

## THE EVOLUTION OF GENDER EQUALITY IN THE EU CANDIDATE COUNTRIES

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**Abstract:** This article explores the progress of gender equality in selected European Union (EU) candidate countries, focusing on a comparative analysis with the EU member states over the past decade. Key indicators will be evaluated to assess the status of gender equality, highlighting disparities and trends relative to the EU average. Among the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), promoting gender equality remains a central priority for governments worldwide, recognised as a fundamental driver of sustainable development and inclusive economic growth. Identifying existing gender gaps and harnessing the full potential of women is essential for achieving meaningful progress and long-term development. The analysis will explore the structure of employment using indirect indicators, including mortality rates, and will assess the overall quality of life for women in EU candidate countries. Particular attention will be given to the evolution of women’s participation in the labour force, expressed both as a share of the total labour force and relative to the female population. Additionally, the study will address aspects of vulnerability among women in these countries. Finally, the representation of women in top and middle management positions will be compared across the selected economies, offering further insights into gender-based disparities in leadership and decision-making roles.

**Keywords:** gender equality, EU candidate countries, women's enhancement, gender gap, female employment **JEL**

**Classification:** J16, J21, O52

### Introduction

Ranked fifth under the Sustainable Development Goals, gender equality is a major concern for policymakers around the world. The objective is to promote gender equality and empower all women and girls. This goal has become even more critical in the wake of recent global challenges, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the war in Gaza, and the energy crisis. It is now clear that achieving gender equality by 2030 is unlikely. In several domains, gender disparities have not only persisted but have widened. The COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts and wars further exacerbated these inequalities, with women in many countries, particularly those with low income, facing significant barriers to accessing essential health services. Statistics reveal that in many states, an increase in violence against women was registered during the pandemic, conflicts and wars.

As per the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals Report 2022, 26 per cent of women aged 15 and older worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. While this figure reflects the persistent and pervasive nature of gender-based violence, some progress has been observed in women’s political representation. As of January 1, 2022, the global share of women in national parliaments increased to 26.2%, up from 22.4% in 2015. Representation at the local government level is somewhat higher, reaching approximately 33%. In the economic sphere, women's participation in managerial roles saw only marginal improvement, rising to 28.3% in 2020, the same as in 2019, from 27.2% in 2015, indicating stagnation in leadership advancement. In terms of financial commitment to gender equality, the

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report highlights significant shortcomings. Between 2018 and 2021, only 26% of countries implemented comprehensive systems to track public budget allocations related to gender equality. An additional 59% had partial systems in place, while 15% lacked even the basic elements required to monitor such expenditures. (United Nations, 2022).

As mentioned by the UN, progress has been fragile and unequal in achieving the SDGs between 2015 and 2025. Millions of individuals continue to endure extreme poverty, food insecurity, inadequate housing, and limited access to essential services. Systemic inequalities persist, disproportionately affecting women, persons with disabilities, and marginalised communities. (United Nations, 2025).

The European Union remains a central actor in advancing gender equality, currently implementing the Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025, which builds upon the earlier 2016–2019 Strategy on Gender Equality (European Commission, 2022). Among the notable UN–EU collaborative efforts is the Spotlight Initiative, a global, multi-year program dedicated to eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls (United Nations, 2022).

While the EU has made significant progress in promoting gender equality, often outperforming the global average across various indicators, persistent gaps remain, particularly in the labour market. Women continue to be overrepresented in lower-paid sectors and underrepresented in leadership and decision-making roles. The EU Gender Equality Strategy 2020–2025 outlines several key priorities: eradicating gender-based violence, challenging gender stereotypes, closing gender gaps in employment, ensuring equal pay for equal work, promoting equal participation across all sectors of the economy, and strengthening women's representation in politics and management positions. (European Commission, 2022).

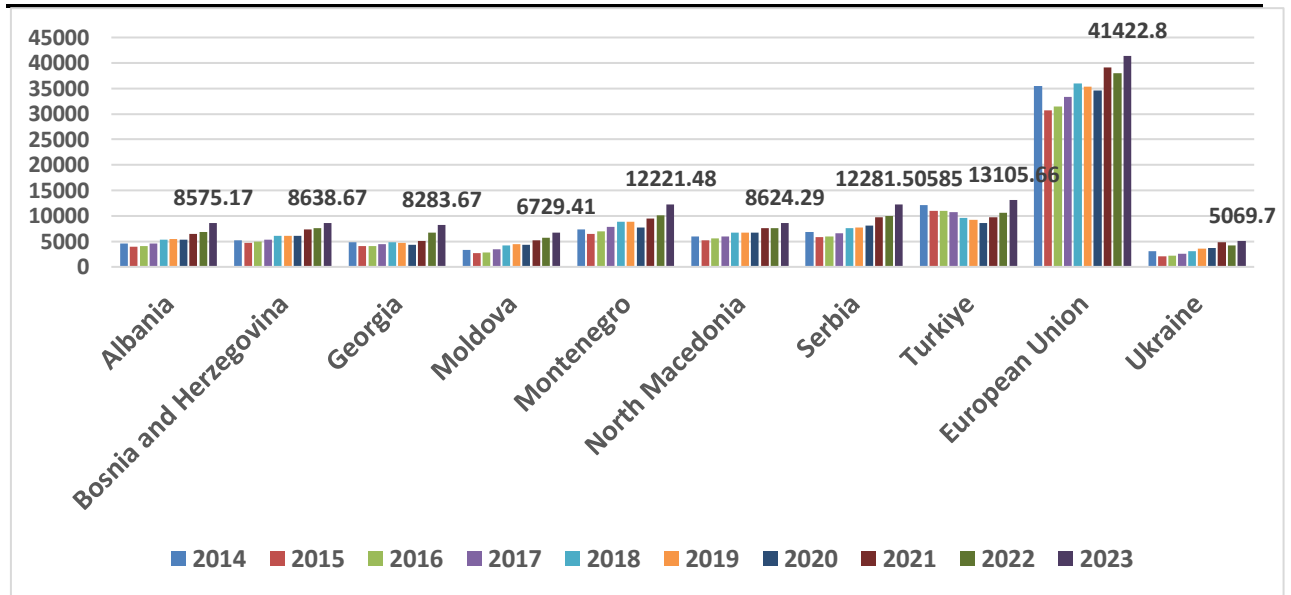
The methodology used in this article focuses on temporal and comparative analysis of gender equality indicators, integrating both socio-economic development and gender-specific labour market dynamics.

