the identified gaps and building upon existing strengths. Consider **developing performance improvement plans** in collaboration with a wide array of national institutions, outlining specific steps and benchmarks for addressing deficiencies and enhancing performance over time within horizontal and sectoral, as well as national and local parts of gender equality machinery.

The recommendation to conduct a thorough needs assessment of governmental counterparts is of **critical urgency** to ensure effective collaboration and alignment of efforts towards gender equality.

### Recommendation 5

The recommendation to ensure the Project's **visual identity**, in the future similar actions, reflects national ownership to foster a sense of shared responsibility and commitment among stakeholders is of **moderate urgency**.

## Lessons learnt

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### Lesson learnt 1:

- Grants and regranting programs **significantly enhance Project effectiveness and bolster sustainability**. By channelling funds to diverse stakeholders, these programs foster innovation, empower local initiatives, and fortify Project impact.

### Lesson learnt 2:

- Strengthening of the gender machinery demands **not only resource mobilization** and capacity building but also a **strategic repositioning** within the political landscape, as this machinery suffers from a **chronic lack of resources**, severe understaffing, and a complex political climate where gender equality lacks prioritization. To 'fortify this machinery', strategic alliances, innovative funding models, and targeted advocacy efforts are **imperative**. Addressing the dearth of 'fuel for this machinery' necessitates engaging both domestic and international partners to **infuse vital resources** and elevate gender equality on the **political agenda**.