The objective is to analyse the evolution of gender equality in selected EU candidate countries from 2012 to 2023 (or the latest available), using a set of economic, demographic, and labour-market indicators disaggregated by gender, and the geographic scope covers the following EU candidate countries: Albania, Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Türkiye and Georgia (included for comparative purposes due to its previous EU integration aspiration and similarities to Republic of Moldova). Data will be sourced from reliable international databases, to ensure comparability of data, including: World Bank Open Data, ILO (International Labour Organisation), Eurostat, UNDP Human Development Reports etc. Limitations of the current research include data gaps: missing values may limit comparability for certain years or countries, structural changes: labour market definitions (e.g., “vulnerable employment”) may differ by source, and causality: the analysis is descriptive/exploratory; causal inference is not attempted here.

#### Results

Several key indicators will be analysed to assess the evolution and current state of gender equality in EU candidate countries, with a comparative perspective against the EU average.

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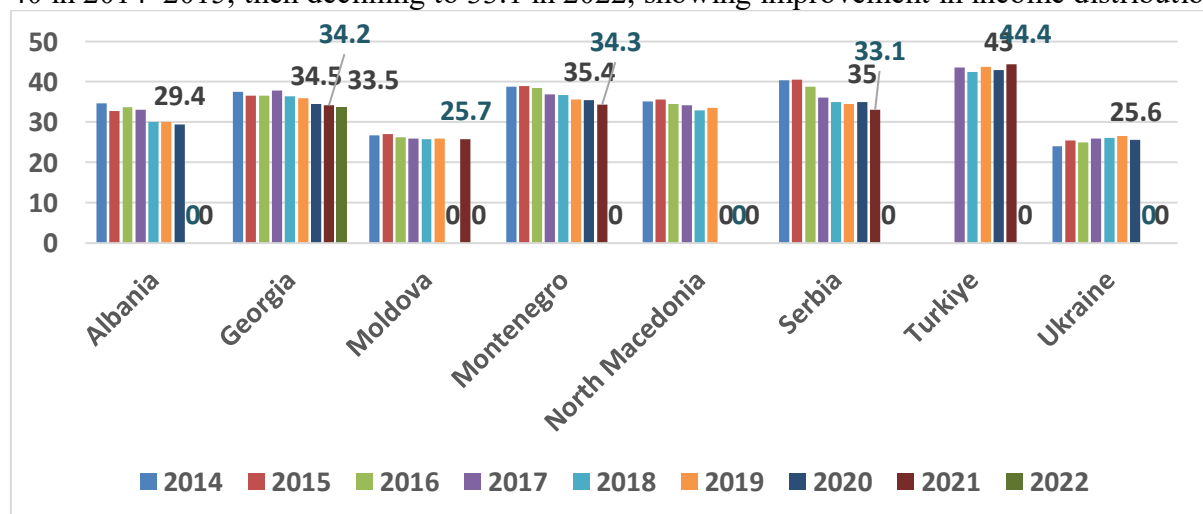


**Figure 1. GDP per capita, US\$, current prices**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

The highest per capita income among non-EU countries is in Montenegro (12,221.5 USD in 2023) and Serbia (12,281.5 USD in 2023), which are at the top in the Western Balkans. Türkiye also stands out, reaching 13,105.7 USD in 2023. While the lowest per capita income is registered in Ukraine, with 5,069.7 USD in 2023, heavily affected by war and instability, and Moldova is also at a low level, with 6,729.4 USD in 2023, though showing steady growth.

Considering the income inequality of selected EU candidate countries, it can be noticed from the figure below that most countries show relative stability in their Gini coefficients across the years, with minor fluctuations. Türkiye stands out with the highest Gini coefficient, around 42–44 in recent years, showing persistent and rising inequality. Georgia, Montenegro, and Serbia present mid-range values, registering moderate inequality: Georgia: fluctuating between 34–36, stabilising at 34.2 in 2022, Montenegro: around 34–39, ending at 34.3 in 2022, and Serbia: highest earlier - 40 in 2014–2015, then declining to 33.1 in 2022, showing improvement in income distribution.



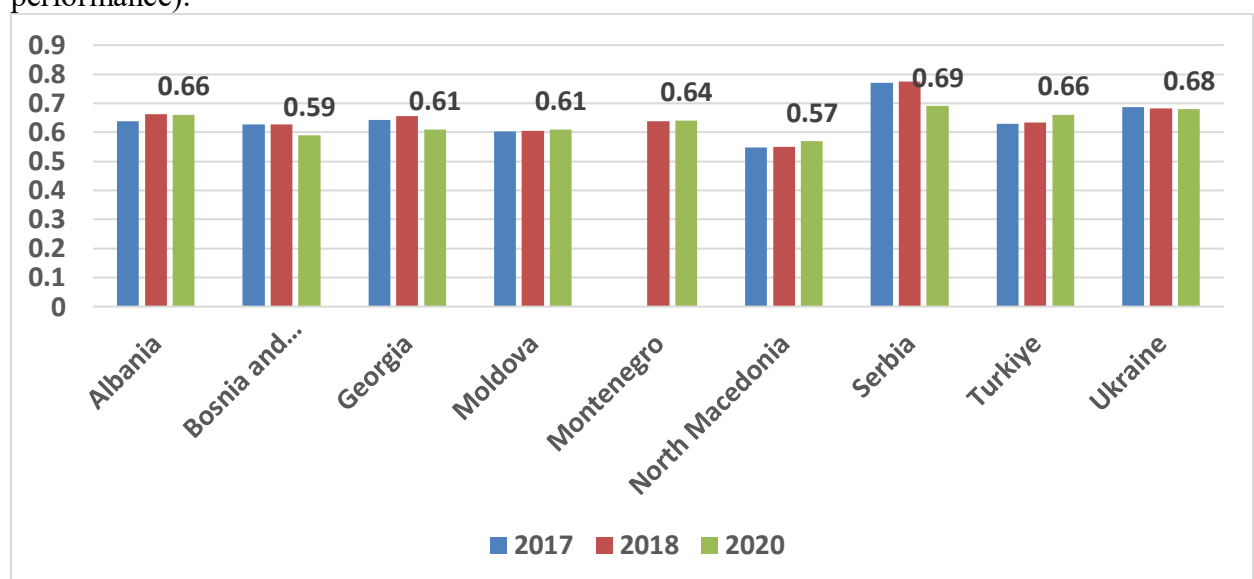
**Figure 2. Gini Coefficient**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from

<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

On the other hand, lower inequality is registered in Albania, with a decline from 34–35 in 2014 to 29.4 in 2019, suggesting a more equal income distribution. Moldova consistently has low inequality, around 25–27, among the most equal in the region, and Ukraine also has relatively low inequality (25–26). Moldova and Ukraine appear more equal, but this is partly due to structural factors (lower overall incomes, a high informal sector, and war effects in Ukraine). Türkiye is a clear outlier with rising inequality. The Balkans (Serbia, Montenegro, and Georgia) exhibit moderate inequality, but Serbia has achieved some reduction. Albania shows notable progress, moving toward greater equality.

The figure below shows the Human Capital Index (HCI) for women in EU candidate countries. HCI measures the productivity of the next generation of workers, given current health and education conditions, with values ranging from 0 to 1 (higher values indicate better performance).



**Figure 3. Human Capital Index (HCI) for women**

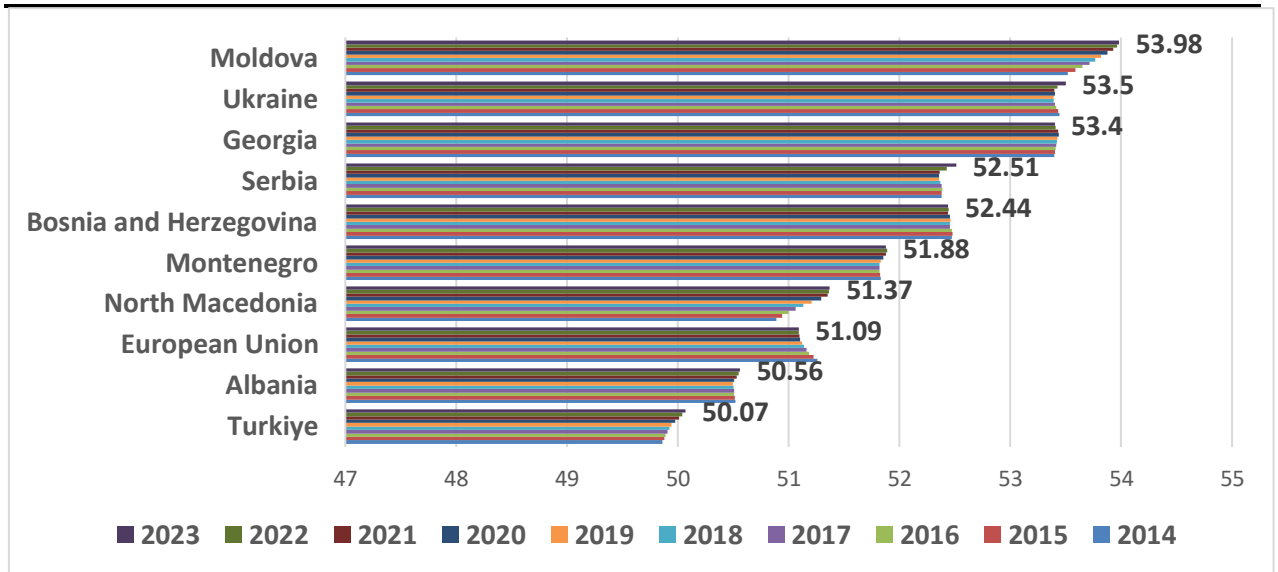
Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from

<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

The HCI values range between 0.57 and 0.69, showing moderate human capital outcomes for women in the EU candidate countries. No country from the analysed ones reaches 0.7 or higher, highlighting persistent challenges in education, health, or labour outcomes for women. Overall, progress between 2017 and 2020 is slow, with limited improvements.

Serbia, Albania, Türkiye, and Ukraine show slight improvements between 2017–2020. Bosnia and Herzegovina, Georgia, and Moldova demonstrate stagnation or mild decline, indicating that gains in female human capital have not been consistent. North Macedonia improved marginally from 0.55–0.57, but remains at the bottom of the regional ranking.

South-Eastern Europe and Eastern Partnership countries fall below EU averages (on average 0.75–0.8 for women). This indicates a development gap, particularly in education quality, health outcomes, and labour force participation of women.



**Figure 4. The share of women in the total population, %**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from

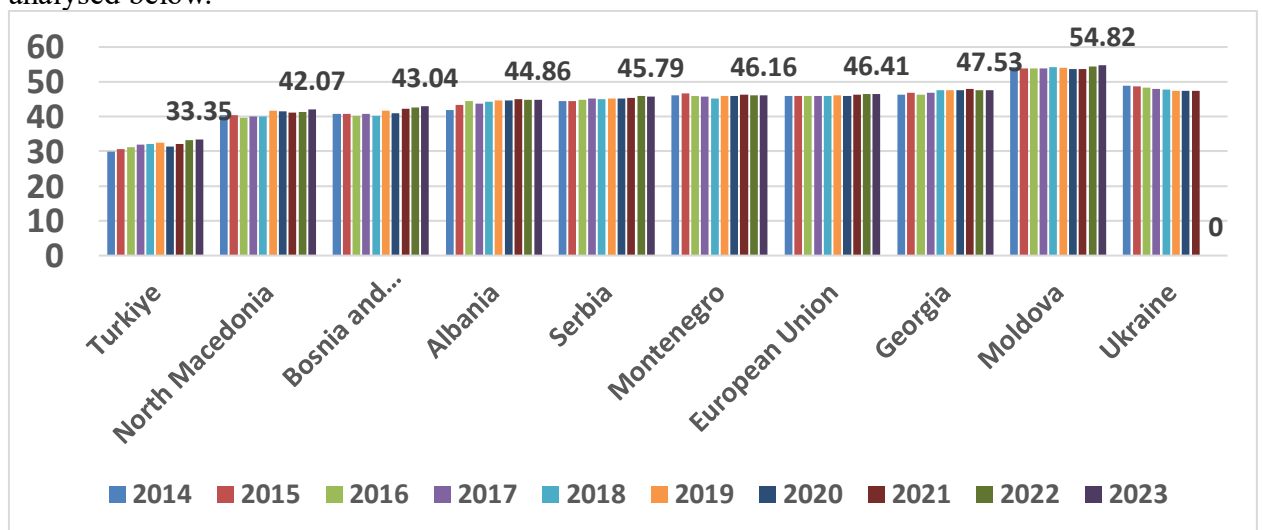
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Across all considered EU candidate countries, the share of women in the population is above 50%. Moldova (53.98% in 2023) has the highest proportion of women, reflecting demographic factors such as higher female life expectancy and male out-migration. Ukraine (53.5%) and Georgia (53.4%) also stand out, showing a similar demographic pattern, largely influenced by male mortality and migration trends.

European Union (51.1%) is close to balance but still has a female majority. Albania (50.6%) and especially Türkiye (50.1%) are the closest to parity between men and women.

Countries with higher female population shares (Moldova, Ukraine, Georgia) face specific demographic challenges: ageing populations with more elderly women than men, Gender imbalances partly caused by male labour migration, conflict-related mortality (Ukraine), and health gaps. Countries closer to parity (Türkiye, Albania) tend to have younger populations and higher male survival rates, narrowing the gender gap.

The structure of the labour market in both the EU and EU candidate countries will also be analysed below.



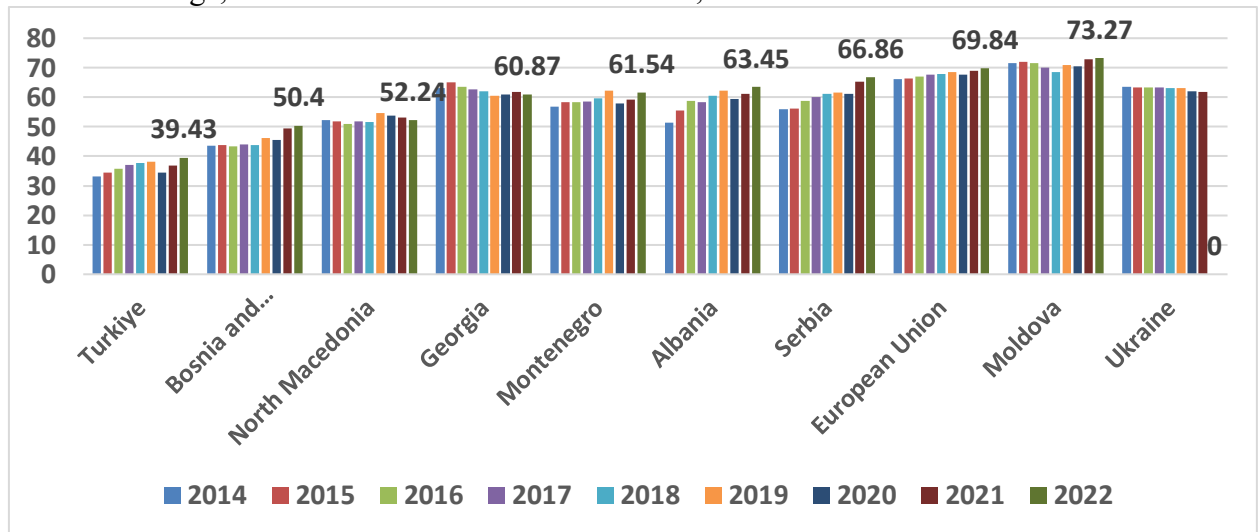
**Figure 5. Female share of the total labour force (%)**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from

<https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

A wide variation across countries is observed, with the lowest female participation in: Türkiye – only 33.35% in 2023, showing structural barriers for women in the labour market (cultural norms, childcare burdens, labour informality). And the highest female participation is registered in Moldova – 54.82% in 2023, meaning women represent the majority of the labour force, which is exceptional for the region.

Middle-range countries in terms of female share in the total labour force are: the European Union: female share around 47.5%, stable, serving as a regional benchmark, Georgia: close to the EU level (47% in 2023)., Montenegro - 46.4%, also slightly below the EU, Serbia - 44.9%, lower than the EU average but relatively stable, Albania (43%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (42%) are in the mid-range, and North Macedonia: 42% in 2023, close to Bosnia and Albania.



**Figure 6. Labour force participation ratio, 15+, female (%), EU and EU candidate countries**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

Türkiye has by far the lowest female participation rate: only 39.4% in 2022, although it shows a slow increase compared to 33% in 2014. This indicates deep-rooted structural, cultural, and institutional barriers for women entering the labour market.

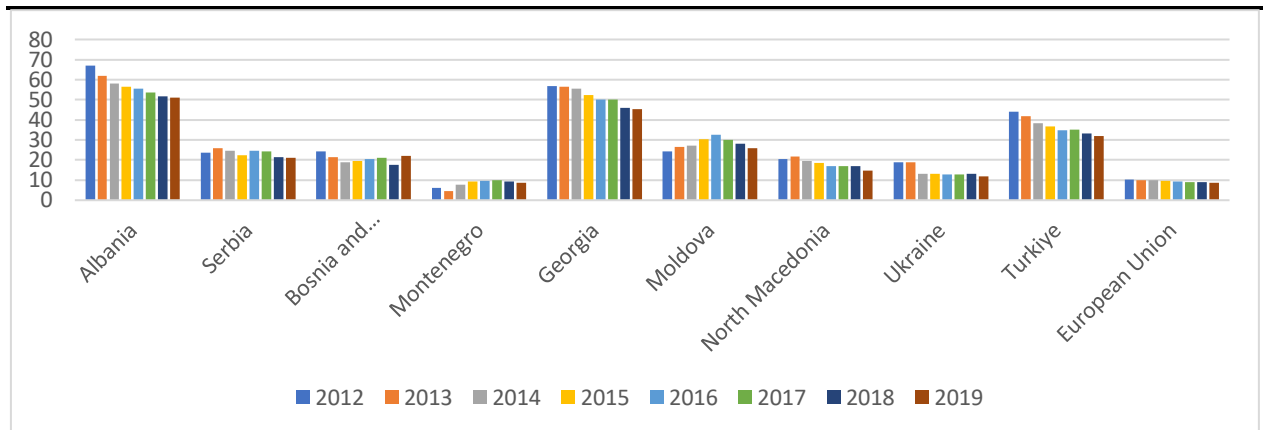
Moldova leads with 73.3% in 2022, showing the highest female participation rate in the region, even above the EU average. This reflects both necessity-driven labour participation and relatively strong engagement of women in the workforce.

European Union - 69.8% in 2022, serving as the benchmark, Ukraine is stable around 62–64% before 2021, though no data is available for 2022 due to war disruptions. Serbia - 66.9%, above the EU average and one of the strongest in the Balkans. Albania - 63.5%, also relatively high. Montenegro (61.5%) and Georgia (60.9%) show strong but slightly below EU participation. North Macedonia (52.2%) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (50.4%) remain low compared to peers, suggesting persistent barriers for women’s inclusion.

All countries show gradual improvements from 2014 to 2022, except Ukraine, where the data stops earlier. The gap between Türkiye and Moldova widened significantly: a difference of more than 34 percentage points in 2022.

Thus, above or close to the EU average are: Moldova, Serbia, Albania, moderate but improving: Georgia, Montenegro, and lagging are: North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina. While Türkiye is significantly below all others, despite small improvements in the female participation rate.

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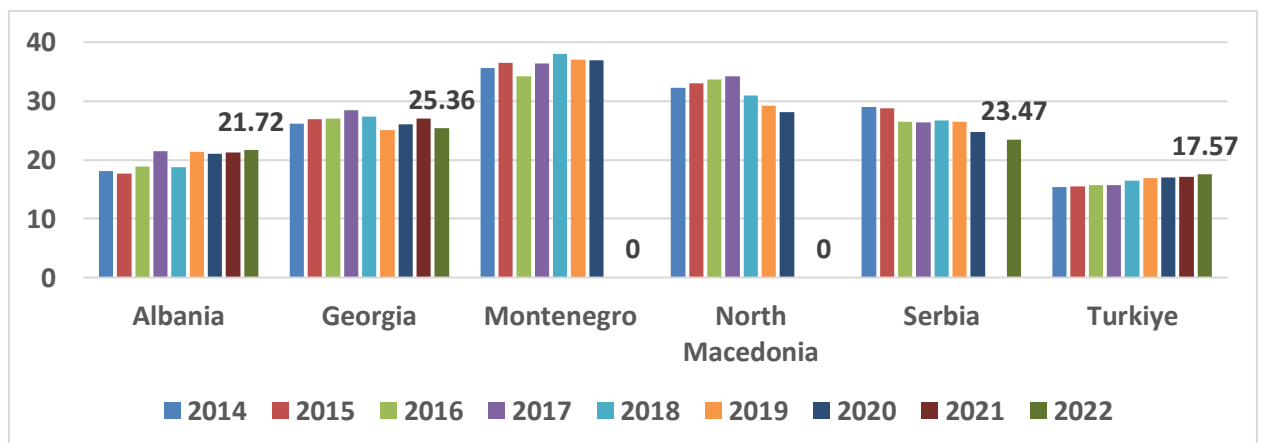


**Figure 7. Vulnerable employment, female (% of female employment) in EU and EU candidate countries and Georgia, 2012-2019**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

There is significant variation in the share of vulnerable employment among women across the analysed countries. In 2019, the proportion ranged from as low as 8.57% in Montenegro to as high as 51.05% in Albania. Vulnerable employment, defined as the share of contributing family workers and own-account workers among total female employment, was lowest in Montenegro, where the rate declined from a peak of 9.86% in 2017 to 8.57% in 2019, though it remained above the 2012 level of 6.16%. The lowest rate recorded in Montenegro was 4.67% in 2013. The European Union held the second-lowest share of vulnerable female employment in 2019, at 8.82%, down from 10.23% in 2012. Ukraine followed with 11.8% in 2019, reflecting a substantial decline from 18.7% in 2012. Conversely, the highest rates of vulnerable employment among women were observed in Albania (51.05% in 2019), though this marked a notable decline from 67.04% in 2012. Other countries with elevated vulnerability rates include Georgia (45.2% in 2019, down from 56.7%), Türkiye (31.8% in 2019, down from 44.1%), and Moldova (26% in 2019, down from a peak of 32.5% in 2016).

Among the EU candidate countries, only Montenegro had a lower rate of vulnerable female employment than the EU average. All others reported significantly higher levels. For instance, Albania’s share was nearly six times higher than that of both Montenegro and the EU, while Georgia’s was over five times higher in 2019.



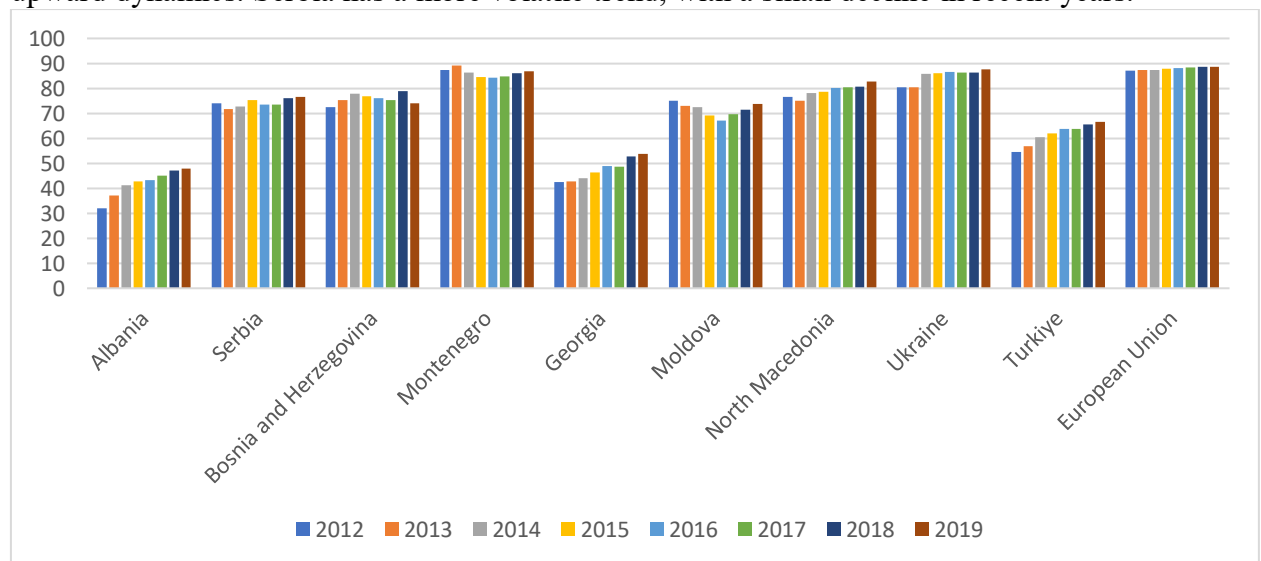
**Figure 8. Share of women business owners (% of total business owners)**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

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Montenegro has the highest share, with women representing around 35–38% of business owners, consistently leading the region. North Macedonia follows closely, with 32–34%, showing a relatively strong female entrepreneurial presence. Georgia: around 25% (25.4% in 2022), relatively stable but clearly lower than Montenegro and North Macedonia. Serbia - around 23–29%, with some fluctuation (slightly declining to 23.5% in 2022). The lowest female ownership is registered in Albania: between 18–22%, showing small but gradual improvement, reaching 21.7% in 2022, Türkiye: lowest performer, only 15–18%, ending at 17.6% in 2022, pointing to strong structural/cultural barriers for women’s entrepreneurship.

Slight upward trends are visible in Albania, Georgia, and Türkiye, though growth is modest. Montenegro and North Macedonia show consistently higher shares but without strong upward dynamics. Serbia has a more volatile trend, with a small decline in recent years.



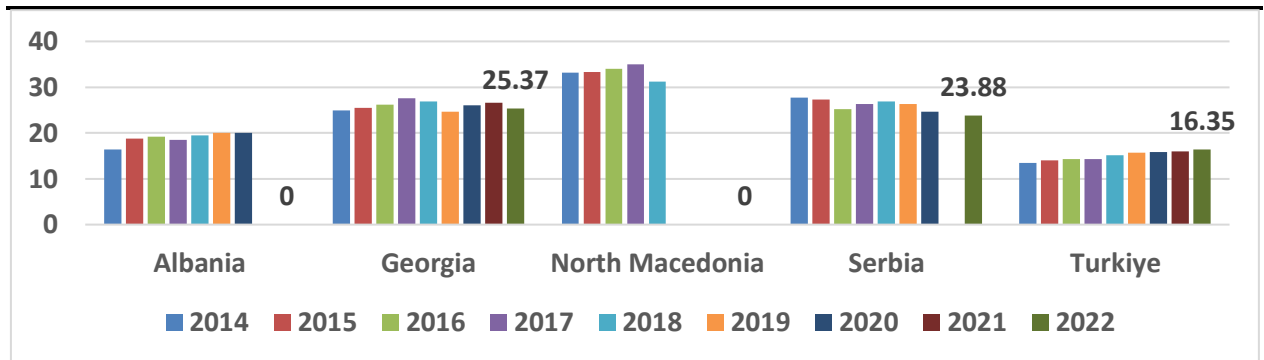
**Figure 9. Wage and salaried workers, female (% of female employment), EU and EU candidate countries and Georgia, 2012-2019**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

A similar ranking is observed when examining the share of wage and salaried workers among women. In 2019, the highest share was recorded in EU member states, where 88.7% of employed women were in wage or salaried positions, reflecting a slight increase from 87.2% in 2012. Ukraine followed closely with 87.6% in 2019, up from 80.5% in 2012, while Montenegro reported 86.8%, a marginal decrease from 87.4% in 2012. North Macedonia ranked fourth, with 82.7% of women in wage and salaried employment in 2019, up from 76.5% in 2012. In Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Moldova, the corresponding shares in 2019 were 76.5%, 74.02%, and 73.82%, respectively.

The lowest shares of wage and salaried employment among women were recorded in Albania (47.8%), Georgia (53.7%), and Türkiye (66.71%) in 2019. Despite these lower levels, all three countries registered improvements compared to 2012, indicating progress in reducing employment vulnerability among women. Among the countries analysed, only Montenegro and Moldova experienced a decline in the share of wage and salaried female employment between the period 2012 and 2019.

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**Figure 10. The share of women directors in total, %**

Source: elaborated by the author based on the data from <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=SE.ENR.PRSC.FM.ZS&country=#>

North Macedonia holds a share of 33–35% of women in director positions across the years, the highest among the countries. This suggests relatively better access for women to top leadership roles compared to regional peers. Georgia - around 25–27%, stable, with a slight upward trend (25.4% in 2022). Serbia - around 24–28%, also stable, with slight fluctuations. Lower representation is identified in Albania: around 16–20%, showing some improvement, but still significantly below regional leaders., Türkiye - lowest performer, with only 13–16% of directors being women, reflecting limited female representation in corporate leadership.

All considered countries show relative stability with minor improvements since 2014. Türkiye has the slowest progress, while North Macedonia consistently maintains the highest share. Serbia and Georgia maintain moderate but stable female representation in leadership.

**Table 1. Female share of employment in senior and middle management (%)**

Countries	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
Albania	14,7	29,3	20,6	19,3	24,0	22,6	31,6	41,3	37,1	30,7	29,1	32,4	..
Bosnia and Herzegovina	23,0	21,4	24,2	24,2	18,8	18,8	26,1	25,4	24,9	20,2	24,1	27,9	..
Georgia	31,0	32,7	33,7	38,8	44,2	31,9	35,7	36,7	33,8	..	..	..	..
Montenegro	23,3	22,7	24,6	17,6	24,9	25,4	23,8	28,2	25,3	28,3	21,8	22,7	..
North Macedonia	23,3	24,7	25,9	23,0	27,3	22,5	28,1	28,2	24,2	24,9	29,8	32,4	31,6
Serbia	29,1	32,7	31,5	30,9	30,9	30,3	29,8	33,6	32,6	36,7	39,9	37,1	33,1
Türkiye	14,3	16,6	15,5	14,5	16,7	17,3	16,3	17,5	19,3	20,7	19,6	20,5	21,5

Source: retrieved from <https://databank.worldbank.org/>

According to the most recent data available in the World Bank database, on the share of women in senior and middle management positions, Georgia remains among the leading countries, with a share of 33.8% in 2020. Although this represents a slight decrease from 36.7% in 2019, it is still higher than the 31.0% registered in 2012. Georgia recorded its highest level in 2016 at 44.2%, underscoring considerable volatility over the years. Montenegro ranks next, with 25.3% in 2020 and a slight rebound to 28.3% in 2021. Despite this increase, it remains below the 2019 figure of 28.2%, though it still reflects improvement over 2012 (23.3%). However, data for 2023 (22.7%) suggests a renewed decline after a temporary peak, indicating persistent fluctuations. North Macedonia has demonstrated a more stable upward trend in recent years. After reaching 28.2% in 2019, the figure dropped to 24.2% in 2020, followed by a recovery to 24.9% in 2021, and then a marked improvement to 29.8% in 2022, 32.4% in 2023, and 31.6% in 2024. This positions North Macedonia as one of the most consistently improving countries in terms of female managerial representation over the last decade. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Türkiye remain at the lower end

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of the spectrum. In 2021, Bosnia and Herzegovina recorded 20.2%, reflecting a general decline compared to earlier years (e.g., 23.0% in 2012 and 24.2% in 2015). Türkiye has shown a gradual but consistent increase, from 14.3% in 2012 to 20.7% in 2021, continuing to rise to 19.6% in 2022, 20.5% in 2023, and 21.5% in 2024, its highest value during the observed period.

Overall, the data shows that female representation in senior and middle management remains limited across most EU candidate countries, although some, particularly North Macedonia and Georgia, have made notable progress in recent years.

According to the most recent data, the share of firms with female top managers remains low across most EU candidate countries, with mixed progress between 2013 and 2024. While some countries have made moderate gains, others have seen declines or stagnation, and the majority still trail behind parity.

In 2019, North Macedonia led among EU candidate countries, with 21.3% of firms reporting a female top manager, an increase from 16.8% in 2013. However, more recent data reveal a decline to 16.4% in 2023, suggesting a reversal in progress.

Moldova followed closely, registering 18.6% in 2019, down from 22.4% in 2013, but then rebounded to 21.6% in 2024, regaining its position among the top performers.

Serbia showed steady improvement, with the share rising from 15.3% in 2013 to 18.2% in 2019, and further to 20.9% in 2024, indicating sustained momentum in promoting female leadership in the private sector.

Georgia displayed the most volatility. While it recorded the highest initial share of 32.7% in 2013, the figure dropped sharply to 16.5% in 2019, followed by a recovery to 21.0% in 2023. Despite the rebound, the 2023 level remains substantially below its 2013 peak.

Albania improved from 12.2% in 2013 to 18.1% in 2019, but more recent data is unavailable to assess continued progress. Similarly, Ukraine declined from 20.9% in 2013 to 17.7% in 2019, with no subsequent data available.

Bosnia and Herzegovina remained relatively stable between 2013 (16.6%) and 2019 (16.6%), but saw a modest decline to 15.3% in 2023, reflecting limited advancement in female executive leadership.

Montenegro has experienced a continuous downward trajectory, with the share falling from 19.2% in 2013 to 15.0% in 2019, and further to 13.5% in 2023, reflecting growing barriers to women's representation in corporate leadership.

Türkiye consistently recorded the lowest values, with 3.9% of firms led by women in 2019, a drop from 5.5% in 2013. No updated data is available, but these figures highlight a persistent structural gender gap.

By comparison, the European Union average stood at 17.7% in 2024, placing it behind Moldova, Serbia, and Georgia (2023), but ahead of several other candidate countries such as Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Türkiye.

These trends underscore the slow and inconsistent progress toward gender parity in corporate leadership. While countries like Serbia, Moldova, and Georgia have shown encouraging signs, the overall landscape continues to reflect systemic barriers that hinder women's access to top executive positions. Addressing these disparities requires not only policy reform and institutional support, but also corporate accountability and cultural change to foster truly inclusive leadership environments. (World Bank, 2024).

Globally, women hold less than one-third of managerial positions. Between 2015 and 2023, their representation rose by only 2.4 percentage points, reaching 30 per cent. At the current rate of progress, achieving gender parity in management could take nearly a century. Thus, in EU candidate countries, the share of women in managerial positions is even below the world average. Overall, women remain markedly underrepresented in top management positions across EU candidate countries.

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As of January 1, 2025, women occupied 27.2 per cent of seats in national parliaments - a 4.9 percentage point increase since 2015, but a modest rise of only 0.3 points from 2024, indicating a deceleration compared to the previous decade's average annual growth of nearly 0.5 points (UN, 2025). While the EU average is about 33%, and from EU candidate countries, North Macedonia is above the EU average, registering 42%, followed by Moldova with 39% and Albania and Serbia with around 35%. The lowest levels of women's representation in Parliament are registered in Ukraine, Türkiye, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Georgia – around 20% below the world average. (UN, 2025)

### **Conclusion**

The analysis reveals significant variation in gender equality outcomes among EU candidate countries and the potential candidate, Georgia. While certain indicators in some countries approach or even exceed the EU average, the majority of observed values remain below the average levels recorded in EU member states.

Between 2012 and 2022, the evolution of the economically active female population aged 15 and older was notably heterogeneous. As of 2022, all EU candidate countries reported lower participation rates compared to the EU average of 47.5%. Among these, Georgia and Albania came closest to the EU benchmark in 2021, whereas Bosnia and Herzegovina reported the lowest rate, 26.5%, which is approximately 21 percentage points below the EU average.

When considering the female labour force as a share of the total labour force, the rankings shift. In this case, Ukraine outperformed the EU average, followed by Georgia and Moldova, with the EU ranking fourth among the countries assessed.

Notably, in 2020, only the EU, Serbia, and Montenegro registered slight increases in the female labour force share. In contrast, other EU candidate countries experienced a decline, reflecting broader labour market disruptions, possibly linked to the COVID-19 pandemic. From the perspective of the share of economically active women aged 15 and older, the European Union ranks highest among the analysed countries. While all EU candidate countries fall below the EU average, Georgia and Albania report rates relatively close to the benchmark, at 50.99% and 50.7%, respectively. At the opposite end of the spectrum, Türkiye records the lowest participation rate, at 19.5%, significantly below the EU average, highlighting major disparities in female economic engagement.

In terms of the share of wage and salaried workers among women, EU member states again lead with 88.7% in 2019, followed by Ukraine (87.6%) and Montenegro (86.8%). Conversely, Albania reports the lowest share at 47.8%, indicating a higher level of employment vulnerability and instability for women in that country.

In terms of women's representation in top management, the disparity is even more pronounced than in other labour market indicators. Türkiye remains at the extreme low end, with just 3.9% of firms reporting a female top manager in 2019, declining from 5.5% in 2013. Meanwhile, North Macedonia recorded the highest share among EU candidate countries in 2019, at 21.3%, although more recent data from 2023 reveal a decline to 16.4%, reflecting setbacks in leadership representation. Moldova shows a more positive trend, with its share increasing to 21.6% in 2024, rebounding from a dip in 2019. Serbia also improved steadily from 15.3% in 2013 to 20.9% in 2024.

Although some countries have demonstrated incremental progress over the past decade, particularly in areas such as female labour force share or regulatory environments (e.g., business start-up conditions), the majority of gender equality indicators remain below the EU average. In several cases, the gaps are wide and persistent, especially in leadership and decision-making roles. The most critical shortfall is in female representation at the top management level, where even the best-performing countries out of the analysed ones, such as Moldova and North Macedonia, remain below parity, and others like Türkiye lag far behind. This underrepresentation reflects

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systemic barriers in access to leadership opportunities for women, including structural discrimination, weak institutional frameworks, and limited enforcement of gender equality policies.

Overall, the findings highlight that while progress has been made, it is uneven and insufficient. Substantial efforts are still required at the policy, institutional, and implementation levels, supported by dedicated budgets and political commitment. In many EU candidate countries, the lack of political will remains a critical obstacle to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. Without sustained reform, these disparities risk undermining the broader goals of inclusive and sustainable development across the region.

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